Movin’ on up (to College): First-Generation College Students’ Experiences With Family Achievement Guilt

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As the first in their families to attend college, first-generation college students (FGCs) experience a discrepancy between the opportunities available to them and those available to their non-college-educated family members that elicits family achievement guilt. The present studies examined family achievement guilt among an ethnically diverse sample of FGCs and continuing-generation college students (CGCs), those whose parents attended college (Studies 1 and 2), and tested a strategy to alleviate such guilt (Study 2). In Study 1, on open-ended and closed-ended measures, FGCs (N = 53) reported more guilt than CGCs (N = 68), and Latinos (N = 60) reported more guilt than Whites (N = 61). Latino FGCs reported more family achievement guilt than the other 3 groups. In Study 2, we examined whether reflecting on a time when one helped family would alleviate family achievement guilt for FGCs. Specifically, FGCs (N = 58) and CGCs (N = 125) described a time they helped their family with a problem (help condition) or did not describe an example (control), then completed the guilt measure. Analyses revealed that (a) consistent with Study 1, FGCs reported higher guilt than CGCs and minorities reported more guilt than Whites, and (b) FGCs in the help condition reported significantly less guilt than FGCs in the control condition and reported no differences in guilt from CGCs across conditions. Finally, perceptions of family struggle mediated this relationship such that reflecting on helping one’s family led to perceiving less family struggle, which led to less family achievement guilt for FGCs.

*Keywords:* family achievement guilt, first-generation college students, interdependence, cultural mismatching

My parents have greatly suffered in the course of time. I have such a connection with my family that I have felt much guilt coming to the university. I feel that I have such a luxury with independence and they are suffering everyday. These thoughts have made me consider dropping out of college and start working full-time to aide my family.

(First-generation college student, 19 years old)

I’ve always experienced [guilt], not only in college but in high school as well. My mother didn’t even finish junior high and I’m the only one in my family to finish high school, as well as go on college. It’s been difficult because there are many times when I have no one to relate to what I’m going through. (First-generation college student, 18 years old)

Going away to college is often the first step for first-generation college students (FGCs; i.e., those who are the first in their families to attend college) to achieve a higher social class (Lubrano, 2003). As the opening quotes suggest, however, this transition to college creates uncertainty and conflict because it highlights economic and cultural discrepancies between the working-class home environment and the middle-class university environment (Day & Newburger, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Piorkowski (1983), for example, theorized that because of their academic success, low-income African American FGCs reported feeling like “survivors” because they “escaped” adversity in the home environment (e.g., alcoholism, financial struggles, etc.). In other words, they experienced guilt because they earned the opportunity to attend college and, in doing so, surpassed the achievements of close others in their working-class home context.

This experience of being the lone person to surpass the achievements of family members has been referred to as survivor guilt (O’Connor, Berry, Weiss, Schweitzer, & Sevier, 2000; Piorkowski, 1983; Whitten, 1992). Piorkowski argued that when students were more successful than their families, they grappled with the stress caused by a realization that family members did not have the same chance of attending college (i.e., that inequalities exist in society) and that family members were struggling at home while they experienced more privileges and pursued more opportunities in college. FGCs were left to simultaneously feel proud of their academic successes and concerned about how going away to college impacted their family (Piorkowski, 1983; Whitten, 1992).

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1 The term “survivor guilt” has been applied to individuals who have survived natural disasters or large-scale atrocities (e.g., Hiroshima, Nazi concentration camps; Danieli, 1985, 1988; Neiderland, 1961), to individuals with anorexia nervosa (Friedman, 1985), and to veterans of the Vietnam War (Glover, 1984).
The purpose of the current research is to empirically test the notion that attending college elicits guilt, in particular, guilt related to surpassing the achievements of family members.

Research on Survivor Guilt in University Settings

While Piorkowski (1983) is the first to apply the concept of survivor guilt to the university setting, she offers no empirical test of the concept. In fact, to date, no empirical evidence for survivor guilt among FGCs has been established. Notably, however, there is both theoretical and empirical evidence of the experience of survivor guilt for one ethnic minority group, namely African Americans. Whitten (1992) described, for example, how African American students who surpassed the academic achievements of family members or peers in the home context were likely to experience “survivor conflict,” a broader term than Piorkowski’s concept, which the author argued could manifest into experiences of guilt, ambivalence, anxiety, and depression. Spurlock (1985) contended that African American adults experienced a psychological numbing, later to be described as a symptom of survivor guilt, when they succeeded beyond family members. Austin, Clark, Ross, and Taylor (2009) provided the only empirical test for survivor guilt and found that it was positively related to depressive symptoms for African American college students. Overall, while the research suggests that survivor guilt may influence the experiences of first-generation and ethnic minority college students, the mechanism underlying the experience, and the extent to which it exists for different groups has not yet been fully examined.

Take Austin and colleagues’ (2009) study showing a relationship between survivor guilt and depressive symptoms as an example. The study used a subscale of the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ; O’Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) that was tested on and validated with community samples (Study 1) and with a college sample that was largely White with no attention to first-generation or continuing-generation status (Study 2). Additionally, the IGQ subscale items focus on guilt related to strangers who are struggling (e.g., “It does not disturb me to see very poor people”; “I am able to retain my good humor even after seeing beggars or homeless people”). Given the lack of a comparison group in the Austin and colleagues study, we do not know if this guilt is unique to African American college students, who may or may not be FGCs, or applies to college students in general. Create new sentence: We also do not know whether the experience of guilt relates to general issues of inequality, as the IGQ would suggest, or whether it is specific to one’s family members struggling. That is, does attending college make all students aware of the privileges and opportunities they are receiving compared to those that do not attend college or does attending college remind working-class minority students of the struggles faced by family members they perceive to have left behind? Further research is needed to determine whether the experience of guilt is related to social inequality in general or, as Piorkowski (1983) suggests, to surpassing one’s family more specifically.

Family Achievement Guilt: Theoretical Contributions and Hypotheses

In this paper, we contend that for ethnic minority and first-generation college students, guilt in the university setting is more related to surpassing the achievements of family members, what we term family achievement guilt, than related to strangers who are struggling. We theorize that what undergirds this theoretical assumption is a cultural focus on important others. Research reveals, for example, that both first-generation and ethnic minority students (e.g., Latinos, Native Americans) tend to prioritize interdependence with close others, such as family, more than continuing-generation (i.e., students who have at least one parent with a college degree; Stephens et al., 2012) and White students (Cuéllar & Maldonado, 1995; Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Gaines et al., 1997; Shim, Barber, Card, Xiao, & Serido, 2010; Triandis, 1995). They also interact more with family members (Argyle, 1994; Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), focus more on the needs of others (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011), live closer to extended family members (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Kamo, 2000; Sena-Rivera, 1979), and prefer the constant presence of family members in their daily activities (Keefe, 1984) than their continuing-generation and White counterparts.

Given the cultural focus on family and attending to others, going to college to pursue one’s own path may be fraught with more conflict for first-generation and ethnic minority students than for continuing-generation and White students because of clashing cultural norms and values (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Lubrano, 2003; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Stephens et al., 2012). Cultural matching theory, for example, reveals that college students are advantaged when their model of self as independent (e.g., continuing-generation, White students) matches the university norm of independence and are disadvantaged when their model of self as interdependent (e.g., first-generation, Latino students) does not match (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013; Fryberg et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). In independent cultural contexts, becoming a “good” adult requires establishing one’s self as autonomous and separate from others (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007), including one’s parents, by moving out, getting a job, and/or going away to college. While interdependent cultural contexts also expect individuals to engage in some of these acts, there is an underlying expectation that the individual will remain connected and will continue to contribute to the family (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Valdez, 1996).

With respect to family achievement guilt, cultural matching theory suggests that students from independent backgrounds are less likely than students from interdependent backgrounds to report feeling guilty for pursuing one’s individual pursuits, such as going to college, because this behavior is not in conflict with their model of self (Stephens et al., 2012). To illustrate, in response to being asked about experiences with guilt in college, one White continuing-generation college student wrote, “I’m looking out for number one. I would feel guilty if I didn’t succeed at whatever it is I want to succeed at. To feel guilt for someone else’s failures is pretty stupid, especially since it is not directly your fault.” For students from interdependent backgrounds, however, the expectation to remain connected to and responsible for close others may place going away to college in conflict with their model of self. As a result of the cultural conflict, these students, in theory, should report feeling more guilt about pursuing their individual goals in lieu of their family’s situation. Indeed, when asked about experiences with guilt, an ethnic minority first-generation college student wrote, “I have such a connection with my family that I have felt
much guilt coming to the university. I feel that I have such a luxury with independence and they are suffering everyday.” In the present study, we anticipate that first-generation and ethnic minority college students will report more guilt than continuing-generation and White college students. At issue, however, is what experiences will students who are both first-generation and ethnic minority report? Extrapolating from culture matching theory, we might anticipate that, because ethnic minority FGCs mismatch on two levels, they will report more guilt from going away to college than White FGCs who mismatch on one level.

Overview of Studies

The purpose of the current research is to examine the nature and experiences of guilt for a diverse sample of FGCs and CGCs. Specifically, in Study 1, utilizing the survivor guilt subscale as well as open-ended and closed-ended measures of family achievement guilt, we will examine whether first-generation and, in this case, Latino college students will report more general survivor guilt or family achievement guilt relative to their continuing-generation and White counterparts. Based on the Austin and colleagues (2009) findings, we predict that first-generation and Latino college students will report more survivor guilt (i.e., based on the IQG subscale) than continuing-generation and White college students. Alternatively, given the research on culture matching (Stephens et al., 2012) and on first-generation and ethnic minority students being family focused (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sena-Rivera, 1979), we suspect that Austin and colleagues, using the IGQ subscale, may have tapped into something different than general survivor guilt. That is, we anticipate that when their sample read about “strangers who are struggling,” they thought about close others at home who struggle. Using a measure of family achievement guilt to test this supposition, we predict that first-generation and Latino college students will report more family achievement guilt than continuing-generation and White college students. Finally, in terms of students who identify as both first-generation and Latino, we will examine how engaging both cultural contexts impacts guilt. Compared to students who engage in only one of these cultural contexts (i.e., identify as White first-generation or Latino continuing-generation), we anticipate that first-generation and Latino college students will report more guilt on open-ended and closed-ended measures and on the survivor guilt measure than continuing-generation and White college students. Additionally, students who are both first-generation and Latino will report higher guilt than the other three cultural groups.

Method

Participants. One hundred twenty-one undergraduate students from introduction to psychology courses at the University of Arizona participated in exchange for course credit. One item was used to determine college status (i.e., first-generation college student or continuing-generation college student). Participants were asked, “Are you the first person in your family to go to college?” and checked “yes” or “no.” If students checked “yes” that they were first in their families to go to college, they were identified as FGCs. If students checked “no,” they were categorized as CGCs. We had students identify which family members graduated from college to ensure that they were, in fact, CGCs (i.e., students identified that at least one parent graduated from college). Fifty-three students were identified as FGCs (32 female, 21 male; 17 White, 36 Latino; M age = 19.08, SD = 1.17), and 68 were identified as CGCs (44 female, 24 male; 44 White, 24 Latino; M age = 18.90, SD = .97). On an 8-point income scale (1 = less than $9,999; 2 = $10,000–$19,999; 3 = $20,000–$29,999; 4 = $30,000–$49,999; 5 = $50,000–$74,999; 6 = $75,000–$99,999; 7 = $100,000–$200,000; 8 = more than $200,000), FGCs reported lower family income (M = 3.52, SD = 1.74) than CGCs (M = 5.50, SD = 1.91), M (1, 115) = 19.99, p = .00, and Latinos reported lower family income (M = 3.47, SD = 1.69) than Whites (M = 5.78, SD = 1.77), F (1, 115) = 36.25, p = .00. The College Status × Ethnic Group interaction was not significant, p = .82.

A 2 (College Status: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Latino, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on age. While there was no main effect of college status (p = .69), there was a significant main effect of ethnic group status such that Latino students reported being older (M = 19.37, SD = 1.24) than White students (M = 18.59, SD = .67), F(121) = 16.44, p = .00. The interaction effect was not significant, F(121) = .15, p = .70. Given the significant age differences between the ethnic groups, age will be used as a covariate in the analyses.

Procedure and materials. In compliance with the University of Arizona Internal Review Board, participants completed the
questionnaires on family achievement guilt—open-ended and closed-ended—and survivor guilt. Participation in the study took approximately 20 min. The survey materials were presented in the following order:

**Open-ended family achievement guilt.** Participants read a description of family achievement guilt and then indicated whether or not they experienced this particular phenomenon. The description read as follows:

In university settings, sometimes students feel guilt for having succeeded when similar others, such as parents or siblings, have failed to succeed. They may ask themselves, “Why should I succeed when my family has failed to do so?” Have you ever fully enjoyed your success because I fear something bad is just around the corner,” “It makes me uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with,” and “I feel uncomfortable if other people envy me for what I have.” Mean survivor guilt scores were computed. Cronbach’s alpha was .61.

**Family achievement guilt questionnaire.** We adapted three items from the survivor guilt subscale to reflect family achievement guilt. Specifically, we added “my siblings or parents” to the end of each item. The three items included the following: “I conceal or minimize my academic successes because I am more successful than my siblings or parents,” “I feel uncomfortable if I am more successful than my siblings or parents,” and “I feel uncomfortable because I have more academic opportunities than my siblings or parents.” Mean family achievement guilt scores were computed (M = 2.46, SD = .76). Higher mean scores denoted more family achievement guilt. Cronbach’s alpha was .61.

**Survivor guilt.** Survivor guilt was assessed using the 22-item Survivor Guilt subscale from the IGQ (O’Connor et al., 1997). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the survivor guilt items (M = 2.81, SD = .41), on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included the following: “It makes me uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with,” and “I feel uncomfortable if other people envy me for what I have.” Mean survivor guilt scores were computed. Higher mean scores denoted more survivor guilt. Cronbach’s alpha was .76.

**Family achievement guilt subscale.** A 2 (Ethnic Group: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Latino, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on survivor guilt with age (M = .30) as a covariate. Contrary to our predictions, no significant main effects for college status (M = .53) or ethnic group (M = .26) were found, and there was no significant interaction effect (M = .18). That is, there were no differences between Latino FGCs (M = 2.91, SD = .43), White CGCs (M = 2.75, SD = .50), and White FGCs (M = 2.73, SD = .40) and White CGCs (M = 2.79, SD = .32; all ps > .15).

**Results**

**Open-ended family achievement guilt.** Two research assistants, who were uninvolved in data collection and blind to both the study hypotheses and to the college status of the respondents, independently coded the open-ended guilt responses. If the participant signified a guilt experience (e.g., “yes, I have experienced this type of guilt”; “yes, I feel that this applies because I am the only one out of my family who has gone to college”; “I have experienced this because my family has never had the opportunity or resources to go to college”), then the response was assigned a 1. Conversely, if the participant indicated that guilt was absent (e.g., “no, I have not experienced this type of guilt”; “no, I am here because I want to be here”; “no, my family has succeeded because they worked hard”; “no, I have never even thought about feeling guilty”), then the response was assigned a 0. The two coders were reliable (kappa coefficient = .85). After calculating the reliabilities and determining coder reliability, the coders discussed discrepancies to determine the appropriate category.

A chi-square analysis was used to test for differences in reported experiences of guilt. As hypothesized, a main effect of college status was found, χ²(1, 121) = 8.78, p < .01, such that more FGCs reported experiencing guilt (34%) than CGCs (7.4%). Also as anticipated, a main effect of ethnic group was found, χ²(1, 121) = 4.54, p < .03, such that Latinos (30%) reported more experiences with family achievement guilt than Whites (8.2%).

These main effects were qualified by a significant College Status × Ethnic Group interaction, χ²(1, 121) = 6.86, p < .01. Partitioned chi-square analyses revealed that Latino FGCs were significantly more likely to report experiencing family achievement guilt (36.1%) than White CGCs (0%), χ²(1, 80) = 1.90, p < .00, and marginally more than Latino CGCs (20.8%), χ²(1, 60) = 1.60, p < .10. Latino and White FGCs (29.4%) did not differ in their reports of family achievement guilt, χ²(1, 53) = .23, p < .32. Furthermore, White FGCs were more likely to report experiencing family achievement guilt than White CGCs, χ²(1, 61) = 1.41, p < .00, but did not differ from Latino CGCs, χ²(1, 41) = .40, p < .26. Finally, Latino CGCs reported experiencing family achievement guilt more than White CGCs, χ²(1, 68) = 9.89, p < .00.

**Survivor Guilt subscale.** A 2 (Ethnic Group: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Latino, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on survivor guilt with age (M = .30) as a covariate. Contrary to our predictions, no significant main effects for college status (M = .53) or ethnic group (M = .26) were found, and there was no significant interaction effect (M = .18). That is, there were no differences between Latino FGCs (M = 2.91, SD = .43), Latino CGCs (M = 2.75, SD = .50), and White FGCs (M = 2.73, SD = .40) and White CGCs (M = 2.79, SD = .32; all ps > .15).

**Family achievement guilt items.** A 2 (Ethnic Group: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Latino, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on family achievement guilt with age (M = .30) as a covariate. Contrary to our predictions, no significant main effects for college status (M = .53) or ethnic group (M = .26) were found, and there was no significant interaction effect (M = .18). That is, there were no differences between Latino FGCs (M = 2.91, SD = .43), Latino CGCs (M = 2.75, SD = .50), and White FGCs (M = 2.73, SD = .40) and White CGCs (M = 2.79, SD = .32; all ps > .15).

**Family achievement guilt items.** A 2 (College Status: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Latino, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on survivor guilt with age (M = .30) as a covariate. Contrary to our predictions, no significant main effects for college status (M = .53) or ethnic group (M = .26) were found, and there was no significant interaction effect (M = .18). That is, there were no differences between Latino FGCs (M = 2.91, SD = .43), Latino CGCs (M = 2.75, SD = .50), and White FGCs (M = 2.73, SD = .40) and White CGCs (M = 2.79, SD = .32; all ps > .15).
Discussion

Study 1 revealed that first-generation and Latino college students reported more family achievement guilt than continuing-generation and White college students. Latino FGCs, in particular, reported more family achievement guilt compared to the other three cultural groups, suggesting that belonging to two different interdependent cultural contexts yields additive effects on experiences with guilt. This finding is consistent with our predictions and with Piotrowski’s (1983) theory of guilt for African American FGCs. Contrary to expectations, we found no college status or ethnic group differences on the general survivor guilt scale, as measured by the IGQ. In effect, these findings suggest that for first-generation and Latino college students, those who tend to prioritize family, guilt related to surmounting struggling family members is more relevant than general feelings of guilt related to surmounting strangers or to social inequality.

Study 2

Building on Study 1 findings, the objectives of Study 2 are threefold. First, to replicate Study 1 findings and to examine generalizability, Study 2 utilizes the family achievement guilt questionnaire from Study 1 with a more diverse sample of ethnic minority college students (i.e., Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans). Consistent with Study 1, we hypothesize that first-generation and ethnic minority college students will report more family achievement guilt than continuing-generation and White college students, and that ethnic minority FGCs will report more guilt than White FGCs and White and ethnic minority CGCs.

Second, we test an initial strategy to alleviate family achievement guilt for first-generation and ethnic minority college students. Prior to completing the guilt questionnaire, students are randomly assigned to either an experimental “help family” condition where they reflect on a time they are able to help a family member with a problem or a control condition where they are not asked to reflect. Despite the established benefits of reflection tasks (see self-affirmation theory; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009), we opted to pair the reflection task with a culture-relevant framing because recent research reveals that such a framing is more beneficial for students from interdependent backgrounds than using a culture-irrelevant framing (e.g., Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fyberg, 2014; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). Given that both first-generation and ethnic minority college students stem from interdependent cultural contexts, we hypothesize that in the help family condition they will report less family achievement guilt than first-generation and ethnic minority college students in the control condition, but will report no differences in family achievement guilt compared to CGCs in the help family and control conditions.

Finally, Piotrowski (1983) theorized that ethnic minority FGCs experienced guilt because going away to college involved leaving family members in aversive conditions. To test this assertion, we examine whether perceptions of family struggle help to explain or mediate experiences with family achievement guilt. First, we predict that first-generation and ethnic minority college students will report perceiving more family struggle than continuing-generation and White college students, and that these perceptions will be positively related to family achievement guilt, such that greater struggle will be associated with increased guilt. Second, in terms of the proposed strategy, we hypothesize that reflecting on a time when FGCs help their family will lessen thoughts about family struggle, which, in turn, as the theory suggests, will decrease reports of family achievement guilt.

Method

Participants. One hundred eighty-three undergraduate students from introduction to psychology courses at the University of Arizona participated in exchange for course credit. Using the same method as Study 1, 58 students were identified as FGCs (40 female, 18 male; 32 White, 26 minority [25 Latino; 1 African American]; M Age = 18.88, SD = 1.09), and 125 students were identified as CGCs (93 female, 32 male; 62 White, 63 minority [46 Latino, 14 African American, 3 Native]; M Age = 19.44, SD = 2.69). Utilizing the same income scale from Study 1, FGCs reported lower family income (M = 3.79, SD = 1.56) than CGCs (M = 5.04, SD = 1.84), F(1, 177) = 23.98, p = .00, and ethnic minority students reported lower family income (M = 4.06, SD = 1.52) than White students (M = 5.20, SD = 1.96), F(1, 177) = 19.28, p = .00. The College Status × Ethnic Group interaction was not significant, p = .85.

A 2 (College Status: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Minority, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on age. No main effects of college status (p = .11) or ethnic group status (p = .31) were found, and the interaction effect was not significant, F(1, 183) = .07, p = .78. Given this, age will not be used as a covariate.

Procedure and Materials

In compliance with the University of Arizona Internal Review Board, participants were randomly assigned to reflect on a time when they helped a family member who was struggling with a problem or to not reflect (control condition). Specifically, in the help family condition, participants were asked to “take a few moments to think about the immediate members of your family (e.g., parents, siblings)” and to “briefly describe a time in which your family was struggling with a problem and you were able to help them with the problem.” Participants were then asked to complete the dependent measures. In the control condition, students did not engage in a reflective task and simply completed the dependent measures. The study took participants approximately 20 min to complete. The survey measures were presented in the following order:

Family achievement guilt was assessed using the same three items as in Study 1. Mean family achievement guilt scores were computed (M = 1.87, SD = .81). Higher mean scores denoted more family achievement guilt. Cronbach’s alpha was .65.

Perceptions of family struggle were assessed using two items. On the first item, students were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with the following item: “Right now, I feel like my family (i.e., parents, siblings) is struggling.” On the second item, students were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 (very good living conditions) to 5 (very bad living conditions), the following item: “How would you describe the overall living conditions of the immediate members of your family (i.e., parents, siblings)?” Mean
scores were computed ($M = 2.31; SD = 1.02$). Higher mean scores denoted perceiving more family struggle. Cronbach’s alpha was .67.

**Results**

**Family achievement guilt by experimental condition.** A 2 (College Status: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: White, Minority) × 2 (Experimental Condition: Help Family, Control) between-subjects ANOVA on family achievement guilt was conducted. Consistent with Study 1, a main effect of college status was found, $F(1, 183) = 9.31, p < .01$, such that FGCs reported more family achievement guilt ($M = 2.11, SD = .92$) than CGCs ($M = 1.76, SD = .74$). Also consistent with Study 1, a main effect of ethnic group was found, $F(1, 183) = 4.03, p < .05$, such that minority students reported more family achievement guilt ($M = 1.97, SD = .81$) than White students ($M = 1.78, SD = .80$). Finally, as hypothesized, a main effect for experimental condition was found, $F(1, 183) = 11.56, p < .01$, such that those in the help family condition reported less family achievement guilt ($M = 1.74, SD = .75$) than those in the control condition ($M = 2.02, SD = .86$).

The main effects were further qualified by a College Status × Experimental Condition interaction, $F(1, 183) = 6.12, p < .02$. See Figure 1 for means and standard errors. Post hoc comparisons revealed that, as hypothesized, FGCs in the control condition reported significantly more family achievement guilt than ($M = 2.48, SD = .91$) than FGCs in the help family condition ($M = 1.74, SD = .81$), $F = 11.68, p < .01$, and than CGCs in the control condition, $F = 14.01, p < .01$. As anticipated, family achievement guilt was alleviated, such that no differences were found between FGCs in the help family condition and CGCs in both the help family ($M = 1.71, SD = .71$) and control ($M = 1.81, SD = .76$) conditions (all $p$s > .44).

Unlike Study 1, the College Status × Ethnic Group interaction was not significant for family achievement guilt, $p = .60$. Similarly, the Ethnic Group Status × Experimental Condition interaction ($p = .29$) and the College Status × Ethnic Group × Experimental Condition three-way interaction, $F(1, 183) = .08, p = .60$, were not significant.

**Perceptions of family struggle.** A 2 (College Status: First-Generation College, Continuing-Generation College) × 2 (Ethnic Group: Minority, White) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on perceptions of family struggle. A main effect of college status was found, $F(1, 182) = 18.68, p = .00$, such that FGCs reported perceiving more family struggle ($M = 2.76, SD = .94$) than CGCs ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.00$). A main effect of ethnic group was also found, $F(1, 182) = 3.94, p < .05$, such that ethnic minority students reported perceiving more family struggle ($M = 2.46, SD = .99$) than White students ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.04$). The College Status × Ethnic Group interaction was not significant, $F(1, 182) = .004, p > .94$.

**Perceptions of family struggle and family achievement guilt.** Pearson correlations revealed a significant positive relationship between family achievement guilt and perceptions of family struggle, $r = .278, p = .00$. Perceiving more family struggle was related to more family achievement guilt.

Next, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether perceptions of family struggle mediated the relationship between college status and family achievement guilt. Following the procedures outlined by the Preacher and Hayes (2008) SPSS macro, we conducted a mediation analysis using 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Based on this bootstrapping procedure, a direct or indirect effect is considered significant if the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero as a value (e.g., confidence interval from .11 to .47). The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .09, F(180) = 9.17, p < .001$. As predicted, the indirect pathway was significant, the point estimate was −.12 and the confidence interval [−.26 to −.04] did not contain zero. See Table 1 for regression coefficients for each pathway. The results revealed that perceptions of family struggle mediated the relationship between college status and family achievement guilt such that perceiving more family struggle led to more family achievement guilt for FGCs.

**Perceptions of family struggle and family achievement guilt by experimental condition: Mediated moderation.** Mediated moderation is an analytical approach by Baron and Kenny (1986) that involves testing the interaction effect of two variables (X and W) on a mediator (M) and an outcome variable (Y). Given that perceptions of family struggle were related to family achievement guilt, we used mediated moderation analyses to examine whether a College Status × Experimental Condition interaction effect impacted the mediating variable (e.g., perceptions of family struggle) and the outcome variable (e.g., family achievement guilt). Again, following the procedures outlined by the Preacher and Hayes (2008) SPSS macro, we conducted the mediated moderation analysis using 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

The mediated moderation model included College Status × Experimental Condition as the independent variable, perceptions of family struggle as the mediator, and family achievement guilt as the dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .09, F(180) = 8.46, p < .001$. As predicted, the indirect pathway was significant, the point estimate was −.08 and the confidence interval [−.19 to −.02] did not contain zero. See Table 2 for regression coefficients for each pathway. The results revealed that perceptions of family struggle mediated the College Status × Experimental Condition interaction on family achievement guilt such that FGCs who reflected on a time they helped their family

![Figure 1. Study 2: College Status × Experimental Condition interaction group differences on family achievement guilt.](image-url)
(help condition) reported perceiving less family struggle, which, in turn, led to less family achievement guilt.

**Discussion**

The Study 2 findings replicated the Study 1 results such that, as Piorkowski (1983) theorized, first-generation and ethnic minority college students reported significantly more family achievement guilt than continuing-generation and White college students. Notably, however, Study 2 did not replicate the College Status × Ethnic Group interaction on family achievement guilt. We also found that, consistent with Piorkowski’s theory, FGCs reported perceiving more family struggle than CGCs, indicating that the guilt may be because they are leaving family members in aversive conditions. Taken together, in a more direct test of Piorkowski’s idea, we found that perceptions of family struggle mediated the relationship between college status and family achievement such that perceiving more family struggle led to more family achievement guilt for FGCs.

In terms of the proposed strategy, Study 2 revealed that reflecting on a time that one helped a family member with a problem alleviated family achievement guilt for FGCs. Specifically, consistent with past research on the benefits of culture relevant reflective tasks (Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, 2014; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005), FGCs in the help condition reported less family achievement guilt compared to FGCs in the control condition, and, as anticipated, no differences were found relative to CGCs across conditions. Finally, as hypothesized, mediated moderation was found such that FGCs who reflected on helping a family member reported perceiving less family struggle, and subsequently, less family achievement guilt. In summary, the research presented here provides empirical support that family achievement guilt exists for first-generation and ethnic minority college students and that colleges can do something to help alleviate these feelings.

**General Discussion**

The current research examined the nature and experiences of guilt for an ethnically diverse sample of FGCs and CGCs (Studies 1 and 2) and provided an experimental strategy for reducing this guilt (Study 2). Study 1 revealed that, using both open-ended and closed-ended measures, FGCs reported more family achievement guilt than CGCs, and Latinos reported more family achievement guilt than Whites. Furthermore, consistent with Piorkowski (1983), who theorized that African American FGCs felt guilt while attending college because of family struggles, we found that students who identified as both Latino and first-generation were more likely to experience family achievement guilt than students who identified as Latino or first-generation separately. Finally, no college status or ethnic group differences were found on survivor guilt. These findings suggest that, for first-generation and Latino college students, experiences with guilt relate more to surpassing the achievements of family members than to general social inequality.

Replicating the findings of Study 1, Study 2 found that first-generation and ethnic minority college students reported more family achievement guilt than continuing-generation and White college students. Contrary to Study 1, however, the College Status × Ethnic Group interaction on family achievement guilt was not significant. That is, there were no differences between ethnic minority and White FGCs (p = .13), yet both of these groups were marginally different from ethnic minority (p < .06) and White (p < .07) CGCs. A closer look at the data suggests that White and ethnic minority FGCs in Study 2 appeared more similar in terms of guilt experiences than White and Latino FGCs in Study 1. One potential explanation for the difference is family income status.

**Table 1**

**Mediation Analysis With Perceived Family Struggle as a Mediator Between College Status and Family Achievement Guilt**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>MV</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Effect of IV on MV (a path)</th>
<th>Direct effect of IV on DV (b path)</th>
<th>Total effect of IV on DV (c path)</th>
<th>Direct effect of IV on DV (c’ path)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College status</td>
<td>Perceived family struggle</td>
<td>Family achievement guilt</td>
<td>−.655*** (−4.20)</td>
<td>.190*** (3.22)</td>
<td>−.350** (−2.75)</td>
<td>−.225 (−1.73)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Numbers represent unstandardized beta coefficients and numbers inside parentheses represent t values. IV = independent variable; MV = mediating variable; DV = dependent variable.

**Table 2**

**Mediated Moderation Analyses With Perceived Family Struggle as a Mediator of the College Status × Experimental Condition Interaction on Family Achievement Guilt**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>MV</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Effect of IV on MV (a path)</th>
<th>Direct effect of IV on DV (b path)</th>
<th>Total effect of IV on DV (c path)</th>
<th>Direct effect of IV on DV (c’ path)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Status</td>
<td>Perceived family struggle</td>
<td>Family achievement guilt</td>
<td>−.398** (−2.52)</td>
<td>.207*** (3.59)</td>
<td>−.244* (−1.93)</td>
<td>−.161 (−1.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Numbers represent unstandardized beta coefficients and numbers inside parentheses represent t values. IV = independent variable; MV = mediating variable; DV = dependent variable.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
larger income gap existed between White ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.91$) and Latino ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.20$) FGCs in Study 1 (Cohen’s $d = 1.34$) than between White ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.66$) and ethnic minority ($M = 3.16, SD = 1.18$) FGCs in Study 2 (Cohen’s $d = .77$). In other words, given these income differences, we speculate that splitting White FGCs by income may yield cultural patterns similar to those found between first-generation and continuing-generation Latino college students, such that a lower income White first-generation college student may have similar experiences of family struggle and family achievement guilt as a Latino first-generation college student. Future work is needed to replicate the College Status × Ethnic Group interaction using groups with similar income gaps.

In addition, Study 2, revealed that when FGCs reflected on helping family, they subsequently reported less family achievement guilt compared to FGCs in the control (no reflection) condition and reported no differences in scores compared to CGCs. In other words, reflecting on helping family alleviated the difference in family achievement guilt between FGCs and CGCs. CGCs showed no differences in family achievement guilt across conditions. Lastly, the relationship between helping family and family achievement guilt was mediated by perceptions of family struggle such that when FGCs reflected on helping one’s family, this led to perceiving less family struggle, and subsequently, to less family achievement guilt.

Taken together, the studies presented here suggest that the experience associated with being the first in your family to attend college and to surpass the accomplishments of family members may impact the transition to college. As the number of FGCs increases on college campus (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005), understanding the psychological consequences of family achievement guilt has implications for how university faculty, staff, and administrators might approach helping them through the college transition in general. For example, many university campuses offer services to FGCs (i.e., national TRIO programs, MERITS, peer advising, tutoring) to help facilitate a smooth transition into the university. Yet, few of these services, if any, directly address the negative feelings associated with surpassing the achievements of one’s family and with leaving one’s family behind in struggling conditions.

The results also highlight a potential strategy for alleviating the consequences of a cultural conflict (e.g., family achievement guilt) that FGCs can experience in college. Specifically, reflecting on a time when FGCs helped their family with a problem led to perceiving less family struggle, which, in turn, led to less family achievement guilt. Future research is needed to determine whether such a strategy would provide long-term effects or would be helpful for intervening in struggles FGCs experience transitioning to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Similarly, by informing faculty and student life staff about the important role that family achievement guilt and, subsequently, “helping family” can play for FGCs, efforts can be developed to potentially alleviate family achievement guilt in the college setting.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Work**

While the current research is the first to empirically document and test the theory of family achievement guilt for an ethnically diverse sample of FGCs and CGCs, it is not without limitations. First, while we find that FGCs are likely to experience family achievement guilt, our sample of ethnic minority FGCs was predominantly comprised of Latino students. African Americans and Native Americans made up a small number of our ethnic group sample in Study 2. Future research is needed to examine, with larger numbers of ethnic minority students, whether there may be other culture-relevant framings that would help alleviate family achievement guilt for these groups. For example, Native Americans also engage in contexts that emphasize the role of close others (Fryberg & Markus, 2007), particularly one’s tribe, which may place them at risk for experiencing tribe or community guilt. Future research could test the cultural specificity of guilt for different ethnic minority groups.

Second, although we find college status and ethnic group differences on family achievement guilt, the reported group means fall below the midpoint on the scale. One explanation for these low means may reside with the nature of admitting feelings of guilt. Prior research reveals that mainstream universities are guided by norms of independence, which means that the “good” or “right” way to be a student is to be separate from or less influenced by others (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Li, 2003; Stephens et al., 2012). Given this norm, American college students in general would be less inclined in a university setting to report feeling guilt because it highlights a cultural mismatch in an independent setting. Yet, despite the norms and pressures of being independent in the college setting, first-generation and ethnic minority college students still reported higher levels of guilt than continuing-generation and White college students, demonstrating that this difference and experience is meaningful. Future work is needed to examine how perceptions of the independent cultural values embedded within the university influence first-generation and ethnic minority college students’ willingness to report or admit that this more relational, interdependent factor is influencing their college experience.

Third, we find that, compared to the control condition, reflecting on helping family members lessened perceptions of family struggle, and subsequently, family achievement guilt. While this finding is consistent with other work demonstrating the benefits of reflecting on important values (Cohen et al., 2006, 2009) and the benefits of using culture-relevant framings (Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, 2014; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005), in this study, we cannot specify whether reflecting on a family-related example or reflecting, in general, is what lessened family achievement guilt. Future research should examine a control condition in which students engage in a nonfamily related reflection task to determine if the reflection has to be family specific in order to impact experiences with family achievement guilt.

Finally, future research is needed to examine the different ways in which family achievement guilt can psychologically and behaviorally manifest in college students. Past research has focused on depressive symptoms as one psychological manifestation of guilt (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2014; Piorkowski, 1983), yet this guilt may also translate into positive prosocial behaviors such as increased helping. For example, family achievement guilt may motivate some students to pursue academic majors that focus on helping others in order to compensate for following individual goals and pursuits instead of taking care of close others. Additionally, does family achievement guilt influence academic performance or college retention for FGCs? A longitudinal study that
examines the effects of family achievement guilt on academic outcomes is needed.

Conclusions

While the experience of going to college and navigating a new university system can be a challenge for all students regardless of college status background, FGCs, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, face an additional barrier in this process. As our findings reveal, FGCs grapple with potential feelings of guilt for surpassing the accomplishments of close others, which has consequences for how these students adjust to college. For example, as our opening quotes suggest, one student considered “dropping out of college” in order to better help one’s family, while another student confessed to feeling isolated on campus. In this way, the experience of family achievement guilt for FGCs is an important factor to study in order to help these students continue to succeed at the college-level and beyond. Continuing to find ways to alleviate family achievement guilt and practical ways of implementing these strategies is crucial to the academic success and psychological wellbeing of FGCs.

References


