Focused, Exploratory, or Vigilant: Reproduction, Mobility, and the Self-Narratives of Second-Generation Immigrant Youth

Blake R. Silver [1] · Freddy Lopez [1] · Fanni Farago [1] · Tharuna Kalaivanan [1]

Abstract

The transition from late adolescence to early adulthood represents a key moment in trajectories of social reproduction and mobility. A central mechanism influencing these trajectories is the cultivation of specific versions of selfhood. Research shows that socialization within various class locations shapes individuals' sense of self in ways that impact how they imagine the future and the actions they take in pursuit of goals. Thus far, however, existing literature has neglected to consider the experiences of youth from immigrant families, a population that encounters unique challenges in the transition to adulthood. This paper relies on 40 in-depth interviews to explore the self-narratives of second-generation immigrant (SGI) youth. We seek to understand how these narratives relate to their future orientations and approaches to planning. Additionally, given the findings of prior research, we consider variation in SGI youths' self-narratives by social class background. Respondents from middle-class families displayed a durable sense of agency, crafting either a *focused self* with a clear trajectory toward a white-collar occupation or an *exploratory self,* open to unbounded personal discovery. By contrast, most respondents from working-class backgrounds exhibited a more tentative sense of agency and narrated a *vigilant self* that was proactive but cautious in the face of uncertainty. Divergence in participants' self-narratives related to different strategies for planning for the future. Our findings extend the literature on the construction of agentic selfhood for college-going youth in the transition to adulthood.

Keywords Self-narratives · Second-generation immigrants · Culture · Transition to adulthood · Agency · College students

✉ Blake R. Silver
  bsilver@gmu.edu

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

The path from late adolescence to early adulthood represents an increasingly precarious life transition where resources and opportunities are unequally distributed (Furstenberg et al. 2005; Silva 2013). In the middle of the twentieth century, youth typically moved into adulthood through a linear sequence of events that included completing formal education, finding full-time employment, leaving the parental home, and forming families in their early twenties (Marini 1984; Settersten and Ray 2010). Recent social, political, and economic changes have prolonged the transition to adulthood. Middle-class jobs that can support a family now require greater investment in educational credentials (Furstenberg et al. 2005), and progress toward traditional markers of adulthood is increasingly reversible, with individuals gaining and losing employment, starting and stopping schooling, and forming and dissolving marriages with greater frequency (Pugh 2015). As a result, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, a key phase in trajectories of social reproduction and social mobility (Arum and Roksa 2014; Furstenberg et al. 2005; Silva 2013), is "more complicated, uncertain, and extended than ever before" (Waters et al. 2011, 1).

Sociological research illuminates a range of consequential factors for youth's trajectories into adulthood, which have important implications for understanding inequality. In addition to disparities in material resources like parental financial support (Roksa 2019; Schoeni and Ross 2005; Swartz 2009), cultural mechanisms also play a crucial role in shaping this life transition (Jack 2016; Khan 2011; Silva 2013; Willis 1977). This paper extends research on how one cultural mechanism, the construction and presentation of identity through self-narratives (Nielsen 2015; Zussman 2012), informs the transition to adulthood.

Research demonstrates the value of examining self-narratives for understanding youth's transition from late adolescence to early adulthood (Hollstein 2019; Rondini 2018). Although studies of self-concept and class inequality in this transition advance understandings of social reproduction and mobility (Lareau 2011; Silva and Corse 2018), existing literature overlooks immigrant youth's experiences. This is surprising given that second-generation immigrants (SGIs) encounter distinctive challenges as they enter early adulthood (Kurien 2005; Portes and Rivas 2011).[1] Research shows that SGI youth frequently confront material and legal constraints (Cebulko 2014; Gonzales 2011), discrimination in the labor market (Veit and Thijsen 2019), anti-immigrant sentiment (García 2017; Sherkat and Lehman 2018), racism and ethnic prejudice (Lopez 2003; Sánchez-Connally 2018), and other barriers to success (Haller et al. 2011; Portes et al. 2005).

This study relied on 40 in-depth interviews to explore the self-narratives of SGI youth in the transition to adulthood. We sought to understand how these narratives related to their future orientations and approaches to planning. Given the findings of prior research (Lareau 2011; Silva and Corse 2018), we considered how SGI youths' self-narratives varied by class background and the implications of such variation for social reproduction and mobility. Although their impending completion of a bachelor's degree would position them for similar post-graduate opportunities (Hout 2012), we found that SGI youth diverged in their self-narratives. Respondents from middle-class families displayed a durable sense of agency, envisioning themselves as in control of their own environment and future. They typically crafted a *focused self*, one that imagined a successful trajectory toward a specific white-collar occupation, or an *exploratory self* that sought unbounded personal discovery. Meanwhile, participants from working-class backgrounds exhibited a more tentative sense of agency. These youths crafted a *vigilant self* that was proactive but cautious in the face of uncertainty.

Each self-narrative related to different orientations toward the future and future action (see also Alexander and Smith 2002). Our findings add nuance to prior understandings of the construction of agentic selfhood among college-going youth.

Reproduction and Mobility in the Transition to Adulthood

Studies of the transition to adulthood reveal important mechanisms shaping the relationship between class background and class destination (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Roksa and Silver 2019). While some youth attain education and careers comparable to their parents, others come to occupy a different social class location. Cultural resources play an important role in these trajectories. One strand of social theory emphasizes how culture explains the transmission of inequality from one generation to the next. This *cultural reproduction* model posits that cultural resources acquired in the family are influential in maintaining inequality in life outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Socialization within various class locations shapes individuals' sense of self in ways that impact the kind of future they are able to imagine and the kinds of actions they take in pursuit of their goals (Bourdieu 1990; Calarco 2014; Lamont 2000; Streib 2011). Middle-class youth cultivate a sense of entitlement and agency, while many working-class youths come to feel constrained (Lareau 2011). These patterns are theorized to reproduce inequality during the transition to adulthood (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977).

According to this model, cultural reproduction is propped up by the inequitable practices of institutions. Schools, for instance, often expect and reward familiarity with the dominant cultural norms, creating disparities in student success (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau and Weininger 2003). As they interact with these institutions, youth from different class backgrounds learn to understand themselves and their opportunities in different ways (Carter 2005; Stuber 2011). Envisioning oneself as controlling one's environment and future can be advantageous (Bourdieu 1990), but the resources to develop agentic self-narratives are often more accessible to middle-class youth than their working-class peers (Lareau 2011; MacLeod 1987).

Alternatively, the *cultural mobility* framework shows how acquiring cultural resources can sometimes facilitate upward mobility for less socioeconomically advantaged individuals (DiMaggio 1982). This model underscores that socialization in the family is just one route for the transmission of culture. Individuals also acquire cultural resources from other settings, including schools. When working-class youth are exposed to certain types of educational experiences, they may become acquainted with dominant culture (Bueker 2019; Jack 2016; Roksa and Potter 2011). For instance, Ispa-Landa (2015) found that adolescents from less advantaged families who attended upper-middle-class schools gained familiarity with dominant communication styles and acquired a sense of self that facilitated successful negotiation with authority figures.

Research on working-class youth who attend higher education provides additional support for the cultural mobility model. College students from working-class families frequently acquire self-conceptions and aspirations comparable to their more socioeconomically advantaged peers (Binder and Abel 2019; Binder et al. 2016; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014). Kaufman and Feldman (2004, 482) claim that college attendance gives students across class backgrounds the cultural resources to envision themselves within

professional careers as they acquire "symbolic entitlement" that they are deserving of white-collar employment.

Notably, recent research illuminates the complex ways higher education can influence culture. While there may be a degree of cultural similarity among college graduates from various class backgrounds, there are also durable differences between the upwardly mobile and their continuing-middle-class peers (Lee 2016; Silver 2020). For instance, Gillis (2019) shows that even at the end of college, students display class-based differences in post-graduate aspirations, with social class backgrounds informing students' orientations toward service programs like Teach for America and Peace Corps. These findings point to the importance of class origin during the transition to adulthood, even among youth with comparable educational experiences.

SGI Youth and the Transition to Adulthood

Studies of the mobility experiences of SGIs in the US rely primarily on explanations that emphasize human capital, economic resources (e.g., parental income), and social capital in the form of access to co-ethnic communities (Haller et al. 2011; Portes et al. 2005; Telles and Ortiz 2008), rather than cultural factors. Reluctance to examine inequality in the cultural resources of SGI youth stems in part from concerns about contributing to a "culture of poverty" thesis, which blames individuals and overlooks the significance of structural constraints (Silva and Corse 2018). Yet, sociologists note that the link between cultural resources and inequality is shaped by social structure, material disparities, and institutions that reward some cultural norms and practices over others (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2011).

SGI youth and their families often hold high aspirations for educational attainment (Kao and Tienda 1995; Lu 2013; Portes and MacLeod 1996; Raleigh and Kao 2010). Additionally, research shows that attending school in the US fosters belief in meritocracy and an understanding of the American Dream that links socioeconomic success and social mobility to moral worth (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Hochschild 1996). With these experiences, SGI individuals frequently feel pressure to follow the cultural norms of their continuing-generation peers as they transition to adulthood (Cebulko 2016).

Yet, SGI youth also encounter obstacles that may dampen their optimism and sense of opportunity (Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Tran and Valdez 2017). SGIs confront widespread anti-immigrant sentiment (García 2017; Sherkat and Lehman 2018), racism and ethnic prejudice (Lopez 2003; Sánchez-Connally 2018), and corresponding labor market discrimination (Drouhot and Nee 2019; Poon 2014; Portes et al. 2005; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1994). In schools, SGI youth's aspirations are often undermined by racist assumptions about student abilities and opportunities (Lopez 2003; Richards 2017; Sánchez-Connally 2020). These forms of discrimination and marginalization complicate access to opportunity and pathways toward upward mobility for many SGIs (Haller et al. 2011; Portes et al. 2005).

This literature demonstrates how social class inequality and encounters with nativism and racism intersect in the experiences of SGI youth (Sánchez-Connally 2020). Given that race, ethnicity, and immigration are tied to economic opportunity in the US (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Renn 2012; Tatum 2017), racial stratification shapes the ways class-based resources are acquired, deployed, and interpreted (Richards 2020; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). While white immigrants in the US have experienced greater ease assimilating into the predominantly

white middle-class, racism can impede the upward mobility of recent immigrants who identify as Asian, Black, Latinx, and Multiracial (Portes et al. 2005). Moreover, changes to the US economy—manifested in an "hourglass labor market"—have disproportionately impacted jobs that historically provided immigrant families with avenues for upward mobility (Portes et al. 2009). Portes et al. (2005, 1007) observed that, "A bifurcated labor market implies that, to succeed socially and economically, children of [working-class] immigrants must cross *in the span of one generation* the educational gap that took their predecessors, descendants of European immigrants, several generations to bridge."

As they confront barriers to opportunity, SGI youth may come to view their futures as uncertain and insecure (Silver et al. 2021). While immigrant parents may compare their experiences with the prospects available in their pre-immigration context, SGI youth tend to compare themselves to peers from continuing-generation families in the US who have greater access to opportunity (Louie 2006). This pattern can lead to feelings of alienation, making the transition to adulthood an emotionally fraught experience (Gans 1992). Resulting disparities in optimism between SGI youth and their parents often create intergenerational conflict (Rumbaut 2005).

While SGIs encounter unique challenges as they enter adulthood in the contemporary US, scholars underscore the need for attention to the resilience of these young people and the creative strategies they use to pursue success (Silver et al. 2021; Kasinitz et al. 2009). Resisting nativism, racism, and ethnic prejudice, SGI students leverage a range of social and familial resources to succeed within and beyond educational settings (Ceja 2004; Sánchez-Connally 2018). Rather than viewing SGI youth as purely constrained by circumstance, it is important to recognize the complex interplay between agency and constraint that characterizes their trajectories to adulthood. To date, however, little attention has been paid to the ways SGIs use cultural resources, such as self-narratives, to navigate this transition.

Weaving Past, Present, and Future through Self-Narratives

Self-narratives refer to culturally informed depictions of selfhood through which social actors connect their past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Generated through social interactions that shape the ways individuals make meaning of their lived experiences and project themselves into the future (Mead 1934; Nielsen 2015; Zussman 2012), self-narratives play an important role in helping individuals assess opportunities, form aspirations, make decisions, measure progress toward goals, and interpret challenges (Alexander and Smith 2002; Polletta 1998).

During the transition to adulthood, individuals make meaning of their identities and construct a sense of self that aligns with aspirations for their adult futures (Dalessandro 2019; Hollstein 2019; Rondini 2018). Because of the way self-narratives draw from social and cultural resources, which are unequally distributed, they often play a role in contributing to social reproduction in the transition to adulthood (Miles 2014; Nunn 2014). For example, Takacs (2020) found that socioeconomically advantaged college students use experiences with co-curricular involvement to craft narratives that signal social status (see also Rivera 2011, 2012).

Additionally, research demonstrates that self-narratives are sometimes influential in trajectories of social mobility (Bettie 2003; Silva and Corse 2018). Drawing from narrative material to project an *agentic self* by envisioning one's aspirational future and feeling capable of

realizing that version of the future can be valuable for attaining middle-class educational credentials and jobs (Silva and Corse 2018; Vaisey 2010; Vuong et al. 2010). Bettie (2003) showed that youth from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds sometimes pursue upward mobility by crafting identities aligned with their aspirational class location, and Nielsen (2015) observed that self-narratives can serve as "ambition imperatives," helping socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals to hold steady to aspirations for upward mobility.

Research Site

This research was conducted at a public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US that enrolls over 30,000 students. While sociological research on higher education often focuses on elite, predominantly white institutions (Stevens 2015), the university we studied is a broad-access institution with a racially and socioeconomically diverse student body. More than half of undergraduates identify with a racially minoritized group, and a third are eligible for Pell Grants. Nearly 40% of students come from families where no parent or guardian has completed a four-year college degree. Finally, while the university does not collect data on students' status as second-generation immigrants, approximately 40% of undergraduates grew up in households where a language other than English was spoken.

This institution offered an ideal site for our study. First, the diversity of the campus meant that SGIs from a range of class backgrounds were well represented. The ability to recruit a diverse sample of participants from a single university allowed us to hold constant institutional characteristics shaping opportunity, rather than studying youth from different institutions with corresponding disparities in resources and prospects. Moreover, the university is representative of a growing sector of higher education that Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) have dubbed "new universities." As neoliberal policies drained funding from public higher education, colleges enrolling racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically marginalized students—including students from immigrant families—became lean institutions, operating on limited budgets and working to cut costs (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). While new universities frequently espouse an access mission, they have few resources to offer student support.

This setting may play an important role in shaping students' self-narratives and has potential to amplify the impact of those narratives. A combination of limited resources and research ambitions at new universities often creates what scholars describe as a "do-it-yourself" model for allocating services, one that emphasizes consumer choice and individual responsibility (Roksa and Silver 2019). These normative institutional arrangements impact opportunities for upward mobility (Stuber 2016). With myriad choices and little guidance, students from marginalized groups often struggle to find or use institutional resources for navigating the transition to adulthood (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bailey et al. 2015). Research shows that this context encourages students to rely on individual or family resources like personal narratives, which can magnify inequality (Nielsen 2015; Roksa and Silver 2019).

Methods

In this paper, we analyze 40 in-depth interviews with college seniors to examine how the self-narratives of SGI youth relate to trajectories of social reproduction and mobility in the

transition to adulthood. Participants were recruited through email lists from student-led organizations and administrative offices. Flyers posted in campus buildings also assisted in finding volunteers, and a few individuals contacted us to take part in the study after learning about it from previous participants. The respondents ranged in age from 20 to 28 years, aligning with a period of the life course described as emerging adulthood (Arnett 2014), aspiring adulthood (Arum and Roksa 2014), or the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg et al. 2005).

Given our attention to variation by social class, we obtained a socioeconomically diverse sample. In defining social class background, we followed others by relying on a combination of parental education and occupation (McCabe 2016; Silver 2020). Individuals with at least one parent with a four-year degree and a white-collar job were classified as middle-class. Working-class individuals included those whose parents did not complete a college degree and worked in blue-collar or service employment. Three respondents were classified as working-class because their parents had bachelor's degrees from other countries but occupied blue-collar jobs. Of the 40 respondents, 58% (*n* = 23) came from middle-class families and 43% (*n* = 17) from working-class families. While respondents' class backgrounds varied, they were all on track to complete a college degree, gaining a key credential for entry into middle-class adulthood (Hout 2012).

The respondents identified with a range of racial and ethnic groups. Aligning with broader representation of SGIs in the contemporary US (Pew Research Center 2013; Portes et al. 2005), students who identified as Asian/South Asian or Latinx had the greatest representation in our sample, each accounting for slightly more than a third of the participants. Black and Multiracial students comprised 8% of the respondents, and Middle Eastern students accounted for 10%. Although the participants were also generally representative of the socioeconomic backgrounds and racial/ethnic identities of students enrolled at the institution, it is important to note that our sample may differ in important ways from the social class and racial/ethnic representation of SGIs in other regions of the US (see for instance, Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Lopez 2003). Table 1 features additional detail on the composition of our sample.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of the Interview Sample

Sociodemographic Characteristic	N	%
Social Class Background		
Middle Class	23	58%
Working Class	17	43%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian/Asian American	9	23%
Black/African American	2	5%
Eastern European	1	3%
Latino/a/x	14	35%
Middle Eastern	4	10%
Multiracial	1	3%
Pacific Islander	4	10%
South Asian	5	13%
Gender		
Women	27	68%
Men	11	28%
Non-binary	1	3%
Transgender	1	3%
N = 40		

Participants were invited for an in-depth, semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour. After collecting sociodemographic characteristics with a questionnaire, the interview guide moved into a series of questions that elicited students' self-narratives. Because of the ways resources, experiences, and social interactions inform self-narratives (Silva and Corse 2018), we also inquired about respondents' daily activities, aspirations for the future, how they were feeling about those aspirations, resources and support systems they used, and various challenges and opportunities encountered along their journeys. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Interview transcripts were analyzed through inductive and deductive methods. We began with an open coding analysis to identify patterns in the data by attaching codes that summarized passages of text (Corbin and Strauss 2008). After achieving broad familiarity with the narratives that students presented in their interviews, we expanded our efforts by conducting deductive, closed coding. This phase focused on applying a series of codes defined during the first round of analysis across all transcripts to classify specific components of each participant's self-narrative. For example, we used multiple codes to capture differences in SGI youths' descriptions of their past, perceptions of their present circumstances, and orientations to the future.

Findings

The self-narratives of the SGI youths who participated in this study diverged by social class background. Respondents from middle-class families relied on two main self-narratives. Some crafted a *focused self*, describing their unwavering trajectory toward a singular white-collar occupation. Others presented an *exploratory self*, characterized by an openness to uncommitted self-discovery. Both narratives were supported by a durable sense of agency and a belief that institutions would be responsive to one's efforts.

By contrast, SGI youths from working-class backgrounds displayed a more tentative sense of agency. Most of these young people conveyed a *vigilant self*, telling stories of how they were proactive but cautious in the face of an uncertain future. These respondents described encountering constraints in the past that they anticipated would persist in the future, making adaptability essential. There were, however, a few working-class SGI youths who diverged from this pattern, joining their middle-class peers in constructing a focused self. To do so, they relied on resources and narrative material that were unavailable to most of their working-class peers.

Each of these self-narratives drew from lived experiences and social, cultural, and material resources—shaped by a confluence of family migration and social class background—to produce different orientations to the future. Moreover, participants' narratives related to distinct approaches to planning for life after graduation. Table 2 offers an overview of these narratives, future orientations, and students' corresponding planning strategies.

Middle-Class SGI Youths and the Focused Self

Most middle-class participants constructed self-narratives about sustained trajectories toward specific white-collar occupations. They demonstrated a *focused self*, connecting their past experiences and present circumstances to craft an identity as someone dedicated to the pursuit of a singular career. Relying on narratives that emphasized "lifelong passions," steadfast

Table 2 The Three Self-Narratives

Self-Narrative	Class Background	Description	Future Orientation	Planning Strategy
Focused Self	Mostly middle class; some working class	Self-narrative about continuity toward specific career goal	Confident in the dividends of merit, hard work	Focus on a single career path, directing efforts toward that goal
Exploratory Self	Middle class	Self-narrative about personal growth through exploration	Comfortable and confident things will work out	Keeping options open and allowing time for self-exploration
Vigilant Self	Working class	Self-narrative about being adaptable to prepare for uncertainty	Cautious and anxious about an uncertain future	Layering a series of backup plans to buffer oneself from uncertainty

commitment to their chosen profession, and the dividends of merit, these youths displayed a clear sense of self-efficacy and agency that made their future aspirations feel attainable.

A middle-class respondent named Ashley, who had been a business major throughout college, described her longstanding passion for working with numbers and her plans to find a job in finance after graduation. She recalled reflecting on: "Just overall, kind of like, 'what do I want to accomplish when I die?' And I don't know when I'm going to die, right? So just at any point I just want to know that I've helped somebody, at least one person…. I just want to have a positive impact." Answering these questions, Ashley recalled how she came to aspire to a career in finance at a non-profit. Narrating a story of focus and determination, she described being optimistic that her plans would work out.

Interviewer: So, as of today, how are you feeling about your plans?

Ashley: Pretty good.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Ashley: Yeah. I don't think I'm going to deviate from it…. I know for sure I will get that nonprofit [finance] job. I really am [very confident], because that's what I really want to do. That's where my heart is. It hasn't been leaving my mind. I've been always thinking about it.

By telling stories of their unfaltering pursuit of a singular aspiration, SGI youths who crafted a focused self were able to manage worries about the future. For instance, when asked if she was concerned about life after graduation, Ashley replied:

Slightly, because I don't know exactly where I'm going to be. There's no set place like right after graduation, here's a job for you, you know, you have to look for it. But I feel like there's always a job for finance. I feel like there is. So, I'm not too worried. The only thing I'm worried about is the job that I'll be starting off with. What if that takes up most of my time, and that's where I'll be stuck, and I don't do what I wanted to do initially?

Ashley claimed to be assured of her ability to land a job in finance. She hoped that her first job would be at an organization where she would be "doing good" for others. While she knew this outcome was not guaranteed, Ashley remained confident.

Respondents who crafted a focused self often linked their future aspirations with early life experiences and talents that were noticed by their families. Where Ashley recalled an aptitude for working with numbers, other middle-class SGI youths described evidence from childhood

that they were cut out to be lawyers, researchers, or writers. For instance, a middle-class young woman named Yessenia recalled influences that shaped her path toward becoming a teacher, "I've always been told that I'm, like, a very good teacher, and also that I'm very patient. So that kind of factored into the decision-making."

Individuals who crafted a focused self went beyond emphasizing their skill in a chosen profession to underscore that they had a passion for this type of work. A middle-class respondent named Adam discussed how his passion for the English language and child development led him toward a career in teaching. He noted, "I want to be a teacher…. I wanna teach elementary school—little kids. I think they're interesting and I like teaching in general. Then I would like work with kids, and I love the English language—I love languages, but especially English. I just love it." Being able to display this type of passion for one's chosen career played an important role in contributing to respondents' optimism about the future. When asked about whether he had concerns about securing a job, Adam was resolute: "I believe that if I have passion for it, then I won't have trouble finding any opportunities. There's always something for me. I believe that…I was never worried…. I knew what I was doing and I have a passion. I believe that this is my lifelong journey, passion, even hobby, so I'll always have it…. Some people may not believe it, but I'm past that concern." Adam's claim that passion and dedication would pay off in the form of a job aligned with belief in meritocracy and the promise of the American Dream (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Hochschild 1996). This vision of the dividends of hard work and enthusiasm functioned as an antidote for worries about the future.

Individuals who crafted a focused self rarely made alternative plans, in part because of their durable sense of optimism. When pressed about whether they had backup plans, these youths described other paths to achieving the same outcome. For instance, in response to a query about what he would do if he was unable to find a job teaching, Adam replied: "A backup? My dream to become a teacher will never change, but if I can't find a job at a school, then I will just start as a tutor.... I'm pretty sure there are always people who want to learn English… so I'm gonna do that." Stating that his "dream to become a teacher will never change," Adam projected the determination and confidence typical of respondents with a focused self-narrative. He described how starting work as a tutor could likewise lead him to a job as a teacher.

The narration of a focused self guided respondents' efforts to plan for the future and prepare for their chosen career in an intentional way. Like Ashley, Yessenia, and Adam, a middle-class young man named Minh traced an interest in history back to his childhood, saying, "I've always been interested in history ever since I was a little kid. I remember when I was reading the children's encyclopedia, I was also attracted by the maps of past Chinese dynasties." When asked about the future, Minh was firm in his aspirations, responding, "definitely grad school… very good experiences are waiting for me." He went on to describe the ways he used his time in college to pursue opportunities that would prepare him for a Ph.D. in history. He described becoming involved in various research projects:

> One thing is, I interned at a think tank in [the city] under Dr. Roberts. I pretty much assisted him on research papers, editing, and writing, and also, I was funded by [a student research program] for undergraduate research…. So I worked on that one. It was pretty interesting. Actually, this one's getting published this July by [publisher name]. It's part of a chapter of a book, but it's still good for a person coming out of undergrad. Yes, I'm doing that. Also, I think—what else did I do during the summer? Oh yes, I

participated in this [history] studies program. [The funder] sponsored this program to get students more interested in history to understand some of the ins and outs of the field.

Likewise, Yessenia recounted engaging in a range of activities beyond the classroom to prepare herself for a career in teaching, including shadowing at a local elementary school and becoming part of an extracurricular group that worked with middle school students. As these examples show, crafting a focused self provided opportunities to allocate one's effort in ways that were likely to make these aspirations more attainable.

Middle-Class SGI Youths and the Exploratory Self

Another group of middle-class SGI youths relied on a different self-narrative. In connecting their past and present to the future, they described an *exploratory self* that was optimistic about the future and comfortable with the unknown. These respondents articulated general aspirations for white-collar careers but felt that they had time to determine specific trajectories and trusted that things would eventually work out in their favor. With this reassurance, they placed an emphasis on engaging in uncommitted self-discovery. While this narrative was open-ended and vague about specific details of future plans, the exploratory self was similar to the focused self in requiring a durable sense of agency. These youths were confident they could marshal the resources to make a period of self-discovery feasible and safe.

A middle-class participant named Janine described her trajectory toward taking a "gap year." She articulated interests in pursuing opportunities for growth and development in graduate school. However, her plans for further education remained vague. She noted: "I couldn't tell you anything about [specific plans for applying to graduate school]. I have no idea. I haven't looked into it yet. I just decided that I'm going to go to grad school later. I have no idea what to do for graduation in the spring. I'll figure that out later." In response to probes about whether she might work during her gap year, Janine responded, "No, I'm not actively looking for jobs. I will be in the future, but not right now, I'm not." Instead, she planned to take time to explore various options before committing to a field or job.

Another example of the exploratory self emerged through an interview with Cameron, a middle-class non-binary respondent who described wide-ranging interests in theater, non-profit work, music, and activism. When asked about how they would make a decision in the event that multiple post-graduate opportunities presented themselves, Cameron responded, "I'd probably opt to do something a bit more flexible…. Something on a more volunteer basis. Maybe once or twice a week, I could come in." For individuals who crafted an exploratory self, this type of flexibility was important. It offered a means of engaging in personal discovery without feeling constrained by the responsibilities of consistent work or schooling.

Several respondents who crafted an exploratory self anticipated taking a "gap year" where they could have new experiences without committing to a specific path. Aliyah, a middle-class young woman, spoke about her aspirations in general terms. After noting that she hoped to have a job and family in ten years, she described her immediate plans in an open-ended manner:

I was thinking of taking a year off before I do my master's. I don't want to go straight into that. I don't know. I guess I'm going to start looking for a job…. Yeah, just apply for jobs and see what it will get me…. I thought about getting my Ph.D., but I think that will probably be way down the line cuz right now I just want to graduate. I'm kind of exhausted, but then that's why I thought about taking a year off and just get into the

work field and gain some experience before going into graduate school…. I thought, first, a semester off, but then I decided maybe a year off would be even better.

Aliyah's quote is illustrative of the openness with which youths crafted the exploratory self. An "apply and see" philosophy was a central part of these narratives that projected comfort with reaching for further education and other developmental opportunities, but also with making intermittent or indirect progress towards actualizing them. Throughout the interview, Aliyah voiced "we will see" in response questions about her plans for the future.

Although she articulated a desire to "gain experience" through work, Aliyah was quick to emphasize that she was not in a hurry to get job. Like Janine, she intended to start looking for employment "probably after I graduate." Even as she discussed plans to be employed at some point in the future, Aliyah avoided committing to a single opportunity. She noted, "I may even have two jobs to start out until I find what I really want to do. You know what I mean?" Just a few months from college graduation, she described thinking about employment and graduate education in similar ways: as opportunities to learn more about herself and her passions.

Respondents who crafted this type of self-narrative were adept at weaving their inclination for exploration through their stories of childhood and college. When describing the summer before senior year, Aliyah diverged from many of her peers. While youths who crafted a focused self often recounted internships, work experience, or summer classes, Aliyah replied: "I traveled. Yeah, I didn't take classes. I traveled to Lebanon and Dubai…. I thought of taking the time to enjoy [the summer] before my senior year…. I went by myself. I have friends over there. I don't have family, but yeah, just visiting some friends. I thought I would just enjoy it." Aliyah described international travel as a way to "soul search," describing how her sister and friends engaged in similar activities during and after college. Although she did not plan to continue traveling after graduation, she described meandering pathways through work and graduate school as additional ways to explore and learn about herself.

Building a self-narrative that prioritized personal growth and development through exploration required various social and economic resources. For example, Janine described the ways her family could provide financial assistance to make a period of self-exploration feasible. She described her mother as "financially supportive," recalling a conversation when "[my Mom] was like 'You don't need to have a job right now because I can help you with money and stuff.'" In addition to the financial support she offered, Janine noted that her mother could provide a valuable social network if she chose to pursue work in healthcare: "I know my mom has a lot of connections in the healthcare field in [this region], so I know she will be helping me in the future, like maybe finding a job." While Janine was quick to reiterate that she was not looking for work at the moment, the knowledge that her mother could facilitate this process and was able to provide financial assistance in the meantime helped to make her self-narrative about personal exploration accessible. Reflecting on her transition into adulthood, she noted, "So far, like I haven't been too stressed. I'm just really happy with how my life is going right now." These participants' faith in things eventually working out superseded concerns about the future.

Working-Class SGI Youths and the Vigilant Self

In contrast to their middle-class peers, who displayed a steady sense of agency and felt comfortable crafting focused or exploratory selves, working-class SGI youths perceived a great deal of uncertainty in the future. The vast majority of these respondents narrated a more

cautious and agile version of self—what we refer to as the *vigilant self*. Working-class SGI youths emphasized the need to prepare for a variety of options to shelter themselves from insecurity. They described primary aspirations for white-collar employment, which were constrained by a sense of uncertainty that undermined their abilities to project themselves into a middle-class future. These participants recounted efforts to layer multiple backup options—including jobs that did not require a college degree—in case they could not actualize their primary career goals.

Vicente, a working-class respondent, illustrated the vigilant self when discussing his plans. He described an aspiration to go to law school but observed that focusing on a singular option left too much uncertainty:

> I guess the first thing I want to do is actually go to law school. That is my top thing…. So that's why I say it's a little scary because you don't know if you're going to get in or not…. It is really rough. I also have that expectation from my family; they're all invested in me at the same time. I'm a first-generation student, so it's like their eyes are on me. My mom always says, "You're going to be a great lawyer," whatever, and I just feel like, "Hell, I hope I get into law school," and I keep telling her that, but she just doesn't really know how the process is to get in.

To manage this uncertainty, Vicente laid out three additional options for the future: becoming a small-business owner, a higher education administrator, or a teacher. In contrast to his middle-class peers, these aspirations diverged from one another in pronounced ways. This was clear, for example, when Vicente described his goals for after graduation:

> I definitely want to go to law school, but I'm really worried at the same time.... So, I'm always wondering like, "What if I don't? What am I going to do?" I have a minor in business, so I have that backup plan. I really want to open a restaurant…. so I have that just in case law school doesn't work out—or even if it does, I want to be able to do that on the side and have a business…. So [going into business] would be my [first] backup plan. Other than that, maybe start a master's... maybe higher education… it's something that I actually just started considering. Like I'm doing different things, like [an academic organization], the university tour guides, and orientation leaders. I feel like higher education is the right thing to do…. This might be plan C. If [law or business] doesn't work out, I can do this…. Another thing is maybe like I was telling my mom, "Maybe I can get a master's in education. I could be a teacher."

Feeling the tension between agency and constraint, respondents like Vicente crafted a self-narrative that involved adaptability to a range of scenarios. On the one hand, he described a sense of fatalism, noting, "whatever happens is going to happen." And yet, Vicente also claimed that being flexible and agile could combat uncertainty. Likewise, a working-class young woman named Ariana noted the importance of having "a plan A, B, and C. Like oh, if your first plan doesn't work, then what are you gonna do?"

The vigilant self was prevalent, even among working-class individuals who seemed poised for a successful transition toward a middle-class job or graduate education. For instance, Sahar, a working-class woman, exhibited a vigilant self. Although she eventually secured admission to graduate school, she discussed elaborate planning involving a range of backup options. Sahar coordinated options for work if she was not accepted to graduate school and applications to master's programs in different fields, which she referred to as "the backup to my backup."

She even recounted how she paid a non-refundable deposit to the first graduate program that admitted her before eventually gaining acceptance to her top-choice school.

In contrast to middle-class respondents who usually developed linear narratives about progress toward focused goals drawing from their early childhood, working-class SGI youths used the past in different ways in their narratives of vigilance. They identified bumps in the road, discontinuity, and constraints that extended through college. For instance, Ariana described her process of looking for internship opportunities, noting that she was considering a range of options. She traced this tendency to simultaneously pursue multiple possibilities to her experiences navigating financial uncertainty in the transition from high school to college:

> I like to have plan A, B, and C. So, for example, after [high] school graduation, I already knew where I wanted to go. I wanted to have the full college experience, but that required money, sadly. So, I applied to colleges, not just the ones in the area but also a little farther…. Actually, I got accepted to [a four-year university] right after graduating from high school. But it was a money issue.... So, I was relying on FAFSA pretty much. If they would be able to cover everything at [the university], then I would have gone straight here. So that was my plan A. If that didn't work out, then I would have gone just to [the community college] for two years and then transfer, and that was plan B. So FAFSA ended up covering everything for [community college], so that worked fine for me…. So, I've taken longer, and that wasn't a surprise… but still, you have to push through it.

By describing these experiences, Ariana emphasized that she was the sort of person who was capable of "push[ing] through" constraints by actively pursuing multiple opportunities.

Likewise, Sahar explained how her tendency to have "backup after backup" connected with her experiences growing up in a working-class immigrant family. She noted:

> I like to plan ahead. I don't wanna skip any steps. I think maybe that's because my parents didn't grow up here, so they wouldn't know the steps to guide me. I need to prepare myself—have backup after backup to make sure [opportunities are] there…. I have to keep that in mind. If I mess up, I can't explain how or why, I transition to different [plans]. I need to have backups after backups. I plan it ahead of time because [my parents] can't really do that…. I feel like it's just helped me better prepare myself in a way. Not having the guidance, doing it on my own and learning from my mistakes, that has helped me prep myself for reality if something does happen.

Sahar went on to observe that preparing for the contingencies of the transition to adulthood was essential because of her responsibilities for financially supporting her family. Her vigilant self-narrative stressed the need to adapt to circumstances, generating "backup after backup."

Other working-class SGI youths told stories about influential turning points that informed who they were. John, a working-class young man, claimed that he had not always been vigilant about pursuing upward mobility. Efforts to position himself for a range of stable employment opportunities stemmed from a shift in his perception of the hardship his parents had endured:

> I mean, it took me a while to finally get it through my head how hard [my parents] worked for their whole lives pretty much. I don't want to end up being broken down as hard as they have been, through all the physical labor and time they've put in. I can't

remember the last time I went on a vacation. I guess years since I've gone on one, and when I also think about my parents have never really done a lot of things for themselves for pleasure, for fun…. My mom's always at home, cooking, cleaning, or going to work, providing food on the table. And same with my dad; he's always out, always working. I guess I spent a lot more time worrying about what I want to do, or thinking this is just pointless or hopeless, to do this or that. It's all just going to end the same, I guess, or just sometimes I thought I'll just follow the same way, I'm going to end up the same way as my parents. But then that fear, I guess, motivated me to try something else.

In this quote, John draws from the challenges his parents encountered to narrate his motivation for adopting a vigilant approach to planning for the future.

In some ways, the vigilant selves that working-class SGI youths constructed were useful for helping them plan. By anticipating future obstacles, they were able to position themselves for employment through a variety of different routes. It was also apparent, however, that a vigilant self-narrative could undermine the efficacy of respondents' planning by detracting from one's focus on a specific aspiration. For example, in attempting to craft a vigilant self—positioned for opportunities in business, educational administration, and teaching—Vicente had made relatively little progress toward his purported "top choice" objective of becoming a lawyer. Just a few months from graduation, he described his limited progress on law school applications:

Yeah, I feel like I'm a little behind with [the application process], but I definitely, I want to take the LSATs sometime at the beginning of next year. So, I need to start studying for that and that's when I'm going to start actually applying, after I get the scores and everything. I'm hoping I get a high score, so I'll be able to get into the law school that I want…. I really should start studying. I kind of have an idea of how it is. I've seen some sample questions and everything, but I really need to get down and start studying.

While Vicente described intentions to study for the LSAT and prepare his applications, he was simultaneously devoting substantial time to improving his business knowledge and related cooking skills should he decide to open a restaurant. He also dedicated effort to become involved in campus organizations to enhance his relevant experience for a career in higher education administration. Each of these activities required time and energy. Despite Vicente's attempts to be prepared and agile, his narrative underscored the challenges of attempting to pursue such different options with equal effectiveness.

Moreover, for some respondents, the tensions between agency and constraint that produced the vigilant self led to plans to avoid higher-status, lucrative fields in favor of more accessible options with lower salaries, some of which did not require a bachelor's degree. A working-class student named Carrie considered becoming an optometrist or physician assistant (PA), but at the time of our interview, she had decided to postpone applications to graduate programs. While she had not entirely closed the door on these options, Carrie planned to prioritize paying off her loans, either by continuing in the part-time jobs she worked during college or transitioning into a full-time job. She described the feelings of constraint that led to this decision:

I think everyone has [worries]. No matter how much you do, you don't think it's enough. I've been talking to people, and they're like, "No, you're set. You're this. You're that." I still don't know, 'cuz you have to interview. What if they don't like me for the interview? The Health Advisor was saying yesterday they look for posture, confidence. They look for all that, like you know you want it. Then it's like, "Why do

you wanna be [a physician assistant]?" You can't say, "Because I like caring for people." It's like, what're you supposed to say? You want to treat people, and they don't like hearing that.... I don't know what to say to them, and I don't like those type of four-people-on-one type of situations. I'm scared for the interview and scared for the GREs.... They expect you to do really well on them, and I'm not good with standardized testing. I don't like being timed.

Rather than take a risk by focusing her efforts on PA school, Carrie postponed her applications to pursue a range of other jobs that did not require a bachelor's degree. This course of action was notable given that Carrie's good grades and experience shadowing in medical offices would have made her a competitive applicant for many programs.

Working-Class SGI Youths and the Focused Self

There were a few working-class SGI youths who diverged from the patterns described in the previous section. Instead of crafting a vigilant self, these individuals joined the middle-class respondents to narrate a focused self. While they represented only a small number of cases, attention to these youths shows how social and cultural resources shaped their self-narratives in ways that differed from most of their working-class peers.

A working-class respondent named Javier wanted to become a physician. He planned to work as an emergency medical technician and take part in a post-baccalaureate program to increase his prospects for medical school admission. Like many of the middle-class youths described above, Javier described continuity in this aspiration, tracing his interest in a medical career to childhood experiences:

There were actually multiple factors [leading to this goal]. One being, so when I was roughly five years old... I can't remember any of this, my mom just told me stories of it. My dad had a serious issue when it came to drinking, so he had a serious condition, ended up being in a coma. It was kind of like discovering that and how a medical profession, it would help me and my family out—kind of made me and encouraged me to do that for other underserved families.

Javier was not the only working-class respondent to aspire to a professionalized white-collar career like law or medicine. Others like Carrie and Vicente had likewise considered these types of careers. What set Javier apart from most working-class SGI youths was a series of experiences and resources that reinforced his sense that a medical career was attainable. He explained how mentorship sustained his aspirations:

Actually, my primary care doctor—his name's Dr. Ariani—played a pretty big role when it came to helping out my family, when it came to financial help, because my mom's just basically looking for more jobs... he basically offered the doctor's office to be cleaned, and he didn't have to do that. I don't know if he did that just to be generous or because he just needs to get it done…. So every Friday we'd go and clean the doctor's offices.

Javier explained how his contact with Dr. Ariani and his medical office provided resources and information that few working-class youths could access.

During college, Javier learned about a summer program for less socioeconomically advantaged students from two faculty members whom he described as "my mentors." The

support he received in this program went further in equipping him with knowledge to bolster his aspirations, demystifying the process of preparing for medical school. Javier claimed that this opportunity solidified his sense that a medical career was feasible by offering specific advice about how to prepare for the application process.

> Honestly, I didn't really have any form of concrete idea or this form of planning till this summer when I went to the medical program…. It was there where I got the overall guidance of how I should go about improving my GPA, when I should apply to medical school, when I should take the MCAT, and just kind of overall mentorship to get a real sense or idea of how to tackle this whole process of going to medical school. We had a lot of speakers come in and many of them were underserved backgrounds…. It was kind of an eye-opener, and they basically explained the process, what they experienced, how they overcame the situation, and it was just a really good program…. I got the chance to speak to Maria. She was one of the coordinators of the program and she kind of just got me to do the process and basically broke it down how I should look around, and where I can look into different institutions to get possibly a free training program to become an EMT.

Javier's self-narrative diverged from his working-class peers in part because he had access to social capital and corresponding informational resources from individuals like Dr. Ariani, his two faculty mentors, and Maria. These social resources helped to connect his past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations to make becoming a doctor seem more attainable.

Similarly, a working-class young man named Luis displayed a focused self when he narrated his progress toward becoming a philosophy professor. He described the impact of his own faculty mentors:

> I'd probably say there's about four professors, that I feel very good relationships with. I would say that they've been open—not just writing letters of reference but just being friends in general, and just providing advice for the future because all of them have done Ph.D. work…. Just things to consider and whatnot… I would say just the support that I've received from the professors… I think the fact that when I expressed to my professors, "Hey, I think I want to do more academic work," they've been very affirmative of that and really affirmed me. "We also see that in the work you've been doing in your classes. So, we are fully encouraging you to do that. We support you wherever you do end up going." I would say, that's been my biggest thing for me this year.

With these experiences, crafting a focused self-narrative was comfortable for Javier and Luis in a way that it was not for most of their working-class peers. As a result, they were able to engage in strategic and sustained planning with the goals of becoming a doctor and a professor.

Discussion and Conclusion

By examining SGI youths' self-narratives during the transition to adulthood, we extend research on the role of culture in social reproduction and social mobility. This study complicates previous understandings of the ways college-educated young people are thinking about themselves and their futures. Presented findings highlight a range of self-narratives found

among SGI youths who are similarly positioned for the future as soon-to-be college graduates. Where prior research suggests that college-going youth generally display a sense of agency in their self-narratives (Kaufman and Feldman 2004; Silva and Corse 2018), our findings uncover important heterogeneity among this group. Drawing from in-depth interviews, we find notable divergence in the degree to which youth from immigrant families describe themselves as being in control of their own environment and future. These differences are shaped by a confluence of immigration experiences and social, economic, and cultural resources. Our findings have implications for understanding reproduction and mobility among SGIs.

Recent research documents an emphasis on self-discovery and exploration during the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2014), especially among middle-class youth (Settersten and Ray 2010). And yet, the self-narratives of SGI respondents from middle-class families were not monolithic. While some individuals displayed an exploratory self with a preference for uncommitted personal discovery, others crafted a focused self, articulating a steady path to a specific white-collar occupation. Scholars often contrast a sense of agency with a sense of constraint (Lareau 2011; Silva and Corse 2018); however, these findings show that youth who share a durable sense of agency can nonetheless build very different self-narratives with very different consequences for their planning processes.

In contrast to the self-narratives of middle-class SGI youths, those from working-class backgrounds typically exhibited a tentative sense of agency. Most of these young people narrated a vigilant self, cautious and proactive in the face of uncertainty. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) claim that college attendance endows students with "symbolic entitlement" that they are deserving of white-collar jobs. However, the SGI youths in our study who grew up in working-class families did not possess this sense of entitlement. Rather, their aspirations for white-collar jobs were complicated by a sense that constraints might prevent them from accessing these opportunities. While they were similarly poised for college graduation and hence credentialed to enter middle-class jobs (Hout 2012), most of these respondents constructed self-narratives that diverged from those who grew up in middle-class families.

The differences between upwardly mobile youth and their continuing middle-class peers are noteworthy given previous research documenting the impact of self-narratives on various life outcomes (Alexander and Smith 2002; Nielsen 2015). In a society characterized by significant uncertainty and instability, having a sense of agency and a corresponding feeling of control over one's own trajectory can be especially advantageous (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2018). The differences between SGI youth from middle and working-class backgrounds are likely to shape their transition into adulthood in prominent ways as they enter post-college life.

Continuity in self-narratives can help individuals sustain aspirations (Nielsen 2015). Youth who display a focused self may be best positioned to sustain trajectories toward white-collar occupations. In addition to providing a consistent set of goals to pursue, the ability to narrate a linear trajectory may pay off in a variety of ways. For instance, Posselt (2016) notes that admissions committee evaluations of students' narratives and claims to merit are a central feature of the graduate school admissions process. Applicants' abilities to frame themselves as focused are likely to impact their prospects as they seek admission to programs that will shape later life outcomes. Furthermore, the impact of these narratives may be amplified as SGIs work to contest the racist assumptions of gatekeepers (Posselt 2016). Similar patterns can be observed in the hiring process for high-status occupations (Rivera 2011, 2012).

When compared to the focused self, the exploratory self may initially seem less advantageous or even risky. Yet research suggests that the contemporary transition to adulthood is

structured to allow and sometimes reward a period of self-discovery for individuals with the resources to support exploration (Gillis 2019; Settersten and Ray 2010). Moreover, exhibiting engagement with personal introspection may prove valuable. Being able to present oneself as interesting and self-reflexive in job interviews, for instance, can pay dividends (Takacs 2020).

Conversely, lacking a sense of control over one's fate can create additional challenges in uncertain times (Giddens 1991). Silva and Corse (2018) note that crafting an agentic self can be especially consequential for working-class youth who are less likely to benefit from the momentum that pushes the middle class to further education and career success (see also Vaisey 2010). Without a durable sense of agency, working-class SGI youths struggled to sustain their pursuit of specific goals as they worked to position themselves for multiple— often divergent—opportunities. The findings presented here suggest that working-class individuals who craft a vigilant self may settle into jobs that do not require a bachelor's degree or forgo opportunities for further education by focusing on post-graduate options that seem most accessible.

The small number of SGI respondents from working-class backgrounds who crafted a focused self-narrative had access to social and informational resources that most working-class youths lacked. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that upwardly mobile individuals are often recipients of guidance from mentors who provide social and cultural resources to help them navigate a range of institutional settings (Bettie 2003; Lareau 2015). These working-class youth may nonetheless encounter notable obstacles as they seek to enact a focused self beyond the point of college graduation. Jack (2019) shows, for example, that less socioeconomically advantaged youth who acquire middle-class social and cultural resources frequently continue to face obstacles related to financial constraints.

It is important to note a few limitations of the current project. Our diverse sample of respondents, while a strength in some regards, limits our ability to speak comparatively about the ways race and ethnicity intersected with class to shape students' narratives. As prior research shows, the social class backgrounds of immigrant families are inextricable from the influence of racism, nativism, and other forms of ethnic prejudice (Lopez 2003; Richards 2017). Our sample included individuals who identified with a range of racial/ethnic groups, including Asian, Black, Latinx, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, and South Asian. Immigrant families from each of these groups have had unique racialized experiences that shape socio-economic opportunities (Poon 2014; Portes et al. 2009). Future studies focusing on SGI youth from specific racial or ethnic groups could examine how the intersections of immigration experiences and racialization shape the narratives of SGI college students.

Additionally, there are limitations to studying a single institution. Personal narratives are crafted in specific settings, which offer access to specific kinds of narrative material (Bettie 2003; Nielsen 2015). Our respondents were enrolled in a diverse institution with many of the normative institutional arrangements typical of a "new university" (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Stuber 2016). This type of educational context may place pressure on students to rely on individual or family—rather than collective or institutional—resources to navigate educational transitions (Roksa and Silver 2019). This could explain our participants' reliance on narrative material drawn from their family immigration experiences, class background, and in rarer cases, specific mentors. SGI youth in resource-rich universities may have used structured institutional resources to craft self-narratives that alleviated the uncertainties felt so acutely by working-class respondents. Additionally, while our respondents did not explicitly link their self-narratives to patterns of discrimination, students at other types of colleges and universities—such as predominantly white institutions—may craft self-narratives that

acknowledge systemic racism, nativism, or ethnic prejudice. Future studies should explore the narratives of SGI youth at different kinds of postsecondary institutions.

Finally, narratives alone are not enough to secure social reproduction or mobility. To be effective, the self-narratives youth craft must be met by receptive individuals and institutions (Ispa-Landa 2015). Importantly, how cultural resources are received is contingent on the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Lopez 2003; Richards 2020). Moreover, other social, cultural, and material resources are necessary to effectively organize action in pursuit of goals (Miles 2014; Silva and Corse 2018). For instance, having college-going aspirations does not guarantee one will complete a bachelor's degree (Rosenbaum 2001). Likewise, aspiring to become a lawyer or doctor does not necessarily translate into attaining those careers. Longitudinal research could further clarify the role of SGI students' self-narratives in their transition to adulthood. Such efforts can extend understandings of social reproduction and mobility among SGI youth.

Notes

1. We follow others in defining second-generation immigrants to include individuals born in the US to immigrant parents and those who immigrated as children (see Louie 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2005).

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Blake R. Silver is Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University, where he also serves as Director of Data Analytics and Assessment in the Honors College. His research explores higher education, culture, and social stratification. He is the author of *The Cost of Inclusion: How Student Conformity Leads to Inequality on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press 2020).

Freddy Lopez is a Sociology major at George Mason University and a research assistant in the Social Science Research Lab. His research interests include social movements, immigration, and higher education.

Fanni Farago is a Sociology Ph.D. student and research assistant at George Mason University and holds an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Houston. She conducts both qualitative and quantitative research projects within the broader areas of immigration, education, health, and program evaluation. She contributed to the present project as a lead research assistant at the Social Science Research Lab.

Tharuna Kalaivanan is a Sociology Ph.D. student at George Mason University and a lead research assistant in the Social Science Research Lab. Her scholarly interests include Asian Americans, immigration, race, ethnicity, and how they are experienced in higher education and the workplace.

Affiliations

Blake R. Silver [1] · **Freddy Lopez** [1] · **Fanni Farago** [1] · **Tharuna Kalaivanan** [1]

Freddy Lopez
flopez8@gmu.edu

Fanni Farago
ffarago@gmu.edu

Tharuna Kalaivanan
tkalaiva@gmu.edu

[1]   Department of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA