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## Staying Close to Home: The Significance of Relationships for Immigrant-Origin Local College Students.

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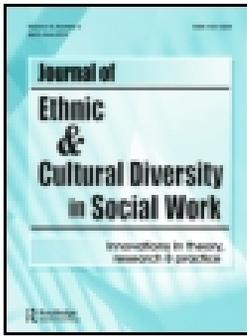
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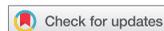


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## Staying close to home: The significance of relationships for immigrant-origin local college students

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### ABSTRACT

For local college students from immigrant backgrounds, entering college involves navigating both existing and new obligations to family, community, and school. This qualitative study describes the relational experiences of 14 immigrant-origin students, alumni of a college preparation program who attended college while living at or near home in New York City. In-depth, semi-structured interviews suggested that supportive relationships with family, peers, and mentors were key to helping students transition to college while maintaining existing ties, while some students also felt torn between their own needs and those of their families. Implications for culturally competent social work practice are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

College students; immigrant families; qualitative research; family obligations; cultural competence

College has traditionally been framed in the United States as an opportunity for students to experience greater independence from their families through leaving home. Yet this emphasis on separation and independence for college students is incongruous for those university students who do not move away from home for school. In particular, it often fails to correspond to the lived experiences of college students from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, for whom family continues to play a prominent role (Fulgini, 2007; Tseng, 2004). Immigrant-origin college students have unique social, emotional, and financial needs (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011; Tseng, 2004), which require social workers with specialized understandings of the unique needs of immigrant populations (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007).

Ethical, culturally competent social work practice requires social workers to be aware of the impact of culture on behavior, attitudes, family roles, and relationships, among many other domains (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015). Pursuing cultural competence includes working to identify and acknowledge values learned in one's family of origin or in mainstream American culture, in order to avoid imposing them unconsciously onto clients (Deweese, 2001). There is a need for research that can help sensitize social workers to

variations in cultural practices and provide support for culturally competent social work practice (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016).

This study sought to explore the relational experiences of immigrant-origin college students who stayed local for college. Rather than seeing college as solely a time for increased independence, this study utilized relational-cultural theory (Jordan, Hartling, & Walker, 2004) to understand the relational growth, conflict, and movement that took place for a group of local college students from immigrant families.

## Literature review

With a few exceptions (e.g., Katsiaficas, Suárez-Orozco, & Dias, 2014), the literature on college students living at home has been based on survey data collected from primarily White, middle-class or upper-middle-class samples of undergraduates. Research suggests that geographic proximity of parents and adult children in college can provide emotional, financial, and practical advantages, as well as tension, conflict, and role confusion (Flanagan, Schulenberg, & Fuligni, 1993; Katsiaficas et al., 2014; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). However, relatively little qualitative literature depicts the lived experiences of immigrant college students living at home and balancing multiple roles of student, worker, family member, and community member.

Studies with immigrant-origin or ethnic minority high school students show that families provide influence, support, and encouragement during the college-choice process (Kim, 2014; Maramba, 2008; Martinez, 2013; Sánchez, Esparza, Colón, & Davis, 2010). However, the influence of the family on college choice is frequently complex and often emotionally conflicted for students, sometimes generating tension as students struggle to reconcile personal academic preferences, parental expectations, and the affordability and proximity of college (Kim, 2014).

One study of Latina/o high school seniors describes the multifaceted role that *familismo* played in their decisions to attend a university close to home (Martinez, 2013). These students described complex feelings around family support, obligation, constraint, and sacrifice, indicating a dynamic worthy of continued exploration with college students.

Once in college, family continues to play a strong role for many immigrant or ethnic minority students (Fuligni, 2007; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Maramba, 2008; Tseng, 2004). Cultural values of interdependence, along with socioeconomic constraint, result in feelings of duty and obligation to support and assist the family, through serving as caregivers, language brokers, and positive role models (Fuligni, 2007; Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2010). Tseng (2004) found that college students from immigrant families spent more time fulfilling family demands than their peers from U.S.-born families, due to their parents' weaker English proficiency, more limited socioeconomic resources, and the youths residing at home.

While many students from immigrant backgrounds are motivated to attend college in order to help their families and honor their parents' struggles (Kim, 2014; Maramba, 2008), some also experience their family obligations as a "double-edged sword," where paid work and other commitments may conflict with academic obligations and contribute additional stress (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Sánchez et al., 2010). A study of young adults from lower-income families found a strong sense of responsibility to support family financially and instrumentally, even as these obligations impacted their own efforts to live independently, pursue intimate relationships, and acquire additional education (Napolitano, 2015). The multiple demands on these young adults' time, including juggling work, school, and family responsibilities, are a significant source of stress (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Sánchez et al., 2010).

First-generation college students may struggle with their parents' lack of familiarity with college-level work, inexperience with American educational customs, and difficulties appreciating the value of extracurricular activities (Maramba, 2008; Teranishi et al., 2011). Parents of first-generation students may struggle to understand the academic and social realities of college, while their peers with college-educated parents may have difficulty relating to these students' complex family and work obligations. Students whose cultural backgrounds prioritize family interdependence and collectivist orientations may experience a cultural disconnect in American postsecondary educational institutions that espouse individualistic values (Katsiaficas et al., 2014; Tseng, 2004). For children of immigrants and other first-generation college students, college can create a tension between the desire to pursue autonomous goals and the desire to support one's family (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Fuligni, 2007; Katsiaficas et al., 2014).

## **Theoretical framework**

Research on the experiences of culturally and economically diverse students suggests a need for greater attention to the significance of interdependence as well as independence during the transition to college. Interdependence is highlighted in relational-cultural theory, a theory which claims healthy interpersonal relationships are as essential for development as individuation, and that maturation and growth take place in relationship, rather than in separation (Jordan et al., 2004). Rather than seeing college as a time solely for separation and greater independence, the current study uses relational-cultural theory as a lens to understand the relational experiences of immigrant-origin students who stay local for college. The following research question guides this analysis: What role do relationships play in helping immigrant-origin local college students adopt a new role in a familiar environment?

## The current study

This study investigated the experiences of 14 immigrant-origin students who attended college locally in New York City. These students were all children of immigrants to the United States; some were born in the United States (second-generation immigrants) while others had immigrated as children or adolescents (1.5-generation immigrants). All had received assistance with applying to college through a college preparation program offered by a local community center in New York City.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 14 current or former local college students (ages 18 to 22) who were either current students or recent graduates of college in New York City. All were alumni of a college preparation program, which provided guidance and support for local high school students, many of whom were the first in their families to attend college in the United States. Of the 14 participants in this study, 10 identified as first-generation U.S. college students, indicating that they would be the first people in their families to obtain a college degree. Half ( $N = 7$ ) attended public four-year universities, while the other seven attended private four-year universities, generally as a result of scholarships they secured with the assistance of the college preparation program. While all participants lived either at home or close to home in New York City, their living arrangements varied: 10 participants lived at home with at least one parent at the time of the interview, three lived in campus residence halls, and one lived in an apartment with roommates. All were children of immigrants who had moved to New York City from various countries in Asia (seven), Latin America (four), Africa (one), the Caribbean (one), and Eastern Europe (one). Eight of the participants were born in the United States and six had immigrated as children. All 14 participants were full-time students while in school, and nine worked part-time jobs between 15 and 25 hours per week in addition to carrying a full course load. Interviews did not explicitly ask about the income levels or socioeconomic status of the students' families; however, several voluntarily described growing up in situations of financial constraint. Please see [Table 1](#) for a description of participants.

### Procedure

Two staff from the college preparation program assisted with recruitment of local alumni for this study, which utilized a purposeful sampling strategy (Padgett, 2008). All interviews were held at the program site. Interviews took

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Immigrant Generation	Ethnicity	First Generation?
Ling	W	2	Asian	Yes
Carlos	M	2	Latino	Yes
Grace	W	2	Asian	Yes
Rose	W	2	Asian	Yes
Salim	M	1	African	Yes
Elsa	W	2	Latina	Yes
Sofia	W	1	Latina	Yes
Arun	M	1	Asian	No
Ana	W	2	Latina	Yes
Emily	W	2	Asian	No
Ahmed	M	1	Asian	Yes
Marissa	W	1	Eastern European	No
Eve	W	2	Asian	Yes
Celeste	W	1	Caribbean	No

place in an empty office or conference room, and were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. All participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form, explaining that their participation in the study was voluntary and that no personal identifying information would be shared with program staff. Participants received a voucher for a free movie ticket as compensation for participating in the interview.

This was an exploratory, qualitative study that drew on in-depth, individual interviews with participants about their experiences as local college students. The use of semi-structured qualitative interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted an average of 60 minutes; saturation was reached after 15 interviews, as no new themes appeared in the interviews. This study was approved by the institutional review board of the first author's university. All names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis of the data followed a multistep, iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the first author, contributing to the first level of immersion and data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each transcript was read several times to note possible themes and generate a code list. Both authors coded the transcripts and met to compare codes and themes. Throughout analysis, the authors used memos to note observations and potential themes (Padgett, 2008). ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software was used for coding and management of data.

Coding followed the approach described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013) of data condensation, data display, and verification. Data condensation consisted of two stages: first-cycle coding and second-cycle coding. During first-

cycle coding, codes were assigned to segments of text communicating either descriptive or symbolic meaning. In second-cycle coding, first-cycle codes were grouped into recurring themes, identifying common patterns and processes across the data (Miles et al., 2013). The thematic analysis cycled back and forth between inductive and theoretical analysis, identifying codes and themes that were grounded in the data, while also interpreting data using prior research and existing theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis indicated the majority of participants interviewed (14 out of 15) to be children of immigrants, whose experiences of staying local for college were strongly tied to relationships with family. Consequently, data were interpreted using relational-cultural theory (Jordan et al., 2004), in order to understand the relational experiences of immigrant-origin students who attended college while residing in a familiar environment.

Potential themes were tested using various theoretical frameworks and were held loosely until their explanatory utility held up under verification in subsequent data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Conceptually clustered matrices allowed the authors to systematically assess the presence and variability of patterns in the data across multiple cases (Miles et al., 2013). In addition to providing support for emerging themes, the matrices allowed for the identification and analysis of negative cases within the data (Padgett, 2008).

Findings were shared with program staff in order to obtain feedback and ensure that findings possessed face validity and situational authenticity (Patton, 2002). Initial findings were also shared with fellow qualitative researchers to provide an opportunity for peer debriefing and to evaluate the theoretical framing of the research findings (Padgett, 2008). Participants were also invited to review initial findings, although none chose to do so. The use of negative case analysis, the iterative analysis of the data using various theoretical frameworks, and multiple analysts all served to enhance the rigor of the study (Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Rigorous qualitative research requires that researchers demonstrate reflexivity, acknowledging the biases, values, and personal perspectives that can influence data collection and analysis (Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2002). This study was conducted against the backdrop of broader American cultural notions about moving away from home for college as a desirable ideal for college students with the means to achieve it. For the first author, a White, middle-class permanent resident of the United States who lived at home as an undergraduate in Canada, personal immigration experiences, as well as interest in the social and cultural expectations associated with home-leaving in the United States, informed the development of the research question. The second author, a middle-class Black American who was encouraged to leave home for college, brought to this study her experiences of navigating college as a racially marginalized student who relied on support from others in order to persist in college. Throughout the research process, the authors made a conscious effort to bracket awareness of personal experiences and broader cultural values in order to understand the participants' experiences in their own

words and on their own terms. At the same time, the authors' prior work experience at this and other urban settings providing services to youths offered valuable contextual information for this study.

## Findings

For the majority of participants, their experiences taking on a new role of college student while maintaining their existing roles as members of their families and communities comprised two broad themes: preserving ties and creating community. Next, each is described in turn.

### *Preserving ties*

For all participants in this study, relationships with family shaped how they adopted a new role of college student while living in a familiar environment. Family ties manifested in three subthemes: obligations to family; tension and conflict; and support and involvement.

### *Obligations to family*

Nine interviewees out of 14 in this study (64%) discussed the support they provide to their immediate and extended families as a significant component of their lives as local college students. They spoke about being available to assist with siblings and household chores, work in the family business, provide translation, or serve as a role model to younger siblings and relatives. Some participants mentioned wanting to be available for family members who were bereaved, disabled, or in need of ongoing support. Carlos described his ability to continue helping his family emotionally and instrumentally as the primary reason for his choice to attend college in New York City. He appreciated being able to pick up items from the store for his mother on his way home from school, or pick up his younger cousin from school. He was also conscious of his role as an example for his younger brother:

I hope he looks up to me, because if he's not, then I'm doing something wrong, because you're always supposed to be an example... I always try to lay the foundation so, you know, he can just finish it up. Always give him that little push, you know?

Like Carlos, Sofia was conscious of her ability to serve as an example for her younger cousins:

They're in middle school, they're not thinking about it yet—but they always tell me, they look at my books and they tell me, "That looks hard." So I tell them, "It's just because you haven't gotten there yet"... Most of my aunts, they're home attendants, almost all of them, and my uncles, almost all of them do construction. So I feel like if I

—if I show success through a college life, they'll be more willing to try it, especially since they don't have nobody else to talk to and their parents won't know.

As the oldest daughter of immigrant parents, Rose talked about her desire to be available for her parents and her younger siblings, a role she has played since childhood:

The thing is, when I was growing up, because I'm the oldest, they relied on me a lot, especially with translations and dealing with stuff like that. And with my little sister.

Grace's parents own a small business and rely heavily on her to assist with translation in all aspects of running the business:

Most of the time, and that's why my service is needed, most of the time when it comes to interacting with other people. Organizing community events in the neighborhood—I'm usually the one who does all the coordinating and planning. Paying the bill! So I read the bill. Contracts—renewing contracts, renewing leases, talking to business partners. My service is important because I speak English and I speak Chinese. I am like the language bridge between the two.

In addition to helping her parents' business, Grace also described obligations to assist members of her extended family and community with succeeding in high school and applying to college.

Ana also spoke about her strong feelings of affection and obligation for her family. She eloquently described the tension that many first-generation college students encounter in the process of applying to college when discussing a cousin who would be applying to college soon:

She also wants to go away for college, but it's not the best option for her because her mom is a single parent, and she also has a little brother. . . I just want to be there to tell her that it's okay to feel, like, kinda torn between going away and staying here, but I think you learn a lot—you learn to be a lot more responsible here, I think.

For several of the participants in this study, the practical and emotional support they continue to provide to their families was a key factor in their decision to stay local for college.

### ***Tension and conflict***

Seven participants (50%) reported that conflicts between their obligations as college students and family members contributed to feelings of disconnection in their family relationships. Several participants discussed how it is difficult for them to get work done at home because of distractions from younger siblings and parents who do not understand the challenges of college-level work. In Sofia's words,

Living with my mom is—she's supportive, but since she didn't go to college, she's not aware of what happens. So, every time I tell her, "I need silence," it's just—she's not really understanding why, and all the stresses in college.

Ling also reported that her mother doesn't understand the extent of her academic workload:

I'm in the library all the time, but she doesn't think that... I leave early in the morning and I don't come back until later in the night, and she's always like, you know, "I don't believe you're going to the library" and stuff like that, and I don't know what I can do—like, should I record my day and give it to her? Because I'm honestly in the library and I don't know what to do. So they don't understand that. But there's nothing I can do about that—maybe over time they'll understand.

Arun said that his parents had trouble understanding why he wanted to join clubs at college, rather than just focusing on his studies: "Yeah, I often find myself—my parents don't understand what clubs are, or what you actually do. And even though I explain it to them, they still don't really get it, you know?" Grace described the tension she feels as a college student with intense familial obligations as though she's "living a double life" that is difficult for both her parents and her college friends to understand:

People don't understand that when you're from an immigrant family, it's very, very overbearing. You have to think about family in every single move that you take. Like, you think, "I want to go study abroad this summer," but it's like, no, someone has to be watching the store, someone has to be making sure Mummy and Daddy's okay, someone has to settle this court case, someone has to translate for Mom and Dad for this interview for this apartment for the projects. Someone has to fill out these applications for your parents, someone needs to go to the dentist with them, to the hospital with them, to the pediatrician with them. It's like, being a translator for the family doesn't mean being a translator, like, you offer your service and that's it. It means you become very, very engaged. It's a full-time job.

Similarly, Ana described her conflicting emotions after leaving an expensive out-of-town university, transferring to a more affordable local college, and returning to live with her family. Her words capture the tension between a college student's desire for independence and the realities of familial and financial obligations:

It was so hard. I was really angry. I felt really resentful, and I don't know—looking back, it's kinda like, I shouldn't have felt that way, but I think I did because, you know, in college when you're away, you have your freedom, you have your own time, and my parents also own a restaurant, so I have to work at their restaurant sometimes. I just felt really pressured and I just felt like I didn't have time for me, and I didn't like that. And I felt, I guess, really selfish, I wanted my own time, I didn't want to share that... it was difficult, I guess because now the real world was, like, in my face. I had to see my parents work, and how tired they were, and before it was just like... "out of sight, out of mind."

These comments reflect the strains that can arise for students from working to balance family obligations, college responsibilities, and the desire for independence.

### ***Family involvement and support***

In myriad ways, families were integrally involved in the transition to college. Participants' eagerness to move away from home varied widely and also fluctuated during the course of their college experiences; however, for the majority of participants ( $N = 9$ ; 64%), family played a major role in their decision about where to attend college. Some participants made an active choice to attend college in New York City as a way to preserve ties and stay connected to family and other obligations. Rose explained:

I wanted to stay close to home with my parents because they don't really speak English and stuff, so I felt like they would need my support. If they needed me, I'd be close by; I'd be an hour away at most.

In addition, the majority of participants in this study ( $N = 10$ ; 71%) discussed the support they received from their parents as crucial to sustaining their college journeys, ranging from home-cooked food to words of support, encouragement, and advice. For these participants, their ties with their families were crucial to their success as college students. For example, Salim described the advice he cherishes from his father:

If I lived away, I knew I wouldn't have someone to talk to, for example. Because I'm the type of person who can't really tell my problems to anyone, just like that. . . . So whenever I have a problem, I would tell him, and he would give me a better way than I would have even saw coming to combat the problem.

Similarly, Marissa identified support from her family as a reason not to leave home for college:

To have someone encouraging you and telling you "You can go through this, you know, you'll laugh about it later, it's fine, you know, just stay strong" . . . I guess it's another reason why I don't regret not going away, because if I went away, you know, you just have to go through that on your own and you don't have that much of encouragement. . . . you don't have that someone who really cares for you and really understands every part of you. So I think that's another way of having it as an advantage.

Other participants mentioned their close relationships with siblings or cousins, especially those who felt their parents were less able to relate to them as college students. Sofia described how supported she felt within her immediate and extended family as a first-generation college student: "I just feel like a lot of my family's proud of me. Every time we're at a family event, everybody asks me about college, and they just express how proud they are of me." For

these college students, the support they received from immediate and extended family was invaluable.

In addition to family ties, financial resources played a major role in these participants' decisions about where to attend school. Half of the participants in this study had initially wanted to move out and live away from home during college, but ended up staying in or returning to the city for school due to financial or familial obligations. Carlos had originally enrolled in a college a few hours outside New York City, but changed his plans the summer before his freshman year:

After I enrolled I decided I wasn't too comfortable leaving home yet. You know, I've always been a family-oriented kind of person. I know it's not too far, but something just told me to stay. And at the time, my mom was also going through a lot of stress, so I figured, you know, "Let's stay in the city; let's help her out."

Two other participants had initially wanted to leave the city for college but were convinced to stay by their parents. Salim described how his parents helped him change his mind:

I mean, at first I did not like the idea of me staying, at all. I did not want to stay, I wanted to go away. But then later on, as my parents explained to me, they gave me good reasons to stay, you know—it was much more than the reasons that I had to leave. And the reason for me leaving was mainly independence, you know, I guess, because I've been with them for so long, but then their reason was the support that they know I'm gonna be missin'.

Marissa also explained that her parents encouraged her, as a recent immigrant to the United States, to stay in New York rather than move to another new location that would require additional adjustment.

In contrast, other participants fervently wished that they could live away from home as college students, but were prevented from doing so by personal or family circumstances. Participants whose parents insisted that they attend college locally expressed resentment that they were not granted a choice in the decision about where they would attend college. Ling described her feelings of frustration about her family's domineering role in her college decision: "I just didn't like—I felt like I was being babied in a way, and I didn't like that. I'm mature enough to make my own choices." Grace described how her parents insisted that she stay local for college, against her own wishes:

It wasn't my decision at first, actually... it was forced on me, to be honest. I wanted to go out of state really badly, but I got a better deal with [local college] and my family needed me around... Because the main reason I didn't want to be in the city was because I wanted to get some independence, I wanted to manage my own time, I didn't want to feel the pressure of familial duty always on top of me.

Grace's experience illustrates the complicated nature of interdependence for some immigrant college students in this study. The complex relational work of preserving family ties led many participants to seek out additional supportive relationships outside the family.

### ***Creating community: Seeking support outside the family***

Participants emphasized the importance of seeking support in managing the challenges of college. A majority of participants in this study referenced the value of both peers ( $N = 10$ ; 71%) and adult mentors ( $N = 9$ ; 64%) in providing support with balancing the multiple roles of student, worker, and family member. Mentors who could offer advice or empathy were particularly significant for those first-generation college students who felt their parents were less available or less well-equipped to assist them with college problems. Ling described herself as not close with her parents, neither of whom speak English, but during the course of a one-hour interview mentioned six different people she actively sought out for support during her first year of college: her sister, her high school college counselor, an upper-year mentor at her school, her school advisor, a professor, and a staff member in the school's diversity office. Similarly, Eve reported that she gets more support from peers than from her parents:

I mean, not so much from my parents because they kinda, they think college is something we should be able to handle. So they don't think we need the support. And my friends? Well, they're going through the same thing, so we're kinda all supporting each other.

In addition to support on campus, eight interviewees (57%) mentioned the value of the support they received from staff at the college preparation program. Alumni appreciated when program staff reached out to them to check in; one said, "Just because we left high school doesn't mean we don't need help." Carlos described how seeking help from one of his mentors at the program helped him cope with feelings of isolation during his first semester at a private university:

It was a rough transition. I kept in touch with [staff] after I graduated high school and I was explaining to him, "You know, first semester's really rough, I feel like I don't fit in—maybe I should transfer." And we talked about it. . . . He said, "Well, let's talk about some ways that maybe you could feel otherwise." He said, "Just put yourself out there." And once second semester came in, I met some people, just made some more friends, started hanging out, started networking. And to this day, I'm glad I didn't transfer—I love it there.

In addition to his supportive relationships with mentors and family members, Carlos also talked about the support he receives from friends at church. Having overcome his own shyness at school, he takes seriously his efforts to

cultivate relationships with others: “I always make sure that I have people, you know, because my philosophy is, everybody needs people.”

Realizing the importance of proactively seeking support for academic and emotional difficulties was a key turning point for participants in this study. In response to a question about whether they experience their school as a “college community,” participants described their efforts to seek out and find their own communities. Celeste described herself as “still in search of that community.” Emily specifically sought out a religious fellowship on her college campus, and explained its appeal in terms of offering relationships as a context for growth:

I feel like I have people I can be vulnerable with. Because that’s what I notice—college is a time when you’re very vulnerable, I feel like there’s so many different emotions and there’s so many things that you experience, but there are people who have been through that or are going through that, and you can help each other grow.

Several interviewees emphasized that their proactive efforts to join campus groups and make new friends at college were crucial to enhancing their college experience, particularly for students living at home with their parents. Arun explained how making connections to peers on campus through clubs was a critical counterweight to his familial obligations:

But I, for my personal growth, I keep my obligations to my clubs, to my friends. . . I realized, having family support is one thing, but what happens when my family goes back to India? Who gives me support then? And I have no, like, cousins or anything here. So for me, it has to come from my friends, and I realized that early on. And so I realized I need to make these bonds and friendships and, you know, have fun and joke around, et cetera, [I] may go on trips, even though my parents are against it, because it’s wasting money, or something like that. But I know that I need to do that, in order so that when my mom does leave, and I’m here by myself, I can rely on people for help.

Marissa identified her ability to proactively seek out opportunities to be a crucial component of her growth in college:

I became more, you know, responsible and more, um, I took more and more initiative, I would say? Before I would just maybe, like, stay on my own and watch, you know, but then, you know, as time went by, I started learning that you have to be the one who takes initiative and you have to seek for assistance, otherwise you might be left out. So I think that has grown as well. And overall as a person I think it has helped me a lot.

Others, like Elsa, found her community off-campus instead: “Every club that I tried to get into, I really didn’t fit it. Really. I couldn’t connect to the people. . . so I decided to find my own community outside.”

The importance of finding community and forming connections with others was highlighted by those participants whose adjustment to college

seemed characterized by disconnection. Rose identified multiple difficulties in her first-year transition, but did not feel close to any of her peers or advisors, and considered the idea of going to counseling “taboo.” She described feeling marginalized on campus as a commuter, explaining, “They say I’m like 50% of the population, but it feels like I’m 5%.” Grace spoke about not wanting to seek assistance from her parents when she was overwhelmed, but not knowing who else to ask for help:

I was getting sick a lot from not sleeping well, being stressed all the time. I didn’t know who to go to. Being in the city, it’s hard because people don’t offer services to you because they think, you’re in the city, you have your parents. But dorming in the city means you have your independence and your parents think you wanted independence. . . . You feel bad going back to your parents—like, you were the one who asked for the independence; why are you coming back to your parents to ask for food to eat?

Ahmed also described himself as struggling to find a supportive community on campus. Speaking about a first-year seminar, he explained: “I knew most of the class, the teachers were really helpful. . . they’d give you advice but uh, you know, they have their own things to do. You can’t always call them up whenever you need it.” Ahmed also reported feeling disappointed in the student mentor assigned to him by his program, but also admitted that he did not disclose his own struggles during his first semester:

They’re student mentors. . . they’re worried about their own studies. And I didn’t find them that helpful, but, like, once in a while, my mentor would contact me, like, “How are things?” I wouldn’t get into detail. I’d be like, “It’s alright.” And she would go, “Okay.”

In this study, the willingness to be vulnerable in new social settings and forge connections with others was vital to successfully navigating the many challenges of college.

## Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the crucial role of relationships with family members, peers, and adult mentors in shaping the experiences of immigrant-origin local college students. Data analysis indicated that the relational experiences of immigrant-origin local college students focused on preserving ties with family and seeking support and community outside the family. For these students, growth was frequently found in relationships with others. The difficulties of navigating independence and interdependence necessitated a willingness to proactively seek out new relationships and support from others.

Findings from this study contribute to the literature on the complex, multi-dimensional role of the family for ethnic minority and immigrant college students. Similar to the students interviewed by Martinez (2013) and Kim

(2014), some of these immigrant-origin students experienced little to no conflict in balancing their own desires and their families' wishes, while others experienced the imposition of family need as a constraint, a sacrifice, or a burden. Echoing Napolitano (2015), many of these young adults felt a clear sense of responsibility to support their families. For these students, college involved a balancing act between increased independence for themselves and ongoing obligations to others. This supports the findings of previous studies on ethnic minority and immigrant-origin college students and the tensions associated with family obligations (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Fuligni, 2007; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Katsiaficas et al., 2014; Maramba, 2008; Sánchez et al., 2010).

This study utilized the theoretical lens of relational-cultural theory (Jordan et al., 2004) to explore how these immigrant-origin local college students balanced both new and existing roles and relationships. For many participants, growth was found in relationships with others. In this study, it was through relationships with others that students learned how to complete college-level work, manage stress, and navigate unfamiliar environments. Participants who were first-generation college students also derived pride from serving as role models for their families. At the same time, they experienced stress when their academic, social, and familial obligations conflicted. In these situations, acknowledging vulnerability and seeking support and assistance from others was crucial. In contrast, those students who described themselves as feeling less connected to others struggled more in college, despite being in a familiar environment. The efforts to preserve existing ties and form new ones at the same time helped students balance the competing demands of independence and interdependence.

For these immigrant-origin students, choosing to stay local for college involved complex relational and cultural negotiations between the expectations of their families and communities and those of their college campuses. In spite of messages suggesting that they should be more independent, most were aware of their need for others, and often sought out informal sources of support from peers, family, and community, rather than institutional supports. This analysis supports the findings from previous studies (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Katsiaficas et al., 2014) that first-generation college students often enter college with different value systems than those espoused by major American universities. These findings highlight the importance of culturally conscious social work practice in working with immigrant youths and families (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Engstrom & Okamura, 2007).

### **Limitations and future research**

As a qualitative study, the results generated from this research are not intended to generalize beyond the specific population from which they were drawn. Future research could overcome the limitations of a single research method,

research site, and population by using multiple methods to explore the perspectives of parents, staff, and program funders, as well as further exploring the intersectional identities of students in terms of legal status, socioeconomic status, or religious identity. Subsequent studies should also be conducted in other geographic locations, to explore the experiences of immigrant-origin local college students in a range of urban and suburban settings. Future research can also explore how urban universities perceive the needs of local students and their families, especially those from immigrant backgrounds.

The students who participated in this study were a purposeful sample selected based on their participation in a college preparation program, and their responsiveness and continued relationships with program staff. As a result, these participants may have been more motivated, responsive, and connected students than those in the larger population of local college students.

### **Implications for social work practice**

Findings from this study contribute to the evidence base on culturally competent social work practice with immigrant youths and families. Qualitative research that provides examples of specific cultural practices and variations in individual experiences, such as this study, can help sensitize social workers to the range of immigrant student experiences and thereby contribute to cultural consciousness (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). The immigrant-origin local college students in this study negotiated often-conflicting expectations from school, family, and peers as they maintained existing relationships and forged new ones. Consonant with a person-in-environment framework, these findings suggest the need for social workers to maintain awareness of the unique and varied relational needs of immigrant-origin local college students (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007), who may be under multiple strains from conflicting obligations, while at the same time deriving tremendous benefit from their continuing closeness to family. Providers working with these young people need to recognize the benefits and the tensions described by these students, and encourage both students and families to develop flexible coping strategies for the transition to college, rather than emphasizing the need to sever ties.

Similarly, these findings remind social workers to be conscious of the assumptions and values that come from family and the broader cultural context, which may clash with the assumptions of another culture—such as the assumption that college is best experienced as a time for increased independence and separation from family (Deweese, 2001; NASW, 2015). Values and assumptions exist at individual, organizational, and systemic levels (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016), and immigrants often experience “cultural collisions” in their interactions with social institutions (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007). Individual social workers seeking to strengthen their cultural consciousness can examine their own assumptions about independence, dependence, and the relationships between young adults

and their immediate and extended families. Organizations that serve immigrant youths and families can similarly interrogate the values, attitudes, and policies that underlie their work with immigrant populations. Agencies can explore the extent to which they emphasize assimilation or accommodation to American culture (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007), as well as their efforts to integrate cultural consciousness into all levels of agency functioning (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). Institutions, including colleges, would do well to recognize students' roles as members of multiple communities, of which college is only one component. These efforts can ensure that providers recognize and support the many communities present in the lives of immigrant-origin students and their families.

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