

# “I would *love* to have these conversations with family”: A Listening Guide exploration of the relational experiences of first-generation students in helping professions

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## Abstract

First-generation students are, by and large, working-class students. While many have focused on their experiences of academic and social integration into college, first-generation students are often just as concerned with remaining integrated in their home communities, reflecting their tendency to value interdependence. This qualitative study explored the relational experiences of first-generation students attempting to share their learning in family conversations. I conducted focus groups with 19 first-generation students enrolled in programs preparing them for the helping professions, particularly social work and teaching. Transcripts were analyzed using the Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 2015). Findings highlighted participants’ struggles to share their learning within their home communities, and varied responses, including self-silencing, being silenced by family, and an emerging sense of relational loss.

## Keywords

first-generation students, social class, Listening Guide, family relationships, helping professions

## Introduction

While framing working-class students on US college campuses as “first-generation” obscures class, it offers greater inclusion to students whose identities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), service workers) sometimes exclude them from dominant constructions of the working-class (white, male, industrial workers) (Linkon, 2018). Indeed, given the prevalence of classism on college campuses in the United States (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Langhout et al., 2009), many students struggle with identifying as working-class (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). Because first-generation students (FGS) are more likely to be low-income and/or low-socioeconomic status (SES) (Bui, 2002; Checkoway, 2018; Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008) their experiences are relevant to working-class studies.

The mystification of class in the first-generation label is unfortunate because completing a postsecondary education<sup>1</sup> often involves socialization into middle-class culture prevalent in academia (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Hurst, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012). That FGS should

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve also used “college” throughout, reflecting the most common way of referencing postsecondary education – that is, any education after publicly-provided primary and secondary education ends (typically at age 18) in the United States. In practice, this includes a dizzying array of public and private, and two- or four-year institutions where students may or may not live on campus, attend full or part time, and may take two, four, or many more years to complete degrees or certificates, or may never complete them.

adapt to college (and not the other way around) is presumed. Researchers focus on FGS' academic and social integration in college (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stuber, 2011). But the process of integrating into college has implications for FGS's family relationships and their ability to *remain* integrated within home communities.

This study explores the relational experiences of 19 FGS in focus group discussions preparing for careers in the helping professions (social work, teaching, and related professions) in a public, four-year university. Slightly more than half (11) of the participants were white, five were Hispanic or Latina/o, and there was one Black/Jamaican, one biracial Native, and one East Asian participant. All but four were women, and the majority of undergraduates (eight of 13) identified as non-traditional, or older than the traditional-aged college student (18-21years). Participants experienced relational distancing between school and home, particularly in conversations about learning. They spoke of silencing themselves, being silenced by family, and relational loss. As Jane Van Galen (2021), who created the *First in Our Families* Digital Story Project, has noted, FGS' own stories about their experiences go largely unheard in a context that celebrates the trajectories of FGS solely in terms of grit, resilience, and ultimately, gratitude for social mobility.

## Literature Review

A foundational study of FGS' relational experiences underscores the assumption that college-going results in separation from family. London (1989) outlined three patterns of "breaking away," with each involving some degree of FGS being sent out as "delegates" to fulfill educational aspirations: being bound to family roles while simultaneously sent out as a delegate, being sent out as a delegate (often to meet a family member's unmet educational aspirations), and experiencing exclusion in their role as a delegate. Themes of separation from family may manifest as the pressure to separate to achieve academic success (Bradbury & Maher, 2009; Lehmann, 2014) or cope with the college transition (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Separation from family was even anticipated in a study of potential FGS, prior to enrollment (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018). Research highlights possible reasons: FGS report higher levels of "family achievement guilt," a sense of guilt over one's educational accomplishments in comparison to family, and Latino FGS report more than white FGS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). FGS feel conflicted by family expectations (McCoy, 2014) or resistance to college (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). FGS report downplaying their student identity or challenges and questions from family about college (Mosier, 2021; Bradbury & Maher, 2009; Orbe, 2004).

But research also highlights the significance of family relationships (Cunningham, 2016; Bradbury & Maher, 2009; Bui, 2002; Covarrubias et al., 2019; Gofen 2009; London, 1989; Orbe, 2004; Stieha, 2010). Family is a source of support (Mosier, 2021; McCoy, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2021), greater than school, teachers, or mentors (Gofen, 2009). FGS report being celebrated as family stars or receiving special treatment (i.e. food, money) (Cunningham, 2016; Orbe, 2004). In addition to receiving family support, many FGS pursue education *for* family, creating a path for others (Bui, 2002; Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Gofen, 2009; Jehangir et al., 2022; O'Shea, 2015) or bringing honor to families and preparing to support them financially (Bui, 2002). Family needs are central to FGS' educational decisions (Bradbury & Maher, 2009), and family relationships are critical to FGS' sense of well-being (McCarron, 2022) and academic success (Gofen, 2009).

The tendency to focus on FGS separating from family, despite literature demonstrating the centrality of family relationships, may arise from the deficit-focused framing of FGS (Gray, 2013; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020), with some (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004) questioning the capacity of

families to support FGS. But it also reflects the dominance of middle-class values in academia (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Hurst, 2010), which emphasize independence and viewing college as a time for self-development (Stephens et al., 2012). In contrast, FGS are more likely to value interdependence (Chang et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2012), often manifested in prioritizing family relationships. Interdependence is central to the working-class value of belonging, which emphasizes relationships over a middle-class sense of “becoming,” a focus on individual achievements (Metzgar, 2021).

As a result, many FGS experience what Rendon (1992) described as “trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds” (p. 56), navigating between middle-class college culture and their largely working-class and/or BIPOC communities. While Hurst (2010) focused on working-class students and didn’t highlight FGS status,<sup>2</sup> she named distinct patterns: Loyalists remained strongly identified with working-class backgrounds, while Renegades assimilated, attributing family’s working-class status to dysfunction. A third group, Double Agents, blended into both working-class and middle-class settings.

A handful of studies focus on FGS and family communication. Among first-year students, there was no difference between FGS and continuing generation students in communication frequency (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017), but FGS have fewer conversations about college (Covarrubias et al., 2018). In both studies, families offered emotional support in the absence of academic advice. Others explore indirect impacts, such as the “memorable messages” of remembering, focusing, and counting on family, not worrying, and setting an example (Wang, 2014) or “cautionary tales,” that frame education not as separation from family, but an intergenerational story of social mobility where low-income FGS build college careers on the sacrifices (not failures) of previous generations (Rondini, 2018).

These studies often focus on academic outcomes, such as academic self-concepts or grades. But conversations are also a potential site for exploring family relationships. A study of first-in-family (first-generation) Australian students revealed that students became “cultural change agents within the household,” encouraging family participation in higher education, leading to subtle shifts in family habitus (O’Shea, 2015, p. 152). Lee and Kramer (2018) noted that “conflicts between home and college habitus are most clearly expressed in interaction, particularly conversation” (p. 89). The low-SES FGS attending selective institutions in their study feared being revealed as “snobs” in family conversations (p. 89).

Most research on FGS in the United States has focused on the relatively small proportion of FGS who attend selective, disproportionately private institutions, while the vast majority of FGS are attending community colleges (Rondini et al., 2018) or less selective institutions (Redford & Mulvaney-Hoyer, 2017). FGS in this study were attending a public, four-year “access”<sup>3</sup> institution, where many students transfer from community college. They were preparing for careers in the helping professions (social work, teaching, and related professions), fields with calls for increasing racial and ethnic diversity (Cassestevens et al., 2012; US Dept of Education, 2016), where attention to class(ism) is limited (Liu, 2011). This exploration of FGS attempting family conversations highlights the relational work – and losses – they experience in becoming members of the helping professions (i.e., social workers, teachers, and related professions)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Although notably, all but one of the students she interviewed were first-generation.

<sup>3</sup> “Access” is a term university leaders use colloquially, but also accurately, as this university is among the roughly two-thirds of degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States that accept three-quarters or more of applicants (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; US News and World Report, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> One may question whether these occupations move students into the middle class, given their relatively low pay in the US. Here I’m influenced by Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s (1977) identification of teachers and social workers as members of

## Theoretical Framework

I followed Orbe's (2008) recommendation that one form of standpoint feminisms, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990) is particularly applicable to FGS. Collins proposed a multifaceted conceptualization of power: it is both dialectical and group based, as well as subjective and responsive to individual agency and resistance. FGS experience the dialectical nature of power when they are constructed as outsiders in college (Orbe, 2008). But FGS also vary in experiences of being impacted by, resisting, or enacting domination, with students who hold more dominant identities (e.g., white, male, traditional-aged, and others) being more likely to disavow the importance of being first-generation (Orbe, 2004; Stuber, 2011). Because I anticipated students' experiences of being first-generation would differ, I wanted an approach sensitive to identity, particularly gender, race, and class, although citizenship and regional identities were also salient.

My approach was also guided by feminist post-modernism, which challenges objectivity, positioning research as inherently subjective (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). This allowed me to attend to relationships among participants, and between the researcher and the topic. My emphasis on relationships was shaped by Gergen's (2009) construction of relational being, and his argument that identities are not individual constructions, but arise from and within relationships. Gergen argued that "remaining intelligible within relationships" with others, from family to strangers on the street, was the glue that "holds civilization together" (p. 140). In other words, our appearances, behaviors, and – as these participants' experiences showed – topics of conversation and the ways we conduct conversation are shaped by people around us. We remain intelligible when those appearances, behaviors, and conversation match what might be expected of us in a given context. The concept of relational being led me to center the relational experiences of FGS preparing for the helping professions. How would students in the helping professions "remain intelligible" within family relationships?

## Researcher Positionality

As a fellow first-generation student, I am familiar with relational distancing. I remind myself often that I am doing work my ancestors never dreamed possible. As a white and working-class student whose arrival at a university was delayed until I was a 30-year-old mother of teens, the academic challenges of completing a college degree paled in comparison to the relational work of maintaining a sense of coherence in family relationships. As an instructor in one of the undergraduate programs we drew participants from, I felt complicit in participants' struggles to articulate what it meant to be first-generation or working-class, something which no doubt reflected my own insecurities as a working-class academic. These explorations of conversations arose from the frustrations and growing sense of isolation among participants. But the struggles to know and be known in conversations with family are also close to my heart.

## Method

These data were drawn from a dissertation of the relational worlds of first-generation college students and the impacts on their socialization into the helping professions (i.e., social work, teaching, and related

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the professional managerial class (PMC), given their role in social reproduction and control, while also recognizing the general collapse of the PMC (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 2013). Most important, though, is the sense of transformation participants expressed that suggested class mobility was a part of their educations (whether desired or not).

fields) (Cunningham, 2016). The research question that guided this study was how do first-generation students in a school of social work describe their relational worlds?

### *Study context and participants*

I conducted focus groups at an urban, public university in the Pacific Northwestern United States. Participants were students in two undergraduate programs (social work (BSW) and an interdisciplinary liberal arts and professional degree (Child and Family Studies (CFS)) and one graduate (social work (MSW)) program.

Following ethical approval by our institution's review board, I used emails, flyers, and in-class announcements to recruit potential participants. In-class announcements were helpful as many students didn't realize they were first-generation. Students were eligible if they had no primary caregiver who had completed a bachelor's degree. Forty students indicated interest, and 19 participated in one of six focus groups (two participants completed individual interviews when other focus group attendees did not show). Participants selected pseudonyms and self-identified their race, ethnicity, sex, and class, as well as other salient aspects of identity. I used participant's own terms as descriptors (i.e., Hispanic, rather than defaulting to Latina/o/x/e, or Native, rather than Indigenous or First Nations). See Table 1 for participant demographic information.

**Table 1**

#### *Participant demographic information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Major</b>
Jayne	European	female	lower-middle	BSW
Veronica	Hispanic	female	none listed	BSW
Arturo	Hispanic/Latino	male	working-class	BSW
Juli	white	female	lower-middle	BSW
Maria	Latina	female	working-class	BSW
Amber	white	female	working-class	CFS
Davis	white	male	low income	CFS
Lizette	Hispanic	female	working-class	CFS
Tara	white	female	working-class	CFS
Amy	white	female	lower-middle	CFS
Bob	Latino	male	working-class	CFS
Brandi	Black/Jamaican	female	working-class	CFS
Lauren	white	female	lower class	CFS
Clara	white	female	lower-middle	MSW
Michelle	white	female	working-class	MSW
Nancy	white	female	working-class	MSW
Dave	white	male	working-class	MSW
Jaclyn	Native/Biracial	female	working poor	MSW
Lainey	East Asian	female	lower middle	MSW

### *Data collection*

Because little was known about the relational experiences of FGS in helping professions, I followed David Morgan's (2011, personal communication) recommendation to use a low-structured, open funnel

interview format. Broad opening questions invited each participant in before narrowing the focus. Key questions included the salience of student identity with family, experiences of a cultural distance between home and school, and how family voices and aspects of students' identities (i.e., race, class, gender, and other aspects of identity) influenced relational experiences. Focus groups lasted from approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed. This paper focuses on the topic most eagerly embraced by participants: experiences of relational distance from home communities which arose within conversations. While I did not directly pose questions about conversations, the challenges of talking with family about learning came up in each focus group or interview.

### ***Data Analysis***

I followed the Listening Guide, a voice-centered relational method of analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 2015) that outlines several readings, or "listenings" of a transcript. Each listening involves reading transcripts with a specific focus while listening to the audio recording. The first attends to *who is speaking* and focuses on plot, metaphors, and inconsistencies, as well as researcher responses: closeness, discomfort, confusion, or other reactions. The second asks *in what body*, and directs attention to the voice of the self, particularly passages with first-person references. Given the tendency for FGS to exhibit interdependent values of the working-class (Stephens et al, 2011), I read transcripts with an eye for FGS to locate themselves in the collective "we" or "us." The first two listenings allowed me to establish relationships with speakers and hear how they described themselves.

In the third (*telling what stories about relationships*) and fourth (*in what cultural and societal frameworks*) listenings Brown and Gilligan (1992) asked how speakers describe relationships. The third attends to relationships that support authentic engagement, and the fourth notes how speakers locate themselves within political, cultural, and historical contexts. Brown and Gilligan (1992) invited researchers to be *resisting* listeners, attending to silence. I noted silence, pauses, or laughter. Given the significance of family relationships, and the struggles emerging in conversations about their learning, the Listening Guide allowed me to remain open to participant voices longer, highlighting contradictory and competing voices (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

### ***Limitations***

This study was limited by the use of single focus groups. Ideally, a repeated focus group design would have allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences over time, as this appeared to be a topic that most participants hadn't considered as part of their education. Indeed, for many participants it was the first time relating to peers on the basis of being first-generation. To address this, I held member-checking sessions in the term following data collection. I used a PowerPoint to flesh out preliminary themes and offered detailed handouts, which included participant quotes. While I was interested in their "check" on analysis, I was also invested in creating a chance for them to experience what I had: the comfort of hearing from others with shared experiences, of realizing they were not alone. This study was also limited by the small numbers of non-Latinx or Hispanic people of color, which is reflective of the larger student body.

### **Findings**

The most critical aspect of participants' relational worlds was the degree to which they were able to remain connected to home communities, particularly family. They experienced relational distance most pointedly in conversations. A theme of "conversations we can't have" emerged in every focus group or

interview. Participants struggled most in conversations with their families about social justice, privilege, and oppression, topics that arose frequently in their studies, but some experienced resistance to any conversations about their learning.

While the salience of their first-generation identities varied when they were at school—some found it meaningful, some did not—*all* participants described their student identities as impacting relationships within home communities. These impacts were most obvious in conversations – or the conversations they attempted to have – with family. Neither the topics they wanted to discuss nor the approaches they’d learned in classroom conversations seemed well-suited to conversations with family. As such, their conversational struggles were a unifying experience among FGS from very different backgrounds. These interactions between Arturo, a non-traditional aged Hispanic man, and Juli, a traditional-aged white woman, offer one example. Throughout, Arturo confidently directed conversation, sharing stories and asking Juli what she thought. Juli hesitated and dropped her words mid-sentence when Arturo spoke. Their sole shared experience seemed to be struggling in family conversations about their learning. (Transcription notes are italicized and bracketed within excerpts).

**Arturo:** and now they [brothers] said that I talk differently. And then — ‘cause my ideas are different...they tell me about family problems and I don’t even relate to it or...so I can’t avoid it.

**Juli:** And going off that, I think language is different for an educated person versus somebody who doesn’t have the same education. Sometimes when I’m talking to my family about social justice, or...like oppression and privilege, they’re like, “I have no idea what you’re talking about” – [*abrupt pause*]

**Arturo:** -- That’s very true what Juli said about... this language, which is about social justice and your own community and groups and the whole social work language.... you know, I have tried to put myself on the same level as my brothers now... I can’t get anymore...I – because being a member of a minority group, most of my life have been oppressed. And I was kind of unconscious of that. So, I understand when I talk with my brother or people...they don’t know much about this stuff. And I’m thinking, “it was probably better, it was better not to know anything...” [*trailing off*].

**Interviewer:** You’re thinking, Arturo, maybe my family is better that way, better not knowing?

**Arturo:** [*5 second pause*] No, I don’t...I tried to tell them, I would like to not tell them. But I think it’s one of my...jobs...to educate people so they can have a conscience?

Here, two undergraduate social work students with divergent experiences connected in struggles to share learning with family: social justice, privilege, and oppression formed conceptual language barriers that stymied family conversations. Arturo referred to himself as a “working-class citizen” and understood first-generation status as an added dimension of marginalization. Familiar with classism, racism, and the nativism directed towards Hispanic people (thus the need to emphasize his citizenship status), he’d found community in the campus diversity and multicultural services. But his pauses and questions suggested a moment of uncertainty. In contrast, Juli was still figuring out what it meant to be first-generation, and was unsure about her class background, initially calling herself “lower-middle class,” but later making references to growing up “super, super poor.” Perhaps out of awareness of her privilege as a white person, Juli yielded, creating space for Arturo’s narrative. But another interpretation highlights the gendered dynamics, which allowed Arturo confidence in directing the conversation and reinforced Juli’s silence. Arturo and Juli’s words challenge any notion that FGS experiences are universal: age, gender, race, and class (and accordingly, ageism, sexism, racism, and classism, or perhaps more accurately, class

consciousness) powerfully influenced their interpretations of their first-generation status. But both felt a growing relational distance with family emerging in conversations about their learning.

Arturo summed up their transformations:

**Arturo:** So, we change. So, you adapt to the culture [of school] ...So now that's what people acknowledge to you...like when my family say, "You look...you sound different," you know? "You write different." Or the letters I send to my mother. It's not the same writing. We change...too much, too much.

Participants varied in how they responded to these struggles: some chose to self-silence and others attempted to share their learning. Below I'll explore their responses, and the relational implications.

### **Self-silencing**

Participants were attentive to the social mobility a degree might promise, and sensitive to the possibility of replicating unequal power relationships with family. As a result, many chose to remain silent about their learning in conversations with family, even when they were also experiencing a profound sense of personal transformation. Sometimes they pointed to geographic distance contributing to relational distance. Bob, a working-class Latino and non-traditional CFS student, was planning to pursue a graduate degree in education and become a teacher. Here, Bob was planning a trip home to the South, and talked about plans to self-edit:

**Bob:** ...a lot of the ideas I got from college...just like a general philosophy, like feminism or all those ideas, are not going to be the thing that people want to hear there.... everything that they'll take from me I'm sure will be like, criticized... All the things I bring to the table may seem...either pretentious, or like I'm talking down to them, or like I'm not going to be at the same...pace as them. I think they're anticipating that, like when I come and see them...I'll come in with all these ideas and be like, very liberal -- and they're like, "we don't care!" [*laughs*]...

**Interviewer:** You said specifically, like feminist ideals and things like that, yes?

**Bob:** Yeah, the other day I was talking to my friend on the phone and they were using words that – I wouldn't use, at all, but I just had to be like...if I were even to complain about that, they'd be like, "Oh, like who do you think you are?" I'm just going to have to accept, and not try to be that person to come in and rescue them from their Southern, like, backwards ways. It's not my position.

Bob's anticipation of this visit highlighted potential conflicts: feminist philosophy would likely be seen as pretentious, too liberal, or "talking down." In this passage we also see the salience of regional stereotypes and perceived political values: Bob was studying in a city that was gaining national recognition for its "liberal" orientation, contrasted here with stereotypes about "backwards" Southern ways.

Similarly, Amy, another non-traditional CFS student planning to become a teacher, spoke about semi-annual family visits in the Midwest and being torn between her desire to share her learning and keep peace:

**Amy:** I actually have some interesting things to talk about — [*laughs*] — now, you know? Rather than just what I did last weekend... School is definitely — I was already sort of ...liberal-leaning and sort of socialist leaning, but this program [*laughs*] has just made that so much more intense, because I'm more informed now and I feel more strongly about that. And so, my family's not — my family is very conservative...they're very conservative in their thoughts and opinions. So, when I go home to visit...sometimes I wonder, is it even worth it to bring up these things? Because I have so little time to actually spend with them. Do I really want it to be, like, you know...conflicting, conflictual-like dialogue, like arguments, like not really arguments, but just sort of intense conversations, and so I sometimes sort of avoid talking about some of the things I learn at school with my family? Even though, I mean, they're super supportive and super stoked I'm in school, but...I don't know...I'm like, "Oh, I don't even want to talk about it." [*laughs*]

Similar to Bob, Amy suspected her learning would provoke conflict. She backpedals in her descriptions of (potential) family conflict: "conflicting," "conflictual-like dialogue," "arguments," "not really arguments," finally landing on "intense conversations." As Amy noted, she already felt politically different, but her learning exacerbated this divide. Her frequent pauses and laughter indicated discomfort, or ideas difficult to articulate.

But the experience of choosing to self-silence was not limited to FGS who lived far from family and had less frequent contact. Here Lauren, a white lower-class student who lived near family, echoed Amy's desires to talk, and her own self-silencing:

**Lauren:** ...I would *love* to have the conversations we have, like in Law and Policy [a required course]. I love it, it's so interesting. I come from a very conservative family. It's like *everything* we talk about is so on the other spectrum, and I think it's fascinating, 'cause I wasn't taught all that, and it's completely eye-opening. I would love to bring it up to my dad, but I know...shit would hit the fan. He would like, destroy me, bring down whatever I'm trying to say, cause he's like, his way or the highway.

**Amy:** But you have facts and figures to go with it!

**Lauren:** Yeah, all my — no --

**Amy:** -- just, like, sift through your notes while you're having a conversation.

**Lauren:** I'm tempted to do that...it would be fun...but it would be dangerous as well.

Similar to other participants, Lauren was certain sharing her learning with family would be futile, and potentially "dangerous." Although she had just explained why she opted to self-silence, Amy encouraged Lauren to talk, suggesting she use class notes to support her arguments. Lauren's words highlight the gendered silencing that is often a part of family relationships in a patriarchal society: "he would destroy me, bring down whatever I had to say." The response of choosing to self-silence entirely was more common among participants in undergraduate (BSW and CFS) programs, but all participants reported some level of self-silencing when sharing their learning with family.

### **Being silenced by family**

While all students were sensitive to the changing power dynamics in family relationships that arose in conversations, some chose to forge ahead, but faced silencing from family. Silencing appeared in a range of responses, including indirect responses (e.g., sighs), dismissal, talking over students, and less frequently, being pointedly asked not to discuss school. Many FGS were inspired by classroom

conversations about social justice issues (many of which felt relevant to their lived experiences as BIPOC, working-class, and/or non-traditional students). They were eager to replicate these conversations with families, and often surprised by family resistance.

As noted above, MSW students were more likely to attempt conversations with family. Clara, a white lower-middle class MSW student, contrasted her experiences with conversations in the classroom and those with family:

I can say a lot of things here [in school] and I can generally feel like I'm understood, or at least I'll get some clarifying questions. But I can say the same thing at home and get, like, a weird look, or a concerning look, of just some clarifying questions that are like, "Wow. We are *totally* not on the same page."

Clara shared a story that highlighted the role geographic distance might play, about a recent trip to visit family in the Midwest. She described a tense ride home from the airport, being lectured by her uncle, a retired police officer, who took offense at her support for Black Lives Matter. But the focus group conversation also highlighted how common Clara's experience was, when she said, "I've definitely made the mistake of saying something I thought was pretty neutral," and was met with laughter (suggesting she was not alone). "I have to be more intentional," she concluded. "I don't have as much time for slipping or messing up when I'm around family, 'cause it's limited time."

But once again, conversational struggles were not limited to participants with infrequent family contact. Lainey, a working-class MSW who emigrated from China as a child, was living with her parents. She described how they reacted when she interrupted their biases about other people of color or unhoused people, a tendency she attributed to their own struggles as immigrants:

.... moving here from another country and to have to make a living for yourself, they survived a lot...they have a certain concept about who they [other people of color and unhoused people] must be. Mostly stemming from survival and fear. And so, when I tell them, ..." Really?" [*raises one eyebrow, skeptical tone, laughs*] ...I push back...it may not always be well received.

While participants were learning to respect a diversity of opinions, it's generally not acceptable for students in helping professions to express overt biases. FGS embraced the anti-bias values central to their emerging professional identities as part of their entire identities, including the parts they shared with family. Participants often felt the need to interrupt their family member's biases when they emerged in conversations, but struggled with this process.

FGS who shared their learning with family were sometimes silenced by dismissals of their learning. Jaclyn, a biracial Native MSW student who identified as working poor, shared her experiences:

...some of the things I've brought home and talked about, they just don't understand.... I did a report...on [local agency serving sexually exploited minors] and was showing videos and explaining the interviews I got to conduct, and my dad was just like, "That stuff doesn't happen." ...I've learned that I just can't have conversations with them, because .... they're not gonna process it...it probably [*laughs quietly*] is just a waste of my time.

Jaclyn continued to attempt conversations, particularly with her mother, but felt her parents were “pretty naïve to what’s going on in the world.” Perhaps the content of her conversation (the experiences of sexually exploited minors) *was* too much to process. Another MSW student, Dave, pointed to the difficulties working-class families might face in engaging with conversations about student learning, “their interests are in surviving, and paying their bills on time, and having enough food...” Dave recalled an offhand comment his father had made years before, when he was earning his bachelor’s degree: “I can see *you’ve* been to college.”

Family silencing, although often indirect, sometimes formed a pattern. Maria, a BSW and working-class Latina, frequently referred to a term her mother and sisters would use when she brought up school:

**Maria:** ...they’re like, “Oh, you know – her social work stuff.” ...I’m learning about all these things: policies and macro-level work, and all this great stuff that I totally love! But when I go home, of course, you know, I’m very close to my family so I want to share... and I’m trying to explain or share white privilege or oppression they’re like, “Okay...so what?” ... maybe I throw too much at them at once so it’s like, “You know, Maria...” they probably block me out and that’s probably my fault. But I wanna have these conversations... like gender roles or the lobbying for immigration reform I did in Washington D.C.... So, when I bring back all these things and I tell my family about it, that’s when they’re like, “Oh Maria. Oh, her ‘social work’ stuff.” [*rolls her eyes and sighs*].

Notice Maria’s questioning of herself: “Maybe I throw too much at them.” She repeated the familial refrain about her “social work stuff” often, each time stiffening her body or rolling her eyes, as if to invoke her mother and sister’s reactions, who seemed at turns bored, exasperated, or put off by Maria’s ongoing attempts at conversation. Maria highlighted the additional complication of language, “When I go home, it’s in Spanish—everything changes in the language, you know?” She persisted, translating her learning into Spanish and continuing to attempt conversations, a strong testament to the significance of these relationships.

Some conversational struggles participants encountered seemed specifically related to their learning in a school of social work. Women (but not men) in each program reported being asked if they were going to “take people’s children away.” A social work student noted that she was afraid of “becoming a social worker” to some of her “more dysfunctional” family members, someone who would surveil and pose a threat. Another student was rebuffed by family after explaining that she would not be qualified to offer therapy to a family member struggling with addiction. Participants seemed attuned to this, and attempted conversations with topics that seemed more neutral. Maria was completing a field placement where she had learned about child development, a topic she’d anticipated was more acceptable, but met resistance. Maria reported, “when I bring up these new ideas, that’s when they’re like, “Oh, here she comes again. Oh, Maria and her theories — Maria and her social work stuff.”

Less frequently, participants were explicitly asked not to speak about school. Nancy, a white working-class MSW student, noted the few family relationships where she could share her learning, such as with her mother. But she described considerable silencing from family, saying “my stepbrother calls me a commie...and my stepsister has told me, they don’t want their kids to hear my liberalism...” To keep the peace, Nancy’s mother asked her to refrain from any more conversations about her learning with her siblings.

***Be(com)ing Unknown to family: Relational loss***

Whether participants chose to self-silence or were silenced by family, being unable to engage in conversations about their learning had relational implications. As they grew in their identifications with the helping professions—particularly social work and teaching—participants often expressed a profound sense of transformation. Many were excited by the person they were becoming. But they also recognized the loss that arose from not being able to share themselves fully with family.

Another example comes from Lauren, whose voice was shared earlier. “I would *love* to have these conversations with family,” Lauren proclaimed. She began with a sense of energy and inspiration—like others, she felt compelled by her learning. But while imagining a conversation with her father, her energy shifted:

**Lauren:** It sucks because the stuff we’re learning, I love it. It’s part of me. And I feel like if I can’t share part of me with my family...they kind of don’t know me, and I don’t like that... [*pauses...notable decrease in group banter and laughter as participants grow quiet*] ...I feel like at least at work and at school, I see people every day so they know me. I feel like they know me better than my parents and sister know me, and I don’t like that...So that’s — it’s hard to be open, but... [*5 second pause*] is that good? [*asking group and interviewer, quietly*]

**Bob:** Yes [*also quietly*].

The Listening Guide opened up this passage in analysis, forcing me to attend to the sudden emotional shift. Moments earlier the group had been laughing, imagining Lauren thumbing through notes and engaging in a heated political debate. The sudden quiet in the room suggested we’d encountered a painful truth about being first-generation: sometimes, the process of learning which might make you feel more fully yourself will simultaneously distance you from people you love most. In this passage, Lauren revealed tensions between school and family: each was central to her self-definition and yet they were at odds. Lauren was being transformed by her learning: “it’s part of me.” But in the process, she was also encountering relational loss.

In another conversation, MSW students took turns describing what it felt like to be unable to express themselves fully to family. Clara, the Black Lives Matter protestor quoted earlier, described feeling isolated, and misunderstood by family. Another participant, Nancy, responded:

The word that was coming up for me was disconnected...especially with my siblings. I don’t feel a connection with them around a lot of things, because I do have that different perspective, from being in social work specifically. But also, I feel like they don’t necessarily see me the same as they did before, before we all kind of picked our future routes and so we just don’t connect about the same things we used to.

Here, each woman took turns describing what it felt like to be unable to speak freely with family. Their conversations were limited for different reasons: Clara’s family was concerned about her safety while Nancy’s had expressly asked her to not speak about her learning. As they listened to each other, there was relief at being able to articulate a loss that was not acknowledged.

Relational loss poses a heavy cost, even for students excited by transformation. It surprised participants, leaving many feeling adrift. In closing, I’ll return to Arturo, one of several participants who located

himself in the collective “we” or “us” almost as often as the first-person singular pronoun. As an older Latino, he had anticipated feeling “other” in school. But he was shocked by changes in family relationships, asking pointedly, “Where do I belong now?”

## Discussion and Conclusion

These findings build upon literature on FGS familial interdependence (Chang et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2012) by focusing on conversations with family as a site for understanding relational experiences. Unlike the majority of research with FGS, which focuses on the small numbers of FGS in more selective institutions (Rondini et al., 2018), this study provided a glimpse into the relational lives of FGS in a less selective institution. These participants attended an urban, public four-year university with relatively large proportions of FGS. And yet their fears about family conversations were not all that different from the low-SES FGS attending an elite institution in Lee and Kramer’s (2018) study, who feared that they’d be revealed as “snobs” in conversations with family (p. 89).

And perhaps it was a fear of being “revealed” that led some participants to self-silence in conversations about learning, or for participants who chose to share, an actual “revealing” that prompted family silencing. Participants expressed a sense of transformation, with many embracing their learning, suggesting socialization into helping professions. Lauren described her learning as “part of me,” reflecting a common sentiment among participants. Some, like Amy, had always been a little “liberal-leaning,” and studying in a school of social work strengthened pre-existing views. Others, like Lauren, who came from a “very conservative” family, felt her views changing, and felt more fully herself as a result. Participant’s identification with social justice values, which is part of upholding professional ethics, suggested their integration in school was successful.

But as Hurst (2010) noted, “education has always been a *classing* process” (p. 23) and socialization into helping professions is no exception. The limited attention to class and classism within the helping professions (Liu, 2011), may put FGS at a disadvantage. While the majority identified as working-class or low income, few could speak to the significance of class background, and some students struggled to articulate any class position. Participant’s general sense of transformation, and excitement about their learning, obscured the embedded class assumptions they were taking on in the process of becoming social workers, teachers, and other members of the helping professions. Linkon (2018) noted the tendency for the FGS label to erase class, warning this mystification could “inadvertently push students into middle-class culture” and increase pressure on FGS to excel academically and transform family situations (reflected in the common theme of creating a path for others (Bui, 2002; Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Gofen, 2009; Jehangir et al., 2022; O’Shea, 2015). These students were, largely, being pushed into middle-class culture, and many embraced aspects of the process. Because this “*classing*” process is rarely openly discussed, the burden of integration rested largely on students, who seemed to be struggling in isolation. Even though conversational breakdowns (either self- or family-imposed) were a widely-shared experience, it seemed to be a topic missing from their education. Focus groups allowed participants to realize relational distancing was a shared experience, and not an individual failure, but participants seemed hungry for more discussion on these topics.

These findings highlight the need for greater attention to social class in education into the helping professions. It was striking that some could not locate themselves as people with classed backgrounds in a society with dramatic inequalities, and most could not speak to the significance of class. FGS demonstrated sensitivity to shifting power dynamics in family relationships, but didn’t recognize these as fears of reenacting classist encounters within families. Attention to class must move beyond the

interpersonal/individual to include a structural understanding of class. Given the historical and contemporary relationships between helping professions such as social work and teaching and the largely working-class communities of FGS, it's not surprising participants experienced some family resistance (for example, being asked if they were going to "take people's children away," a fear with roots in the overrepresentation of working-class families in the United States foster system). Participants knew classroom topics were relevant to their families (i.e., white privilege, immigration reform, police brutality). But participants seemed to lack models for having these conversations in a way that resonated within home communities. Most approached conversations with a need to persuade or inform. What seemed to be missing from descriptions of their conversational struggles was the possibility for conversations that explored, questioned, or expressed curiosity about how privilege, oppression, or social justice were relevant or experienced within home communities.

This study highlighted the centrality of sharing one's learning with family as a critical aspect of FGS' relational lives, and the relational struggles and losses they encountered as part of their education into helping professions. Given the values of interdependence among FGS, these relational losses are important to attend to. Rather than "breaking away" from family (London, 1989), these participants' desires for conversations signaled a need for a continued sense of belonging (Metzgar, 2021) within their largely working-class communities.

### Author Bio

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