

**Resilience Processes of First-Generation College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

Resilience is a communicative process in which people engage in storytelling, sensemaking, and adaptation during disruptive, traumatic trigger events. The COVID-19 pandemic is well-documented as a global disruption to people's everyday lives, and, when addressing the ways in which the academic institution can better assist students, it is useful to know the ways in which they persisted through. This study aims to note and analyze first-generation students', a group already subject to challenges within academia, resilience processes in order to advocate for policy improvements.

*Keywords:* supportive communication, resilience, first-generation, COVID-19

**Resilience Strategies of First-Generation College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the perceived aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health across the globe has suffered, in part due to required isolation and an extreme alteration of support systems (Gloster et al., 2020). This is echoed by research done on university students, showing the importance of social support during widespread crises (Ducharme, 2020; Szczepanska & Pietrzyka, 2021). Existing literature asserts that, contrary to popular belief, the age group that experiences loneliness most frequently and severely is not the elderly, but young adults (Beam & Kim, 2020; Qualter et al., 2015). The transition to college is seen as a major life development and one that results in a substantial identity reformation for most students, but comes with mental health challenges that are only exacerbated when students come from marginalized backgrounds, as may be the case with first-generation students, or FGS (Azmitia et al., 2008; Azmitia et al., 2013; Conley et al., 2020; Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018; Mofatteh, 2021; Patterson et al., 2022; Ressa, 2022). FGS here is defined as students whose parents or legal guardians have not completed a four-year college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). These students in particular are vulnerable to the stressors that accompany pandemics, as they tend to come from low-income families, and are more likely to live in environments that contain some form of abuse (Lederer et al., 2021; Soria et al., 2020). In the face of one of the most widespread disruptions of life, how FGS find ways to engage in discourses and narratives interdependently to endure and re-emerge is important to understanding what ways institutions can better serve this group (Buzzanell, 2010; Richardson, 2002).

**First-Generation Students**

As noted in extant literature across multiple disciplines, improving conditions for marginalized groups results in an improvement for all parties (Edyburn, 2015; Standen et al.,

2021; Williamson, 2019). As FGS tend to also deal with economic hardships and access to financial and mental health resources, their struggles during the pandemic may be unique and additionally strenuous in comparison to their non-FGS counterparts (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2021; Soria et al., 2020; Wang & Nuru, 2017). Without the same level of institutional knowledge that non-FGS students receive from parental units, there are also knowledge gaps regarding the minutiae of academic procedures that may also raise the stress level of specifically FGS (Nichols & Lucas, 2010; Wang, 2012). This may have been exacerbated during periods of remote learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where faculty and students alike were forced to rapidly adapt to the changes in existing procedure (Ducharme, 2020; Gloster et al., 2020; Szczepanska & Pietrzyka, 2021). In noting the resilience practices of FGS students, universities may become more aware of the stressors placed upon more marginalized students and find ways to combat those stressors.

### **Narrative Practices and Resilience**

Historically, resilience has been a singular, insular characteristic unique to individuals. This individualistic, neoliberal approach to resilience, though, often places the onus and blame on the person processing through trauma to bounce back (Potter, 2023). However, modern literature has established that, while human resilience does allow us to learn to persist through hardship and loss, it is “constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people’s abilities to create new normalcies” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 9; Houston, 2018). The transformative and adaptive processes focused on within Buzzanell’s Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR) reinforce the importance of community, storytelling, and meaning making regarding the continual exercise of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018; Everet et al., 2016; Harter, 2013; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Xu, 2013). The power of storytelling especially cannot be understated,

as narratives foster and facilitate the construction of order through disruptive periods (Harter et al., 2005; Petraglia, 2007; Xu, 2013). Centralizing the social construction of reality, we can note how the stories that people tell themselves and others establish what normal is (Buzzanell, 2018; Fisher, 1984). In focusing on how people construct the narratives around widespread traumatic events, we may be able to comprehend how to best serve those people and the communities of which they are a member. Specifically with a group of marginalized people, like FGS, this ability to construct a new reality of normality through trauma could inform others as to what procedures serve and antagonize them.

### **Communication Theory of Resilience**

According to Buzzanell's CTR (2018), resilience processes occur in five interconnected, nonlinear ways: a) crafting normalcy, b) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings, c) creating identity anchors, d) maintaining and using communication networks, and e) putting alternative logics to work. This pentad is activated reactively, based around a trigger event. Crafting normalcy involves integrating new language, interactions, routines, rituals, and storytelling into one's life. Foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings is noted by Buzzanell to center "the embodiment of resilience" (2018, p. 101). This often involves conscious decision-making to enact behaviors that address a person's distress despite their own negative emotions. Affirming identity anchors is done through a series of discourses where people re-establish their identity and their relationships to others. While maintaining and using communication networks, people utilize face-to-face and mediated communication to "make sense of what is happening and assess their situations while stabilizing strong ties" (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 102). This construction, reconstruction, and utilization of social capital is not only vital for sensemaking and solidifying their relationships

during turbulence, but can also aid in the other aspects of resilience. Finally, putting alternative logics to work refers to a method of reframing where resilient systems find ways to incorporate chaotic, irrational, or paradoxical rules or routines that emerge due to the disruption. This framework has typically been used to note resilience processes regarding natural disasters but has also been used to illuminate resilience processes surrounding health communication and immigration (Lee et al., 2020; Scharp et al., 2021; Xu, 2013). In this instance, the trigger event would be the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the surrounding events (the temporary lockdown in March of 2020, mask enforcement, virtual learning, etc.). Because the processes are not linear, CTR does not attempt to force trauma victims into a monolithic timeline, but instead allows for a richer description through the categorization of how people persist after trigger events.

### **Research Questions**

To further extant literature regarding communicative resilience and first-generation college students, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the most common trigger events and obstacles that FGS experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Which resilience processes, as noted within CTR, did FGS students utilize and enact during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

After receiving approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the data set utilized included 24 participants all of whom were at least 18 years old, belonged to a family where no parent/guardian completed a 4-year college degree, and currently enrolled in college.

Eighteen of the participants identified as women, three identified as men, and three identified as non-binary or gender non-conforming. Thirteen of the participants identified as White, four identified as Hispanic, five identified as Black, and one identified as multi-racial. These participants ranged from 19 to 72 years of age, with a mean age of 24.85, and all attended public and private universities across the continental United States.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

In the data set analyzed in this study, twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted over a videoconferencing software. These interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours and 9 minutes, with an average duration of 46 minutes and 57 seconds. The interviews used a turning point model to ascertain the participants' perspectives and focus the analysis done on the events that the participants deemed valuable (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Dailey et al., 2016; Graham, 1997; Golish, 2000). For confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants. Each interview was automatically transcribed by the videoconferencing software and these transcriptions were downloaded and edited to correct any mistakes made by the software.

### **Data Analysis**

To address the research questions above and classify the resilience processes used by first-generation students, I used the interview transcripts as raw data with each narrative provided by the participants as the unit of analysis. Each pre-pandemic story was then set as a baseline to compare pandemic stories to gauge resilience processes. Then, mid- and late-pandemic stories were categorized according to which process of CTR they most closely could be associated with. Each transcript was read multiple times to conduct a thorough thematic analysis, where the first read was done in order to gain an overall understanding of the interviewees' perspectives and the second was done to locate emerging themes. As these initial themes were noted, I verified that

they fulfilled the requirements set by Owen (1984) of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. After comparing the stories told pre-trigger event, noting pandemic stories that had similar meanings, identical wordings, and stressed emphasis that occurred after the beginning of the pandemic allowed for categorization and comparison to Buzzanell's (2018) five CTR processes. These processes guide the themes listed throughout the analysis done. Upon review of the listed initial themes, another read of the raw data was conducted to confirm that the categorization was reflective of the content before the list was adjusted and finalized. Each category and subcategory was then paired with an exemplar statement to further develop each (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

### **Data Validation**

In accordance with best practices for interpretive scholarship, multiple data validation strategies were utilized. First, each interview was recorded and transcribed, resulting in 1040 pages of transcription. Then, analysis of each interview was conducted past the threshold of theoretical saturation. Finally, I used detailed and rich quotes from the participants to provide evidence for my findings.

### **Results**

The intent of this study was to analyze the different resilience processes used by first-generation students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the results showed that students did indeed utilize multiple resilience processes throughout the pandemic and often had a common trigger event. Obstacles noted by participants were economic as businesses shut down, safety concerns that arose due to the virus, and a sudden disconnect from friends and loved ones as social distancing and online learning became more prevalent. The most common CTR processes depicted by interviewees were foregrounding productive action while background



negative emotions and putting alternative logics to work, while the overwhelming majority of interviewees noted their trigger event as the spring break vacation during 2020. In centering analysis around these two categories, which could act as supratemes for the sake of analysis, two themes emerged for the first category and one emerged for the second, resulting in three total themes: (1a) *the ball is in my court*, (1b) *just getting it done*, and (2) *Calvinball is confusing*.

When considering how productive action was foregrounded, the first theme to emerge was *the ball is in my court*. This, from students, was an acknowledgement that, despite the hardships that they were experiencing throughout the pandemic, they ultimately had the autonomy and agency to complete the work that had to be done. This did not require the negativity associated with their circumstances to suddenly become positive, but rather represented a resolve to put those feelings aside while performing labor associated with school and work. There was a reframing that was present within this theme where students perceived themselves as rerouting the negative energy associated with the pandemic into the work they felt obligated to complete. While students embodying this theme may have had higher academic or organizational success, this did not always result in a more stable mental state and students were more likely to articulate feelings of burnout.

“Circumstances can really mess you up and I think it was just telling myself, ‘We can either choose to sit in the circumstances, or we can try our best to try and move forward.’ So, I think that’s how it really affected me as a person. Just allowing me to say that, like, the ball is in my court and that I can really do what I need to do in order to reach my goals.”

Here, Carrie, a 21-year-old student, expressed her reconstruction of her perspective to foreground action over the mental environment that she found herself in. Reframing in this way

was very positive for Carrie, as it allowed her to continue moving towards her academic goals. In the context of the pandemic, this allowed for a continued push towards her end goal of graduating with an undergraduate degree. However, while this could be productive in the short term, it could lead to higher levels of burnout, which could then instigate the second subtheme.

Another way that students foregrounded productive action while backgrounding negative emotions was *just getting it done*. This theme, while similar to the previous one, was slightly more nihilistic. Students expressing sentiments within this subtheme articulated a desire to do the bare minimum to persist through, but refused to go above and beyond the requirements, as they may have done prior to the trigger event. This was due to a perceived lack of intrinsic value in completing the assigned tasks or a lack of emotional energy to put forth towards caring about the tasks. Students whose professors or employers were unyielding in their expectations during this time period expressed intense frustration towards a perceived lack of empathy regarding difficulty putting forth the same quality of work as the students had completed prior to the trigger event.

“[It was] really just trying to find like the will and the energy to kind of, like, fight through the burnout and just getting through it. Because now it’s kind of hard to, like, go to people for encouragement, because everyone’s kind of feeling that way. And, so, like, now it’s not necessarily the imposter syndrome and stuff as much as it was, as now [...] just trying to work through that, like, just being mentally exhausted. You have no fuel.”

Natalie, a 21-year-old student, described how even just persevering and functioning was a challenge for her, because, as she said, simply finding the energy was incredibly challenging. This was coupled with the conscious, empathetic understanding that due to the nature of the pandemic everyone else was experiencing similar circumstances. This could make it difficult to

enact Buzzanell's (2018) resilience process "utilizing and maintaining communication networks," as people may feel as though they are taxing others' emotional bandwidth in a way that the person reaching out may not be able to withstand. However, the phrase "just getting through it" notes the core of this subtheme, where participants noted committing as much as they were able which, while being a lower quality than prior to the trigger event, was the best that they were able to do at that time.

The primary theme nested within putting alternative logics to work is *Calvinball is confusing*, a title that references popular comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. In this strip, Calvinball is a game that is constructed by the eponymous Calvin with ever-changing rules based on the child's whims. While the Center for Disease Control had been clear with their directions and instructions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this information may not have been properly disseminated to students, as many expressed their confusion and misunderstanding of mask mandates in the initial wave after the trigger event. A commonality noted among the participants was that it often felt like employers' and universities' expectations and procedures changed incredibly rapidly, as institutions attempted to navigate online learning and mask mandates were either enforced or ignored. Participants stated that they felt as though they could only do their best and stay flexible, but that the constant adaptation became frustrating to deal with.

### **Discussion**

In this study, I assessed and analyzed the resilience processes that first-generation students engaged with during the COVID-19 pandemic. In conducting this analysis, I have noted the most commonly articulated processes and explored the nuances that occur when CTR processes are navigated in practice. This study makes important contributions to existing

literature on CTR, FGS, and student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, I highlight my findings and present theoretical and practical implications of the present study.

My first research question addressed trigger events and obstacles faced for FGS during the pandemic. In my analysis, the overwhelming consensus was that the trigger event during this time was the spring break vacation of 2020. This was noted to be caused by a change between the expectations set before spring break and the change in policy during the vacation period. The obstacles noted by participants were economic, health-based, and/or social, as the pandemic impacted students' abilities to work consistently, exacerbated health and safety concerns, and distanced students from their peers and loved ones. This was noted by participants to be incredibly mentally and emotionally taxing and caused much distress within participants.

The second research question aimed to note the resilience processes that FGS engaged with after the trigger event and add nuance and details to how those processes were enacted in real time. Through further analysis of the interview data, I identified the two most common processes utilized by participants, foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotions and putting alternative logics to work, and found three total themes within those processes: (1a) *the ball is in my court*, (1b) *just getting it done*, and (2) *Calvinball is confusing*. Participants noted difficulties even while enacting processes that may, at first glance, be seen as wholly beneficial. For example, *the ball is in my court* occurred when students acknowledged and located their agency within the distressing time but could be accompanied by burnout. *Just getting it done* could result in a negative downturn in the student's grades or organizational performance, but may have been all that the student was able to complete.

*Calvinball is confusing* may seem to be the most straightforward theme, but may be unavoidable as crises involve new rules and procedures.

### **Implications**

These findings present both scholarly and practical implications regarding nuances in students' resilience processes, and academic institutional policy during crises. These qualitative findings provide richness to Buzzanell's (2018) CTR, because, while resilience has been deeply explored in literature, interview data from first-generation students has not been analyzed in this capacity for such a timely event. Through analysis of such rich text, the study of communicative resilience is furthered and enriched.

In addition, these findings have significant practical implications. Through recognizing the difficulties that students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic institutions can make procedural adjustments that benefit all parties involved. Faculty especially can benefit from a deeper understanding of the stressors placed on students during this time and have the most individualistic agency to adapt their expectations and curriculum in the future. Institutions can be more intentional and conscious of the confusion that may arise due to conflicting or rapidly altering policy during crises and can adapt their messaging strategy accordingly.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

However, despite the implications of this study, there are still limitations and areas for further research. The sample for this study was majority white and female, which may have led to different findings than a more diverse sample. The findings also, in centering the experiences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, exclude the resilience processes of faculty and staff at academic institutions. Future researchers may find that there is more nuance gained in uncovering information from that population. As is typical with retrospective interview data,

these findings may be hindered by the participants' memory. Despite recollection allowing for a broad quantity of events, time allows for the recollection of events to become muddled and for subsequent experiences to alter the participants' recollection. Future research and studies may consider attempting to collect longitudinal or more immediate data regarding resilience processing with a focus on first-generation students.

### **Conclusion**

A recurring sentiment from the participants of this study was a new-found appreciation for the interactions and relationships they currently have. While the pandemic has been and continues to be devastating, the lessons learned from the mandated social distancing era can be utilized to inform future students, faculty, and administration for future crises and empathetic ways to accommodate marginalized subsets of the community.

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