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Traversing Bourgeois Spaces: How a First-Generation College Student Makes Sense of the Academy

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TRAVERSING BOURGEOIS SPACES: HOW A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE
STUDENT MAKES SENSE OF THE ACADEMY

by

Tabatha L. Roberts

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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TRAVERSING BOURGEOIS SPACES: HOW A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT MAKES SENSE OF THE ACADEMY

Tabatha L. Roberts, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2013

This thesis presents an autoethnographic interrogation of the intersections of identity for a first-generation college student (FGC) in the process of becoming an FGC PhD graduate/student. It explores the intersections of social class and power and how both concepts are embedded in educational practices, specifically through interpersonal relationships of teacher/student, and within institutions of higher education. Through the theoretical lenses of co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy, and the methodologies of autoethnography and the sensemaking paradigmatic framework it is possible to see how I interrogate my positionality as a working-class first-generation college graduate/student in the context of higher education institutions, and where I foresee my positionality affecting the communication discipline in terms of critical educational practices throughout the latter stages of my academic career.

This autoethnography is based on my diverse lived experiences, including my childhood and my sensemaking experiences encountering college contexts for the first time. It is also based on my specific interpersonal experiences with professors, mentors, students, and peers, and how these interpersonal experiences have created a trajectory of critical educational outlooks and goals for the communication classroom.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This autoethnographic journey was both a triumphant and extremely frightening process for me. Although I had the idea for this manuscript in the first year of my master's program, I didn't know how to articulate my thoughts. I didn't really know who I was. This manuscript has therefore changed with me. Through every draft and every edit, I became a new person – a better person. I have gained confidence and a deeper understanding of myself as a student, a scholar in the making, and as a daughter, sister, and mentor. However, none of this growth could've happened without the support and guidance of many of my family and faculty members. Therefore, I would like to thank the following people for helping me become someone I always knew was there, but never knew *how*, to be.

First, I would like to start with a quote from one of my favorite musical artists, Jason Mraz, which encapsulates my gratitude toward my advisor, Dr. Mark Orbe: *“You're like an island of reality in an ocean of diarrhea.”* I know... It sounds funny rolling off the tongue but that's what your advice and mentorship has been for me. I applied to Western Michigan University because of your work. However, who I envisioned you to be was not who I met in the first week of my master's program; you were better. You solidified my decision to further my degree because you were genuine and accepted me and all of my quirks with open arms. When I first met you, I experienced a 'cosmology episode.' Since then, I have been challenged, praised, and

Acknowledgments—continued

worked to the bone. I would not have had it any other way. You have helped to catapult my career in so many ways and I appreciate you more than you know.

DUMELA*

Second, I would like to thank Dr. Chad Edwards and Dr. Autumn Edwards. Chad, you have enabled me to grow as a critical communication pedagogue by trusting me to include critical work in the basic communication course that *you* created. That must have been a difficult decision for you to make. You have become a true friend and hopefully someone whom I will keep in contact with throughout my academic career. Autumn, like I have said before, you are an angel. Although we have not worked together directly, you have been someone I can rely on and go to for advice and conversation. When you speak, fairies literally do cartwheels.

Last, I would like to thank my mother, father, and cousin for allowing me to write about their lives and construct parts of their identity through my own interpretations. I keep telling myself how difficult it was for me to encounter specific times in my life, but I cannot imagine how difficult it would be for me to read about my life through someone else's words. You all are brave and wonderful people. I love you so much. Mom, you are the most wonderful person I have ever met. You are my best friend and my confidant and I am the luckiest daughter in the world. Dad, I know we have had our differences but I admire your strength. Although at times it feels like I am angry with you, I am also proud of you. You are my father and my friend. Gerri, you are not only my cousin, but my sister. The love that I have for you may feel toxic

Acknowledgments—continued

at times, but please know I will always be there for you. Stay strong and look to me for support. Thank you all for allowing me to release some of my anger and fears. This process has truly been therapeutic for me. I could not have done it without you.

Tabatha L. Roberts

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Objective Statement

This analysis will begin by providing a rationale for an autoethnographic research study of the intersections of identity for a first-generation college graduate/student. First, I will discuss the purpose of this thesis and I will present a poem I wrote as an undergraduate student. The purpose of presenting this poem is to demonstrate the diversity of lived experiences for a first-generation college (FGC) student. I will also discuss my personal background in order to establish some of the contextual and situational characteristics of the poem and of this author. Thus, throughout this thesis, I will explore the development of my hybrid identity as a working-class young woman on a journey to becoming a first-generation college graduate/student (FGCG). I will also provide an overview of the literature review and method section of this thesis. In doing so, I will position myself within the literature about first-generation college students in both communication and education research. I will also discuss how I will use autoethnography and Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld's (2005) theoretical model of organizational sensemaking as both a methodology and paradigmatic framework in later chapters. Last, I will discuss why and how I became committed to understanding my own experiences as an FGC student, and why I remain committed to synergistic mentoring and critical pedagogy as a first-generation college graduate/student. This chapter will end with a preview of the chapters in this thesis.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the intersections of identity for a first-generation college graduate/student. More importantly, however, is that this study will add to the gaps in communication research regarding the unique perspectives and communicative practices FGC students bring to the academy (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). This study is significant for many reasons. The first is that the FGC student population in U.S. colleges is immense. For example “roughly 30% of entering freshmen in the USA are first-generation college students, and 24% — 4.5 million — are both first-gens and low income” (Ramsey & Peale, 2010, para. 7). Thus, this thesis is especially significant for communication and higher education scholars and teachers interested in the lived experiences of first-generation college students because they will recognize firsthand the complexities that come with owning such a label in higher education. Also, they’ll be able to connect to a first-generation graduate student who finds issues of power, hierarchy, and class as reflective of both developmental barriers and breakthroughs in classrooms, research, and mentor relationships. Second, this micro-analysis of the lived experiences of a first-generation college graduate/student is also important for FGC students entering or already participating in college. Not only will they be able to follow another first-generation college student in her path leading to college, they will understand how they might use their own unique vantage point and positionality as a form of empowerment for other FGC students who find navigating the academy a confusing and daunting task.

The ultimate goal for this project is to not only understand my own development and identity negotiations in higher education, but it is to argue how communication and

education scholars, researchers, and teachers should unite in the mentoring, sponsorship, and research of first-generation college students. Combining communication and education literature will benefit both academic disciplines and add to the current literature given the inextricable links between both fields. In other words, higher education provides the context in which first-generation college students find themselves. Further, communication is the process through which first-generation college students develop their identity and come to understand how society and culture affect interpersonal relationships within and outside the academy (Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004).

In the following section, I will introduce a poem that I wrote during my undergraduate years that represents how I shaped my identity in college. I will also discuss my personal background and a complex set of lived experiences to bring clarity to some of the developmental stages that brought this study to life. Interwoven throughout the text of the first three chapters will also be italicized reflections alongside narrative excerpts – a layered account (Ronai, 1995) – to exemplify the complex and evolutionary ways that culture, class, and my relationships with my family have impacted my positionality, development, and identity negotiations as an FGC graduate/student in higher education. This will help you, the reader, to gain a better understanding of my sensemaking processes and journey into academia, as well as the analysis section of this thesis.

Thus this thesis is not just about my path *in* higher education as a first-generation college student – rather it is about my path leading *to* higher education and the stages of sensemaking that I have experienced *because* of higher education. Unknowingly, this poem has become the framework for my life and this thesis is the first major project in

reflecting on the intersections of my identity. Most importantly, this thesis is in response to those researchers and teachers who are convinced that first-generation college students will not make it (at worst) or will only make it against seemingly insurmountable odds (at best) (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Finally, this thesis is a way for me to thank all those professors and mentors who have both guided and stunted my development throughout the difficult process of college life.

* * *

I am

A daughter, born to a single mother, who is the youngest of 7; the strongest person I know

I am the “only child” to everyone else, but a sister to someone I’ve never met

I am spoiled even though she struggled for most of my young years

I am unable to explain it, but I am aware of what drugs are, what they look like, and how they affect my father, at age 4

I am, at age 5, also aware of what a crack house looks like, how “hypes” react over the pipe, and I am a new friend to a boy who is also stuck in the bedroom coloring on the wall

I am unable to tell my mother the events of my weekends with “daddy”

I am still in awe of him

I am older and no longer feel like it’s okay to be absent in your daughter’s life

I am bitter, mean, and absent in his

I am accepting of the drug world and most of my friends do them in high school

I am a raver, a pot-head, a mixture of Pink Floyd and Rhythm and Blues

*I am confused when pot turns into heroin and my friends are no longer experimenting but
are addicted*

*I am exposed to an "epidemic" of bratty suburban drug users and I am thankful my
conscious is too strong to participate*

I am a 17 year old drop out with a G.E.D.

I am no longer accepting to the darkness that is my past

*I am, instead, aware that it is up to me to make decisions, and I am confident that I am
capable of success.*

I am national 1st place award winner in Philadelphia for comedic public speaking

I am proud, blown away, and more confident that I have ever been in my entire life

I am, again, reminded of my past

*I am a god mother to a boy whose mother, my cousin, has forgotten him for the "snake
bite" of the needle*

I am hiding my purse at Christmas

*I am angry that at 25 this is happening to her, when it should've been in high school
when it was normal to be a moron!*

I am pissed as hell at her absence in his life

*I am aware that I hate her for her actions, love her for the person she is deep down
inside, but I will never respect for allowing the venom to turn her into a devil*

I am at a wake for her sponsor

I am at a wake for grandma

*I am at a wake for my best friend whose heart stopped working at 24 because the venom
that used to run through his veins has stopped the blood flow to his heart*

I am a woman with no faith

I am aware that I have no answers to the scariest questions in the world

I am trying to be strong with my soul feeling empty

I am loved by the people that help me get through it

I am a daughter to a single mother who's the most amazing woman I know

I am a daughter to a father who has been clean now for over 10 years

I am still spoiled even though I try not be

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had, the privileges I have been exposed to, the stages in my life that I have learned from, and the people in my life that have guided me through it all

I am a strong woman with a strong belief in herself

I am eventually going to have faith

I am eventually going to answer some questions

I am aware that because I am who I am...

I am going to be anything I want to be.

* * *

Complex Set of Lived Experiences

I wrote this poem while I was attending a private college in Naperville, Illinois. The class was Intercultural Communication and it was one of the first classes I had enrolled in after my transfer from a local community college. At the time of my transfer I was a 25-year-old full-time bartender and part-time undergraduate student. I had also spent the previous five years figuring out my place in higher education.

The poem was written for an assignment titled “I am.” The premise of the assignment was to tell a story about yourself that describes different aspects of your identity. I loved these types of assignments. In fact, I had always been really open about my life with friends growing up. However, as I sat down to write this poem, I struggled with how I was going to explain who I was to my Professor. Would she look down on me if I shared too much? Would I be ridiculed for sharing personal information? What I decided to share in the poem was, at the time, all I knew to describe myself, and looking back, I’ve realized that the poem told the story of my life through a layered account (Ronai, 1995). The parts of the poem that spoke of sadness, confusion, disappointment, and heartache, were only temporary. Even as an undergraduate student I knew that one day I would “find the answers” to those scary questions. Looking back, I realize that those scary questions were all related to my path in higher education. *Why am I here? Why don’t I fit in? Why don’t my professors appreciate my point of view? How am I going to get through this? How am I going to make change?* Through this thesis, I want to answer some of those questions and challenge myself to see my life through the contributions I can make, and have made, to the academy. Hopefully, this thesis is my first step in creating the change I want to see.

* * *

The beginning of the poem discusses my mother and I’s relationship and represents the weaving of our stories. She was the youngest of seven children but she was/is the strongest of all her siblings – literally the strongest person I know. Although she isn’t aware of it her life has emulated for me the injustices of being a woman in a male dominated railroad industry. She has also shown me how women are unable to use

their voice when it comes to issues of adoption, sexual harassment, and single-motherhood. However, the most influential aspect of our relationship is that she has proved to me – through her life struggles, work ethic, and undeniable empathy, love, and compassion – that anything is possible. Like her I am also strong. At the age of four I knew not to tell her about my weekends with my father until I was old enough to convince her they didn't do any damage to my life. (*They did*). I saved her from feeling any guilt for letting me love my daddy.

* * *

If I didn't go to college perhaps my life would've mimicked my mother's struggles with young pregnancy and adoption. Perhaps I would have allowed the men my mother works for to treat me the same way they treat her. Perhaps I would have been more patient when it came to loving addicts.

* * *

This poem is also about my father and I's relationship and how our stories intersect. He is one of five siblings (his sister was murdered, his older brother is in prison, his younger brother is just out of prison, and his only living sister is married with two beautiful twins). He is aware that he wasn't present through all the major details of my life, but he is proud that he stayed away for the worst times of his. Unknowingly he has shown me the damaging effects that gangs, drugs, and wild lifestyles do to relationships. He has shown me how being honest with your child about such issues creates a young person who is accepting of the drug world. But he has also shown me the strength it takes to turn your life around. I love him more and more every day.

* * *

Strolling down the dark hallway I'm holding his hand tightly. I am in an unfamiliar place. The ceilings are high and a dark wood color. As we enter the room a woman is violently shaking back and forth sitting in an old rocking chair. Her head is bent slightly toward her breast. Her skin is a dark mahogany and her eyes are yellow and hollow. I notice that her hand has been amputated. As I look up at Daddy I ask "Why is that lady missing her arm?" His answer is "because Tabby, she fell asleep on it and lost all the blood circulation to her hand."

* * *

When I asked him about that woman later in my life, he told me she shot heroin in her veins for so long that a doctor had to amputate her arm. He also told me that when he returned to the crack-house later in the week, he found his drug dealers and fellow users shot to death.

* * *

As we pass the unfortunate woman, there are dozens of men fighting in the kitchen. The lights are faded to a dim yellow and I can't seem to make out what the conflict is over. Daddy pushes my butt and tells me to make my way into the bedroom. He will come get me when he is done. As I look around the room my curiosity takes over. I realize that the men are fighting over a crack pipe as my dad walks into the crowd. In the bedroom is a little boy with a curly afro. He is standing on the bed coloring on the wall. I stand next to him and we begin jumping up and down drawing circles of blue and purple on the dingy walls. I have enjoyed this weekend with Daddy.

* * *

There is also another part of this poem that discusses my relationship with my cousin and the world of heroin addiction. Her story is intertwined with mine for many reasons. First, she was my sister growing up. She was a bit older than me and I had sympathy for her because she wasn't shown love from her parents the way I was shown love from mine. Her mother was/is an epileptic who had to depend on men to live financially and somehow my cousin got lost in the mix. When we were kids she was teased a lot as well. She had buck teeth and cross eyes and I spent many summers in my dress shoes beating up the kids in our apartment complex for calling her names. And together we lost our innocence during childhood. This continued into high school when we experimented with drugs, partied our asses off, and both dropped out of school. But something changed after she gave birth to her only son. She began using heroin and I saw – for the first time as an adult – my childhood being replayed through her son's life. She was everything I hated about my father and I hated her for allowing the snake bite of the needle to ruin her and child's life.

* * *

I think my innocence was stolen from me. Even today it is hard for me to admit the things I have done. I was so young and I saw so much yet it wasn't even half of what I knew those close to me were experiencing. I lost my innocence through their lives. Through their pain, I connected with a world I didn't understand, and to this day, do not understand. I was 9 when I drank my first beer, smoked my first cigarette, kissed my first boy, and lied about my age. The constant moving from apartment complex to apartment complex made it impossible to keep any friends. Looking back however, those apartment complexes were all located in the same town. Yet, my nine year old mind imagined them

being long distances away. Each new complex added a layer to my identity. Each new complex made it possible to be another person. Living in each new complex I met more and more impoverished, damaged young bodies. These people helped define who I was becoming and who I am today. Their stories are enmeshed in my childhood. And as I try to reflect on those years the more entangled the stories become. Because when you're young nothing matters but these people. Every time Sonja's mom smacked her upside the head I felt it. Every time Courtney's mom called her a piece of shit and drank herself into oblivion I cried with her. Every time that Casey shoved a needle in her arm to hide the pain she felt from the loss of her father and her promiscuity, I was there to hold her. But I was also engrossed in it all as well. I provided the vein when hers stopped working. I got high so that they wouldn't waste the poison. I lost my innocence living their lives – even if it was only temporary.

* * *

Overall, this poem is about how higher education saved me. And intertwined are my experiences during my undergraduate college experience. When I wrote this poem I didn't know I would ever be in the process of attaining a master's degree in communication. I never thought that I would consider myself an aspiring scholar – *whatever that means*. What I experienced from early childhood, what I was “supposed” to become does not add up with the way I describe myself today. Even more, the part of my identity that is a first-generation college student did not become salient until I entered my master's program (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Orbe, 2004; 2008). But for me, and many others, college became the context that offered a way to rethink my “identities and reconfigure them in new ways” (Azmitia et al., 2008, p. 11). And this

poem was the first time I began to see myself within the context of an organizational structure. Through this process, I've realized that my story reflects the experiences of other first-generation college students as well. I was born to a lower-income family (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2003), I dropped out of high school (Bartholomae, 1985), my parents never went to college or didn't finish high school (Chen, 2005), and I relied on governmental funding to pay for college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle et al., 2006; Vargas, 2004). But most importantly, these facts only touch the top layers of my own and other students' stories. They mean nothing and, yet everything, in a first-generation college graduate/students' development.

This poem tells of a young girl who grew up too fast. It tells of a young teenager who found haven in drug users and rock-n-roll. It tells of a young woman who knows she will eventually find her own power. But today this poem is about strength – the strength for me to continue down a path that isn't so clear or easily demarcated. A path that I am terrified to travel. A path that has also helped me realize that the privileged position I am in today is because of the decisions *I* made. And it is also a path that has helped me realize that the literature that exists to describe me is misinformed.

Through this process I've also realized that I have more power than I ever thought was possible. The power I have today – although transient – is *empowerment*. In other words, I have the power of giving “power to” (Bate & Bowker, 1997) myself and others through my writing and mentorship; as a graduate assistant I have the unique positionality of both student and teacher. Personally, this process of sensemaking and autoethnography means taking a critical step toward forging a new identity; an identity that involves the agency to decide who gets to dictate my life. But this process is also a

way for me to give agency to other FGC students as well, so that they might come to understand their own positionality and identities in the academy and use their unique viewpoints and voice for social change. In the present stage of my career, I want to use that empowerment to create synergistic relationships with my students; how I plan to do that later on is through critical communication pedagogy.

Commitment to Critical Communication Pedagogy and Synergistic Mentorship

Fassett and Warren (2007) define critical pedagogy as “teaching and research addressed toward understanding how communication creates and may, therefore, challenge sociocultural oppressions—e.g., classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, etc.” (p. 3). Critical communication pedagogy not only makes educators more aware of the strategic rhetoric taking place within their own everyday discourse, but makes students aware of the hegemonic discourse that resides all around them – in institutions, organizations, U.S. society and even in their own discourses (Fassett & Warren, 2005; 2007). Although I cannot fully utilize this form of pedagogy at this stage in my academic career, I can make a commitment to my colleagues and students, including first-generation college students by becoming a social activist – working against the hegemonic ideologies of educational institutions that have placed me and others in an inferior position (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

I have begun working toward this commitment in the basic communication course that I teach. Although I must follow a syllabus created by my supervising professor, I have introduced conversations and in-class activities that give students a chance to understand strategic rhetoric taking place from the media. I have also discussed oppressive experiences I have had throughout my college career, and I urge students to

take agency in recognizing when oppression might be happening to them. Further, I have used my position as T.A. mentor to assign pedagogical literature to my fellow teaching assistants. These include readings from Fassett and Warren (2005), Sprague (1993), Kahl (2011), and other instructional and communication education scholars. The goal of providing these readings is to urge my colleagues to question how their discourses and teaching strategies affect their students in multiple ways.

By writing this thesis, I am also trying to make a difference. Through autoethnography and the stages of sensemaking, I am creating a self-reflexive story of my diverse lived experiences that might help other first-generation college students who are also trying to navigate the ivory white tower. In other words, by reflecting on the micro and mundane lived experiences as a first-generation college graduate/student, “the possibility for change emerges in dialogue...[when that] dialogue challenges the unexamined certainties held as truth by the individual or the group” (Ford & Yep, 2003, p. 249). This thesis is thus the first stage in my commitment to teaching communication through a critical lens, and as I venture off through the latter stages of my career, I can use this thesis as a story of empowerment for other FGC students as they reflect and talk about their own lived experiences within the walls of the classroom. Thus this thesis will hopefully provide a fragmented narrative exemplar that unites first-generation college students to end the cycle of oppression by recognizing the communicative strategies other FGC students have had to use to succeed in their educational institutions.

Writing this thesis is also a first stage in my commitment to create synergistic mentor relationships with my students both now and later in my academic career. Described as a form of power by Bate and Bowker (1997), synergistic relationships are a

process; one in which pursues the following acts: (a) valuing, discovering, and creating the contributions, unique vantage points, and perspectives of each other, (b) emergence of power through the mutuality between one another, (c) promotion of power in the generative sense – encouraging choice and energy, and (d) sharedness of power through interaction and the benefits that accrue through interaction and relationships. Thus my commitments to both synergistic mentor relationships and critical pedagogy is the driving force of this thesis, and the motivation for me to understand my unique and valuable positionality as both teacher and first-generation college student.

In the upcoming chapter I present an extensive literature review of the research on first-generation college students from higher education and communication literature. First I will define what the status of FGC student entails. In doing so, I will discuss how first-generation college students have been (mis)represented by both communication and higher education scholars. Second, I will present literature that focuses on FGC students and identity– their expectations for success, unique vantage points, etc – to argue how FGC students are an important and valuable student population in both two and four-year institutions. Third, I will discuss co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy as a way to introduce to the reader the theoretical lenses from which to view the communicative strategies I have used and plan to use throughout my college experience and career. Personal examples of these communicative strategies will be examined in later chapters. I will also describe the concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and introduce the theoretical model of organizational sensemaking (Weick et al. 2005) that will be used as the paradigmatic framework for this autoethnographic thesis.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter I will present an extensive literature on first-generation college students from both higher education and communication literature. I will also address the gap in communication research regarding these students and examine how they have been defined, stereotyped, and (mis)represented in both fields. I will also review how the intersections of their identity create dialectical tensions as they navigate the academy and other social and cultural contexts. Thus, I will spend a substantial amount of space focusing solely on communication research. Additionally, I will review literature examining FGC students' expectations to succeed and the role of advisors and mentors in navigating academic life. Further, I will review theoretical frameworks and pedagogical strategies that scholars have used to examine such students and discuss the role they can play in emancipating these students from their at-risk label (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Last, I will introduce Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking as well as Weick et al. (2005) theory of organizational sensemaking as the paradigmatic framework for the analysis section of this autoethnographic thesis.

Gap in Communication Research

There is a vast amount of literature in higher education and student affairs journals discussing different elements of the first-generation college student experience. For example, when entering "first-generation college students" in the search engine of the *Journal of College Student Development*, over 1,064 articles and books appear; many of which have first-generation college students in the title. Further, the *Journal of Higher*

Education, and the many New Directions journals (e.g., *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development: The Intersections of Personal and Social Identities*) cover topics related to the FGC student experience. However, there is a lack of literature in the communication discipline regarding this topic. For instance, when entering “first-generation college students” in to the search engine of Communication and Mass Media Complete, only 15 articles appear. Orbe (2003; 2004; 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004) has been a leading scholar/researcher in the field of communication regarding the communicative experiences and identity negotiations of FGC students. Also, Putnam and Thompson (2006) have extensively researched the communicative experiences of first-generation college students of color.

What seems to be the most obvious reason for the gap in communication research on first-generation college students is the number of ways these students are characterized. In order to locate academic articles regarding FGC students in communication journals, certain labels must be used (i.e., non-traditional, at-risk, unprepared, immigrant status, etc). For instance, researchers use descriptors such as “at-risk” (Educational Resources Information Center, 1987), “underprepared” (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1989), “non-traditional” (Query, Parry, & Flint, 1992), and/or “socially or economically disadvantaged” (Lippert, Titsworth & Hunt, 2005). However, FGC students do not always fit these criteria (Orbe, 2004). In fact, some FGC students who enter college do not come from “non-traditional, disadvantaged backgrounds” (Orbe, 2004, p. 132).

Further, researching first-generation college students is a daunting task because of the lack of accurate data regarding the population of such students at the preponderance

of US colleges and universities (Orbe, 2003; Padron, 1992). However, the number of first-generation college students entering colleges and universities has been increasing since the 1920s (Billson & Terry, 1982; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Orbe, 2004), as evidenced in Ramsey and Peale's (2010) *USA Today* report. Researchers publishing in higher education journals, communication and critical studies, instructional communication, and communication education journals are attempting to understand FGC students and their experiences within the university and/or classroom. However, almost no research exists regarding the communicative experiences of first-generation college students (but see Orbe, 2003; 2004; 2008; Orbe & Groscurth; Putnam & Thompson, 2006). Also, to my knowledge there are no researchers in the communication field that use autoethnography to discuss or analyze their own individual development as an FGC student; in particular how communicative factors have contributed to their development and success in college. As a result, FGC students are often placed into homogenous groups and labeled by researchers in stereotypical ways.

Stereotypes of FGC Students

While some communication scholars use qualitative methodologies such as ethnography or phenomenology to understand FGC students (Orbe, 2003; 2004; 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Putnam & Thompson, 2006), education and communication education scholars take a more positivist approach in their research (e.g. McKay & Estrella, 2008; Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Pearson, Carman, Child, & Semlak, 2008; Waldeck, 2006; Wheelless, Witt, Maresh, Bryand, & Schrod, 2011) by identifying aspects of a student's identity (i.e., socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexuality, race, etc.) as at-risk categories (Fassett & Warren, 2005, 2007) without accounting for the diversity

of lived experiences. Thus, it is imperative to use a definition of first-generation college students that can be applied to the co-culture of FGC students in order to negotiate any stigmas placed on these students by academic institutions and researchers alike. The U.S. Department of Education's Longitudinal Study uses an operative definition of FGC students as those "whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree..." (as cited in Engle et al. 2003, p. 13). Although this definition will be used as a general description for FGC students, there are many individual differences amongst this student cohorts that need more attention.

Researchers have used a variety of labels to describe first-generation college students since the 1980's. For instance, Johnson (1994) contends that "*high risk students* first appeared in the Educational Resources Information Center's (ERIC) (1987) *Thesaurus of ERIC descriptors* in 1980...as 'students, with normal intelligence, whose academic background or prior performance may cause them to be perceived as candidates for future academic failure or early withdrawal' (p. 35). Further, the U.S. Department of Education's National Longitudinal Study (as cited in Engle, et al. 2003) describes first-generation college students as "more likely to be female, older, African American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families" (p. 14). First-generation college students are presumed to be less prepared than their "traditional" counterparts (Chen, 2005). Research (e.g., Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle et al. 2003; Vargas, 2004) indicates that such students are less prepared because they have lower aspirations for college, they lack the social support to plan for college, and they cannot afford the cost of college. However, the FGC student experience is more complex than these generalizations can capture.

Many first-generation college students report having a lack of adequate support from family and friends to pursue college which leaves them with little preparation once they enroll (Putnam & Thompson, 2006). The transition into higher education is often overwhelming as students experience an awareness of their bicultural identity (Hendrix, 2000). The movement into a bourgeois space (Hendrix, 2000) causes some first-generation college students “to feel as if they are operating in multiple worlds, or standing at the edge of two cultures – that of their family and friends and that of their college” (Putnam & Thompson, 2006, p. 124). Such dialectical tensions (Orbe, 2008) create further dilemmas for FGC students as they attempt to negotiate their multidimensional identities.

Intersections of Identity

Several scholars (e.g., Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Covarrubias, 2008; Miller & Harris, 2005; Orbe, 2004; Putnam & Thompson, 2006) have looked at race, gender, and class to understand the identity negotiations that first-generation college students undergo regarding decisions to participate, and/or remain, in higher education. Since many first-generation college students come from working-class backgrounds, financial pressure and lack of parental support make the decision to go to college a difficult one (Putnam & Thompson, 2006). Those that do decide to attend college experience added pressure that “in addition to attempting to learn an ‘alien culture’ of academic and social rules...must also negotiate issues of marginality – on both ends – as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes and college life” (Orbe, 2004, p. 42). In order to handle these types of pressures, “FGC students enact multiple aspects of their personal, cultural, and social identities” (Orbe, 2008, p. 82). Further, because the college environment is such a

“pivotal point of development” (Orbe, 2008, p. 81) for most students, FGC students and those from working-class and underrepresented racial backgrounds have an added pressure to adapt to the college environment while staying true to their past selves (Archer et al., 2001; Orbe, 2008; Putnam & Thompson, 2006). These tensions make it clear that race, ethnicity, and social class should be considered when understanding FGC students’ personal and social identity development (Azmitia et al., 2008). And as evidenced by this research, many FGC students find it a difficult task to negotiate the intersections of their identities in multiple contexts.

Negotiations of Identity in Social and Cultural Contexts

For many FGC students college provides the context that reproduces social inequalities present in the larger society, creating a dual critical consciousness (Hurtado & Silva, 2008). For instance, when students enter institutions of higher education, they may “encounter the invisible histories of ethnic and racial groups, gender inequality and its machinations in society, and the nature of economic deprivation” (Hurtado & Silva, 2008, p. 18). And often, these realizations make their racial and/or class identities more salient (Hurtado & Silva, 2008; Orbe, 2004; 2008). As a result, communicating with parents about collegiate experiences is often a difficult task because doing so separates FGC students from their family and friends (Orbe, 2008). Thus first-generation college students often report censoring themselves when communicating about college experiences in fear that they will sound condescending to their family or that no one will understand their unique vantage points at school (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004, p. 44). However, other students opt out of college altogether to avoid giving up their working-class identity (Archer et al., 2001). For some, going to school means taking the risk that

one would stay poor – an ideal that deters not only working-class students away from higher education – but also students from collectivist cultures and diverse racial backgrounds who experience pressure to take financial care of their family or keep their racial identities salient (Fallon, 1997; Fiske, 1988; Orbe, 2003; 2008; Putnam & Thompson, 2006; Rendon, 1995). In a narrative excerpt from Putnam and Thompson (2006), a Mexican American female student described how her family influenced her not to participate in higher education:

My father used to say that college taught you how to do something well but never taught you how to earn money. He used to say, ‘What’s the use of going to school? They don’t teach you how to get rich, you need common sense. I know tons of people who have gone to college and have the ring to prove it but are dumber than a doorknob.’ My father didn’t think that college was necessary to live well in this life and he wanted me to believe the same thing. I finally dropped out of college after only a year and a half...My father was pleased, now I could spend more time on important things like earning money to help the family out. (p. 128)

However, family pressure, race, and social class are not the only deterrents of attending college for first-generation students; peer relationships also affect their retention rates as they try to navigate academic life. For instance, Dennis, Jean and Chuateco (2005) contend that when “handling stress and academic problems, peers are often the most helpful building block when it comes to academic success” (p. 234). However, peers who do not come from the same social class or racial/ethnic backgrounds can also make students more aware of their unique co-cultural status.

For instance, Miller and Harris' (2005) work in white racial identity in the communication classroom and Covarrubias' (2008) research of ethnic discrimination in the college classroom formulate the reality that racial inequalities still exist within institutions of higher learning. This corresponds with the negotiations of identity both for the student being discriminated against, in addition to the student unaware of his/her privileged white status and use of racialized discourses. Consequently, when issues of race enter the classroom discussion, students undergo negotiations and realizations of their own identity that can either increase or decrease the saliency of their first-generation status (Orbe, 2004), and/or racial presence in an academic space (Orbe, 2003). Students often report feeling frustrated and angry, wanting to drop out of school when their identities are further marginalized in the classroom (Covarrubias, 2008).

White privilege also affects traditional European American students' understanding of their privileged statuses, making it difficult to determine how to live an antiracist life, in addition to communicating about race. In Miller and Harris' (2005) study, white students were faced with collective guilt and had a hard time understanding the fact that black experiences differed from their own. Although this study did not concentrate on first-generation college students, the notion of white privilege corresponds to Orbe's (2004) study of first-generation college students' acknowledgment of their FGC status and Covarrubias' (2008) study of masked silence sequences. Interestingly, Orbe (2004) found that European American, traditionally aged male students were the participants who primarily described their FGC status as non-salient or ignored their FGC status altogether. On the other hand, nontraditional female students of color from lower socioeconomic statuses described their FGC status as highly salient (p. 140). Even though

students with a heightened awareness of FGC status reported a greater motivation to succeed, others “acknowledged the pressure that this status exerted on their college experiences” (p. 137). Whether to speak up about racially laden communication or discuss the acknowledgment of their own, FGC status represents dialectical tensions for such students, with some opting for dismissive silence (Covarrubias, 2008). These tensions further marginalize FGC students’ identities and add extra pressure for students to succeed within educational institutions (Orbe, 1998).

Dialectical Tensions

The research above lends itself to acknowledging the dialectical tensions that first-generation college students experience; specifically the experience of feeling similar and different to other students who are not first-generation (Orbe, 2008). One of the secondary tensions that first-generation college students experience is the conflict of whether their FGC status is peripheral and/or central to their identity on campus. For some FGC students, their status on campus is not central to their definition of self until they are reminded of their unique positionality. When something triggers this part of their identity, they may experience mixed emotions such as “pride, humility, and purpose” (Orbe, 2008, p. 87; see also, Putnam & Thompson, 2006). However, those who identify solely as a FGC student can be limiting (Orbe, 2008) especially when other aspects of one’s identity (socio-economic status, race, sexual orientation) have not become salient markers.

Another tension that affects the saliency of first-generation college students’ status and their development in higher education is that of stability/change – in particular the secondary tension of divergence/convergence (Orbe, 2008). For instance, “they [FGC

students] might embrace their FGC student status and consciously avoid assimilation, working to maintain the uniqueness of their experience and highlighting how their perspective contributes to a diverse learning experience” (Orbe, 2008, p. 88). Similarly, students report that their FGC status is a motivating factor for them to complete their journey through higher education. The following excerpt from Orbe’s (2004) research regarding the identity negotiations of first-generation college students highlights the previous contention and contradicts the aforementioned research that first-generation college students have lower expectations to succeed:

[Female African American FGC student] Sometimes it gets really hard—What keeps me going is that I am the first in my family to [to attend college]. And I have four younger brothers and sisters that look up to me... That’s what keeps me going instead of just shutting down or throwing a temper tantrum. I just keep going. I can’t do anything but finish. (p. 137)

High Expectations to Succeed

Studies have demonstrated that first-generation college students had high expectations of college success just as much as their “traditional” counterparts, and were not the only students unprepared for college level courses (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Orbe, 2004; Putnam & Thompson, 2006). Accordingly, many students find that their FGC status gives them a sense of pride and motivates them to act as role models for their siblings and fellow students (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Attaining a college degree for many first-generation college students means taking “the first step toward a better future” (Putnam & Thompson, 2006, p. 134) and involves making a choice for a better life. Those who come from working-class backgrounds/neighborhoods also find haven in

motivating their community by sharing their collegiate experiences (Orbe, 2004; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Also, when compared to non first-generation college students, studies have shown that FGC students had the same expectations to obtain higher level degrees (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004). Students who do find it difficult to transition into college often comment on the low quality of high schools they attended prior to their college experience while others reported having inadequate guidance from advisors (Engle et al., 2003). Further, because advisors and teachers typically guide students throughout their academic career, it is vital that FGC students create relationships with more experienced faculty members; especially when they are experiencing tensions negotiating their positionality in higher education.

Role of Faculty and Mentors

Several studies have demonstrated that first-generation college students' success is dependent on the role of faculty members' credibility, service learning courses, personalized education, and intervention strategies (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Miller & Harris, 2005; Waldeck, 2006; Wheeless et al., 2011). The relationship students have with their instructor can build self-esteem and a sense that the instructor cares about their well-being and success in school (Waldeck, 2006). When parental and peer support is lacking, personalized education has the capability of aiding student success by "meeting the needs of a diverse student population" (Waldeck, 2006, p. 345). Smaller class sizes, flexibility, and collaborative learning experiences are also strategies instructors report using to aid in their students' success. Other researchers (Wheeless, et al., 2011) argue that instructor nonverbal immediacy, enthusiasm, and homophily affect the attrition rates of college students. Not surprising, first-generation college students report that their interactions

with faculty outside the classroom are “integral to their success in the course and beliefs about their success at achieving other academic goals” (McKay & Estrella, 2008, p. 367).

Peer support (as alluded to earlier) and relationship building in and outside the classroom are also important contributors to student success. Studies have shown that team building and collaborative classroom exercises enable students to talk about personal experiences which make them feel more comfortable regarding their at-risk status (Waldeck, 2006). According to McKay and Estrella (2008), service learning not only provides first-generation college students the ability to form relationships with faculty members, it also enables students to engage in activities outside the classroom that cultivate a sense of community for those who may feel alone and anxious in an unknown space. Such close-knit interactions can provide “mentoring [that] can reduce the barriers to successful college participation by offering first-generation students the opportunity to develop a relationship with a person who is highly skilled in guiding them through the unfamiliar territory of a university” (McKay & Estrella, 2008, p. 360). However, many first-generation college students report that instructors do not facilitate a healthy environment in the classroom and often cite that their educational institutions make it difficult to transition into academic life (Engle et al., 2003).

In an attempt to bypass this harsh reality, researchers have provided pedagogical and instructional strategies that teachers can use in their classroom to better understand FGC students. These include andragogical practices (Engleberg, 1984); critical communication pedagogy and engaged pedagogies (Fassett & Warren, 2005; 2007; Pensoneau-Conway, 2009); teacher caring behaviors (Teven & Gorham, 1998; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Teven & McCroskey, 1997) and memorable messages from mentors

(Wang, 2012). While the aforementioned research focuses on the communication between teachers and first-generation college students, it is important for this thesis, and the reader, to encounter a theoretical framework – co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) – that is “grounded in the lived experiences of the persons it seeks to describe” (Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 2).

Thus, the following section will review the aforementioned theory in detail. I am including this here for a number of reasons. First, “co-cultural theorizing provides insight into the process that co-cultural group members use to negotiate their ‘cultural differentness’ with others” (Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 2). Second, I came across this theory during my undergraduate experience. Orbe’s (1998) theory helped me negotiate my marginalized FGC student status and communicate with professors. I will discuss how I used this theory in practice in Chapter Four. Before I discuss this theory in detail, I also want to be clear the extent of which co-cultural theory helped me understand my positionality in the academy. In other words, it saved me. bell hooks (1992) had a similar experience. For instance, she explained:

Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense... I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me... I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 1)

Co-Cultural Theory

An extension of critical feminist theories – in particular, muted group (Kramarae, 1981) and standpoint theories (Smith, 1987) – co-cultural theory originally described ways in which traditionally marginalized persons communicate within dominant social

structures. Orbe's (1998) theory emerged as he collected phenomenological descriptions of persons deemed "nondominant" group members including gays/lesbians/bisexuals, women, people of color, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Orbe (1998) termed underrepresented groups as co-cultures so as to "avoid the negative or inferior connotations of past descriptions (i.e., *subculture*) while acknowledging the great diversity of influential cultures that simultaneously exist in the United States" (p. 2). Thus he insisted that the term co-culture be embraced in order to avoid typifying dominant group members (e.g., European Americans) as a superior culture. The origins of the theory emerged from a series of research projects conducted in which Orbe and other co-researchers conceptualized nine communication orientations, twenty-six communicative practices, and six influential factors that influence the selection of specific communication behaviors of co-cultural members (Orbe, 1998). These factors are: (a) preferred outcomes (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and separation), (b) field of experience, (c) abilities, (d) situational contexts, (e) perceived costs and rewards, and (f) communication approaches (i.e., nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive). He also advocated for the application of his framework and the importance of further inquiry by contending that: (a) communicative practices can generally apply to the assorted marginalized groups co-existing in the United States; (b) co-cultural standpoints are legitimized regardless of in-group/out-group status; and (c) non-dominant perspectives can be made visible unlike traditional research that focuses on the perspective of dominant cultures. Thus, co-cultural theorizing holds particular utility in situational contexts such as the academic setting and the communicative choices for first-generation college students.

Since the theory's original conceptualization, numerous scholars have adopted the co-cultural framework for various research endeavors in the organizational and academic realm; many of which can be applied to the FGC student experience. For instance, Buzzanell (1999) investigated the organizational experiences of underrepresented groups; Lapinski and Orbe (2007) examined how marginalization is negotiated across underrepresented groups in college classrooms; Lee (2006) investigated a co-cultural female professor in a diverse classroom; and as already alluded to, Orbe and Groscurth (2004) used co-cultural theory to examine first-generation college students communicating on campus. Further, researchers have expanded the heuristic provocativeness of this paradigm through their choice of methodology. Not only do these works speak from the standpoint of marginalized groups, they describe the strategic communication that – similar to FGC students whose marginalized status is salient – individuals can use to communicate with dominant societal members (e.g., mentors, professors, non first-generation student peers). However, to my knowledge there are no first-generation college students that use autoethnography to self-examine co-cultural communication taking place in their own past or present interpersonal encounters. Thus, it is difficult to decipher whether the outcomes for FGC students of applying co-cultural practices with professors, make the person(s) in the dominant culture aware of their social membership, or the implications of how their discourses force co-cultural members (e.g., FGC students) to negotiate their marginalized status. Therefore, critical communication pedagogy can be used as an extension of co-cultural theory to expose the rhetoric that takes place between FGC students and teachers. This extension is also another example of why I am so committed to teaching communication courses through a critical lens.

In the next section, I will summarize Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking and describe what the nature of sensemaking entails. I will also explain Weick et al. (2005) theoretical model of organizational sensemaking to discuss the framework I will use for the analysis section of this thesis. Last, I will argue that autoethnography is the most appropriate way to analyze my positionality and development in higher education through the sensemaking framework. In the third chapter I will discuss autoethnography.

Concept of Sensemaking

The concept of sensemaking, as articulated by Weick (1995), literally means the making of sense. His conception of sensemaking is “fundamental to organizational communication, an extension of systems theory, and [is] an intellectual bridge between linear, hierarchical, rational views of organizing and more participative and improvisational approaches” (Seiter & Dunn, 2010, p. 1). Thus it has been used by many scholars in the communication field as a framework for making sense of mundane and trivial organizational experiences such as crisis situations (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001; Weick, 1993), identity management among human service workers (Tracy, Clifton, & Scott, 2006) sexual harassment experiences of women of color in academia (Richardson & Taylor, 2009), experiences of a first-time African American school district superintendent (Daily, 2011), and the socialization of a first-year communication faculty member (Herrmann, 2008). Additionally, because it is an improvisational approach, it has been utilized in conjunction with autoethnography, ethnography, and critical race theory (Daily, 2011; Richardson & Taylor, 2009).

According to Weick (1995) “sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity” (p. 6) which “involves turning circumstances into a situation that is

comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 409). Thus, the activity of sensemaking is a reflexive process that urges people to make sense of the world and how their individual selves create it (Weick, 1995). When sensemaking takes place at a social level, members of an organization unite to collectively retrospect on a problem to interpret the actions and contextual factors that went into “good people struggling to make sense” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410, also see Snook, 2001). In other words, sensemaking is a social interplay of making meaning materialize – it is essentially “an issue of language, talk and communication” that brings “situations, organizations, and environments...into existence” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409) rather than a focus on decision making processes.

Sensemaking is also grounded in identity construction which enables the self to be understood as a text (Weick, 1995). In other words, sensemaking is an individual activity which always begins with a “self-conscious sensemaker” (Weick, 1995, p. 22). For instance, newcomers in organizations (Sias, 2009) actively engage in environmental scanning – developing cognitive maps of their organizational environment (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Thus, sensemaking is an activity that individuals actively engage when trying negotiate their identity. Take, for instance, the following excerpt from Weick (1995):

[The] self, rather than the environment, may be the text in need of interpretation. How can I know who I am until I see what they do? Something like that is implied in sensemaking grounded in identity. I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking, what implications do these events have for who I will be? What the situation will have meant to me is dictated by the identity I adopt in

dealing with it. And that choice, in turn, is affected by what I think is occurring.

What the situation means is defined by who I become while dealing with it or what and who I represent. (p. 24)

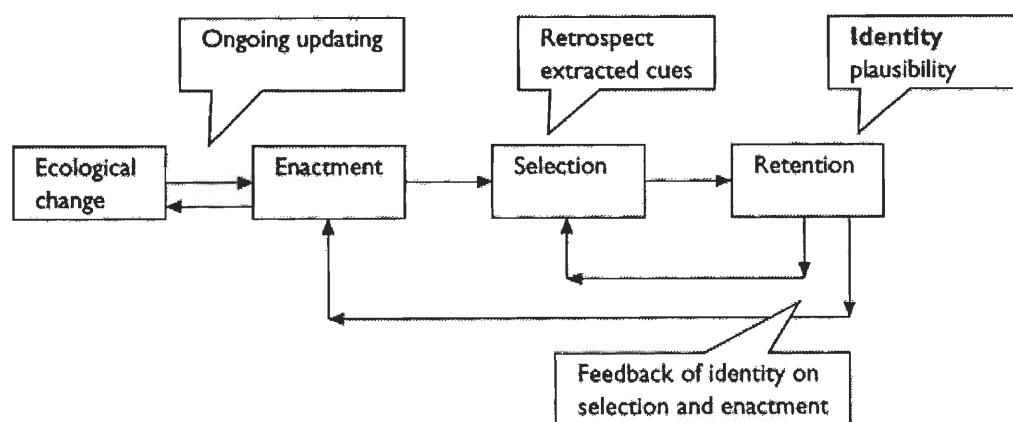
Weick et al. (2005) contends that “explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world” (p. 409). Thus, in order to understand oneself and one’s positionality amidst organizational life, individuals must make meaning out of trivial organizational events. This is a cyclical process, often occurring in stages although not in a linear process. Rather Weick et al. (2005) contends that sensemaking is an updating, reciprocal, reoccurring, and ongoing process. Further, sensemaking is both an external and internal activity occurring through talk and interpretation of meaning. I will discuss the stages of sensemaking next along with a rationale of why sensemaking is a useful framework for understanding the identity negotiations and communicative experiences of first-generation college graduate/ students. I will also discuss why autoethnography is the method that best fits within this paradigmatic framework before introducing autoethnography as a methodology in the following chapter.

Stages of Sensemaking

The process of sensemaking is always occurring but is triggered when an individual or set of individuals experience a discrepancy in the normal flow of daily life (Weick et al., 2005). The abnormality that an event would puncture a seamlessly orderly world forces individuals to create subjective formulations or interpretations to give meaning to the event to continue organizing processes. In other words, people try to make

sense out of equivocal experiences as they search for a way to handle uncertainty (Mills, 2003). Weick et al. (2005) contends these types of subjective configurations occur in stages or as intraorganizational evolutions. Weick et al. (2005) also compares this cyclical process to Campbell's (1965; 1997) model of evolutionary epistemology (ESR sequence). This model proposes that "sensemaking can be treated as reciprocal exchanges between actors (Enactment) and their environments (Ecological Change) that are made meaningful (Selection) and preserved (Retention)" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 414).

Figure 1: The Relationship Among Enactment, Organizing, and Sensemaking



Ecological Change \leftrightarrow Enactment

Enactment occurs when there is some sort of anomaly, discrepancy, and equivocal trigger that counteracts the expectations individuals have of normal organizational life (Weick et al., 2005). As mentioned above, when people enter into situations for the first time they bring with them expectations for social interactions and organizational processes. The term "expectations" is valuable in understanding this initial sequence or phase. When individuals experience a disturbance in their normal stream of consciousness, they experience what Weick (1985) describes as a "cosmology episode." According to Weick (1993) "a cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and

deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (p. 633). Thus when individuals are faced with a surprise, event, or interpersonal trigger that seems inconceivable, they are forced to make sense of things otherwise taken for granted. In other words, “cosmology episodes can...represent the first time individuals abandon their previous expectations” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001, p. 9); especially when their identity constructions are affected by these expectations.

First-generation college students may experience this stage of sensemaking the first time they take notice of their FGC student identity (enactment). For instance Orbe (2004) found that some students never thought about their FGC student status until they were asked to be a part of his study. Although many students in this study did not always reflect on their FGC student status, those whose FGC status was highly salient, often reported social and environmental factors as triggers for their identity negotiations (ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment). Take for instance the following excerpt from a Hispanic student during his first semester in college:

I used to think about it [FGC student status] a lot at the beginning. I kept thinking about it probably like the entire first month. ‘Wow, I’m in college. Wow, I’m the first one to go. Wow, I’m going to classes. I have my backpack and everything. I look like those people on TV that go to school.’ (Orbe, 2004, p. 139)

As evidenced by this excerpt, this man took notice of his surrounding which affected the way he internalized his identity. Walking around with a backpack – looking like students he saw on TV – made him more aware of his FGC student status (enactment). Although he probably knew he was the only person from his immediate family to attend college, he did not focus on this part of his identity until he entered the college campus. The college

campus was the ecological change – or the environment – that the instigation to sensemaking began. Also, because the ESR sequence suggests that sensemaking is ongoing and updating (as evident in the back and forth motions between ecological change and enactment), any context or situation that may feel unexpected or different for FGC students can begin sensemaking processes and identity negotiations. For instance, triggers that have affected the saliency of FGC students' identity were events such as graduation (Orbe, 2004), communicative experiences with family members (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004), and decisions that led to a pathway into higher education such as personal crises, comments from employers, and communicative experiences with role models or teachers (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling, 2010). The next stage of the ESR sequence – selection – describes how first-generation college students may interpret particular episodes in social contexts.

Selection

Just like the qualitative researcher who reduces interpretive data at micro levels and engages in conceptual development of data sources by building macro structures (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), the sensemaker in the selection phase generates a story from what s/he interpreted from the equivocal triggers (Weick et al., 2005). This involves both retrospection and interpretation of extracted cues (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). First, it requires retrospection because “we are conscious always of what we have done, never of doing it. We are always conscious directly only of sensory processes, never of motor processes; hence we are conscious of motor processes only through sensory processes which are their resultants” (Mead, 1956, p. 136 as cited in Weick, 1995, p. 26). In other words, the stories that we use in the creation of meaning are really just

interpretations of past events. Not only are these stories partial, but they will change depending on what is happening in the present (Weick, 1995).

Second, selection involves interpretation of extracted cues or put more clearly, an established point of reference that will be more or less conceivable depending on the social context. As people extract cues through retrospection of previous acts “they generate tangible outcomes” (Weick, 1995, p. 55) or road maps that explain unequivocal triggers. Similar to self-fulfilling prophecies, these road maps “lead people to act with more intensity which then creates a material order in place of a presumed order” (p. 54). Thus, first-generation college students can benefit by experiencing this stage of the sensemaking process.

In Putnam and Thompson’s (2006) study for example, many Mexican-American FGC students reported that they felt pride once they realized they belonged to the FGC student cohort. Although they described negative interactions with their families (extracted cues) stemming from their choice to attend college (e.g., complaints from family members, difficulties of being a role-model for younger siblings, etc), they interpreted the hard work that goes in to being the first in their family to attend college in a positive light (retrospection). In other words, once they prophesized the implications that their FGC student statuses can have on their family members’ and FGC friends’ lives they kept themselves motivated to succeed and finish school. However, the *retention* stage of sensemaking is where the feedback of one’s identity on selection and enactment becomes plausible (Weick et al., 2005).

Retention

This stage of the sensemaking process is directly related to the goal of reducing uncertainty. For instance, as a new story is created *plausible* reasoning takes place (Weick, 1995). According to Weick et al. (2005) “when a plausible story is retained, it tends to become more substantial because it is related to past experience, connected to significant identities, and used as a source of guidance for further action and interpretation” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 414).

This is a type of reasoning that “involves going beyond the directly observable or at least consensual information to form ideas or understandings that provide enough certainty” (Isenberg, 1986 p. 242). Thus what becomes of this reasoning does not need to be accurate interpretations; rather the creation of meaning should be a plausible enough to move on from the discrepancy. Weick et al. (2005) explains plausibility another way:

The important message is that if plausible stories keep things moving, they are salutary. Action-taking generates new data and creates opportunities for dialogue, bargaining, negotiation, and persuasion that enriches the sense of what is going on... Actions enable people to assess casual beliefs that subsequently lead to new actions undertaken to test the newly asserted relationships. Over time, as supporting evidence mounts significant changes in beliefs and actions evolve. (pp. 415-416)

First-generation college students may experience this sequence of sensemaking when they return home from their college campus. For instance, as FGC students learn the culture of academic institutions (e.g., registering for classes, understanding financial aid, or feeling as though they are full members within the college setting) they act as

motivators for others in their communities (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Putnam & Thompson, 2006). Not only do FGC students report the sense of pride they feel in motivating others, they also believe their experiences in college have paved the way for their family and friends. Take for example, the following excerpt from Putnam and Thompson (2006):

Being a role model for my younger sisters is also a hard job. As the oldest brother, I'm paving the way for them. They won't have to go through the same things I went through, because they can always ask me for advice how to apply for certain programs, what professors to take, what classes they need, and where or who to go to for course equivalency advice. (p.132)

Thus retention begs us to enact the world in new ways; ways that we believe are better than before. As evidenced by the aforementioned discussion then, writing autoethnography is a way for first-generation college students to enact back to the world a new sense of identity – one in which is not defined by the constraints of academic research, past lived experiences, or other barriers they may have faced throughout their academic careers. Additionally, because the sensemaking process cycles between retention and selection and back again, there are multiple chances to create an identity, or an interpretation of past experiences that releases enough uncertainty until the sensemaking process begins again.

In the following chapter, I will review how scholars define autoethnography and I will meld the sensemaking process with subsets of autoethnography – layered accounts and critical reflexivity. Then, I will review the critiques of autoethnography to exemplify the weaknesses post-positivist scholars see in the methodology. Lastly, I will preview

chapters four and five followed by ethical considerations for writing about intimate others (Ellis, 2007).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

In this chapter I will define autoethnography as a methodology and discuss how it has been used in research and praxis. I will also overview two styles of autoethnography that have informed the analysis section of my thesis. In doing so, I will argue why autoethnography is a useful method to use with sensemaking theory. I will also discuss the critiques of autoethnography followed by a preview of chapters four and five. I will end this chapter with a consideration of relational ethics.

Defining Autoethnography

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000) autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...” and autoethnographic texts can “appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (p. 739). Thus autoethnography is an alternative to realist ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; 2006) and it enables researchers and writers to express themselves in reflexive and unconventional ways. For instance Ellis and Bochner (2000) contend that, “in reflexive ethnographies, the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Not surprisingly then, many researchers “who are fully committed to and immersed in the groups they study” (p. 741) are autoethnographers. However, autoethnographers are also researchers who write “evocative personal narratives specifically focused on their academic as well

as their personal lives” and in these texts, “authors become ‘I,’ readers become ‘you,’ subjects becomes ‘us’” (pp. 741-742). Thus an important goal of this type of writing – and a major goal of this thesis – is to have the reader use the author’s experiences as a way to “reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (p. 742).

Some scholars use autoethnography to create a relationship with their data that show how they make sense out of a given social phenomenon. For instance, Fassett and Warren (2007) use autoethnography to make sense of critical communication pedagogy, to describe what critical communication pedagogy is, and to discuss how useful it can be in the college classroom. Additionally, they use autoethnography to question their own communication and how *they* might “create and sustain complex social phenomena...[such as] identity, power, and culture” and how *we* “can explore our own roles in making social structures that bind us” (p. 47). To these scholars, autoethnography cannot be defined solely as a research method because it is their way – their choice of methodology – through which sensemaking becomes possible. In other words, autoethnography is their way to be self- reflexive about – and to critically analyze how – the personal is inextricably linked to the cultural and political in complex ways.

Other scholars use autoethnography to blur the personal with the cultural through dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; 2000); multiple reflective and layered accounts (Ronai, 1995; 1996); healing narratives (Ellis, 1999; Lewis, 2007); embodied texts (Payne, 1996), fragmented narrative bricolages (Markham, 2005), and by examining pop-culture artifacts (Boylorn, 2008). However, the styles of autoethnography that fits best with Weick et al. (2005) theory of organizational sensemaking (ESR sequence) and the form of writing I will use in the analysis section of this thesis is informed by both Ronai’s

(1995) layered autoethnographic account and Adams and Holman Jones' (2011) work that focuses on the intersections between reflexivity, method, and paradigm. Like Ronai (1995, 1996), I want to compare and contrast my personal experiences as an FGC student against existing research (Ronai, 1995, 1996; also see Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011), and I want to write with the performative "I" to have the reader experience moments with me, and use "you" to bring readers into my sensemaking process (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). In other words, I will write a critical personal narrative that as Denzin and Lincoln (1997) explain will "queer autoethnography, by politicizing memory and reconfiguring storytelling and personal history, as counternarratives" (p. 5). I will do this innovatively by using the ESR sequence as a paradigmatic framework and autoethnography as a method interchangeably.

Combining Sensemaking and Autoethnography

Sensemaking is an updating, reciprocal, reoccurring, and ongoing process that individuals experience as they construct stories to make sense of equivocal experiences. There is no result of these stories and no clear cut retrospective version of the story told in present time. That isn't what the process of sensemaking entails. Sensemaking allows us to move on from whatever triggered our uncertainty in the first place by creating an interpretation – a story that is partial, incomplete, and constructed – but one that works for us. Autoethnographers experience the same sensemaking process in their writing. As Ellis et al. (2011) explain:

As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* and *ethnography*. When writing an autobiography, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. Usually, the author does not live

through these experiences solely to make them a part of a published document;
rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight (p. 3)

Thus autoethnographers' stories are always subject to partiality and selective production (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) and Weick (1995) would argue that there is validity in the autoethnographer's research; especially when he claims that "if hindsight is a bias... then everyone is biased all the time" (p. 26). Thus, a clear connection can be made between autoethnography and sensemaking – in that whether you are reading autoethnography or writing with it, you are "recontextualiz[ing] what you knew already in light of your encounter with someone else's life or culture" (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 23). You are extracting cues (Weick, 1995) about life that have been created through our own and others' personal interpretation of past lived experiences. Thus, the world in which we try to interpret is just a mixture of everyone's personal constructions.

In the following section I will explain Ronai's (1995) use of the layered autoethnographic method and I will describe Adams and Holman Jones (2011) work as they have both inspired how I will write the analysis section of this thesis. Furthermore, I will reflect on their works to justify my choice in method. Hopefully, this will enable you – the reader – to understand why the evolutionary process of sensemaking is a useful paradigmatic framework for writing a reflexive and critical layered account.

Layered Account

Ronai (1995) writes a layered autoethnographic account which she describes as "retrospective participant observation" (pp. 420-421) situating herself as both researcher and child sex abuse survivor. She defines layered accounts as "a postmodern ethnographic reporting technique that embodies a theory of consciousness and a method

of reporting in one stroke” (p. 396). She goes on to say that the “layered account offers an impressionist sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer’s narrative” (p. 396). Through her layered account, she uses emotional experience and introspection, and situates herself as both subject and object by including statistics on sexual abuse. She also explores her fantasies and includes theoretical thinking to make her layered account as accessible to readers as possible. Thus, her style of writing and telling – of pitting herself and her story against the culture of sexual abuse and positivist writing – does not follow a linear format; nor does sensemaking. Instead, she contends that those “empty spaces” that are created from writing through a layered account are vital for readers to find a place in the author’s stream of consciousness.

Throughout the first two chapters of this thesis, I have positioned myself within the literature about first-generation college students by choosing to include research that both applies to me as a student and also what I think is objectifying what it entails to hold this status in academia. My identity has been constructed in this literature without my permission. My personal background and lived experiences have been made invisible by researchers’ stereotypes and generalizations. But it’s more complex than that. First-generation college students – just like any other student who may be experiencing difficulties in academia – have stories that matter. Thus, I need to add my experiences to this academic research. I need to examine the choices I made and be self-reflexive about why those choices may have contributed to some of the dilemmas I faced navigating academic life. Writing through the evolutionary framework of ESR in Chapter Four does just that. I examine mundane interpersonal experiences and utilize theoretical language to

show how I've made sense of these moments from the positionality of a first-generation college graduate/student. In doing so, I fulfill what Ellis et al. (2010) describe as a layered account by invoking "readers to enter into the 'emergent experience' of doing and writing research, conceive of identity as an 'emergent process,' and consider evocative, concrete texts to be as important and abstract analyses" (p. 4).

Critical Reflexivity through Autoethnography and Sensemaking Theory

Adams and Holman Jones (2011) link reflexivity, autoethnography, and queer theory by writing in a way that brings the readers into their own experiences. They use "I," "you," "we," and "her" to tell their stories and they justify this choice because these terms "combine us, as authors and readers, into a shared experience. My experience—our experience—can politicize your experience and could motivate and mobilize you, and us, to action" (p. 110). When they use "you," I am pulled into their story. I'm not sure which author was discussing their experience, but I was pulled into a story about a parent and his/her child's experience on a cruise. By using "you" I felt like the parent. I was also concerned why the child was so upset. I learned more about the connections between reflexivity, autoethnography, and queer theory because I was able to experience their choices in describing the connections.

In Chapter Four, I am also applying reflexivity, autoethnography, and queer theory by examining my lived experiences throughout higher education as a first-generation college graduate/student. However, I am doing so innovatively by using the ESR paradigm to make sense of my multi-faceted identity. Thus, I am fulfilling some of the elements that Adams and Holman Jones (2011) claim when they describe this critical methodology. For instance, they state:

The *autoethnographic* means sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling. The *queer* means making conversations about harmful situations go, working to improve the world one person, one family, classroom, conference, and essay at a time. The *reflexive* means listening to and for the silences and stories we can't tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never questionably *know* (pp. 111-112).

Through the sensemaking framework, I use *I* to discuss my experiences in new environments (ecological change) and how those experiences thrust me into the enactment stage of sensemaking. I am doing this because I want to write with the performative *I* – to show my experiences while they are being told (Pollock, 2007). I use *you* in the selection stage of sensemaking to not only to create a partial explanation for myself of what was happening in the enactment stage, but to bring you – the reader – into my experiences in hopes that you may find glimpses of your own lives in my story. In the retention stage of the ESR sequence, I incorporate theoretical language to show how I have made sense of my experiences throughout higher education, and how those experiences have constructed my multi-faceted identity. Together, my hope is that *we* can make sense out of my lived experience in a way that will move toward collective action. In the following section I examine some of the critiques of autoethnography.

Critiques of Autoethnography

The critiques of autoethnography are vast and include phrases like “navel-gazing,” (Sparkes, 2002) “self-absorption,” (Atkinson, 2006) “me-search” (Fine, 2003), and “artsy craft literary exercises” (Sanders, 1999). Autoethnographers’ work is described as “soft research” compared to the hard “facts” that are produced out of quantitative studies. Some critics go as far as to claim that the practice of autoethnography itself is inherently exaggerated, over-celebrated, and the goals of autoethnography are no different than interactionist ethnographers (Atkinson, 2006). However, debating over semantics and turf are not the goal of autoethnography promoters. In fact Art Bochner makes the remark that “the self-indulgence charge seems like only another way to try to reinscribe ethnographic orthodoxy” (as quoted in, Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 24). Ronai (1995) makes a similar claim regarding sociology and the field’s obsession with the production of scientific knowledge. She says that,

Sociology is like an abusive patriarch who demands the silence of his children...Like the dysfunctional family that strives to present a respectable front to outsiders... the typical article format requirements in sociology are used to represent sociology as a respectable ‘science’ in the eyes of other scientists, and the public at large. They must know how research is ‘really’ conducted by sociologists because the family might be broken up as a result. (p. 423)

These critiques further fuel the autoethnographic fire of scholars like Ellis and Bochner (1996; 2006) and Denzin (2006). Denzin argues that the critique of realists – especially Anderson (2006) who is trying to take ownership of a subset of autoethnography he calls “analytic autoethnography” – is like comparing apples and oranges. For Denzin (2006)

scholars like “Ellis, Bochner, Richardson, St. Pierre, Holman Jones, and their cohort want to change the world by writing from the heart” (p. 422); scholars like Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006) do not.

In the following chapter, I discuss the mundane interpersonal experiences and developmental moments that triggered my identity negotiations throughout my time at my community college, my undergraduate four-year institution, and my master’s program. I discuss these experiences through the ESR framework found in Weick et al. (2005) article. I traverse through these moments in back and forth motions – following the pathways of the ESR model.

In chapter five I examine my choices in method and paradigmatic framework and discuss the limitations of those choices in examining my positionality as an FGC graduate/student in higher education. Second, I examine my choices in theoretical lenses and discuss the limitations of applying those theories in my analysis. Last, I discuss the implications of applying the sensemaking framework with autoethnography as well as co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy for future research and pedagogical praxis.

Together, these chapters illuminate the communicative experiences of a first-generation college student through her development and journey into the status of a first-generation college graduate/student. These chapters are not meant to “bash” anyone or defame anyone’s reputation. Instead, they are meant to show how communication has the powerful affect to alter, reinforce, and shape a first-generation college graduate/student’s multidimensional identity in both empowering and oppressive ways. I do not identify anyone (who is alive) by name, nor do I divulge any identifying information (Ellis,

2007). In fact, as I'm learning how to write in this alternative form, I am particularly concerned with relational ethics and the responsibility I have to the intimate others who are presented in the story I write about myself. Below, I define what relational ethics entails and describe some of Ellis (2007) relational ethics guidelines that I have considered throughout this thesis.

Relational Ethics

Ellis (2007) makes the contention that as autoethnographers, we run some of the same risks as other researchers who are mandated to follow procedural ethics guidelines by IRB committees. As such, we should consider how to protect the human subjects who are constructed in our stories, and we should work to maintain their privacy. A central question we should ask ourselves as Ellis (2007) proclaims is, "what are our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves" (p. 5)? Also, Ellis (2007) suggests that we should "decide when to take our work back to those who are implicated in our stories" (p. 6).

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I have grappled with both of these issues above. First, I have contemplated what this story will mean to those who might find themselves in this thesis (particularly, my mentors, advisors, and professors). Since there are no clear cut rules to follow from IRB committees, I have considered how my words may hurt, surprise, or even damage those relationships I am trying to improve throughout the sensemaking process of writing in this alternative form (Ellis, 2007). The advice that I have decided to follow from Ellis (2007) is to "live in the world of those [I] write about and those [I] write for and to..." and to "strive to leave the communities, participants, and [myself] better off at the end of the research than [I was] at the

beginning” (p. 25). That is all I can do. All I can do is be mindful that people are not always aware of what they are saying when they say it – that they are only aware of what they have done when they have looked back on their actions (Weick, 1995). Thus, just as I must be mindful of my own writing and interpretations, I ask that the reader – or those who might find themselves in my story – do the same. Together, we can urge ourselves to better to one another. We can urge ourselves to remember that communication shapes and alters our identities. We can urge ourselves to be self-reflexive simultaneously.

Second, I have contemplated whether to take this thesis back to those (particularly my family) who may find themselves in my writing. This contemplation has created fear. I am frightened that my mother will be disappointed with some of the decisions I have made growing up, and that she won’t understand how I have constructed her identity, I am frightened that my father may not appreciate the story about the crack-house, and like Ellis (2007), I am embarrassed of my assumptions that none of my family will read this thesis unless I provide them with the document myself. But I have to remember that just like the sensemaking process, “autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111).

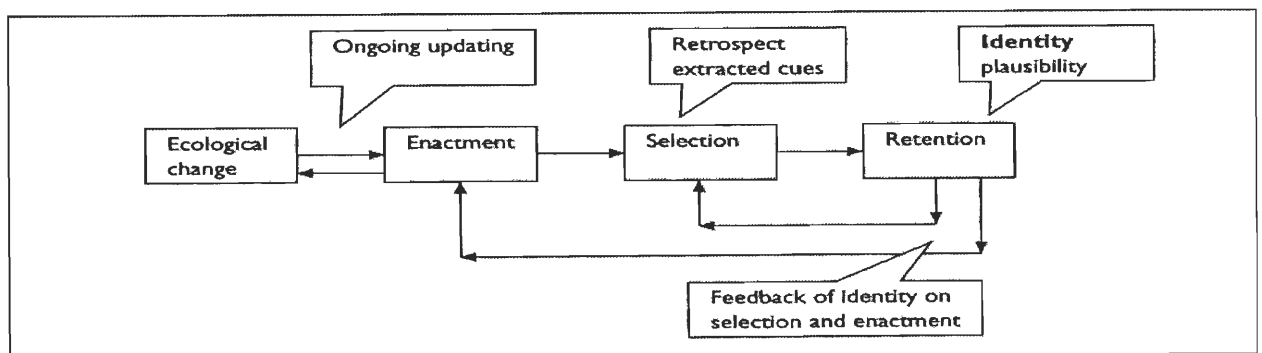
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Introduction

To write this chapter I utilized the ESR sequence (Weick et al. 2005) to analyze particular moments and interpersonal experiences from my undergraduate years to my master's program. I traverse through the ESR sequence following the paths of the graph found in Figure 1 below. For the first part of the sequence – ecological change – I relive my encounters with new social contexts (i.e., community college, four-year institution, and master's program) and I write with the performative *I* to have the reader experience the uncertainty I felt living in these moments. After I experience each new context, I follow the sequence of the ESR framework to the enactment stage of the model and discuss the interpersonal triggers that made me engage in the sensemaking processes. I also write with the performative *I* because of the reciprocal relationship between ecological change and enactment in ESR model. In other words, the uncertainty that I felt encountering new social contexts was fueled by particular professors and significant others throughout my experiences in institutions of higher learning. Thus, I relive these moments so that I can proceed throughout sensemaking process.

Figure 1: The Relationship Among Enactment, Organizing, and Sensemaking



Before proceeding into the selection stage of the sensemaking process, I relive my experiences in two social contexts – undergraduate two-year and four-year institutions – following the ecological \leftrightarrow enactment sequence. I do this because my sensemaking process was more intense at my four-year institution. The negative experiences I had with a professor at my four-year institution thrust me into the selection stage of ESR sequence and eventually, the retention stage. I use *you* in the selection stage of sensemaking to not only to create a partial explanation for myself of what was happening in the enactment stage, but to bring you – the reader – into my experiences in hopes that you may find glimpses of your own lives in my story. I do this because as I was making sense of these moments, was able to understand more about academia and my positionality as a first-generation college student in such contexts. In the retention stage of the ESR sequence, I incorporate theoretical language to show how I have made sense of my experiences throughout higher education, and how those experiences have constructed my multifaceted identity.

Thus the first two sequences that the reader will follow with be the reciprocal relationship of ecological \leftrightarrow enactment at both my two-year and four-year institutions, followed by the selection and retention stages of the sequence that are representative of my experiences at my two-year institution. I will then traverse back to the selection and retention stages of the sequence to make sense of my experiences at my four-year institution. I use the model in the following way: Ecological change #1 \rightarrow enactment \rightarrow ecological change #2 \rightarrow enactment \rightarrow selection (community college) \rightarrow retention (community college) \rightarrow selection (four-year institution) \rightarrow retention (four-year institution). I decided to follow the sequence in such a way because it helped me

understand some of the interpersonal experiences I had with professors at my four-year institution, and why these moments thrust me into further sensemaking processes once I entered my master's program.

After I describe the retention stage of the ESR sequence that examines my experiences at my four-year institution through a theoretical lens, I once again relive an interpersonal experience with a professor at my four-year institution (enactment). This will then thrust me into the last sequence of the ESR model (my master's program) and I will re-experience my time at this institution following the sequence in a linear fashion. Thus, the last sequence will follow the ESR model in the following way: Enactment (four-year institution)→ ecological change #3→ enactment→ selection→ retention→. Thus, in this part of the chapter I discuss my experiences in my master's program and how the juxtapositions of my previous sensemaking processes and experiences during my undergraduate years have informed my future goals and academic interests as I embark on the status of a first-generation college PhD graduate/student.

Reliving Community College

[Ecological Change #1]

This building is large, much larger than my high school. I walk in through the double door and look in my backpack for all of my supplies. Do I have a pen? Check. Did I bring my notebook? Check. Where is my classroom? I turn right and walk up the giant staircase. My heels miss the natural grooves of the stairs; I have to use both feet to land each large step. Am I in the right building?

I am walking through a narrow hallway with brown walls. This place is like a maze. Why are there two parallel hallways of classrooms? Oh god, what I am doing here?

What I am doing with my life? Do I even know how to be a college student? Keep walking, Tabatha. You can't *just* be a high school drop-out. Perfect! There is a sign that tells me what direction to take.

I walk into my class and find a seat. Wow, is that my teacher? He's so young! He is smiling and looks excited to meet us. I learn his name and that he bowled a perfect 300. I learn that his wife is an actress and they met in college. I am watching a video of him performing a comedic speech. He is so funny. He reminds me of a better-looking Jim Carrey. He sweats a lot.

I feel a sense of community here. I wonder if that's why they call it *community* college. Who knows? My teacher likes me. He is trying to convince me to join the speech team. He thinks that I have potential to perform. He's crazy. He asks me to meet the other performers. I guess I'll try this out.

I meet the members of the college's speech team in a large room in the Arts building. Damn, they have their own room at the college to study and perform? They are welcoming. Some of them are part-time students taking night courses when they can. We have similar life stories. Well, maybe some of us do. Dante and I do. He was in the Marines. He is Puerto Rican. He is the best performer I have ever seen. He is my boyfriend, now.

Dante and I perform a drama together. We are dating in the story but no one knows that we are dating in real life. I love him. I love my peers. I love performing. I belong here. I belong in school. My confidence is shoddy, though. I don't believe in myself. My teacher thinks I'm selling myself too short. Maybe he's right.

I choose to perform a poetry piece written by Sapphire. Her words stick with me. They sting at times but I am pulled in to her story. She is raw, ruthless, but she speaks from the heart. She tells of rape, masturbation, and racism. She ignites in me, memories from my childhood. I am not black like she is. I was never raped. But I perform her words through my body and I project her pain. I win awards for speaking her hurt.

I realize that as a young Puerto Rican woman I do not know of any political leaders that move me the way Sapphire does. I write a speech about the lack of Latino/a leaders and I use comedy as a technique. I joke how my culture “multiplies like rats” but inside I know my family –the only true representation I have of a Latino/a family – were young and naïve when they had their children. I worry that I am doing my culture a disservice. I win a first-place trophy for making fun of a culture I really know nothing about.

I can’t take any more classes here. What am I going to do now? I’ve spent five years here. It’s my second home. I look into transferring to another school. Am I really going to be a full-time student? Anxiety is racing through me because I know I can’t take my time once I leave this school. My life is staring at me in the face and I have to jump in head first. I guess I’ll apply to a nearby private institution. They have a speech communication track. Maybe they’ll let me coach their speech team. I can’t imagine performing anymore.

Interpersonal Triggers at Community College

[Enactment]

“Tabatha, can I talk to you for a minute after class?”

“Sure” I say although I am apprehensive for this encounter. My teacher is really good-looking and he talks to me like an adult. He is not like teachers I had in high school. Every time he engages me in conversation, I blush. Am I crushing on this man? I am used to a typical hierarchical relationship with my teachers; professional, detached, somewhat awkward.

“The speech you gave today was just what I was looking for. I can tell you are a natural performer. Will you come to a meeting for the speech team? See what it’s all about? I am the assistant director and I coach students on their performances.”

“I guess,” I say although I really don’t want to do it.

He and I are friends now. We talk about sex and his marriage. I tell him about sex with Dante. He coaches me on my poetry performance. He loves how I use my body to signify a scarf slowly falling from my shoulder to the floor. Are these the types of encounters teachers typically have with their students? Is college the space for these types of interactions? I don’t care. He is the only person I can talk to about college. He understands my unique qualities. He finds it interesting that I have lived a somewhat unconventional life compared to other students in his classes. I label him my friend, my mentor. I want to be like him when I become a teacher. I want to have a similar relationship with my students.

I am in a hotel room in Philadelphia for the National Forensics Competition. I am with other members from my speech team. We are in this room because my mentor, my friend, wants to give us a pep-talk before our final speech competition. He lists off the names of those who have made it into the final round.

“Ben,” he says, “you made into finals for debate and informative. Meg, you made into finals for poi. Tabatha, you have made it into finals for poetry, after-dinner speaking, and drama interpretation.”

My colleagues gasp. “Don’t glorify her,” he says. “You all are winners.”

I’m embarrassed by my success.

He begins to cry because his close friend passed away recently. He tells us that we should cherish this time in our lives because moments are fleeting. I am sobbing watching him break down. My fellow colleagues criticize him for using his friend’s death to motivate us. I admire him for this moment and his transparency. He is everything I want to be.

Reliving Private 4-Year Institution

[Ecological Change #2]

This campus feels different than the campus at my community college. It is nestled inside the Naperville community; amidst Victorian style houses strewn with vibrant colors. A few blocks away are the streets that contain several eateries and bars; a location I have avoided since I turned 21. Where I grew up people called Naperville “yuppie-ville.” It’s not unusual to see Lamborghinis and Bentleys driving through the streets. People who live in Naperville have money – old money – and live in houses with in-ground pools. I loathe this area. It makes me feel insignificant, poor, less worthy. Walking around campus makes me feel the same way. I feel like a stranger, an outsider of this institution.

I am walking around campus on a beautiful day. The sun is warm on my face. I lift my head up into the sky and close my eyes. I can’t believe I made it here. I can’t

believe that I took the plunge. When I open my eyes, I notice the sounds of the birds and the formation they are flying. Some of them land on the historic buildings that house my classrooms and professors' offices. This campus makes me feel like I'm living in the colonial days. I wonder what Martin Luther King Jr. talked about when he visited this campus. I wonder how I am going to fit in here. I look around again and I see other students walking hurriedly to their classes. Do they feel the same way I do?

I call my mom to tell her about this moment. I tell her how lucky I am to be here and how confused I am that I have made it this far. I tell her about the birds and the sunshine. She tells me that I am an old soul. She says that she didn't have the types of moments I am explaining until she was in her thirties. She understands this peak experience. She understands everything that I am telling her about this moment.

I'm thinking about her life and what it would've looked like if she had this same experience. I'm thinking about my life growing up and how her strength inspired me to walk on this campus. I feel like we are kindred spirits and I am thankful to have her in my life. I have to do this the right way. I have to graduate for her. Will I ever feel like I have to graduate for myself?

I'm meeting one of my professors. I don't know what to call him. Do I refer to him by his first name, or do I call him professor? What does this title even mean? He senses my ignorance. He doesn't seem to like me. I don't know what he is talking about in class. What does rhetorical criticism mean? Why is he warning me and my classmates that he will be talking to us like grad students? Why does he want things to be confusing for us?

I can't understand his academic language. I am frustrated because I am overthinking my first assignment. I am researching how to write an abstract. I have no idea what a methodological tool is, or what a methodology even means. Why isn't he answering my emails? Why can't he help me to better understand? Is this what a four-year institution is like? I want to go back home, back to visit my friend. I want to go back to *community* college.

Noticing Discrimination and Power at 4-Year Institution

[Enactment]

"Hi everyone, my name is Dr. Jones. I'll be your instructor for today."

Why is she calling herself Dr.? *I say to myself.*

"Dr. Milihan is away at a conference. I understand that you have an abstract assignment due. Are there any questions I can help you answer?"

Perfect time for me to lash out! I raise my hand.

"Yes? And your name is?" She says.

"Hi, I'm Tabatha Roberts" I say, taken aback by her forcefulness. "I just want to know if I did this right. I don't feel like Professor Milihan has taken the time to help me do this assignment. I have been trying to contact him for days but I've gotten no response."

She looks at me puzzled. Oh no, I probably should not have said that in front of the class.

Or at all.

"Well, I don't know the details of this assignment," she says. "But I'm sure when he gets back he can help you figure things out."

"Doubtful" *I say to myself.* She can sense my attitude toward her comment.

She lectures me and my classmates about the relationships we should have with professors. She tells us how busy they are, how much they have on their plate. She seems irritated. I'm sure I have caused this sudden change in her mood.

Professor Milihan returns from his conference and hands back our abstracts. I read in large red ink, 40%. What! I spent days on this assignment. How did I get such a terrible grade? After class, I approach Professor Milihan. He's telling me to sign up for his office hours so we can discuss my future in class. He is cold toward me. Oh no, did she tell him what I said?

I can't meet with him until next week. His office hours are always booked and he doesn't respond to emails. I am frustrated for more reasons than one. I am being informed from my advisor that the class I am taking with Professor Milihan – Media Criticism – is making it impossible for me to fulfill a requirement. My advisor is telling me that because Professor Milihan is teaching my class with a Rhetorical Criticism book, I have to take Persuasion Theory in order to graduate. This school doesn't offer Persuasion Theory every semester. I won't be able to graduate on time! I'm hyperventilating.

I am in Professor Jones' office begging her to be my instructor for an independent study. She doesn't seem to like me either. She asks me to sit down in her office.

"Let me give you some advice." She says. "When you are around professors your voice should automatically become lower. There is a level of respect that is demanded of professors. We are experts in our field. We are doctors."

I tell her that I have no idea professors have the title Dr. in front of their name.

"Have you researched any of your professors, Tabatha?"

Research my professors? For what? *I think to myself.*

She tells me to Google my professors because most of them are well-known scholars.

I should lower my voice because they have degrees?

“What is your major, Tabatha? What do you want to do in your life?”

I feel like she is mocking me. I am breaking down. Tears are swelling in my eyes as I am telling her that I want to become a teacher because I want to help transfer students navigate their way from community colleges to 4-year schools. I don’t want them to feel lost and confused.

I feel the walls start to break down between us. Her eyes are saying something different, now. She understands me. She tells me that before I meet with Professor Milihan, I should calm down. She advises me that it’s not the best idea to walk into his office frustrated.

“Believe me, you’ll get more from him if you’re calm,” she says.

I am knocking on *Dr.* Milihan’s door. He thinks I am here because I want to talk about my grade. I’m not here for that. I know I’m better than a 40%. I tell him that I am frustrated because the classes I need to graduate aren’t offered in time. I tell him that I don’t think this school adheres well to transfer students’ needs.

He looks at me cross. “What is your grade point average?” He asks.

“It’s a 3.9,” I say, confused.

“No, I’m not asking what your grade point average was at the community college, what is your grade point average here?”

“It’s a 3.9!” I proclaim.

“You see, Tabatha. This is the problem I have with transfer students – they are not trained the way students are trained at four-year institutions. Their education is inadequate. When

they get to schools like this one, they can't keep up. I don't have time to deal with transfer students' issues. I don't get paid enough to deal with these problems. If it were up to me, every student would start their freshman year at a four-year institution."

That's it. *I think to myself*. This place isn't right for me.

Narrative Reduction of Interpersonal Triggers at Community College

[Selection]

You spent five years at the community college because it was convenient. You could afford this college which helped because you could avoid learning the language of financial aid. You were able to take your time there without feeling rushed.

When you walked into your first communication classroom you had no idea you would be standing in front of your peers with looks of admiration and liking. You didn't know that you would have to remind yourself on a daily basis that it's okay to feel lost. But, that's what growing up is all about – not knowing anything at all until you've figured something out.

Dante changed your life because he spit poetry at you like venom and it made you queasy. When he stood up in front of your classroom and performed, he took you to mountain tops. He told you that you were worthy and beautiful. He showed you what a Puerto Rican man can be. You fell in love with him because of his essence, his beauty, his tough olive skin. But you didn't need him. You had the same skin.

You blushed during every interaction with your teacher because you were not used to being around strong, smart men. Your father and your step-father were the only two male figures in your life. What did they show you? They showed you how to be weak and selfish. They showed you the kind of person you didn't want to be so you

confused admiration for your teacher with attraction. But that was only temporarily. You figured it out later on. You figured out that the attraction you felt for him was simply because he was the first person that ever instilled confidence in you.

The path you chose in your life was not an easy one. Every step that you took was headed in the wrong direction. You didn't have anyone to guide you the other way. You had addicts in your life and a mother who was also trying to figure things out. You were friends with lost souls. But when you started college you knew there was something else waiting for you. That room in the Arts building became your home because you found an avenue to express yourself. You used performance to do it because it was too difficult at the time to show anyone who you really were. You used Sapphire's struggles to represent your own. You were growing. Slowly.

You will never really know if the relationship you had with your teacher was the "right" one. You knew that it felt good to rely on someone. You knew that the both of you enjoyed each other's company and he wanted you to succeed. When you would sit in his office and share personal stories it didn't feel wrong. The only time it felt bad was when you disappointed him.

Remember when you were in Philadelphia and he took you into a large room to practice your comedic speech until he thought it was perfect? Remember how he stood in the back of that room and made you project your voice to make sure everyone could hear you? When you performed the following day for the finals, he was in the crowd cheering you on. Don't you remember the look in his eyes when you got a standing ovation? He was proud of you. You were proud of you.

He told your fellow speech team members not to glorify you because he wanted you to be humble. He didn't want others to look at your success and feel bad about their misfortunes. At that moment he taught you not to gloat. When he cried about his friend he reminded you that there will always be barriers in your life. He taught you that no matter how successful you become, life can vanish in a matter of seconds. At that moment he taught you how to feel.

You didn't want to leave this school and continue your education because you didn't think you could do it without him. You knew there was a chance you could fail. You knew there was a chance you might disappoint your mother. But you also knew that there was no turning back. You were in too deep. You were really strong but you didn't know how to be stronger. You needed time.

Feedback of Identity on Interpersonal Triggers from Community College

[Retention]

If it wasn't for my teacher at the community college I would be in a different place; one in which I didn't hold the positionality of a first-generation college graduate/student. My father was a drug addict. I was a high school drop-out. Neither of my parents graduated high school. These lived experiences painted a grim picture of me. I was an "at-risk" student. It would've been really easy and even expected for me to give up. But my teacher became my mentor and my confidant. He provided for me what I missing from home. He had a degree but he also provided psychosocial benefits such as friendship and support. He was nurturing and provided an environment where I could learn and explore for myself (Buelle, 2004). He is a major reason why today, I can be honest about my past and be proud that I am a first-generation college graduate/student

with diverse lived experiences. But our relationship is also the reason why I can admit that I am still an FGC student with particular needs.

I need an occasional “good job” Tabatha! Way to go! I need to connect. I need someone with credibility – with a degree – to say something genuine once in a while. I need my professors to be more uplifting. I want more engaged pedagogies – pedagogies of the erotic (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009).

A pedagogy of the erotic recognizes how sexuality (not in the usual sense of the word), embodiment, and desire are absent from teacher-student relationships. Love and connection – two basic human desires – lose value in educational systems where the mind is more important than the heart. But the relationships that teachers have with their students can be more personal. And as Pensoneau-Conway (2009) explains, “when students and teachers come to know one another on a personal level, they create space in which they feel they have a personal stake in what happens in the classroom” (p. 191). These relationships are “erotic” because they involve self-actualization and the affirmation of personhood. They transform the lives of both teacher and student and the blur the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable in these types of relationships. They enable “educational participants to imagine that the world can be different, and to actualize their role in creating change” (p. 191).

The relationship I had with my teacher at the community college motivated me to go to school. If it weren’t for our conversations and his acknowledgment of my personhood, I don’t know how far I would’ve made it in college. I loved him. But it was a love that was ignited because of his passion – his pure and genuine care for my development. He showed grace toward me even though I didn’t ask for it (Su, 2013). I

pushed myself because I wanted him to be proud of me. And a result, I became a more well-rounded student. Really, I became a more well-rounded *person*.

Our relationship also propelled me to envision what any future interactions would like with my professors. I imagined that I would build the same relationships when I transferred to a 4-year institution. However, I quickly realized that these relationships were few and far between.

Partial Articulation of Power and Discrimination at 4-Year Institution

[Selection]

Dr. Jones was cold and forceful because you were unlike most of the students at the private college. You didn't understand hierarchy and you assumed professors were people you could have genuine conversations with. When you were honest about your frustrations, she probably assumed you were lazy. She judged you because you didn't perform the traditional role of student.

You experienced difficulty learning academic language because you came from a working-class background. You grew up in a blue-collar home. You never had academic conversations with your parents or your peers and the school you attended prior catered to the needs of a working-class student population. You were smart but you didn't know how to articulate yourself in a scholarly manner.

You felt like an imposter in the Media Criticism class because you were not ready to learn rhetorical concepts. You received a poor grade on your first assignment because you were overcompensating for your lack of understanding. You thought that if you researched enough and spent hours trying to write the perfect abstract, you'd impress your professor. You over did it.

When you met with Dr. Jones she assumed that you needed guidance finding the next direction in your life but you just needed someone to talk to. You needed someone to see you for what you were becoming. She probably asked you if you have researched your professors because she wanted recognition for her own expertise. How could you blame her? She worked just as hard as you did when she was a student.

She probably told you to lower your voice when interacting with professors because she didn't want you to ruin your reputation in the department. She probably knew that you genuinely didn't understand power. She is a feminist scholar. She recognized the damaging effects that could happen to you if you weren't careful in how you communicated with Dr. Milihan. She pointed you in the direction of the panopticon (Foucault, 1977). She made you aware that you were powerless on multiple levels.

When you sat in Dr. Milihan's office and told him that you didn't feel your school was catering to your needs, you offended him. He had been teaching there for many years. He was a well-known and respected professor. He was also the director of your department. Although you were aiming your frustrations at the transfer process, he felt attacked. He needed to put you in your place. He needed to turn you in to a complacent student. He did.

You left his office feeling defeated because you were misunderstood. He saw you as a number, a 40% grade. You wanted to give up because you imagined college as a space where you can develop. College was supposed to be the place where you could openly express your opinions. But that day you realized it was just like any other organizational structure you belonged to. You needed to learn how to play the game.

Feedback of Identity on Power and Discrimination in 4-Year Institution

[Retention]

During the time that I was experiencing difficulties with Dr. Milihan I was taking a communication theory class with Dr. Jones. I was also taking a class with a feminist scholar in the Women's Studies department. These women were the first exposure I had to feminism and the curriculum that I was being exposed to in their classes inspired my area of interests.

In my theory class I read muted-group theory (Ardener, 1975) which led me to co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998). This latter theory changed my life and provided me with the theoretical language to describe my experiences with Dr. Milihan. Mark Orbe's words stung me more than Sapphire's. It explained why I got fired from my position as a clerk for the railroad industry. It helped me negotiate why men belittled me at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. But more importantly, it gave me the communication tools to graduate and bypass any further discrimination with Dr. Milihan. It became the invisible cloak I used to fight power. It also helped me realize that the communication strategies I attempted to use with Dr. Milihan in the past negatively affected our relationship.

My initial interaction with Dr. Milihan was strewn with disaster the minute I knocked on his door. I had no plan of action – no way to determine or possibly even control the direction that this interaction would go. In my field of experience, I didn't need to strategize my communication behavior with teachers. I should've listened to Dr. Jones. I should've asked myself "what communication behavior will lead to the effect that I desire" (Orbe, 1998: also see Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 296). However, because I felt like an imposter to this institution and was without the theoretical language from co-

cultural theory, I did not have the ability to exercise the proper communication practices that would release me from the discriminatory encounter. Instead, I overcompensated in Dr. Milihan's class by attempting to become a superstar – an assertive assimilation practice (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Not only did I receive a 40% grade on my first assignment, other assignments were graded less than average.

While I was taking a class in the Women's Studies department, I utilized a feminist professor as a liaison for guidance in how to handle the situation with Dr. Milihan. She empathized with my struggles because she too, had experienced negative interactions with this man. She told me that I should analyze a feminist poem for my next assignment – a poem that she knew Dr. Milihan cherished. However, I was taking a media criticism course so I needed to bargain with my professor to allow me to analyze literary content. Before I met with Dr. Milihan I used another assertive assimilation practice – extensive preparation. Knowing that he was an expert in debate, I planned how I was going to approach the situation and thought about ways that I could convince him to let me write a feminist criticism on the content of the poem. It worked! However, my communication approach did not mend our tarnished relationship.

It wasn't until I found co-cultural theory that I was able to negotiate which communication approaches would yield the most desired responses from my professor. After taking (and passing) the media criticism course, I had to take argumentation and debate with Dr. Milihan. Seeming as how assertive assimilation tactics did not work in the past, I chose to interact with Dr. Milihan using nonassertive assimilation practices. Instead of making myself stand out, I blended in with the crowd. I observed how my classmates interacted with professors. When I would approach Dr. Milihan I did so

politely and used a softer tone in my voice. I called him Dr. instead of professor. I was developing positive face. I no longer expressed my frustration when he didn't respond to emails or when he forced me to take an independent study instead of a class. I was averting controversy – another nonassertive assimilation practice and it worked in my favor. But I still wasn't content knowing that I had to use particular communication practices to graduate. I wasn't content with the fact that I was the only one in the relationship that had to alter communication behaviors. Getting higher grades from Dr. Milihan wasn't enough. I needed a space to express my frustrations. I needed to understand what was happening to me at this school. So, I applied to graduate school.

Ongoing Interpersonal Triggers at 4-Year Institution: Noticing a Path to Change

[Enactment]

I am sitting in Dr. Jones' office. We are friends now. Well, not exactly friends but we definitely have a mutual respect for one another. She is telling me that I should apply to graduate school. I never thought about going for my masters. It took me so long just to get my bachelor's; how could I possibly do this all over again?

"Tabatha, believe me you are ready for this" says Dr. Jones. "You have the ability to conceptualize, you just need to work on your writing. You'll get that practice in graduate school. And from what I've seen in class you really like co-cultural theory – why don't you apply to Western Michigan University? Dr. Orbe is a professor there!"

Wait a minute, theorists are real people? *I think to myself.*

Dr. Jones scrolls down the page on Western Michigan's website. "Look here Tabatha, if you wait to apply, Dr. Orbe will be off sabbatical. You can start there right when he is returning!" Without reluctance I begin the application process.

I am opening up a letter from WMU congratulating me on my acceptance for a teaching assistantship. Holy crap! They want to pay for my school? I don't know what to do. Should I leave Chicago for Michigan? Should I leave all of my family and friends? Should I leave the person I live with; the love of my life?

Dr. Jones is telling me not to put my life on hold for my boyfriend. "If he really loves you, Tabatha he will support this decision no matter what."

I am telling her that I am scared to leave him, scared to leave everything I know behind. She tells me that she moved to Morocco for three years during her PhD. "Believe me," she said. "You will learn so much more about your partner over the phone. You will be able to read his voice and tell when he is upset. He will be able to tell if you are upset through your silence or the way your voice quivers. You will get to know each other more than you ever thought was possible. If it's meant to be, Tabatha, he'll support this."

The graduate program director from WMU is contacting me because he thinks I should apply for a Thurgood Marshall Fellowship. I look on the website to see what the application requirements are. I have to write an essay that describes how my values are similar to Thurgood Marshall. He was the first black justice in the Supreme Court! How does my life or my values remotely come close to this man's accomplishments?

There is only one thing I can think of to talk about. I have to tell *my* story. I have to be honest. I have to tell the fellowship committee about the discrimination I felt from my professor. I have to tell them how hard it is for me to be the first in my family to go to college. I have to tell them that I want to be a better teacher than my professor was to me.

Dr. Jones helps me revise my fellowship application draft. She helps me articulate what it is about co-cultural theory that changed me. She is making me realize it was my

socio-economic class that put me in an inferior position. Oh my god! Am I really going to send this? Is the fellowship committee going to believe me?

I open a letter from the graduate college. The first word that I see is *congratulations*. I can't believe it. I got the award! I drop to the floor in my living room. I am crying, even shaking from disbelief. My boyfriend is holding me. He is laughing because this is supposed to be a good thing. "Baby, why are you crying?" He says. "You did it! This is a good day!"

I am feeling so overwhelmed. My mom said that if I didn't get an assistantship, she would help me pay for my tuition. I don't need her to do that now. Someone in Michigan believes in me enough to take that burden off of my mom.

I am packing my belongings while my family is carrying heavy boxes to the moving truck. I feel so lucky that they are at my apartment to help me with the move. When everything is packed, I take one last look at my empty apartment. I spent 3 years here; two of those with the man I want to marry. My heart is racing so fast it feels like it's going to rip from my chest. This is the craziest thing I have ever done. I will never sleep in that hot bedroom again. I will never walk up the stairs nervous that my boyfriend is hiding behind something waiting to scare me. I'm moving to Michigan without him. How did I make this decision so fast?

I say goodbye to my boyfriend and drive away. I can't cry anymore. All of my tears have dried up. The only thing I can think of is that I am going to be a teacher?! I am the first in my family to get a degree. I am going to do this the right way. I am going to be the change I want to see in the academy.

Reliving Graduate School

[Ecological Change #3]

Walking around this campus makes me feel like I am a character in a cheesy college movie. “Son in Law” is the first thing that comes to mind. I feel like the main character in the movie. I probably stick out like a sore thumb. It feels strange that at 26, I am just now *going away* to college.

I can hear the sounds of guitars echoing off the buildings. Students from a fraternity are yelling across campus pleading for donated cash. There are dozens of people sprawled out on the grass listening to music. The summer air feels good on my body and I smile as I observe others relaxing and enjoying the warmth.

I am nervous as hell as I enter the tallest building on campus. This building houses my office and other communication faculty members and staff. My office is small and I have to share it with four other people. They are teaching assistants like me but we are all here for different reasons. I am the only one in my office who wants to go for a PhD.

My classes are interesting but my confidence is lower than it's ever been. I'm finding it difficult to articulate my ideas. I feel stupid and I am worried that my peers will notice. I'm being told that we all made it to graduate school for a reason but I don't know what that reason is. I have no idea how I got here or why the graduate college is paying for my school. There had to have been better candidates.

One of my professors can tell that my confidence is low. He scares me. He reminds me of Dr. Milihan but he insists that I am his colleague. I like his class because

he pushes me. He wants me to lose my passive voice. Something about his persona makes me want to push harder.

I am teaching a basic communication class which is the only space I feel confident. I thought I'd stand up in front of class just as unstable as I come off in my grad classes. Luckily, my supervising professor does not observe me in my teaching role. I'm pretty much free to conduct class how I like. Other than following a syllabus, I have the freedom to frame the course topics the way I see fit.

Most of my students have active minds and make it easy for me as a first-year teacher. I identify with them because I was just recently in their shoes. Some of them cross the boundaries of what I'm comfortable with; one student stands up and performs a two-minute improvisational speech about her birthday. She tells her fellow students and me that when we think of her birthday – 4/20 – we should remember Hitler and take a hit from our pipes. I give her a zero for her what I deem is an inappropriate topic.

I take a significant amount of points off from another student's grade because she arrives late for every class. In the first few weeks of the semester she was never tardy. She stood out and I admired her out-spoken self. I was like her in undergrad. But she is rubbing me the wrong way. She is coming to class every day with an aura of confidence and entitlement. She doesn't seem to realize that missing half of the class is the same thing as being absent. I want her to like me but she doesn't respect me. I don't respect her either. I wish she would've told me that she was a single mother and lived a long distance from campus. I would've considered giving her a break.

The professors in my building are pretty distant. This is surprising to me given my expectations of graduate school. Dr. Jones used to tell me that professors treat teaching

assistants like peers. This experience is starting to feel like a more time-consuming extension of undergrad. I am expected to present myself as a professional but no one is watching. No one seems to care. I'd rather just be myself.

I am both a student and a teacher and I'm getting upset knowing what happens behind the scenes. Why are we charging our undergrads so much money for books? Why do we have to keep our doors open during office hours? Am I supposed to be as distant with my students as my professors are with me? I want to know my students' stories. I want to provide them the space in the classroom to reflect on their lives and their place in society. I don't want them to look at me the same way I looked at Dr. Milihan.

I am watching my colleagues slip through the cracks and I am blaming the faculty for their fate. Why doesn't anyone recognize this? Why aren't they helping my peers? This doesn't seem fair. This experience feels worse than my interactions with Dr. Milihan. I don't think I'm cut out for this life. I don't think that I can be a communication scholar.

Noticing Discrepancies on the Path to Change: Updating Self and Communicative Choices

[Enactment]

I have completed the first year of my master's program and I am registering for a summer class about feminism and women in higher education. My department doesn't offer these types of classes and I have been waiting to take a class like this at the master's level. I am really excited about the course content and the fact that I am going to be taking a class with PhD students. I am hoping this experience will challenge me academically.

My class is being taught by a PhD teaching assistant and a professor. They both identify as feminists and they believe the course content mirrors some of their experiences navigating academic life. They are tough and brilliant – the kind of women I aspire to be.

The readings are making me angry. I am learning the history of higher education and the fact that women have been absent in many of the top universities. I am learning that we are paid less than our male colleagues and only a handful of women have been offered positions in top ranking administrative positions. I am thinking of my future and I'm envisioning the struggles that I have had and will continue to have if I decide on a tenure-track. This class is also making me angry at my department.

My colleagues and I are writing a paper about the lack of women mentors in higher education. There are three of us from my department and we decide that we will use standpoint theory to release some of our frustrations feeling neglected in our department. As I'm writing my portion of the paper, I am realizing that the frustration that I am feeling is not really my own. I have a mentor. Although he is male, he is all I need. He enables me to have a voice and a space to express it. It is my colleagues that I want to write this paper for. I want them to use this paper as a site of reflection for feeling that no one cares.

It is the last day of class and we are presenting our paper in front of our peers. The feedback, however, is not what I expected. My professor asks: "Have you all ever considered your role in creating the change you want to see? Have you ever thought about reaching out to your professors to get the support you need?"

I never thought about that before. *I think to myself.*

Part of our paper is urging our department to treat us like academic mothers. My professor seems aggravated by our call for these types of relationships. She says: “I’m sorry, but that is asking a lot of your professors. You are asking us to basically hold your hand throughout this process. Don’t you see your agency in all of this?”

I guess I don’t.

I am in the second year of my master’s program and I have been chosen to be a mentor for my fellow teaching assistants. I take this responsibility with pride and determination; I want them to have a different experience than my colleagues. I am telling them that they need to ask for help and not expect it to be handed to them. I am telling them what to watch out for. I am telling that that is okay to create relationships with their students. I want them to take their teacher role seriously. I want them to understand that they can learn from their students just as much as their students can learn from them.

This responsibility is making me reflect on my role as a student and my emerging role as a teacher and mentor. I can see all of the mistakes I am making and I am thinking through some of the reasons my professors treated me the way they did. There has to be an explanation for this. If I can look inward, my professors should do the same. Shouldn’t we make it a goal to be better to one another?

Retrospective Attention on Emerging FGC Positionality

[Selection]

When you left Chicago to move to Michigan you were terrified. You were leaving all that you knew behind. It was the first time that you would be away from your mother. Of course that hurt, she is your best friend. But you knew there was nothing for you in

Chicago. Although it was a tough decision to move away from your boyfriend, you knew he would hold you back. You were growing without him. If you stayed, you would have lived your life for someone else. You would have worked at the bar and continued to be unhappy. Yes, it hurt him. Yes, you broke his heart. But if you stayed, you would have resented him. It was time to go.

During the first couple months of graduate school you weren't confident because you imagined that your professors and peers would be cut-throat. You thought that they would undermine you. But when you met your advisor you knew you came to the right place. Things were hard but you were ready to pursue your dreams. You just needed to understand who you were becoming.

What you learned during your undergrad, you still have to apply today. As a first-generation college student you have to work a little harder to understand academic material. You have to read articles twice. You have to apply theory to the life you were used to living and figure out ways to make it matter in college. You have to show who you are now but stay true to your working-class roots. Co-cultural theory has become your lens and you will use the communication strategies for the rest of your life. You are woman in a male-dominated field. Your academic interests are not popular. You will always be a co-cultural member. However, you will forget at times that your position as a teacher and mentor places you within a larger dominant membership. You have to constantly engage in self-reflexivity to understand how that position might place your students and peers in inferior positions. You're already doing it.

As a first-generation college student who has experienced discrimination in academia you are at an advantage. You have seen firsthand, how power marginalizes

people. This is probably why you spent the first year of your master's program blaming the faculty in your department for your colleagues' misfortunes. But you can use your marginalized status to transform how others view you. How you view yourself. How you treat others. You can use your life story to make all the small changes you want to see.

You gave your student a lower grade for showing up late to class because you had no other choice. You were a teaching assistant. You didn't make the rules. When you get to the point where you can write your own syllabus, you can make the classroom a different space for your students. Take what you are learning now and remember to change what you didn't like about your experiences in the future.

Your professor's feedback made you realize that you have more power than you thought was possible. Yes, you have to be strategic at times. Yes, it's not going to feel good. But you can use your body and your ontological viewpoints to constantly perform what you think a teacher should be. You can make visible who you are – a first-generation graduate student – and enable others to acknowledge that what society deems “different” isn't abnormal. You can take those small steps in your everyday life to counter normativity. It will be difficult. You will want to give up. But remember that nothing will change in your life or those around you if not for social activists. Be a social activist in every avenue of your life. You will leave a larger imprint on the world (however small) than you think.

Feedback of Identity on the Experiences of Navigating Higher Education

[Retention]

When I was taking a communication theory class during the first year of my master's program, I experienced one of the most life changing cosmology episodes to

date. Dr. Orbe helped me realize that I was a first-generation college student. I always knew that I was the first in my family to attend college, but I had no idea that I was part of a student cohort that attracted so much attention from researchers. I never knew I had been labeled. When this part of my identity became salient, I also found autoethnography, sensemaking theory, and critical communication pedagogy. It was at that moment that I knew I had to tell my story. I had to prove to all those researchers that my student cohort deserved to be looked at through a microscope; not just as generalized statistics or glossed over facts.

In my theory class I had to write a state-of-the-art literature review about a communication topic and I chose to examine research about first-generation college students. I was surprised that most of this research described FGC students as at-risk, underprepared, and socially or economically disadvantaged. But more importantly, this research made me feel bad about this part of my identity. I felt like a victim; as if somehow I got dealt the short end of the stick. But then I found the work of Deanna Fassett and John Warren who interviewed a student named “Jane” that had also been categorized as an “at-risk” student. In this article, Fassett and Warren (2005) asked an important question: “What if the notion of educational risk is a social construction, a concept made meaningful in and through our interaction with others?” (p. 239).

They argued that “educational risk might be best understood as in flux...” and that “any aspect of one’s identity is only a predictor of the likelihood of educational failure (or success) in as much as it exists in relation to an espoused ideology (of the institution, classroom, teachers, researcher, peer, etc.)” (p. 239). They had it right! Anyone can be at-risk of educational failure. But I am only “at-risk” if I allow others to

espouse that identity on me. Further, my students are only “at-risk” if I allow the ideologies of the institution to determine what it entails to be a successful student. Better yet, we are all “at-risk” if we don’t try to understand, at a more micro-level, how we are reproducing institutional ideologies through our social interactions.

Thus, Fassett and Warren’s (2007) work is especially pertinent to those researchers (e.g., McCroskey et al., 1989; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Pearson et al., 2008; Waldeck, 2006; Wheelless et al., 2011) and professors who claim certain aspects of an FGC students’ demographics or socioeconomic class automatically place them at a disadvantage. For instance, Fassett and Warren (2006) argue that when researchers point out these characteristics (as indicative of academic failure), they “lose sight of the fact that race or ethnicity is only a predictor of risk as it exists in relation (or in contest with) a particular ethnocentric bias” (p. 240). Thus they agree with Nakayama and Krizek (1995) and contend that the academic institution can be seen in light as a place that normalizes Whiteness.

I have experienced first-hand how professors treat students when they assume certain characteristics place them at a disadvantage. I was discriminated against because of my educational background and my class position. But when I got to my master’s program I slowly transformed who I was. Now, I am no longer ashamed of my co-cultural position. I don’t need to hide behind nonassertive assimilation communication practices. I am able to be more assertive and seek “a balance between attending to [my]self and others’ needs as [I] try to transform societal structures” (Orbe & Roberts, 2012, p. 300). I can be honest about the fact that I am a first-generation college

graduate/student – I can communicate myself and educate others to “reflect [my] co-cultural experiences” (p. 300). But I can’t stop there.

Thus, a vital extension of co-cultural theory can be made by including a dialogic element; critical communication pedagogy as both praxis and research. For instance, if teachers’ communicative choices during interaction with FGC students contains rhetoric and discourse that “functions to secure and sustain the dominance of Whiteness as a system that levies power” (Fasset & Warren, 2005, p. 243), they are marginalizing students and forcing them to strategically communicate (Orbe, 1998). However, as FGC students strategize they also take part in the language that normalizes their marginalized identities instead of resisting them. The same can be said of researchers who label FGC students at-risk, underprepared, or socially/economically disadvantaged. Thus Fassett and Warren (2005) challenge educators and researchers alike to “respond tactically, to create a discursive space for personal and collective agency” (p. 244). Critical communication pedagogy is such an avenue. According to Fassett and Warren (2007):

Critical communication pedagogy is about engaging the classroom as a site of social influence, as a space where people shape each other for the better and for worse; it is about respecting teachers and students and the possible actions they can take, however small, to effect material change to the people and world around them (p. 8).

In all my life I never thought that there was a teaching philosophy where both teacher and student discover, uncover, and engage in dialogue about social injustices happening in their own classroom and in larger social structures (Fassett & Warren, 2007). This philosophy feels like the beginnings of a revolution. Although the roots of

this philosophy can be traced to such scholars such as hooks (1994), Butler (1990; 1997), Freire (1992; 2003), Foucault (1977), and McLaren (1994), I was never exposed to these ideals in classes. It probably feels too dangerous, too “activist” for many teachers to incorporate this philosophy in their classrooms. But when things aren’t said, or when topics are ignored, injustices will be repeated. Thus, it is vital that these two theoretical frameworks are melded to challenge institutional ideologies.

I do not have the chance to fully employ critical communication pedagogical strategies into my own classroom. I am a graduate assistant who is handed a textbook, a syllabus, and told specifically what to cover. However, Fassett and Warren’s (2007) work has inspired me to make small changes in the way I teach. They have urged me to learn from my students and to question my own discourses. And they have solidified my commitment to mentor FGC students who are attempting to navigate academic life. Additionally, co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) has helped me realize that the discourses that occur between my own professors and I, require strategic rhetoric – a realization that I see as inhumane, detached, and destabilizing. I do not want this for my students or myself.

Further, my experiences in academia have made me determine that intercultural theories need a place in the college classroom alongside critical communication pedagogy. I don’t see change as possible without both schools of thought. Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) provides a useful framework from which to view interactions between students and teachers. If at any time, anyone can be at-risk of educational failure, teachers and researchers should examine how students negotiate their identities in the classroom or in the larger college setting. We should ask ourselves what teachers are

doing to notice these negotiations. We should ask what students are doing or not doing to succeed or fail. We should try to examine, if possible, what kind of communication strategies students are using to communicate with those in positions of power; those who determine their successes or failures. But simply naming what is happening is not enough. We need to take it a step further. We need to understand what is happening in the larger university context – how labeling practices exist, and then change how we communicate with our students.

Reliving Ph.D. Program

[Enactment]

I just got a call from the director of Southern Illinois University. “Tabatha, he says, I want to invite you to be a PhD student in the School of Communication...

In the following chapter I examine my choices for applying the sensemaking framework in my autoethnographic thesis as well as my choices for applying co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy. I also discuss the limitation of those choices. Last, I discuss the implications for method, paradigmatic framework and theoretical lenses for future research and pedagogical practices.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In the previous chapter I offered mundane experiences from my personal and academic life over the last 11 years. These years have been the most enlightening and equally trying years of my life. Although I could not capture everything I experienced in those years, I have extracted the most memorable moments – moments that have molded me into the complex person I am today. In this moment, I am a first-generation college graduate/student who will always be an FGC *something*. Whether that something is an FGC PhD student or an FGC professor, I will always identify as being the first in my family to have experienced academic life. This status – however it may evolve – is not just an academic label. My FGC status affects the relationships I have with my family, friends, peers, students, and professors. My journey in understanding what my FGC status means has caused me to lose, gain, tarnish, and rebuild relationships with people in my life. Carrying around this status has informed my understanding of power and how racism, sexism, and classism runs through many of us and exists in most social contexts. Thus, being an FGC graduate/student also means being aware of larger societal oppressions I would have never been able to see if I didn't attend college.

In the scheme of things I chose the red pill by furthering my education. My eyes are open and wide and they scan the world with more complex algorithms, constructs, and ideas than ever before. These newly formed ways of seeing society, culture, and those within it has sometimes pushed me into the margins when I return home. My friends no longer understand my anger, anger that is sometimes directed toward them

when they say racist or sexist comments. My family – especially my father – is proud of me but does not really know why. My friends who are the not the first in their immediate family to attend college do not talk about college the way I do. For them, college equates to a degree which equates to a job which equates to money. For me, college is my only choice. College is my new language. College is my journey to being a more responsible and caring person. All of this has to do with my FGC status. I embody this label and I feel it in every movement and conversation. I know more about myself because I have taken ownership of what this label means *for me*.

Today, I am a woman with strength who has just as many weaknesses. I am a woman who realizes how prejudice people are and how we as humans spend more time focusing on each other's differences rather than focusing on our similarities and our basic needs for love and connection. Today, I am a woman who is, and most likely will always be, nervous about experiencing new situations. I will sometimes offend and I will oftentimes feel disempowered. I will act in situations without thinking about how those actions might affect others, and I will spend a considerable amount of time reflecting on all my mistakes. I will always worry because I have always been someone that engages in self-reflexivity. Hopefully, I will learn from my mistakes to make better choices in the future. But for now, all I can do is try to be better – to mold myself into someone I expect others to be.

In this chapter, I will return to my choices in method and paradigmatic framework and discuss the limitations of those choices in examining my positionality as an FGC graduate/student in higher education. Second, I return to my choices in theoretical lenses and discuss the limitations of applying these theories in my analysis. Last, I discuss the

implications of applying the sensemaking framework with autoethnography as well as co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy for future research and pedagogical praxis.

Autoethnography as a Method of Choice

When I first encountered autoethnography, I was not only astounded but relieved that there was a semi-‘respected’ method in my field that I could use to examine some of the questions I had about communicative experiences that I felt couldn’t be answered with other methods. When I was in my undergraduate four-year institution I was never allowed to use *I* in any of my work. Professor Milihan once told me that my *I* had no credibility because my personal experiences could not possibly represent others’ lives. To him, examining oneself to expose larger societal issues was not research. With my master’s level academic training, I realized that what Dr. Milihan was referring to was generalizability – a term I have come to understand as a basis for critiquing social-scientific work.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) discuss that people who choose autoethnography as a method are also concerned with generalizability. However, unlike social-scientific researchers, autoethnographies can represent the relationship a reader has with an author’s story. They state:

In autoethnography, the focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers, and is always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know; it is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes. (para. 35)

Thus, I chose autoethnography to examine my mundane lived experiences and my positionality as a first-generation college student in higher education because I felt like the reader (FGC or not) needed a closer understanding of what it feels like to be representative of a student cohort that academic research categorizes with negative labels. I understand the limitations that come with using this methodology and I have tried to understand the critiques.

However, trying to understand these critiques is forcing me to mediate the conflicts between realists (Anderson, 2006) and interpretivists (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) who are debating the criteria for evaluating autoethnography, whether autoethnography should be analytical or emotional (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006), what it entails to write in an alternative form, and how we can rename autoethnography so it can be used in more “theoretical ways” (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006). These debates make me question my own ontological assumptions and whether my interest in autoethnography is the result of educational socialization or my own epistemological path. But as I create meaning out of these critiques, I am reminded of all those times I spent in classrooms grappling with positivist research. I am taken to the first class I had in my master’s program. The instructor started the class by warning the “qualitative people” in the room that this is not the class for them. “I don’t do soft research. In this class you will learn to think like a scientist. You will use words like parsimonious, heuristic, and objective. You will not speak or write in a passive voice.” When I would get papers back, part of my feedback would read “You need to be more confident. Use less emotion.” But it is not in me to write in a detached form.

I wrote the previous chapter in such a way to show that making sense of my positionality in the academy as a first-generation college graduate/student means “bringing the past into the autobiographical present... [to] insert myself into the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it” (Denzin, 2006, p. 423). There is no other way to explain my development (Ronai, 1995). I cannot write in a linear format. Further, I should not have to separate myself from other first-generation college students described in academic literature. I am a part of those statistics; I am that “at-risk” student that scholars want to prescribe remedies for (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Thus, my analysis is vital to the communication and education fields. It is a glimpse into how a first-generation college student experienced the academy, how a first-generation graduate/student makes sense of her multidimensional identity, and what unique perspectives both FGC and FGCG students can bring to the academic world.

Limitations of Writing Autoethnographically

One of the major critiques that autoethnographers encounter – and one that I understand as a limitation of the method – is that you must be an amazing/evocative/artistic writer to use autoethnography as a method (Moro, 2006). Carolyn Ellis, for example, has been critiqued numerous times for her style of writing. Her work has been labeled “self-indulgent” (Anderson, 2006) and “boring” (Moro, 2006). Further, Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) is suspicious of autoethnographies because they “annoy” and “outrage” him given the “amateur” and “anti-intellectual” authors behind autoethnographic works (p. 301). These critiques are limitations of autoethnography as a method. They signal that autoethnographic work is not only difficult but may be

impossible for some students/scholars to use. I have considered these limitations in my own work.

The first limitation of my autoethnographic analysis is that I may not be considered an evocative writer. I have not been trained in literary or creative writing and I am new to applying autoethnography as a method. As hard as I might try to pull readers into my story it is very possible – even likely – that the reader(s) will not identify with my lived experiences. In an attempt to explore this limitation during the writing process, I tried my best to show and tell simultaneously by writing with the performative *I* and *you* – what I argue is a form of pedagogy in itself. I can only hope that by showing and telling my experiences as a first-generation college student (e.g., the uncertainty of encountering college campuses for the first time, experiencing discrimination without the theoretical language to unpack larger societal oppressions, etc.) that *at least one* FGC student may find solace in my story. Also, I can only hope that *at least one* professor or teacher engages in self-reflexivity and works to acknowledge his/her students in new ways. As Fassett and Warren (2007) state, “autoethnography...helps uncover particular kinds of communication phenomena. It generates new insights into how power works around/through/in our bodies; it helps us imagine alternate, possible futures” (p. 135).

One thing that I can say for sure is that after I discussed my experiences as a first-generation college student in higher education at a recent National Communication Association conference, a professor pulled me aside and solidified my choice in methodology. She thanked me for telling my story because it made her want to learn more about her students’ lives. Thus, although my writing may not have an artistic

quality, it is my pedagogical tool for reminding scholars and teachers to see the importance in lived experience.

A second limitation is that my analysis may be considered self-indulgent. Is this just a story about myself? Does it mean anything to those who read it? Is it just a “blah, blah, blah” autoethnography that scholars like Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) will scream if they have to read? I don’t know. Chapter Four is a compilation of my lived experiences so in that sense, yes, it is self-indulgent. It is also pedagogical, however, in that it is about what I want to change in the communication field and the type of teaching philosophy I believe in because of my lived experiences. Thus, if I justify my analysis by answering to the questions above, I will be discrediting my own work. Further, by addressing this limitation I am justifying my epistemological path and so I would rather call my personal narrative a form of therapeutic release (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) than try to imagine that I can speak for others. I cannot. I accept that fate in all social-scientific or “artistic” work.

For me, writing this thesis with autoethnography is empowering. The story that will be told after this thesis is complete will be my version of how I got to where I am today. Further, I can only hope that this thesis will “serve as a landscape within which [I] and others might be able to make commitments and to act in ways that serve to establish new meanings and new patterns of behavior” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416). As I venture out into my career my commitment to creating synergistic mentor relationships and my instructional commitment to critical pedagogy will hopefully be realized. However, until that time comes, I can use this thesis to enact back to my students – first-generation college students or not – that I care about their successes in school. I can empower them

in the classroom with my own version of material I have no option but to present. I can ask them to question their assumptions as I'm learning to question mine. Further, I can say to those who have mentored me, thank you for showing me how to be a better person and a better teacher. And I can say to those professors who stunted my growth: Thank you for your narrow and close-minded ideologies. Thank you for inspiring me to write my story. Thank you for helping me see the world through softer eyes. Autoethnography has enabled me to do that. It has helped me make sense of my experiences and what my FGC status means to me and the larger academic community.

Sensemaking as a Paradigmatic Framework of Choice

I chose the sensemaking framework (or ESR) alongside autoethnography because they felt complementary. What I mean is that the sensemaking framework felt like a useful organizing tool to retrospect on my experiences navigating academia, autoethnographically. The framework, however, allows for more than just retrospection. It enabled me to engage in reflexivity as I ventured into the later stages of the model (i.e., selection and retention). For instance, had it not been for this framework, I might not have let go of some of the anger I had toward my professors in both my undergraduate and graduate institutions. I might have blamed others for communicative tensions that perhaps were not entirely their fault. I might have constructed my status as a first-generation college student through a victimized lens instead of one that has opened my eyes to larger and more important issues.

The reciprocal nature of the ecological $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ enactment sequence was where I was able to re-experience the start of my identity negotiations in higher education. Writing about encountering each new college campus reminded me of how uncertain I felt

making the decision to further my education. They were scary, intimidating, and extremely confusing times in my life. I must admit that I strongly believe others have experienced similar fear walking through an academic building for the first time. I strongly believe that other students have reached out for help and have been rejected by their teacher or professor. These types of things happen all the time. Thus, I felt like the sensemaking framework would enable me to show how an FGC student adapts in these environments. Of course, everyone is different. There are those who are extremely brave and confront change and instability with mountains of strength. I, however, am not one of those people. I'm pretty sure there are others out there like me.

The selection sequence of the ESR model helped me create a personal and partial interpretation of what I experienced during the ecological $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ enactment sequence. I chose not to include theory or references in that section because, in all honesty, I wrote that section for me. I experienced sensemaking writing through the sensemaking ESR framework. I already knew the theoretical language I was going to apply in the retention stage. I knew all that in the first year of my master's program. But I chose to talk about these experiences performatively – using *you* in hopes that I could pull the reader into my experience (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). This helped me engage in reflexivity and as Adams and Jones (2011) say, queer autoethnography.

The retention stages of ESR sequence is probably one of the most important, or at least, pedagogical moments in my analysis. It is the collection of my sensemaking processes and what I want to do with all that I learned going through academia. I am an FGC pedagogue in those moments, not just an FGC graduate/student. This stage created a path for me to walk toward in my academic career. Thus, I can honestly say that this

framework has solidified who I am now and has inspired me in so many ways to do better things in my future. I can be a different person in my PhD program. I can experience new situations with a little more confidence than I have before. I'm not entirely sure that if I chose to write an autoethnographic analysis without this framework I would've had the same result. Any choice in framework is of course not without limitations. Thus, I will discuss some of the limitations below.

Limitations of Sensemaking Framework

One of the limitations of using the sensemaking framework in my analysis is that while I was experiencing sensemaking by writing in an alternative form, I was also objectifying and inventing that which I was trying to deconstruct. In other words, the triggers that set the sensemaking process in motion (e.g., unequivocal environmental contexts) do not exist outside of an individual's own cognitive creations. For instance, Weick (1995) contends:

There is *not* some monolithic, singular, fixed environment that exists detached from and external to these people. Instead...people are very much a part of their own environments. They act, and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face. There is not some impersonal 'they' who puts these environments in front of passive people. Instead, the 'they' is people who are more active. (p. 31)

This is a paradox for those who plan to use sensemaking as a framework in social-constructionist ways (Allard-Poesi, 2005). It's a paradox because "it defines reality and meanings as socially constructed, yet it seeks to disengage from that experience and objectify it" (Allard-Poesi, 2005, p. 171).

A second limitation is that this framework (especially the ESR) is confusing to follow. Where does one make a conscious choice to follow the sequence in particular ways? I chose to traverse through my experiences in a complex fashion – introducing the reader to two different ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment sequences before I moved on to the next stage. There is no direct path to choose or a clear way of determining when to traverse in a different direction when writing autoethnographically. It is instead an individual choice, a matter of making sense out of making sense of sensemaking processes. Could it be argued then that to engage in the sensemaking process through autoethnography is to engage in the selection stage solely? Is autoethnography the right method to apply this framework? Although I cannot answer these questions with any sort of expertise, I can argue that any theory or extension of theory is just as fluid as when the theory was originally conceived.

Co-Cultural Theory and Critical Communication Pedagogy as a Choice for Research and Praxis

I chose to discuss co-cultural theory in my analysis because of how practical it was during my undergraduate years in both personal and academic contexts. On a personal level, I came across this theory while I was researching conflict in romantic relationships from the standpoint of muted-group theory. Although I was researching conflict in a general way, muted-group theory helped me explain some of the conflict in my own romantic relationship. Also, Orbe's (1998) list of communication practices gave me the tools to gain more equality with my boyfriend. Although I wrote that paper in an analytical and scholarly way, it was innately about my boyfriend and I – another reason why I think a lot of scholarly work is inherently biased. What I mean is that when

scholars research a communicative phenomenon, regardless if they choose a quantitative or qualitative methodology, they are researching that phenomenon because of some sort of passion. They encounter their site or their participants with some sort of interest or personal connection. Thus, although academia requires us to write in a detached form, we have to remember that the scholar, the author, is never fully detached.

Academically, co-cultural theory helped me explain my experiences with Dr. Milihan. I realized that I was a co-cultural member and how power and social class were regulating me to a marginalized position. It was because of co-cultural theory that I was also able to consider the costs and benefits of using communication practices with my professor and which practices would yield the most desired responses. After I used this theory in practice, I realized how important theory is to the communication field. I also realized how co-cultural theory can be utilized in many situational contexts.

When I got into my master's program, I kept co-cultural theory in my bag of tricks but I realized that it did not give me the voice that I originally assumed. Yes, it gave me a way out of marginalizing communication encounters, but I noticed that theorizing through a co-cultural lens did not give me a choice to confront interlocutor(s) with power. Thus they were not able to gain a sense of their own dominant positionalities. In other words, co-cultural theory did not tell Dr. Milihan that his race, sex, and class intersected in ways that made him blinded to co-cultural members' experiences – to my experiences. I realized in my master's program that co-cultural theory wasn't dialogical enough. I needed a different tool to engage dialogue – to expose injustices *between* interlocutors so that learning and change can take place as a process. Critical communication pedagogy is a philosophy that can do just that.

Critical communication pedagogy is more than just a philosophy that exposes power inside the classroom. Just like my FGC status permeates the boundaries of the university, so too do the tenets of this critical theory. According to Fassett and Warren (2007), “critical communication pedagogy as praxis, as a way of being in the world...means that often there are no easy responses to or understandings of power, of who has it and who doesn’t”(p. 124). Why this teaching philosophy is thus so important to me is that I can use it to understand how power also runs in and through me. Maybe *I* failed to truly listen to Dr. Milihan when I sat in his office. Perhaps, he really did care. Did I steal that moment in his office and construct it into something that victimized me or unfairly constructed his identity and communicative intentions? If Dr. Milihan read my analysis, would he think that I had it all wrong? Maybe. Maybe *we* should’ve tackled these types of inquires *in that moment*. Instead, *I* used communication practices – strategies if you will – that gave me the power to play the academic game. I hustled him. But that didn’t change him or me. It simply meant that I was able to pass his class and move on from the discriminatory encounter with an understanding of how to use communication strategies for my own benefit. It also meant that he was able to continue that behavior with students who came after me. This latter contention points to the limitations of applying co-cultural theory in my analysis.

Limitations of Analysis and Application of Co-Cultural Theory

One of the limitations of this analysis is the use of co-cultural theory alongside autoethnography as a method. Since I only researched myself, does my analysis extend co-cultural theory’s heuristic provocativeness? Does my analysis add to the scope of this theory? Much of the research that has utilized co-cultural theory has done so by

examining interactions as they are observed, rather than, self-examined interactions. Thus, because I have constructed and simultaneously deconstructed interpersonal experiences, it can be argued that my subjective account of applying co-cultural practices was merely a story – one without any basis of Truth. However, a lot of co-cultural communication research elicits retrospective responses from participants similar to my analysis, but reports of those responses are made by detached researchers. This limitation thus applies to other scholarly work that interprets participants' responses through a co-cultural framework, or any qualitative methodology.

A second limitation is the use of co-cultural theory through the framework of the ESR sequence. Did I really experience what I wrote about? Is it possible that by engaging in retrospection through the sensemaking framework I left valuable pieces of my experiences untouched? Further, can I really consider myself a co-cultural member in the context of an academic institution? In other words, did I earn that standpoint (Harding, 1991)? Did I take the time to critically reflect on my positionality? These questions present limitations for the utilization of co-cultural theory and my application of this theory alongside the sensemaking framework because I am assuming (through retrospective accounts) that my positionality as a co-cultural member was a fixed identity throughout my educational experiences. Just like Fassett and Warren (2007) suggest that educational risk is a fluid state of being, and that any student can be at-risk at any time, I am suggesting in my analysis that I was a co-cultural member throughout my entire undergraduate experience. However, I did not explore how my first-generation college student status was intertwined with other dominant cultural positions. The fact that I was a college student gave me more power and privilege over those who never attended

college, or who were unable to experience college life. Thus, I was only a co-cultural member in the particular situational context of the university, and at particular times. It might be useful to examine intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in future research to fill this gap in co-cultural theorizing.

Limitations of Discussing Critical Communication Pedagogy

One major limitation of discussing critical communication pedagogy is that I have never been trained as a critical communication pedagogue. Although I stated in my analysis what I wanted to do with this teaching philosophy, I never had the chance to apply it in my own classroom or in interpersonal encounters with any expertise. Thus, I simply predicted or made plausible what this teaching philosophy can do for me and other FGC students. Thus, I do not know if what I was proposing in my analysis has any validity or heuristic value. I won't know all of this until I turn theory and method into practice.

This is a limitation of applying critical communication pedagogy as a practice. For instance, Fassett and Warren (2005) examined a student named Jane and applied tenets of critical communication pedagogy in their analysis. However they admitted in Fassett and Warren (2007) that they lost touch with this student. Although they exposed the injustices taking place in Jane's institution and helped Jane to tell her story, she remains a present absence in their classroom (p. 136). Jane can only remain present in their writing and their future application of critical communication pedagogy. Thus, I will examine below how the melding of co-cultural theory with tenets of critical communication pedagogy through the framework of the ESR and autoethnography can help keep students like myself and Jane remain present in academic research.

Future Directions

As evident in my analysis and in research regarding first-generation college students' communicative experiences in higher education (also see literature review), the melding of co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy alongside the sensemaking framework and autoethnography has utility for both future research and pedagogical practice. Thus, I introduce ways theory and method can be applied by researchers, teachers, and students to examine both personal and academic possibilities.

Sensemaking and Autoethnography as a Pedagogical Technique for Identity Negotiations

More and more first-generation college students enter into higher education contexts every year (Ramsey & Peale, 2010), oftentimes without a clear understanding of how the intersections of their identity, including their FGC status, may present them with communicative challenges. Thus, in order to help these students make sense of their emerging selves, the sensemaking framework can be utilized as a general in-class assignment or within First Year Experience (FYE) programs. Professors or teachers can make this possible by creating a sensemaking instructional worksheet that discusses each part of the ESR sequence and encourages students to reflect and write about their experiences autoethnographically following the ESR model (similar to my analysis) throughout their first semester or first-year in college.

For the ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment stage of the sequence, instructors can urge their students to discuss how they felt encountering the college campus for the first time. Further, instructors can ask their students to report on any specific person(s) that inspired or perhaps disempowered them to apply for college. These can include family

members, high school counselors, or anyone who has left a memorable imprint on students' lives. This would work especially well for first-year FGC students.

In the selection stage of ESR sequence, the instructor can urge his/her students to make sense of what they experienced in the ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment stages, encouraging them to write performatively as I did in the analysis section of this thesis. In doing so, instructors can discuss different approaches to autoethnography that can aid their students in developing their manuscripts. This activity can be both a sensemaking device for first-generation college students and a lesson plan that encourages introspection on a personal level. However, FGC students can also use as their manuscripts as mentoring tools for other FGC student peers and/or siblings. This part of the activity is also meant to enable students to traverse through the next phase of the ESR sequence. However, instructors should encourage their students to build on the ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment stage of the sequence if they feel there are other triggers that need examining before moving on to the retention stage of the sequence.

Because this activity is meant to be a longitudinal in-depth self-examination, the retention stage of the ESR sequence should come toward the end of the semester or first-year and only after the students feel that they have fully examined the other stages of the sequence. Instructors could then probe students in this section to examine scholarship that they have learned in class or in other classes that relates to their experiences navigating academia. Some of the questions that instructors can use in this section can include: (a) How has your FGC status been informed by communication concepts and/or theories discussed in class? (b) How has academic scholarship helped you to make sense of your identity and/or interpersonal experiences discussed in earlier stages of the model? (c) Do

you feel like you understand your choice(s) to attend college? (d) How was your identity been shaped by engaging in the sensemaking process? (e) How do your lived experiences and FGC status contribute to your institution of higher learning?

This process can have immense implications for instructors, students, and the academic institution as a whole. Not only can the instructor use this information for their own research but the students' autoethnographies can be published on social networking sites or be kept in the library so that other FGC students and academicians can learn more about the FGC student experience.

Implications for Instructors and/or Researchers

Instructors who are researchers in their field can use their students' sensemaking autoethnographies to not only examine their own pedagogical practices but to examine how FGC students may position themselves as co-cultural members in their academic communities or in other situational contexts such as their homes. They can thus turn these examinations into academic articles and submit them to academic journals such as *Communication Education*. Co-cultural theory can be utilized as a theoretical framework and many of the communication factors and communication practices can be used to help FGC students understand their positionality in various contexts and how they might use communication practices with various people. As a result, scholars can learn more about their students, publish research that examines their students at a more micro-level, and then use their students' stories to engage in dialogue about these experiences with their students. Thus, learning can take place simultaneously – between teacher and student, and the larger academic community of scholars (application of critical communication pedagogy).

Implications for Academic Institutions

By publishing and/or keeping records of these sensemaking autoethnographies, administrators can also learn more about FGC students and some of the communicative challenges and/or unique insights that come with owning this status in higher education. This has utility for research and the implementation of programs that are designed to help ease FGC students' transition into academia as well as keep FGC students' retention rates as high as possible. Further, instructors who use these stories as research can act as consultants for student development and/or student affairs committees, helping to ensure that FGC students get the care and attention necessary to navigate academic life.

Implications for FGC Students

As FGC students create their personal narratives through the ESR sequence they can work through some of the communicative tensions and identity negotiations experienced between the contexts of home and school. The ecological change \leftrightarrow enactment stage of the sequence would work particularly well for these types of reflections. Further, because many FGC students report that they don't really think about what their FGC student status means (Orbe, 2004, Putnam & Thompson, 2006) this experience can help them understand their positionality in the academy and at home, and motivate them to stay in college. Weick (1995) contends that people do not truly understand their actions and/or communicative experiences until they are able to reflect on their actions, thus as FGC students traverse throughout later stages of the ESR sequence, they can make sense of their decisions to attend college which can further motivate them to act as role models for other students on campus (FGC or not).

This implication is not just a prediction. For instance, while doing research with a student success program geared toward aiding FGC college students during their first year in college, I interviewed three FGC students that all reported how their participation in the success program and their FGC status simultaneously motivated them to encourage their roommates and fellow peers to succeed in college. Because these students had an awareness of their FGC student status and the challenges that come with having this status in college (e.g., being the first in their family to experience college, not having a clear understanding of the financial aid process, being unclear about initial intentions to attend college), they felt it necessary to help guide their friends and others on campus who were experiencing similar difficulties. Further, two of the FGC students I interviewed motivated their parents to go college. Thus, if FGC students had a personal narrative of their own sensemaking processes, they could use it as a source of guidance for others who feel just as overwhelmed as they did taking the plunge to further their education.

Conclusion

In the first year of my master's program I had a vision of this thesis. I didn't know how to articulate it then and I'll admit that I have only begun to truly articulate myself in my writing. This experience has been life-changing. I have implicated not only myself and my future career in this document, but I have implicated my family, friends, and professors in this process. Their identities, my identities, now exist in these pages. I now have a new understanding of that little girl who held tightly on to her father's hand as her life was put in danger. I can now respect my mother for her choices in men and my father's decision to stay absent in my life because of his addiction. I can try to be more

understanding of my cousin's life path and why she chose heroin over raising her son. I am able to do all of this because I now have more of an understanding of myself. I too have chosen to allow toxic men in my life. I too, have experimented with drugs. I too, have made poor choices that have affected those that I love. That is life. Sometimes we make decisions without thinking about how they are going to touch others' lives. The goal, however, should be to learn from our mistakes so that we can be more caring individuals. This last year has opened my eyes to all of this.

As I said in the beginning of this chapter, my FGC student status is not just an academic one. I am now someone my little cousins and my godson will look up to. My mother and father will tell their friends and co-workers that they have a daughter who is going for her PhD. This means that I have a responsibility to be role model for my family. Even more so, I have a responsibility to other first-generation students who are thinking about or who are already enrolled in college. I have walked in the shoes they might try on their own feet. Thus, I have to take this responsibility and run with it. I have to be someone others can rely on for guidance and support. I believe that both experiencing college and writing this thesis has helped me become that person. Hopefully this personal narrative will encourage others to take the red pill.

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