

Article Review of “The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First Generation College Students”

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Introduction

The journal article was based on a study done in the American higher education context. Published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 46 (3), pages 223-236, “The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First Generation College Students” is an article written by Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005). For this review, I will discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and the conclusions drawn from the article. I will also identify the article’s relation to other works in the same areas of inquiry. The focus is to see how this work fits into a broader intellectual discourse, and the existing literature on the subject of students in postsecondary education.

In this article relating to college student development, the authors studied the role of personal motivation characteristics, and environmental social supports on college outcomes. This longitudinal study of 100 ethnic minority first-generation college students was designed to examine their personal and career related motivation to attend college. I will first examine the strengths and weaknesses of this study in terms of Research Questions and Research Problems, The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework, The Research Design, Findings, and Authors’ Discussion. Next, I will discuss how I view this study on ethnic minority students being first-generation college students situated in the context of the student retention and first-generation college student literature. To conclude, I will briefly explain my insights on the value of this piece of research to scholars and practitioners who wish to undertake work on these two areas on minority college students in the future. Although the authors did not specifically use “Research Questions and Research Problems, and The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework” as subtitles, in this essay, I will organize my analysis based on the above subheadings for purposes of clarity.

Research Problem and Research Question

The authors’ approach to present a gap analysis as the identified research problem is a brilliant strategy. The research problem was clearly articulated, and presented very early in the article. In fact, the gap analysis stood out in the very first paragraph when they argue that although ethnic minority students are more likely than other students to be the first in their family to attend college, many related studies focused on first-generation college students as a group, without focusing specifically on those who are ethnic minorities. Hence, producing

a gap - there is no known study focusing on ethnic minority as first-generation college students. The authors again presented another gap analysis, in the third paragraph, that there is little evidence regarding the role of student motivations and social support on college outcomes for ethnic minority first-generation college students.

However, my understanding of ethnic minority students was initially challenged at this point when the first paragraph did not specifically include the authors' definition for the ethnic minority in their study. Although it was mentioned in the second line of the first paragraph that at-risk students include those ethnic minority first-generation college students who typically have poorer academic performance and higher dropout rates than other students, it was not clear to me at that point in my reading, which ethnic groups are actually included as minority in that particular study. The United States has diverse ethnic minority groups. For readers who are unacquainted with the diverse American population composition, they would not be able to envisage the racial background of the "ethnic minority" mentioned. Many pages away, however, in the research design section related to research methodology and research participants, I was able to come up with an assumption that the ethnic minority studied were Latino and Asian. It would have been very helpful if the authors could specifically define which ethnic minority groups they are referring to at the beginning of the article. Also, they did not provide a clear definition for the concept of first-generation college students in the introductory paragraph.

On balance, the authors provide useful research questions that include (1) What are the students' motivations for attending college from the aspects of individualistic and collective motives, and (2) What is the role of the environment in the student's academic performance, i.e. the impact of family and peers on academic outcomes. Their prediction was that peer support would be a stronger predictor of college outcomes than family support. Therefore, their study hoped to explore both the perceived support and perceived lack of support from family and peers, in order to predict college achievement and outcomes. In that regard, the authors did a wonderful job of bringing the reader's attention to the research problem and the research question. With the above descriptions, the authors have done a good job of narrowing the focus of the study by obviously indicating what the study entails. Consequently, readers are well informed of the research problem, the research questions, the purpose and the significance of the study.

The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Although the authors did not specifically define their proposed notion for ethnic minority in the beginning of the article, I find that their seemingly deliberate attempt to introduce the literature on first-generation students very useful. The literature paints a picture of these students as lacking in both personal skills and social supports that could contribute to positive academic outcomes in college (Terenzini et al., 1996). In order to "build the case" (Meriam, 1998, p. 51) for doing their study, the authors argued that, if these students were from ethnic minority background as well, they would face additional challenges. In that regard, this argument justifies their need to study the impact of family and peers on ethnic minority college students' academic outcomes.

Although Creswell (2003) posits that "in grounded theory studies, case studied, phenomenological studies, literature will serve less to set the stage for the study" (Creswell, 2003, p.30), the literature – in this case study – is integrated into the development of the

problem for study (Meriam, 1998). As such, the author finds it necessary to include a discussion on non-cognitive variables. By including non-cognitive variables in their study of ethnic minority students who are the first in their family to attend college, they argue that variables such as positive self-concepts are predictive of academic success and they are more important than traditional measures of cognitive skills like SAT. They believe that the work of Sedlacek and colleagues (1985, 1987, and 1994) is an important model for investigating the extent to which personal characteristics of students influence their college outcomes. From the authors' explanations, I am convinced that the model for non-cognitive variables is especially useful for studying the influence of college outcomes that relates to motivation for attending college, and contextual factors, including the availability of social support from family and peers. Accordingly, I agree with the authors that such variables have a great deal of influence on college outcomes over and above the effects of these students' background characteristics.

The Research Design

The disparity of the numbers between Latino (84) and Asian (16) of the 100 participants for the study triggers my curiosity. My first question was how were the participants selected? Fortunately, the authors explained that all the participants who met the criteria for the study were invited to participate. The criteria included, self-identifying as Latino and Chinese/Vietnamese (Asian), having parents who did not complete college education, and being first-time freshmen at age 18 or 19. Of the 390 students who were eligible, 144 agreed to participate in the study. However, only 100 were still participating in the spring semester of the second year. Up to this point, it is easy to follow and understand the steps involved in selecting the participants. With that systematic procedure, I have no more reservations about their choice of participants.

The authors go to great lengths in describing the methodology for selecting the participants who were attending an ethnically diverse urban commuter university on the West coast. As a research strategy, this case study approach (Yin, 2003) is appropriately used to "contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena." (Yin, 2003, p.1). Although there was no specific mention that this was a case study, it does resemble a case study inquiry (Yin, 2003), which "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis." (p. 14).

The Research Findings

Comparison of Latino and Asian participants shows that there was a significant difference in their high school GPA and cumulative college GPA. In both cases, Asians had higher GPAs than Latinos. Although high school GPA was the strongest predictor of cumulative GPA, it also predicted poorer college adjustment. Family expectation motivation was unrelated to any outcomes. Family support and the perceived lack of family support were unrelated to the outcomes.

Since the study aimed at investigating ways in which motivational characteristics and environmental social supports contribute to ethnic minority first-generation college students, the findings demonstrate that there is connection between the personal/career motivation for ethnic minority students to attend college and college outcomes. The authors predicted that family expectation motivation would be important for ethnic minority students. Contrary to

the authors' hypothesis, family expectation motivation was not significantly related to college outcomes. Unfortunately, the absence of "checking for representativeness" and "checking for researcher effects" (Huberman & Miles, 1998) may weaken the appeal of the study's findings among higher education scholars interested in ethnic minority and first generation college students.

The authors conclude that although both individually oriented and family based motivations may be found concurrently among ethnic minority, their findings show that personal motivation is more closely related to adjustment and commitment. Thus, the authors suggest that the ability to have both collectivist and individualist motivations may be most predictive of academic success in the United States, despite coming from parents of collectivist cultures. They often consider the needs of the group to be more important than the needs of individuals. Many Asian cultures tend to be collectivist.

The Authors' Discussion

Nonetheless, findings from this study are an important addition to the literature on first generation college students. When analysing the results, the authors found that their findings are similar to past research in that both family support and peer support are related to college outcomes. Nevertheless, when both family and peer support variables are included in their regression analysis, their findings suggest that peer support (or lack of needed peer support) is a stronger predictor of college grades and adjustment than support from the family. Consequently, the authors maintain that the results confirm their hypothesis that first-generation college students would perceive their peers as better able than their family to provide the support they need in order to do well in college. Their findings also correspond to Astin's (1993) longitudinal study of college students that some of the most important predictors of college outcomes were characteristics of students' peer groups.

When many past studies have focused on perceptions of the amount of support individuals have access to, according to the authors this study is unique in that both peer/family support and the lack of needed support were included in the analysis. As such, their findings reveal that it is the lack of needed support that is more strongly related to college outcomes. The authors conclude that the impact of lack of peer support on academic outcomes suggest that these students would benefit from programs that promote study groups, peer mentoring, or similar services in order to deal with the pressures of studying for a college education.

Situating this Research in a Broader Context

In my opinion, this work shall be situated in a couple of theoretical areas including that of student retention and first-generation college students. By citing prominent scholars like Terenzini, Pascarella, Sedlacek, Tinto and Astin, I believe the three authors have done a commendable job of establishing a degree of legitimacy to their work on students in postsecondary education. The authors argue that it would be beneficial to determine if these types of motivations and support are predictive of outcomes later in college, including persistence in finishing a degree.

Therefore, this research can be situated in the framework of student retention theories. This study adds breadth to intellectual discourse on many other related works on minority students

retention including: Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman's (2000) "Mentoring programs for high-risk undergraduates," Terenzini, Cabrera, & others' (2001) "Swimming against the tide: The poor in American higher education," Strage's (1999) "Academic persistence for Hispanics, and Rodriguez," and Guido-DiBrito, & others' (2000) "Cultural support systems that embrace diversity." In fact, time and again, many studies have shown that ethnic minority students are not only less-advantaged youth (Swail, 2000), who often become less involved in out-of-class campus activities (Terenzini, Cabrera, & others' 2001), research findings suggest persistence is related to dynamic interactions (Just, 1999), and the dynamic nature of student persistence requires an environment that embraces diversity (Kennedy & Sheckley, 2000).

Additionally, a campus culture that provides students with a sense of community and pride (Gonzales, 2002), and provides opportunities for poor and minority students to persist is a shared responsibility of higher education institutions and the public sector (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). Also, students' level of commitment rather than academic and social integration has a direct impact on retention (Biel, Resien, & Zea, 1999). In addition, Adelman (1999) concludes that the true challenge of degree attainment for the higher education community requires remedying its ailing pipeline at the elementary and secondary levels.

Nevertheless, I believe this work can also be situated in the first-generation college student literature. This study serves to augment the current body of literature on first generation college students including the recent work of scholars like Choy (2001), Duggan (2001), Hu, & St. John (2001), Ishitani (2003), and also Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, (2004).

The Value of this Research for Future Study

For future study, I wish to see the researchers' articulation of their roles in the research. Their reflections about their experiences as researchers negotiating the insider-outsider continuum might be insightful. The strengths of this study can be countless. I believe that the value of this study would appeal to practitioners and scholars in the field of students in postsecondary education. The findings from this study have the potential to make both applied and theoretical contributions, especially those interested to study more on ethnic minority students, first-generation college students, and student retention in college.

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