Luck, Love and Legitimation: First-Generation College Graduates' Attributions for Success in the Context of Unequal Educational Outcomes

By

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Abstract

This article explores the reasons first-generation college graduates offered for their noteworthy and disparate level of educational attainment, specifically relative to the attainment of their family of origin, an area of potential relational conflict. How first-generation graduates explain/attribute their success and the limited educational attainment of their family of origin not only reflects family relations but also impacts them in potentially important ways. A qualitative interpretive analysis was applied to open-ended survey data from a sample of 1st gen college graduates (N=317), diverse by race, gender, age and institution type, while this same data was also coded/quantified by attribution type (i.e., dispositional vs situational). The thematic and attributional analyses integrated and presented here reveal a tension between individual investment in the notion of meritocracy and the competing investment in a set of family relationships, relationships that may have played a critical role in motivating and supporting that graduate's success. The type of attributions that graduates made for educational attainment varied by specific graduate-family relationship (i.e., parents vs siblings), with graduates more likely to view their siblings as individually accountable for their limited educational attainment, while forwarding more situational attributions for the limited attainment of parents. I argue that graduates manage the deep contradictions posed by ideologies of merit against family/kinship values by adopting an attributional strategy that takes into account important familial relationships and favors relationship-enhancing attributions over distress-maintaining ones.

Keywords: First-generation college graduates, educational attainment, cross-SES relations, social mobility, attributions for success, first-generation family relations

Introduction

First-generation college graduates embody the essence of the American Dream, fulfilling our cultural mandate that children should achieve more than their parents have, and satisfying our deep need to believe that structural barriers of race, gender, and class can be overcome via educational attainment. Not only does educational credentialing create new economic and professional opportunities (Chetty et al. 2017; Ross and Willigen 1997), post-secondary experience also changes the sense of self and of others, in relation to one's shifting identity. The first college degree also impacts how one sees the world (Chickering and Reisser 1993; Ramirez and Soriano 1981), and ultimately how the world sees that individual (Kuppens et al. 2015; Tannock 2008). Moreover, the first-generation college graduate often introduces new social inequalities within their families of origin with the earning of a degree, thus inflecting their family relationships with classed dynamics in ways that differ from those of upper and middle classed families (Jones 2005; Morton 2020; Ross 1995). How we explain individual differences in educational attainment impacts interpersonal relationships, both within and outside the bounds of family relations. This article presents an in-depth analysis of the reasons graduates offered for their noteworthy and disparate level of educational attainment, specifically relative to the more limited attainment of their family of origin.

Applying Attribution Theory to Educational Achievement

Attributions, or the processes by which people explain the causes of behavior and events (Heider 1958), are considered a foundational concept within the field of social psychology, and as such, offer a fundamental entry point into how we make sense of, and attach meaning to, behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Jones et al. 1972; Weiner 1986), a concept especially suited to applied research (Weiner 1990). Attribution theory has been most extensively applied to the study of motivation, particularly to achievement motivation (Weiner 1990). Weiner (1985; 2010) formulated a broad attribution-based model of motivation that explicitly focuses on the relationship between achievement motivation and attributions for past academic success and failure. Weiner argued that how people explain and understand the causes of behaviors and outcomes (i.e., attributions) works to motivate future actions/behaviors, and is correlated with psychological and affective outcomes. Weiner indirectly connects attributional theory to the relational context via his theorizing of the affective consequences associated with specific types of causal attributions (Weiner 1985), arguing that "each causal dimension is uniquely related to a set of feelings" (560). Weiner outlined specific emotions likely to result from specific attributions; for example, pride is identified as the affective outcome of assigning internal causes for success, while internal and controllable causes of failure lead to guilt and regret. Other identified affective outcomes are shame and humiliation (resulting from internal, uncontrollable causes of failure), hope (resulting from unstable causes of failure) and hopelessness (resulting from stable causes of failure) (Weiner 2010:33).

While Weiner (2010) argued that causal attributions have psychological and affective outcomes for the individual making them, others have argued that causal attributions also have psychological and affective outcomes for the subjects of those attributions (Graham 2010; Lopez and Wolkenstein 1990:116) as well as specifically relational outcomes (Fincham, Bradbury and Grych 1990). Of interest here are the affective outcomes associated with attributions for academic success/failure and how such emotions impact relationships within the family.

Type of attribution (dispositional vs. situational) has also been associated with political affiliation and ideological commitments (Sahar 2014). Sahar (2014) finds substantial support for Weiner's attributional model, which "proposes that causal attributions are associated with judgments of personal controllability or responsibility, which elicit particular emotional reactions that are in turn linked with behavioral intentions" (2014:230). Sahar demonstrates the pervasive influence that attributions of responsibility have on policy attitudes (e.g., toward welfare, abortion, race-targeted policies, gay rights, and intergroup conflicts). For example, dispositional attributions for poverty are associated with political positions hostile to the poor, while those offering situational explanations tend to be more supportive of social welfare programs (Zucker and Weiner 1993). The same association between structural attributions for racial inequality and support for policies aimed at reducing racial inequality has also been demonstrated (Sahar 2014:238). Thus, how we explain disparate levels of success has implications for the solutions we endorse to address such inequalities.

Type of attribution is, in effect, a means of enacting the Self-Serving Bias (SSB) (Miller and Ross 1975), a theory which posits that people are motivated to protect and enhance their self-esteem and favorably interpret information to their benefit. SSB predicts that people will take advantage of an opportunity to maximize their self-esteem by attributing their success to their disposition or to their intended actions while distancing themselves from failures. While the pervasiveness of the SSB has been demonstrated in a meta-analysis of SSB research (Mezulis, et al. 2004), this tendency does vary by population (e.g., by age, culture, and psychopathology) and is muted in some situations.

Ramirez and Soriano (1981) studied the causal attributions for both college success, and lack of college success among Chicano undergraduates, finding that graduates were generally more likely to attribute their success to external characteristics of others or of institutions (38% of participants), or to both internal and external characteristics (also 38%) rather than singularly to positive internal characteristics of themselves (23%). This story is reversed for the Chicano non-graduates, 67% of which made external attributions for their lack of college completion compared to 22% who attributed this lack of attainment to internal factors, a pattern of attribution that likely maintains self-esteem. The research presented here similarly complicates the assumed drive to bolster self-esteem by highlighting the ideological dilemmas embedded in graduates' explanations for disparate educational outcomes across family members, and how these conflicts are discursively negotiated by first-gen college graduates.

Examining the explanations that first-gen grads give

for differences in status and attainment is important as they likely negotiate a set of competing motivations embedded in such explanations/attributions that differ from the motivations of those coming from families with histories of higher educational credentialing. For first-gen college graduates, what may be at stake is the perceived worth and value of those closest to them. Seeing one's family as personally responsible for their limited educational attainment may negatively affect family relationships, while a consideration of situational influences may undermine the value of their own educational achievement, calling into question the legitimacy of meritocratic ideology.

Attribution Theory Applied to Relationships

Research suggests that attribution practices impact close relationships in significant ways (Cropley and Reid 2008; Fincham and Bradbury 1993; Fletcher et al. 1990; Gardner et al. 2011; Manusov 2002). The association between interpersonal attributions and marital satisfaction is considered particularly robust (Bradbury and Fincham 1990; Fincham and Bradbury 1992; Sabourin et al. 1991). In studies of dating (Fletcher et al. 1990) and married couples (Fincham and Bradbury 1993), researchers identified an association between relationship satisfaction and attributions. Moreover, Cropley and Reid (2008), utilizing a latent variable analysis, conclude that, "positive attributions are the mechanisms through which couple closeness leads to greater relational satisfaction" (373). They argue that "the way an individual is perceived and evaluated by his or her partner affects that individual's satisfaction. Specifically, when the partner makes positive attributions for the other's behavior, the other is more satisfied" (Ibid 371).

Evidence also suggests that attributions play a causal role in the development and the breakdown of close relationships (e.g., Bradbury and Fincham 1992). Fincham and Bradbury (1992) summarize the research on attributions in marriage writing, "Distressed spouses are hypothesized to make attributions for negative events that accentuate their impact (e.g., they locate the cause in their partner, see it as stable or unchanging, and see it as global or influencing many of the areas of their relationship), whereas non-distressed spouses are thought to make attributions that minimize the impact of negative events (e.g., they do not locate the cause in the partner and see it as unstable and specific) (457)." Similarly, in their study of seventy-four French-Canadian couples, Sabourin, Lussier, and Wright (1991) found that the more likely individuals were to attribute their marital conflicts to global or stable causes and to assign blame to their partners, the more likely they were to report marital dissatisfaction (see also Camper et al. 1988). Larrance and Twentyman (1983:163) report a similar pattern of stable and internal attributions by abusive mothers toward their child's perceived transgressions or failures. Such attributions are considered distress-maintaining and "maladaptive" as they can exert a negative influence on communication within relationships (Bradbury et al. 1996) and have been tied to more negative nonverbal behaviors by the attributor (Manusov 2002:27), while relationship-enhancing attributions have been associated with more positive nonverbal behaviors between couples (Ibid). The type of attributions that graduates make for educational successes/failures, while differing from couples' attributions for the conflicts that they experience, may similarly impact relational tensions between specific family members and satisfaction within the family.

Methods

This work comes from a more comprehensive mixed-method inquiry (Burns 2013) investigating the social psychological and relational impact of disparate levels of educational attainment between first-generation college graduates and their family of origin. First-generation college graduates' experiences and educational values were investigated via an online survey (N=317) using a range of Likert scale items and open-ended survey questions, the latter of which serve as the data set for the current article. The purpose of this survey was to broadly assess first-generation college graduate attitudes about their college experiences, post-college family relationships, current educational values, and justice beliefs.

Procedures & Participants

An anonymous internet survey was constructed, targeting first-generation college graduates across a broad range of participants. Graduate respondents were directly recruited from two CUNY[1] alumni associations and from Berea College[2], a private liberal arts and Christian university serving college students in the Appalachia area, as both institutions enroll large percentages of 1st generation college students.

[1]The City University of New York
[2]https://www.berea.edu/

Consequently, 60.7% of survey respondents are alumni of CUNY campuses, while 20.4% are alumni of Berea College, with the rest of the sample (18.9%) coming from a mix of other colleges and universities.

This strategy yielded a diverse survey sample of 340 respondents including graduates from public and private institutions (64.3% vs. 35.7% respectively), both urban and rural schools, and categories of race/ethnicity in proportions (61.4% White; 14.5% Black; 12.4% Hispanic; 5.3% Asian/Pacific Islander; 4.4% other; and 1.8 Multi-racial/ethnic) roughly comparable to the racial demographics of the total 2015 Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions[3]. Thirty-six percent (36.1%) reported the Bachelor's degree as the highest degree earned, while over half of survey respondents (52.1%) reported having earned an MA degree, and 64% held an M.A. degree or higher (9.8 % hold a PhD and 2.1% have Professional degrees). All participants reported that their parents had ***not*** earned a 4-year degree.

Analytic Design and Interpretive Method

Analyses focus on the open-ended item that directly asked respondents to explain why they were the first (and sometimes only) person in their family to earn a 4-year college degree: "Why do you think you were the first in your family to earn a degree?" The open-ended data for this item was analyzed two ways: first, responses were analyzed by **attribution type**, consisting of the a priori coding and quantizing of the qualitative data by attribution type (i.e., situational versus dispositional) and in terms of who was referenced in graduates' explanation of relative success (i.e., self/graduate or other/family member). However, because qualitative survey data doesn't always produce interpretable findings when quantified and analyzed statistically, an interpretive grounded-type methodology was also employed to identify significant emergent themes across the open-ended responses in a **thematic analysis** of the same data. Given the relatively large data set and short survey responses, a deep interpretation of specific individual responses (a method best suited to interview data) isn't always methodologically possible or appropriate. To address each of these limitations and maximize the value of the data, I combine these analytic strategies and integrate findings from these differing attributional and thematic entry points.

Attribution Analysis

Guided by the concept of self-serving bias and general attribution theory, I use the basic dichotomous categories of dispositional/internal and situational/external attributions (Rotter 1966) to analyze graduates' explanations for their educational successes. The coding structure for this open-ended item consists of 4 primary coding categories: ***Dispositional Self*** (attributions made by respondents that relate to *an internal and stable aspect of SELF*), ***Dispositional Family*** (attributions made by respondents that relate to *an internal and stable aspect of members of respondents' FAMILIES*); ***Situational Self*** (attributions that relate to the situational/external and unstable aspects of respondents' context that contributed to their educational success), and ***Situational Family*** (attributions that relate to the situational/external and unstable aspects of family member's context that accounts for differential educational attainment).

Thematic Analysis

Josselson's (2004) organization of narrative stances into a hermeneutic of restoration (faith) and/or a hermeneutic of demystification (suspicion) offered an analytic approach that aimed to "illuminat(e) the intended meanings of the informant" (5) to understand participants as they generally understand themselves (6), but which also "attempts to decode meanings that are disguised" (p. 1). My primary analytic frame is a *hermeneutics of restoration*, as I prioritize participants' intended perspectives on their family relations and sense of meritocracy in the context of educational disparities.

However, participants are not always aware of the ideological dilemmas or psychological ambivalences they potentially struggle with, demanding a *hermeneutics of demystification* (or suspicion), which requires attention to what isn't said or that which is avoided in talk, potentially revealing psychologically important phenomena or experiences that are not consciously known by participants. Discourse analysis and positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré 1999) further allow for the interpretation of unconscious and unintended meanings in texts, and thus facilitated the execution of a hermeneutics of demystification in the analysis of the ways in which privilege and difference perhaps go underground in interpersonal interactions within working class families of college graduates.

[3]Black graduates are slightly over-represented here, and Asian/Pacific Islanders graduates are slightly underrepresented relative to the overall percentages of BA degrees conferred in 2015. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_322.20.asp?current=yes

Responses were first read to generate an initial coding scheme, essentially a list of free codes informed in part by the initial attribution coding. Neither the attribution nor the open codes were mutually exclusive, allowing the multiple coding of responses. Through the iterative coding and revision process, theoretical relationships between the emerging codes and the a priori attributional coding evolved and were clarified into more generalizable findings (Braun and Clarke 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1990; 1997). Selected survey responses were used to illustrate the larger trends in graduate perspective while also providing a range of responses within specific conceptual categories.

Findings

"Why do you think you were the first in your family to earn a degree?"

In this open-ended survey item, first-generation college graduates were asked to account for their differential educational success, specifically explaining why they succeeded when others in their family (i.e., their social position) did not. Out of 340 surveys, 317 graduates responded to this item, totaling 716 distinguishable attributions for an average of 2.26 attributions per respondent (and median of 2). Participant responses were coded for each type of attribution that they offered in their response, resulting in responses with multiple codes assigned. However, these data were analyzed at the respondent level rather than at the level of individual attribution, which has the potential to overstate findings[4]. Given that respondents averaged more than two separate attributions in their responses, totals of the percentage of participants making each type of attribution do *not* add up to 100%. As Table 1 shows (See Table 1 in the Appendix.), respondents offered a range of explanations for their differential educational success, frequently giving multiple reasons that referenced themselves as well as referenced members of their families.

Graduate Dispositions

Inconsistent with attribution theory, slightly more graduates made situational (47.31%) than dispositional attributions (46.05%) for their success in this open-ended item, with roughly 46%[5] referencing at least one dispositional characteristic of themselves[6], but typically within a mix of attribution types and targets:

"*I seriously took advantage of opportunities made available to me and I believe luck played a role in providing me an opportunity.*" -- Graduate #50 (White, Male, BA)

"*I am the eldest sibling and always had high goals for myself.*" -- Graduate #129 (White, Female, MA)

"*I wanted to go to college, and it was expected of me since I was an excellent student. Brooklyn College allowed me to do this without creating a financial burden for my family.*" -- Graduate #174 (White, Female, MA)

What stands out in the analysis of the *dispositional self*-responses -- typically attributions where we would most expect to see a self-serving bias -- is the degree to which graduates did not fully capitalize on the self-enhancement potential of the attribution opportunity offered by this question. A deeper look within the graduate responses suggests that although this sample of first-generation college graduates used self-serving attributions, perhaps as a means of self enhancement, they did not do so at the expense of their family members. Instead, graduates often attempted to maintain a positive portrayal of self as well as the integrity of family members within a context of differential educational success, in part by downplaying their exceptionalism, even while taking credit for their educational success.

The responses above[7] highlight graduates' ambition and initiative ("I took advantage," "had high goals," "I wanted to go"), as well as establish the existence of

[4]The number of respondents, rather than number of attributions, is reported in order to address critiques of quantizing open-ended qualitative data, which caution that "frequency counts and cross-tabs may underrepresent or overrepresent the distribution of meaning in the sample. It has been suggested that one way to avoid this is to calculate frequencies on the basis of the number of respondents rather than the number of comments (Kraut 1996)" (Jackson and Trochim 2002:311).

[5]Percentages are offered throughout as an indication of the general prevalence of specific experiences and phenomena, not necessarily as a statistical rendering of the data.

[6]Over a quarter of respondents (27.13%) made singularly dispositional attributions for themselves and no other types of attributions (regarding family or for themselves).

[7]Annotated with anonymous respondent ID# and basic demographic information such as gender, race/ethnicity, and highest degree earned, if such information was provided. A small number of respondents choose not to supply certain demographic information.

favorable – almost random -- circumstances facilitating their pursuit of a degree ("luck played a role," "eldest sibling," "Brooklyn College allowed me"). Graduates also qualified their dispositional explanations, for example: "I don't know. My parents would say it's because I am the smartest" (Graduate #48, Black, Female, MA) or "Because I don't know how to do anything else but write. I don't have useful skills beyond this" (Graduate #209; White, Female, BA). Graduate #48 diminishes the label of "smartest" by making it the assessment of her parents and not her assessment, while the second respondent highlights the limitation of her skill set, rather than her expertise, re-situating to whom we assign merit.

Graduates qualified their success by prioritizing situational factors that explained family members' lack of success:

"*My brother and I were raised by a single mother. She didn't have the opportunity to attend college. My brother dropped out of high school and wasn't interested in additional education beyond the GED. I was intent on being a biologist*." -- Graduate #9 (Hispanic, Male, MA)

"*I am the youngest in my family. My parents were immigrants from P.R., they did not have any schooling. It was important to me personally to get a higher education*." -- Graduate #19 (Hispanic, Female, BA)

In explaining the differential achievement within their families, these two graduates positioned their individual role in their success as last in a list of multiple reasons. Like other graduates, they both first established the limiting circumstances of their family members, rather than their exceptional qualities, in accounting for their attainment.

Disposition of Desire

"*I wanted it--they didn't. My siblings all went to vocational school.*" -- Graduate #96 (White, Female, BA)

Graduates also found ways to simultaneously support meritocratic ideology and individual worth (theirs and their family member's) by emphasizing the role of desire (as "interest" and motivation) and choice in determining educational pursuits and outcomes. A large minority of graduates' dispositional attributions positioned their desire for education and/or their want for "more" as the most significant contributor to their success, fueling their hard work and supporting the development of their capabilities and positive qualities. While desire (as ambition, or determination) constitutes a "self-serving" attribution, it also presents a way of positively positioning oneself that doesn't simultaneously disparage others, at least explicitly. The following responses (below) illustrate the explanatory power afforded to educational desire:

"*I wanted to go to college to better myself in life and college wasn't that important to my parents and brother.*" -- Graduate #56 (Hispanic, Female, BA)

"*I always wanted to know more about the world around me and really take the trouble to learn more about it -- even at a high price. Others prefer a more comfortable life.*" -- Graduate #82 (Asian, Female, MA)

Graduate attributions of personal success concomitantly account for the lack of success of similar others, demonstrating their understandings/positioning of family members. What stands out in these three examples is the close connection made to the (lack of) desire of siblings/others, who are identified as having chosen not to pursue a college degree. Graduates #96 and #56 are clear that they wanted "it," their siblings didn't, implying an equality of opportunity and meaningful choice. Graduate #82 is more general in identifying "others" who "prefer a more comfortable life," reversing generally accepted notions of class comfort, but also highlighting the "high price" that many first-generation graduates associate with educational attainment.

Family members' lack of a college degree was similarly framed by some as a lack of personal desire and choice, rather than being explicitly due to an undesirable personal quality or characteristic, or to structural impediments. Rather, these graduates understand their exceptional success to be an issue of differing priorities.

Escapist Fantasies, Freedom Dreams

"*Because I wanted to escape where I was from, have a life that was filled learning, and a better quality of life than remaining in rural Southeastern Ohio would have given me. I also did not want to be financially dependent on a man. I wanted to be able to take care of myself and to be financially independent.*" -- Graduate #54 (White, Female, MA)

"*A mentor in high school encouraged me to attend college. She always said 'education is your salvation'*." -- Graduate #187 (White, Female, MA)

Deploying a narrative of personal desire didn't always allow for both the valuation of self and family though, as in the case of those respondents (like the women quoted above) making dispositional attributions for self who explicitly attributed their success to their desire to *escape* some aspect of their lives through

higher education-- from a context of perceived deprivation, toward independence and freedom from family, dependency or socio-cultural (e.g., gender) roles. This small but significant group of graduates[8] saw educational credentialing as a means of accessing a better life, financial independence, even a means of economic and social "salvation."

These graduates expressed the profound drive to live very different lives than those traversed by their less-educated family members. They strongly disidentified with their family members, seeing them instead as "negative role models" (#185) that they "did not want to do and be like" (#31):

"*Because I did not want to do and be like my parents or and my friends, receiving the benefits from the government.*" -- Graduate #31 (Hispanic, Female, MA)

"*Being the youngest I saw my siblings as negative role models that I did not want to follow. So that made me pursue a path that was different than theirs.*" -- Graduate #185 (Hispanic, Male, MA)

"*I believed that I had to do something else to break the cycle of teenage pregnancy, welfare, and drugs. I seen how my grandparents and mother struggled so I knew that God had something better for me to do which required education.*" -- Graduate #81 (Black, Female, MA)

Of course, their family members might also have seen themselves as negative role models and hoped that their child or sibling would find another path. However, family members were likely not seen as negative models in all aspects, but those aspects specifically related to education and education-related outcomes (e.g., employment).

The other side of escape is freedom: Graduates dreamed of freedom from dependence, from a hard life and poverty, from "utter intellectual and spiritual deprivation," the fate of older siblings and parents who had to work too hard for too little. And graduates dreamed of the freedom to: learn, travel, grow, and live comfortably -- mobility desires were often explicitly individual, and the paths out of poverty they sought (or were offered) did not appear to include their families: "I wanted more out of life than my family provided" -- Graduate #105 (White, Female, MA). But while the desire for escape might be seen as the acceptance of, or resignation to inequality, it is also a rejection of one's assumed place within it.

[8]8.7% of all responses referenced the desire to escape.

(Dis)Positioning Family Members

"*They all fucked up and got pregnant or got someone pregnant and ran after the project life. They followed the dumb ass man my mother married and ran the streets. Now they regret it.*" -- Graduate #231 (Black, Female, PhD)

A very limited number of respondents (40 in total) offered dispositional attributions for family members[9] (13 referencing parents, and 25 referencing siblings) as an explanation for their success, ranging from generous (e.g., Graduate #316 below) to harsh (Graduate #231 above) in their assessment of them. These were instances of respondents' active referencing of some stable, enduring quality of a family member to account for the graduate's success, rather than passive or implied references or attributions to parents' or siblings' lack of educational success:

"*I think my parents always made their marriage and children a priority. They married young, bought a home, started a family and had too many responsibilities that encompassed most of their time.*" -- Graduate #316 (White, Female, BA)

"I followed through where my older sisters didn't. Although 2 of them (oldest and 3rd oldest) had started college they got side-tracked. The older one by a good job that didn't require college and the other began using drugs and became an addict. The second oldest had 2 kids by the time she was 19. I wanted more for myself." -- Graduate #66 (White, Female, PhD)

"My parents were immigrants and didn't have either the will or the ambition to attend college." -- Graduate #156 (White, Female, BA)

"*I never really knew the answer to that. I think I do have a lot of common sense and realized a degree was the way to go. My siblings didn't value education.*" -- Graduate #217 (White, Female, MA)

The harshness of participant #231's response wasn't typical of graduates' discussion of their parents and stands in stark contrast to the other quoted (and more typical) graduates who positively positioned their parents. For example, graduate #316 indicated that her parents made family life their priority rather than higher education – a choice that privileges family values and which few would explicitly critique. She also provided a range of situational explanations as well. Graduates #156 and #217 sit in the affective center of the range of dispositional attributions for family, associating

[9]Five respondents referenced their family only in general terms, e.g., "they" and "my family," while 3 respondents specifically mentioned both their siblings and their parents.

differences in attainment with low educational values, lack of personal will, and limited individual ambition. Still, when interpreted within the context of graduates' full responses, these more average attributions are situated adjacent to other possible explanations for disparate outcomes (e.g., parents were immigrants). These multifaceted and multivalent attributions/ explanations again suggest that these first-gen college graduates favorably position family as well as support the tenants of merit and social class. We might also more broadly interpret #231's anger and rage, regret and disappointment, as directed both at family members and perhaps also at the gap between aspiration and outcome now separating her from some of her family members.

Looking deeper within these dispositional attributions for family members (with several graduates mentioning both a parent/s and sibling/s), a pattern starts to emerge: twice as many graduates made dispositional references to siblings than to parents, illustrating their tendencies to judge family members differently depending on their relationship to the graduate. Social context inches into graduates' references to parents, while a discourse of differing priorities and conscious choice more often anchors the responses referencing siblings, as evident in the quotes above and below:

"*My parents were teenagers when they had me and my brother allows life to take charge of him instead of taking charge of it.*" -- Graduate #194 (Female, Queens College, MA)

"I had considerable support from friends outside the family who helped me get into and stay in college. My parents did not have money to attend school; my brothers weren't interested in attending. I thrived on school." -- Graduate #55 (White, Female, MA)

"*I think I was the first to get my degree because I made it a priority and did not let outside forces to deter me. My siblings let other aspects rule their existence and then they never pursued further education. My parents were more concerned about working to help support their families and then finally their own family.*" -- Graduate #342 (Hispanic, Female, MA)

Graduate respondents understood their parents to be limited by their circumstances (they were young parents, lacked money for college, or needed to support their families) while siblings were passive ("brother allows life to take charge of him" and "siblings let other aspects rule their existence"), or they didn't value higher education (Graduate #55). Graduates on the other hand, "thrived on school" and didn't "let outside forces deter" them.

Situating Family

Over a fifth of graduate respondents (23.34%, n=74) made attributions for their success referencing *situational* (i.e., external, unstable) qualities of their families – nearly double the number (12.61%, n=40) of *dispositional* attributions offered for family -- to explain disparities in educational attainment within their families of origin. The fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977) predicts that when accounting for the behavior of others, dispositional characteristics are more salient and accessible to respondents than are situational factors. Instead, graduates were more likely to explain a family members' lack of success by citing contextual rather than individual factors.

On the surface, this imbalance indicates a tendency to favorably position family by more frequently highlighting contextual aspects of their lives rather than invoking personal shortcomings to explain their relative lack of attainment. This finding also replicates lab study findings reported by Sedikides et al. (1998), who found that relationship (dyadic) closeness reduced self-enhancement tendencies of the SSB. It also suggests that as an integral part of one's identity, one's family is extended the attribution bias that protects the self.

However, the pattern of attribution previously found within the limited number of dispositional-family attributions is reinforced in the situational attributions referencing family members' limited educational attainment. Significantly, these *situational* explanations more often referenced the situational aspects of parents' lives over siblings' lives (58 mentioning parents, and 16 referencing siblings[10]), reversing the pattern of *dispositional* attributions which were double the number of references to graduates' *siblings*, again suggesting that graduates hold their brothers and sisters more accountable for their lack of educational success than they do their parents for similarly limited formal education[11].

Many graduates express the belief that all the children within a graduate's family have comparable access to a college education, and differential educational attainment was guided most by their desire, choice and personal prioritizing. Parents are granted the desire

[10]In addition to these situational attributions referencing parents and/or siblings, 5 referenced their family in general terms such as "they" or "my family" without explicitly differentiating siblings from parents.

[11]Of those offering situational attributions directly referencing their siblings, 6 also referenced parents (6 of 16) and/or referenced both dispositional explanations regarding their siblings as well as situational attributions (7 of 16).

for a degree but exempted from having to earn one by an understood and accepted lack of opportunity. The American dream mythology moralizes doing "better than" one's parents while supporting and being supported by the notion of an inherent equality ostensibly existing between siblings. In individualizing their success as well as the failure of siblings, while granting their parents a "pass" graduates bolster and legitimate the current neoliberal system of educational/class meritocracy. Moreover, such relationship-specific attribution tendencies have implications for relationships within working class families, such as reflecting and contributing to tangible differences in the intimacy of graduate-parent relationships compared to the relationship their siblings have with their parents, and to tensions between siblings specifically attributed to differences in higher educational attainment such as feelings of resentment and relative deprivation.

Graduates: Situationally Successful

"I had a caring teacher that heard of a college that had a program that would afford me the opportunity to attend without having money." -- Graduate #116 (Black, Female, MA)

"I was simply, the oldest, and it was understood. Most Asian families put education FIRST, then career, then have a family." -- Graduate #40 (Asian, Female, BA)

"Youngest of five children that graduated from high school at sixteen. There were few options, but it was important to my parents that I attend college. Had I decided to drop out at some point, it would not have been too large of an issue" -- Graduate #12 (White, Male, MA)

While many respondents (46.05%) understood their success in terms of their own dispositional and stable personal qualities, graduates also attributed their success to forces outside of themselves with considerable frequency (47.31%). As Table 2 shows (See Table 2 in the Appendix.), these outside forces clustered primarily around the themes of opportunity, and family expectations/support for college going. In a sense, all situational factors imply circumstances of luck and opportunity, but within this category of contextual factors, graduates specifically mentioned opportunity/luck and birth order (mostly as the eldest child) most frequently. Together, opportunity and birth order constituted two thirds (66%) of the responses in this category[12]. Graduates also cited, although to a much lesser extent, the different generational standards for higher educational attainment and increased credentialing requirements as additional reasons for differential degree attainment.

Family Expectations of the Dream

The first reason is that my parents always emphasized the benefits of getting an education. The second reason is that after I experienced earning a living as a high school graduate, I became convinced that a college degree will help me live a better life. -- Graduate #183 (White, Female, MA)

My parents were immigrants and understood that an education was the key to attaining immediate assimilation and success in America. -- Graduate #224 (White, Male, MA)

It wasn't an option, rather a must, and once my family saw I was excelling in school in my early years, it really became less of an option and more of a family wide expectation. --Graduate #256 (Black, Female, MA)

As the oldest of 3 kids, it was my father's dream to send his kids to college to get the education he never could afford. -- Graduate #321 (White, Male, BA)

A family's expectation, a father's dream – The promises of a college degree (e.g., assimilation, success) hangs in the balance of degree attainment. But balance is tension -- taut and fraught -- promise and threat teeter there under anxious feet that resist being bare, who support more than themselves. Family is often the source of graduate striving and ambition – not the singular source, for graduates have made clear their own primary role in translating the hopes of parents, teachers and siblings, the support and opportunities, both found and created, into a college degree. But for many first-generation graduates, the hope and aspiration – the "must" -- begins at home in accordance with the dreams of one's family. Home is where many graduates find the support and encouragement, the psychic sustenance, to successfully pursue a college degree.

For other graduates, this ambition is internally driven, sometimes in perceived antagonism to their families' preferences. Across these ends of the spectrum though, graduates use several strands of attributions to tie up an explanation for their success within a familial context of limited educational attainment. Graduates do bolster their self-concept in their explanations for success, but they are not totally self-serving in those attributions:

[12]This tabulation of the frequency of responses fitting into these emergent thematic categories is intended to show relative discursive prominence rather than as a statistical rendering of this qualitative data. Given that thematic categories are not mutually exclusive, the multiple coding of responses into potentially more than one category means that these numbers total more than 100%.

they readily acknowledge the role of opportunity/luck and draw attention to the role of family support and positive educational values in their successes. Graduates frequently downplay their exceptionalism even while supporting the notion of individual merit (and failure), and the mythos of an American dream, by emphasizing the ways that they ultimately translated this support and luck, via effort and/or smarts, into the reality of a degree. They grant their parents a pass for their limited attainment but hold their siblings especially accountable for their lack of college achievement. And these attribution tendencies may impact, and be impacted by, family relations.

Discussion

The college degree is presented as a universally available, equalizing mechanism and yet our system of higher education continues to reproduce extremely unequal outcomes across social categories of difference. How first-generation college graduates explain/attribute their success and the limited educational attainment of their family of origin, not only reflects family relations but also impacts them in potentially important ways. The contradiction posed by faith in meritocracy and the lack of academic success of one's family of origin, present first-gen graduates with a range of ideological, moral, and relational dilemmas. To fully accept the legitimacy of their own educational merit, requires also accepting that family members may have 'chosen' educational, maybe even professional, 'failure' by not obtaining a college degree, even in the face of a desire to earn one, pitting meritocratic ideology against the moral integrity of their families. Such ideological dilemmas are revealed in this open-ended data, as graduates both claim their achievements/merit in the face of unequal opportunity and outcomes as well as assert the moral value of their family members who have not had the same type of success.

Graduates' explanations for disparate levels of attainment often challenge the reliability of the equal opportunity narrative by laying out the significant situational barriers facing their parents and siblings. This finding suggests that people are not singularly motivated to justify unequal outcomes that enhance their own ego, preserve a fabled meritocracy, or sense of a "just world" (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Lerner 1980). They can also be motivated by a desire for connection to others and an interest in relationship tending. I argue that graduates manage the deep contradictions posed by ideologies of merit against family/kinship values by adopting an attributional strategy that is mindful of important familial relationships and favors relationship-enhancing attributions over distress-maintaining ones.

Relationship-enhancing attributions tend to be those that attribute positive behaviors to dispositional causes and negative behaviors and outcomes to situational/external causes. Relationship-enhancing attributions are a critical component of "well-minded relationships" (Harvey and Omarzu 1997) and have been associated with greater relational trust and satisfaction. The "minding theory of relationships" is primarily concerned with romantic non-familial relationships but Harvey and Omarzu (1997) also state that relationship minding is likely practiced in friendships and family relationships as well (224). However, the attributional work required to reduce relational conflict while also validating graduates' deservingness simultaneously diminishes the graduate by increasing the emotional labor demands and cognitive load of first generation graduates that continuing education graduates simply do not shoulder.

While my findings support the idea that we extend the self-serving bias (SSB) to our family/significant others, they also suggest that how and when we extend the SSB varies by specific relationship (e.g., parents versus siblings). For first-generation college graduates, seeing one's family as personally responsible for their limited educational attainment can be distress- maintaining and thus negatively impact family relationships. In this sense, attributions can also act as a distancing mechanism as much as a relationship enhancing mechanism. In this study, we see more distress maintaining attributions made regarding siblings and relationship-enhancing attributions offered for parents. Consequently, the intervention of the college degree may be especially damaging for cross-attainment sibling relationships.

Going forward, this research invites more hypothesis-driven confirmatory research questions investigating the relationship between attributions for educational attainment, and family relationships. For example, do dispositional/internal attributions for disparate outcomes predict greater levels of interpersonal tension or conflict within the family context? What is the directionality of the relationship? Do relationship-enhancing attributions contribute to greater trust and relationship satisfaction between cross-attainment or credential-discordant siblings? If so, how might attributional training, a motivation-enhancing intervention that has been applied in educational contexts to increase achievement (Hall et al. 2006;

Haynes et al. 2009)[13], as well used in a wide range of applied contexts (see Hilt 2004 for a review) including in marriage and family counseling, similarly aid in addressing the relational conflicts that emerge for first-gen students and thus potentially support retention efforts?

CONCLUSION

This paper explores how a sample of first-generation college graduates explain the disparities in educational attainment existing between them and their families of origin. The qualitative data presented here reveal a tension between individual investment in the notion of meritocracy, and the competing investment in a set of family relationships, relationships that may have played a critical role in motivating and supporting that student's success. The differential attributions for parents over siblings -- meritocracy for siblings, family values for parents -- is another way that graduates negotiate the contradictions between these ideologies of family and merit, with their relationships with siblings as potential collateral damage.

This work highlights the limits of framing the purpose of higher education solely in terms of social mobility and demands that social science researchers and academic institutions expand their conception of educational outcomes beyond individual level variables such as graduation rates, income, or employment, to also include psychosocial and relational measures as well as consider the families and communities that this population is embedded within. This research also offers critical insight to campuses that recruit and serve first-generation students, information that could inform initiatives to increase enrollment and retention, by working to reduce the familial distancing associated with higher education for low income and first gen students specifically by helping them develop and strengthen bridging strategies to remain connected to both family of origin and school.

[13]AR entails training students to modify attributions for their failures, from more dispositional attributions toward causes perceived to be under their control and characteristic of a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006; Haynes Stewart, Clifton, Daniels, *et al.,* 2011).

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Frequency of Attribution Type and Target[14]

Respondents making any DISPOSITIONAL attributions (N=317):	**DISPOSITIONAL Referencing SELF** (i.e., the Graduate)	**DISPOSITIONAL Referencing FAMILY**	**DISPOSITIONAL Referencing BOTH (SELF and FAMILY)**
53.62% (n=170)	46.05% (n=146)	12.61% (n=40)	5.04% (n=16)
Respondents making any SITUATIONAL attributions (N=317)**:**	SITUATIONAL **Referencing SELF/ Grad**	SITUATIONAL **Referencing FAMILY**	SITUATIONAL **Referencing BOTH** (SELF and FAMILY)
59.62% (n=189)	47.31% (n=150)	23.34% (n=74)	11.04% (n=35)

[14]These are not mutually exclusive categories.

Table 2. Thematic Coding of SITUATIONAL/Self Attributions

Thematic Coding of SITUATIONAL/Self attributions	% of Situational/Self Responses (n=150)	% of all "Why First" item responses (N=317)
Opportunity/Luck	40.66% (n=61)	19.24%
Birth Order	26% (n=39)	12.30%
Education as a Family Value	20.66% (n=31)	9.77%
Family Support	18% (n=27)	8.51%
Generational Requirement	11.33% (n=17)	5.36%
Other/Miscellaneous	21.33% (n=32)	10.09%