

The Complexity of Cultural Mismatch in Higher Education: Norms Affecting First-Generation College Students' Coping and Help-Seeking Behaviors

Janet Chang
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Shu-wen Wang
Haverford College

Colin Mancini, Brianna McGrath-Mahrer, and Sujey Orama de Jesus
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Objectives: First-generation college students commonly experience financial, academic, and personal challenges that are exacerbated by a cultural mismatch between independent university settings and interdependent family environments. There is a paucity of research on the influence of cultural norms, including cultural mismatch, on first-generation college students' coping and help-seeking behaviors. The present research explored how cultural norms affect coping and help seeking for academic, financial, and psychological problems among diverse first-generation college students. **Method:** Eleven individual interviews were conducted to obtain pilot data, and 8 group interviews ($n = 60$) were conducted to examine cultural norms, relational concerns, coping, and social support. These same 71 participants (51% Ethnic Minority; 49% White; 70% female) completed a background survey (e.g., demographics, use of resources, coping, and family obligation). **Results:** Most students were self-reliant and underutilized social support because of concerns about negatively affecting close relationships; these relational concerns included burdening others, being judged by others, and making matters worse. Concerns about face loss and group harmony were heightened among ethnic minority students. Despite limited quantitative evidence for White-Ethnic Minority differences in coping and psychological and academic functioning, minority students reported higher levels of family obligation. **Conclusions:** Results revealed a mismatch between hard independence (being self-reliant, resilient, and emotionally tough) and soft independence (being self-expressive, pursuing personal interests, and gaining a sense of freedom) and illuminate how relational concerns hinder help seeking among first-generation college students. These findings support culturally tailoring outreach efforts to address norms that promote self-reliance and the underutilization of services.

Public Significance Statement

First-generation college students (whose parents have not earned 4-year college degrees) experience academic, financial, and psychological stressors as well as encounter barriers to seeking help for their problems. Qualitative findings reveal racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students tend to rely on themselves and underutilize social support because they have concerns about negatively affecting close relationships (e.g., burdening others and making matters worse). Cultural nuances in independence (e.g., autonomy and self-expression) and interdependence (e.g., prioritizing others' needs) values influence these students and shape the process of help seeking.

Keywords: first-generation college students, culture, coping, social support, relational concerns

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Janet Chang, Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania; Shu-wen Wang, Department of Psychology, Haverford College; Colin Mancini, Brianna McGrath-Mahrer, and Sujey Orama de Jesus, Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Janet Chang, Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania, 125 West Rosedale Avenue, Wayne Hall Room 533, West Chester, PA 19383. E-mail: jchang@wcupa.edu

First-generation college students (FGCS) are a vulnerable population in higher education. These students, whose parents have not obtained 4-year college degrees, experience significant adversity because of limited financial resources or significant financial debt (Furquim, Glasener, Oster, McCall, & Desjardins, 2017), less academic preparation (Atherton, 2014), poorer quality interactions with faculty (Kim & Sax, 2009), and concerns about belongingness and fit on campus (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Relative to continuing-generation college students (who have at least one parent with a 4-year college degree), FGCS take longer to graduate (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011; Ishitani, 2006); they are 51% less likely to complete college by their fourth year (Ishitani, 2006). Prevailing explanations of the social-class achievement gap tend to focus on resource deficiency (i.e., the lack of financial or academic resources) or individual factors (e.g., skills) and overlook the importance of a cultural mismatch between norms of independence ingrained in American higher education and interdependent norms that characterize working-class contexts (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012).

The theory of cultural mismatch asserts that FGCS experience a disadvantage because of the misalignment between their own cultural values and independent university norms. Independent norms, which are common in middle-class contexts and emphasize the importance of autonomy, self-expression, and paving one's own path, are at odds with interdependent norms that prioritize being community-oriented and responsive to others' needs. Past studies have shown that this cultural mismatch between independence-interdependence norms is one important factor that leads to various negative outcomes for FGCS, including lower grade point average (GPA; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014), greater perceived difficulty on academic tasks (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), lower tendency to seek out college resources (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), and greater negative emotions and biological stress reactivity during academic tasks (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

There is evidence that this cultural mismatch and its negative impact on FGCS can be reduced. For example, a difference-education intervention that empowers FGCS to understand how their backgrounds affect their college experiences was found to improve FGCS's psychosocial adjustment to college (e.g., mental health and engagement) as well as academic performance through increasing use of college resources (e.g., emailing and meeting with professors; Stephens et al., 2014). Another intervention that aimed to increase the utility value and personal relevance of course material was found to have the greatest positive impact on students who were both ethnic minority and FGCS, compared with those holding only one of those identities (Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, & Hyde, 2016). However, this work and others have not yet explored the influence of cultural norms, including cultural mismatch, on FGCS's coping and help seeking for both academic and nonacademic problems. Moreover, there may be additional cultural nuance in the constructs of independence and interdependence relevant to social class. Specifically, Kusserow (2012) conceptualized middle- and upper-class contexts as exhibiting *soft or expressive independence* that emphasizes cultivated growth to reach one's potential, whereas *hard independence* prioritizes self-reliance rooted in survival, financial and otherwise, that is com-

mon in working-class contexts. Similarly, Stephens et al. (2014) distinguished between *expressive independence* (self-expression, influence, and self-differentiation) and *hard interdependence* (social responsiveness, resilience, adjustment, and interpersonal connectedness). To date, a paucity of research has examined how multiple forms of independence in the context of cultural mismatch are instantiated in social class and higher education settings among racially/ethnically diverse FGCS (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc, & Azmitia, 2018). Accordingly, the present research examined cultural norms and nuances related to independence-interdependence that may affect coping and help seeking.

Social Class Disparities in Higher Education

A cultural mismatch between institutional independent norms and working-class interdependent norms may serve to disadvantage FGCS in ways that affect not only their academic achievement but also their adjustment and psychosocial well-being. When Stephens, Fryberg, and colleagues (2012) surveyed administrators from first- and second-tier universities about institutional expectations for undergraduates and asked continuing-generation students about their motives for attending college, both administrators and continuing-generation students endorsed independent cultural norms (e.g., self-expression, leadership, and autonomy in solving problems and conducting research) and motives (e.g., individual development and exploration), respectively. In contrast, FGCS endorsed interdependent motivations related to college attendance (e.g., benefitting others and their community). In a subsequent longitudinal study, FGCS, motivated by interdependence, had lower academic performance in the first 2 years of college, compared with continuing-generation college students, motivated by independence (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). This discrepancy in academic performance appeared to be mediated by independent and interdependent motives.

The social-class achievement gap likely endures across the college years because of sustained differential opportunities and advantages, with explanations including differences in family cultural capital (Dumais & Ward, 2010) and child rearing practices in middle-class contexts that uniquely equip children with the skills and outlook to succeed in upper-class arenas (Lareau, 2002). Furthermore, FGCS tend to experience marginalization and social segregation on 4-year college campuses (Johnson et al., 2011; Ostrove, 2003). Psychological barriers experienced by working-class students, such as being overwhelmed and intimidated in the context of feeling socially isolated and inadequate (Ostrove, 2003; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993), and problems with identity management and motivation, also present obstacles to college success (Jury et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, FGCS are more vigilant to threatening cues and have heightened awareness of poor performance compared with continuing-generation students (Jury, Smeding, & Darnon, 2015).

Additionally, greater stress reactivity and negative emotional experiences in FGCS in culturally mismatched environments may contribute to higher emotional distress and poorer adjustment. For instance, lab-based experimental work has shown that FGCS experience greater biological reactivity and negative emotions relative to continuing-generation students during an aversive academic task congruent with independent norms (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). Although there is limited research on diverse FGCS's

mental health and professional help seeking (e.g., [Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalango, Ziemer, & Utley, 2017](#)), FGCS have been shown to report more somatic symptoms but not depressive symptoms than continuing-generation students ([Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008](#)). In one study using a single-item measure of mental health (feeling depressed, stressed, or upset), FGCS reported higher levels of stress/depression, yet lower use of services compared with their peers ([Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014](#)). Because mental health may be predictive of academic persistence and ethnic/racial disparities in mental health are well-documented, disparities in college persistence and mental health may also be interconnected and further moderated by ethnicity/race ([Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009](#)), though more research is needed. As such, it is imperative to examine help-seeking behaviors for both academic and psychological problems among diverse groups of FGCS.

Impact of Cultural Influences and Relational Concerns on Help Seeking

Relational processes, like social support, are significant correlates of help-seeking behaviors ([Chang, Chen, & Alegría, 2014](#)) that are particularly relevant to FGCS adjustment. Social support may entail explicit forms involving the disclosure of problems or emotions and reliance on others for guidance, assistance, and/or solace, in contrast to implicitly knowing that one is loved or cared for by others ([Taylor, 2011](#)). Although growing literature on cultural mismatch has focused on how the cultural motivations of independence and interdependence differentially impact FGCS, less is understood regarding how FGCS who are ethnic/racial minorities utilize or underutilize explicit social support for academic and psychological problems.

FGCS tend to come from working-class families, but they are often ethnic/racial minorities ([Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017](#)). Past research has shown that ethnic/racial minorities experience greater identity threats on campus (e.g., [Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013](#); [Hwang & Goto, 2008](#)), belonging concerns (e.g., [Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016](#); [Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009](#)), family orientation (e.g., [Campos, Ullman, Aguilera, & Dunkel Schetter, 2014](#); [Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002](#); [Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999](#)), and psychological distress ([Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011](#); [Lee, Okazaki, & Yoo, 2006](#)) compared with their White counterparts. Recent studies have signaled the importance of looking at the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and social class on cultural mismatch and college adjustment (e.g., [Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015](#)). For example, the previously mentioned intervention that aimed to enhance the utility value and personal relevance of course material was most helpful to students who were both ethnic minority and FGCS ([Harackiewicz et al., 2016](#)).

Interdependence is complex and not necessarily uniform in its effects for groups identified with interdependence ([Chang, 2015](#)). Cultural mismatch researchers have posited that interdependence fosters students' reliance on their families and working-class community for support. In fact, FGCS may lack familial support of their desire to pursue college ([Wartman & Savage, 2008](#)). Familial financial support has also dropped significantly for FGCS in the past 15 years (80.3% down to 65.5%), and in 2015, only one third of these students were able to utilize at least \$3,000 from their

family to pay for first-year college expenses ([Eagan et al., 2016](#)). Further, prior research has documented that, compared with their continuing-generation peers, FGCS report less social support from parents and less disclosure (e.g., [Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009](#); [Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011](#)). Ethnic minority students, in particular, may experience demands and challenges associated with family obligation ([Covarrubias et al., 2018](#); [Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015](#)). These strains on familial ties and incongruities between student and parental educational goals may complicate the use of social support.

Separate from the social class literature, cultural studies (largely quantitative) examining social support have identified the critical role of relational concerns in inhibiting social support behaviors among individuals with interdependent self-construals (namely in Asian and Latino cultures; [Chang, 2015](#); [Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008](#); [Wang, Shih, Hu, Louie, & Lau, 2010](#)). [Taylor and colleagues \(2004\)](#) investigated the most frequently reported explanations for nonuse of social support and identified a range of relational concerns, including eliciting criticism or negative judgment, jeopardizing harmony within the group, causing one to experience loss of face, and/or making issues worse. These interdependent concerns stem from the importance placed on close social relationships that privilege harmonious group bonds and goals ([Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005](#)). Therefore, utilizing explicit social support, which involves disclosure, may be laden with interpersonal risks. Indeed, Asians/Asian Americans respond to explicit support-seeking with greater biological and psychological stress than do Euro Americans (but are more benefited by nondisclosure based support; [Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007](#)), and a daily diary study found that group harmony values partially explained lower daily support use in Asian Americans ([Wang et al., 2010](#)). Qualitative work has found that while Asian and Latino/a American college students reported interdependent concerns and engaged in self-reliance, Asian Americans were more motivated by face loss, whereas Latino/a Americans were motivated to preserve in-group harmony and not make problems worse ([Chang, 2015](#)). Thus, there is great complexity to interdependence-based relational concerns that stem from racial/ethnic differences.

Present Research

There is a paucity of qualitative and quantitative research examining the influence of cultural norms (e.g., relational concerns) on FGCS's coping and help-seeking behaviors for academic and psychological problems. Qualitative research on cultural mismatch has been substantially limited ([Covarrubias et al., 2018](#); [Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015](#)). Most significantly, quantitative research methods are less equipped to illuminate the dynamic, complex intersection of help-seeking behaviors and culture, including social class, while qualitative research on cultural mismatch affords the opportunity to do so. Hence, the goal of the present research was to explore nuances in the influence of cultural mismatch and values derived from cultural norms on coping and help-seeking behaviors among FGCS.

Furthermore, published studies have predominantly sampled FGCS attending elite private institutions or top tier public universities—settings that lend themselves to social class disparities between upper- or middle-class students and working-class students (e.g., [Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012](#); [Stephens et al., 2014](#); [Stephens,](#)

Townsend, et al., 2012). Although FGCS status is related to higher perceived institutional classism (Allan, Garriott, & Keene, 2016), cultural mismatch may be attenuated in college settings with less stark social class disparities, a greater proportion of working-class students, and student compositions involving large numbers of commuters and transfers from community college. However, this issue has been underinvestigated in past research (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2019; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Tibbetts, Priniski, Hecht, Borman, & Harackiewicz, 2018). Tibbetts et al. (2018) found that FGCS may not experience concerns about belonging and identity associated with cultural mismatch at 2-year colleges, which emphasize more interdependent norms. Therefore, the present research further examined cultural mismatch in yet another kind of educational setting between a 2-year college and elite private institutions—a public regional university.

To date, there is a dearth of research on how relational concerns and cultural mismatch influence FGCS's coping and help-seeking motivations and behaviors. Given that qualitative research designs are ideal for unexplored topics, the present research used a qualitative approach (Pilot Study and Study 1a) to provide an in-depth understanding of how relational concerns and cultural nuances in cultural mismatch foster and hinder the use of social support among FGCS. Because FGCS are disproportionately racial/ethnic minorities from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017), the present study also explored cultural differences between White-majority and racial/ethnic minority FGCS (primarily African American, Latino/a American, and Asian American). Specifically, we examined how culture tied to race/ethnicity and social class, including different forms of independence and interdependence, shapes coping and help-seeking behaviors among diverse FGCS. Accordingly, the goals of the qualitative research were: (a) to identify relational concerns salient to FGCS; (b) to explore the impact of relational concerns and a cultural mismatch on their coping and help-seeking behaviors for academic, financial, and psychological problems; and (c) to examine cultural similarities and differences between White and ethnic minority students. In Study 1b, a quantitative survey component was used to explore potential racial/ethnic differences in students' awareness of resources, coping behaviors, demographic information, and feelings of family obligation that may be related to FGCS's help-seeking behaviors.

Method

Qualitative data were collected in the Pilot Study (individual interviews) and Study 1a (group interviews), and survey data were collected across both studies (see Study 1b). Group interviews were conducted to allow for direct, richer qualitative comparisons, as one primary objective was to explore how relational concerns and cultural mismatch influence coping and help-seeking behaviors on the part of FGCS. In the Pilot Study and Study 1a, we utilized grounded theory techniques and procedures to conduct thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Grounded theory is valuable for producing rich descriptions of underexamined processes and topics. This approach was ideal for exploration and discovery of relational concerns and nuances in cultural mismatch—new phenomena in FGCS—given the aforementioned gaps in prior research (Charmaz, 2014). We examined survey data to provide back-

ground information about interviewees and additional context for understanding the qualitative findings.

Pilot Study: Individual Interviews

Participants

Eleven FGCS ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.81$, $SD = 1.89$) participated in individual interviews. Students who volunteered for the study self-identified as a FGCS (i.e., whose parents do not have a 4-year college degree).¹ Nine participants (82%) identified as female, and eight participants (73%) identified as White. Three identified as Jamaican American, biracial Puerto Rican and Spanish American, and biracial Vietnamese and Chinese American. All participants were born in the United States and attended the same public regional university in the Northeast United States (with ~18,000 students).

Most participants (45%) reported a family income of \$15,000 to \$49,999 (\$15,000–\$24,999: 18%; \$25,000–\$29,999: 9%; \$30,000–\$49,999: 18%). Others reported family incomes of \$50,000–\$69,999 (9%); \$70,000–\$99,999 (37%); and \$100,000–\$124,999 (9%). Regarding parent education, attainment of a high school diploma was most common (37% of mothers, 46% of fathers). Some parents possessed a technical degree (18% of mothers, 27% of fathers), and others attended some undergraduate institution(s) without obtaining a degree (27% of mothers, 9% of fathers). All interviewees received some form of financial aid, with federal loans being the most common (91%).

Participants were recruited using campus recruitment flyers, emails, and in-person class announcements. Participants were given a \$25 gift card. The institutional review board at the first author's institution granted approval.

Procedure

First, a brief online prescreening instrument was administered to interested students—to verify their eligibility and availability. Second, before the interview, eligible participants completed an online survey consisting of demographic questions and items from existing psychological measures; this same survey was completed by participants in both the Pilot Study and Study 1a (please see Study 1b for quantitative analyses of these survey data).

Participants provided informed consent and agreed to be recorded. The interviewer used a semistructured interview protocol, with questions based on past literature on cultural mismatch, FGCS, and relational concerns. Participants were asked to describe their motivations for attending college; influence of family, college, and personal values, and the relationship between those values; family support of college; college expectations and experiences; barriers to parental college education; family and friend support; coping and help-seeking behaviors; instances seeking or not seeking social support; and reasons for underutilizing social support (see [online supplemental materials Appendix A](#)). The interviews lasted 57 min on average. Audio recordings were tran-

¹ Two of the participants were White graduate students on campus who recently graduated from college (within a year) and self-identified as a FGCS, and the other nine students were undergraduates. For simplicity, we referred to this entire group as FGCS in subsequent parts of the article.

scribed by one of the interviewers and research assistants, and transcriptions were verified by different research assistants. The two interviewers, including the principal investigator, met to debrief and discuss interviews after reviewing their notes and transcripts.

Qualitative Analysis

The principal investigator and five research assistants of various cultural backgrounds (Asian American, Latina American, and White American) formed the research team involved in coding. A coding scheme was developed, drawing on past research and a review of all 11 transcripts. Five research assistants coded the first interview, and smaller teams of 3–4 research assistants coded the remaining 10 interviews, achieving an average coding agreement of 95%.

Utilizing grounded theory methods, the process started with open coding (identifying and developing categories based on textual analysis); coders looked for similarities and differences between interviews to derive categories and subcategories of codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). For example, in the broader category of college motivation, “parental encouragement” was a discrete code. The team coded the presence (1) or absence (0) of a code. During axial and selective coding phases (a process of making associations or connections between codes, and finalizing and elaborating on core codes, respectively), coders used an iterative, constant comparative method to develop an organizational scheme of prevalent concepts and a narrative about common themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). After coding and analyzing each transcript, the team engaged in group discussion to reconcile any inconsistencies in coding, to highlight evidence in support of codes, and share observations of patterns. The principal investigator acted as the internal auditor and asked questions about how codes were determined and what constituted evidence of the codes. The process of detailed observations, open discussion, and internal auditing helped ensure the integrity of qualitative analyses (Morrow, 2005).

Results and Discussion

These pilot data revealed similarities across interviewees in college motivation, family values, and the role of financial stressors. The majority of participants reported, in order of prevalence, motivations to attend college because of familial/parental expectations, familial/parental encouragement, personal interest, life improvement, and/or as a natural next step in their life trajectory. Although some of these motives (e.g., parental encouragement, life improvement, and exploration of personal interests) echo earlier findings (e.g., Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), FGCS in the present study appeared to be motivated by the potential for financial security or stability to overcome socioeconomic adversity, while recognizing their families’ emphasis placed on the value of hard work. These findings highlight norms associated with hard independence (Kusserow, 2012). Not surprisingly, financial stressors, such as obtaining money to pay for school and concerns about burdening parents who lacked the financial means, added to the difficulty of college life, which is consistent with past research (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hébert, 2018; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Almost three quarters of those interviewed reported that self-expression was promoted by the university, which they appreciated

about the higher education setting. This finding reinforces results from prior research documenting independent university norms (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). However, the latter finding stands in contrast to previous cultural mismatch studies because participants did not experience identity threats related to self-expression norms.

Most stated a personal preference for self-reliance, or a desire to solve issues individually, rather than seek support. Although the theme of self-reliance is similar to what Covarrubias et al. (2018) and Kusserow (2012) described in their samples of Latinx and Asian FGCS and working-class parents and children, respectively, the present research revealed novel insights about how coping behaviors, like self-reliance, social support, and avoidance, are fostered or undermined by relational concerns in FGCS. Those interviewed tended to avoid issues entirely, often through distraction. These behaviors were related to a number of relational concerns tied to problem disclosure; most participants indicated that sharing issues would make problems and their relationships worse, elicit judgment, burden others, minimize their problem, generate feelings of discomfort around sharing, and not have any benefit (i.e., “be pointless”). The majority also reported forms of psychological distress, with a small number of others stating they struggled with relationship problems as well. Overall, the findings suggest that FGCS may have unmet psychological needs, self-reliance may be a barrier to help seeking (Chang, 2015), and relational concerns may be salient to diverse FGCS—that were further explored in Study 1a.

Study 1a: Group Interviews

We developed the group interview protocol based on the pilot study findings and prior literature on culture, social support, and FGCS. The group interview questions focused primarily on the potential role of cultural mismatch, coping strategies for different types of problems, experiences with problem disclosure, and factors (including relational concerns) that encourage and discourage the use of social support and other types of coping.

Social support is culturally constructed; it can vary across situations and types of issues. Consequently, group interviews were utilized to identify points of cultural nuance, group norms, and consensus, which are typically more difficult to discover through quantitative methods. Group interview methods have been used effectively with majority and minority groups (Krueger, 1994; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015; Yeh, Kim, Pituc, & Atkins, 2008).

Participants

Group interviews involved 60 undergraduate students (68% women, 27% men, and 5% nonbinary), ranging from 18 to 25 years of age ($M = 19.48$, $SD = 1.88$). Participants self-identified as a FGCS (i.e., whose parents do not have a 4-year college degree) and were enrolled at the same public regional university. Participants came from various ethnic/racial backgrounds (45% White Americans; 22% African Americans; 15% Latino/a Americans; 5% Asian Americans; 5% Arab Americans; and 8% Multi-racial). The sample was fairly diverse relative to the campus composition, in which Whites constitute approximately 76% of the undergraduate university population. All participants, except for one Asian American male student, were U.S.-born. While there

was great variability in family income, most participants (51%) reported annual incomes in the \$15,000–\$49,999 range (\$15,000–\$24,999: 18%; \$25,000–\$29,999: 5%; \$30,000–\$49,999: 28%). A small number of participants (8%) reported a family income of less than \$15,000, whereas similar numbers reported family incomes of \$50,000–\$99,999 or \$100,000 or greater (about 20% each). They most frequently had parents who obtained a high school diploma (32% mothers, 28% fathers) or lower level of education (21% mothers, 25% fathers), with a minority completing technical school (12% mothers, 25% fathers), some college (23% mothers, 10% fathers), or an associate's degree (12% mothers, 8% fathers). Most participants (95%) received financial aid.

Participants were recruited via campus flyers, recruitment emails, in-person class announcements, and a snowball sampling technique common in qualitative research (that involves participants referring potential participants). Participants were given a \$15 gift card incentive. In total, eight group interviews were conducted, with an average of 7–8 participants in each group. All participants were active in contributing to discussion. Recruitment efforts ended after saturation was obtained; transcriptions and subsequent coding of the data did not reveal additional new findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Measures

Participants completed an eligibility screener and online survey (described in Study 1b) before group interviews. As in the Pilot Study, the screener was used to verify eligibility.

Group Interviews

Informed by the pilot study findings and past literature on culture, social support, and FGCS, the semistructured group interview protocol included open-ended questions and probes asking participants to describe motivations for college; familial, college, and personal values, and the relationship between those values; different kinds of problems and coping strategies; and help-seeking behaviors and reasons for avoiding seeking help (see [online supplemental materials Appendix B](#)).

Participants first provided informed consent, which included agreeing to be audio-recorded. The lead interviewer then introduced themselves and the observer(s) to the participants, and explained that the discussion would focus on stressful situations and coping strategies for FGCS. Participants were informed that the observers were present to take notes that facilitate transcription. Sessions lasted an average of 64 min. Confidentiality was discussed to ensure a setting that encouraged conversation (Krueger, 1994). The interviewer referred to the interview protocol in asking questions and probing individuals for explanation, while working to engage all individuals in conversation. By repeating questions to individuals who had not originally answered questions, levels of group consensus and disagreement could be ascertained, while follow-up questions were used to help clarify answers. As needed, time was devoted to topics and insights that generated greater interest and discussion, while keeping track of the extent of disagreement and agreement. The interviewer outlined major points stemming from group discussion, allowing for clarification or correction of any misunderstanding. Afterward, the interviewer and observer(s) debriefed, and recordings were transcribed verba-

tim (though taking care to anonymize data). Transcripts were then reviewed by at least one additional research team member for accuracy. Group interviews ended when saturation was reached; the research team determined that conducting additional interviews would not reveal new patterns in the data.

Qualitative Analysis

The research team involved in coding consisted of the principal investigator and five research assistants of various cultural backgrounds (Asian American, Latina American, and White American). First, the research team developed a coding scheme informed by prior research and a comprehensive review of all transcripts. All research assistants who were involved in transcription coded all interviews, and the principal investigator served as the internal auditor. Similar to the Pilot Study, the research team used grounded theory methods. The process entailed open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Starting with open coding, the team examined similarities and differences in the data to derive categories and subcategories of codes. Research assistants identified whether codes represented the views of all participants in a single group interview, the majority of those participants, and the minority of those participants. Codes that were present were assigned the value of 1, whereas absent codes received a value of 0. Further coding was conducted to compare White and racial/ethnic minority FGCS. During axial and selective coding stages, coders engaged in an iterative, constant comparative method to organize and enhance understanding of emerging concepts and to develop a coherent story of prevailing themes.

Using an open coding strategy, the team developed categories, discrete codes, and definitions to be applied in analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For example, in the broader category of relational concerns, “burdening others” was a discrete code. Sixteen broad categories emerged from this analysis: college motivation, family values, university values, personal values, family tensions, difference in values, similarities in values, financial stressors, academic stressors, psychological stressors, coping strategies, help-seeking barriers, relational concerns, feelings about sharing problems, parents not understanding college experiences, and social support experiences. After coding and analyzing each transcript individually, the team compared discrete codes and larger patterns across broad categories.

To ensure data quality and integrity of coding procedures, detailed observations, thorough debriefing following interviews, and rigorous auditing of codes were used (Morrow, 2005). Research team members were encouraged to discuss possible codes, while challenging one another based on evidence. This review led to a comprehensive, systematic coding approach, whereby the team would openly discuss and resolve any differences in codes. Percent agreement across the top three coders was calculated by determining whether initial codes for each coder were consistent with final codes; the average coder agreement was 88%. After open discussion and internal auditing, the team derived and finalized common themes. The coinvestigator who was not directly involved in coding reviewed the research team's work and offered insights.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative analyses revealed a number of important patterns, including major stressors, the complexity of cultural mismatch, salient relational concerns affecting FGCS, and how these students cope with their problems. Consistent with the Pilot Study, participants expressed a strong motivation to work hard and meet expectations, with the latter being a major source of stress for some participants. As in the present research, financial concerns tend to be a constant source of stress among FGCS paying for college (e.g., Engle & Tinto, 2008). In this study, students whose parents were struggling to help pay for college experienced additional stress and feelings of guilt knowing that their parents were burdened. Lack of experience and knowledge navigating the financial aid process constituted an additional challenge for those students and their families. Collectively, these findings suggest that stressors, coupled with family expectations and dynamics, may foster heightened relational concerns.

Overall, qualitative analyses revealed three major themes reported more fully below: (a) a tension between self-expression and self-reliance; (b) explicit social support was underutilized as a means of coping; and (c) cultural similarities and racial/ethnic differences in relational concerns, which contribute to the underutilization of social support and to the imperative that one must solve one's problems by relying on oneself.

Tension Between Self-Expression and Self-Reliance

Cultural similarities. Analyses of personal, family, and university values revealed a cultural dissonance in what participants perceived the university valued and what they thought their parents valued. However, this cultural mismatch was not between independence (university) and interdependence (family) values. Instead, there was a tension between self-expression and self-reliance espoused by the university and their families, respectively. Most participants emphasized the importance of both.

I think it's really important to become your own person and to live your own life. . . . It's important to be able to rely on yourself and be able to take care of yourself. (18-year-old Sri Lankan American female student)

In effect, participants enacted two different forms of independence. For their parents, participants reported family emphasis on being self-reliant, which entailed solving one's problems without relying on others and being self-sufficient and resilient—related to hard independence values of survival and perseverance (Kusserow, 2012). Self-sufficiency was regarded as the ability to provide for oneself without assistance (especially financial) from one's family or other people. This is in contrast to the theme of soft independence (Kusserow, 2012). FGCS perceived that the university context promoted developing one's sense of self through freedom of expression, personal exploration, and the pursuit of one's interests.

It's primarily independence. . . . it's just being able to do what you want to do. . . . pave your own way as you want to do it, not because of other factors. (22-year-old White American male student)

Receptive to soft independent university norms, many participants reported feeling free to be themselves and grow as people. Students felt that they were able to have a voice at the university,

whereas they may not have had freedom of open expression at home.

There's a lot more focus here on exploring your identity and being comfortable with who you are. I feel like you can be a lot more expressive here than maybe you could be at home. (18-year-old White American female student)

Also, participants largely agreed with the idea that the university promoted openness of different viewpoints. On the whole, these findings suggest that cultural mismatch may be attenuated in this particular public regional university setting.

Racial/ethnic differences. To a greater extent, ethnic minority participants emphasized the importance of self-reliance, whereas White participants stressed personal growth, self-expression, and happiness.

You can do whatever, as long as you're happy. (21-year-old White American female student)

Additionally, White and ethnic minority participants differed with respect to their perceptions of the university in cultivating inclusivity and diversity, with the latter raising some concerns about the lack of diversity and issues with a sense of belongingness on campus. These divergent perspectives were related to coming from culturally different home communities. White participants reported growing up in communities that were fairly homogeneous and politically and/or religiously conservative, which differed from their own personal views. In family contexts, this generated heated discussion or family conflict in expressed views. Ethnic minority students, on the other hand, came from more diverse and less conservative backgrounds.

Summary. The vast majority of FGCS reported a cultural match with independent university values, while they also expressed independence values aligned with their parents or families. Although there was a tension between family and university values, this did not result in a perceived sense of cultural mismatch on the part of the students.

Self-Reliance and the Underutilization of Social Support

Cultural similarities. An overwhelming majority of participants reported that self-reliance was their first and primary means of coping with problems.

I don't really tell my mom about issues that I am having. Kind of just my successes because I don't want my parents to be worried about me and think that I am in over my head. So, I'd rather just kind of work through it and keep it from them. Keep it from them so they don't worry. (22-year-old Egyptian American female student)

Many participants indicated they would rather struggle through resolving a problem on their own before imposing on anyone else.

I kind of keep my things to myself. I don't open up to people really easily. (21-year-old Asian and White American female student)

Being self-reliant appeared to promote coping strategies that were not problem oriented. For example, some students mentioned avoidance, a wait-and-see approach, and distraction as ways of coping with stressors.

I don't like disclosing so much information with so many people . . . I think I kind of just dwell on the situation for a while and just kind of think of alternatives to make it better. (18-year-old Ecuadorian American female student)

The vast majority of participants reported underutilizing explicit social support. If students could not handle the problems on their own, they turned to other forms of social support. Some participants mentioned “hanging out” with other individuals as a form of companionship that led to stress relief, but these social experiences did not entail problem disclosure (i.e., implicit support). Relatedly, many participants also received comfort from the knowledge that they had people who loved and cared for them. Typically, explicit social support was used as a last resort. In effect, these findings indicate not only that FGCS may underutilize explicit forms of support, but also that self-reliance may be a common strategy, extending beyond college-related problems and situations.

Students not only filtered the amount and type of information shared, but also were selective with whom they shared the information based on the type of problem. Participants mentioned seeking support mostly from those who could understand and relate to the problem at hand (i.e., relational universality; Yeh, Arora, & Wu, 2006). Given the significant absence of role models or mentors, many participants felt challenged navigating the university system when they had questions or needed guidance. This is consistent with prior research noting the value of role models and social networks for FGCS (e.g., Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015). In the present study, many participants reported that their parents did not understand college and close others may not be able to relate to their situation. Some students reported a desire to learn more about their professional and career development, and they felt they were not receiving enough valuable information. These results suggest a lack of mentors, and students who had mentors clearly expressed how valuable and important that mentoring relationship was to them.

Racial/ethnic differences. With some exceptions, most White participants who reported turning to social support after overcoming their reluctance expressed how valuable it was—in making them feel better. In contrast, ethnic minority participants tended to report that they may be the only ones who could resolve the problem and that seeking out others would be pointless or burdensome to others.

Sometimes I'll just keep it to myself. I might not even go to other people, mainly because I could be the only one who could fix the problem. (21-year-old African American female student)

Sometimes I feel like it's a burden . . . like I am fine going to people, but then when I actually say it, I feel like they already have their own problems, like I'm just putting another load on them. (18-year-old Ecuadorian American female student)

These patterns suggest that cultural values and norms tied to ethnic minority identity may exert additional influence on non-White FGCS, with specific relational concerns hindering disclosure.

Summary. Although cultural mismatch researchers have posited that interdependence fosters students' reliance on their families and working-class community for support (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), the present research revealed the complex

ways support may be dampened. The majority emphasized family value placed on self-reliance, including self-sufficiency, which conflicted with university norms regarding self-expression. Their problems may be compounded by the underutilization of formal and informal sources of support (e.g., family support, counseling, and campus services). In addition, relational universality—that is, the preference for seeking advice and comfort from others who have shared similar experiences (Yeh et al., 2006)—was important in determining to whom they disclosed problems. This finding is consistent with qualitative research demonstrating the importance of relational universality in fostering problem disclosure among Asian and Latino/a American college students (Chang, 2015). This underscores the highly selective and purposeful “filtering” process by which our FGCS sample determined whether and from whom to seek support. Both the underutilization of social support and the lack of problem disclosure are at odds with independent university norms (e.g., personal expression and getting your needs met).

Cultural Salience of Relational Concerns

Analyses revealed cultural patterns of relational concerns and associations with the underutilization of social support and self-reliance (see Figure 1). Figure 1 depicts shared relational concerns related to the disclosure of personal problems (i.e., invite judgment, burden others, make matters worse, and to a lesser extent, minimize the problem) among all participants. Additionally, it shows relational concerns that were particularly salient to ethnic minority FGCS, including maintaining group harmony, avoiding face loss, inviting criticism, and in some cases, *el que dirán* (concerns about what others will think in Latino cultures) and concerns about gossip. Ethnic minority participants were concerned about both criticism (that was directed at them and communicated to them) and judgment, whereas White participants emphasized caring about what others think (judgment) but not about what they say (criticism). Figure 1 also depicts a reciprocal association between the underutilization of social support and self-reliance as well as the role of hard independence.

Cultural similarities. The present research illuminates overlooked barriers to help seeking among FGCS, including concerns that disclosure of problems would burden others, invite negative judgments, and make matters worse. Relational concerns not only affected preferred methods of coping but also constituted a major source of stress among first-generation college student participants. Significant barriers to social support included concerns that problem disclosure would burden others and make matters worse.

I would rather not tell other people about my academic problems because as soon as I say something about it, I feel like it becomes an even bigger issue than something I can just take care of myself. (18-year-old White male student)

Furthermore, participants reported concerns about problem disclosure eliciting negative judgments from others (e.g., being perceived as less than, being pitied, and being judged harshly by others).

I don't take judgments too well. If somebody does say something I don't like, or [I] feel like they're judging me, I'd probably break down. (21-year-old African American female student)

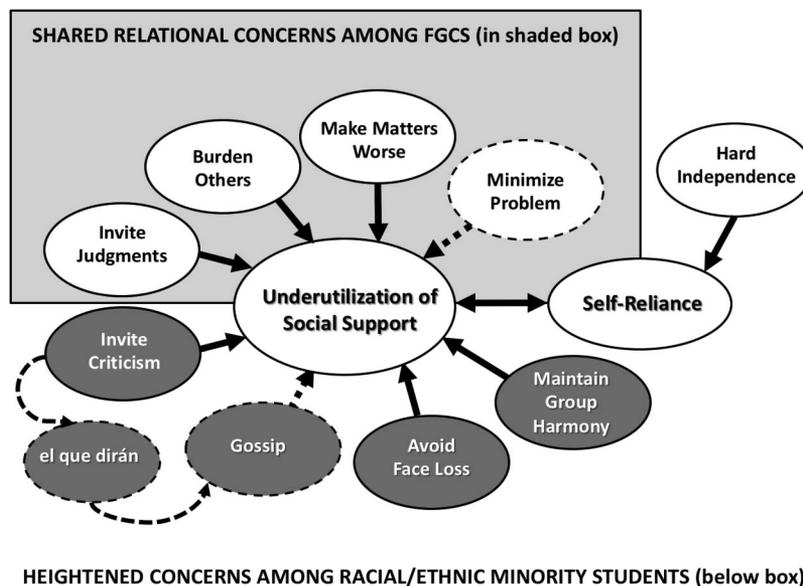


Figure 1. Cultural similarities and differences in relational concerns. FGCS refers to first-generation college students. Dashed lines indicate less emphasis in the present data.

To a lesser extent, a few participants reported the disclosure would result in close others minimizing their problems. Overall, concerns about the impact of problem disclosure on important social relationships contributed to both the underutilization of social support and imperative to be self-reliant in solving problems (see Figure 1).

Racial/ethnic differences. The breadth, depth, and salience of relational concerns were particularly pronounced for FGCS from ethnic minority backgrounds. Ethnic minority FGCS tended to experience additional concerns that disclosure of problems would jeopardize their relationships with others in keeping with prior work on ethnic minority college students (e.g., Chang, 2015; Taylor et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2010). For example, their concerns related to maintaining group harmony or avoiding conflict.

Depending on the subject matter, like you don't want to offend anybody, but I'm not saying you necessarily would if you were to share something, but . . . I just don't want to offend anybody. (21-year-old biracial Japanese and White female student)

In particular, ethnic minority FGCS expressed concerns about inviting criticism, disrupting group harmony, and saving face or avoiding shame and embarrassment.

I worry about the way that the people I am close to will see me when I disclose a problem to them, especially if it has something to do with my mental health. (18-year-old Puerto Rican and White American female student)

I just think the whole judging aspect in general, regardless of if it's a relationship, grades, whatever it is. I feel like that could definitely take a toll on whatever relationship it is. (18-year-old Cuban American female student)

In some cases, ethnic minority participants were also concerned about potentially provoking gossip and *el que dirán*.

For ethnic minority students, these concerns contributed to a greater reliance on themselves and underutilization of social support compared with their White counterparts. And when students described accessing support in some circumstances, they engaged in an effortful cognitive process to select the support source for which they anticipated the greatest level of helpfulness with the lowest relational costs. These issues stemming from maintaining close relationships constituted a major source of stress that posed substantial barriers to help seeking among FGCS.

Summary. The underutilization of support and the lack of problem disclosure are at odds with independent university norms. These findings make an important contribution to the extant research by demonstrating that White and Ethnic Minority FGCS have salient shared and distinct relational concerns that hinder support use and help seeking—that are not limited to Asian and Latino collectivist cultural groups (Campos & Kim, 2017; Chang, 2015; Kim et al., 2008). In addition to the influence of hard independence values associated with social class, FGCS from minority backgrounds may be responsive to interdependence values associated with their racial/ethnic identity that affect the salience of relational concerns.

Study 1b: Online Survey

Quantitative data from participants' responses on various questionnaires were examined to provide a background context for better understanding the rich qualitative analyses of themes that emerged in the interviews. Data reported are from 60 participants who took part in group interviews (Study 1a) and 11 participants from the Pilot Study. Of the 71 participants, 49% were White Americans, 20% were African Americans, 14% were Latino/a Americans, 6% were Asian Americans, 4% Arab Americans, and 7% Multiracial. Given the ethnic diversity of the sample, we examined group differences between White Majority and Ethnic

Minority participants; the sample sizes of ethnic minority subgroups were too small to conduct meaningful analyses by specific subgroup. All descriptive information and *t* tests for survey data are reported in Table 1.

Measures

The online survey assessed use of campus resources and included widely used measures of coping strategies (Brief COPE; Carver, 1997), psychological distress (Kessler Psychological Distress Scale; Kessler et al., 2002), familial responsibility (Family Obligation Scale; Fuligni et al., 1999), communal relationship orientation (the Communal Orientation Scale; Clark, Oullette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987), and individualism and collectivism cultural orientations (Individualism-Collectivism Scale; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

Coping strategies. The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) was used to measure a range of different coping strategies, such as emotional support, reframing, self-blame, and denial. Participants indicated their agreement with 28 different statements about their responses to stressful experiences (e.g., “I’ve been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things”) on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from *I usually don’t do this at all* to *I usually do this a lot*). The Brief COPE has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability in prior samples, and researchers have embraced its use as an expedient way to collect reliable and valid information about coping behaviors across varying contexts (Chase, Welton-Mitchell, & Bhattarai, 2013; Hagan et al., 2017). Correlations are

reported for 14 coping strategies given that they were all comprised of two item subscales; correlations varied considerably ($r = .15-.89$).

Psychological distress. Distress levels were measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002), which consists of 10 items measuring anxiety and depressive symptoms (e.g., “During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel nervous?”) on a 5-point Likert Scale (ranging from *none of the time* to *all of the time*). Higher values indicate higher levels of distress (e.g., <20 being “well”; 20–24 “mild distress”; 25–29 “moderate distress”; and >30 “severe distress”). The K10 is widely used and has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability and construct validity with various clinical and community samples (Andrews & Slade, 2001; Hides et al., 2007). Cronbach’s α in the current sample was .90.

Family obligation. Feelings of familial responsibility were measured using the 24-item Family Obligation Scale (Fuligni et al., 1999). Participants were asked questions assessing their current participation in activities and level of assistance to family (e.g., “Help out around the house”), their level of respect for their family (e.g., “Treat your parents with great respect”), and anticipated levels of future support for their family (e.g., “Have your parents live with you when you get older”). Responses ranged from “not applicable” to “almost always” on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of family obligation. The scale has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability and construct validity in prior samples (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Fuligni et al.,

Table 1
Sample Descriptives and Group Differences

Measures	All			Whites			Ethnic minorities			<i>t</i> -value	Cohen’s <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Individualism-collectivism											
Horizontal individualism	70	28.47	5.44	34	28.97	5.33	36	28.00	5.58	.74	.18
Vertical individualism	70	19.27	6.77	34	19.91	6.90	36	18.67	6.62	.77	.18
Horizontal collectivism	71	26.59	5.26	35	26.29	5.39	36	26.89	5.18	-.48	.11
Vertical collectivism	71	21.35	9.39	35	18.17	8.36	36	24.44	9.41	-2.97***	.70
Relationship scales											
Communal orientation	71	5.08	.86	35	5.02	.96	36	5.14	.77	-.60	.14
Family obligations–Current	71	3.15	.78	35	3.02	.81	36	3.27	.74	-1.38	.32
Family obligations–Respect	71	3.29	.86	35	2.94	.86	36	3.62	.73	-3.60***	.85
Family obligations–Future	71	2.58	.86	35	2.32	.80	36	2.83	.85	-2.61**	.62
Coping strategies (Brief COPE)											
Instrumental support	71	2.35	.87	35	2.37	.87	36	2.33	.89	.18	.05
Reframing	71	2.80	.84	35	2.76	.88	36	2.83	.82	-.38	.08
Blame	71	2.58	.89	35	2.66	.92	36	2.50	.86	.74	.18
Planning	71	2.98	.83	35	2.99	.84	36	2.97	.84	.07	.02
Humor	71	2.31	1.06	35	2.54	1.08	36	2.08	1.01	1.85*	.44
Religion	71	2.00	1.01	35	1.91	.98	36	2.08	1.05	-.70	.17
Acceptance	71	2.85	.81	35	2.87	.83	36	2.83	.80	.20	.02
Distraction	71	2.99	.75	35	2.79	.79	36	3.19	.67	-2.36**	.55
Active coping	71	2.91	.84	35	2.81	.78	36	3.00	.89	-.93	.22
Denial	71	1.47	.66	35	1.44	.66	36	1.50	.67	-.36	.09
Substance use	71	1.35	.68	35	1.43	.62	36	1.26	.73	1.02	.25
Emotional support	71	2.51	.98	35	2.67	.95	36	2.35	1.00	1.40	.33
Disengagement	71	1.59	.70	35	1.56	.76	36	1.63	.65	-.40	.10
Venting	71	2.50	.79	35	2.54	.88	36	2.46	.70	.45	.11
Psychological distress											
Kessler psychological distress	71	23.94	7.68	35	24.66	7.80	36	23.25	7.61	.77	.18

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

1999). Reliabilities for the present subscales were: .81 (current assistance), .74 (family respect), and .75 (future support).

Communal relationship orientation. The 14-item Communal Orientation Scale (Clark et al., 1987) assesses the importance that individuals place on close others' needs and feelings, and the strength of belief in the importance of caring for one another. Participants were asked how well various statements characterized them (e.g., "It bothers me when other people neglect my needs") on a 7-point Likert Scale (ranging from *extremely uncharacteristic of me* to *extremely characteristic of me*), with higher scores indicating higher communal (vs. exchange-based) orientation. Internal reliability and construct validity of the scale have been shown in prior samples (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Thompson & DeHarpport, 1998). Cronbach's α in the current sample was .81.

Cultural orientation. The 16-item Individualism and Collectivism Scale (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) was used to measure collectivism (i.e., viewing the self as part of the collective) and individualism (i.e., viewing the self as autonomous and independent) on vertical (i.e., hierarchical) and horizontal (i.e., egalitarian) dimensions. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with statements (e.g., "I often do 'my own thing'.") on a 9-point Likert scale (ranging from *never/definitely no* to *always/definitely yes*). The measure produces four subscales: vertical collectivism, horizontal collectivism, vertical individualism, and horizontal individualism. Acceptable internal reliability and construct validity have been found in prior work (Triandis, 2001; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Reliabilities for the present subscales were: .73 (horizontal individualism), .78 (vertical individualism), .65 (horizontal collectivism), and 1.00 (vertical collectivism).

Results and Discussion

Coping and use of resources. Of the 14 coping strategies measured by the Brief COPE, our full sample most strongly endorsed distraction, planning, and active coping, and least strongly endorsed denial, substance use, and disengagement. Independent sample *t* tests showed very few group differences in coping (see Table 1); for example, Ethnic Minority FGCS were significantly higher than White FGCS on self-distraction. Participants were also asked about their use of various campus resources. The most widely used resources include student health (Whites 37%, Ethnic Minorities 36%), learning resources (Whites 29%, Ethnic Minorities 36%), counseling center (Whites 20%, Ethnic Minorities 17%), peer tutors (Whites 14%, Ethnic Minorities 33%), the writing center (Whites 26%, Ethnic Minorities 31%), and career services (Whites 11%, Ethnic Minorities 22%).

Psychological and academic functioning. We also examined racial/ethnic group differences in psychological and academic functioning. There were no racial/ethnic differences in levels of psychological distress.² Regarding academic functioning, White FGCS scored marginally higher than Ethnic Minorities.

Family and relationship values. Ethnic Minority FGCS scored significantly higher than Whites on two out of three dimensions of family obligation: respect for family and future support to family. While Ethnic Minorities self-reported more respect for family and anticipated providing more support in the future to their families, they did not differ from their White peers in the support they provide to their family currently. Additionally, they did not differ in overall communal orientation to relationships.

Cultural orientation. Ethnic Minorities scored significantly higher than Whites on vertical collectivism, indicating stronger endorsement of the self as part of a collective in which hierarchy is accepted. However, they did not differ on horizontal collectivism, vertical individualism, or horizontal individualism. They did not differ in their endorsement of the self as being part of a collective in which equality is normative, nor did they differ in seeing the self as autonomous in either hierarchical or egalitarian contexts.

Summary. In contrast to the qualitative findings, analyses of survey data revealed few differences between Ethnic Minority and White FGCS. These patterns may indicate that these students shared commonalities with respect to social class and characteristics associated with attending a public regional university. Regarding culture, race/ethnicity, and coping, the results suggest that in-depth qualitative methods may uncover richness and depth in ways not possible with quantitative methods (Phinney & Haas, 2003). For example, in the present research, self-reliance appears to discourage help-seeking behaviors for problems, even though students were aware of campus resources, and some reported the availability of support and benefits associated with social support. This finding is also significant because self-reliance is a barrier to help seeking, in line with prior cultural research (Chang, 2015; Ortega & Alegría, 2002).

It is important to recognize that much like independence is nuanced, so is interdependence. In particular, Stephens et al. (2014) delineated between hard interdependence characteristic of working-class American contexts and interdependence common in other collectivist contexts (e.g., East or South Asian). They argued that the type of interdependence prevalent in working-class settings "reflects the foundational American ideal to be free from constraint (e.g., including some expressions of independence through its normative emphasis on strength and toughness) but is tempered by the ongoing requirement to be socially responsive" in an effort to shield or preserve the self from danger (p. 616). This distinction dovetails with our finding that, in contrast to White students, Ethnic Minority FGCS reported both greater respect for family and expected to provide more support in the future to their families. That there were no group differences in levels of current involvement and assistance given to family reinforces the notion that while the current reality of obligatory family connections appeared similar for both White and Ethnic Minority students (that is perhaps because of the structural demands of being a college student), the psychological connection to family—both present and anticipated—may contribute to relational concerns about burdening others, maintaining harmony, and avoiding judgment and criticism that were observed in our interviews. Indeed, prior research has shown that feelings of family obligation are consequential for mental health, well-being, and family relationships of Chinese and Mexican youth (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Telzer, Tsai, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2015).

² Additionally, a chi square test of independence was used to examine patterns of frequency between Racial/Ethnic Group (White vs. Ethnic Minority) and K10 psychological functioning subgroup (scores <20 indicate being "well"; 20–24 indicate "mild distress"; 25–29 indicate "moderate distress"; and >30 indicate "severe distress"). Results were nonsignificant, $\chi^2(3, N = 62) = 3.42, p = .331$.

General Discussion

The present research revealed the complexity of cultural mismatch related to both hard and soft independence. To our knowledge, it is the first to examine how relational concerns influence coping and help seeking among diverse FGCS. Most notably, relational concerns (e.g., burdening others) discouraged disclosure and the use of social support and appeared to be a contributing factor to self-reliance. Although past research has demonstrated a cultural mismatch between university-based middle-class independence and family based working-class interdependence (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), our research uncovered a mismatch between soft and hard forms of independence in our FGCS sample. Participants embraced the desire to be self-expressive, develop and pursue personal interests, and gain a sense of freedom, all in keeping with soft independence priorities to explore, nurture, and express one's unique inner attributes (Kusserow, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). At the same time, participants shared the family pressure and motivation to be self-reliant, resilient, and emotionally stoic and tough, which aligns with hard independence values to survive and persevere (Kusserow, 2012).

Kusserow's work delineates how access to resources and social and cultural capital help to produce the class-based futures that are anticipated by wealthy versus working-class parents, leading to differences in child rearing rooted in hard versus soft independence values. However, in our sample, FGCS from both White and ethnic minority backgrounds simultaneously endorsed both types of independence that both encouraged an embrace of the self-expression oriented college experience as well as hindered the use of support and resources to help cope with difficulties. In particular, hard independence appears to be associated with self-reliance in coping, which may be a potential cause and consequence of the underutilization of social support because of relational concerns.

FGCS from diverse backgrounds in the United States may enact both soft and hard independence. In a study that focused on 34 low-income Asian and Latinx American FGCS, Covarrubias et al. (2018) found that they demonstrated different forms of soft and hard independence. Their findings emphasized "gaining freedom, becoming self-expressive, pursuing their individual interests, and becoming mature" as well as "being resilient, being self-reliant, being tough, being mature, and break tradition" (respectively, for the types of independence, pp. 1–2). In contrast to their results, our findings are more consistent with Kusserow's (2012) conception of social class differences based on fieldwork studying children and their families living in Manhattan and Queens, NY. Middle-class norms focus on emotion-directed self-expression and self-exploration. In contrast, working-class norms center on a survival-oriented form of self-reliance, self-resilience, and hard work related to perseverance and discipline (Kusserow, 2012). In effect, the present findings make a unique contribution to the extant literature on cultural mismatch by illuminating self-reliance as tied to social class survival and to concerns about problem disclosure jeopardizing close social relationships.

The present research contributes novel insights about the relational consequences of problem disclosure for FGCS and the complexity of cultural mismatch. There remain caveats that should be recognized. Although our research design involved students who self-identified as FGCS, we recognize that we did not limit our samples to only low-income students, though we note that the

vast majority of participants (95%) reported receiving financial aid. Income may not necessarily indicate a lower-status occupation. More important, levels of educational attainment may be better indicators of social class, because of the correspondence between education levels and self-descriptions of working class and middle class; individuals without a 4-year college or higher degree tend to characterize themselves as working class (Lareau & Conley, 2008, as cited in Stephens et al., 2014). Moreover, the contrast between the present qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that future research should examine the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and social class using multiple methods, and in the case of quantitative research, with larger samples to detect effects (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). While there were some moderate to large effects in the quantitative White-Ethnic Minority group comparisons, the sample sizes were not sufficiently large enough to conduct more advanced quantitative analyses and additional ethnic subgroup analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data. On a related note, examining group comparisons involving continuing-generation students and how cultural norms may vary by types of groups and academic settings would benefit future research. Lastly, further research is also needed to determine the extent to which FGCS's preference for self-reliance is an expression of independence, by acting self-sufficient, relative to an act of interdependence, given they are responsive to relational concerns.

Campus-based initiatives and strategies to assist FGCS should take into account both cultural nuances and cultural barriers within the context of students' familial class-based norms and racial/ethnic identity. Perhaps most compelling is an emerging body of work showing the effectiveness of various interventions for closing the gap between first- and continuing-generation students; these interventions all focus in some way on reframing the cultural norms of higher education to be more inclusive of interdependent norms and to value diverse social class experiences (e.g., Stephens et al., 2014, 2015). Indeed, interventions that specifically address the two-prongs of hard and soft independence—and help reframe the mobilization of support and connection with others as being part of the self-exploration and self-expression journey—may be especially meaningful for students from working-class backgrounds. Furthermore, the present findings highlight the significance of and need for campus-based programs that address the college experience for FGCS, provide professional development opportunities, and pair FGCS with faculty mentors. Outreach efforts need to be culturally tailored to address the underutilization of support, preference for self-reliance, and cultural factors tied to different forms of independence and interdependence that deter diverse FGCS from using support.

Conclusion

Although prior research on cultural mismatch underscores the negative consequences of a mismatch between independence and interdependence (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), this mismatch may be attenuated in some respects. The present qualitative findings provide a unique and complex picture of the cultural patterning of social support driven by both interdependence (prioritizing others' needs) and hard independence (self-reliance and resilience), but not soft independence (self-expression). The findings suggest that hard independence and interdependence connected to relational concerns influenced coping and contributed to

self-reliance and the underutilization of explicit social support among FGCS. Universities are encouraged to promote culturally sensitive models of help seeking and frame help seeking in ways that appeal to FGCS.

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