Coping With Conflict: Self-Authorship, Coping, and Adaptation to College in First-Year, High-Risk Students

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Coping With Conflict: Self-Authorship, Coping, and Adaptation to College in First-Year, High-Risk Students

Jane Elizabeth Pizzolato

Through a series of interviews with 27 entering, high-risk college students, this study investigated the relation between self-authorship, coping style, and adaptation. Findings suggest high-risk college students enter with self-authored ways of knowing, but self-authorship disappears quickly as students have marginalizing experiences. Subsequent adaptation seems related to students' abilities to employ problem-focused coping strategies, which are related to the reemergence of self-authorship.

Research on high-risk students has typically sought to understand what makes these students more likely to leave college prematurely by identifying characteristics and labels that may make students more likely to stop out, drop out, or fail out of college (e.g., Choy, 2002; Nichols, Oreovec, & Ingold, 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Walter & Smith, 1986; Tinto, 1993; Yeh, 2002). This literature has led to classification of entering students based on risk for attrition. College students are typically labeled “high-risk” if their academic backgrounds, prior performances, or personal characteristics (i.e., personal characteristics are those attributes and labels that place the student in a population without a long or necessarily successful history in higher education such as low SES students) make them potential candidates for academic failure or early withdrawal from college (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Choy; Yeh).

Although high-risk is often used interchangeably with at-risk, the term high-risk is chosen here because it suggests risk for withdrawal or failure is a gradient scale, rather than a binding quality a student unequivocally has or does not have. Emphasis on the gradient nature of risk points out that students labeled as high-risk may adapt and achieve. Understanding such patterns of adaptation among high-risk students, and the cost at which they come, should help institutions better support high-risk students during their transition to college, and promote students’ continued achievement (see also Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). This study aims to investigate coping patterns in entering high-risk college students, and how their epistemological orientation is related to their coping strategies and ultimate degree of adaptation to their college environment.

COPING AND HIGH-RISK STUDENTS

Examination of the definition of high-risk students clarifies particular challenges this student group may have to cope with upon entrance to college. Academically high-risk students are typically underprepared and lack prior knowledge shared by their low-risk peers (e.g., Choy, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001; Yeh, 2002). Their often less-than-
adequate academic preparation may then require high-risk students not only to make the typical adjustments to college learning but also to make up for knowledge they lack, and to cope with professors and peers who expect particular levels of prior knowledge and academic skills they may not have mastered before coming to college. Adding to the academic challenges facing entering high-risk students are social and personal challenges that many high-risk students may face because of their minority racial or ethnic group membership. The literature suggests that when students from ethnic and racial minority groups, or mixed racial and ethnic families enter predominantly White institutions they often experience marginalization and discrimination based on external racial and/or ethnic features (e.g., Jackson, 1998; Nishimura, 1998; Renn, 2000; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Torres, 2003; Woo, 1997).

Coping skills then become important because they affect these students’ causal attributions, and ultimately whether and what type of help they seek to develop increasingly more successful methods for learning academic material and for coping with interpersonal conflict (e.g., Duval & Silvia, 2002; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998). If students’ coping skills help them construct accurate pictures of themselves and ways to overcome their weaknesses, they should have more tools for successful adaptation to college than students without such coping strategies (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Feenstra, Banyard, Rines, & Hopkins, 2001; Shields, 2001). The ability to make sense of marginalizing experiences while maintaining goal-directed behavior necessary for successful adaptation to college, may however, be challenging without a self-authored epistemological orientation.

Epistemological orientation generally, and self-authorship specifically, are hypothesized here to be related to coping, because they describe the more global ways in which students make and enact decisions regarding knowledge and identity construction (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1968/1999). According to Baxter Magolda (2001), as students develop self-authorship, they move from feeling unsatisfied and in need of self-definition, to constructing internal foundations—internally defined perspectives to guide action and knowledge construction (see also: Kegan, 1994). Self-authorship is thus defined here as a particular and relatively enduring way of orienting oneself to provocative situations that recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge and balances this knowledge with the development of internally defined goals and sense of self.

Based on their defining characteristics (e.g., academic preparation and demographic characteristics), high-risk students may be particularly likely to have collegiate experiences (as opposed to postcollegiate, see Baxter Magolda, 2001) that compel them to question whether they belong in higher education. Persisting students may therefore need to construct and rely on strong, internally defined goals of graduating, high perceptions of academic competence, and an internally defined sense of self. If this is true, then as they cope with their new environment, persisting high-risk students may be equipped to effectively balance self-enhancement and accurate self-evaluation by recognizing their goals, their current abilities, how they are situated in their context, and what type of support may be available, and then developing strategies to act on the integration
of this combination of needs and knowledge. If students are considering all these perspectives in the construction of coping strategies, their enacted ways of knowing may then fit Baxter Magolda’s (2001) definition of self-authorship. Thus self-authorship may be an important factor in understanding high-risk students’ coping strategies.

Coping and Self-Authorship in High-Risk Students

The literature on coping, however, suggests maintenance of self-authorship may be difficult when students are immersed in marginalizing environments. Duval and Silvia’s (2002) Dual Systems Model of Self-Serving Attributes helps clarify the challenge inherent in high-risk college students’ adaptation to and maintenance of self-authorship in college. Duval and Silvia claim there are two driving systems behind students’ coping decisions. The first system is the self-to-standard comparison system (SSCS). The SSCS governs comparisons students make of themselves to others, the goal being feelings of similarity to others. Because high-risk students may be pointed out repeatedly as different from and not as smart as their peers, over time the additive effect of these experiences may cause them to be unable to fulfill the needs of their SSCS, and lead to feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Such feelings may in turn make it challenging for students to adapt and feel capable of managing external influences, rather than feel controlled or defined by them—the former being a hallmark of self-authorship.

Similarly, external influences may negatively impact the functioning of the second system in Duval and Silvia’s model—the causal attribution system. The causal attribution system helps students make causal connections between themselves, their environments and outcomes of events. The goal of the causal attribution system is to develop plausible causes for outcomes, and involves seeking accurate information, rather than seeking to merely enhance self-concepts. If, however, students have experiences that highlight their differences as inferior characteristics, and the messages students receive about themselves and their abilities are consistently negative, the causal attribution system may actually not help them develop plausible causes for outcomes. Rather, as may be the case for high-risk college students, activation of the causal attribution system in their new environment might lead to attributing their inability to fit in and/or keep up academically to stable, immutable personal characteristics. If this is the case then maintenance of an epistemological orientation even close to self-authorship seems unlikely, thus making adaptation to college improbable. Given the possible relation between coping and self-authorship, this study was an investigation of if and how self-authorship is related to students’ coping skills and subsequent adaptation to college.

METHOD

This was an exploratory qualitative study of self-authorship, coping, and adaptation in first-year, high-risk college students. Grounded theory was employed, because it allowed for investigation into participants’ individual stories as well as shared patterns in self-authorship, coping, and adaptation (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Participants

Purposeful sampling techniques were employed to ensure all participants were
identified as high-risk by the same criteria (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Participants were recruited from support programs designed to help high-risk students transition to university life at a large, public, Midwestern university. I attended program meetings to advertise this study and interested students volunteered to participate. The data discussed here focuses exclusively on 27 of the 35 participants who were first-year students. Just over half of this sample (N = 27) was female (n = 14). The sample was largely non-White: Black or African American (13), Latino or Latina (7), More than one race (3), and Asian (1). All participants are referred to by the pseudonym they chose.

Procedures

Data were collected through interviews. Each student participated in two, one-hour, semistructured interviews. The hour-long interviews were semistructured to ensure all students were asked the same main questions, but flexibility was allowed so individual experiences could be explored in sufficient depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 1991). The first interview assessed whether students entered with a self-authoring orientation by focusing on students’ precollegiate and early collegiate experiences and sense of self. The goal was to understand the types of experiences these students had prior to college (e.g., “I’d like you to tell me a story about an important experience in your life before college.”), with probes about the ways they processed these experiences (i.e., “How did you make that decision?” and “How did this experience affect you/make you feel?”), and how this seemed related to the way they were currently processing experiences in college (e.g., “Now that you think about the situation, would you make the same decision now?”). The second interview focused on the students’ experiences in college by asking similar questions that focused on their collegiate experiences (e.g., “I’d like you tell me about an important nonacademic experience you’ve had since you’ve been in college.” And “I’d like you to tell me about an important academic experience you’ve had since you’ve been in college.”). The goal was to understand how students made sense of and coped with collegiate experiences, and if their adaptation to college was related to self-authorship. Given the topic of the second interview, data obtained through this interview were the main focus of analyses here.

Both interviews focused on students’ stories about experiences they identified as important. This method of asking students to describe important experiences and how they processed them was recommended by M. Baxter Magolda (personal communication, Fall, 2002) as a way to detect self-authorship. Furthermore because this method of interviewing asks students to walk the interviewer through their cognitive and behavioral responses to situations, data regarding students’ coping styles could be collected.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Patterns and themes were constructed through constant comparative analyses of the transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analyses were appropriate for code building (Boyatzis, 1998) because self-authorship has not been studied or described in relation to coping, so preexisting codes did not exist. These analyses yielded a set of codes used in interview analyses. Three main coping strategies emerged from this larger set of codes: avoidance, self-regulatory coping, and
supported coping.

To check the trustworthiness of my interpretations and to examine my biases, two colleagues coded three interviews each. The goal here was not to establish interrater reliability. Because multiple stories could be told based on the data, and I chose to focus here on only how students coped with and developed and adapted through challenges to their entering sense of self, examination of whether coders would develop similar codes to my own was not a goal. Rather, I was interested in examining my conclusions and interpretations for bias and clarity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To do this, both coders were first-generation college graduates who had been classified as high-risk college students. Their coding agreed substantially with my own, and they posed questions that helped me examine my coding, such that the degree of bias in the codes was diminished.

The coded data suggested students’ levels of self-authorship were related to the coping strategies they employed when faced with challenges arising from negative self-to-standard comparisons. So finally, shared patterns in coping, self-authorship development, and adaptation were captured in the theory constructed from the data.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study suggest that although these high-risk students entered with self-authoring ways of knowing intact, their SSCSs were challenged early on, and so the students moved away from self-authorship as they sought formulas for being successful. Depending on the degree to which the challenge to their SSCS was central to their entering sense of self, students coped with challenges in different ways. The coping styles students chose affected whether or not self-authorship reemerged, which in turn related to adaptation to college.

Entering College as Self-Authored Knowers

By the time the participants entered college they had demonstrated their abilities to act in self-authoring ways. Through their commitment to and ultimate achievement of their collegiate aspirations these students developed internal foundations and using these internal foundations, they were able to successfully negotiate between multiple perspectives as they worked toward their internally defined goals of becoming college students. Makayla’s story illustrates the importance of developing and using internal foundations in her achievement of her college goals.

He [my dad] wasn’t supporting me the way I wanted him to, but his caution made me think more about what it would be like for me to go away for college, how it would feel for him, and I started to think more about how I was going to deal with all that, and if I wanted to. I thought I did, but I needed to know more about why.

Rather than be controlled by her father’s cautions, Makalya’s statement shows how she learned to manage his concerns about her aspirations. Makayla began to consider his perspective on her situation, and also tried to anticipate how she would feel if she chose to follow through with her goals. Her questioning and reflection helped her “know more about why” she wanted to go to college; she did not just make her decision to pursue college based on a gut instinct, but rather sought to understand her situation—including her father’s views—and her goals, to
develop internally defined reasons for attending college, and to ensure that her own internally defined values and goals were in line with her pursuit of college.

Then because she developed internal foundations, Makayla seemed better able to respond to her father’s cautious support in a way that maintained and enhanced both her relationship with her father and her own personal goals.

Once I knew why, I could talk to my dad better, and he was like, “Okay. That sounds good to me, but you’re not putting too much on yourself too soon, are you?” And by that time I was able to be like, “No, Dad, this is a good thing for me to do, and I can tell you why.”

Makalya’s story appears to exemplify what Baxter Magolda (2001) called “the essence of self-authorship.” In this example Makayla “manages external influence rather than being controlled by it” (p. xix). Makayla’s ability to control external influences comes through “careful consideration of external perspectives and others’ needs, but this consideration occurs in the context of [her] internal foundations” (p. xix).

Makayla’s development and use of internal foundations was not unique to her, or to students who initially lacked full parental support for their aspirations. Even when students’ parents encouraged collegiate aspirations, developing internal foundations seemed necessary for their continued commitment to these goals. For example, Zeke said:

It’s kind of hard to get somewhere with only a high school diploma, you need a degree. That’s kinda how they [my parents] preached it to me when I was younger. But where I’m from, that’s just not what people do. Nobody goes to college. I was the first . . . I’m just so hungry to be successful, but I had to deal with a lot of shit from my friends and people askin’ why I thought I was too good to work on the docks. To get to college I kind of had to do things a little bit different. I had to be different. That was really hard sometimes. I really had to think about why I wanted this so much, because it would have been so easy to just give up.

Even with parental support, for Zeke to cope with pressures to give up his goals, he needed internally defined values, beliefs, and goals. Without these internal foundations, he suggests he would have likely given into external definitions of himself. Constructing and following their own formulas for becoming college students, participants in this study showed their capacity for self-authorship (for a complete discussion see Pizzolato, 2003). Then through their navigation of the college application process many of these students showed they could balance multiple perspectives in the context of their internal foundations as they worked to become college students.

Disruption of Equilibrium

When the participants entered college they felt anxious, but nonetheless sure they could be successful. “I felt prepared academically, but not; it’s like you’re ready but you’re not ready. I feel like I did my part, and if I kept doing it, I’d be okay, but I just had some nervousness about me” (Anthony). And April said, “I was really scared, because I’ve never been on my own before . . . but I was so excited because I felt ready to move on to this new portion of my life . . . I felt ready for the next level.”

This incoming sense of competence was shattered as students encountered situations that made them see themselves in uncomfortable ways. These students encountered
multiple situations that made them feel incompetent or misunderstood by peers and faculty. Through these experiences, the students saw themselves as unfortunately different from their peers, and questioned their entering senses of self, because it conflicted with who they were to others or how they compared to others.

Students’ SSCSs were provoked in the academic arena by one of two types of experiences. In the first type, students had classroom experiences where they saw they were lacking knowledge other students shared. For example, Tye said,

In my class people’s always talking about stuff that I had no idea existed . . . English is kind of like my subject or something like that, but I’m like, “Damn, I never heard of that stuff!” . . . I never even heard of these people or these things, and people are just talking about them so fluently, I feel so left out. And I’m not stupid, but I’ve felt that way a lot in class.

Tye and other students found themselves in classes where they knew less about the content than their peers did, and so as they compared themselves to their peers, they began feeling deficient, and their sense of competence as college students decreased. The second academic provocation to students’ SSCSs came through advising or professor-student interactions that suggested to students they were less capable than their peers. Naty explained that although she felt confident in her abilities and wanted to challenge herself, her advisor was unwilling to let her take charge of her academic schedule. Naty found this frustrating, because she spent her first semester in classes she described as “boring.” And perhaps more importantly she said,

My focus will not go away regardless of the obstacles—boring teachers or annoying advisors, but I hope the rest is not this way, because I think [the advisor is] trying to make it really easy, because maybe she thinks I can’t do it for real, and that’s hard for me, because it does make me wonder if I’m as good as other people. I think I am, but stuff like this makes me wonder.

Through interactions suggesting they were less capable than their peers, these students began to question their own abilities. This particular provocation of students’ SSCSs was possibly more detrimental to their senses of self than comparisons arising from peer interactions, because, as Ana said, “It’s difficult when you feel dumber than everyone in your class, but it’s worse when a professor acts like you’re dumb just because of who you are, and like without giving you a real chance.”

Socially, as these students interacted with their peers they often encountered situations where their previously stable racial or ethnic identities were questioned or negated by others. Such experiences tended to leave students in a state of intense disequilibrium. Cosette described well her experience as a student of mixed ethnicity.

It’s just really hard, because I’m put in a minority position, because I might be Hispanic, but I don’t look Hispanic, because I have white skin, and people see me as White, and I don’t fit into their little categories, and I am the one who is talked about all the time, and I am the one who is out of place . . . I think of myself as Hispanic, but other people don’t, and they don’t want me to think of myself that way.

This disruption of her ethnic identity was challenging to Cosette because she thought she had established this dimension of her identity. Furthermore, because her Hispanic
identity was important to her but questioned by her peers, Cosette felt dissimilar to and unwelcome in a subgroup in which she thought she would fit.

The implications of the dissonance resulting from such challenges to students’ SSCSs were large. After finding themselves different from their peers, students in this study experienced high levels of negative affect and typically stopped acting in ways that fit with their entering goals and beliefs—their internal foundations. They opted instead to fit in. Joe said he found himself engaging in behaviors he knew were wrong just “to be one of the guys.” And Cosette’s description of the effects of her ethnic identity disequilibrium showed how influential such disequilibrium could be across domains.

I feel like I don’t know who I am or what I’m talking about—anywhere—because the whole attitude of these people saying, “Oh, that’s not right.” And, “Oh, you aren’t that,” and just always opposing me, it seems like now the majority of the time I’m just doing things to make people happy, and I’m saying, “I don’t know,” “I don’t know,” just to have an opinion—in class or not—just so people stay friends with me, and so I can actually get through a day.

Like Joe and others, Cosette found herself internalizing others’ expectations and doubts and behaving in ways inconsistent with her entering sense of self and self-authoring capabilities. The intensity of felt dissonance between who they thought they were personally and academically, and how they were being defined by peers, professors, and student affairs professionals shook these students’ internal foundations. This dissonance seemed to push students to focus on immediate social goals (e.g., fitting in), rather than on long-term identity goals (e.g., becoming a college graduate) rooted in their internal foundations. These changes in goal focus left the students feeling uncomfortably different from their peers, but also unable to rectify the problem because they were unhappy with themselves when they acted in ways that afforded them higher levels of acceptance.

Causal Attributions, Coping, and Self-Authorship

As a result of the negative affect arising from students’ feelings of great dissimilarity between themselves and their peers, these students sought ways to decrease this intense dissonance and return to their previous state of identity stability. Through engaging their causal attribution systems (Duval & Silvia, 2002), students sought probable reasons for their experiences. For example, after describing her emotional response to feeling like an outsider, Cosette said:

I guess another step is processing and identifying myself, because after you take away high school and all of those norms, who are you? What do you really want? And I thought I had that figured out, but I guess I still have a long way to go. Now I have to really spend some time really processing what’s going on here.

Through activation of the causal attribution system, students moved from just feeling different, toward “figuring out” why they felt as they did, and how to act in ways that would decrease the tension they were experiencing. Students’ causal attribution systems helped them (a) identify why they felt dissimilar to others, and (b) to develop and act on plans to “get back to doing what [they] came to college to do” (Zeke).
The students engaged their causal attribution systems in three distinct ways, resulting in three different coping styles: (a) avoidance coping, (b) self-regulatory coping, and (c) supported coping. The following sections discuss these styles and both their epistemic and adaptive outcomes. This information is also summarized in Table 1.

**Avoidance Coping**

When students handled challenges by blaming the institution or individuals within the institution without considering how they might play a part in either the provocation of the challenge, or creating change so the challenge was lessened and/or removed, then the student’s strategy was coded as avoidance coping. Students who employed avoidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoidance Coping</th>
<th>Self-Regulatory Coping</th>
<th>Supported Coping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td>Blaming of current situation on external factors &amp; then justifying lack of focus on challenged dimension(s) of identity</td>
<td>Reflection on challenges, commitment to and action toward decreasing challenges-all done in isolation of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Used When</strong></td>
<td>Central dimensions of identity are not challenged by self-to-standard comparisons</td>
<td>Central dimensions of identity are challenged by self-to-standard comparisons and the student can individually develop emotional and cognitive clarity regarding these challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptation</strong></td>
<td>High levels of adaptation in a single area, but low levels in the challenged arena</td>
<td>High levels of adaptation in the challenged level, but low adaptation in other arenas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemological</strong></td>
<td>Return to seeking of formulas for knowledge construction and success-no return of self-authorship</td>
<td>Return to self-authorship only in the area in which they were challenged by self-to-standard comparisons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1.**

Summary of Coping Styles and Outcomes Resulting From Student Engagement of Their Causal Attribution Systems
coping \((n=7)\) tended to be challenged on dimensions not central to their senses of self, or dimensions students convinced themselves were not central to their sense of self.

For example, due to his classroom experiences, Chingy felt academically inferior to his peers, but when he looked for probable causes for this feeling, he attributed his inferiority exclusively to external causes: “I know I’m a smart dude, I just wasn’t prepared right.” Although he may have been poorly prepared, Chingy’s causal attributions removed his sense of control over his academic success or failure; because he attributed his failures to stable, external factors, he also considered his locus of control to be external as well (see Weiner, 1985). To cope with his sense of academic helplessness, Chingy, a student athlete, claimed that, “I’m not into school. I don’t do well, but I don’t have time to do well. . . I’m gonna go pro.” By justifying his avoidance of academic focus, Chingy coped with feeling less academically competent than his peers by deciding academic competence was not important to him.

Focusing on why their current situation was unimportant was common amongst students who engaged in avoidance coping. Nicole and Josh shifted their focus from feelings of academic inferiority to feelings of social isolation, and so they focused on making friends instead of on developing tools to become academically successful. Through this shift in focus, students were unable to identify potential behaviors that could have helped them lessen or remove their feelings of inferiority in the challenged domain.

Such coping strategies worked initially, in that they allowed the students to maintain positive opinions of themselves, while providing justifiable reasons for why they had difficulty and did not need to focus on particular arenas. Ultimately, however, avoidance coping strategies did not prove useful to students’ adaptation. Through avoidance coping, students’ adaptation was stunted in two ways. First, these students were not adapting well to college learning, and so they found themselves academically behind their peers. Then although mid-semester academic warnings motivated these students toward problem-focused coping, the intensity of focus that their academics required forced them to ignore, or at least downplay, their adaptation in nonacademic arenas. Nicole spoke of how she had to put all her efforts into school and ignore her friends, and Chingy had to stop spending so much time learning plays.

Avoidance coping was also detrimental to students’ self-authorship development. Their entering self-authoring abilities were subsumed beneath formula following. In trying to catch up in school, these students sought out existing strategies to follow without thinking; “I got a math tutor who just like breaks everything down for me. That way I can just memorize all the right stuff. . . I wish I had a tutor like that in my [political science] class.” Jackie’s statement shows she was so invested in formula following, she could not transfer skills across courses. Seeking external formulas for success, self-authoring ways of knowing seemed to disappear. This apparent disappearance of self-authorship is reminiscent of Perry’s (1968) discussion of retreat. According to Perry, when students encountered challenges that were too great, they sometimes retreated to lower levels of reasoning. It is possible then that students in this group retreated from self-authorship because they experienced their challenges as overwhelming.
Self-Regulatory Coping

Unlike students who engaged in avoidance coping, students in the self-regulatory coping category \((n = 6)\) focused on reflective problem solving when they encountered negative self-to-standard comparisons. After an initial emotional response to self-to-standard comparisons, these students became clear about their feelings and returned to their goals. With this clarity, students employed adaptive coping skills to recognize what they needed to do and take appropriate action. Dion’s response to his academic situation illustrates self-regulatory coping. Initially he only felt distressed and angry because he felt like he was working harder than most people, and they were still ahead of him: “When you can’t never get over the top, and things never seem to fall your way . . . you kinda get to the point where you just don’t want to do it anymore . . . that’s where I got to.” But with reflection Dion gained clarity regarding how to work through his situation.

I’ve just never been able to see myself as being a nobody; that’s just something I couldn’t accept. . . . I have this opportunity to get 4 years of education, and I know a lot of other guys who didn’t have this opportunity, and now they gotta find something else to do. . . . It’s gonna be intense, but I have to try to work up to this level.

This level of clarity, coupled with his desire to succeed, led Dion to goal commitment. “I just put my head down and started working hard. I got tutors in everything, and lots of flashcards and study guides. I basically had to say, ‘I gotta do this, this, and this.’” It is important to note here that self-regulation means the student was able to individually become clear about feelings arising from the self-to-standard challenge. The action then taken may still involve others, just as Dion’s tutoring did.

Through this type of coping, students returned to their entering goals. For example, Zeke realized being late to class and loudly doing everything but participating were helping him fit in, but were not in line with his hopes for himself. “When I realized that, I had to change. I pretty much just stopped acting like a jerk. I stopped sitting by the guys that were still doing that stuff. Now I go early and sit up front.”

Epistemologically these students moved toward their entering self-authored ways of knowing; they returned to their original set of beliefs about themselves, and let these beliefs guide their actions. This return to self-authorship, however, was bounded by the situation in which their self-to-standard comparison occurred. In their attempts to adapt to one part of the college environment (e.g., academics) and cope with the challenges they were experiencing there, they coped in ways that isolated them. In turning inward and, in Zeke’s case, physically separating himself from others, these students were left feeling moderately successful in one arena, but still generally out of place. For example, Cosette said she was “starting to talk more, even when people just don’t want to hear me, or act resentful toward me,” but although this action was helping her “not just disappear,” it also left her feeling lonely.

These students’ stories highlight the darker side of self-authorship. Just as Baxter Magolda’s (2001) participants often excluded or separated from family, peers, or significant others as they worked toward self-authorship, Cosette, Zeke, and others in this group experienced self-authorship as a lonely place.

Supported Coping

Most students in this study were not as clear about how they felt about the challenges
arising from self-to-standard comparisons, as were students who used self-regulatory coping. If students felt unclear about how to process challenges to their sense of self, the challenges they were trying to process were central to their conception of self, and they coped in two distinct phases, they were coded as using supported coping \((n = 14)\). In the first phase these students sought clarity through conversation, and in the second students constructed and enacted plans for coping with challenges. The term supported indicates the main difference between students in this group and students who used self-regulatory coping. In the latter, students reached clarity regarding challenges and created general plans for increasing their self-concepts in isolation of others, whereas supported coping students initiated social relationships to develop both clarity and coping strategies. The degree to which students used these relationships varied, but relationships were integral to students reaching emotional clarity and constructing responses to challenging situations. As Ashley said, “Sometimes it’s like there are things you’ve thought about in your head, but it just doesn’t become really clear to you until you vocalize it to somebody else.” And Hollis claimed that, “You know, sometimes you just need other cats to be like, ‘Dude, what are you doing?’ so that you can even realize what you’re doing and can start to act different.”

Social support served multiple important functions. It could, as Hollis suggested, help students recognize the disconnect between behaviors and goals, and it could help students become more clear about how they were feeling and what they wanted for themselves. Sarah spoke about how talking with friends helped her “get focused more on what I really want” and also “figure out how to get there.” Clarity and coping strategies often developed through relationships with peers, especially more experienced peers. April went to her older cousin to find “the resources I need,” and Maija talked with her hall advisor when she needed help making sense of confusing situations.

**Supported Coping Strategy 1: Directed Coping.** Students’ shifts from social support to problem focused coping happened in one of two ways. In the first form, students \((n = 5)\) moved into problem-focused coping with the direct help of another. In Hollis’s case, his friends helped him realize he was acting in ways that were going to get him into trouble. Once he accepted this reality, Hollis did not know how to change, but a friend reminded him he had access to counseling, and as Hollis said:

> I never thought I’d be a dude on a couch, but I decided to call the shrink up, and she made an appointment with me right away ... she’s been really helpful ... she helped me start to modify my behaviors, (makes quotation marks with his fingers) and that’s really helped me get back on track.

With the help of his counselor, Hollis began to refocus on his entering goals and abilities, and lessen the challenges he was experiencing.

In Hollis’s case, and for other students following similar paths, supportive relationships provided an arena for airing concerns, receiving emotional support, and getting procedural direction. As Joe said, “Sometimes you know you need to make some changes but you have no idea how. That’s where other people can be really helpful.” With guidance from others these students moved toward coping with the negative affect arising from their self-to-standard comparisons. Others helped them deal with
this negative affect, by helping them make sense of their emotional responses and construct ways to decrease the intense dissonance they were experiencing.

It is important to note here that Joe, Hollis, and other students initiated helping relationships with others they believed could help them both identify their own feelings and goals, and then take appropriate steps toward reaching their goals. Through this attempt to identify their own responses and abilities, students in this group moved back toward self-authorship. Although they were by no means back to using their entering levels of self-authorship, the effort they put into even trying to find their own feelings in the situation and act based on these feelings coupled with their goals is reminiscent of their self-authored ways of knowing. These students’ descriptions of the helpful role of others in their self-authoring process provide an interesting contrast to the lonely self-authoring experience of students in the self-regulatory coping group. This contrast suggests self-authorship need not be an isolating experience. In Baxter Magolda’s (2001) words, “good company” seems to make self-authorship more comfortable. For students in this subgroup helpful others acted as coaches so students could learn how to manage the intense and diverse external pressures of their new environment in ways consistent with their internally defined beliefs and goals.

Through their effort to figure out what they believed, and who they were and wanted to be, these students tried to take charge of their actions and sense of self, rather than allowing themselves to be defined by the expectations and assessments of others.

Supported Coping Strategy 2: Needing Listeners. Some students \( n = 9 \) who initially sought social support moved toward problem-focused coping with less direct interventions from others. These students described themselves as people who needed to “think out loud” (Makayla), and who liked “to get opinions, even if [they] don’t take them” (April). Through talking to others, students identified their own goals and needs. For Ashley, talking to her friends helped her reevaluate and gain emotional clarity about her situation, “As I started to talk about it, it was like why do I have to prove . . . how much I’m dedicated?. . . . Why is it that I have to walk this line, and why do I even put up with these inconsistencies?!” Others provided students in this group with an arena for talking through and making sense of their feelings.

The clarity arising from conversation seemed to facilitate their construction of problem-focused coping strategies, but unlike the other subgroup of students who sought social support in their coping process, Makayla, April, Ashley, and other students in this subgroup moved away from the social arena as they built coping plans. Students gained clarity through self-initiated social interactions, but then the students withdrew to consider how to best cope with the situation. Makayla’s experience demonstrates this shift from desiring a listener and social support, to problem-focused coping:

I was really upset, because I felt like [a certain organization] only really wanted me because I’m Black . . . and that was so aggravating. I talked with L— . . . really I just needed to talk it out. Then I was able to figure out what I needed to do, because it’s really not just about [that organization], it’s really about adjusting to this whole college thing and figuring myself out.

After she spoke with her student advisor, Makayla worked to individually figure out
what she needed to do to feel better, in this situation and in the broader scheme of college. Through reflection, Makayla ultimately decided to join the organization and try to recruit other Black students to join as well, while also joining predominantly Black student groups, so she would not always “feel like the one Black person.”

This form of coping helped students rediscover their existing self-authored ways of knowing. Through a combination of social interaction and individual reflection, these students resurrected their internal foundations, and began to use them when coping with negative self-to-standard comparisons. For example, when Ashley found her sense of self challenged by who one of her male friends expected her to be, she returned to her central beliefs about herself and relationships—her internal foundations—and allowed these beliefs to guide her processing of this situation. “I really had to reevaluate, because that’s just not who I want to be. I’m not here just for the bettering of someone else . . . so it’s like I was thinking, what is this all about?. . . . It made me self-reflect.”

Because these students were able to rediscover and use their internal foundations, their self-authorship abilities surpassed those of their high-risk peers’. Their ability to self-reflect across domains led them to approach future situations with higher levels of confidence, and greater faith in who they were and how the decisions they were making fit into their larger sense of self. In her second interview, Ashley’s description of her college experience illustrates how students in this subgroup were able to generalize their self-authored ways of knowing across situations.

College has been a learning experience . . . because you find yourself in situations that you didn’t necessarily plan for. And it says a lot about you—how you react to them. You have to take the time to evaluate . . . self-reflection is what it’s all about.

Students, who like Ashley, were able to move from social support toward more individually reflective coping processes, began to understand and acclimate themselves to the idea that college was neither easy nor a stable environment. Obstacles could not always be planned for, but with a solid sense of self, they could be confident in their abilities to cope with future situations if they took the time to reflect and evaluate the situation and their place in it.

The coping strategies in both subgroups led to adaptation in spite of challenges. Because these students sought support when they encountered difficulties, they refined their help-seeking behaviors and built a network of peers and mentors who could provide guidance and resources for coping effectively.

DISCUSSION
The findings from this study build on existing work on the coping-adaptation relation in college students by illustrating how self-authorship is related to first-year challenges and coping strategies in high-risk students. The findings suggest entering college was an important crossroads in the participants’ self-authorship development. More specifically, the students’ stories imply that self-authorship may be inhibited by overwhelming challenges that call into question students’ internal foundations. As students encountered messages about who they were and who they could be that conflicted with their internal definitions, the intense disequilibrium they initially experienced led to a retreat from self-authored knowing.
This notion seems to conflict with Baxter Magolda’s (2001) definition of self-authorship, insofar as development of self-authorship seems to imply buffering from overwhelming external influences through student development of skills that allow them to manage external influences. The stories the participants in this study shared, however, suggest that although development of self-authorship provides students with the skills to negotiate between multiple competing expectations in the context of their own internal foundations, whether students are able to use these skills may depend on the degree of external hostility they perceive toward outward expression of their internal foundations. Although these students developed self-authored ways of knowing prior to college, entering college they encountered significant challenges to their internal foundations. The intensity and scope of these challenges led students to reflect on their internal foundations, and slipped into a phase of trying to act in ways consistent with external expectations of them. During this phase, most students felt uncomfortable with their choices, and with the help of others they were able to unearth their self-authored ways of knowing. This pattern of retreat from and re-emergence of self-authorship suggests self-authorship might come in two forms: action and reasoning, where action involves behaving in ways consistent with self-authored thinking, and reasoning is an ability to cognitively and intrapersonally make sense of situations. Whether students can act in self-authored ways may then depend on both their ability to reason, and their perception of support for self-authored action. Support here means a student may need to perceive that the cost of acting in self-authored ways does not outweigh the benefits in terms of their ability to maintain a particularly desired role identity. In the case of these students, one explanation of their initial retreat from self-authorship may be rooted in an initial sense that to act in ways consistent with their internal foundations would unduly threaten their ability to maintain their college student identity. As students selected coping strategies, some students using self-regulated and supported coping strategies were able to resurrect self-authored knowing, because others helped them generalize previously developed self-authoring reasoning skills to their new environment.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

There are a number of limitations to note. First, the sample may have affected the findings. The participants came from the same predominantly White, Midwestern university. And the majority of the participants came from monoracial home communities. Similar studies with a more diverse group of participants, and participants from multiracial communities would be helpful in understanding how students from more diverse communities and at different types of institutions cope with challenges to their senses of self arising from self-to-standard comparisons, especially around racial and ethnic identity conflict. Additionally, all the students in this study were also participants in university-sponsored support programs for high-risk students. As these programs were intended to help students smoothly transition into college life and academics, the participants in this study likely have more support and resources available than high-risk students who were not participating in such programs. Study of adaptation, coping, and
self-authorship in students not electing to participate in such programs would be helpful in understanding the relation between these constructs in high-risk students.

Secondly, the timing of the interviews may have affected the findings. All interviews took place during the participants’ first semester of college. Although each set of interviews was conducted over a one-week period in September and late November/early December to decrease the effect of time on students’ responses, this time frame did not allow students much time to try coping strategies or for self-authored ways of knowing to reemerge. As this study is part of a larger longitudinal study, however, coping and self-authorship will be examined over an extended period.

Another important limitation of this study is its failure to explicitly address the role of institutional racism in these students’ development during college. Given the already large scope of this study, I chose not to explore this issue in depth, but students’ comments about feeling like they could never get over the top, and experiences of peer and staff discrimination based on skin color, point out the intrusion of racism in these students’ lives. Further attention to this reality and its impact on development is important to better understanding of high-risk students’ college experiences.

Implications for Practice

Given the importance of others’ in the participants’ stories, the findings of this study have multiple implications for practice. Classroom experiences made the participants aware of the skills or knowledge they did not have, but even in the face of such experiences, many participants were unwilling to give up or believe they lacked the ability to be successful. Thus it seems important for both advising and teaching situations to build on students’ recognition of the gaps in their knowledge and their resilience in the face of this recognition. Rather than suggesting students may not be able to handle college coursework, individual interactions with these students should seek to empower them to make plans for being successful in the face of challenges they report.

These findings have important implications for the construction and reformation of support programs designed to help high-risk students be successful in college. Academically, these programs should continue to provide students with information about test-taking, note-taking, and study strategies, but distribution of this information may be most helpful if students were engaged in conversation around these issues. Said otherwise, because the findings suggest some students are overwhelmed by the expectations of prior knowledge expected in their courses, it is important that strategies are not conveyed as formulas. Helping students figure out whether their classroom difficulties are arising from inappropriate or ineffective strategies, lack of necessary prior knowledge, or misunderstandings of expectations should occur before the conversation moves to particular strategies. And learning and study strategies should not be a one-time conversation, but an ongoing developmental process.

Along these same lines, tutoring was often helpful to these students, but the results of this study show that access to tutors alone is not likely the best route toward adaptation and development in high-risk college students. When tutoring crossed the line into formula feeding, students tended to rely on their tutor for knowledge construction skills. Thus emphasizing and teaching nondirective
tutoring strategies to tutors would be helpful, because such tutoring techniques would help students build their sense of competence, and develop metacognitive skills in the academic domain so they can ultimately assess and modify their learning strategies on their own.

The preponderance of students’ struggles not directly related to academics gestures toward the potential of support programs to promote self-authorship development through nonacademic programming. Many students cited older peers as particularly important in their development, so it seems that support programs including advanced students may be particularly well suited to support incoming students. If program staff spend time talking with and learning from advanced high-risk students, they may be able to compile a list of resources to help entering students transition to college life. Additionally, incorporating a peer mentoring relationship into support programs would likely assist entering students by providing them with an older, experienced peer they can go to with concerns and questions they may feel uncomfortable asking in a large group setting, or not know who to ask. And if support programs are residential, then programming that focuses on coping with racial, ethnic, and class discrimination may help students by validating the reality of their experiences, and providing them with a forum for sharing their experiences and coping strategies. If such programming is undertaken, particular attention should be paid to the existence and unique issues of students of more than one race or ethnicity, because students from mixed backgrounds spoke passionately about their struggles to fit in on campus in light of the strict racial and ethnic categories they found represented in existing identity-based student groups.

More broadly the findings of this study gesture toward the impact of continued social inequalities on students’ preparation for college. Addressing inequalities in higher education is important, but attention to such inequalities in the larger institution of education in which students participate prior to college seems important as well.

Conclusion

College presents students with a variety of academic and social situations that often challenge their entering sense of self. For high-risk students in this study, entering college significantly disrupted their sense of self. Through a variety of coping strategies, each with different outcomes, these students worked to decrease the negative affect they were experiencing. Students’ chosen coping strategies seemed related to whether they adapted well to college and whether self-authored ways of knowing reemerged. Additionally, the findings suggest that although others are important, how others involve students in coping with daily stressors affected the reemergence of self-authored ways of knowing. Baxter Magolda and King’s (2004) recent work on the Learning Partnerships Model, begins to specify practices supportive of self-authorship in college students. But the findings here gesture toward the need for further intervention studies, so data-driven interventions can be effectively implemented such that institutions, programs, and individuals are better able to respond to the unique needs of high-risk college students and support their development of reflective coping skills.

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