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Seeing Success: Biographies of Low-Income Students

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SEEING SUCCESS:
BIOGRAPHIES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

A Thesis

Presented to the

The Faculty of the Department of Counselor Education

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Julia M. Morrice

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SEEING SUCCESS:
BIOGRAPHIES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

by

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August 2015

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ABSTRACT

SEEING SUCCESS: BIOGRAPHIES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

by Julia M. Morrice

The purpose of this narrative ethnographic study was to explore the success stories and lived experiences of six low-income students, utilizing an asset-based approach and attention to cultural wealth. Low-income students are less likely to attend college, and those that do are less likely to complete a degree. There is presently a lack of asset-based research that explores the successes of low-income students. A semi-structured interview protocol yielded biographical narratives of low-income students, which included discussions about identity and provided insight into the cultural wealth possessed by low-income students. In an effort to better understand the use of visual methodologies in ethnographic research within the field of education, participants were asked to share family photographs and personal artifacts with the researcher while telling their story. Conclusions made by the researcher highlight the necessity of understanding identity and culture as an integral part of a low-income student's educational experience.

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1. Introduction

Students from low-income families are significantly less likely to attend college (Elliott, 2013; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Rouse, 2004; Tierney, 2009; Turner & Pallais, 2006) and complete four-year degrees compared to their peers (Castleman & Page, 2014; Elliott, 2013; Navarro, 2012). With the most recent figures from the United States (US) Census Bureau categorizing 34.2% of the population as low-income, it is the researcher's opinion that accessibility to college for low-income students should be improved (2012). Without a college degree an individual's median income is a mere \$21,466 a year (US Census, 2013b), which is under the US poverty threshold of \$23,550 for a family of four (US Census, 2013a). It also places the individual within the low-income range (US Census, 2013b). It is necessary to examine college access for students from low-income backgrounds in the US and the contributing factors in their decision to attend or not attend college.

Economists agree that to sustain the US economy it is necessary for 60% of the workforce to have a college degree. This number is projected to increase to 63% by 2018, as more jobs require at least a college degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). According to census data from 2013, only 29.2% of the US has completed some college or a 2-year degree, and a scant 18.4% hold a 4-year degree (US Census, 2013c). Expanding college access to low-income families may raise the number of 4-year degree holders.

In order to investigate college access, many studies use a deficit-based approach to investigate why certain groups are less likely to attend and complete four-year college

degrees (Castleman & Page, 2014; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Rouse, 2004; Tierney, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Researchers are focused on low-income families, minority groups and inner city schools to gain awareness and understanding of the deficits and shortcomings these groups encounter (Castleman & Page, 2014; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Rouse, 2004; Tierney, 2009). Deficit-based thinking has become the norm when evaluating low-income individuals (Yosso, 2005). However students who are low-income have a wealth of invaluable and unique life experiences and skills. By focusing on what students do not have, researchers and educators have not taken into account their cultural wealth, which may include survival skills, persistence, a strong desire to succeed, and perseverance to overcome difficult circumstances (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Navarro, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Asset-based and student-centered intervention programs has been demonstrated to work for many different groups including low-income, minority, first generation (Applegate, 2012; Downtown College Prep, 2013; Navarro, 2014), adult, and veteran students (Applegate, 2012). By conducting more asset-based research and adding to society's limited understanding of the cultural wealth of low-income students it may be possible to increase college access for low-income students.

Problem Statement

Research shows low-income students are less likely to attend college and complete four-year degrees compared to their peers. There is presently a lack of asset-based research that celebrates the success and cultural wealth of low-income students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how low-income students can improve their likelihood of attending college and graduating, by analyzing information gathered from interviews with low-income students who have successfully completed a four-year degree.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What factors contribute to a student's decision to attend a college?
2. How does an individual's life story relate to his or her academic and personal success?
3. How do class and culture intersect with a person's identity?
4. What cultural wealth do low-income students and their families possess?
5. How does the use of pre-existing photographs, family photographs, and personal and cultural artifacts affect the interview process?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are set for the context of this study and its discussions:

Cultural capital. A sociological term first used by Pierre Bourdieu in 1973, it is used to describe the social mobility which middle and upper class members of society are granted by their status. It is propelled by cultural norms of dress, speech, intellect, and physical appearance. Its existence is also aided in the way the United States education system supports the middle and upper class (Bourdieu, 1973). Students with low

socioeconomic status are disadvantaged by their weak cultural capital (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014).

Cultural wealth. An individual or group may have unique skills, knowledge, contacts or resources that are used to survive oppression. Examples include stories, language, family, kinship, aspirations, social networking, and community strength. While cultural capital is defined by the dominant culture, cultural wealth includes the experiences and histories of historically marginalized people (Yosso, 2005).

Deficit-thinking. The idea that minorities are to blame for their low academic performance because their family of origin does not value or support emotionally their child's educational future. Pioneer researcher in the subject, Tara Yosso, defined this term and argued that this idea is new in the field of higher education research (2005).

Low-income. A family of four with two children under the age of 18 is considered to be low-income if their income is less than twice the poverty threshold. For a family of this size an income of less than \$47,668 per year would place them into the category of low-income (US Census, 2014b). These figures are calculated by gross income, before all taxes, and do not include food stamps or other noncash benefits (US Census, 2014a). Thresholds vary by family size, including number of adults and number of children under the age of 18.

Assumption

In the context of this study, the researcher assumed that the participants were truthful and presented an accurate representation of their life stories.

Limitations

While conducting this study, certain limitations were present that were beyond control of the researcher:

1. While the researcher used recordings, transcriptions, and field notes to record data, all data were subjected to any biases the researcher may be aware or unaware of.
2. Interviews were limited to one hour maximum, which may have limited the depth and scope of information collected.
3. When using pre-existing photographs, the context and the validity of the photographs may be unknown. The information gathered from participants is their own representation of the truth (Pink, 2007).

Delimitations

There were intentional limitations within this study due to the research design:

1. Ethnicity was not controlled for when selecting participants. Due to the scope of the issue of access to higher education, this study was concerned with access for low-income individuals in general and not specifically with regards to ethnicity, cultural identification, or citizenship.
2. Immigrant students were not discussed or controlled for when selecting participants.

Significance Statement

Literature that explored the lives of low-income students from an asset-based perspective is limited. While there are a small number of studies that touch upon the need to focus on successes and positive attributes of low-income individuals (Martin et al., 2014; Navarro, 2012; Yosso, 2005), much research defines only their deficits (Yosso, 2005). The findings of this study add to the very limited understanding of the cultural wealth of low-income individuals, specifically that of low-income students who have successfully completed a four-year college degree. In addition to better understanding the life narratives of low-income students, this investigation uncovered new information of how the use of visual methodologies aids and limit the interview process of individual interviews. Furthermore, educational research using family photographs, pre-existing photographs, and personal and cultural artifacts is nonexistent, and this study fills that void.

Information gathered in this study may benefit those working with low-income, first generation, and other at risk populations. Counselors and practitioners may be able to use the findings to create a new, asset-based framework for working with students, families, schools, and communities.

Discussion

This research is written with the understanding that not everyone wants to go to college and not everyone would do well in a college-level academic environment. It is the researcher's opinion that a formal education is not a dictator of a person's successfulness in life or their capacity to be educated. However, the choice to pursue a

college education should not be a privilege, but an opportunity available to all individuals.

By collecting interviews from low-income students who have attended college and completed a four-year degree, the researcher adds knowledge to the limited field of asset-based educational research. In celebrating the success and cultural wealth of low-income students, the researcher aims to document how college access might be expanded to more students. Using Bourdieu's work on cultural capital (1973) as a lens, the idea of deficit thinking and asset-based approaches in research and educational programs will be discussed.

The following chapter discusses the importance of narrative and the benefits of allowing participants to play the role as the expert of their lived experiences. Through interviews and the use of pre-existing photographs in research, narratives can be created which come from the hearts of participants. Instead of the researcher leading the interview process, participant-led semi-structured interview protocols are examined and justified as a progressive research form.

2. Literature Review

Low-income students often have the same higher education aspirations as their peers but become discouraged or lost along the way (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Downtown College Prep, 2013; Rouse, 2004). A survey of 8,000 students from urban high schools in Los Angeles revealed 77% of the students hoped to have a career in the future that requires a college degree, and 82% hoped to earn more money than their parents (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Unfortunately these aspirations are not always transformed into college degrees or higher paying jobs. As of 2013 only 18.4% of the US population over 25 years had achieved a college degree (US Census, 2013c) and the majority came from a middle or upper class background (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). While there exist many asset-based intervention programs to assist low-income students in attending college, asset-based research is lacking (Yosso, 2005).

The majority of available research analyzes the deficits low-income individuals possess rather than focusing on the assets they have. The abundance of deficit research may perpetuate classist perspectives, a lack of respect for commonly marginalized communities, and an attitude of negative thinking. This research study explored the success stories of six low-income students, utilizing an asset-based approach and attention to cultural wealth. The following literature review provides a comprehensive summary of research on low-income students within the last 10 years. Subjects reflected upon include influences in a youth's decision to attend college, existing intervention programs, financial aid, the role of the family, cultural wealth, and cultural capital. Also

discussed is the use of photography in narrative research, particularly photo elicitation interviews and family photographs.

Low-income Students

The majority of research on low-income students states they are more likely to have low academic performance (Kim, 2004), including low grade point averages and below average standardized test scores (Elliott, 2013). Individuals are more likely to graduate from college by the age of 26 if they are from a family where one or more parental figures have attended college (Elliott, 2013). Many low-income individuals do not identify as a college going student and have a history of negative educational experiences. Researchers document that low-income students have a history of reduced academic confidence, poor time management skills, and a lack of responsibility (Navarro, 2012).

While 51% of students from the wealthiest income quartile in the US (United States) will earn a four-year degree by the age of 26, only 7% of students from low-income families will do so (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). For higher income students the choice to attend college is less likely to be a conscious one. Rather, college attendance and completion is assumed of them. Low-income students who have attended college report the decision to attend a conscious choice, one which took much persistence. If an active role is not taken, college attendance will be less likely to occur (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Downtown College Prep, 2013; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). It has been documented that low-income students have the same college

aspirations as their peers, but have less success translating their educational ambitions into tangible plans (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Rouse, 2004).

To investigate this phenomenon researcher Cecilia Rouse from Princeton University conducted focus groups with high school seniors in the Baltimore City Public School District (2004). After comparing her collected data with a National Education Longitudinal Study, she concluded that low-income students have less success in translating their ideas for the future into actual plans. The students who participated in the focus groups had high educational aspirations and desired future work in jobs that required advanced degrees, but were unaware of the steps necessary to get there (Rouse, 2004). This is one suggested explanation for why low-income students are underrepresented in four-year schools, especially selective colleges, private colleges, and top ranking schools (Pallais & Turner, 2006).

What Makes a Difference

To combat low representation of poorer students in higher education, studies conducted within the last 10 years have focused on what makes a difference in a student's decision to attend college. Influences explored in recent studies include an involvement in activities in high school (Posselt et al., 2012), peer influence, high school environment (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011), support from teachers and counselors (Roderick et al., 2011), and an early introduction to college planning and financial aid (Castleman & Page, 2014; Tierney & Vanagas, 2009). The most common theme educational researchers documented is the effectiveness of creating a climate of college expectation at high schools, where students feel supported by staff and also have

early access to information regarding admission to college and financial planning (Castleman & Page, 2014; De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011)

A group of researchers reviewed results taken from a 2004 national survey of high school graduates and found that those who participated in extracurricular activities, particularly leadership, were 75% more likely to enroll in a more selective college (Posselt et al., 2012). Leadership activities teach life skills, such as organization and problem solving, and give students a sense of purpose. In an extended review of a larger collection of national surveys of high school graduates from 1972-2004, the research team concluded that in addition to the importance of involvement in extracurricular activities, there was a record of colleges placing increased importance a student's extracurricular activities, heightened consideration of SAT scores, and more weight on completion of advanced math courses. If high schools wanted to send more of their students to college, improved grades would not be sufficient. Low-income students need a more well rounded application package than in past decades, even for minimally selective colleges (Posselt et al., 2012).

In order to assist low-income students in increasing their marketability to college admissions boards, students need to increase motivation to succeed. A school's environment, created by both peers and faculty, can aid in promoting college attendance (De La Rosa, 2006; Roderick et al, 2011). College attendance needs to be discussed in freshman year, as opposed to junior or senior year. Students should feel supported early in their high school career (Downtown College Prep, 2013). High schools with teachers who have high expectations of their students and strongly support their decision to attend

college are more likely to produce college graduates. By encouraging or requiring students to apply for college, more students are likely to apply (Roderick et al, 2011).

One survey of students at public high schools in Chicago noted that students who attend a school where a higher than average amount of students apply for college are more likely to apply as well. This same group of researchers specifically noted that students who applied to at least 3 colleges were significantly more likely to enroll in a four-year school, regardless of income, ethnicity, and parental educational attainment (Roderick et al., 2011). For many low-income students, college applications need to be a requirement rather than an option, and early support from high school staff has been observed as key in this process (Downtown College Prep, 2013).

In an effort to understand how high school faculty can best deliver support to its students, researchers Benjamin Castleman and Lindsay Page of Harvard University conducted interviews with staff members of high schools in Boston. Most interviewees agreed there were two main areas which needed increased focus. First, students needed support understanding and negotiating financial issues associated with college attendance, including loan paperwork, tuition, understanding additional fees, and remembering due dates. Second, staff stressed the importance of extended support after high school graduation, specifically during the summer months between high school and college. During this time students need to sign up for classes, complete prerequisites and file additional miscellaneous paperwork. Many staff members relayed stories of students “melting” (i.e. changing their educational plans) during those transitional summer months and never making it to their first semester of college. Low-income students too often

lack assistance after high school to navigate their way to college, both from family and school (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Interventions

Various intervention programs exist to support low-income students during their transition from high school into college. Intervention programs exist in the form of asset models and deficit models, and are usually classifiable by one of these distinctions (Yosso, 2005). Deficit models seek to define a population's limitations and use that as a foundation to build their program upon. Deficit-based programs do not rely on existing strengths (Navarro, 2012). The goal of asset-based programs is to find what strengths and wisdom students, families, and communities already have to share (Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007) and to include these lived experiences in the building of the intervention program (Yosso, 2005). Intervention programs most commonly exist at the high school and college level. Two successful programs highlighted below are Downtown College Prep (Downtown College Prep, 2013) and the Academy for College Excellence (Navarro, 2012). These programs were selected for inclusion in the review of literature because they most strongly embody the concept of cultural wealth and most clearly represent a working asset-based program.

Downtown College Prep (DCP), a public charter school in California, operates with the firm belief that students and their families have cultural wealth that may aid educational success even if they don't have college knowledge or higher education experience. This school caters specifically to low-income students and those who will be the first in their family to attend college. To evaluate their program's successfulness, 500

DCP alumni completed surveys and were interviewed about their experience at DCP. Of the sample 90% were from low-income families, 80% began at DCP below grade level in math or English, and 41% were raised by parental figures who did not complete high school (Downtown College Prep, 2013). 76% of the sample enrolled in college after graduation, and 90% of those students completed at least a 2-year college degree (Downtown College Prep, 2013).

A majority of DCP students reported that they were motivated by the abundance of career opportunities they saw for themselves, while understanding that many would require a college degree. Students' indicated they were more interested in increasing their chance of working in a field of their choice, than necessarily increasing their potential income or social status. However as 78% expressed that understanding the college planning process was complicated, it is clear that there is a disconnect between student aspirations and the actual steps needed to get them there (Downtown College Prep, 2013).

To prevent students from getting lost in the process, DCP documented its strategies for working with students to achieve their career goals. Wanting their students to not lose their motivation and drive, they expose students to the process of a four-year degree and what challenges they can expect to face. Understanding they might not be able to complete their four-year degree in 4 years or less is an important lesson in reality for students. In addition to communicating honest and realistic expectations DCP aims to expose the financial aid and college application process to both students and families. DCP recognizes that families want to help their children succeed, but may not have the

tools or experience, and so they offer support to parents who are able to be more involved (Downtown College Prep, 2013).

Another program with an asset-based model similar to Downtown College Prep's is the Academy for College Excellence (Navarro, 2012). This program exists within 5 community colleges in California and 1 in Pennsylvania, serving students who are at high risk of failure. It maintains a curriculum that responds to students' needs, refining and revising as frequently as necessary. The program recruits students at the beginning of their community college experience and places them into cohorts. All students take a foundation course together and are encouraged to take as many other classes together as possible. Importance is placed upon getting to know fellow students and calling upon peers for help (Navarro, 2012).

All students matriculated are from low-income backgrounds and experienced various risk factors such as unsafe living conditions, domestic abuse, homelessness, extreme stress, and hunger. Acknowledging these students' life experiences, the program's foundational course is based on the topic of social justice, as the students are likely to relate. It takes an asset-based approach to make something positive out of the experiences the students possess. Midway through the program, students were asked to complete a survey to document how they have changed since joining the program. Students reported better judgment, the development of mindfulness, improved communication, and increased care about academics (Navarro, 2012).

In addition to Downtown College Prep and the Academy for College Excellence there are a multitude of programs aimed at high school and college students (Castleman

& Page, 2014; Hooker & Brand, 2009; Pondiscio, 2013; Zweifler, 2014). What is unique about these programs is they maintain strengths based attitudes towards high risk students while producing high success rates. These programs all embody the belief that students from low-income families need additional support, not because of their deficits, but rather because their assets are different from those of students from higher income backgrounds (Castleman & Page, 2014; Downtown College Prep, 2013; Hooker & Brand, 2009; Navarro, 2012; Pondiscio, 2013; Zweifler, 2014). Intervention programs should focus on continuous support for low-income students which stretch beyond high school and into college, and should aim early to foster the desire for higher education (Navarro, 2012; Pondiscio, 2013).

Financial Aid

In a survey of 8,000 students and their parents from urban high schools in Los Angeles students reported they could not depend on parents to support or assist them with the financial aid process. Parents communicated they would like to assist as much as they could, however they were uncertain of financial aid availability and the process. Some parents stated they were doubtful their child would receive financial aid for college and therefore did not want to encourage their child to apply (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006).

College affordability has deteriorated significantly between the years of 1995 and 2003 and continues to do so (Karikari & Dezhbakhsh, 2010). Low-income students often have unmet need (Long & Riley, 2007), with an average of 79% of low-income students not meeting their financial aid needs. As of 2004 this unmet need averaged \$5,684 a

year, even after expected family contribution, grants, and loans (Long & Riley, 2007). Comparatively, only 13% of higher income students suffer from unmet need (Long & Riley, 2007). Students with unmet need often resort to credit cards, student loans, and private loans, all which lead to higher than average debt after graduation (Long & Riley, 2007).

In a survey of 925 recent college graduates 66% were in debt, at an average of \$27,200. 15% owed more than \$50,000 (Roksa & Arum, 2012). Researchers have made suggestions for boosting higher education opportunities and access to financial aid for low-income students (Karikari & Dezhbakhsh, 2010; Pallais & Turner, 2006). Need based aid should be increased, making grants a larger percentage of a student's financial aid package (Karikari & Dezhbakhsh, 2010). If schools do not have the available resources to do so, money should come from the state and federal government (Pallais & Turner, 2006). Other possible opportunities for financial aid could include creating scholarship opportunities within public schools (Karikari & Dezhbakhsh, 2010).

While scholarship programs for students within public schools are less common, a school district in Kalamazoo, Michigan has a unique scholarship program called the Kalamazoo Promise. The Promise was announced November 10, 2005 to the surprise of Kalamazoo residents. Anonymous donors paid for both tuition and fees for high school graduates of Kalamazoo public high schools who agree to attend a public two or four-year college in Michigan. In order to be eligible students must have lived in the district for at least 4 years, and once in college must have continuous enrollment and residency. They must also maintain a 2.0 GPA, make progress annually towards a degree or

certificate, and maintain status as a full time student (Andrews, DesJardins, & Ranchhod 2010).

In 2012, 7 years after the announcement of the scholarship, a team of researchers conducted surveys and interviews with both high school students and district faculty. 58% of students said they saw an improvement in the attitude of their peers in regard to respect for academics and aspiration for higher education. 85% of students felt more positively motivated to succeed. Changes in high schools' environments were noted by faculty, including behavioral improvements, better student experiences in school, student responsibility, and a willingness in students to try their best. Teachers noted an increase in conversations about college, both between students and with staff (Miron, Jones, & Kelaher-Young, 2012).

With the worry of college affordability removed from the equation, The Promise helped teachers translate academic success, college aspirations, and career goals into tangible steps for students. However misinformation about The Promise, and college in general, still managed to impede college plans. A majority of students interviewed said they based their college plans on what they knew and understood about The Promise. A student interviewed stated she still didn't think she would be able to go to college, because she heard there were only 200 scholarships available. She added that her mother thinks you need at least a 3.8 GPA to qualify to receive the aid (Miron, Jones, & Kelaher-Young, 2012). As neither of those statements are true, it is clear that there is a need for more conversations about financial aid which involve both students and families.

The University of Southern California's Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis compiled and examined 3 years of information gathered from students, families, high school counselors and community policy makers. It was concluded that misconceptions exist about financial aid, and students base college attendance decisions on this misconstrued information. Without receiving correct information about financial aid early and often, low-income students are particularly prone to abandoning ideas of pursuing higher education. Intervention proposals include group sessions and one on one assistance for understanding financial aid, and a continued discussion after high school about finances. This could occur in schools, community centers and at home with family. Families need to be included in these conversations about financial aid, and the earlier they are the more they will be able to advocate for their child's future (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006).

Role of the Family

Deficit-based perspectives of low-income families paint a picture of children who underperform and of parents who are uninvolved and apathetic (Bok, 2010). Many studies conclude low-income students have lower academic performance (Kim, 2004) and are less likely to attend college (Elliott, 2013; Posselt, et al., 2012; Roderick, et al., 2011; Rouse, 2004; Tierney, 2009; Turner & Pallais, 2006). There is a lack of research however which seeks to expose the attitudes of the parental figures of low-income students. A recent study interviewed low-income parents who did not attend college, many of whom did also not complete high school. Most parents interviewed agreed they do in fact want to help their child succeed, and many said they have high educational

aspirations for their children (Bok, 2010). The reality is that the parents had a lack of familiarity with the education system, financial aid, and the college process. Many parents in low-income families did not complete or attend college, but their limited first hand experience does not mean they cannot support their child's aspirations (Bok 2010; Yosso, 2005).

Many asset-based intervention programs recognize that parents have high aspirations for their children's academic success and would benefit from more assistance from their child's school (Downtown College Prep, 2013; De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Hess et al., 2007). In an effort to create stronger relationships between schools and families, schools can try reaching out to parents and students in freshman and sophomore years. Discussions about college and financial aid too often do not occur until the later years of a student's high school career (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). By discussing college and financial aid options early there are less surprises for parents and students when it is time to apply for college (Downtown College Prep, 2013). Schools like Downtown College Prep advocate for these early conversations as a way to build trust and rapport with family, and prevent the college process from becoming overwhelming later (Downtown College Prep, 2013).

Cultural Wealth and Cultural Capital

Including families in the discussion of low-income student success has been a key focus in recent asset-based intervention programs (Downtown College Prep, 2013; De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Hess et al., 2007) and in asset-based research as well (Bok, 2010; Yosso, 2005). In the last decade research has slowly begun to use a cultural framework

to guide discussion of student success, particularly when considering traditionally marginalized students such as low-income students and students of color (Yosso, 2005). Using a cultural framework promotes the understanding of the lives of individuals involved, including students, parents, and families. This provides a more holistic understanding of the lived experiences of the population (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). While the benefits of this perspective are clear, there still remains little research utilizing a cultural framework.

First used to argue for the value of Latino/Latina and Chicano/Chicana cultures, the idea of community wealth asserts that the lived experiences of a group have value (Yosso, 2005). Low-income students of all ages may have a wealth of life experiences and skills. These experiences have been observed to yield survival skills, persistence, a strong desire to succeed, and perseverance to overcome difficult circumstances (Navarro, 2012). This collection of experiences and the resulting development of self is part of their cultural wealth. Students and their families can also acquire cultural wealth from their ethnic culture, their community and their family (Yosso, 2005).

While anyone, regardless of background, can have cultural wealth, cultural capital is defined, maintained, and used by the dominant culture (Yosso, 2005). French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu first used this term in 1973 to describe social mobility and explain how it came to belong to only middle and upper class members of society. Propelled by cultural norms of dress, speech, intellect and physical appearance, its existence is aided in the way the United States education system supports the middle and upper class (Bourdieu, 1973; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). In the United States' higher

education system there is a history of middle and upper class domination, where the cultural norm of education for the rich is unquestioned and accepted as natural (Bourdieu, 1973). If this idea continues to be unopposed by society, consciously or unconsciously, then low-income students will be unlikely to increase their social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).

Researchers have theorized that low-income families often do not have the cultural capital to understand the financial aid and college process (Hooker & Brand, 2009; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). The knowledge and background they possess might not be sufficient to aid in the understanding of a system they have historically not been part of. However, the cultural wealth they may possess, including a persistence to succeed and an ability to overcome difficult circumstances, can aid in a low-income student's journey to college (Navarro, 2012). To increase college attendance for students who have been previously barred from the higher education system these students need to be given more accurate, user friendly college and financial aid information earlier in their educational career (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Other possible solutions and interventions should be explored, taking into consideration the existing cultural wealth, experiences and assets of low-income students. Utilizing the theory of cultural wealth can yield to better understanding of the stratification of higher education and the classist undertones in deficit thinking.

Photography in Research

In a better effort to understand the lived experiences of specific populations, visual methodologies can be employed as a data collection. Originally used in

anthropology research, it has become common in the disciplines of sociology and cultural studies (Pink, 2007). John Collier began publishing work in 1967 with the use of photography in his research, attesting to its validity as a data collection method. While the specific use of photographs differs per study, Collier introduced the use of photographs, taken by the researcher, as inventories of culture. Others have argued for the usefulness of collecting photographs, but agree they are most useful when combined with other data collection instruments, such as surveys and interviews (Pink, 2005).

Photo elicitation interviews (PEI) allow participants to bring their own recently captured photographs to the interview and act as the experts (Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, & Kleist, 2010). The researcher uses the materials to stimulate the conversation and aid in the extraction of information (Clark-Ib  nez, 2004). With the participant as the guide, the photographs allow the researcher an intimate and immediate window into their reality, experiences, and culture (Koltz et al., 2010). By inviting the participant to share their own photographs, it might be possible to gain a more focused and in depth understanding of the subject and their lived experiences. While visual methodologies are less common in educational research, the small amount of researchers who do choose to explore photographic data often use PEI specifically.

Uncommon in educational research that uses PEI is the use of historical or family photographs. In a recent review of social science research, PEI using pre-existing images was less common than PEI using newly generated images (Pink, 2005). In the specific area of educational research, the use of pre-existing photographs and family photographs is underutilized. A recent search of two journal article databases, Education Resource

Information Center and Education Research Complete produced 30 results when searching for peer reviewed articles with key terms “family photographs” and “education”.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed makes a clear argument that deficit-based thinking in research denies the value of the lived experiences of traditionally marginalized people and disregards the cultural wealth they possess (Yosso, 2005). Low-income students have a wealth of life experiences that should be taken into consideration when investigating their educational attainment and creating intervention programs (Navarro, 2012). While there currently exist many asset-based intervention programs, there is a history and abundance of deficit-based intervention programs. Additionally, there is a lack of asset-based research. This study fills the need for narrative research that celebrates the academic successes of low-income students. By also investigating the usefulness of family photographs during photo elicitation interviews in educational research this study closes an existing gap in literature.

3. Methodology

Research shows low-income students are significantly less likely to attend college (Elliott, 2013; Turner & Pallais, 2006; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Rouse, 2004; Tierney, 2009) and complete four-year degrees compared to their higher income peers (Castleman & Page, 2014; Elliott, 2013; Navarro, 2012). There is presently a lack of asset-based research which celebrates and explores the stories of low-income students. This study aimed to showcase students who came from low-income backgrounds and have completed a four-year college degree. It was the purpose of this study to investigate what factors influence academic success for low-income students. The stories that were collected are biographies of academic success, recorded with the hope that the wisdom and meanings shared could benefit other students from similar backgrounds. "Success," for the purpose of this study, is defined as students who have completed four-year college degrees. Participants were encouraged to bring family photographs, preexisting photographs, or other personal artifacts to aid in the telling of their life story. Interviews were designed to be led by the participant, while simultaneously guided by the researcher.

Participants

For this study six individuals were selected. The participants were between 22 and approximately 40 years of age and all had a bachelor's degree. According to self reported information, all participants spent the majority of their formative years in one or more households considered low-income. Participants financed the majority of their college education, either through loans, grants, work study, or other means, without

assistance from their parents or other guardians. As of 2013, a family of four in the US that earns less than twice the poverty threshold is considered low-income according to the US Census Bureau (2013a). The most recent data marked the poverty threshold in the US at \$23,550 for a family of four (US Census Bureau, 2013b).

The age range has been selected as a control to insure participants are recent college graduates, meaning their narratives are more likely to be fresh in memory and relevant to current and future students. It was not necessary to screen for individuals with specific types of bachelor's degrees earned, as this study is not concerned with what subjects the students studied. Gender, race and ethnicity did not play a role in inclusion or exclusion.

Recruitment

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before recruitment commenced. Participants were gathered using convenience and snowball sampling. Verbal announcements were made in a small number of San Jose State University's graduate level Counselor Education courses, asking for volunteers. It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary and that there would be no compensation. It was requested of the audience that they recommend to any friends who might be interested in volunteering to contact the researcher. Recruitment was closed when six prospective participants contacted the researcher, agreed to participate, and signed consent forms. Each participant signed and received a copy of a consent form (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience. The meeting location for interviews included a variety of casual coffee shop settings, including Starbucks and a café on San Jose State University's campus. Participants were asked to bring with them any family photographs, preexisting photographs, or other personal artifacts they felt aided in the telling of their life story as relating to their academic success. These items were used as a story telling aid and not kept by the researcher. A list of local resources was provided at the end of the interview for any participants who wished to seek counseling (see Appendix B).

Instruments

A list of questions prepared by the researcher guided the semi-structured interview. Please see interview questions attached (Appendix C). It was the goal of the researcher that the interview be led by the participant and that the interviewee felt unrestricted by the interview questions. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

The researcher's personal password protected iPhone device was used to record the interview, and the file was later moved to a password protected laptop computer and erased from the iPhone. Names were changed to protect identities.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded for reoccurring themes. The researcher did this manually by listening to the recordings multiple times and typing the transcripts verbatim. Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach interviews were coded for

data. Common themes were documented, and the most common themes formed the basis for the results. Constructivist grounded theory assumes that discoveries are not made from the information collected; rather results are formed as a result of the researcher's interactions and participation with those interviewed (Wertz, Charmaz, Josselson, Andeson, & McSpadden, 2011). It is understood that the researcher becomes interwoven with the data and acts, in a sense, as an additional participant as well as the instrument.

The researcher used a constant comparative method to consider emerging themes and compare them to new interview material as collected. Open coding was used to break the data down into segments by theme and make connections between transcripts. Commonly occurring themes were grouped into concepts, which were then interwoven with field notes and personal reflections. Selective coding was used to assist in identifying the core focus and results of the data collected.

Positionality of Cultural Wealth

This paper is written from the perspective that all people's narratives have value and by listening to the lived experience of a person, new knowledge may be gained. As a researcher and an individual, I believe in the value of learning from individuals or groups who may have different life experiences than I have had. Additionally, I respect and appreciate representation of culture, and recognize minority culture is often buried under or appropriated by dominant White culture. I feel strongly about the notion of cultural wealth, wanting to better understand the experiences of someone who grew up in a different culture than I did. I feel it is important, especially as a member of the dominant culture, for me to understand the experience of someone who is underappreciated,

misrepresented, and misunderstood by society. With this project I sought to better understand institutionalized racism and classism in society and our school system, and the deficit-based thinking and research it encourages.

4. Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how low-income students can improve their chances of attending college and graduating with a four-year degree, by interviewing low-income students who have completed a four-year degree. During the process of conducting the interviews it became clear that the project was more about identity and culture than about college attendance. The narratives provided by the six participants involved represent a need, whether conscious or unconscious, to talk about family, culture, and identity when asked about ourselves. It was expected that the results would yield a better understanding of how low-income students could improve their chances of attending college and graduating with a four-year degree. The results indicate that in order to better understand a group of people, it is necessary to not ignore their story and their history. By using narrative theory as a lens, this study sought to make meaning of the participants' verbal interactions with the interviewer and better understand dialogue as a way to make sense of identity.

The work presented in this project is a reflection of who I am as an individual and as a researcher. During the process of interviewing participants and analyzing the data collected, I became aware of the idea that who I am could, to an unknown extent, affect the information my participants supplied. It could also affect the meaning I drew from the words my participants shared with me. I came to understand that I was the instrument for the data collection, and therefore I affected the information I was able to collect and also was responsible for the manner in which I interpreted it.

I consider myself a left brained person when it comes to my work life. I am analytical, organized, and have a particular need to group ideas and place them into metaphorical boxes. The completion of written work, regardless of the subject, for me most usually involves an outline, defined categories, and an assortment of lists. When it comes to my social life and recreational interests, I feel the right side of my brain come out. I am creative, crafty, and open to new ideas. I am chatty with people and, additionally, an extreme extrovert. I enjoy the imperfect and am titillated by unexpected twist endings and unexpected experiences.

The work of interviewing participants in a casual social setting and then using our conversation as data joined together my two selves. My left brain and my right brain came together, however it was messier than the left side was comfortable with. There was a need to categorize the information and structure the questions. There was also the need to release myself into the conversation and let the participant guide me. I came to understand that my thoughts, my reactions, and my words shaped the conversations recorded and still continue to shape my understanding of the stories told. It was impossible to remove myself from the data and place it in front of me to analyze. Instead I was immersed into the data and forced to allow it to be messy. Becoming part of my research was the unexpected twist, found in an unexpected place.

What I am left with are more questions than what I started with. The perfect outlines and defined categories of my research are less so. The participants' dialogues are not separate from my own thoughts and interjections. It is evident that their telling of their lived experiences was shaped my reactions, memories, emotions, and lived

experience. The right side of my brain has the desire to reflect on my personal thoughts and the experience of being a part of the conversation. The left side wants to ignore myself as a participant and focus on a detailed examination of the presented information. In an effort to appease both sides of my brain I have organized the data from the interviews by the three most often occurring themes and allowed myself to provide my personal anecdotes and lived experiences as well. Prominent themes to be discussed include family, culture, class, identity, support programs, and mentors.

Family

“What was I going to do after school? My parents didn’t know. They just focused on the here, the now. The two weeks. That’s another low-income issue” (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015). Rick’s (see appendix H for biography) family never expected him to go to college, but rather, was satisfied when he finished high school. He explained that as a low-income family, his parent’s focus was on present needs. Attending university was not an immediate or pressing need. Rick’s family was not accustomed to look farther into the future than the arrival of their next paycheck. In addition, he stated that his family understood and valued education based on their experiences in Mexico, where they had to pay for secondary education. It was seen as a privilege if your family was able to afford to send a child to secondary school.

I didn’t have plans after high school, and my family are immigrants. We didn’t have family with college educations. In my family it’s high school. It’s *secundaria* in Spanish. They don’t think about college. College is a specialized training program. So job preparedness class is what you would do. It’s not like college here where you find yourself. (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015)

After years of a family paying for their child to receive a high school degree, college was seen as extraneous. Research has suggested that a majority of parents are unaware of financial aid support and availability (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006), even when their child may qualify for full tuition coverage (Mangan, Hughes, & Slack, 2010). However the idea of Rick attending college was more than a financial investment; it was a time investment in something his parents did not value. Unless it resulted in specific job preparedness training, a college degree was redundant. Rick's family's initial opposition to his college attendance was not just for financial concerns, but related to the long term investment of time as well.

There was a clash of cultures apparent between the information about college Rick had gathered himself compared with the ideas about education his parents valued and expected. Investing in education beyond high school was seen as a negative action towards the family. It showed that Rick was more interested in helping himself than his family. Rick shared with me how his parents reacted when he told them he wanted to go to college after high school, and described their change in attitude over time:

...And I talked to my parents and I said, "I'm going to try this." They said, "We don't know anything about this." ...But it was uplifting. Cause if you look at them, if I take myself away from them and turn back the time for when they were young, they did the same thing I'm doing. They said, "OK, we're gonna wipe the slate clean. We're gonna go start somewhere new." So change didn't scare them. So I came up to them, at 15 or 16, and said, "I want to invest in the future because I feel this is the pathway for a better job." (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015)

Because Rick's parents had previously experienced a major life change, he felt they were able to accept that their child wanted to take a risk as well in trying something new to better himself. They were clear with him that they weren't able to pay for school

or able to provide knowledge about the process. This is a common theme among students across all class, income, and race backgrounds. Many students have shared with Rick a similar experience of not being able to depend on parents to support them through the process (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). He was aware that if he needed help during the process of college applications and arranging financial aid, he would need to seek assistance from outside of the family. His parents told him they wouldn't be able to give him any direction because they hadn't gone through college themselves.

Even though his parents weren't able to provide guidance throughout his college experience or able to make tuition payments, they absolved him from all duties at the house and allowed him to develop in whatever direction he wanted to. He said this is how he was able to attend university. His parents gave him room to develop academically and as an individual, as they saw he was making positive choices for himself. They didn't understand at first why he felt it necessary to go to college, but they saw he had an opportunity to explore and take a chance, just like they did when they emigrated from Mexico. For Rick, it wasn't that his family necessarily changed their mind about college and of their high value on placing family needs before individual wants. What happened was they allowed him to take a risk and placed trust and faith into a child they loved and respected. He stated he hopes one day to be able to relieve them from some of their financial burdens so they can have another opportunity to grow and develop. They allowed him room to grow, and now he wants to be able to give that freedom back to them by liberating his family of their overwhelming amount of financial obligations.

Even though Rick's parents had no knowledge or advice about college to share with him, they had experience with change and taking risks. Researchers who observed and interviewed students from high school Downtown College Prep in 2013 noted that students can benefit from recognizing their parent's experiences, even if devoid of college experience, have value (*Downtown College Prep Report*). Rick was able to draw value and motivation from his parent's experience emigrating from Mexico and starting a new life in California. He felt they took responsibility for their future, just as he did by going to college.

Andrea (see Appendix G for biography), like Rick, also comes from a Mexican family. Her immediate family emigrated from Mexico when she was a small child. She is the first in her family to graduate from high school. Her parents expected she would graduate from high school because she loved school and showed promise academically. Her parent's support was meaningful to her, even though they did not have a strong understanding of her the college process. The importance of emotional support from parents in place of financial support is clear for Andrea and Rick, and a topic under researched in the field of education. While her parents support her values on education, when Andrea was in high school this sentiment was not echoed by her extended family. She brought to the interview with her the tassel she wore on her cap for her high school graduation ceremony. While her family is large and social, and often gathers together for celebrations, only her parents were in attendance at her graduation.

So I guess I'll start with my tassel. I brought my high school one because I'm the first one on both sides of my family to graduate from high school. That's why I brought this one. From '06. This means a lot to me, and to my mom. Because

when I graduated only my parents came, no one else from the family showed up. (A. Garcia, personal communication, January 24, 2015)

I was shocked upon hearing her extended family did not attend her graduation, knowing they often get together for events and celebrations. I thought the significance of her accomplishment would be recognized and celebrated by her family members. She went on to explain that the lack of attendance at her graduation might have been because the degree does not have much value to them. I realized that a high school diploma for her family wasn't seen as unobtainable, rather, it was understood to be unnecessary. Over time that perspective has changed for her extended family.

As my cousins have been graduating from high school, I've been attending. And more and more family has been going now. I think they understand the importance of it. That it's a big deal, that not everyone does it. Or has done. So I get to see that change now in the family, where more and more come. There's a bigger crowd of support at the graduation. I think they're valuing it more. (A. Garcia, personal communication, January 24, 2015)

Andrea tried to justify to me why more of her family did not attend her high school graduation, but I could tell she felt disappointment when remembering the event. The ceremony was a moment of excitement for her accomplishments, even if her parents expected she would finish high school. She told me her family isn't very open emotionally, and that her parents have never outright told her they are proud of her academic accomplishments. She showed me a picture of her parents at her college graduation, standing on either side of her and planting kisses on either side of her cheeks. With this photo she admitted overhearing her parents bragging about her college degree to their friends, and she smiled at the thought of her parents pride and her success.

Immediately after showing me the aforementioned photo, she pulls out a framed photograph of her entire extended family posing together at her cousin's *quinceañera*. There are so many people crowded into the photograph, making it hard to count each one, and I can see multiple generations represented. They are all squished together and looking pleased to be celebrating the birthday of the young woman shown in the center of the family, who wears an elegant ball gown. Many young children crowd around the feet of adults and teenagers. She said she wanted to show me all of her little cousins and siblings who she will now be mentoring through the college process and their academic career. I commented that she seems to have a family who is all happy and proud to be together, and very social. The smile she had on her face begins to fall and she starts stumbling over her words:

My family—I am thankful to have everyone. Like, my parents have been together. Not much drama going on. But my parents have always been—we grew up with just the necessary. I don't know—I've never gone through—I've never had like, nothing to eat. You know my parents—my dad to this day works two jobs. He's been in the same job for like 15 years. You know, I don't have to have their jobs. You know, that's why I told them, I'm going to get educated. (A. Garcia, personal communication, January 24, 2015)

With this statement it becomes apparent that her family's financial situation and lack of education are connected to her inspiration for pursuing a college education. Additionally, as is seen with many other low-income students, she aspired to work in the field of her choice, not necessarily because she wanted to increase her earning potential, but to increase her career options (*Downtown College Prep Report*, 2013). She didn't want to blame her parents for their financial situation or sound ungrateful, and made it clear to me that her father works hard to support the family. She didn't want to sound as

though she feels her parents are at fault for causing any hardships she may have faced growing up, and wanted to point out that she was never hungry. Her parents are good people in her eyes and were supportive in the ways they knew how to be.

While Rick and Andrea described healthy and normal relationships with their family, Jen (see Appendix D for biography) and Fern (see Appendix E for biography) startled me with candid and open-hearted accounts of years of abuse at the hands of their family. Their stories were emotional, yet told in a factual manner. There were few moments where their voices faltered, and I gathered from their personal narratives that they had come to accept their stories as fact and as part of their identity. As the first two participants I interviewed, I was taken aback at how much both Jen and Fern underwent as children and how openly they conversed with me about their experiences.

When I asked Jen about what role her family played in her college attendance, I felt the interview shift. Instead of tensing up, as I imagined I would do when discussing something emotionally thick, she sat back comfortably in her chair and relaxed. I imagined this was not the first time she has discussed the topic of her family and her experiences growing up. While my question was about attending college, the answer I received was about abuse and her family's unreliability. Her college journey is interwoven with abuse, chaos, and dysfunction. She made it clear that college was not something she ever considered asking her parents about.

Well the way I grew up, I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. Like my dad would beat my mom and he would beat me as well. And later on my mom had depression. So it was like, I never went to them when I went to school.... (J. Chen, personal communication, December 26, 2014)

Jen said many times in the interview that the tough situations she faced as a child shaped her, and gave her a strong backbone. While her upbringing was difficult, she believes it contributed to shaping her into who she is today. When discussing her family and their struggles, she mentioned her parents and the fact that they only completed high school. I interpreted this as a connection she has made between education and family function. Her family was dysfunctional, abusive, and had financial issues. They also did not place value on higher education. This association may have contributed to her desire to pursue a college education. Many studies have demonstrated that children from low-income families are likely to have parents who did not attend college, and therefore have limited first hand knowledge to share with their children (Bok 2010; Yosso, 2005). Jen recognized her parent's lack of education, and hinted at an understanding that the stress of being low-income may have been related to their education levels.

They only graduated high school. And that was it. And seeing how they struggled every single day with financial needs. And my parents where the kind where—well there's some parents who won't tell their kids what's going on. My parents were the exact opposite. It was all out. ...My parents, looking at how you took care of us and you guys struggled every day—I'm not gonna go through that. So I was always very strong willed. (J. Chen, personal communication, December 26, 2014)

Jen found solace and comfort at school. She described school as a sanctuary, and as a constant in her life. She recounted to me stories of an unstable home life. To this day she is still struggling to recover and process the trauma. Instead of collapsing under the pressure and weight of abuse, Jen found happiness and relief at school. She felt safe and comfortable in an academic environment, and for as long as she can remember has enjoyed school. She told me, "...When I go to school, I feel anything is possible. Like

there's no limits in life. Anything you want to do is—it's just a breath of fresh air for me” (J. Chen, personal communication, December 26, 2014).

The words she chose to use to describe her relationship with school, as a place and an activity, are powerful. She talked about school as one might talk about religion, or a long time friend or lover. School has always been there for her and has given her the possibility of escape from her chaotic home life. Knowing there was a place where she could go where she would feel comfortable was assuring and may have contributed to her perseverance to overcome her difficult circumstances. The wealth of her life experiences gave to her a desire to succeed in school and seek a college education, and should be considered part of her cultural wealth. Low-income students have a wealth of life experiences and skills that are too often overlooked and disregarded by educators (Navarro, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Family: Personal reflection.

When I was in fourth grade my closest friend and I decided we would both attend UC Berkeley, obtain Ph.D.'s in Archeology and additionally Library Science, and become a bold research team of feminist, crime fighting Indiana Jones like characters. We didn't know yet about the college application process, the cost of college attendance, or the weight of student loans. We were empowered by the very real possibility of a college education in our futures. I believe this possibility was aided by a lack of monetary worries, personal successes in school, and a family attitude that college degrees were expected of us.

While I didn't recognize it growing up, money was usually tight for my family. My parents hid any money problems we had and made sure worries about bills and finances were far from my ears. There are a variety of reasons my parents may have done this (see *Class, Culture, and Identity: Personal Reflection*). What it resulted in was a false financial security in which I never worried about how my family would pay for anything, including college. For my parents, comfort was important, and pursuing a college degree was taught as a means of affording comfort in life.

While my mom worked minimally outside the home, my parent's were both teacher's with college degrees. My dad taught at a variety of levels, including middle school, high school, and community college, while my mom spent a few hours a week in a preschool classroom. I have many memories of their classrooms and of spending time on the various campuses they taught at. I never doubted that I would attend a university one day, and when I walked the campus of my local community college as a young child, I felt a sense of awe and admiration. I knew a college campus was a space I was welcome to be.

My parents valued and respected education, and recognized I was independent and mostly self disciplined when it came to completing homework. They made it clear that school, not social activities or employment, was to be my focus. I enjoyed school, and so they rarely intervened or participated much in my academic life. Because of this, I was left on my own when it came time for college applications. I felt I could reach out to my parents if I needed assistance, but I avoided doing so, possibly out of stubbornness and pride. What mattered though was that I had their support and I understood I could

come to them if I needed to. They were a resource that contained personal accounts of success in higher education.

The path to college seemed such an easy path for me, and so I never stopped to think how I was going to pay for tuition and living expenses. I naively expected my parents would be able to foot the bill, as the message I received growing up was that college attendance was expected for me, and that our finances were in good standing. After attending community college, I transferred to a large, public university in the Bay Area of northern California. I was shocked when I received my acceptance letter, and my parents didn't share my excitement. They tried to convince me to attend the local university and live at home. I rejected this idea, not understanding they couldn't afford the cost of a more expensive university and the additional living expenses of moving away from home. They made a deal with me that they would pay for half of the tuition and expenses. I agreed, and took out student loans for half of the expenses for two years of education. What I wouldn't learn until years later, is that they paid the other half mostly with private bank loans. While I am utterly grateful for their support, I feel enormously guilty for the financial burden I have caused them.

My family assisted greatly in forming and shaping my value of a college degree. My parents showed me what they were able to do with a college education, and placed great importance on their degrees. Money was not often discussed during my adolescence, and they created an environment where I rarely had to worry or question if my family would be able to afford to assist in my college education.

Stephanie (see Appendix F for biography) and Sandy (see Appendix I for biography) told narratives similar to my own. Their parents expected them to go to college, and they never doubted the probability of their attendance. I found it harder to connect with Rick, Andrea, and Jen, whose family placed very little value on education, both secondary and post-secondary. Jen and I however connected on the idea of school being like a sanctuary. No matter what was happening in my life, I could most often look forward to escaping to a place of nurture and possibilities. School had a history of being a happy place for me, and I continuously received the message that I was welcome there.

Class, Culture, and Identity

As a kid I knew it, [college], was a pathway to get somewhere, to get a better job. To get a better life. I didn't know how exactly, but I knew I had the tools to do it. As I started growing up I started understanding what the college system was, I started understanding the social implications of having a secondary degree. Seeing like, wow, this is like having a medal. This is a privilege. And when I brought that information back home. They're like, oh wow. In Mexico when you have a [college] degree they say it's called a *licenciatura*. It's like a word that sounds like a lawyer. It's like you're a lawyer of Biology. People are like, "Woah, sorry doctor".... (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015)

Rick expressed to me the pride and praise he associated with completing a college degree. It was clear he valued education and sees a high school and college degree as having positive social implications and social mobility. He identified as someone who worked hard to further his education and holds great respect for the institution of higher education. He is also aware that socially, having a college degree would allow him more mobility and earn him respect. The idea of attending university is placed on a pedestal, and Rick didn't always see himself as a college student. A university campus was not seen as a place he was welcome to, as though he didn't belong to that type of space

because he was poor. Rick recounted to me his experience visiting a college campus for the first time, after receiving his acceptance letter.

When I got accepted, I went with my dad to the school. We went to a meeting for prospective, potential students at UC Santa Cruz. I didn't want to walk into the building, my dad didn't want to walk in. There were a lot of white people there and we felt like, we don't belong here. You know. They had really nice tables—now I know it's just a normal reception area. I felt like, are we in the wrong place? But someone said, "Oh, come in here." And I guess there was more than one person who felt like that. ...So when you see something nice, it's like, woah. Cool man, but how much is this going to cost me? ...You don't want to be embarrassed. You don't want to look a fool. (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015)

Getting a college degree was not just for the benefit of himself, but his family as well. As Rick mentioned before, going to college was seen by his family as a selfish act, one that disregards the immediate needs of his family. By bringing his degree and the knowledge he gained back to his family, he was able to feel good about what he has accomplished. It was expected of him to consider the family's needs and he was clear in his interview that he wanted to help his family financially by gaining earning potential with a college degree. He also described a stigma of not having a college education compared to the praise and social implications of becoming a college degree holder. Rick had to consider his wants and needs and try to balance that with the family's desires. This put him in a tough spot, where he was faced with pressures from his family to consider not pursuing a college education, and society's message that it has value. Rick was committed to attending college, and had to find a way to present to his family that he valued both them and his dream of obtaining a four-year degree.

Rick is aware of the limitations he might have faced without a high school or college degree, and of being from a low-income family. Sandy and Andrea also noted

similar awareness of the limitations of being low-income and of the opportunities college might create. Sandy could have attended a four-year university right out of high school, if she was able to have afforded it. She was admitted to a respected public university, however knew she could not manage to pay for tuition and living expenses, even with financial aid. Instead, she enrolled in community college and became a member of something called “First Year Experience”. It was there that she learned it was not necessarily a bad thing to be low-income. There was a way to work with it. The program Sandy participated in had other students who were low-income as well.

They were like, “Yeah, you’re low-income but so what? Yeah, you still have options.” And then the perspective of limitation went to options. It started transitioning to like, yeah, I’m low-income, but look at all these programs because I’m low-income (S. Hadad, personal communication, March 10, 2015).

For Andrea, her limitations were not just monetary, but due to being undocumented as well. She did not have legal residency in the US, meaning she could not apply for financial aid, be picky about what job she worked, or obtain a driver’s license. Driving without a license or car insurance was stressful, and so she cut her trips short and limited herself to only driving at certain times during the day. When she needed to get a job to pay for tuition, she found her options were limited. Her options were restricted to work places where they didn’t collect social security information upon hiring. This meant she worked long hours at a fast food restaurant, when she would have preferred to work somewhere that might have been easier for her, like retail. Being undocumented cut down her internship opportunities as well. Getting a college degree, and her residency, would mean she would have options that her parents never had. She described a newfound confidence, knowing she now has skills, and her residency, that

provide a freedom she did not have. This confidence is something low-income students may need assistance in developing, which can be provided through mentors and intervention programs (Navarro, 2012).

While Andrea spent years working at a fast food restaurant, Fern (see Appendix E for biography) spent years working retail. She wondered if she would ever be able to find a different, more meaningful type of work. Like many other low-income students, Fern had the desire to develop a career that could earn her more income, but she was unable to connect her aspirations with a firm plan of college attendance (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Fern described an awareness of having many limitations and many hardships to overcome before she earned her college degree. As a non-English speaking immigrant with no high school degree, she saw herself as useless. Her parents did not earn their high school degree, and during her youth they reminded her that she would be useless without it as well. After entering adulthood without finishing secondary school, she came to realize she had fulfilled the prophecy her parents made years ago. At this point in her life, her self worth was at an all time low and she felt as pathetic and incompetent as her parents warned her she would be. Too often low-income students have the ability to do well in school, but suffer from a lack of self worth (Navarro, 2012), just as Fern did.

Now that Fern has completed her college degree, she is working on a master's in Education. With these degrees, she is confident she has options, and more important, she is beginning to develop a sense of self worth. After learning English, she still saw bilingualism as a disadvantage. It was challenging to imagine herself developing in any

job field when the language barrier was still difficult to overcome. Working at a university with a large population of Chinese students, she has found her bilingualism to be useful for the first time. A moment of change came, and Fern said, “ I start to learn my weakness could be my strength” (F. Yang, personal communication, January 20, 2015).

In identifying being bilingual as a marketable skill, Fern is able to see value in herself. She says she is still working on her self worth; however, she beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. By making sense of where she fits in in the world, she is able to find peace with her identity. By utilizing her skills as a bilingual speaker, she is able to use her assets and refocus on the wealth of skills she has (Navarro, 2012).

Being an immigrant has long been a part of Fern’s identity. She stated strongly that she is intolerant of Chinese women who marry men from the United States purely in an effort to get citizenship. She was clear that she came to this country for love and simply that. While expressing this she became aggravated and visually upset. She was struggling significantly to express how truthful she was being with me, and it was apparent it bothered her that I may have misinterpreted her intentions for marrying. It was clearly important to her that I did not judge her intentions, her story, and her life experience as a Chinese immigrant. She was experiencing an identity contingency, where she is aware of a stereotype and feels she may be treated or judged in a certain way because of it (Steele, 2010).

Fern’s experience stemmed from the stereotype threat of being judged for marrying an American man and gaining citizenship. She did not want to be associated

with this stereotype, something that challenged her identity and belief system. Andrea also experienced and described stereotype threat and identity contingency. For Andrea, the lazy Mexican stereotype and those that perpetuate it frustrated her. The existence of this stereotype inspired her to not become a person who would perpetuate it. She was forced to come to terms with negative stereotypes of Latinos/Latinas and felt proving herself successful academically would challenge the stereotype (Steele, 2010).

...I've always felt I didn't want to be the stereotype. I wanted to, not just prove to myself, but to other people. No, like, that there are a lot of us that do have potential that do want to do well. Yeah, I mean, I don't get upset at it. I just look at it. Like, I just want to prove it wrong. We might have more struggles, but if other people can do it, why can't we? My own people, student's, Latinos, who don't want to do anything. Those are the people I get frustrated with. Uh, the big frustration for me is the ones that—let's say they get their documentation, they got their residency, but then they're not doing anything with it. Those are the one's that frustrate me. It's like, you are given everything, but you're not putting it to good use. Complacency is something I'm not OK with, in my culture (A. Garcia, personal communication, January 24, 2015).

Jen also experienced frustrations with identity and of wanting to identify with the Asians she met in college. However the Asian women she met during her undergraduate years were all in sororities, something she was not interested in. She was conflicted, as she felt a need to fit in with other Asian people, particularly women, because they shared a culture. Jen also had other pieces of her identity to wrestle with and understand. Born in Taiwan and having lived for a time in Costa Rica, her identity was made up of many pieces. She felt lost because she felt the need to find a group with which she connected. Her blended identity created internal confusion and made her college journey difficult.

I mean it was tough! Part of the time I was judged because I was Asian, or wasn't white, or because I knew Spanish, you know. There was always something where I kind of feel like, I needed to fit in or find a group that blended best with me. Being born in a different country, but then knowing an entire different culture,

and a different language. But then coming here and learning English. And then my parents wanting me to go to Chinese school at the same time while I was learning English, even though I didn't know Asian people that much. It was kind of like--kind of like I was running around! ...Yeah, and then my friends were Mexican and it was kind of like, I didn't have a set ground. But I think that kind of helped me find who I was. In a way, it was just, I kind of felt lost. But I didn't because all of those different identities were me (J. Chen, personal communication, December 26, 2014).

While Jen was talking her arms flailed about, emphasizing each sentence, and her eyes darted around wildly. Her narrative on the topic was clearly raw, natural, and unrehearsed. She was passionate when describing her experience and struggled to put together her thoughts and feelings as she spoke. This moment of the interview was the most memorable for me. It was where I began to most clearly understand Jen and her struggle to define herself and make peace with her multifaceted identity.

In my call for participants, gender, race, and ethnicity did not play a role in inclusion or exclusion. It was an intentional decision to not ask participants directly in the interview process what their cultural, ethnic, or national identity was. Additionally, I did not ask about their relationship status, whether or not they had children, or what they did for employment. I wanted each participant to be able to define themselves through their narrative and allow the details of their life to be revealed organically. I found it notable and surprising that each participant with whom I spoke gave details of either their culture or nationality by the end of the interview, without prompting. One by one, each participant disclosed their country of origin, the language(s) they spoke, where their relatives were from, their ethnic culture, and/or their family's culture. I asked the participants to tell me about their journey to college, and what I received were complicated and layered narratives of culture and identity. I was unaware of how integral

and grounding a person's cultural identity can be for himself or herself. This realization alerted me to the fact that, as a White American, I am not devoid of culture, but rather too often unaware of the existence of my own culture due to its prevalence in American society. I have the privilege of being able to ignore my culture because it is so commonly reflected and represented in American society.

Class, culture, and identity: Personal reflection.

It would not be until my undergraduate years of college that I realized my childhood fantasy of receiving a college degree was something that may not exist for other children, and that this was a fantasy born of middle class privilege. While I remain unsure of my class identity, I am grounded in an understanding that I benefited from being raised by parents who subscribed to a middle class lifestyle. This middle class lifestyle included the sense of financial security and my parent's teachings of class entitlement. While my parents couldn't afford to pay out of pocket for me to attend college, they raised me with a false sense of security that they could. They acted as though our family earned the income of a middle class family, and they subscribed to a belief that college was expected for me in order to maintain that identity. Good grades were stressed, and my parents ensured I spent time participating in activities that were respectable in White middle and upper class social circles.

Social class was stressed as an important part of any person's identity. My parents taught me that everyone presents a message to the world, starting first with our outward appearance, and then our speech, our chosen topics of conversation, the activities in which we participate, the peers with which we surround ourselves, and the

goals we aspire to accomplish. Etiquette and manners were extremely important. I recall various objects, people, and activities being labeled by my parents as “lower class,” and I learned to differentiate myself from them. Tattoos, piercings, cigarettes, sex, loud music, heavy makeup, skin exposing clothing, and crude humor were all labeled as “lower class.” I knew my family wasn’t rich, and I knew we weren’t associated with the things I was taught were lower class. This led me to believe that my family was an average, middle class White family. I was under the false belief that we had economic capital and that I came from a family that could afford to pay for their children to attend college. I do not identify as coming from a low-income family, however I now understand we were not middle class. Reviewing the transcripts from the interviews sparked an internal dialogue of how I identify myself and whether I harbor classist ideals.

My parents maintained the facade of having economic capital because they understood that with money, or the appearance of it, came a sense of belonging to a higher status. With economic capital, comes cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). If my family was able to keep up appearances and subscribe to what they believe are middle and upper class ideals, then perhaps we would fit into higher society and reap the social capital benefits and social mobility that come with it. My parent’s need to hide their lower income, I believe, was born out of shame for who they are. They adopted a lifestyle they couldn’t afford, but wanted to represent. Their presentation of their desired class shaped the identity they presented to the world.

It was therefore a surprise to me when I began interviewing participants and I found myself identifying with the statements I was hearing. Interviewees spoke about

living at home during college years, attending community college, struggling with covering college costs, not receiving adequate financial aid, the burden of large student loans, and of working part or full time while in school. While listening to these stories, I told myself these are things most students face, and even if we had these factors in common, I was middle class because I didn't suffer from emotional or financial hardships. I told myself I attended community college because I wanted to, not because I had to. I struggled with college costs because of tuition hikes and the high cost of living, not because of low-income. I paid for half of my educational expenses because my parents and I agreed it was the responsible thing to do, and it would teach me money management skills, or so I thought it might. What I didn't know until very recently was that my parents paid for most of my education with a private bank loan. Still, I told myself that to have access to a bank loan was a resource, and having resources is a perk of being middle class.

Taking a step back and reflecting on the interviews, my reactions, and my identity, I have begun to question my learned definitions of lower, middle and upper class. Why is it that someone who does not have financial stability is labeled as someone that lives a life without privileges, advantages, or comfort? My family's teachings about class have informed a prejudice that I was unaware of until completing my interviews. It is a misunderstanding, grounded in teachings since childhood, that those who come from low-income families must have suffered and are disadvantaged in some fashion. This prejudice also supports a misconception that those who are financially stable are exempt from lives interwoven with struggles, financially and emotionally.

I became aware while analyzing interview materials that I was searching for statements relating to hardships and deficits. I recognized this as a contradiction to my project, as the very creation of this project was to fight against the prevalence of deficit thinking in research, and the racist and prejudice thinking it allows (Yosso, 2005). I realized deficit thinking is my norm, and it allows the support of stereotypes I associate with a person's perceived class. While asking people to tell me about their experiences, and focusing on hardships, I became aware that I expected to hear stories of suffering and of pain. I uncovered a preconceived idea that having less money means a life of stress, hardship, pain and suffering. While this may be true for some, it is not true for all. Through narratives of culture, class and identity, I began to process my own identity.

Support Programs and Mentors

Andrea, Rick, and Sandy were involved in a program called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). The program exists in middle and high schools and takes place as a single class period. According to the interviewees who participated, instructors worked with students on reading, writing, research skills, and college preparedness. Their experiences varied, but both Andrea and Rick described their experience as significantly helpful in their college going process and both felt lucky to have been involved in the program. Sandy however felt the assistance given by her AVID instructor was unhelpful and confusing. While it was disheartening to hear Sandy's experience with the AVID program was not as positive and useful as Andrea and Rick's, it shows that the same program and its effects can vary depending on the teachers involved and students served.

Rick feels he is a product of AVID and would not have attended college if it were not for the information and guidance he received. He recalled being approached in seventh grade to join the program after failing a math class. He didn't give much thought to signing up for the class, and said he could have easily gotten into drugs if someone had asked him to participate in that kind of activity as well. Middle school was a pivotal time in Rick's life, when he felt he was just beginning to shape his personality and define who he was. Had he been approached in high school to join AVID, rather than in middle school, he mentioned he might have declined to participate. He put it down as luck that he was approached at the right time to join a program that would end up being highly influential on his path to college.

Before joining AVID, Rick had no plans to attend college, and additionally he was unaware of the requirements to apply. As a low-income family, Rick saw his parents were restricted from being future oriented as they were too often were living paycheck to paycheck. The farthest in the future they would concern themselves with planning were the next two weeks ahead, or when the next paycheck would arrive. This restriction meant that Rick wasn't used to thinking years in advance or planning out long term goals. When he failed a class his freshman year of high school, he was frustrated to learn the grade would matter on a college application. His AVID instructor took the time to explain the A-G requirements to him and make it clear he needed to work hard now, even though it was only his freshman year, in order to make college admissions requirements. After that experience, he said he never failed another class. Early conversations about college applications and admissions requirements have been shown to have a more

positive affect on students than waiting until junior or senior year to make requirements clear (Castleman & Page, 2014; De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011).

...And my teacher told me, “Hey, if you get a D, you won’t make the requirements for college.” And I thought, “Well that’s dumb, I’m only a freshman.” They’re like, “No, that’s a rule. They don’t accept that.” And that’s when I got familiar with the A-G requirements. And I thought, “OK, I’m going to try this college thing” (R. Vargas, personal communication, February 20, 2015).

Andrea was also recruited in middle school to join AVID, and like Rick, feels lucky to have landed the opportunity to join a life changing program. She credits her college attendance with her AVID teacher, who she identified as her first mentor. She described her AVID instructor as, “the one who literally held my hand and helped all four years” (A. Garcia, personal communication, January 24, 2015). She went on to say that it was because of this instructor that she went to college.

Andrea’s teacher assisted Andrea and her AVID classmates with college applications and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. As an undocumented student, Andrea did not have a social security number, and she was unsure how that would affect her applications. Two other girls in the class were also undocumented students. Andrea remembers not knowing how to find information pertaining to her situation, or understanding how she would be able to pay for college or apply for financial aid. At the time there were few options for federal aid. Her instructor called the schools she and other undocumented AVID students were applying to and gathered information for them.

The seriousness in Andrea’s voice and the enthusiasm in which she spoke when telling this story made it clear she feels a great passion and thankfulness for the initiative

her AVID instructor took. For her instructor, it may have been just a few simple phone calls to a handful of schools. What was described though highlighted the power and effect a mentor figure, teacher, or adult can have on a high school student's journey to college. In addition to her instructor, Andrea mentioned the effectiveness of being part of a cohort that had other undocumented students. Additionally, as a cohort, her AVID class was able to grow and develop together. When students are able to share aspirations of college attendance, their chances of applying and attending college increases (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Andrea was in a cohort of students who had higher education aspirations, and had a mentor figure to help guide them there.

Sandy unfortunately described to me an experience unlike Rick and Andrea's. She felt her instructor did not clearly understand the specific needs of her students, especially low-income students like herself. When she applied for college in senior year, her AVID teacher was there to assist with the application process. Sandy had already visited her local community college and spent time crunching numbers, taking into consideration tuition and living expenses. Her plan was to attend community college for two years and then transfer to a four-year school. Unfortunately her AVID instructor thought community college was an unwise choice and pressured Sandy to apply for a four year. Sandy felt judged for her decision to attend community college and noted feeling unsupported in her life path. Sandy suggested future AVID instructors should take note of the neighborhood and area of town their students are from and respect cultural values and income levels.

While Sandy did not feel AVID was useful on her journey to college, she praised the programs she participated in through her community college. The summer after high school, she joined a program called “Summer Bridge”. The program included summer events and lectures on the topics of financial aid, college writing, time management planning, and transferring to a four-year university. Recent studies have begun to document summer transition programs, highlighting the benefits of creating transition support for low-income students who have just graduated high school and are starting college (Castleman & Page, 2014).

After the summer program was completed, Sandy was funneled into a two-year program, known as “First Year Experience”. This program placed students in a cohort group that attended classes together and invited students to social activities on the weekends. This cohort based program, similar to AVID, allowed students to grow together. It also had the added benefit of being able to supply students with their own staff of counselors and teachers. This gave students the feeling of belonging to a community, one built on shared experiences and continuity. Sandy described feeling as though her teachers and counselors understood her better, and that her peers were more likely to have had similar life experiences as her. 78% of a group of low-income students when interviewed said understanding college and how it works was challenging (*Downtown College Prep Report*, 2013). Being a part of both “Summer Bridge” and “First Year Experience” gave Sandy the specialized attention and tools needed to understand her new academic environment.

While in community college Andrea participated in a cohort based program as well, called Puente, which is specifically crafted for Latino/Latina students. Andrea stated the counselors were extremely supportive, and understood the particulars of being an undocumented student. Andrea met other undocumented students and got to know her peers through multiple classes together. The experience of coming to know other undocumented students was eye opening and uplifting for her. She felt it made her situation a little easier, realizing many other people were also going through the same struggles. While in her AVID class she met a small number of other undocumented students, but in her Puente classes there was an entire community. A researcher studying a similar cohort based program, Academy for College Excellence, argued strongly for the importance and value of peer support within a success program (Navarro, 2012).

Stephanie and Fern did not participate in any intervention programs. They did however have adult figures in their life that served in the mentor role and provided assistance during their journey to and through college. Stephanie remembers wanting to go on college tours while in high school, but not being able to afford to do so. Going to a four-year college was important to her, and also expected by her parents, and she wanted to make sure she picked the right school. Her guidance counselor personally funded a trip to several large universities in California for students at her high school. She doesn't recall how he selected the students, just that it was a small group of 6 or 7 teenagers. She credits the trip as providing insight to the world of college and giving her the opportunity to see firsthand what the out of area universities were like. Stacy was thankful her

guidance counselor stepped up and voluntarily provided the college tour experience for her and the others who might not have been able to attend.

In addition to speaking highly of her high school guidance counselor, Stephanie repeatedly thanked her sister for taking on the role as the oldest child, and as an effect, taking parental pressure off of her. She believes her life was easier because her sister was there to take on some of the responsibilities for the family, leaving her and her younger sister to be able to focus on just themselves and their schoolwork. She affectionately noted that her sister even provided her an allowance, something her parents could not do. It was natural for Stephanie to turn for her sister for support when she transferred to a local community college from her four-year college after freshman year. She felt the university was not a good fit for her, and she was homesick as well. Her parents and extended family members looked down on community colleges, and wanted her to stay at the university, regardless of her feelings. While she knew she needed to make certain decisions for herself in order to maintain her happiness, going against her parent's wishes took an abundance of courage. She turned to her sister, who supported her in transferring and gave her the encouragement she needed to make the best choice for herself.

Unlike Stephanie, when Fern needed guidance she found herself seeking guidance outside of the family. Fern left high school without finishing her diploma, and soon after moved from Hong Kong to the United States and began working full time. She went through a rough period financially and emotionally, struggling to make enough money to pay rent while handling a divorce. At some point, due to personal issues that Fern did not opt to disclose, she was put in touch with a social worker. This woman recognized that

Fern was very bright and would do well at the college level. She encouraged Fern to reach out to a counselor at a community college and learn more about courses, majors, and financial aid. Over the years Fern lost contact with her, but later sought out her guidance when she was suffering through severe depression. For a second time in her life, this woman was there for during times of extreme emotional hardship. Over time this woman became like family to her. During the interview she affectionately referred to the woman as “auntie”.

Fern was tremendously honest and open about her life experiences, which include a history of abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts. She detailed to me the abuse she suffered from a young age at the hands of her parents. Born a girl when her parents wanted a boy, she was often dressed in boys clothing and given short haircuts. Her father would physically and verbally abuse her, and she recalled her mother did nothing to stop it. “...Now that I’m an adult I felt pity-ness of my dad and my mom. Because what kind of people would stand for that” (F. Yang, personal communication, January 20, 2015). It might be that Fern needed someone from outside of the family to step in and be a support figure for her. She may not trust adults who are connected with her past or with her family. I speculated that she needed someone who didn’t know her past life to show her that she has value and worth, in order for her to take steps towards growth and personal development.

Support programs and mentors: Personal reflection.

The first time I thought about going to college was in second grade. I had a wonderful teacher whose lesson plans were regularly bursting with creativity. Her

attitude was fun and goofy, but she was respected and could keep command of her classroom. She was not afraid to engage in controversial conversation topics with us and I never felt she belittled us or simplified information because of our age. She was the teacher who believed in everyone and went out of her way to make sure we all felt appreciated. At the end of the school year I told my mom I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. This teacher made such an impression on me, and I decided I wanted to have a classroom just like hers in the future. My mom told me I would need to go to college and get a special certification to teach. That's when I knew I was going to go to college.

Stephanie, Fern, Rick, and Andrea spoke about adult figures and mentors in their life in a way that reminded me of my feelings of affection for my second grade teacher. These figures shaped the ideas and aspirations of these participants, and each expressed a feeling of luck to have had these experiences. I too feel thankful and a sense of luck that I was paired with many wonderful teachers throughout my K-12 years, and that there was at least one who inspired me, in some way, to attend college.

Photographs and Personal Artifacts

The use of photographs or other visual, tangible objects in interviews was meant to provide extended and supplementary opportunities for understanding of a participant's narrative and lived experiences (Clark-Ibñez, 2004; Koltz et al., 2010). While all participants were asked to bring either photographs or objects with them to the interview, only half did. At first I was frustrated by what I interpreted as a lack of respect for directions. Participants were given consent forms before the interview, so they could familiarize themselves with the requirements and focus of the interview session. The first

participant who I met with did not bring anything, and was unconcerned about the fact. She informed me that she did not want to go through the trouble of looking through photos. At this statement I was became frustrated and annoyed, as I envisioned the opportunity for participants to share objects during the interview as a chance for them to take charge of their story and demonstrate it visually in addition to verbally. I was also hoping to gain a better understanding of visual methodologies through practice.

After a few interviews, I forgot the most important reason I asked for participants to share photographs or objects and also why I was interested in examining the use of objects and photographs in the first place. These visual, tangible representations of a participant's story offer the person the chance to express themselves in a way that words may not. It allows them to present evidence and convey emotions that could be missed in conversation. While I wanted to explore the possibility of the experience of learning about my participants through the use of visual aid(s), the most important factor in my decision to include a visual component was to afford the participant more comfort and ease in telling their story. I came to understand, after completing interviews, that this might not be something every individual is comfortable with. In fact, to demand the presence may have been a burden to the dialogue and could have hindered the process, rather than act as a way of freeing the dialogue.

When I imagined the interviews, I saw two people sitting down together, sharing images of family, friends, places and memories. If an object related to their academic journey, I wanted them to be able to share that as well. For me, this experience is associated with positive memories. I enjoy, with both new friends and old, the

experience of flipping through photo albums, scrolling through photographs on a smart phone, examining objects, and admiring meaningful details. There are three issues I now understand with requiring objects or photographs to be present.

The first issue is that a participant may not want to share anything. They may feel more comfortable communicating verbally or possibly feel uncomfortable communicating with a visual aid. The second issue may be that they do not have any objects or photographs for a variety of reasons. Third, the visual item may cause unneeded stress or emotional upset for the participant. While participants were notified of the minor emotional risk involved in participating, the reasoning for including a visual aspect to the conversation was to make the participant feel comfortable. As a researcher, I was seeking a way to put the participant at ease, not create tension. The upheaval of heavy, painful emotions is only productive if it allows for a better understanding of the participants' story. It was not the intent of my research to make a participant unnecessarily uncomfortable.

Fern was the only participant who I observed to become mildly agitated while sharing photographs with me. However her uncomfortable expression yielded greater understanding of her interpretation of her childhood, and subsequently, her narrative of her journey to college. The photos she chose to share with me were recent, candid portraits of herself with her mother and sister. I noticed the trio looked quite happy together, and upon pointing this out, she recounted the abuse she faced as a child. She told me they are happy now but were not when she was younger. Her speech became

choppy and disjointed while she spoke, as she attempted to string together the pieces of information she wanted to share.

Now [the family is happy]. But not before. ...Especially because my dad hit me a lot when I was younger. Yeah, because he—because now when I'm an adult I felt pity-ness of my dad and my mom. Because what kind of people would stand for that. Then my dad always do some heavy duty job because he didn't do an education. Then he went and—he stayed outside and gambling because—so when he loose he would hit us. So I had some child abuse. But I didn't realize at the time. (F. Yang, personal communication, January 20, 2015)

Fern wanted to make clear to me that she still loves her parents, however she is trying to understand why they treated her so poorly. She offered an explanation that her father worked long days, and had a second wife whom he sent money to, but the quizzical look on her face told me her explanation didn't justify her father's behavior. Had Fern not shared with me the photos of her family, I'm not confident this part of her story and history would have been shared. The dialogue we had at this point in the interview felt very raw, personal, and powerful. I felt as though Fern was allowed me to see a part of her she wouldn't volunteer casually to anyone, and the photographs acted as the invitation I needed.

Stephanie brought to our meeting a small charm, one that could be strung on a bracelet or necklace. It was in plastic packaging still, and she informed me her sister had just recently given it to her. Stephanie and I had a more difficult time connecting than I experienced with the other participants, and the interview was much shorter and sparser in words. Of my prepared list of questions we made it through the first half in 6 minutes. She seemed a bit shy, and perhaps she was uncomfortable sharing so much of her personal information and story. In the few minutes we discussed the charm she brought,

the conversation felt as though it had more direction. Stephanie gained total control over the conversation, and she seemed more at ease. In addition, our visual focus was off of each other and down at the table where the charm lay. As a result of the charm the conversation turned to her family's concern over her personal safety, and lingered over her close relationship with her sister.

Andrea brought to her interview the most number of objects, and clearly took care when selecting what to share. She brought 3 photos as well as her tassel from her high school graduation. The photos were all in frames, showing the care and appreciation for these particular photographs. Her high school tassel served to start a conversation about her high school graduation, and she conveyed to me the disappointment that her extended family did not attend. This prompted a conversation about her family's value's of education and their opinion of the importance of a high school education. The photographs allowed a story to unfold that gave me valuable insight into her family's changing attitude on education and her reactions to the change.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This project was designed to be a simple investigation, focusing solely on low-income students and the story of their journey to college. I was resistant to make it anything more than that, and impervious to my advisor's recommendations that I should allow the project to explore other ideas and issues as they present themselves. I had created a vision in my head of a project that was solution oriented and focused. I wanted to take a peek into my participants' stories and process the information they gave me. I envisioned after completing and reviewing the transcripts I would be able to assemble a list of factors that contribute to educational success of low-income students. I wanted to be able to show clear and accurate results, without getting stuck on topics that were in my mind extraneous or distractingly emotionally heavy. This is due to two things: time and self-preservation.

To dive in so deep and to be submerged into the narratives of the people I interviewed made my thoughts become muddled and confused. It was difficult to grasp the participants' meaning and truly understand my reactions to their statements, when I had not yet attempted to develop a full understanding of my own story and my journey to college. It was necessary for me to unpack my own narrative and history, in order to understand someone else's. However this meant leaving myself naked and vulnerable, and exposed for everyone, including myself, to see. It isn't just my participants' stories that matter, but my own. Realizing this meant I would have to trek through a place in my mind I was uncomfortable with. It also meant that the results of the study were not going to come out as clear and simple as I had envisioned. In the beginning I imagined my

results could be processed into list or possibly a bullet point summary, as though I were a machine of some kind. Once I learned this was not realistic, or beneficial, I gave up on the idea, and focused on making meaning of the stories and how they were narrated.

After completing my interviews, and after many hours of discussion with my advisor, I understood why he smiled so coyly at me when I first proposed my thesis to him 1 year ago. What he knew, that I didn't know at the beginning, was the amount of self reflection and emotional exploration necessary in order to complete my ethnographic research. I set out to interview six participants, unbeknownst to me that there would be, in a sense, seven participants. I became a participant as soon as I began interviews. I was also the instrument with which I analyzed the data gathered. I did not understand the necessity of including my self analysis of my own identity when I began the project.

The themes that emerged while reviewing transcripts included family, class, identity, mentors, AVID, financial aid, immigrating, culture, language, peers, cohorts, and money. There is a lack of research and understanding of social class, culture, and identity as it intersects with education. Additionally, asset-based research is lacking, and is overshadowed by deficit-based research. As outlined in Chapter 2, often deficit thinking rules research and intervention programs, and fuels racism and prejudice thinking in schools (Yosso, 2005). In addition to a lack of research on the topics of social class, culture, and identity within the field of education, visual methodologies remain underexplored and underutilized. Further research and use of photo elicitation interviews could benefit discussions about identity and could cultivate a better understanding of those interviewed.

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Appendix A. Consent Form

REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Seeing Success: Biographies of Low Income Students

NAME OF THE RESEARCHER Julie Morrice, San Jose State University graduate student.

PURPOSE

This study aims to showcase students who come from low income backgrounds and have completed a four year college degree. It is the goal of the researcher to highlight what aided in this population's completion of a four year degree and what did not, so that current and future students in similar situations may benefit from the wisdom shared by participants. Similar to a biography, the purpose of this study is to bring to the public the stories of real students and the wealth of knowledge they have to share.

PROCEDURES

Interviews will be scheduled at the participant's convenience. The meeting location will be either on campus at San Jose State University or at a public location that is convenient for you. The theme of the interview will be about you, the participant, and your life story as relating to your academic and personal success. You are asked to bring with you any personal or family photographs you would like to share with the interviewer, or other cultural or personal artifacts you feel aid in telling this story. The interviewer will not keep these items. Interviews will last approximately 1 hour. They will be recorded, audio only, and transcribed by the researcher. Names will be changed to protect identities.

POTENTIAL RISKS

Risk is mild. A list of resources for counseling will be provided at the end of the interview for any participants who may wish to seek counseling. For privacy protection pseudonyms will be used in the report. In addition to this, the interview materials will be kept in a locked cabinet which only the researcher has access to, and digital materials will be stored on a password protected computer.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Potential benefits may include positive emotional well being gained from reflection during the interviewing process. Although there may be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about how students succeed in their goals of completing a degree at a four-year university.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Identifying information will not be included in publication or dissemination. Interviews will be recorded, audio only, and later transcribed by the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used in the report to protect identities. The use of a participant's information will not jeopardize the participant's career, employability, reputation, or put them at risk of criminal/civil liability.

Audio recordings as well as transcriptions will be kept in a locked cabinet that only the researcher will have access to. Digital materials will be stored on a password protected computer.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the entire study or any part of the study without any negative effect on your relations with San Jose State University or Julie Morrice. You also have the right to skip any question you do not wish to answer. This consent form is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You will not waive any rights if you choose not to participate, and there is no penalty for stopping your participation in the study.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

For further information about the study, please contact Julie Morrice, at 559-908-5409, or email juliemorrice@gmail.com.

Complaints about the research may be presented to Lewis Aptekar, Interim Department Chair, at 408-924-3662, or email lewis.apterkar@sjsu.edu

For questions about participants' rights or if you feel you have been harmed in any way by your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President of Graduate Studies and Research, San Jose State University, at 408-924-2427.

SIGNATURES

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to be a part of the study, that the details of the study have been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this

document, and that your questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

By checking this box you give your consent to an audio recorded interview.

Participant Signature

Participant's Name (printed) Participant's Signature Date

Researcher Statement

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to learn about the study and ask questions. It is my opinion that the participant understands his/her rights and the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures of the research and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent Date

Appendix B. Resources

After Hours Advice Nurse San Jose State University Health Center

1-866-935-6347

Counseling Services San Jose State University

Administration Bldg., Rm. 201 One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0035

Phone: (408) 924-5910 Fax: (408) 924-5933 Email: counseling.services@sjsu.edu

Crisis/Suicide

Hotline Phone #: 1-855-278-4204 (Toll-free) (All Santa Clara County) Phone: (650)

494-8420 (North County - Toll Free) Phone: (408) 683-2482 (South County - Toll Free)

Regional Medical Center

225 North Jackson Avenue

San Jose, CA

(408) 259-5000 (hospital operator)

Police Department

9-1-1 from any phone

Appendix C. Interview Questions

Interview Questions (Subject to change during the interview process)

When do you remember learning or being told that college was something you could do?

When did you decide to go to college?

Tell me about how your family's and your teachers' attitudes about you attending college.

What role did your family have in your education?

What or who do you feel was most helpful in your journey to college?

What helped you feel successful while in school?

How did you finance your education?

Tell me about the items you brought with you today.

Appendix D. Jen's Biography

Jen is a graduate student in her late 20's who lives in the Bay Area in Northern California. She has a bachelor's degree in theater arts and is currently working to complete a master's degree in the field of education. Jen was born in Taiwan, and at the age of one her family moved to Costa Rica. She remained there with her family until around the age of seven. At that time her parents relocated the family to the Bay Area. She identifies as coming from a low-income family.

Jen is from a family of four and has an older sister. Her mother and father are divorced, however her and her parents currently reside together in the same house. Her father remarried to a woman who lives in China, and Jen stated she does not want to meet her. Her mother suffers from severe depression, her symptoms of which include paranoia and hearing voices. Jen defined her family as dysfunctional, both growing up and presently.

Jen suffered from verbal and physical abuse from her father, and her parents argued constantly. She shared with me a memory of when she was four years old and her parents were fighting. Her dad was trying to hit her mom, and so she stood in between them to protect her mother. It is experiences like this that she attributes to her strong backbone, her independence, her early maturity, and her strength. She said she is used to the chaos, but unfortunately sometimes seeks it in relationships if things are too calm.

Jen stated that coming from a dysfunctional, abusive family was "like a blessing in disguise" and that these struggles made her who she is today. While she wishes she didn't have to have gone through those tough experiences, they are woven into her

identity. She has found that school is like a sanctuary for her, and being a part of a university community has helped her get through difficult times. For her, it feels refreshing after having a bad day to be able to go to school and talk with other students about something other than “typical worries”.

Jen believes in the power of growth and of the necessity to step outside your comfort zone. She has learned to not doubt herself and to challenge her fears. She suggests other students who may be in similar situations as she has been to not give up and to keep challenging themselves. Jen feels that everything is different now that she has attended college. Her view on life has changed and she feels she has grown tremendously as a person. School for her has always been like a sanctuary, and going to college was “like a breath of fresh air”. Everything was overwhelming for her as a high school student, but now things have changed and she attributes her college attendance to her new mindset.

Appendix E. Fern's Biography

Fern is a woman in her early 40's who lives and works in Northern California. Originally from Hong Kong, she moved to California in her early 20's after marrying a Chinese American man. The marriage unfortunately ended in divorce, but Fern decided to stay in the United States. Her family, including her mother, sister, half-sister, and half-brother, live in China. Her father has passed away.

Fern recalled to me years of abuse as a child, both verbally and physically. She didn't realize until receiving counseling as an adult, that the way her parents treated her was wrong. Her father had another wife in China, who he sent money to and also had children with in secret. He was a gambling addict, and would beat Fern and her sister when he lost. Often she was dressed in boys clothing and treated poorly for the fact that she was not the son he wanted. She says she still loves her parents, but feels absolute pity for them, that they would treat a child so poorly. As a result of the abuse, she has suffered from years of depression and overwhelming thoughts of suicide. She has only recently begun to learn the concept of self worth and has started to build her self esteem.

Fern is about to finish her master's degree, and yet does not have a high school diploma. As a teenager, she did not see the point of finishing high school. Coming from a low-income family, she wanted to be able to contribute income, and additionally, found high school was "boring". She decided a better use of her time would be to enter the workforce. Her parents disagreed, and reminded her of the fact that they themselves did not complete high school. They told her she would be useless without a high school diploma.

After working for a few years, Fern met a Chinese American man and they fell in love. He wanted her to move to California with him, and while it meant leaving her family behind, she ultimately wanted to be with him. However after 7 years of an unhappy marriage, they divorced. Fern decided to stay in the United States.

Not speaking English, she enrolled in night classes to learn the language. She then began to take community college courses part time while working full time. Fern first only intended to get her AA degree, however she began to wonder if maybe she should also pursue a bachelor's degree in order to increase her earning potential. She was working at a clothing boutique and it barely covered her rent and living expenses. She decided she didn't want to be "stuck" in that job the rest of her life, and transferred to a four-year university.

Presently, she is near completion of the requirements for a master's degree in Education. She has found that speaking Chinese, while once a set back, is useful in her current work at a large, Bay Area state university. Being bilingual and living in an area with a high population of Chinese students has provided her with the opportunity to develop and use her skills as a translator. She hopes she can assist students who may have had similar experiences and struggles as she once had as an immigrant.

Appendix F. Stephanie's Biography

Stephanie is a graduate student in her mid 20's who was born and raised in the Bay Area in Northern California. She lives part time in an apartment with roommates, and part time at her family's house approximately a two hour commute away from school. She has two sisters, one older and one younger. Her parents are married and she lives at home with them.

Stephanie always knew she would attend college one day, and stated that higher education is a tradition in her family. She feels college wasn't even an option for her, but rather, expected. Coming from a low-income family, she feels getting a college degree is a way to get out of poverty.

Stephanie's older sister is a role model for her, and Stephanie feels a deep appreciation for the sacrifices her older sister made. She recognized the stress and pressure her parents put on her sister, and was thankful her sister took on her role as the oldest child. She's not sure she would have been able to handle it, and was glad her sister took some of the responsibilities she had away from her.

When Stephanie first started college it was at a large, well respected university in another city. Her family stressed the importance of picking a "brand name" university and of avoiding state universities and community college. After an unhappy first year at the school, she came home to attend community college in the area. She said it was a hard decision, one her parents greatly opposed, however it was in her beset interest. Her parents never understood her decision, but her sister was there for her and was supportive.

Stephanie completed community college and transferred to a local state university. She feels lucky to have received financial aid, and for only having to work part time while attending school. Now that she has finished her bachelor's degree, she is working on a master's degree in the area of Education.

Appendix G. Andrea's Biography

Andrea is in her mid 20's and currently resides in the Bay Area of Northern California. Born in Mexico, her and her immediate family immigrated to California when she was a small child. She currently lives with her younger brother, younger sister, mother, father, uncle, aunt, and two cousins. She is in the process of completing a master's degree in the field of Education.

Andrea described herself as confident, outgoing and social. She told me she's always felt very comfortable around people, and attributed that to having grown up in a large household. While there are currently 8 people in her house, when she was growing up there were about fifteen. She has a large, loving family and is very close with her siblings and parents.

Andrea is the first on both sides of her family to graduate from high school. School is very important to her, and she is proud to see her younger siblings and cousins working towards completing their high school diplomas. She hopes one day the younger members of her family will also complete their Bachelor's degrees. A Bachelor's degree to her means having opportunities to make more income and the freedom to choose her career, which she feels her parent's don't have.

As an undocumented immigrant she experienced difficulties applying for college, receiving financial aid, and finding employment. While in school she worked full time at a fast food restaurant that hired her under the table. It was frustrating to be limited in what types of employment she could get. She recounted the nervousness of driving without a license or insurance, and of feeling geographically stuck. Now that she has her

resident card, she is determined to not let her siblings or cousins take their residency or citizenship for granted. She takes no excuses for laziness.

Andrea took AVID courses in high school and was a part of Puente during community college. Through these programs she developed relationships with mentors who assisted her in navigating the path to college. In addition to the wonderful mentors she gained through these programs, it was meaningful to meet other students who had similar experiences and difficulties. Realizing she wasn't the only one who was undocumented was eye opening and comforting.

Andrea aspires to work with undocumented students when she is done with her master's degree. She said she would like to give back the knowledge and support she received from her mentors to the new generation of students. She attributes her college attendance and completion to her mentors, and would like to give that support back. She believes anyone can be successful.

Appendix H. Rick's Biography

Rick is a male in his mid 20's who lives in the Bay Area of Northern California. His parents immigrated to California from Mexico before he was born. His father works as a laborer. He identifies as coming from a low-income family.

Rick remembers getting into trouble during middle school. He stated he hung out with a bad crowd and focused more on sports than academics. He didn't see academics as important until freshman year of high school, and stated that his parents never spoke about college. For Rick, not having anyone in the family who went to college mystified the process greatly and made it seem as though an unrealistic option.

After failing an algebra class in seventh grade, his teacher recommended he enroll in the AVID class at school. If he were older when approached, he said he most likely would have been resistant. Middle school was a pivotal point in Rick's life, a time when he said he had no dreams or aspirations. He didn't know about his options for college, or the process for being college ready, until he received information in his AVID class. He learned the necessity of long term planning, something he said he wasn't learning at home.

Rick has a great respect and appreciation for his parents. He admires the sacrifices they made in leaving their home country and starting somewhere new. For him to go to college was an unknown journey, but the change didn't scare his parents. This was reassuring for him. He saw they had taken a chance in emigrating from Mexico, and likened his decision to attend college as a similar risky, yet exciting journey. He knew even if they didn't understand why he wanted to go to college, they were willing to stand

by his side. When Rick was asked what it means to be successful, he replied, “To wake up every morning and be happy, that’s success.”

Appendix I. Sandy's Biography

Sandy is in her mid 20's and lives in the Bay Area of Northern California. She attended a prestigious public university in California and majored in Ethnic Studies. She lives at home with her parents and siblings, and has a healthy relationship with her family. Her parents are immigrants from Yemen, where her father attended college.

Sandy always knew she would go to college after high school, but she didn't exactly know what steps she would need to take to get there. Although her father has a college degree, she stated that her parents never gave her any advice or information about applying for college, paying tuition fees, or attending school. She thinks maybe it was because when her father went to school it was a different time, and a different country, and so he didn't have any relevant information to share. A large reason her family chose to move to the United States was for educational opportunities for her and her siblings. She always knew college would be something she would pursue.

Being Yemeni, Sandy was aware that she was different from the dominant cultures around her. She didn't wear a head scarf, so she didn't feel connected with other girls from her culture who did. In high school there were clubs for other cultural groups, but not for hers. A Latina friend of hers invited her to join the Latino/Latina club at school, so she could attend the college tours they went on. At the local community college, her and her friend collected information and decided to attend after high school.

Towards the end of high school she felt confident that community college was the best choice for her, coming from a low-income family. She knew she couldn't afford to pay for 4 years of university tuition, as well as the rent for an apartment or dorm. In her

AVID class, her teacher discussed college plans with graduating seniors. Sandy was turned off when her teacher insisted she apply to four-year universities and ditch her plan for transferring to a four-year school from community college. When she brought up high tuition costs and her family's inability to afford payments, she noted her instructor pushed the idea that finances shouldn't be a deciding factor. Sandy applied to many four-year universities and was accepted. When she reviewed the financial aid packages offered, she reconfirmed what she already knew: she couldn't afford to attend a four-year college.

Sandy felt the AVID program and her instructors had good intentions and ideas, but they didn't translate well to a school in such a diverse neighborhood. Regardless, she found her voice and stood up for what she knew was best for her. She attended community college and transferred to a highly respected public university in California. She was able to pay for her entire education herself, utilizing a combination of grants and scholarships, as well as maintaining a part time job. She shared her grants and her income with her family when they were short on bills, and was glad to be able to do so.

Today Sandy lives with her family, but is itching to get out of her parent's house and out of her hometown as well. She is considering attending graduate school and is interested in studying Education.