A Window into the College Transition: Narrated Agency and Communion as Predictors of Student Adjustment

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Background

- The college setting provides a set of opportunities and challenges for students as they take on new responsibilities, manage their autonomy, and attempt to establish new social networks: all in a new and unfamiliar environment.
- We expect that students who find more success in these endeavors will be better adjusted during their college careers.
- Among the approaches for gauging students' early adjustment, autobiographical narratives—such as narrative reflections on the college transition—provide rich insights about students' conscious experiences and the goals and values they incorporate from their life events.
- This study addressed the ways students' narratives of the college transition informed college adjustment across three time points.

Method

Two hundred eighty-eight undergraduates were recruited from a Midwestern university (78.3% women; M age = 18.4 years, SD = 1.6) to complete online measures at three monthly periods. Most students were in the first year of college (85.0%). A majority of students identified as White (83.3%), followed by groups identifying as Black (5.6%), Southeast Asian (3.1%), Multiracial (2.4%), Latina/o (2.1%), Asian Indian (0.7%), Middle Eastern (0.3%), and American Indian (0.3%).

At baseline, students provided self-reports on aspects of college adjustment:
- Sense of Belonging at College (Goodenow, 1993; [1-5]; ωs = .94-.96)
- Homesickness (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; [1-7]; ωs = .77-.88)
- Life Satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985; [1-7]; ωs = .91-.93)

Students also provided open-ended narratives about their college transition experience. Teams of coders then rated these narratives for displays of motivational **agency** ([0–3]; interrater reliability ω = .97)—goals for self-advancement and mastery—and **communion** ([0–3]; interrater reliability ω = .87)—goals for interpersonal success and relationship-building. Two narrative segments are provided, underscoring high displays of agency and communion, respectively:
- **High Agency Sample**: …It has made me a more independent but also dependable person. I love myself more and have figured out how to work under pressure…
- **High Communion Sample**: …The first thing that comes to my mind when thinking about my college transition is missing my family. I am super close to them, so it is hard. My thoughts and feelings about the college transition are that I may be a little upset to be away from home, but I am so excited!...

Results

Variable Means (SDs)	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Agency	1.28 (.64)	--	--
Communion	1.29 (1.07)	--	--
Sense of Belonging	3.84 (.68)	3.77 (.69)	3.78 (.77)
Homesickness	4.44 (1.15)	4.32 (1.08)	4.20 (1.17)
Life Satisfaction	5.11 (1.34)	5.01 (1.36)	5.28 (1.20)

Hierarchical linear models tested change over time in reports of college belonging, homesickness, and life satisfaction given displays of agentic and communal motivations in narratives of the college transition.

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Results (cont.)

There was a trending **main effect** of communion on the overall intercept for **homesickness** *(p = .07)*. Students incorporating more communion in reflections of the college transition had higher average homesickness.

Figure 1: Agency and Sense of Belonging

There was a **main effect** on the overall intercept of agency for **sense of belonging** *(p = .01)*. Students incorporating more agency reported higher average belonging.
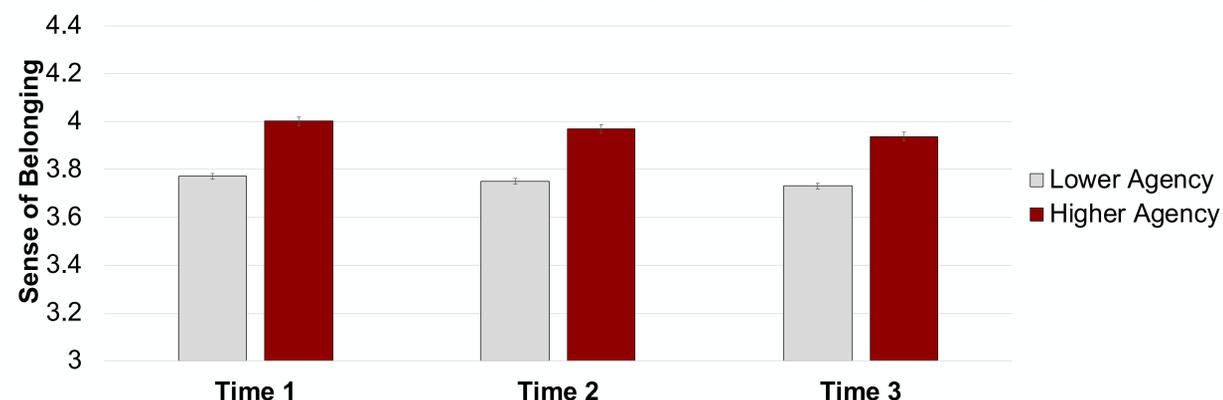

Figure 2: Agency, Communion, and Life Satisfaction

There was an **interaction** on the time slope between communion and agency for **life satisfaction** *(p = .05)*.
- Students **low in both motivational themes** reported lowest life satisfaction across time, despite improvements over time.
- Students higher in only **agency** or **communion** started higher in life satisfaction, but reported slight declines over time.
- Students **higher in both motivational themes** started higher in life satisfaction and continued to flourish, relative to peers.
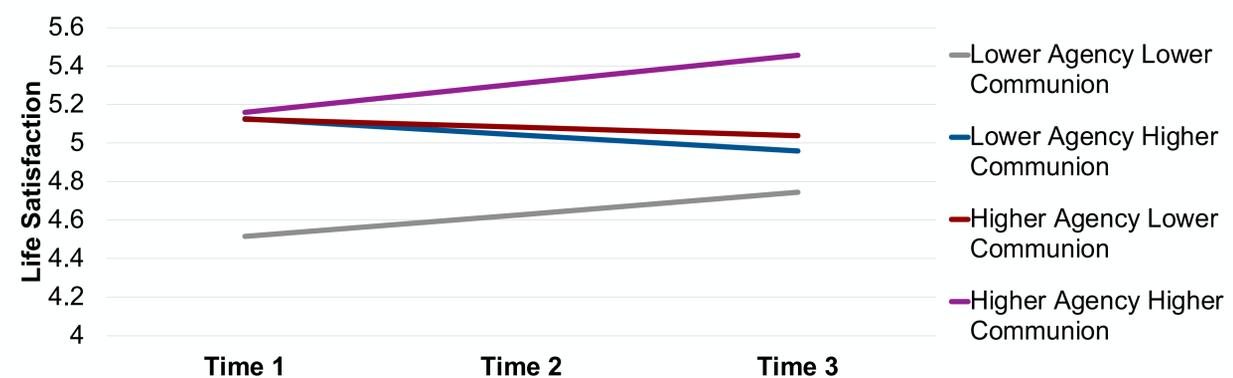
Discussion

- Two sets of life motivations—desires to get along (communion) and desires to get ahead (agency)—were tested as predictors of college student adjustment over time.
- Communion was weakly predictive of greater homesickness. Agency was robustly predictive of greater feelings of college belonging. In concert, communion and agency robustly predicted greater satisfaction with life.
- Communal students are navigating not only the pressures of building *new* ties at college, but also *maintaining* ties with old friends and family – this can be a challenge. However, students who successfully manage their own needs alongside those of their relationships are likely to thrive in college.
- **Future directions** include considering younger populations and processes contributing to the development of these motivational schemes (i.e., attachment security; personality traits), as well as the implications of these motivations for transitions into additional adult roles (i.e., career employment; marriage)