Emotional Granularity, Coping, and Adjustment in First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCS) who are the first in their family to go to college face unique challenges in their transition and adjustment to college and graduate at significantly lower rates than their non-FGCS peers. Research has shown that emotional health is integral to maintaining overall well-being, which includes both physical and mental health, and in-turn is a useful predictor of individual students' adjustment to university environments (Smidt & Suvak, 2015). It has also been theorized that the ability to, whether verbally or conceptually, characterize emotional experiences with nuance and granularity is correlated with the ability to better overcome adversities. To assess whether emotional granularity may help FGCS retention, we collected the self-narratives of 10 FGCS juniors and seniors about their transition to and through college through in-person interviews. We used a grounded theory approach to code the narratives for emotional granularity (EG), an individual's ability to differentiate between specific states of emotion and coping strategies for negative events. Analysis revealed a correlation between EG and the number of coping strategies utilized, suggesting that institutional efforts that improve the EG of FGCS may help their retention.

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Increasing numbers of first-generation college students (FGCS), students whose parents did not attend a four-year institution, are attending college in hopes of creating a better life for themselves and their families. Higher education enables socioeconomic mobility by enriching students' social networks and providing opportunities for higher paying careers (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Unfortunately, relative to their non-FGCS peers, FGCS have significantly less social and economic capital (i.e., resources gathered through social networks, college knowledge, and financial assistance from families) to draw on while adjusting to and navigating through college (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). For instance, many parents of FGCS who did not attend college are unable to offer specific pieces of advice to ease their children's transition to college. In contrast, drawing on personal experience, parents of non-FGCS can stress the importance of applying for financial aid, asking for help in class or during office hours, utilizing on-campus resources, or proactively searching for financial assistance. FGCS are also often socioeconomically disadvantaged, as their parents do not have a college degree that would make them competitive for higher paying jobs, compared to their non-FGCS peers. As a result, FGCS may spend less hours building new social networks or studying and instead spend their time working to support themselves or even their families. Taken together, the lack of social and economic capital available to FGCS can exacerbate the difficulty of their adjustment to and success in college.

The combination of these unique financial, academic, and social challenges can be overwhelming to FGCS and places them at risk of dropping out in their first two years and never reaching graduation (Ishitani 2006; Tanjula, 2014). FGCS who do not drop out in the first two years still face challenges, as 72.6% of FGCS who remain in college after two years are unable

to graduate from college in four years, while only 57.9% of non-FGCS graduate at . This difference remains even when comparing graduation rates of FGCS and non-FGCS in five and six years after matriculation (Hurtado, Franke, DeAngelo, Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

A growing body of research focuses on improving FGCS retention. Institutional efforts to improve the retention and graduation rates of FGCS have focused on developing programs focused on promoting a sense of belonging and providing academic support to students. More specifically, encouraging FGCS to participate in the mentoring programs offered by the federally funded *Equal Opportunities Program* and, at the university where these data was collected, creating *The First Generation Initiative*, which are both designed to offer academic and social support to FGCS as well as increase their visibility on campus. Unfortunately, research shows continually and significantly lower rates of sense of belonging, higher rates of depression and stress, and lower use of mental health services for FGCS relative to non-FGCS (Stebleton, 2014). While the institutional efforts and programs are far from ineffective, FGCS continue to face at times overwhelming obstacles on their journey through college.

Previous research suggests that well-being, a consistent state of positive emotions, peace, and health, is tied to intrinsically motivated learning and facilitates optimal states of learning (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). Thus, understanding the factors that contribute to the well-being of FGCS and applying this knowledge to institutional strategies to improve FGCS retention has immense potential. Empirical research has shown that emotions, mental states of varying intensity of pleasure or displeasure associated with thoughts, feelings, and behavioral responses; are closely linked to well-being (Smidt & Suvak, 2015). The skillful regulation and expression of one's emotions is necessary to have positive and productive social interactions, as it facilitates effective communication, consideration for others, and appropriate reactions to dangerous or

detrimental situations (Nesse, 2000). A meta-analysis of over five-hundred peer-reviewed articles on happiness and success established that happiness has a causal relationship to both successful outcomes in interpersonal and professional realms. The analysis revealed that happy people seemed more likely to be objectively successful because their happiness facilitated prosocial behavior, positive self-perceptions, and problem-focused coping, i.e., coping strategies that remove or lessen challenges through active engagement in activities and relationships (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Happiness and other positive emotions have also been theorized to contribute to successful life outcomes in the *Broaden-and-Build Theory*, which states that a positive emotion such as contentment can lead to a broadening perspective of the world and self, which facilitates the ability to empathize with others and thereby build social relationships and skills (Fredrickson, 2001).

Skillful regulation and expression of negative emotions also plays a critical role in mental health and well-being. Healthy awareness and expression of negative emotions can motivate people to withdraw, conserve resources, and otherwise avoid harm (Kavanagh, May, & Andrade, 2009), and the ability to acknowledge, rather than suppress, negative emotions has been correlated with increased ability to adopt adaptive strategies, strategies that address the negative situation in a positive and healthy way (i.e. exercise, meditation, building social networks), over maladaptive coping strategies, strategies that are temporary fixes and even harm physical or mental health in the long run (i.e. binge drinking, self-harm) (May, Andrade, Batey, Berry, & Kavanagh, 2010). In other words, people who suppress or attempt to avoid expressing negative emotions are more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as regularly relying on alcohol in response to life events that prompt negative emotions. Suppressed negative emotions may also erupt as hostility and aggression, harming the suppressor and others (Garofalo, Holden,

Zeigler-Hill, & Velotti, 2016). Research suggests that individuals' ability to regulate, express, and acknowledge both positive and negative emotions is critical for developing well-being and increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes in higher education. These studies suggest that improving the well-being and happiness of FGCS may facilitate their transition to college.

The validity of EG as a predictor of academic success can be examined, though not conclusively, with retroactive examination of gender differences in FGCS graduation. Previous research has shown that women tend to pay greater voluntary *and* involuntary attention to emotion than men, and display greater negative emotion differentiation, a concept analogous to emotional granularity (Mankus, Boden, &Thompson, 2016). This may be in part due to socialization, as girls are more likely than boys to be socialized to express and discuss emotions (Chaplin, 2015; Fivush & Buckner, 2000). Gender differences in EG may therefore contribute to the observed gender differences in FGCS's retention, reported by the Office of Undergraduate Retention and the FGCS committee at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2014, which showed that male FGCS had lower graduation rates than female FGCS.

Numerous, and sometimes inconsistent, conceptual models of emotions that have been proposed over the years since the inception of emotion research (Ekman, 2016). Following Darwin (1959), emotions were initially conceptualized by Ekman as universal experiences shared by all humans across cultures; his theory of universal emotions, which includes seven such emotions, has been widely researched and supported cross-culturally (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010). Other prominent models of emotions include the James-Lange and the Canon-Bard theories, which are physiological theories of emotion, and the Schacter-Singer Theory, a cognitive theory of emotion that draws on the former theories (Lang, 1994).

Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett challenged Darwin and Ekman's theory of universal emotions by proposing the theory of constructed emotions, in which emotions are conceptualized as unique experiences formed by an individual's culture as much as the physiological inheritance common to every human being. Barrett argues that the cross-cultural replications of Ekman's initial studies on the universality of emotions were faulty and too confounded by poor methodology. Barrett's theory is based on the observations and studies she carried out to show that different cultures conceptualize emotions differently, and in some cases, do not use or express some of the seven universal emotions (Feldman, 1995). Extending upon this theory, Barrett proposed the concept of emotional granularity (EG) to capture individuals' ability to differentiate between emotions to cognitively label and experience them, an ability very much influenced by how a culture conceptualizes 'emotion' in their distinct tradition. Applying this culture-sensitive paradigm of emotions to design and execute institutional strategies to improve FGCS retention may be especially effective, as FGCS come from diverse background of culture and ethnicity.

High EG, or individuals' ability to put their feelings into words with a high degree of complexity, has been found to be associated with well-being, suggesting that improving EG may also improve well-being, learning outcomes in school, and resiliency (Kashdan, Barrett, & McKnight, 2015). The ability to characterize emotions with nuance may be correlated with the ability to employ diverse and appropriate coping responses to stressful and negative situation. For example, an FGCS with high EG would be able to first characterize specific emotions during their transition to college, such as the nervousness of leaving their families, excitement of moving to a new environment, or the hopefulness for meeting new friends and communities, and muster adaptive coping strategies: such as talking to their families about this change, seeking

advice from older students, or being more proactive in seeking out opportunities for

socialization. In other words, a FGCS with high EG in theory would respond appropriately to

each affective state, conserving mental and emotional resources. In contrast, an FGCS with low

EG may fail to reap the benefits of employing flexible and more finely tuned coping responses to

the situations that provoke the same feelings, because of their inability to characterize, express,

and process these feelings.

In further support of rationalization, EG regarding positive emotions (*positive EG*) has

been linked to the psychological characteristic of resilience, an individual's ability to cope

successfully and bounce back from negative experiences (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004).

People high in EG regarding negative emotions (*negative EG*) have also been found to be less

likely to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as binge drinking, aggression, or self-injurious

behavior in the face of intense distress (Kashdan et al., 2015). This may be because people with

high negative EG are able to differentiate between situations that call for differing levels of

emotional responses and respond more appropriately to each, thereby conserving more emotional

resources than someone who responds with a single emotion to all situations. Taken together,

these findings suggest that improving EG may improve FGCS retention, specifically by

facilitating positive characteristics such as clearly characterizing negative emotions in response

to negative experiences and utilizing adaptive coping strategies in response.

In the present study, we hypothesized that 1) FGCS' with higher EG would utilize more

varied coping strategies than FGCS with lower EG. Second, 2) we hypothesized that EG and the

number of coping strategies would be correlated with better academic performance. Lastly, 3) we

hypothesized gender differences in EG, as men in Western cultures are generally socialized to

hide and suppress their emotions, which results in fewer opportunities to develop their EG relative to women (Chaplin, 2015).

To investigate the relationship between EG, coping strategies, and successful adjustment as measured by GPA, we interviewed 10 junior and senior FGCS regarding their college journeys, focusing on their self-narratives of the 'Ups and Downs' of college. We then coded these interviews for EG and coping strategies. Participants' GPA was collected from the university registrar.

Method

Participants

Ten FGCS participants (4 male, 5 female, and one gender non-conforming; 3 Mexican, 2 Asian, 1 Armenian, African American, Burmese, Caucasian, and Mixed) in their junior or senior year of college were recruited through the psychology research pool. They received course credit for participating in the study.

Procedure

To allow the participant to first reflect on their college journey, participants were first asked to draw a timeline of their lives from their junior year of high school to the present moment in college. Time was represented on the x-axis and high points and low points ranging from -20 to 20 were represented on the y-axis. Participants were asked to map the highs, lows, and turning points in their educational pathways and relationships starting in their junior year in high school and ending with their current quarter in college.

Researchers then conducted interviews ranging from 20 to 60 minutes with the participants using the timelines as points of reference. During the interviews, participants were asked to explain the high points, low points, and turning points they had marked on the grid and

describe their resources and challenges at the university. Interviews were recorded digitally using Garage Band and transcribed verbatim for coding.

Coding

   Positive and Negative EG Because previous studies have also differentiated between positive negative emotional granularity, and positive and negative emotions are thought to contribute to serve different evolutionary functions, emotional granularity was operationalized as the number of different positive or negative emotions mentioned by the participant. A list of 57 emotions from the website 'therapistaid', a website created and maintained by a certified mental health practitioner, was used for initial coding, and additional emotions were coded through discussion between the coders, which included the author of this thesis and his advisor. For each transcript, participants coded the number of different emotions expressed by the FGCS. Each emotion was only counted once as the aim of the study was to measure EG, not total emotional expressivity.

   Coping strategies To ensure that our coding captured the variety of all coping mechanisms that may be used by FGCS, coping mechanisms were operationalized based on the emotion-focused and problem-focused coping model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984); Problem focused coping included strategies that effectively removed or reduced challenges, and emotion-focused coping strategies, included strategies reduced negative emotion in situations when removing the challenge is not immediately feasible. Thus, actions that either directly addressed a problem/obstacle were categorized as a *problem-focused coping strategy*, and actions that focused on improving the mood of the participant in response to a problem/obstacle were categorized as an *emotion-focused coping strategy*.

Cumulative GPA was collected from the university registrar. Participants signed a consent form prior to participation to permit the access of their academic information.

Results

Participants' transcripts were qualitatively coded for the number of positive and negative emotions and problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. The data were analyzed using the statistical analysis software SPSS. As seen in Table 1, the participants expressed an average 9.1 emotions, ranging between 4 and 18. Emotion-focused coping strategies mentioned by the participants averaged to 1.6 and ranged from 0 to 4, where problem-focused coping strategy averaged to 3 and ranged from 0 to 6. Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies combined averaged to 4.6 and ranged from 2 to 10.

As seen in Table 2, a one-tailed correlation test showed that positive EG was significantly correlated with problem focused coping strategies ($r(9) = 0.57$ $p = 0.04$). Negative EG was also significantly correlated with problem focused coping strategies ($r(9) = 0.58$, $p = 0.04$), in addition to total coping strategies ($r(9) = 0.66$, $p = 0.02$). Total EG was significantly correlated with problem focused coping strategies ($r(9) = 0.65$, $p = 0.02$) and total coping strategies ($r(9) = 0.64$, $p = 0.02$).

Contrary to our predictions, GPA was not significantly correlated with positive, negative, or total EG, nor problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies. Also contrary to our predictions, men expressed more emotions on average than women, with an average of 8.8 emotions during their interview compared to the 7.25 emotions expressed by women on average.

Discussion

In line with our first hypothesis, high EG (expressing a variety of emotions) correlated with the number of problem-focused coping strategies, though there was no significant

correlation between EG and emotion-focused coping strategies. This finding suggests that there is indeed correlative relationship between EG and how FGCS cope with challenges during college.

Contrary to our second hypothesis, neither EG nor coping strategies were correlated with GPA. However, there are many possible confounding factors that influenced GPA other than EG and the number of coping strategies, such as different majors, differences in grading schemes of classes, and other extenuating circumstances.

Lastly, contrary to our third hypotheses, men displayed more emotional granularity than women; inverse to previous research showing that women are socialized to be more emotionally expressive than men (REF). Possibly, this finding was due to our decision to only count emotion words once; women tended to repeat the same word or qualify the intensity of the emotion more often than men. For example, Participant 20 utilized the word 'love' in multiples to convey her emotions to the interviewer, and she also marked the intensity of the emotion words through emotional inflection, "Yeah, because that's when I got my, um, job as an RA. And I loved it, loved it, loved it, LOVED it." This interpretation is supported by research by Tannen (2007), who found that women are more likely than men to repeat their emotions and use emotional superlatives or indicators of intensity, such as exclamation points, in their verbal and written dialogues. Thus, in order to examine gender differences in the emotional lives of FGCS, a more nuanced operationalization of emotions may be needed.

A limitation of this study is in the simple operationalization of the constructs. Barrett (2018) operationalized emotional granularity in two dimensions, their valence (positive or negative) and intensity (Smidt & Suvak, 2015). As seen in Participant 20's example above, the

current study's operationalization of emotional granularity did not consider the intensity of the emotion concepts and adding intensity to our coding system is a future direction for research.

Coping strategies were also operationalized simply, and did not differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies for the quantitative analysis for the sake of simplicity. It would be interesting and useful for future research to address whether high EG specifically predicts more adaptive coping strategies, and whether low EG predicts maladaptive coping strategies in FGCS.

While the small sample size allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis of each interview, a larger sample size would have improved the robustness of our findings. A larger sample size would also allow for more robust analysis of ethnic differences that may influence EG, such as emotion concepts unique to certain ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This is especially important considering that most FGCS come from a diverse, multi-ethnic background and may conceptualize emotions in ways for which there are no exact equivalents in mainstream Western culture or the English language (Barrett, 2018). In addition, cultures such as East Asian cultures encourage their members to limit their emotional expression (Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao, 1995). Indeed, the only Asian male participant expressed only 5 distinct emotions compared to the average of 8.8 emotions. Interestingly, cultural practices such as stoicism have been shown to be correlated with depression in Asian-heritage adolescents; researchers have shown Asian American adolescents are less likely to express emotions than other ethnic minority groups in the U.S., which makes it difficult to identify and treat youth who are experiencing mental health challenges (Yeh & Inose, 2002). The concept of 'machismo' in Latinx and Hispanic cultures is also an example of is a sociocultural masculine ideal that values authority, respect, aggression, and dominance. Thus, cultures such as Latinx or East Asian cultures with similar values of

masculinity or gender-neutral values can discourage the expression of emotions, which may be an environment in which development of EG is hindered (Yeh & Inose, 2002; Durik et al., 2006). Thus, it is imperative for future research on how EG may play a role in the success of FGCS in higher education to account for the intersectionality of cultural identities, such as cultures from their ethnic backgrounds and the mainstream American culture.

Despite its limitations, this study serves as an effective pilot study that shows the relationship between EG and coping strategies. The findings suggest that improving EG may increase the variety of coping strategies utilized by FGCS, though whether this affects well-being or academic outcomes remains to be elucidated.

Future Directions & Implications for Institutional Practice

Emotional health is undoubtedly essential to the well-being and success of FGCS. The causal relationship between emotional granularity and successful adjustment to college should be investigated by future researchers by designing and testing interventions aimed at increasing emotional granularity and its association with well-being, academic performance, and persistence towards graduation. Institutional efforts should also focus on destigmatizing seeking help from mental health resources amongst the FGCS community, as FGCS utilize mental health resources at lower rates than non-FGCS (Stebleton et al., 2014). Hence, the ethnic backgrounds of individual FGCS must also be taken into consideration when designing institutional efforts at improving FGCS retention by targeting EG and emotional health, which should be culturally sensitive to maximize efficiency.

Two thematic approaches could prove useful in addressing both FGCS well-being and EG. Allowing FGCS to explore and build their narratives throughout and encouraging mindfulness. Indeed, recent research suggests that people can down-regulate negative emotions

such as sadness and anger by telling narratives that place the events that prompted those emotions in past tense, as well as include positive emotions (Pasupathi et al., 2017). Much of current themes in therapy involve helping the client re-construct harmful or negative self-narratives into positive ones (Neimeyer, 2001). Thus, institutional strategies that acknowledge, explore, and build the self-narratives of FGCS has the potential to improve FGCS well-being, emotional granularity, and likelihood of graduating successfully.

The practice of mindfulness simply directing one's attention to negative emotions without trying to suppress them, has gained an enormous following and popularity in the Western world in the last few years and has been shown to enable positive and adaptive emotion focused coping strategies (Kavanagh et al., 2010). A mindfulness themed intervention could also help FGCS accept and process their negative emotions, which may increase their negative emotional granularity (May et al., 2009; Kashdan et al., 2015). One scenario in which this type of intervention could prove helpful was in the case of one of the Latino males who participated in the study, who turned to drinking alcohol again in order to cope with his grandmother's death; a maladaptive emotion focused coping strategy: "I drink occasionally, but after the death of my grandma I started [binge] drinking again." A mindfulness-based intervention, according to the results of previous research, may have helped him find healthier coping strategies; Indeed, Kavanagh et al. (2009) found that mindfulness regarding negative emotions decreased alcohol use.

FGCS are quickly becoming a major population demographic at universities, making it an urgent issue to understand and support their transition and journey to college. A total of 42% of students that attend the state university in which we collected our data are FGCS; this university has also been designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution because at least 25% of the students

are Latinos. Students that make up the FGCS demographic come from more diverse backgrounds that include other ethnicities than Latinx and Hispanic, however. Thus, increasing inter-cultural emotional granularity, an individual's ability to acknowledge and express emotion concepts from varying cultures, would benefit not only the Latinx and Hispanic students, but also members of ethnic groups who have traditionally not pursued college, such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong students, as well as ethnic groups with relatively low representation, such as Native American and African American students. Institutional efforts should focus on increasing the participation of eligible students from all of these ethnicities in the programs such as *Equal Opportunities Program* and *First Generation Initiative*. In addition, Stebleton et al. (2014) have shown that many of the challenges that FGCS face are emotional in nature. Hence, as the present study shows a correlation between emotional granularity and coping strategies, we suggest that institutional efforts to increase FGCS' emotional granularity may assist in improving their happiness, well-being, and ultimately academic success during their journey to and through college.

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Table 1.

Counts of emotion, coping strategies, and GPA, sorted from lowest to highest counts of total emotional

expression

Participant # (Male/Female)	Positive EG	Negative EG	Total EG	Emotion Focused CS	Problem Focused CS	GPA
059 (Female)	2	2	4	2	0	2.84
041 (Chinese Male)	4	1	5	1	3	3.81
026 (Mexican Male)	2	4	6	2	1	2.56
058 (Female)	3	4	7	2	6	2.75
004 (Asian Female)	3	5	8	0	2	3.25
043 (Burmese Male)	4	4	8	1	2	3.17
020 (African American Female)	6	4	10	3	3	2.83
025 (Armenian Male)	7	3	10	0	3	2.62
042 (Caucasian Male)	9	6	15	1	4	3.83
061 (Guamanian, Hawaiian, and Philipino Non-Gender Binary)	8	10	18	4	6	3.5

Table 2.

One-tailed correlation tests between all constructs.

		Negative Emotional Granularity	Total Emotional Granularity	Problem Focused Coping Strategies	Emotion Focused Coping Strategies	Total Coping Strategies	GPA
Positive Emotional Granularity	R	.566*	.889**	.565*	.146	.479	0.46
	P	.044	.000	.044	.344	.080	0.091
Negative Emotional Granularity	R		.881**	.583*	.509	.664*	0.272
	P		.000	.038	.067	.018	0.224
Total Emotional Granularity	R			.648*	.367	.644*	0.415
	P			.021	.149	.022	0.117
Problem Focused Coping Strategies	R				.362	.898**	0.305
	P				.152	0	0.196
Emotion Focused Coping Strategies	R					0.736**	-0.048
	P					.008	0.448
Total Coping Strategies	R						0.199
	p						0.291

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).