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Indigenous Women College Students' Perspectives on College, Work, and Family

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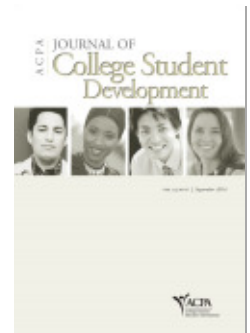
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Indigenous Women College Students' Perspectives on College, Work, and Family

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Native American and First Nations (herein collectively referred to as Indigenous) women college students are faced with the challenge of balancing their cultural imperatives and the demands of the dominant Western culture in family, school, and work/employment roles. In order to explore these women's experiences and perspectives, this study analyzed unstructured qualitative interviews of 11 Native American and 9 First Nations female college students. The themes that resulted from the hermeneutic analysis were (a) honoring Indigenous culture and community, (b) living in two worlds, (c) pursuing individual fulfillment and goals, and (d) acknowledging the importance and influence of family.

College graduation has become an increasingly important contribution to career success. For many culturally diverse students, however, academic persistence rates are much lower than for those from majority backgrounds. This is particularly true for Native American and First Nations students (herein referred to collectively as *Indigenous* unless group-specific research is cited). Jackson and Turner (2004) reported that, as of 2004, only 9.3% of Native Americans held a bachelor's degree or higher as opposed to 20.3% of the general population. Mendelson (2004) reported that 60% of First Nations people age 20 to 24 who lived on a reserve had not yet completed high

school or obtained a comparable certificate such as a General Education Diploma (GED). According to Statistics Canada and the 2006 census, only 9% of First Nations women obtained a university degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate) as opposed to 23% of women in the general population (Milligan & Bougie, 2009). Despite evidence of academic ability, postsecondary dropout rates were higher for Native American and First Nations students than for any other cultural or ethnic group (Freeman & Fox, 2005; Mendelson, 2004; Reddy, 1993).

One obstacle to academic success for Indigenous college students is the perception that they must live in two worlds (Juntunen et al., 2001)—that of their tradition and that of the “White campus” (Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988, p. 13). For example, Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) found that successful Native American college students reared on reservations reported that getting through college required them to adapt to a different culture; these successful students also reported having kept a strong sense of their own culture.

Although relatively little research has explored Indigenous students' experiences, research on other culturally diverse groups has suggested multiple barriers and contributions to academic persistence. Financial concerns (Canabal, 1995; Laanan, 2000), differences in cultural and academic expectations (Huffman,

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Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Taylor & Olswang, 1997), academic and faculty support (Langdon & Clark, 1993; Mayo, Marguía, & Padilla, 1995), and insufficient academic preparation (Tierney, 1991; Westby & Rouse, 1993) greatly influence culturally diverse students' persistence. For example, Longerbeam, Sedlacek, and Alatorre (2004) found that Latino students were more likely than were non-Latino students to identify a lack of finances, academic stressors, and family obligations as barriers to finishing college. With respect to family influence, Clayton, Garcia, Underwood, McEndree, and Shepherd (1993) found that Mexican American students perceived their parents having greater influence on students' academic and occupational decisions than did their non-Mexican American counterparts.

Indigenous Women's Experiences

The transition to college and persistence to graduation may be particularly difficult for Indigenous women. Though information regarding the academic and career journeys of Indigenous women is limited, Juntunen et al. (2001) noted that Indigenous women college students do not typically use vocational services and may have a skeptical view of career counseling. This skepticism may be increased to insensitivity on the part of counselors regarding the cultural values of Indigenous people (Bichsel & Mallinckrodt, 2001). For example, community orientation and the importance of family are two values that heavily influence Indigenous students' career and family decisions but may be less appreciated by mainstream career counselors (Sue & Sue, 1999).

In addition to the challenges imposed by postsecondary settings, Indigenous women may also experience tension from expectations based on their cultural tradition. The work of women within Indigenous cultures is wide and varied. For example, Indigenous

participants in a study by Kawulich (2000) described their work in four domains: home work (related to agricultural/rural upbringing, taught by female family members), public work (working outside of the home for pay), community/volunteer work (dancing, teaching language, and other projects by which they could preserve the culture), and cultural/home work (crafts such as beading or metal work). Within these domains, women are traditionally responsible for home- and family-related tasks (Kawulich, 2000). Indigenous women have complex, broad, and at times demanding roles within these domains. For example, Indigenous women participate in and share responsibility for the education and raising of children throughout the family unit, which often extends through the second cousin (Sue & Sue, 1999).

For many Indigenous cultures, "inter-relationships between a large number of relatives are important, and there is a strong respect for elders and their wisdom and knowledge," and "life is to be lived in the here and now. Long-term plans such as going to college are seen as acts of egoism rather than future planning" (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 277). These important cultural values may combine to make transition into college and the work force more difficult for Indigenous women.

Relatively scant literature has focused on what Indigenous women college students believe or anticipate with regard to family and work. Given the well-documented struggles that many people face in balancing culture, work, and family life, a greater understanding of how Indigenous women prepare for, participate in, and think about the integration of these important areas may help illuminate the path these college students walk. Therefore, we employed a qualitative method to explore the meaning, expectations, and experiences of Indigenous college women regarding family, work, and education. Our

purpose was to increase understanding of Indigenous women's experience as college students. We hope to therein further the development of culturally sensitive academic, career, and personal counseling and to assist college personnel in bolstering academic persistence for these students. Two main questions guided our study: "What are the perspectives of Indigenous women college students regarding work/career, education, and family?" and "How do Indigenous women's cultural identities influence their academic, career, and familial decisions?"

METHOD

We investigated the lived experience, or "life world" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 29), of Indigenous female college students regarding perceptions of college, work, and family. As outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), we employed a qualitative analysis of unstructured interviews through successive readings of interview transcripts using a hermeneutic circle. A relational ontology served as the philosophical foundation for the study (Schwandt, 2000). In other words, our fundamental assumption was that relationships are primary and necessary to understanding human experiences and that meaning is constituted in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. The epistemological foundation of our method is hermeneutic and dialectic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Hermeneutic analysis (Gadamer, 2004) views understanding as a "linguistic event" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 136) and as a way of understanding the meaning of human existence. It is in dialogue with the participants that knowledge is found. A key tenet of this epistemology is that "understanding is something that is *produced* in [that] dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter

through an analysis" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195, italics in original). Meaning is not something that is constructed or created as much as it is negotiated "in a matter of coming to terms" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). The interviewer acts as the investigative tool in the process and enters into a dialogue with the participant through which meaning is produced. In keeping with this philosophy, our process incorporated Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) approach to interviewing, which is characterized by the following underpinnings:

1. Attention to the everyday life of the participants.
2. Efforts to understand the meaning of the themes in the dialogue.
3. Dialogue aimed at qualitative rather than quantitative knowledge.
4. Encouragement of in-depth descriptions of the participants' experience.
5. Encouragement of descriptions of specific experiences.
6. A deliberate openness to novel and unexpected perspectives.
7. Focus on the phenomena of interest without using restrictive questions.
8. Acknowledgement of possible ambiguities and contradictions in the dialogue.
9. Awareness of new insights that may come to interviewer and participant in the interview.
10. Knowledge that each interviewer brings varying degrees of sensitivity to different aspects of the participants' experiences and perspectives.
11. Awareness that the obtained knowledge is interpersonal.
12. Emphasis on the interview being a positive experience for the participant. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 28-32).

Participants

Participants in this study were 20 female college students who attended one of three 4-year public colleges or universities located in Canada and the southwestern United States. Participants included Indigenous women from three Native American tribes [Diné (Navajo), Zuni, and Tohono O'odham] in the Southwestern United States and one First Nations tribe from Central Canada (Cree). The Diné and Cree nations are two of the largest Indigenous groups in their respective countries. Each has large reservations or reserve lands located in primarily rural areas. Participants had lived on or near their respective reserve or reservation for at least 9 years before the age of 18; each had chosen to attend a college or university located away from their lands. The college and universities chosen represented a variety of institutions of higher learning, including a community college, a branch of a flagship research institution, and the main campus of a large public research university. It was assumed that participants would be engaged in the process of navigating the demands of living in two cultures (Jackson et al., 2003).

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 53 years, and experience in post-secondary education ranged from one semester to 7 years. Six of the participants were single, eight were partnered, two were divorced, and one was widowed. The relationship status of three participants was not reported. Eight of the participants had children.

Procedure

Participating faculty and Indigenous student center staff assisted in recruiting participants. In total, 11 interviews were conducted in the Southwestern United States and 9 in Canada. No compensation was provided for participation. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire after receiving

a brief overview of the study and informed consent. We enhanced confidentiality by recording individualized identification codes on demographic questionnaires in lieu of participant names. Participant names were tied to their identification code only in instances where participants elected to provide their e-mail addresses and consented to be contacted as participant-reviewers at the end of the study.

Data Collection

The principal investigator and a female member of a research team conducted one-on-one, in-person interviews on participating campuses. Interviewers followed a list of guiding questions (see Appendix) to minimize leading questions and to maximize the depth and breadth of interviewee responses (Patton, 1990). Guiding questions emerged through collaboration with a research team experienced in interviewing Indigenous individuals and a review of the current literature. The principal investigator tested the guiding questions in a pilot interview. As interviews progressed, the guiding questions were refined to enhance clarity. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 15 to 60 minutes in length, with an average length of 45 minutes. Members of research team transcribed the recorded interviews. The principal investigator interpreted the transcripts using a hermeneutic method (Gadamer, 2004; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data Analysis

The post-interview interpretation of the transcriptions reflected the same philosophical and theoretical assumptions as the interviews. First, the principal investigator conducted an unfocused overview of the text in order to study the text with limited presuppositions and to begin to illuminate the meanings set forward in the interview dialogue (Jackson & Patton, 1992; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

She then began an interpretation through successive readings using the hermeneutic circle. This process involved engaging with the text at increasingly deeper levels by identifying themes and then circling back to the text searching for disconfirming statements (Hoshmand, 1989; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The identifying of meaning in a section or statement and subsequent returning to the text looking for evidence that either confirms or disputes the identified theme is the essence of the hermeneutic circle. Jasper (2004) described this process as follows: “In order to gain an overview of the text in its completeness, we must give proper attention to the details and particulars. But we cannot appreciate the details and particulars without a sense of the whole work” (p. 21).

Having compiled valid interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the final task was to identify language that communicated the findings in a way that precisely represented the meanings and themes of the study. Following this process, the principal investigator identified an initial set of themes. Because the interviews were conducted in two countries with similar but distinct sociopolitical histories, she conducted the initial stages of analysis on each country independently. She then compared the preliminary themes from the two sets and judged them to be consistent and complementary. The principal investigator conducted the subsequent final analysis of all 20 interviews as a whole.

Trustworthiness

We integrated analysis and theme auditors into the study to further verify the trustworthiness of the themes. A male graduate student trained in qualitative methods audited the analysis by conducting an independent hermeneutic analysis of four of the interviews (two from each country). Two theme auditors with extensive experience with Indigenous students

evaluated the final set of themes. One auditor was an Indigenous graduate student who had participated in transcribing the original interviews. The other auditor was a non-Indigenous Native Studies researcher from a large public university. The theme auditors read selected quotations for each theme and evaluated them in terms of (a) their experience as cultural experts and (b) coherence between the quotes and the themes.

We asked the auditors to comment on the veracity of the themes as per the text and their own experience with Indigenous populations. The analysis auditor produced initial themes and meaningful components identical to those that the principal investigator had identified. The Indigenous auditor verified that the themes were true to her experience as an Indigenous woman. The non-Indigenous auditor indicated that the themes were coherent and complementary with extant research. The list of themes was finalized after receiving auditor feedback. We attempted to include each of the three communities of validation that Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recommended (e.g., the interviewed participants, the general public, and the research community; p. 214) by contacting participants who had originally consented to review the findings at the time of their interview. We did not receive additional information from the participants.

Investigator Assumptions

We made several assumptions in this study. First, we assumed that the Western educational system has value for Indigenous women and that pressures experienced by the women as students would be similar to the pressures they may experience in the work force. We further assumed, based on previous research, that students at the three institutions of higher learning were engaged in balancing their family life with their education and employment

(Jackson & Smith, 2001; Jackson et al., 2003). It was also assumed that the students would have considerable commonality of experience despite the fact that they were from different tribal and national backgrounds. By virtue of the participants' role as students, we assumed that participants were comfortable enough on a college campus to be self-reflective and frank in their interviews.

In addition, the principal investigator recognized that her experience as a single, European-American, female doctoral student from a conservative background that places high value on family influenced her research. Prior to conducting the study, she had no particular experience with Indigenous communities but became interested in Indigenous issues as a part of a broader interest in pluralism and diversity. She had participated on a longstanding research team that had been exploring Indigenous students' academic and career experiences and developed the study in collaboration with the team. We have assumed that, through the hermeneutic process and the use of auditors, these inherent biases and assumptions would not impede the trustworthiness of the results.

FINDINGS

Analysis of participant interviews produced four primary themes comprising seven secondary themes and seven tertiary themes. Primary themes included (a) honoring Indigenous culture and community, (b) living in two worlds, (c) pursuing individual fulfillment and goals, and (d) maintaining the importance and influence of family. These themes are interconnected, as was evidenced in the participant quotes that support them.

Honoring Indigenous Culture and Community

A theme of honoring Indigenous culture and

community through (a) cultural preservation and (b) service to Indigenous community emerged. Participants discussed varying levels of personal and familial cultural expression with an overarching community orientation.

Being a Cree person and a Cree woman, you are supposed to know who you are and your culture. . . . I hate to say that when someone is Cree like me and they are a woman and they don't really know about tradition and or about powwow or anything, then I would think, "They aren't really an Indian." (Participant 16)

In addition, participants discussed a loss of connection to their cultural communities as they transitioned into college as well as feeling strengthened through emotional and cultural support from their nation (e.g., Indigenous student centers, members of the tribe/band following their school/work progress, access to traditional cultural activities).

I used to dance and sing and everything, and now I don't do anything. And so I am going to start getting back into that. . . . I lost myself when I came here. I am not me anymore—the way I would be when I was at home—and I do not like the way it feels. It feels like I have no culture. (Participant 20)

Cultural Preservation. Participants' statements reflected a desire to pass Indigenous spiritual traditions and language on to their children even if they themselves were not well-versed in the Indigenous culture or had not decided about having children. This desire to preserve the Indigenous culture motivated participants to want to return to the reserve/reservation after school and/or to live close to their extended families. Participant 4 stated, "I want to pass the whole package. I mean my grandparents and my parents they taught me everything. . . . I want my kids to know all of that stuff . . . to teach their children and their grandchildren."

Service to the Indigenous Community. Commitment to the Indigenous culture was also shown in a desire to be of service to the Indigenous community. Participants discussed serving the community (a) as role models to other Indigenous people and (b) through their career.

Serving as a Role Model. Getting an education was discussed as a way for participants to be role models to (a) family members of all ages, (b) Indigenous children in the community, and (c) their current or future children. Participants discussed a desire to help Indigenous youth avoid alcoholism, drugs, teen pregnancy, and other negative pressures by going to school:

Navajo children . . . when they see a young Native American go to school, you know they look up to you and they are like, “Oh I can do that, too. I can be successful like that too.” They can go ahead to change their life style and turn their life around to go in the right direction . . . “Wow, I didn’t think that I could do all that!” (Participant 4)

Participants also identified their own role models and described receiving support and encouragement primarily from other women.

Serving Through Career. Participants discussed pursuing a career that would be useful on the reserve/reservation and to the Indigenous culture as a whole. Though career paths were not always clearly defined, participants discussed varying paths that would move them toward an end-goal of a degree and career that helps the community. Participant 20 described her experience:

I just wanted to get my education so I could actually do something about what I see like at home. Make a difference at home. Why go somewhere else and try to make a difference where you don’t even know anybody? It just means a lot more when you grew up with people . . . it will just be different. You’ll feel

really cool. . . . Not only [making a difference in] their lives but in the community.

Living in Two Worlds

Participants described a perceived requirement to be proficient in both their Indigenous culture and the broader culture of Canada and the United States (often described by participants as the “White” world). A theme of walking between the Indigenous and the dominant cultures and living in two worlds arose as participants were growing up and transitioning into college. Participant 11 highlighted this when she said, “We have basically two things to do—our traditional ways and the ways of the world around us.” The degree of biculturalism varied among participants and within their families. This theme includes subthemes of (a) academic persistence, (b) spiritual tension, and (c) the impact of the women’s rights movements.

Academic Persistence. Participants identified a central goal of finishing college and advised other Indigenous women to persist in their academic pursuits. One participant said,

I try and encourage [other students] that way . . . stay in school. It will be worth it in the long run, and I think at one point that’s what people had to tell me—it will be worth it in the long run—so I keep telling myself that, especially on the days when I get really discouraged. (Participant 9)

The women described their transition into college as being difficult at times, and many mentioned watching family members and friends drop out. Family responsibilities, having children, the loss of cultural and family connection, and finances were identified as factors that affect persistence.

Spiritual Tension. Participants discussed feeling a spiritual tension that resulted as they tried to balance the conflict between traditional spiritual beliefs and dominant

religious and secular thought. Participant 16 stated, “Balancing the spiritual part—the Cree—and the education is really hard because there is no room for spirituality in education. There’s nothing, so they don’t mesh together. Combining those two is hard.”

Reactions to the spiritual tension varied widely. For example, although some participants discussed participating in both Christian and Indigenous spiritual traditions, considering them to be “the same thing,” others expressed confusion with respect to spirituality. Participant 17 discussed the difficulty that arose for her after learning about the history of her Indigenous people and the way her people had been treated by Christians. She said,

I took some Native Studies courses . . . and they just really broke my heart. . . . So, ever since then I’ve just been really, really iffy about all the religions. I’m not atheist. I do believe that there’s a greater power out there. I just . . . getting in touch with the right power is my problem.

Influence of Women’s Rights Movements. A theme reflecting the influence of the women’s rights movements emerged as participants discussed (a) shifting roles of women and (b) advocacy. This theme references the interface between the roles of women in Indigenous and dominant cultures as well as the interaction of Indigenous peoples with the dominant culture at large.

Shifting Roles of Women. Participants discussed generational shifts in female roles. With each generation, the women described respect for traditional gender roles as well as increased acceptability and support for women to explore career options, pursue an education, and seek a voice and empowerment in public. They also described shifts in women’s expectations regarding the division of traditionally gender-specific home and family tasks:

I talk to [my granddaughters] a lot about how important it is to stay in school and . . . just have fun as long as they can. I talk to their dad, “Don’t make women out of them even though they are at that age. Even though the tradition says this is automatic, and this is automatic, and this is what happens. Let them play their sports. Let them have their friends. Let them be out there and let them get involved with things,” I said, “but still keep them close . . . and they will be alright.” (Participant 9)

Advocacy. Participants also discussed gaining an education within the dominant culture in order to gain a stronger voice, a sense of empowerment, and credibility. One participant said,

I think the only other way to make a big change . . . is by coming here and grabbing my degree or another two degrees and going back and saying, “Look! I am not just a blathering idiot,” at membership meeting; “you have to listen to me!” (Participant 15)

The theme of advocacy was seen in participants’ desire to speak up—to “find the advocate inside”—for themselves and for their Indigenous community in response to racism and sexism. Participant 14 stated, “At times I try to prove myself—that I can work no matter my skin color. . . . I’ve got to be able to show them that we, as a whole, women can work. Aboriginal women can work.” Participants also discussed efforts to improve the dominant cultures’ perception of Indigenous peoples. Participant 4 said, “This is where we come in—to teach them that we are modern people, too. . . . Informing them gives them the knowledge to not judge how [individuals on the reservation] live or how they look.” Participant comments reflected both a movement toward a more solid Indigenous identity as well as some minimizing of Indigenous identity in response

to prejudice and discrimination from both dominant and Indigenous cultures. Gender-based discrimination seemed as salient, if not more salient, as racial discrimination in the lives of the women.

Pursuing Individual Fulfillment and Goals

Participants identified college as something that enriched the self while allowing them to be more effective in helping others in the community. Although participants discussed the individual nature of their goals, priority was often placed on family and community. Participants distinguished a career from having a job (i.e., having a career implied enjoying work as opposed to working just to have income) and identified college as a way to find a career:

It's like the dream come true. Being a little kid and always driving by the university, I always wondered what it would be like to actually be a university student. And now that I'm here . . . it makes me feel a sense of accomplishment that I actually did something great with . . . what I'm going to be. (Participant 17)

Maintaining the Importance and Influence of Family

The importance and influence of family (broadly defined by participants as blood relatives, adopted relatives, and family friends) was a major theme throughout the interviews. Family was identified as the most important priority. Participant 6 reflected this value:

I am always going to want to come home, even though money can be important, too. But, like my dad always says, your family is more important than money. Money comes and goes but family doesn't, so that's why it is important.

Individual family members and dedication to family heavily influenced participants'

decisions about partnering, having children, forming a career, and pursuing an education. Participants' comments reflected that the traditional way was to put family first, and some participants stated that pursuing a career at the expense of having children felt selfish. Analysis of participant comments produced two secondary themes: (a) family support and (b) family expectations and roles.

Family Support. Family was identified as the most influential support system in participants' lives, as was illustrated by participant 9:

I think it is important . . . to know that your family supports you. For a long time I [thought] that I was doing this on my own . . . and it took me a while to realize that they missed me, too, and they loved me. I know that I have their support . . . now I see how much they miss me and that encourages me to keep on doing what I am doing so that I can hurry up and go home. That is a big thing—to feel that support from my family.

This support was discussed as being influential in participants' transition to college, ability to persist in college, and success in balancing the demands of student life with the demands of family life. Participants identified specific ways in which family had or had not supported academic pursuits, and at times, identified a lack of support as motivation to work hard and prove that they could be successful.

Family Expectations and Roles. In addition to the support that family provided, participants addressed family influence regarding (a) expectations for career/education, (b) gender-based roles and expectations, and (c) balancing roles and expectations for family, school, and career.

Expectations for Career and Education. Family expectations for career and education were influential in participants' education and career paths. Working outside of the home

in the future seemed to be expected, and family attitudes about education and employment influenced whether or not participants attended college as part of their preparation for work. When asked what motivated her to come to college, participant 13 stated,

I guess my parents, mostly my mom, because . . . education was important to them and so they saw people that lived on the reserve who didn't really have an education and didn't really have like, I guess, a way of supporting themselves. She wanted us to have an education and then get a good job so we would be like financially stable for our kids.

Positive family messages about college motivated participants to work hard in school and not let the family down and provided support in balancing family and scholastic demands. Family messages that did not overtly support college attendance were also noted as participants described indirect paths into college and family members' skepticism in the face of the need to provide for children. When asked how her family felt about her attending college, participant 3 said,

At first they didn't like it. They thought I should just work and provide for my kids. But after a while they began to realize, "Maybe she is doing it the right way." And now they don't say anything to me, not anymore. They don't bother me. They just more help me even more now.

Gender-Based Roles and Expectations. Participants discussed traditional gender-based roles within the family. The degree to which families adhered to traditional roles varied widely within the same family and across generations. Participants described a division of male and female responsibilities at home (i.e., female roles traditionally included preparing food, taking care of children, cleaning the house, and doing laundry; male

roles included taking care of the home's surroundings and constructing/building objects). In addition, participants classified their family roles by relationships (i.e., mother, sister, aunt, grandmother, daughter, wife) and by actions (i.e., nurturer, role model, advice giver). Participant 4 described an example of these roles:

The main thing is to be there once you have kids, to provide for your children, to be there to show love to your kids, and to teach them the culture and the values . . . and being there for your . . . spouse and to provide that support for them. I think those are pretty much the things I learned from my grandparents and my mom.

Participants discussed filling gender-based roles early in adolescence, such as helping raise younger siblings and cousins. Participants also referred to an expectation for them to form families of their own. Participant 7 described some of the stress that this expectation placed on her:

I am still not ready [to have children]. I just freak out when people talk about it—like family. Because I got married it seems like they have this pressure on me like I am going to have kids or something. It is kind of hard, but I think they kind of understand now that I have explained . . . to them . . . how hard it is. I am not ready for that . . . they don't bug me about that any more.

Balancing Roles and Expectations for Family, School, and Career. The tension between the multiple roles that participants fill was reflected in a desire to give time and support to family while focusing on school. The tension that the women discussed seemed to reflect their community's desire for them to be successful in school and work while also fulfilling their family roles. Participant 2 verbalized this tension:

You know what? Come to think of it right now, I actually fill both roles—my own role, where I don't have to stay home . . . where I can still go to school and strive towards what I wanted at the beginning, and still be what he wants . . . his laundry, cooking, and that [kind of] thing. So I've looked at both roles at the same time. On the weekends or whenever I feel like I need to have help, I tell him, "You know, you need to do some of this and some of that." . . . But, at the same time, my mom tells me, "You know, women are supposed to do these things." So, come to think of it, I do. I fill both roles. That's why it's kind of overwhelming sometimes.

Participants discussed balancing these roles by both mentally separating responsibilities (e.g., focusing solely on school while at school and on family when at home) and trying to combine family and education (e.g., working on homework while spending time with family).

Participants defined successful careers as those that allowed them to be home with family in the evenings and on weekends. This process reflected an expectation to put family first. For participants who were partnered, the balancing of roles and expectations was complicated by the need to reconcile differing expectations of in-laws, partners, and families of origin. These decisions involved parenting, the division of domestic duties, spirituality, education, and career. For partnered and single participants, having children affected the expectations placed on participants' role balance. Participant 4 described these expectations when she said,

You can do whatever you want. Just know that if you want a career and go to school that's good, that's ok, but . . . our expectation is to provide nourishment to our kids and then to have two different roles: as a mother and to continue our careers in what we want to do.

Children were seen as both restricting freedom and as the most important part of participants' lives. Participants consistently advised others to wait to have kids until after college in order to make it easier to be successful in both family and education.

DISCUSSION

Indigenous women college students' life experiences are greatly influenced by a combination of cultural and familial factors. Decisions that Indigenous women college students make about education, family, and career seem to be based in a fluid bicultural, family-oriented identity. The following sections will discuss the findings in light of the current body of literature, highlight implications of the results, review the limitations of the study, and provide suggestions for future research.

Themes and the Current Literature

Themes that emerged from this study both support and build upon the current body of research. Similar to Kawulich's (2000) study, this study found that education is seen as desirable and helpful for many Indigenous students. As was reported by Juntunen et al. (2001) and Jackson and Smith (2001), Indigenous students in the present study described attending college as a bicultural experience in which they are expected to be well-versed in both Indigenous and dominant cultures. We also found that a connection to the Indigenous culture was helpful (Juntunen et al., 2001; Kawulich, 2000). This connection was identified as support received from the Indigenous community through encouragement, funding, traditional spiritual ceremonies, and connection to other Indigenous students and leaders through Native American and Aboriginal Student Centers. Participants also described feeling a sense of purpose through pursuing careers that would allow them to

give back to their Indigenous communities and be role models for other Indigenous people. Participants also identified a tension between Indigenous spiritual traditions and the dominant culture's main religion, Christianity.

Previous studies have documented that some students experience a paradoxical cultural pressure to both gain an education and maintain their cultural identity (Jackson et al., 2003; Kawulich, 2000). Results from the present study indicate a further paradoxical pressure to gain an education and maintain a cultural identity while at the same time fulfilling specific gender roles and meeting family expectations. These expectations include forming a family, being available to their immediate and extended family, and performing the majority of household work. This paradox underscores the expressed tension in prioritizing school, work, and family life, and participants discussed it when addressing issues of academic persistence, career choice, and interactions with family.

In describing a portion of this paradoxical pressure, participants stated that they had been advised by family and friends to wait to have children until after completing their education. Participants passed this advice on to other women regardless of the participant's own situation. However, family members' advice shifted once participants had children; children were then described as the most important priority and college as acceptable as long as the needs of the partner (when applicable) and children were met. This was further supported by comments of participants who had returned to school after their children were grown. Having raised their children, participants were given the message that it was more acceptable for them to go back to school and "do something for themselves." Education then became more of an option for the fulfillment of the participant. This paradox may be part of why First Nations women

tend to receive post-secondary credentials later in life (i.e., ages 35-54) than do their non-Indigenous counterparts (Milligan & Bougie, 2009). However, participants who had returned to school after raising children equally discussed feeling the pull of family as they expressed sadness and guilt for not being around their grandchildren to teach them about their Indigenous culture.

The guilt expressed by participants was one example of the stress that can result from the work-family conflict. Parker and Aldwin (1994) stated that the degree to which work-family conflict causes distress for women students of all ages may depend on how much value the individual student places on education/career, with less stress occurring when women placed high value on career. Although commitment to education and career varied, many of the participants in the current study placed a higher value on family than on school/career. According to Parker and Aldwin's findings, this indicates a need for sensitivity to the likelihood of increased stress in balancing school and family for Indigenous women. This finding was not limited to women who had children.

Participants reported that the school-family was stressful for Indigenous women college students but also indicated that family support and interactions could provide important strength and motivation for the students (Napholz, 2000). Family support assisted individuals in fulfilling family responsibilities and in academic persistence. This support was felt through words of encouragement, time together, a sense of making family proud, and the family's provision of childcare. The influence of family was also evident when family members expressed doubt that the participants could be successful in school. Participants said this lack of encouragement was an impetus to work harder, graduate, and prove that they could successfully balance

family and scholastic demands.

The need to live in two worlds—those of the Indigenous and dominant cultures—complicated participants' ability to navigate the tension between school and family. As an example, the shifts in gender-based expectations in the dominant culture through movements such as feminism, civil rights, and women's rights (Heer & Grossbard-Shechtman, 1981; Rudy, Popova, & Linz, 2010) were mirrored in participants' discussion of shifts in gender-based expectations within the Indigenous culture. Participants expressed these shifts in their requests for a more egalitarian division of gender-based roles as well as in describing the tension that they experienced as they balanced individual goals and family expectations for career and education.

Although participants voiced a desire for more equality in decision making and performance of household chores, the general expectation that women are mainly responsible for household duties seemed to still apply. When participants discussed boyfriends', husbands', or fathers' participation in household responsibilities in their efforts to support the participant's education or employment, they discussed it in a manner that indicated that the participant held ownership of those duties and that the man's assistance was not expected. This was further illustrated by partnered participants who reported growing up in a home where the division of household duties (i.e., making bread, cleaning, child care) was more egalitarian; once partnered, the task of negotiating the division of household duties was complicated by in-laws' gender-based expectations of the participant.

In addition to the shift in roles and expectations for women inside of the home, participants also discussed changing roles in the larger community (Alfred p. Sloan Foundation, 2008; Weer, Greenhaus, Colakoglu, & Foley, 2006). Participants talked about

employment outside of the home as if it were an established norm. Although participants described education as a difficult yet fulfilling option that many of their mothers and grandmothers did not have, employment was not discussed as a choice. In fact, although the most prominent role for women in the culture traditionally was cited to be in the family, the option of being a stay-at-home mom was not mentioned by participants in this study. However, participants identified college as a way to have a type of employment that would be enjoyable and meaningful and would secure a nine-to-five schedule that would allow them to be home with their family. In fact, having a career and a family was at times discussed as being mutually exclusive regardless of the relationship status of the individual. This seemed to be due to the priority that the participants and their families placed on being home with the family. In other words, working a less meaningful job that allowed the individual to be at home with the family was seen as more traditional and compatible with meeting family responsibilities than was pursuing interest in a career that required extensive travel or time away from home.

The effects of cultural shifts toward gender equality are also seen in the development of a bicultural identity and in participant's efforts to find a voice within their bicultural identity. For college students in general, effort that may feel to them to be self-focused is often required. This may be difficult for Indigenous students who may come from a collectivistic worldview. Often participants viewed education as something that is for the betterment of the community or family. The desire to return to the reservation or reserve to help the community with their chosen profession was a reflection of the deeply held commitment that the individuals have to their Indigenous culture and may be a way to resolve the cognitive dissonance of working toward goals

that may be perceived as selfish, such as school work and professional pursuits (Sue & Sue, 1999). Through this viewpoint, individuals are able to meet personal goals while upholding their collectivistic goals. Participants also discussed attempts at resolution in the theme of advocacy, as they pursued an education to gain a “voice” and empowerment, which they could then use to help their community.

Implications

Individuals who come into contact with another culture vary in how they construct their ethnic identity and integrate the behavior, norms, and values of the second culture (Bichsel & Mallinckrodt, 2001). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that each Indigenous student will face the exact same pressure or balance the expectations for career, culture, and family in the same way. However, understanding that there is a multi-layered constellation of factors that influence these Indigenous women may assist college personnel, counselors, and career advisers to better understand the needs, goals, and decisions of the individual with whom they are working.

Facilitating the students’ connection to their Indigenous culture is highly recommended. Thomason (1999) illustrated that the provision of a Native American or Aboriginal (First Nations) Student Center has been paramount in assisting students in both their transition to the college or university. These centers also provide cultural support and connection that participants identified as crucial in fostering academic persistence (Thomason, 1999). This support is augmented by the presence of elders from local bands and tribes. Furthermore, facilitating contact with Indigenous women who can act as role models for students, including women who actively balance career and family responsibilities, may provide crucial support and guidance for Indigenous

students. This might be accomplished by inviting women from the community to participate in workshops or through structured outreach programs such as job shadowing. In addition to providing opportunities for Indigenous women students to interact with Indigenous professionals, colleges may find it beneficial to design programs that connect students with opportunities to be of service to Indigenous communities.

These findings provide valuable information for career counselors. The provision of career counseling may assist Indigenous women in clarifying career and educational goals and identifying or broadening career options given the value of family. It is imperative that career counselors be prepared to assist the Indigenous woman in identifying the goals that she has set for both family and career. It may be that her career goals are uncertain, vague, or disconnected from her current course of study. Furthermore, if an individual is motivated by a desire to help the community from which she comes, it may be helpful to explore both the aptitude and interests of the student and assist her in identifying ways in which her particular strengths can be utilized. Traditional assessments alone may not paint a full picture for the student or for the career counselor (McCloskey & Mintz, 2005). For example, one participant whose aptitude and career tests suggested a career in engineering had elected a career in social work in order to provide direct service to her community. It is likewise important that career counselors and college faculty and staff not assume that a student’s Indigenous identity has led her to place her family as the most important priority in her life.

Implications for personal counselors from the present study are equally rich. As is true for college students from other culturally diverse backgrounds, Indigenous women are in the process of negotiating their identity as either

an emerging adult or nontraditional student (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Although these students will be similar to non-Indigenous students in many ways, it may be helpful to keep in mind the priority and value that may be placed on family—both family of origin and on forming a family—as well as the varying degrees of biculturalism that the student, the family, and possible in-laws may hold. It is also important to recognize that women who do not have children of their own may still be filling the role of a caretaker for younger siblings, cousins, etc. (Sue & Sue, 1999). With relatively few role models to guide them, Indigenous students are faced with reconciling the values of receiving an education, carrying on Indigenous traditions, and performing the majority of household and family-related duties. These students may feel the pressure to do and to be everything for their families and for their culture. Counselors may assist the student in exploring roles that she currently fills as well as those she anticipates filling in the future (McCloskey & Mintz, 2005).

Counselors may also assist Indigenous women in identifying which values within the Indigenous and dominant cultures seem paradoxical and ways that she would like to reconcile the tension. For example, the role of spirituality and Indigenous tradition in the student's life may be important aspects of the student's identity. The counselor's demonstration of cultural competence, respect, and openness to the integration of spirituality in the student's life will help establish necessary trust (Trujillo, 2000). In addition, exploration of the interplay of individualistic and collectivistic goals may be helpful. Although the dominant culture often places importance on putting the individual first in decision making about majors and careers, this practice may not be culturally sensitive to individuals whose cultural values place more importance on a collectivistic basis for decision making

(Sue & Sue, 1999). However, recognizing that participants in this study discussed college as a place to gain a voice of empowerment, exploration of how the student prioritizes self, family, and cultural voices in the decision making process would be appropriate.

Limitations

There are limitations of the current study. First, although multiple auditors substantiated the themes and the interpretive process, the researchers were unable to secure participant member checks that could have further substantiated the findings. Second, it is possible that conducting the interviews on campus could have affected the information that participants were willing to share. Finally, although none of the participants identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or two-spirited, the study's purpose and questions may have been perceived as heterosexually oriented and thus limited its ability to access the experiences of GLBT Indigenous students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study confirmed findings of existing research and offered direction for further inquiry into Indigenous women's experiences of family, school, and work. As was mentioned, participants identified some effects of feminism and a movement toward equalization of gender roles within Indigenous cultures. Further research is recommended on the relationship between the strength of bicultural identity, the expression of traditional spirituality, and satisfaction in decisions made about career, education, and family. Additional studies exploring the experience of family members of female Indigenous college students may also be beneficial, as they could allow for greater understanding of the community's expectations and available support structures during the college experience. Furthermore,

many participants expressed interest in using their degrees to build their communities on the reservation/reserve. However, Milligan and Bougie (2009) reported that many of these graduates do not actually end up working long term on reserves/reservations. Follow-up studies that investigate factors playing into college graduates' decisions about where to live and work after graduation would be valuable.

Finally, there is a need for future research that inquires after the lived experience of gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, questioning, and two-spirited Indigenous students.

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APPENDIX.

Guiding Questions

1. What were your plans and hopes coming in to college? For after school?
2. Tell me a little about your family?
3. Does your tradition have any rules/norms for women in the family? What are they?
4. What do you see as your roles/what are your roles in your family (as a daughter, sister) (Or if married, what were your roles as you grew up)?
5. What will your role be in your future family (wife, mother) (or if married, current family)?
6. How did your family feel about you going to college/university?
7. How did/do you feel about coming to school?
8. What has been/was helpful in making that transition?
9. What do you plan to do when you are done with college/university?
10. Do you plan to have a career? How do you see it playing into your future family life?
11. Do you have any concerns about life after college/university graduation?

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