

"The fear you'll be the same person when you go home and the fear you won't": A narrative inquiry of first generation in college student recipients of the Benjamin A. Gilman



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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students (FGCS) are consistently underrepresented within education abroad. For FGCS to have the opportunity to study abroad, they often need funding to help pay for their study abroad experience. The Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship aids FGCS in increasing participation in study abroad, but there is limited research on the experiential outcomes of participating Gilman Scholarship students. Previous research has shown the positive benefits of education abroad for all students and for FGCS more specifically, but understanding a previously overlooked group of people will provide evidence to continue to support FGCS engagement in international education. To identify how the Gilman Scholarship has impacted FGCS, this research utilizes a transformative learning theory framework to better understand FGCS students' experiences during and after their study abroad program. Primary data will be collected using qualitative methods and narrative inquiry. Applying narrative inquiry by interviewing and surveying FGCS who have received the Gilman Scholarship will effectively represent how FGCS understand the transformative nature of their experiences abroad with the Gilman Scholarship program. The findings from this research will aid those in higher education, international education, and policy research, ultimately helping increase long-term support for First-Generation College Students (FGCS) engaging in higher education abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose:

- A qualitative narrative inquiry to better understand the experiences of FGCS who have received the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship
- Help explain how FGCS participants themselves understand their experiences with the Gilman Scholarship and the role they feel the program played in their post-graduation lives
- To contribute to our knowledge of the unique experience of FGCS within education abroad
- To show how the Gilman Scholarship is achieving its mission of diversifying and supporting this group of students who are typically underrepresented within international education

Significance of Study:

- Provide a further understanding of how a US federal educational initiative impacts higher education, international education, and policy research
- Strengthen the understanding of education abroad as a transformative learning experience and the transformation over time
- Provide new relevant information on the Gilman Scholarship and its impacts to help continue the program to benefit the recipients of the scholarship
- Provide further support for the Sen. Paul Simon Act, which intends to expand the Gilman Scholarship, increasing the level of federal support for education abroad and FGCS
- Contribute to the support and have a better understanding of creative data elicitation techniques by using narrative inquiry in this research
- Help increase long-term support for FGCS engaging in higher education abroad, to ensure meaningful engagement for these students after they return from abroad

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do first-generation college students reflect on their experiences with the Gilman Scholarship?

How do these first-generation college students understand the impact of their Gilman Scholarship experience for their long term personal, social, academic, and professional goals and aspirations?

FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Different organizations define "first-generation students" differently. Definitions vary in how much exposure to postsecondary education is experienced by different combinations of parent/guardian arrangements (e.g., highest extent of exposure for one parent/guardian or both parents/guardians)
- First-generation status can be determined by one or more of the following: neither parent attended or completed college, neither parent graduated, both parents did not attend or complete college, or one parent specifically completed college
- Neither parent having pursued postsecondary education was the most common indicator of FGCS status
- FGCS are less likely to enroll in and graduate from college, so policy makers frequently concentrate on initiatives for ensuring success for this student population
- The relationship between parental education and postsecondary choices will be especially important as the demographics of the American population continue to change
- Federal definition of FGCS (used for this study): "A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree. A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree" (Federal TRIO Program)

UNDERREPRESENTATION IN STUDY ABROAD

- Before the pandemic in 2020, ~10.9% of all undergraduates (including those enrolled at community colleges) and 16% of undergraduates at four-year institutions studied abroad (IEE 2022 Open Doors Report)
- FGCS constitute an estimated 40% of the undergraduate student population in the U.S. but are less likely to study abroad than their peers whose parents attended college (Ashcraft & Snodgrass, 2023)
- Factors attributed to underrepresentation: lack of information on opportunities, program costs, financial aid restrictions, family and community expectations, not seeing peers with similar backgrounds engaging internationally, concerns about graduating on time, lack of compelling study abroad destinations, and racism among others (Engel, 2017; Wanger et al., 2020)
- CASSIW has determined that only 8% of FGCS study abroad (Mason & Garcia, 2022)

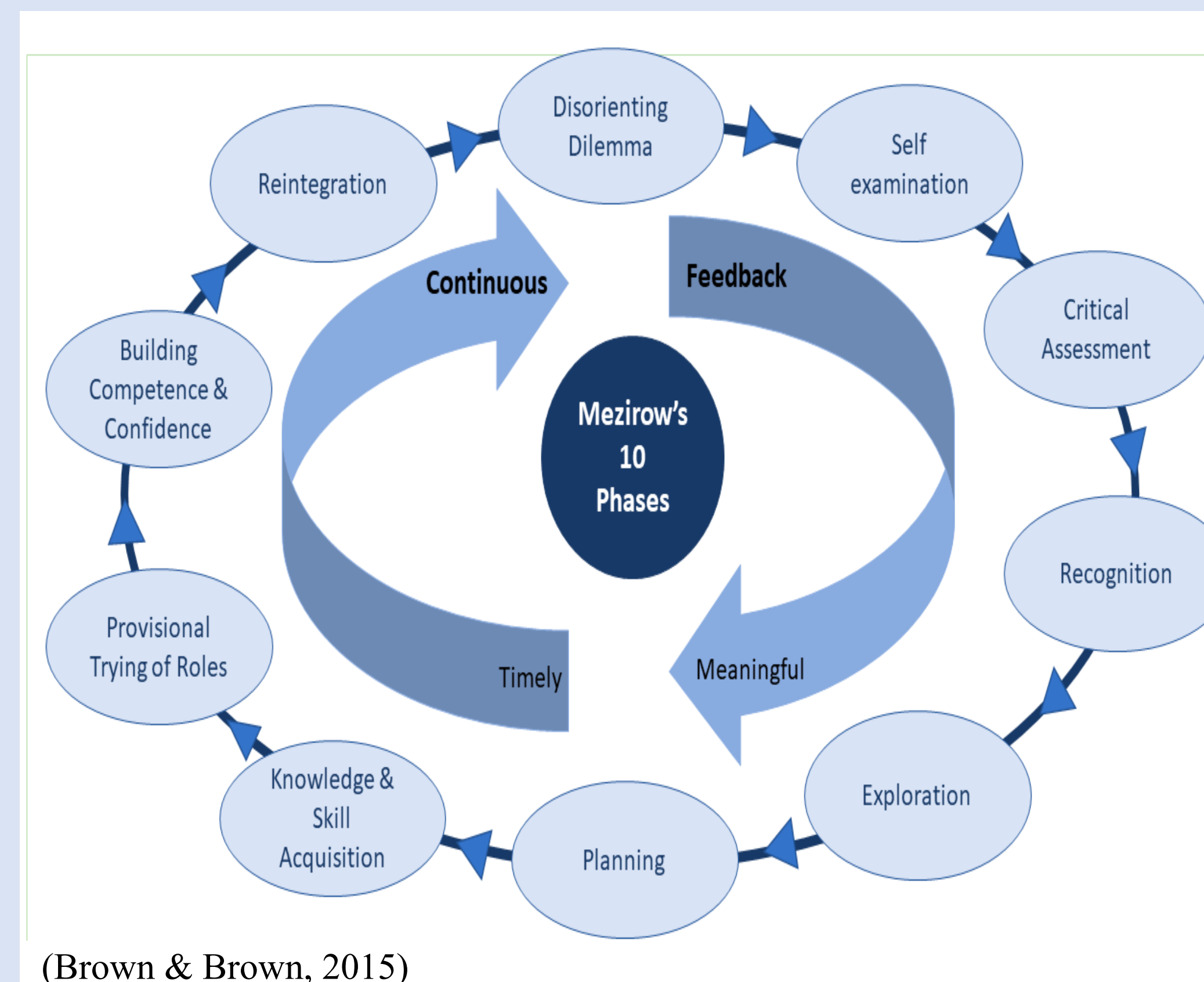


THE GILMAN SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

- Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program supports students with "limited financial means" to study or intern overseas
- Every academic year, around 3,000 scholarships worth up to \$5,000 are given to undergraduate American citizens who want to study or intern overseas
- These expenses include program tuition, accommodation and board, books, local transportation, insurance, international travel, passport and visa fees, and more. Award recipients are selected through a competitive screening procedure..
- Candidates must either be receiving a Federal Pell Grant at the time of application or show documentation that they will during the duration of their internship or study abroad program
- The Gilman Program directly advances the objectives stated in the Joint Statement of Principles by offering financial assistance to diverse U.S. students who have limited means to pursue study and internships abroad
- The Gilman Program's goal is to raise a new generation of American leaders who will reflect the country's great diversity and possess the global connections and expertise needed to enhance both economic growth and national security for the country; equips recipients with skills essential to both economic growth and national defense

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

- Transformative learning theory, by Jack Mezirow (1978) explains how an adult makes sense of and construct meaning from their lived experiences through a process of critical self-reflection and rational discourse that transforms an individual's previously held perspectives or frames of reference
- TTL believes that how learners interpret and reinterpret their experiences is essential to meaning-making and learning (Mezirow, 1994, p.222).
- Critical reflection and discourse are essential elements of TTL
- Critical reflection: "making an assessment of what is being reflected upon," directed toward one's assumptions or presuppositions
- Discourse: dialogue "involving the assessments of beliefs, feelings and values" by examining supporting evidence for and against competing viewpoints



(Brown & Brown, 2015)

NARRATIVE INQUIRY

- The creation, interpretation, and portrayal of storied versions of lived experience are the focus of narrative inquiry.
- Narrative inquiry from an epistemological perspective that examines the nature of knowing and frequently looks at lived experiences.
- When the researcher is not involved in the story, ontological narrative inquiry is necessary, and it calls for a deeper investigation of truth as it is understood or experienced by the people in the story.
- Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing trend in social scientific research, particularly education, to use narratives to portray individual or group experiences.
- Because narrative inquiry contradicts conventional, more scientific methodologies, it has drawn increasing attention and critical analysis: The standards used to evaluate research narratives remain unclear. Narrative research has challenged the conventional definitions of validity by obfuscating the distinction between reality and fiction.

METHODS

Qualitative Study Using Critical Narrative Inquiry:

- Research participants: storytellers (participants) selected from pool of FGCS awarded Gilmans between 2014 and 2019 at a large, public R1 university in the Southeast of the United States
 - 70 potential storytellers (out of 99 Gilman awardees during this time period)
- Multimodal Data Collection:
 - Informational Questionnaire (qualtrics): to elicit interest in joining focus groups from Gilman Scholar alumni
 - Focus Groups: up to 20 storytellers in two focus groups
 - Creative Reflection Activity: five storytellers selected to complete activity combining "cabinet of curiosities" and "timeline"
 - Storytellers collect up to 10 objects that convey their trajectories post-Gilman and place objects into a timeline that makes sense to them and can be conveyed to a listener
 - Individual Interviews: conducted with each storyteller to share story and understanding of trajectory post-Gilman
- Narrative Data Analysis:
 - Qualitative data analysis using NVivo software

ETHICAL COMPENSATION

REFERENCES

