

FIRST YEAR RESIDENTIAL TRADITIONAL-AGED COLLEGE STUDENTS'
FIRST SEMESTER EXPERIENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR SOCIAL
IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

NIESHA CHARISSE DOUGLAS. First year residential traditional aged college students' first semester experience and its impact on their social identity. (Under the direction of DR. LISA R. MERRIWEATHER)

The needs of our society are not met when students fail to matriculate. Studies indicate that about 80% of four-year institutions graduate less than one-third of their first-time, full-time degree-seeking students within six years (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010). Research has documented the impact of the first-year experience (FYE) on matriculation, especially with regard to academic preparation. Research also indicates that attending college for the first-time places recent high school graduates in a pool of uncertainty and a field of responsibility. That uncertainty includes undergoing psychological and sociological changes. Researchers found that those changes also impacted matriculation. Social identity is one aspect of psychological and sociological change that has been under explored with respect to the FYE. The purpose of this study was to examine the first year, first semester experience of traditional-aged college students and to understand better how the first semester impacts their social identity. Bronfenbrenners' (2005) Developmental Ecological theory was used as a framework to examine how the environment as defined by the microsystem, macrosystem, mesosystem and exosystems of the FYE influenced the social identity of first-year students. A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to capture the essence of the experiences of FYS. Thirteen first-time residential traditional-aged college students between the ages of 18 and 19 were interviewed. Thematic analysis using a constant comparative analysis

technique identified three major themes: Family Ties, Social Identification and Balancing College Life. Staying connected with family, identifying personality traits and juggling social and academic life are key to understanding social identity within the first semester of college. The findings suggest that colleges and universities should put more emphasis on programs that assist students with understanding how social identity is influenced within the new environment. A well-developed social identity may help to mediate the challenges of the FYE.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education has served a pivotal role in our society. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education reported that more than 21 million students were expected to attend college in the fall, a number that has significantly increased since the mid 20th Century. Issues abound in higher education but over the past few decades, higher education has focused mainly on access because of economic and social imperatives. Economically, there has been a significant push in the need for more college graduates (Roksa, 2012). Employers are looking for educated workers to fill positions that would help sustain the economy. These positions required that workers have specific skill sets and knowledge. This knowledge includes working with technology, problem solving and critical thinking skills. These skills require a complex of processes that are reflective with a less automated mode of thinking (Roska, 2012).

Today's workers also need to learn to work with people from different countries because the United States has one of the most diverse workforces in the world. Changes in technology and communication have disrupted traditional methods of labor by requiring that workers have a college education in order to work collectively in ethical and cultural environments (Ormell, 2012). While working with people from other

countries is important, the United States also has to compete with those countries to remain economically solvent both as a country and as individuals.

According to the Lumina Foundation for Education, global competition is one of the reasons why middle-class jobs for the under educated worker have decreased. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2013) reports that the United States falls behind several nations in regards to 4-year degree college graduates under the age of 25. Meanwhile, the college attainment rates among young adults are continuing to rise in other industrialized countries (Lumina Foundation Report, 2009). Jobs that require low-skills are still prevalent in the U.S., but often those workers are less likely to remain in the middle class. The Lumina Foundation also reports that there are severe consequences that are devastating to the economy when middle-income jobs depend on the completion of some form of postsecondary education. Those consequences include another financial recession, an increase in the unemployment rate and the closing of small businesses. These effects would mostly affect the middle to lower-class workers who are dependent on those jobs.

In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) was amended and signed into law by President Bush. The amendment increased the award amount for Federal Pell Grants, which provides additional assistance to those populations that are underserved and lack the

means to pay full tuition out-of-pocket. This legislation made it easier for high school graduates to attend college who may have otherwise gone straight into the workforce. This law was partly in response to the inequities with regards to access to higher education within the minority population. This inequality also created disparities in wage earning. In 2013, the HEOA implemented some changes that affected specific populations. These changes included funding programs that promoted post-baccalaureate opportunities for Hispanic Americans, as well as increased funding for Master's programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

There are considerable differences in wages between the college graduate and the non-college educated worker. Despite the slow increase in the job availability, undereducated workers are three times more likely to be unemployed than the college-educated workers (Baum & Payea, 2004). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), in August 2014 the unemployment rate for individuals with at least a high school diploma was at 7.5% as compared to individuals with a bachelor's degree at 3.5%. Those who are non-college educated may be more likely to earn salaries that are below the poverty level, which increases their chances of depending on state and federal assistance programs. The job outlook for the college graduate is more promising than the non-college educated worker.

Singh (2011) explains that benefits are not only economic, but are psychosocial as well. College graduates are more likely to show a broader range of intellectual and academic skills. They are likely to participate in activities that affect social change and engage in activities that promote racial understanding and the belief that equality should span across all races and ethnic groups. For example, college students who spoke out against racism, discrimination and the unfair treatment of minorities led the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s. College educated persons tend to be more aware of social issues, and are more likely to be citizens who are committed to changes which are impactful to their communities in various ways.

College graduates are more likely to have jobs that offer packages that include health and life insurance. Enabling them to receive care that protects them as well as their families, as oppose to having a job that provides insurance that is costly. Living healthier lives can eventually lead to less public spending on specific social programs such as Medicaid, food programs and welfare.

Some other psychosocial benefits of completing a degree include self-determination and self-confidence, which may lead to a decreased likelihood of the onset of mental health issues. Completing a degree can ignite feelings of pride and evoke a sense of accomplishment. It also gives a sense of hope that can lead to a fulfilling and satisfying career.

Finally Marginson (2011) highlights the advantages of socio-economic equity in higher education. Reintroducing a socially representative system that broadens access to underrepresented groups can advance fairness and inclusion. Fairness and inclusion should continue to be priorities when it comes to access. Providing more opportunities for minorities to access higher education increases student enrollment while adding diversity to the student population. It is a step towards equality, but it is far from the goal of an equitable education.

Matriculation and The First Year of College

The first year of college marks a critical time of transition. Levitz and Noel (1989) describe this epoch as a time in which institutions should establish “a firm and positive relationship with the freshman” (p. 66). Benjamin, Earnest, Grunewald, and Arthur (2007) state “The first weeks of school are a time to help new students deal with basic needs and adjustment issues, such as finding classes, changing schedules, and dealing with feeling overwhelmed” (p. 16). Research on FYS suggests that many students may “encounter difficulties in the transition to university” (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, p. 223).

These issues may produce a lack of involvement, unhappiness, isolation and alienation (Lawrence, Ashford, & Dent, 2006; Mann, 2001; Pargetter, 2000; Perry & Allard, 2003). In 2004, an Australian study reported that despite the efforts of first-year programming, about a third of enrolled students felt unprepared for college. They also reported

experiencing a “reality shock” when their first semester grades began to appear (Krausem, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). The first year experience is important because it impacts the retention rates at colleges and universities.

More recently colleges have recognized that the issue of college graduation is bigger than access. Considerable attention has been directed toward matriculation. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in October of 2012, 66.2% of high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities. Among the recent high school graduates enrolled in college, over 80% of them were listed as full-time students and attended a 4-year institution (US Bureau of Labor statistics, 2014). About 40% of college students will leave without completing all the requirements needed to graduate (Porter, 1990). Matriculation is an ongoing concern for colleges and universities because funding is being tied to college graduation rates. Failure to graduate such a high percentage of the student population alarms college administrators, and increases the need to retain students.

College administrators and researchers have sought to understand the factors impacting matriculation. They continue to examine intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate college students’ to continue their pursuit of obtaining a college degree. Intrinsic factors include self-efficacy and a positive self-identity (Kroger, 2000) that perhaps may have an impact on matriculation. Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers were two

psychologists whose research suggested that human motivation is based on a series of needs. They proposed that learning was focused on experiences and self-direction, thus leading to a goal of self-actualization and a positive view of self (Merriam, Cafferella & Baumgartner, 2007). Fields (2005) explains, “high perceived self-efficacy depends in part on confidence that with appropriate tools and training, tasks that can be effectively managed” (p. 540). Lack of confidence and negative self-appraisals lead students to forego tasks that can be challenging and provide motivation (Fields, 2005).

Some extrinsic factors include support from others such as peers and family. Cohen (1983) studied peer influence on college students and found that one of the weakest areas of peer influence was on college aspirations but he posited that peer influence was the strongest when it came to drug use. Although college aspiration was found to be the weakest area, peers have influence elsewhere that can affect the life of a college student such as drug and alcohol use.

Another extrinsic factor that impacts matriculation is the family influence. Students who receive support from home are more likely to matriculate to the next level. Miller (1997) states, “Parents believe a college education is among the most important investments they can make” (1997, p. 5). This understanding of what a college education means can be embedded in the student’s psyche at an early age. Some students are aware of how important a college degree is. Both intrinsic and

extrinsic work together to increase college students' willingness to continue to stay in college (Smith, Yun Dai & Szelest, 2006).

Problem Statement

For FYS, the biggest challenges are adapting to the new environment and adjusting to the increased academic rigor of classes. It is important that these students have programs to assist in their transition to college. Colleges are aware of the issues of matriculation, but research suggests that for the subpopulation of first-year traditional residential students the issue of matriculation is even more pressing. Student success rates are alarmingly low and have not changed significantly in many years. Research shows that less than one-third of degree-seeking, full-time traditional, residential first-year students in public four-year institutions graduate in four years. Students who enter college as first-time, full-time students take at least six years to earn a bachelor's degree — and only 55 percent graduate in that time span (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). These statistics show a need for programs that target FYS. Some researchers explain that in order to improve the overall effectiveness of postsecondary education the quality of learning must change in order to meet the needs of our society (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010). These startling statistics force colleges and universities to react by developing initiatives and programs, which specifically address the needs of FYS.

Research indicates that attending college for the first-time places recent high school graduates in a pool of uncertainty and a field of

responsibility. That uncertainty includes undergoing major psychological and sociological changes. These changes can make adjusting to college life socially, emotionally, and academically challenging (Chickering, 1969). These challenges play an integral role in the students' overall human development.

First-year college students are required not only to achieve in the classroom, but they are placed into an environment that forces them to interact with others while developing socially. One social challenge is the development of new relationships. Bonding with professors, peers, and staff is important when attending college. Developing positive relationships with others can help FYS get acclimated to the college environment. Participating in social groups on campus can be beneficial towards reaching academic goals. Sororities, fraternities and major clubs can be instrumental in obtaining those academic goals and also provide a support system that reduces stressful encounters. Adjusting to the campus community can also be difficult. Navigating around the campus community can be overwhelming. This lack of direction can lead to isolation from peers, friends, family and associates. The absence of family or loved ones may contribute to the social problems of FYS.

Despite the challenges that students face, most can cope with their new life role after the first semester. For others, social, emotional, and academic challenges make the first-year stressful and unmanageable. Gerders and Mallinckrodt (1994) explained that social and emotional

adjustment difficulties were a better prediction of attrition rates than students having academic difficulties because they have low confidence that fuels their departure from college. This is why we need to explore the psychosocial issues related to FYS' experiences during the initial semester of enrollment.

Other reasons FYS tend to depart after their first semester are their feelings of self-doubt and fear that result in a great deal of stress (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). These emotions are commonly developed during the first semester of the first year. Previously mentioned was the importance of self-efficacy as an intrinsic factor in matriculation. FYS tend to be intimidated when they attend college. They feel the pressure to succeed academically, and their intentions are not to fail. Fear of failure is something that many people struggle with, not just FYS. Colleges and universities need to be equipped with programs that will help students manage themselves psychosocially. This explains the need to understand how students' experiences affect them psychologically and socially.

A third reason FYS fail to finish their degrees could be the intense classwork and academic rigor that are expected when achieving a degree of higher learning. The class work in college is more challenging and requires many hours dedicated to reading and studying. Professors, who are experts in the field, design the classes and prepare students with the knowledge and skills needed to assist them in a specific career. Skills such

as time management and study skills are tools that are necessary to keep up with academic demand.

There are many students who are underprepared for the pace, academic expectations and discipline of higher education (Conley, 2008). In fact, the university used in this study has a retention rate of 80.4% (University of North Carolina, 2014) for FYS as opposed to the state average of 85.5%. In order to increase the retention rate of FYS, colleges create programs that cater specifically to this population and introduce them to the college experience (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010). Such programs provide resources specific to the needs of FYS, as well as the foundational knowledge provided in social sciences, science, mathematics, humanities, communications, physical activity, and healthful living.

The transition from high school to college is very stressful socially and mentally (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009). This transition from adolescence to adulthood has been theorized from multiple perspectives: psychological, social, and, ecological. In order for educators and administrators to gain a better understanding of first-year students (FYS), researchers should interrogate the experience during the initial semester of enrollment and its impact on social identity. Perhaps being able to develop one's identity could be a key component to a successful first year in college.

FYS are embarking on a journey that will begin to shape who they are as adults, as well as their identity development. Though physical

changes impact perception, it is the cognitive and social changes that are most relevant to understanding the shifts in social identity (Erikson, 1968). The first-year experience may impact social identity as FYS are forced to adapt to a new environment. Erickson (1968) discusses psychosocial conflict as an accelerant towards the question of 'Who am I'? There is an increasing body of evidence suggesting that the first-year college experience brings fundamental change and questioning to young peoples' lives, a change that can either positively or negatively impact matriculation.

Social identification is a phenomenon that can occur both within the environment and outside of the environment. FYS are submerged in a diverse cultural setting during the first semester, which can be overwhelming. Social and academic interactions as well as social identity development take place within those cultural settings.

Purpose of Study

Delving into an unfamiliar environment without the accompaniment of one's parents is scary and uncomfortable. However stepping out of one's comfort zone can promote growth. Many FYS find it challenging to adjust to the unfamiliarity of the college environment. FYS communicate frequently with family members to help relieve the stressful transition. In order to cope with the mental and physical demands of college, FYS begin to develop new relationships with their peers. They learn how to cope with life's roadblocks and the difficult coursework.

The transition to college can be a critical time to examine the predictors of relationship quality with self and others (Parade, Leekes & Blankson, 2010). This transition is a time for personal growth and identity development. If the risk factors inherent during this transition can be identified, then that could have a positive impact on retention.

The purpose of this study was to examine the first-year, first-semester experience of traditional-aged college students and to understand better how the first semester impacts their social identity.

Research Questions

Three research questions were explored to identify the impact of the first-year experience on social identity: 1. What elements of the first-year experience do FYS perceive as impacting their social identity? 2. How does social capital shape identity development during the FYE? 3. How do the various systems within the context component of the developmental ecology theory affect social identity?

Significance of Problem

We can shed light and better understand the challenges and obstacles that influence the development of FYS by understanding the impact of the first semester of college on their social and psychological identity. Potential programs that provide student support can benefit from the findings of this study, which identifies issues related to the social transition that FYS face and shows how interactions within the environment influence behaviors and certain outcomes. By understanding

psycho-sociological and other external factors that influence the transition from adolescence to adulthood, support can be provided for programs that target FYS thus potentially improving retention rates in colleges and universities. This study adds to understanding the multiple ways ecological theory can be used to ameliorate issues experienced by FYS in their initial semester of study.

This study enhanced our understanding of FYS, their experiences, and the impact of the FYE on the transition of adolescent identity to adult identity. Additionally, few have discussed how the first year experience impacts social identity through the lens of developmental ecological theory. Though many theories have been advanced to explain social identity development, this study used Developmental Ecological Theory as a theoretical framework to help explain how environment impacts a student's social identity.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Bronfenbrenners' (2005) Developmental Ecological theory as a framework. A psychologist by the name of Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 developed an ecological theory of human development that explained human growth and development in early childhood (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009). The theory discussed how behavior is influenced by the interaction between person and environment. This interaction explained how people grow and develop both personally and socially. Some research highlighted how the

connections among behavior, decisions, identity and learning affect individual outcomes but fail to consider what Bronfenbrenner discussed; how the interaction within the environment can impact those outcomes. Ecology theories can help to explain how outcomes are impacted by the interaction between a person and the environment. His human ecology model focused its attention on individuals rather than culture. Although later as the socio-cultural climate shifted, he made adjustments to his model to reflect the culture change.

Bronfenbrenner's ecology theory described how the environment as a whole influences the person. Within the culture of higher education, it reminds one to not only focus on certain elements, such as peer culture, social interaction and academics. By observing the environment as a whole, educators create conditions in which students can learn more about themselves as college students. This can lead to personal growth, allowing for better adaptation to any new environment.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological models helped explain how environmental changes assist in personal development. Bronfenbrenner explained that personal development is a function of the interaction of the person and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010). There are four components that explain how environment can promote or inhibit student development. They are:

- Process-explains the forms of interaction between organism and environment.
- Person-shapes the course of development.

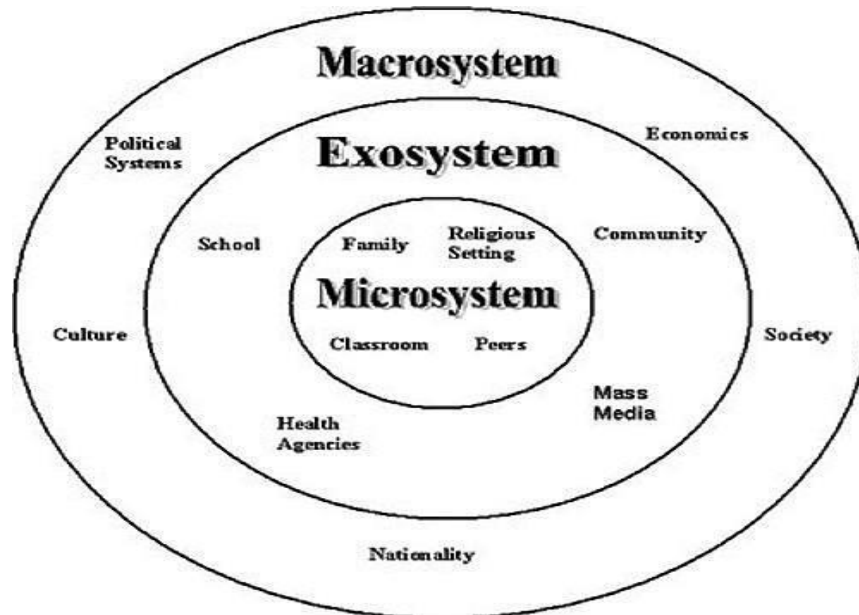
- Context- the systems in which forces and resources that provoke reaction.
- Time- represents the duration of development.

These four components function together to promote development.

This study focused specifically on the various systems within the context component - mesosystem, macrosystem, microsystem, exosystem (See Figure 1 -The mesosystem is not included in the figure below, but is included in the theory itself) - and how these systems contribute to the development of social identity. The context element is the highlight of the model, and it is the most examined part of the theory. Focusing on context keeps the attention on the individual, which is the aim of this study.

Bronfenbrenner's model explained that within the context component was "where work of development occur as an individual's developmentally instigative characteristics inhibit or provoke reactions---- forces and resources----from the environment in the course of proximal processes" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patten and Renn, 2010, p. 163). Within these systems is where the characteristics collide with the individual's willingness to assimilate. The environment forces the individual to respond through interaction.

FIGURE 1: BRONFENBRENNER'S SYSTEM



(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner's Development Ecological theory describes how the environment influences social self-perception and explains how personal development from an ecological perspective can be linked to social identity. Developmental Ecology Models are scientifically based and can be useful in providing an alternative way of understanding how "college students, whether traditionally or nontraditionally aged, face many changes that can have short-and long-term effects on their lives" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010, p. 212). Environmental changes have been shown to have a significant impact on college students' social identity. Ecological Models provide a model of how humans adapt within their environment, and how that environment can promote growth and development (Evans, Forney, Guido & Patton, 2009).

By examining student social identity development through an ecological lens, we can see how the environment influences individual interactions. Though other studies may look at problems of matriculation through individuals groups, i.e. first generation and racial groups, many studies fail to look at the interactions between individuals and their environments to see how and why outcomes may occur as they do (Evans, Forney, Guido & Patton, 2009).

Methodology

A qualitative study using phenomenological interview as its method was used to gather data for this study. The researcher drew upon the experiences of first-year students to obtain an understanding of how it impacted their social identity. The researcher gained meaningful insight by using interviewing as a method.

Delimitations and Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study involved participation. There were more African-American women than anticipated. During the recruitment phase, more minorities responded to the email blast than Whites and males. This was a bit unexpected because the college used in this study was a predominately white institution (PWI). The researcher expected a limited number of minorities, but ended up getting the most participation from them. Another limitation was time. Time constraints constricted the amount of time the researcher had to recruit a sample that may have mirrored more the school's population. Studying such a diverse

group of students was a delimitation in this study. The study focused on first year residential traditional-aged student population as opposed to the experiences of a particular subgroup such as race, gender, and first-generation students. Future studies could focus on race and gender. This study was also delimited by college type. The participants in this study were students at a predominantly white institution.

Definitions

Throughout the study the following key terms were used: ecology, social identity and social capital. Steward (1955) defines ecology as “adaptation to the environment” (p. 421). Social identity theory is defined as an individual’s self-concept from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Nezleck & Smith, 2005). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), social capital is defined as networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups.

Summary

The first year in college is both stressful and overwhelming, however if we have a better understanding of how the first year can impact social identity then perhaps more students will matriculate after their first year. Chapter 2 discusses the literature reviewed for this study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

OVERVIEW

“What students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 8). Some, including myself, would challenge that statement. Theorists have long since postulated a relationship between the environment and the individual. Akbar (2006) explains one way in which the environment and the person are connected. Akbar discusses how people should use the environment as a method for developing one’s inner life. For example, he describes “the processes of the physical world [environment] are also a source of instruction for the development of the inner life” (p. 5). The processes of the physical world refer to life experiences such as obtaining a new job, attending college and starting a family. By observing these processes educators gain information from which they can create conditions in which students can learn more about themselves and others. Learning more about themselves leads to personal growth, which allows them to better adapt to any environment.

The “inner life” refers to self-identity, which represents how you would define yourself. According to Akbar (2006), the inner life is best

understood as a form of community-- a community of self. The community of self is composed of drives or instincts and the senses. Drives are like instincts and are not explicitly taught. They can either move a person toward or away from things. People tend to move towards things that promote pleasure or satisfaction and move away from things that are detrimental and cause pain or discomfort.

Many students attend college to acquire knowledge that would lead to a well-paying job, thus satisfying the need to make money and live. Satisfaction is the drive that motivates them to enroll and stay in college. Another drive would be a need to become an adult. Students also attend college to detach themselves from their parents. They want to be able to make decisions about their personal life, without consulting their parents. Thus fulfilling the need to become an independent adult.

Senses are another component of self. Senses are detections that the human body uses to recognize and communicate with the physical environment. At birth, humans began to connect to the world through development of their feelings. Sight, hearing, taste, smelling and touch are channels through which humans receive messages (Akbar, 2006). Our environment helps to develop these senses as we began to grow. As we grow older senses become signals that help us recall certain information from our brain (Akbar, 2006). For example, if a student walks past the cafeteria on campus and smells something familiar cooking that could trigger a memory of home. The environment is a source of instruction in

which information is exchanged. College students are introduced to a new environment in which they rely on senses and drives to grow and develop. Akbar's (2006) concept of community of self is consistent with how other scholars describe the role of context on student development.

Changes in the environment can instigate personal growth. Akbar (2006) describes the environment as a source of information for the development of the self-identity. This study examined the first semester experience of first year residential traditional-aged college students (FYS) and how the environment impacted their social identity. This chapter discusses first-year experience, the relationship between environment and student development, developmental ecology theory and social identity.

History of the First Year Experience

The history of the FYE highlights the importance of the first year in college. During the early years, FYS were victimized through hazing, forced servitude of upperclassmen and typically disrespected because of their class status (Dwyer, 1989). Freshman were not given opportunities to engage in coursework, invited to certain social activities including organizations such as fraternities and sororities, and sometimes purposively disregarded from some educational groups (Higgins, 2010). They were treated as what Freire (1979) called "depositories of information" and the professors were the depositors. More challenging work in the classroom was left up to the professors' discretion (Higgins,

2010). FYS also struggled with inaccessibility to textbooks and resources; many students today still experience this during the first year.

In 1640, it was recognized that these students needed additional attention to help “ease the young man’s transition from home to college” (Dwyer, 1989, p. 30). The first freshman advisors were put into place at the Harvard College Customs and were a part of the University freshman initiative (Dwyer, 1989). The “Customs” were a series of statements that allowed upperclassmen to perform certain acts against freshmen.

Eventually, Harvard created a faculty council, eliminating “The Customs” and started to focus on helping freshman students adjust (Dwyer, 1989). This led to one of the first orientations for FYS. Many of the challenges that needed addressing were issues of social adjustment, academic adjustment, financial adjustment and time management issues. Though there were advisors to cater specifically to freshmen students, they were not specifically trained to address their unique needs (Higgins, 2010).

Orientation programs began as recruitment practices that were individualized and run by undergraduate admission offices (Higgins, 2010). As admission officers, orientation programs helped to increase enrollment and retain students until graduation. Orientation provided an opportunity for FYS to tour campuses, meet faculty, staff and peers before classes started. Many orientation programs are located in the admission office; however other university departments have since taken on the task

of handling orientation, like academic affairs or student affairs.

Orientation programs have grown from such one-day sessions to overnight sessions that include stays in residence halls to multi-day camps to weeklong welcome activities (Higgins, 2010).

In 1972 at the University of South Carolina, University 101 was introduced as an experimental “first year” course for freshman students. This course was created out of a response to student riots against the war in Vietnam. According to the founder of University 101 and also the university’s president at the time, the goal of the course was to bridge an unsettling gap among students and faculty/staff. The objectives were to build trust, open communication and understanding in hopes of reducing tensions on campus (University of South Carolina, 2002). According to the University of South Carolina this is where the term “first-year experience” was created. In addition to the primary purposes of the course, there were other goals and objectives:

- 1) To create positive views of the University
- 2) To aid in retention efforts to help students matriculate to the sophomore year.
- 3) To provide a better understanding of post-secondary education and highlight the universities resources.
- 4) To improve pedagogical practices among faculty and staff

(Higgins, 2010, p. 8-9)

Since the creation of these programs, students have experienced a more positive view of college life, and there have been some success academically (Kuh et al., 2010). When other institutions recognized that orientations were beneficial, those institutions began to create other programs such as learning communities, co-ops and freshman interest groups that specifically catered to FYS (Higgins, 2010).

Colleges are addressing the problem of retention among FYS by creating courses for FYS as an introduction to the college experience in a diverse setting (Kuh et al., 2010). Such classes provide resources specific to the needs of first-year students, as well as the foundational knowledge provided in social sciences, science, mathematics, humanities, communications, physical activity, and healthful living. Many of those programs are very successful and have improved the retention rate among FYS. Though those programs are very effective, research studies rarely examine the students' first semester and how that environment affects their social identity. These programs are essential to the development of FYS transitioning to college. They play a role in student development within the first year.

Student Development and the Environment

Scholars have noted that the college environment-peer culture, time and academic-plays an instrumental role towards student development. Renn and Arnold (2003) contend that peer culture on college campuses influence learning and development. They argue that

human ecology theory should be considered as a framework to understand the development of college students better. Renn and Arnold (2003) examined peer culture through the systems within Brofenbrenners Ecology theory. They consider peer relationships as an important component of learning and development. Tinto (1998) also recognized that building relationships with peers impacts learning and development.

Tinto (1998) suggests that experiences differ among residential four-year college students and students attending a two-year institution. One difference includes the limited amount of time that students at a two-year university spend on campus. Often the only interaction among those students with faculty is in the classroom whereas a student attending a four-year institution spends more time interacting with peers and faculty in and out of the classroom. Tinto agrees that the environment has an influence on student development, which has parallels to Brofenbrenners theory of ecology.

Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn and Terenzini (1996) noted that some studies have attempted to “identify specific college experiences that influence changes in values, attitudes, and the ways that individuals relate to their external world” (p.175). What we can generalize from those previous attempts is that the college environment has an impact on changes in value, attitude and psychological behavior during college.

Astin (1993) reminds us of the power of peer groups and the significant impact they have on the college experience, mainly suggesting

that student-to-student interaction has strong positive effects on learning development, academic development, personal growth and cultural awareness. Astin also mentions the psychological effects of peer interaction. According to Astin, student-to-student interaction has positive effects on self-concept. A positive view of self can decrease the chance of students becoming depressed.

Chickering argues that educational environments have strong influences on student development and identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). Chickering believes that the academic environment impacts student development more than peer interaction. He created seven key influences within his theory of student development: institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities and student development programs and services. These key influences act as modifiers toward the development of the student.

For example, institutional size is one of the principal forces. If a student comes from a small town where many of the residents all know each other, then it would be difficult to adjust to an environment with a large population and low recognition between people. Being both academically and socially involved increases student persistence, thus increasing student retention. Tinto (1998) explains that we must consider both academic and social integration as key components for a successful first year. Therefore environmental change has an impact on the students'

social development. In order to address the issues of matriculation, we must consider how the environment can instigate a reaction within the students' development.

Social Identity

Social identity “is the process by which people come to understand who they are (ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation and others) and how these identities affect other aspects of their lives” (Evans et al., p. 228). Our understanding of how the first-year experience can affect a students' social identity is rather limited.

“Social identity is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are and reciprocally other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (Jenkins, 1996, p. 5). Social identity explains how individuals associate their identity with membership in a particular group(s). Social identity theory became prominent in American society during the 1960s and 1970s and was first known as social psychological theory (Evans et al., 2010). There were many discussions around group processes and intergroup relations. There were many researchers who criticized the field, explaining that the research neglected to view the social psychological theory in its entirety (Hornsey, 2008).

Later the theory was renamed to the social identity theory. What emerged was the idea that intergroup relations and group dynamic affect relations and identity. Social psychologist Henri Taifel performed research experiments and concluded that participants followed a norm of

competitive group behavior. Hornsey (2008) questions the source from which the norm transpired. These questions were later answered in social identity theory. Most of the earlier studies and publications were from the perspective of the social psychology.

Others in the social psychology field define social identification as a process of depersonalization. Roccas and Brewer (2002) identify individuals as collective entities, which are connected to others by their commonality, rather than their personal relationships. One could argue that FYS both are connected personally and socially to anybody that they deem have similar interests, whether it is geographically or personally. Roccas and Brewer (2002) explain that students can belong to more than one group, thus creating multiple identities. For example, a FYS can identify with his or her racial or ethnic group, sex or gender or groups that share common interests of the student.

College is a place where self-identities are developed and shaped. Assimilating to a new environment is the cause for re-discovering true self. In order to fulfill the need to fit it, students may develop multiple identities. “The intersection of multiple identities is a socially constructed, contextual phenomenon enacted in everyday life that motivates action to create a more equitable society” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 244). In conjunction with the understanding of self and others, Jones and McEwan (2000) explain that through external factors within the ecosystem, students may

develop multiple identities. Multiple identities are formed as a result of the groups that students mostly identify with such as class, race, and religion.

These social groups impact their perception of themselves as well as others' perceptions of them. Adolescents who transition from middle to high school undergo conflict and often find themselves identifying with a specific group. Coleman (1974) suggests that peer group membership is very beneficial toward social development in adolescents. Tarrant et al. (2001) warns us that there have been limited studies indicating that peer group association is connected with positive social development in adolescents. However, Taifel (1978) explains that a part of an individual's concept derives from his or her knowledge of his or her membership group(s).

Researchers have created models to show the varied groups of identities. Abes' et al. (2000) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity was used as a guide to explain how multiple identities can be categorized into subgroups. These subgroups provide a richer and more detailed portrayal of relationships students perceive and their connection between their personal and social identities (Jones & McEwan, 2000).

Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimension of identity shows the relationship between context, perception and meaning making. This model includes three key components that describe what

relationships students perceive among their personal and social selves.

Jones and McEwen's multiple dimensions of identity is described as:

- Meaning Making: depends on complexity, contextual influences through different degrees.
- Contextual Influences: peers, family, norms, stereotypes, and socio-political conditions.
- Self-Perceptions of Multiple Identity Dimensions: race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, religion (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Explorations of multiple identities are influenced by social phenomena. The meaning-making component is best described as the student's perception of self. According to Jones and McEwen, this component is complex because students are constantly trying to discover who they are. They join different groups and organizations on campus in an effort to begin to develop their identity. This grappling with self will continue throughout adulthood. Adults are constantly trying to re-define themselves according to their experiences and life stages.

Brofenbrenner Developmental Ecological Model

Most models of student development explain how students view their social identities over a period of time, however ecological models explain how students interact with campus environments to assist in their development of their racial, social and sexual identities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Kuh, et al., 2010). Ecological models deviate from the common understanding of how students develop personally and socially in college.

The Developmental Ecology Model provided a theoretical framework that illustrated how the FYE is an ecosystem comprised of the interactions between individuals and their environment.

The context component of the ecosystem includes four systems. The microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing persons. The macrosystem includes parent's economic history, institutional decision makers, tuition/financial aid policies, immigration and visa agencies. The exosystem includes mechanisms that are beyond the control of the researcher such as the students' family background, economic status and culture. Finally the mesosystem describes peer relationships and the interaction with others. In order to cope with the new adjustment of college life, students begin to develop new relationships to adapt to this new environment. Kuh et al. (2010) explains, "developmental ecology focuses its attention on the individuals rather than the cultures in which they are embedded" (p. 161).

Macrosystem

According to Bronbrenner (1993), macrosystems

consist of the overarching pattern of micro- meso- and exosystems characteristics of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles,

opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems. (p. 25)

In order to help ease the transition to college, parents must be supportive, reliable and non-judgmental. Studies have shown that family support is critical throughout one's life (Caplan, 1982). There are many influences that students face on college campuses, and it is important for their parents to understand that the transition is a process that will take time. However, not all parents are supportive. Berrios-Allison (2005) explains that college students from poorly "disengaged families" (p. 205) may experience feelings of rejection and insecurities.

Social capital identifies properties of social structure, such as family, peers, community networks, that are used by agencies to achieve their interest (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar argues that social ties are entities controlled by social structures and are used in the interest of the actors. Stanton-Salazar refers to social capital as the reservation of instrumental or supportive relationships with institutional agents.

Wellman (1983) associates social capital with social distribution of possibilities (p. 163). This means that unequal distribution of opportunities for entering into different social and institutional contexts results in forming relationships with agents who exert different degrees of control over institutional resources, such as bureaucratic influence, career-related information, and opportunities for specialized training or mentorship. These "agents" are important because they are seen as the dominant group

who creates these opportunities to benefit themselves thus isolating those outside the group. In other words, access to many valuable resources and information---via social networks---only occur within the dominant social group, excluding those who are in the minority population. Social capital only exists through its relation among persons that facilitate the actions (Muhammed, 2010).

Muhammed (2010) also explains that trust and honesty are essential to being able to accomplish things as compared to a group that does have trust and integrity. Trustworthiness among the group allows for group members to be able to receive what they want by doing “favors” for each other. There have been many studies that point to the fact that “who you know” is just as important, if not more, than “what you know” (Coleman, 1988).

Many academicians and school leaders believe that all schools are at the same level and receive the same educational opportunities. Within the past couple of years states such as North Carolina have continued to slash the educational budget leaving universities and primary public schools with little to no resources needed to enhance the educational experience. With the downsizing of teachers and teacher assistants, many schools are closing, and classroom sizes are increasing putting constraints on the teachers who are still employed. These concerns could have a lasting impact on low-income families in that it widens the gap between the low and middle class, thus influencing social capital even more. Such

an impact will affect the decisions of students who are considering college as an option. With a decrease in funding opportunities, students are faced with challenges that are beyond their control. Receiving a job that will be able to support them financially becomes more and more attractive, however the rising cost of tuition becomes less appealing. The macrosystem exemplifies this idea of how economic status and social capital influences people.

Exosystem

Culture and social relationships have a direct link to student experiences and social interactions in school (Delpritt, 2006; Okey & Cusick, 1998). The exosystem describes culture and economic status within the family. Cultural experiences such as museums, Girls Scouts and Boys Scouts groups and exposure to music and arts differ between white and minority groups. Lareau (2002) found that relationships that middle class White parents have with teachers, school leaders and the community are vastly different from Black and Latino kids who live in low-income neighborhoods. Lareau (2002) continued by saying that compared to middle-class children, working class and low-income parents often participate in fewer activities with their children and are less involved in their children's overall experience. This trend continues toward higher education.

The interaction between parents and children is vital throughout the primary and secondary school years. Parents who have shown a vested

interest in their children's overall experience during the primary and secondary school years are more likely to do so when their children go to college. Standardized test prep courses, college visits and in some cases job shadowing are used as supplemental resources outside of high school to help prepare the student for higher education. Some low-income families may lack transportation resources to be able to attend these "outside of school" programs. That parental interaction plays a significant role in student development is not debatable.

Microsystem

Research studies also suggest that peer and friend relationships have a significant impact on student's educational experience (Hey, 1997; Mac & Ghail, 1994). For many, a child's very first friend could be a sibling, cousin or close family friend. These friendships usually shape the way we play and interact with others. "Friendships represent peoples' first authentic interpersonal relationships, and they make a profound contribution to their sense of well-being" (Cambron et al., 2010, p. 384; Sullivan, 1953). However as we get older, these friendships are better defined and are predicated upon trust and willingness to open up oneself to another (Brooks, 2007). Outside of the rigor of academics, college is a place where friendships are made. Developing personal relationships is contingent upon one's willingness to open up and form new relationships. Giddens (1992) and Pahl and Pevlin (2005) indicate that those relationships result in a new type of association has emerged. Giddens

refers to this new type of friendship as 'pure relationship'. Brooks (2007) implies that such a relationship is only sustained as long as it satisfies the needs of the persons involved. Given the time frame of a student's collegiate career, such a friendship would be befitting. Giddens (1992) refers to genuine relationship as situations.

where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (1992, p. 58)

Developing a close relationship with someone outside the person's family can often lead to a lifelong friendship and help build one's network.

Building networks is key to increasing one's social capital. Many times these systems can lead to job positions and other opportunities. Networking can also include forming professional relationships with teachers or school leaders. First year students are used to receiving direction and guidance from an authority figure such as a parent/guardian. Gravitating toward their professors, who are seen as experts, provides a level of comfort that they are use to receiving from their parents. Interacting with professors through mentorships has proven to be beneficial for both the student and the professor. Support from professors is an effective method that benefits students' academically and personally.

Mesosystem

The final system within the context component of Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecological model is known as the mesosystem. Renn and Arnold (2003) explain that the mesosystem is the place where campus peer culture meets the interactions between the developments of relationships within the microsystem. Some examples include the interaction between roommates, an athletic team, between students of different class ranks, and with faculty and students. Those interactions can result in a lifetime bond. Within this system, those relationships are valuable to the development of the student

Mentoring is an example of a relationship within the mesosystem. The term "mentor" originated from a character in Homer's *The Odyssey*. When King Odysseus went to war, he entrusted his son Telemachus' life to his friend Mentor. Mentor looked after Telemachus while his father was away (Mandelbaum, 1990). In its traditional context, mentor is often used to describe a person. This person is usually older thus having experienced more. Merriweather, Howell and Douglas (2013) write "Mentoring as praxis demonstrates the relationship between two individuals toward the accomplishment of articulated and shared goals. It is critical that both mentors and mentees conceptualize the partnership as an investment and shared responsibility" (p.261). However, mentoring in higher education may also come in the form of programs directed toward high risk, underserved, underrepresented and underprepared students.

Underserved, underrepresented and underprepared students benefit from a mentoring environment which Parks (2008) describes as an environment that “provides vital support for a significant transformation: that is, the move from a more limited world view and ability to make a meaningful contribution to a more adequate world-view and enhanced capacity to contribute in positive ways to the ongoing evolution of life” (p. 6). Mentoring environments focus on the personal and social development needs of its students. These environments provide “essential gifts” to students who are experiencing their first year of college. The gifts are:

- Recognition: A mentor recognizes you both as you are and as you could become, both your potential and your vulnerability.
- Support: Good mentors provide varying and strategic forms of support and encouragement, honoring your vulnerability.
- Challenge: Good mentors simultaneously also provide rightly timed challenge, honoring your potential (p. 6).

Within the context of a mentoring environment, these components should be considered when describing the goals and outcomes of the program. Considerations should be given to both traditional and non-traditional approaches to mentoring to afford students with the most beneficial resources to ease their transition to college. This literature review sought to identify the most relevant literature related to first-year students entering a four-year university for the first time. While mentoring is an important aspect in student transition and is commonly related to

academic transitioning, we must also consider the how FYS socially integrate within the environment is also important

Social Identity meets Social Integration

Social integration in college is important. Tinto (1975) explains that social integration and academic integration are both needed for a successful first year. When entering a college for the first time, there are a new set of goals and commitments that students adhere to. These commitments are academically and socially related. An example of a goal commitment would be striving to get high marks/grades in class. This goal commitment according to Tinto (1975) is academically related.

Institutional commitments might include befriending someone in class to help with homework or studying.

These commitments are also socially connected. During the first year of college, students seek to develop new relationships. Mac and Ghail (1994) explain the importance of making friends and the impact that it has on the college experience. Social integration refers to how well one interacts within the environment (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model supports this notion of social integration by explaining how these commitments relate to student retention. The model also explains that students who persist in college and graduate are active in the college culture in and out of the classroom. For example being involved in study groups and honor societies. Other examples includes involvement in sororities and fraternities which require members to have a good academic record.

There are similarities between both social integration and social identity. While social integration acts as a “checklist” or tally to see how many friends or associate’s one has, social identity enlists friends and peers to help shape their identity or help define who they are. Tinto (1989) explains that social integration is an important factor in student retention. Social integration therefore is also an important component in the development of student identity.

Many studies about first-year students focus on curriculum, campus activities and academic programs. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2010) talk briefly about the physical environment of schools and how that can influence “students’ feelings of well-being. Ecological theories have been under utilized in understanding student development. While researchers argue about which is more impactful to student development, academic or social integration, this study looks at the ecological environment as a key component of the students’ development. Bronfenbrenner’s Developmental Ecology Model can be used to consider the role of academic, social, personal and economic influences on student attrition.

Summary

On today’s college campuses, you can expect to find students from all different backgrounds and cultures flooding classrooms with the desire to achieve and a thirst to succeed. Social identity allows students to explore self without compromising what they believe. This study explains how the

first-year experience impacted the students' social identity, and it also provided insight into their development as a new college student.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the first semester of the first-year experience of first-year students and its impact on their social identity. The three research questions explored were: What elements of the first-year experience do FYS perceive as impacting their social identity? How does social capital mediate identity development during the first-year experiences? And how do the various systems within the context component of the developmental ecology theory affect social identity? This research study used a qualitative research methodology. Details related to the overall design of the study, participants in the study, data collection method, data analysis and the methods of verification are presented in this chapter.

Qualitative research focuses on trying to describe and make meanings of experiences. Rossman and Rallis (2012) explain that “qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive” (p. 9), which is unlike quantitative research that tries to control the variables and predict the outcome of a problem. A major strength of qualitative research is its ability to facilitate description and interpret complex phenomena, including subjective experience that cannot be easily quantified by mathematical analysis (Ramm & Kane, 2011). Qualitative research,

therefore, provides a more humanitarian approach to research (Ramm & Kane, 2011). Qualitative research can create a deeper understanding of first-year student experience.

Design of Study

This study followed a phenomenological design. Phenomenology explores the meaning of an individual's lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In adhering to the purpose of this study about the first-year experience, using a phenomenological approach was befitting and necessary to acquire information from FYS.

Phenomenology concerns itself with ideas and the essence of the "real world" (Moustakas, 1994). The most essential or vital part of phenomenology is describing the lived experience of an individual. Richardson (1990) describes phenomenology as "an empirically based approach aimed to identify the qualitatively different ways in which different people experience, conceptualize, perceive and understand various kinds of phenomena" (p. 53). In this study the phenomenon is the first semester of college at a 4-year university through the descriptions given by FYS.

FYS are not only diverse in the way they look and speak, but also in the way they think and act. They bring with them a specific ideology about how to navigate through life and its purpose. The use of this research methodology welcomed different perspectives and point of views

from students with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This helped the researcher to understand the phenomenon through a different lens.

This methodology identified the nature of lived experiences of FYS (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is both descriptive and interpretive. It allows the participants to conduct an internal investigation of their feelings while reflecting on their experience. Individuals comprehended their experiences differently and used different words to describe how they felt. The participants described an experience that meant the same, but used different words to convey the meaning. Within the scope of phenomenology, it is important to understand the phenomena from the standpoint of the person who lived it. By allowing space for reflection in the interview, the researcher created opportunities for participants to describe in their own words their experience and the elements of the experience that were most important to them.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a 4-year university in the southeastern region of the United States with a student population of 20,000 or more. This institution is a publicly funded, state supported institution located in the metropolitan area of a large city. As described by Patton (1990), purposive sampling is the selection of subjects based on some characteristic such as age, demographic or race.

The selected thirteen participants were between the ages of 18 and 19. All of the participants met the following criteria: 1) considered full-time students according to the registrar and were enrolled in at least 12 credit hours as a campus resident during the first semester of their first year. 2) In addition, the students lived on campus for the first semester and 3) had just completed their first semester of their first year of college.

There were three males and ten females that volunteered to participate in the study. Those participants represented different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The demographics included African-American/Black (9), White/Caucasian (3) and Hispanic (1).

The sample of students who volunteered for the study varied in personal experience and life experience. Many of the students came from working class families and often were well aware of the importance of education. They understood what the stakes were regarding getting their degree and how higher education would improve their way of life. Appendix D describes the participants and their background to provide more context.

Before recruitment began, permission was granted from the institutions' Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research study. After receiving permission from IRB, the Assistant Director of the University College was contacted by email (see email script Appendix A). University College specifically serves first-year students. University College was chosen as the contact because it works closely with first-year

students by creating programs and advising to assist in their transition. It provides contact information and resources for the students that it serves. This department was more than willing to assist with recruitment because it benefitted the most from the findings of this study. The researcher also worked in this department, which provided easier access to the population under study.

An email blast was sent out to all FYS through University College. Recruitment methods such as flyers and posters were considered during the initial phase of the recruitment; however, the researcher who was an instructor within the department that worked specifically with FYS, had an adequate number of respondents to the email blast. During recruitment several people expressed interest, but after a series of attempts to communicate interview times, a few participants were not available during the times that were presented. Those who participated in the study were offered a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card as an incentive for completing the interview.

Data Collection

Interviewing is the most common method used in a phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviewing was the method chosen to collect the data. In semi-structured interviews the goal is to understand the participants' point of view and interpret their experiences through narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). According to McNamara (2009), the strength of the general interview guide approach is the ability

for the researcher to ensure that general areas of information are collected from each interviewee. This approach also provided a focused conversational point that allowed a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee. Using interviewing as a method of collecting data allowed individuals to explain in depth their experiences.

The interview questions were created and specifically worded to answer the research questions presented at the beginning of this study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) remind us, “standardized questions do not bring standardized answers, for the same question means different things to different people” (p. 134). Therefore, each participant was asked the same questions, but there were different follow-up questions (McNamara, 2009) because each interviewee came from different backgrounds making his/her experience unique. Follow-up questions were implemented and sometimes deviated from the specific interview questions, however these questions were to ensure that the participants provided more rich and descriptive responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews took place in an informal environment on the campus of the school. The informal environment allowed the researcher to develop a rapport with the participants. The participants felt comfortable enough to open up and answer sensitive probing questions. A digital recorder was used to record the interviews along with the researcher taking notes to

record thoughts. Below are examples of the interview questions used during the interview process:

1. Tell me about your first week on campus. What did/didn't you expect to see?
2. Describe your social interaction between you, peers and the faculty/staff? Did you often communicate with your professors?
3. Describe any new discoveries about yourself or your personality during your first year.
4. Describe your some of the challenges that you had to overcome during your first semester. How did you overcome it? Were there any financial issues?

Data Analysis

The researcher used thematic analysis. Van Manen (1990) describes theme generation as “the meaning of a point, a simplification, the use of not using objects and capturing the phenomenon for understanding” (p. 87). Generating themes is an intricate process that requires an incredible amount of patience and focus. Rossman and Rallis (2012) explain that “generating themes is an art” (p. 279) and involves appreciating the complexity of data. Van Manen (1990) describes the process of theme generation as “recovering structures of meanings that are embodied and dramatized human experience represented in the text” (p. 78).

The researcher used focused coding an analytic technique to generate themes. According to Thornberg and Charmaz (2011), focused coding is used to sift through large amounts of data and identify re-occurring patterns and multiple layers of meaning. The researcher was able to identify ideas and specific language that re-occurred within each transcription. Concept mapping was also used to organize thoughts and generate themes within the transcriptions. This analytic tool was used to plot the themes and connect them through specific descriptions.

Methods of Verification

It was important that the researcher ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Guba and Lincoln (1981) further noted that all research must have “truth value”, “applicability”, “consistency”, and “neutrality”. These components are necessary in order for it to be considered worthwhile. The truth-value component was demonstrated through re-iterating thoughts by the interviewee capturing moments of reflection and accuracy. Applicability and consistency were achieved by asking questions in a specific order making sure that the answers fell in-line with the previous responses creating a more accurate pattern. Finally, neutrality was reflected in the researcher’s tone keeping the participant engaged and focused on the interview.

Ethical Considerations

A confidentiality statement was created and issued to the participants in accordance with the guidelines of IRB. The participants

were required to sign a document to highlight the dynamics of the study including risks and also to ensure privacy. The interview transcripts were stored on a password protected USB drive locked in a drawer and were only accessible by a key that remained with the researcher at all times. To distinguish the participants' transcripts from one another, a letter was used to replace the participants' name to assure privacy.

Summary

In summary, using a qualitative research method was the best way to answer the research questions presented in this study. Implementing a phenomenological framework provided a better understanding of FYS' lived experiences. Focus coding was used to analyze the data and generate themes. The next chapter provides the results of the data analysis process.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of data collected from the interviews of FYS at a 4-year university. The purpose of this study was to examine the first semester of the first-year experience of first-year students and its impact on their social identity. To illuminate the phenomena of the first semester of college, the following research questions were designed to paint a better picture:

1. What elements of the first-year experience do FYS perceive as impacting their social identity?
2. How does social capital shape identity development during the FYE?
3. How do the various systems within the context component of the developmental ecology theory create multiple social identities?

The focus of this chapter is to interpret the results from the participants' interviews.

Theme Divisions

Results of the thematic analysis shed light on the lived experiences of the thirteen participants. This section divides the analysis into three themes. The three themes constructed from the data were Family Ties, Social Identification and Balancing College Life. The themes are further divided into nine dimensions/categories, three per theme. Table 1

shows the theme divisions along with the dimensions or categories that explain the theme in further detail. The table shows an excerpt from the interviewees that describe the theme's meaning.

Theme 1: Family Ties

A rope is made up of intertwining strings. It is through the intertwining that it derives its strength. Ropes are a means of tying elements together. The participants in this study provided information about the importance of family ties, the connectedness to family, and identity development during their first year. The responses reflected a need for some connection to home. Many of the participants felt that staying connected with family members was important in maintaining some familiarity. Some of the participants indicated that their family was the driving force behind them wanting to pursue higher education. These driving forces included opportunities afforded to them that their parents did not have. Attending college would provide working class students an avenue for economic stability. Within this theme are three dimensions that provide a more detailed understanding of familial ties. These dimensions are respecting the centrality of family, reconciling familial status and negotiating independence.

Respecting the centrality of family often involves the importance of incorporating family values in decision-making. These decisions may include adhering to a schedule or determining whom to allow in their social circle. The participants realized early on in the semester that

making decisions on their own would be difficult. Many explained that when they were confronted with a problem, they would frequently call home for a resolution. The participants quickly realized that becoming an adult required problem solving skills and decision-making. Participants reflected on their inexperience when solving personal problems.

Luckily for many, participating in programs like the learning community and first year seminar helped them to resolve some of those problems. Some of the participants indicated that they did not participate in those programs, but wished they would have. The connection to home is essential towards students' developing social identity.

This study found that FYS were vulnerable and seemed very unsure of themselves. Constant reassurance from family helped them to increase their overall confidence in making decisions while unintentionally loosening some of those family ties. The inclusion of family does not signify a sense of weakness but instead shows a sense of acknowledgment of the values and lessons taught by their parents. For instance, when asked what role spirituality played in their lives, many participants indicated that they grew up with some affiliation to religion. Upon entering college those religious values and practices such as going to church every week were often dismissed. Participant WW is an African-American female from Raleigh, NC. Her family has military ties, and she is a first-generation college student. She is the youngest of four children. When asked about her spirituality she said:

I do believe in God and I am a Christian, back home I did go to church like every Sunday and when I first came here. I didn't go to church that much and like a choir that I am involved in on campus, goes to church. That is another way that I stay connected.

She indicated that she grew up attending church, but had not continued the traditional practice. Though she grew up with this religious background, she admitted that she had not focused on trying to find a church near her school.

However, she still continued to engage in religious rituals such as praying and reading her Bible. It seemed that she wanted to continue to respect the values and traditions of her family in her way. She continued to acknowledge the fact that being a Christian was a valuable part of her life which kept her connected to her family. Her spirituality is a key part of her identity and therefore she relied on that to get her through the first semester of college. Several of the participants described religion as playing a significant role in their lives and felt that it was necessary for them to continue to practice their faith in a new setting. This allowed some to regain confidence in their spiritual selves.

Reconciling familial status is related to the family's social and economic capital. Social capital is the shared knowledge, understanding, norms, rules and expectations about patterns of interactions that groups of individuals bring to a recurrent activity (Ostrom, 2000). Families who have sent their children to college are investing in their future thus

increasing their chances of finding a stable job. It is understood by many that funding a higher level of education is expensive and often includes some sacrifice. For those who depend on financial aid, like many of the participants, the pressure of competition coupled with the urgency of finding a job after graduation was stressful. The participants whose families were prepared financially still found themselves at odds with trying to keep up with the extra expenses of college. Some of the participants' parents couldn't afford those extra expenses. Financial hardships were discussed by many of the students during the interview. Many of the participants were faced with the realities of being financially independent from their parents. As a result, the participants realized that the expensive things that they received in high school masked their perception of their parent's economic status while others were completely aware of their parents' economic status and did not expect any additional financial support.

Maintaining familial status is an important part of the FYS' 'family identity'. Several of the participants in this study were unfamiliar with their parent's economic and social status until they started college. They realized that college created more expenses outside of tuition. Those participants tried to reconcile the expenses of college by looking for jobs, searching for scholarships and minimizing unnecessary cost. This was common amongst all of the participants. They needed money for basic needs such as snacks, lotion, toothpaste and other personal items.

These participants were coming to terms with their families' financial and economic status. For instance, Participant MM an African-American female, out of state student from Maryland, did not realize how much her parents were struggling financially to send her to college. When asked what economic category her family fell in she replied:

“I want to say like middle class. We never had financial issues until we went to college”.

Both of her parents worked for the United States government and had pretty decent salaries. At home, her reality was a nice big home with luxury cars parked in the driveway. However, the realities of college were realized when she recognized that living out of state required additional money, especially when having to travel to home. She recognized that her parents were making a huge sacrifice for her financially, so she decided to limit the times that she asked for money. In this instance, participant MM reconciled that although her parents made good money, they struggled in trying to help pay for the things that she needed. This caused the participant to critically analyze her situation ultimately deciding to transfer to a school closer to home at the end of her second semester to help alleviate some of her costs.

Negotiating independence refers to the interdependency that students assume when they gain ‘freedom’ from their parents. It is sometimes difficult to declare independency when a person is technically still dependent on someone else. So what does it mean to be independent?

I believe independency means to have control over one's actions without the influence of someone else. This was a major step for the participants. The students were trying to develop a sense of self, which is a form of independence. The participants struggled with independence. Many described the experience as frightening, but also liberating. This led to a better understanding of identity. Declaring independence is not without its struggles. The biggest challenge with being independent is accountability. Many students struggle with holding themselves accountable for their actions. They looked for some assistance or a 'bailout'. One of the major issues that the participants dealt with was the process of making independent decisions without the help from their parents. As a result, some participants explained that they would engage in activities that often put themselves at risk academically and personally. The caveat to independent decision-making is the probability of making a wrong decision that could compromise academic standing.

It seems that many of the participants would make impulsive decisions without considering the consequences. The constant pursuit of peer validation causes a lack of judgment among FYS. FYS are in constant negotiation with themselves regarding their independence. They felt more independent because they were making decisions without consulting their parents. For example, some of the decisions that they made included when to go out, or choosing to associate with people that they normally would not associate with. Participant JJ, an African-

American female who is an only child, admits that she made questionable decisions that she knew her parents would have had an issue with. When asked if she discovered anything new about her personality? She responded by saying:

I always knew that I had conflicts in myself because I have extremes. Because like making decisions, I was a very bad decision maker. Like, when it came to social decisions like parties I would think like fast. But when it came to like... oh there is a field trip for an organization, [I would say] oh I don't know business people, I would be like um I wonder if I should go or not. I thought about the wrong decisions. Like I should have been thinking about the consequences. Going out smoking or drinking or going to somebody's house who was having a "kickback"(get together at a friend's house). I [would] give more thoughts about academic decisions versus social things.

She realized that being independent was hard. When she began to reflect on her behavior during her first semester, she realized that she was not making decisions based on consequences, but she was making them because she could. Social-psychological factors influence decision making among FYS. They jeopardize their social and educational status just to fit in with other students. It is a constant negotiation with the idea of being dependent and being independent. Independency does not mean that a

person loses sight of his or her values. It means that you have the freedom to incorporate what you have learned.

Theme 2: Social Identification

People seek social acceptance from peers, co-workers and family.

Chapter 2 discussed the advantages of social integration and peer influence. A few female participants discussed altering their physical appearance to fit in. All of the participants discussed the importance of being accepted socially. This study occasionally would find that all of the students wanted to make friends and interact with other students from different backgrounds. Learning about other cultures not only expands a persons' view globally, but it allows for self-evaluation and it opens up hidden interests.

The participants found that integrating into the culture of college is overwhelming. Getting use to the academic demand coupled with interacting with strangers was described as scary by many of the female participants. However many of the participants indicated that the fear subsided once they discovered more about themselves and others around them. This study found that the participants typically struggled with understanding who they were in their new roles. They associated themselves with people that had similar interest. The participants began to discover that their interest changed throughout the first semester. These new interests constantly evolved throughout their college experience. Within this theme there are three dimensions: (Re) constructing self,

seeking social acceptance and dealing with isolation. These dimensions explain why the participants struggled with social identity and how they dealt with that struggle.

(Re)constructing Self

College signifies identities in transition. The process of transitioning into college not only requires transformation academically, but it allows for a social transformation to take place.

The individual develops an identity grounded in the assimilation and acceptance of contextually specific shared beliefs, rules, values and expectations as a result of interaction with significant others and with the generalized other; that is, with the attitudes of the social group to which the individual belongs. (Mead 1934, p. 158)

Mead explains assimilation occurs when social transformation begins to take place. The participants started off associating themselves with others who had similar interests. However as time lapsed, participants explained that meeting different people proved to be more beneficial because they were learning about new things.

The participants also explained that they struggled to find out ‘who they were outside of their family and friends from home. They discovered more things about their personality that was unrecognizable before. Participant SS is an African-American female from a small military town. She comes from a single parent home. Her parents are divorced. Her mother is a nurse, and her father is a high school teacher. She explains that

her biggest challenge during her first semester was realizing that she was a “small fish in a big pond.” She was lonely and knew that she needed to make new friends to fit in. She noticed that when she tried to make friends, they would misinterpret her statements. She describes her first month on campus:

I was really lonely. Like out of a school of about 20,000 something people, I felt really lonely. I am not in Fayetteville anymore and these people in Charlotte are like who is SS [name is replaced by letters]? They are like who is she talking to, and I am apologizing, like NO, I am just playing; this is not really me.

Participant SS then understood that people really needed to get to know her personality first.

Seeking Social Acceptance

The previous category mentions the importance of FYS being socially accepted. Any time a person enters a new environment or new setting that requires some social interactions; they seek acceptance from others. College can be viewed as one big social community. Within that community, there are vast arrays of people who are diverse. Diversity comes in the form of language, cultures, behaviors and appearances.

The participants realized that getting to know people and gaining acceptance is not an easy task. Building relationships with others is difficult, but it is a necessary component in the development of a person’s social identity. Participant JJ is an African-American female from

Tennessee. She explained that getting involved with organizations is important to make friends. She also explained that joining an organization helps you to meet other people. When asked about any organizations that she was involved in, she replied:

I am really involved. I am in the business honors program, and we do a lot of activities on campus. I am in Voice of Eden, which is the choir on campus. Um, and campus activities board, United Black Professional, Coalition of 100 Black Women, and I am in the leadership learning community.

Many of the African American participants were involved with organizations that targeted African-American members. This specific population seemed to struggle with social acceptance. They struggled to find their voice and indicated that the university lacked programs that made them feel included on campus. They explained that the events that took place around campus were not inclusive, so they spent much of their time in the student union or their rooms. However after finding organizations such as the Black Student Union, which is an organization that promotes the unity of black students through the development of connectedness, they were more confident and felt more included. Though this specific demographic sought social acceptance culturally, each participant wanted to fit in. This category solidifies the need for acceptance in a new environment. All of the participants agreed that being

accepted by peers and “fitting in” were critical in the transition process, thus creating a peer identity.

Dealing with isolation was challenging for all of the participants. At one point, all of the participants explained how difficult it was being away from their family. Their isolation was accompanied with fear and emptiness. Participant OO is a Hispanic male, a mechanical engineering student, from a small town outside of Asheville, NC. His father works for a company that makes plastic, and his mother is a stay at home mom with two other kids. When asked about what was his biggest challenge? He talks about his relationship with his family, he said:

It was just the loneliness, and I used go to sleep and think about what I would have done if I were at home. I think about being around mostly strangers. But I kept telling myself this is what I need to get things done. I was afraid that the professors wouldn't take me seriously. The fear of not being understood, like you want to be...

He understood that being in school was his chance to pull his family out of poverty and he had responsibilities to home being the oldest sibling. Though he felt lonely and isolated, he knew that his family was counting on him, which allowed those feelings of isolation to be met with appreciation and gratefulness.

The participants in the study talked about feeling ‘lonely’ and missing their family. However based on the responses, the feelings of

loneliness seemed more like discomfort. Ironically the absence of family seemed to be a big contributor to the feelings of isolation even though many of the participants lived minutes away from the college and therefore could have easily gone home.

Theme 3: Balancing College Life

This last theme covers the expectations that a college requires and the new life that FYS are placed in. College brings about new responsibilities. Television shows portray the social aspects of college, such as the parties, sports teams and co-eds attending spring breaks in Cancun. However, attending college requires more than just a fake ID. College represents higher learning and a new level of thinking. It also represents a new level of responsibility. These responsibilities include: going to class, turning in assignments, communicating with your professor and getting along with your roommate. Rarely does the television depict the academic life of a first year student. The dimensions in this theme illustrate the need for FYS to find the balance between their personal and academic lives.

FYS must adapt to not only the academic rigor, but also their new social responsibilities (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). These new social responsibilities include adjusting to classes, waking themselves up and deciding when to engage in social activities. According to Holmstrom et al. (2002), research studies indicate that residential FYS are less concerned with academic demands of college and more concerned with changes in

daily routines. FYS have to adapt to the daily routines. Without parental influence over their lives, it was difficult for some FYS to understand whom they were without their parents being around. Many participants talked about discovering new things about themselves that they didn't realize at the beginning of the semester. The dimensions in this theme reflect those new discoveries. They are confronting academic expectations; communicating is key and "think responsibly".

Confronting Academic Expectations

Academic expectations in college are significantly higher than those on a secondary level. Professors are scholars that spend a considerable amount of time working in their field. The participants in this study talked about their experiences in the classroom. All of the participants expressed frustration with trying to keep up with the academic demand in the classroom. Many indicated that they were unprepared with the amount of assignments and expectations in the classroom, thus increasing their pressure to adapt. Participant JJ explained that he had a very hard time adjusting to his classes. When he was asked about what was his biggest challenge during the first semester? He replied:

I was pretty much lost and homesick because I was so close to my parents. So this was kind of different for me being away from them. That kind of disorganized my mind from all academics and I did really bad last semester. So I am repairing that this semester. I ended up on probation last semester. I was just overwhelmed

with the class sizes and how they were just lecture, lecture, and then a test. I just did not think that the classes had enough assignments like homework because I am not a good test taker. I had poor time management skills. I was usually stressed out with assignments.

Adjusting to the academic rigor of college proved to be very challenging. What seems to be a consensus among all the participants was learning how to manage time between classes and extracurricular activities. Participant JJ was very honest about not being able to handle life in and out of the classroom. While participant JJ explained how difficult it was to handle the work, another participant indicated that she had an issue with class sizes. That participant also felt intimidated in class discouraging her from making friends with classmates. Social integration within the campus environment is connected to FYS' achievement in the classroom. Some of the participants reported that once their social network was established, they began to focus more on assignments.

Participants discovered that there was a balance that needed to be struck. Too much focus on developing social networks could negatively impact performance in class. For instance some participants were so focused on making friends that their classroom performance began to suffer. Participant GG, a White/Caucasian male from Waxhaw, NC, described how he handled his academics after being put on probation by the university. He explains:

I only go out on the weekends, Don't hang out with your friends all of the time. You can but don't go overboard. Don't miss things that you shouldn't miss. Don't stay out too late when you know you have to get up for class the next morning. Um don't go out on the weekend until all of your homework is done. Like sit down on Friday and complete all of your work before you go out. Those are some of the things that I am trying to do.

He also talked about how he had to study more once he came to college. He was not used to studying in high school, so making the time to study was a big adjustment.

Communicating is Key

This category outlines the importance of communication. Means of communication are constantly changing. Social networking is the primary source of communication among college students. Students use social networking to make friends, stay current on upcoming events and to share information. Email is also an effective communication tool. School administrators and faculty use email to distribute assignments and engage in personal conversation with students. Throughout these interviews the participants all agreed that communication with peers, faculty and professors was a necessity. All of the participants also recognized that the lack of communication at the beginning of the semester was the source of many of their academic problems. There is a difference between the interaction between faculty in college and teachers in high school. College

faculty are sometimes faced with huge classes and are not able to interact with each student. Office hours and email are the most effective ways to communicate with them. Whereas high school faculty have limited class sizes and can interact with students on a more personal level. Participant GG realized that communicating more with his professors was a necessary component that assisted in his success in the classroom. He knew that not communicating with his professors could have damaging effects. He said:

I just think that there were some assignments and stuff that I needed to talk to them about, and I would have gotten something better. Yeah, just getting feedback in general about how I was doing in class and I didn't do it. I wish I would've.

This dimension is just an extension of what the overall theme conveys. Balancing college life includes improving communication skills with peers, faculty and staff members. With so many different ways to transmit information, whether it is electronically or face to face, these participants explained the importance of communication.

Thinking Responsibly

The decision to act is a right that most people exercise with responsibility. Responsible behavior requires that people consider all of the repercussions of decisions before they act. There are occasions where peoples' decisions are not met with positive outcomes, but instead produce negative results. Adults sometimes struggle with responsibility and accountability. Thinking responsibly means that a person considers others

before a decision is made. This can be difficult sometimes when people get wrapped up emotionally, and disregard their instincts. College students are transitioning into adulthood and often deflect any sense of responsibility for their actions. Social events and new relationships trump responsible behavior. Participant AA is an African-American female from Fayetteville, NC; she comes from a single parent home. When describing herself at the beginning of the semester, she talks about how irresponsible she was. She said:

I partied a lot because I felt free. Everybody is going I might as well. I was worried less about my grades and more about trying to figure out who I was going to hang out with.

No parental guidance signifies freedom to make questionable decisions. Some of the participants described instances in which they would purposely go places that would put them at risk for getting into trouble. Those acts of irresponsibility are directly related to the need for social acceptance. Common sense seemed to be absent from their thought process. FYS grappled with trying to fit in even if it meant costly repercussions.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present findings from data collected in several interviews with FYS during their first semester of their first year of college through the process of phenomenological analysis. The results from this study highlighted the phenomenon of the first

semester in the first year of college through three themes: family ties, social identification and balancing college life. Several dimensions were identified of how the participants experienced social, personal and academic issues and how their social identity was impacted during their first semester of college.

Attending college for the first time is not easy. The transition from high school to college can be challenging. Having a strong support system is a definite asset. The ability to confront and recognize fears is an advantage to surviving and getting through the first semester. In addition recognizing who you are, making good decisions, and having support from all stakeholders are essential for personal and academic growth and can lead towards a successful first year.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A phenomenological approach was applied and used in the current study to understand the experiences of college students within the first semester of their first year. This study was created out of a desire to gain insight on the social identity development of FYS during their first year. Previous literature suggests that social identity plays a major role in the development of students at the collegiate level. Three themes - family ties, social identification and balancing college life – were developed from the data analysis and provided a response to the three research questions. The interpretation of findings, implications for further research and conclusions regarding the essence of the phenomenon of the FYE will be discussed in this chapter. The research questions that will be discussed are:

1. What elements of the FYE do FYS perceive as impacting their social identity?
2. How does social capital mediate identity development during the FYE?
3. How do the various systems within the context component of the developmental ecology theory create multiple social identities?

Interpretations of Findings

Research question #1: What elements of the FYE do FYS perceive as impacting their social identity?

There were several elements within the first year that FYS perceived as impacting their social identity. These elements include independence, peer interaction and isolation. These elements were significant in the development of FYS social identity. The understanding of the world and how people fit in is directly related to what is taught by parents. It is from there that bond development occurs with parents, siblings, grandparents, etc. This occurs during childhood and continues throughout the aging process. Parents or guardians are the first teachers and therefore are looked upon for guidance and support. That support extends throughout adulthood, but people still often consult their parents when decisions are being made. As long as there is a connection, people can move forward to the next stage in their lives.

In the theme, Family Ties, it was evident that the idea of being independent of family played a major role in the construction or rebuilding of FYS social identity. Consistent with Berman and Sperling (1991) and Rice (1990) parental attachment was viewed as a personal reassurance, through which FYS derived a sense of security that facilitated independence from the family and exploration of new social environments. While the idea of being independent or “free” from parental authority seems like an emancipation of responsibilities, FYS still value

the opinions of their parents. It was obvious that many FYS shared a close bond with their family. During childhood any problem or issue that arose, was a family issue and therefore was solved within the family. Moving away from the family environment resulted in individualized decision-making. People move away from family in the decision-making process and move more towards independence.

Correlational studies have shown that adolescents who reported feeling close to their parents scored higher than their peers on measures of self-reliance, responsible independence and behavioral competence (Steinberg, 1990). Other studies suggest that students describing themselves as having a close relationship with parents also described themselves as being more independent, dominant, and responsible (e.g. Kenny, 1987). These close ties influence FYS in a way that they are reminded of the support that they have at home and in fact accept independence with a condition that they include opinions of their family. After all, the development of one's identity starts within the family unit. This sets the foundation for who people are, but not necessarily who they become.

The next element that impacts social identity is peer interaction. Interaction among adolescents is a significant factor when adjusting to the culture of college. Within the theme of social identification, peer interaction demonstrates a need for FYS to build new relationships with others. Though different, most students have a common goal, and that goal

is to make friends. Some people have this idea that when entering college, adjustment is automatic and making friends is easy. This is not the case. Different people have different attitudes. Some participants expressed negative feelings about their peers in regards to their social interaction. Jealousy, envy and drama filled social media disputes were some of the adjectives used to describe their interaction within certain settings. These negative confrontations began to translate into lessons learned throughout the semester.

Peer interaction exerts significant influence. Activities among students and their peers offer opportunities of learning (Benjamin, Earnest, Grunewald & Arthur, 2007). These lessons allow students to learn more about themselves while interacting with other students. The more students interacted with their peers, the more they seem to learn about themselves.

The last and final element of impact involves the feelings of isolation that the participants described during the interviews. This is also located under the social identification theme. Isolation or loneliness seemed to affect the way that FYS saw themselves. Often times people use isolation as a method to reflect. Although FYS perceived isolation as a negative, it served as a tool to understand how to adjust to college. Bell and Bromnick (1998) explain that self-disclosure could provide the means under which a new student would be able to direct their thoughts away from home, and hence reduce feelings of loneliness. Tan (1996) explains that college graduates reported that they progressed more personally than

academically. This idea of doing a self-evaluation during the first-year supports the notion that as students continue to matriculate they grow more personally which impacts their social identity. Spending time alone with themselves provided space for students to engage in self-evaluation.

Familial influences, social connections, peer interaction, and new responsibilities are all elements that influence how students' see themselves. The participants described a change in how they saw themselves after the first semester. They reflected on their experiences in high school and understood that college was not just a place of higher learning but also was a place for growth and development. The participants realized that past reflections on family background and new revelations in the FYE helped cultivate their inner self (social identity).

Research Question # 2: How does social capital shape identity development during FYE?

According to Dinda (2008) “ social capital can be considered as the stock of active connections among individuals—the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and make possible cooperative action” (p. 2021). These connections were developed through peer interaction and group affiliation for the FYS. FYS benefited from peer interaction and by involving themselves with other groups. Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007) argue that individuals develop an identity grounded in the assimilation and acceptance of shared beliefs and values from social groups that an

individual belongs to. For example, many of the African-American participants felt excluded from the campus community because there were minimal opportunities to connect with individuals within their culture who shared the same interests. They felt more connected with campus after joining organizations such as the Black student organizations. An African-American participant said “I got involved with black student union because I wanted to get involved with my culture here.” This was an indication that she needed to get involved with an organization that she could identify with, whereas before, she was not a member of the organization, and she had trouble identifying with some of her peers.

Weber (1998) argues that social identification is “the intersection of multiple identities and is a socially constructed, contextual phenomenon enacted in everyday life that motivates action to create a more equitable society” (as cited in Kuh et al., 2010, p. 244). This further supports the findings relative to social capital. Students in this study accrued more social capital as they joined multiple groups and these groups shaped FYS’ identity during the first year. Jones and McEwan (2000) further explain that through external factors located within the context component of the ecosystem, students develop multiple identities. FYS developed and enacted a separate identity with their parents, peers, faculty as well as themselves.

These multiple identities are defined more within the first year. Because the first year of college marks the transition from a child to adult,

FYS are trying to find out who they are independent of their family. The participants in this study were immersed into an environment that was culturally diverse and provided multiple and varied opportunities for interactions with others. Social capital was found to influence the identities of FYS. It offered an explanation for why the need for social interaction was so prevalent among the participants. Those interactions provided a means for continued personal growth.

Research Question #3: How do the various systems within the context component of the developmental ecology theory develop multiple social identities?

Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecology consists of four major components: process, person, context and time. Within the component of context an ecosystem that consists of five systems: microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem, mesosystem and chronosystem are described. The interpretation of the findings will focus on all of the systems with the exception of the chronosystem.

The microsystem, to reiterate, is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing persons. Renn and Arnold (2003) explain that faculty relationships, peer relationships, roommates and classmates fall into this category. A microsystem aligns itself within the themes of social identification and balancing college life, where FYS seek validation from peers and acknowledge that communication with faculty is important. Relationships with peers and

faculty impact FYS' social identity in that they acknowledge that the interaction among these groups is vital for their growth as college students. FYS students develop an "academic identity", which they communicate with professors to increase their chances of success in the classroom. This was present in the data analysis. They also create a 'peer identity' in which they build relationships with peers to feel socially accepted. Baumeister and Muraven (1996) indicate identity is a phenomenon that is always in the process of becoming as individuals choose, alter and modify their identities based on what will enable them to negotiate particular contexts.

The exosystem is a way to address the diversity of the students' experiences. In this system, social capital was important. In the theme Family Ties, there was a recurring notion that FYS stay within the confines of shared beliefs. This system impacts their 'family identity' in which values and beliefs are maintained through other groups who share the same ideology. For example, those with Christian beliefs seemed to interact more with other Christians. Mead (1934) suggests individuals develop identity built on assimilating and accepting specific shared beliefs, rules and values within the social group that they belong to.

The macrosystem refers to the culture and social relationships that have a direct link to student experiences and social interactions in school. The social identification theme falls within this system. The culture and social relationships are formed during social activities and events. FYS

join organizations to socialize with others and make friends. They then form a 'group identity' or 'racial identity' in which they identify themselves a member of that group. For example, a couple of participants said that they joined a dance group in which they identified themselves as dancers. Because they were a part of that organization, when they met people outside of the group, they identified as a member of that organization by referring to themselves as "dance girls". This evidence further explains how an identity is formed within the exosystem.

The mesosystem is what Renn and Arnold (2003) call a place where campus peer culture meets the interactions between the developments of relationships within the microsystem. This system is reflected in all of the themes. This is where family, peers, and faculty intersect. Self-identity is developed in this system. Self-identity morphs into social identity in the mesosystem and microsystem. Scanlon et al. (2007) write "The situated identity nature of identity means that individuals engage in identity formation in multiple contexts of what is a segmented life world" (p. 228).

It is understood that interaction between these systems influence identity development among the individual. The findings within this research conclude that multiple identities are created when the individual interactions take place within a new environment. These identities are in response to the need to adapt and assimilate. FYS change depending on the group in order to benefit or gain acceptance. The transition within the

first year symbolizes a time where transformation occurs. When a person leaves one environment for another, the systems within the context component influence that individual, creating multiple identities.

These identities are developed to help the individual adapt to the new environment. The environment influences the creation of multiple 'selves' played by FYS. This assimilation can be equated to actors in a play or film. Depending on the production, the actor takes on an identity according to the role that they are given. In this case, individuals are given the role as a student and the production is the first year of college. This production also features roles played by faculty, staff, other college students, and parents. The setting or location is the college campus. In life, whenever people are placed into a different environment, i.e. new location, or new job, they must adapt to the new setting. That setting may result in creating or modifying their identity.

Implications for Further Research and Practice

The findings from the analysis respond to the study's research questions by developing themes that best represent the lived experiences of FYS within their first semester of college. The intentional goal was to show how the FYE could impact a student's social identity. These findings have significant implications for advancing the understanding of the first-year experience and how educators can assist in its improvement. Readers new to this demographic should understand how critical the first year is for traditional students. Though many universities do a great job in

addressing the needs of this population by creating specific programs and offering classes with a curriculum that focuses on college integration, perhaps universities could extend the focus to personal and social development. Based on the key theme of social identification it would be appropriate to include a more personal focus on student development.

FYS go through so many personal changes that it affects their academic abilities which then affects attrition rates. Those administrators who work closely with FYS have a good understanding of how the environment can affect social adjustment. Also, there could be a program setup for first-generation students and their parents to prepare them for the first year. This also could assist in helping that population of students' and their families become better aware of the challenges during the first year.

Student Affairs administrators who work toward developing programs to assist students should focus less on creating activities and more on the development of students. Colleges and universities become so concerned with retaining students and attrition rates that they overlook those students who need to understand self within the foreign college environment. Without intervention, these students may drop out. So the question now becomes, "how do we prepare students for college life?"

First year programs, like learning communities and seminar courses, are great at providing campus resources and tools needed for the academic side of college. However, this generation of students is not necessarily lacking academic skills, but they often lack life skills. Skills

like how to handle roommate issues or how to handle rejection. Students fail to realize that everything will not always work out in their favor. There will be rejection and times where life will intervene. One recommendation would be to not isolate FYS from other students. Based on the theme of balancing college life, it would be befitting to incorporate other students in the life class to share their experiences. Seminar courses could become “life classes” open to the entire student body, but be required for first-year students. This would allow FYS to learn from the experiences of upperclassmen. This class could connect those students who are committed to succeeding in college and role model for the others what it will take to succeed in college.

This class would be held every semester or quarter and be open to those students who want to talk about life. The facilitator should be a student-affairs professional who specializes in student development. This person would select a panel of students from different backgrounds and majors who would want to share their college life experience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see how the first semester of the FYE impacted FYS social identity. The findings in this study were reflective of the lived experiences of traditional first-year college students. The participants in this study provided meaningful dialogue that reflected their experiences as first-year students. There should be a continuation of research studies such as this that examine the development and role of

social identity vis-a-vis the social aspects of college, rather than just focusing mainly on academics and traditional view of social integration. College is a place where students grow personally and academically. Banks, Biddle and Slavings (1992) remind us the “growing emphasis on students' thoughts and opinions, including their perceptions of social influences, suggests a reconceptualization of a social psychological problem rather than a practical problem for educational institutions” (p. 322).

As administrators and educators we should continue to invest in our students' lives by offering as many options as possible. We also must reflect on our own personal and academic journeys by empathizing with our students. We need to continue to be passionate about educating our students by putting our research into practice and focusing on both the academic and social aspects of college. The participants in this study struggled with balancing both life and college. If we take the focus off primarily performance in academics and also balance that with performance in life we can provide our students with a college experience that has lasting and more holistic benefits.

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APPENDIX A: EMAIL RECRUITMENT LETTER

Hello,

My name is Niesha C. Douglas and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership department here at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I am conducting a study to fulfill the requirements of Doctor of Education. The study concerns First-Year student experience and its impact on social identity. This study will benefit those who work closely and follow the success and retention of first year students.

I am looking for participants who are willing to be interviewed for about 60-90 minutes concerning their first semester and a possible follow-up interview lasting no longer than an hour of additional time. Eligibility consists of being a first year student recruited based on the following criteria:

- Must be considered a First Year Student by admissions office;
- Enrolled in a four-year university
- Must be living on campus
- Must be considered a full-time student enrolled in at least 12 credit hours

I would be very grateful if you would be willing to take part in my study. If you so, you will have the chance to find out more about the study before coming to any decision. You will be under no obligation to take part. Eligible participants will receive a \$10 gift card upon completion of the interview and necessary paperwork.

This study is supervised by Dr. Lisa R. Merriweather, assistant professor in Educational Leadership department. She can be contacted through email at lmerriwe@uncc.edu. The use of email to recruit participants for this study will be approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Niesha Douglas
ndougla2@uncc.edu

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

First Year College Students' First semester Experience and its impact on social identity

First Year Student Interviewee

Project Title and Purpose

The title of the study is "First year student's experiences and its impact on social identity." The purpose of this study is to examine the first semester of first year students and how it impacts their social identity.

Investigator(s)

This study is being conducted by Niesha C. Douglas, a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education under the supervising faculty advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. Lisa R. Merriweather.

Eligibility

Eligibility consists of being a first year student recruited based on the following criteria:

- Must be considered a First Year Student by admissions office;
- Enrolled at UNC-Charlotte and currently in your second semester.
- Must be living on campus and between the ages of 18 and 19
- Must be considered a full-time student enrolled in at least 12 credit hours

Overall Description of Participation

You will participate in one interview which will take no more than 2 hours and a follow up interview if necessary which will take no more than 1 hour. You will be provided the opportunity to review the transcript from your interview. Interviews will occur on campus at an agreed upon location with the participants and can be face-to-face or over the telephone. The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for use in the data analysis process.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

There is minimal psychological risk as participants respond to questions regarding their graduate school experience. Discussing personal experiences may bring up some upsetting feelings that are unforeseen.

This study will be as confidential as possible. The confidentiality form will be reviewed carefully and allowing time for participant questions. Participation is voluntary and

participants can withdraw at any time. Any information that participants do not wish to share will not be disclosed.

This knowledge will be used to have an impact on institutional practices and is beneficial toward policy and program development for key institutional stakeholders, and relative to funding and retention practices of First Year Students. This research provides for strategic mechanisms for enriching the academic timeline in which a student is enrolled by improving the support infrastructure needed for persistence and success. Research that can enhance the success of the first year is critical to enhancing to overall academic missions of the university.

Volunteer Statement

You are a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. If you decide to be in the study, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to participate in the study or if you stop once you have started. Participation is completely voluntary and a \$10.00 gift card from a selected retail store will be given to those who complete interviews.

Confidentiality Statement

Any information about your participation, including your identity, is confidential. The following steps will be taken to ensure this confidentiality. Participant names will be changed to assure confidentiality and anonymity. Niesha Douglas will manage all student interview data. Any identifiable information will be removed from each interview transcript during the transcription process use pseudonyms (fictitious names) instead. No references will made in oral or written reports, which could link you to this study. Use of direct quotes from interviews will not include your identity. The expected number of student interviewees recruited for this research is fifteen.

It is planned that all records of this study, including interview files and audio files, will not be kept beyond three years after completion of this study.

Statement of Fair Treatment and Respect

UNC Charlotte wants to make sure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. Contact the university's Research Compliance Office (704-687-1871) if you have questions about how you are treated as a study participant. If you have any questions about the actual project or study, please contact Niesha Douglas, ndougl2@uncc.edu or Dr. Lisa R. Merriweather, Dissertation Advisor, lmerriwe@uncc.edu.

Approval Date:

This form was approved for use on of IRB approval.

Participant Consent

I have read the information in this consent form. I have had the chance to ask questions about this study, and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age, and I agree to participate in this research project. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form, after it has been signed by me and the principal investigator of this research study.

(Signature of Interviewee)

(Printed name of Interviewee)

(Date)

(Signature of Interviewer)

(Printed name of Interviewer)

(Date)

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your first week on campus.
2. What did/didn't you expect to see?(probing question)
3. Describe your social interaction between you, your peers and the faculty/staff?
4. Did you communicate often with your professors?
5. How did you overcome it? (probing question)
6. Describe what your parents/family are like.
7. How are you paying for school? Financial Aid, Parents, Scholarships?
8. What economic category would you say that your family falls in? Working class, Middle class etc..
9. Did you experience any financial setbacks?(probing questions)
10. How were you able to handle it? (probing questions)
11. How would you describe yourself to a stranger?
12. What ethnicity do you consider yourself?
13. What gender would you consider yourself as?
14. How would your parents/family describe you?
15. How would your friends describe you? (probing questions)
16. Describe some of the challenges that you had to overcome during your first semester.
17. Describe your social network on campus?
18. How did you make friends?
19. Are you involved in any campus organization?
20. How do you budget your money?

21. How would you describe yourself at the beginning your first semester?
22. Describe any new discoveries about yourself and your personality during you first year.

