Belonging, Intentionality, and Study Space for Minoritized and Privileged Students

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Introduction

During his keynote address at this conference in 2005, Robert Ibarra posited that academic libraries, in response to changing student needs, may have begun to develop more inclusive environments than other places on campus.[1] At the time, the sociologist was impressed by the cultural shift he saw within academic libraries, presumed to be in response to the growing ubiquity of the internet, which "spurred many campus libraries to become more user-friendly and community-oriented than ever before."[2] This was evidenced by relaxed food and drink policies, the presence of cafes within libraries, and the transformation of "catacomb-like reading rooms" into noisy, group study-oriented learning commons.[3]

In support of his idea, there is evidence that underrepresented students groups and women use spaces in their campus libraries more than the typical White male college student does.[4] Whitmire's study on African American students' use and perceptions of academic libraries led her to suggest that academic libraries can be "a racially neutral space for students of color—a counter-space."[5] This has been recently reinforced in a quantitative study that found that black college students attending non-historically black colleges and universities in the U.S. felt welcomed in academic libraries.[6] Indeed, there are many examples of academic libraries working to promote inclusivity to underrepresented student populations in their spaces. These include: creating prayer rooms for the convenience of students of all faiths,[7] offering free feminine hygiene products in library restrooms,[8] providing lactation rooms[9] and gender-neutral and family restrooms,[10] ensuring gender diversity in library maker-spaces,[11] and eliminating overdue fines and hosting food pantries,[12] not to mention a great variety of programming and recruitment efforts aimed at promoting racial diversity in the workforce and positive, constructive communication across differences.

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that scholarship on library spaces "contains no substantive discussion of the systematic exclusions of non-White notions of space, study, navigation, language, signage, and architecture that have constituted the construction of library spaces."[13] These authors note the perpetuation of normative whiteness that suggest the existence of an ideal "neutral one-size-fits-all type of space" and that "inviting" or "welcoming" means the same for everyone.[14] They conclude that despite all of higher education's efforts in general, and all of the efforts of academic libraries specifically, "academic libraries still fall short of their intention to be spaces of empowerment and growth for marginalized community members, especially people of color."[15] Even though a few specific campus spaces, including libraries,[16] surface repeatedly in research on campus climate and belonging, lack of research on the role of campus spaces in the lives of students led Samura to conclude, "there is still little clarity on how space operates and limited work on the relationship between built environments and diverse students' interactions."[17]

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Using a critical constructivist approach infused with narrative inquiry practices, this study explores how students' social identities intersect with experiences in library study spaces and influence sense of belonging at a predominantly white university. Interviews with students from a variety social identity backgrounds were analyzed to better understand what role human interactions and ecological factors in study spaces have on students' sense of belonging. This study also examines whether the widely reported notions regarding student preferences for library study spaces due to their purposefully built socio-academic nature hold true for both privileged and minoritized students.

Sense of Belonging

The notion of belonging ties back to psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, where the bottom tier of need includes an individual's physiological and safety needs, and once those needs are met, the next level up the pyramid is belonging - being part of a community or in relationships with others.[18] Numerous frameworks have been used by scholars to study and explain the concept of belonging for college students. Strayhorn suggests core elements of belonging which provide a solid foundational definition. A sense of belonging:

- Is a basic human need,
- Is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior,
- Takes on a heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among certain populations,
- Is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering,
- Engenders other positive outcomes, and
- Must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change.[19]

A large amount of research has linked college students' sense of belonging to a number of student success measures, including academic achievement, persistence, and engagement.[20] Positive relationships with faculty and staff, support systems, friendships, involvement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, and social acceptance have all been associated with improved sense of belonging.[21] Research has also demonstrated that a lack of sense of belonging can negatively influence students and that minoritized college students face "a chronic state of belonging uncertainty" regarding their fit in the university setting.[22]

Additionally, research on belonging and minoritized students has consistently suggested that students from different social identity groups experience belonging differently and that minoritized students generally report a lower sense of belonging than their privileged peers.[23] Latinos, African American men, and Asian-American students reported a lower sense of belonging at predominantly white institution than their white peers.[24] Students' sense of belonging has also been linked to socio-economic status and working-class students felt less like they belonged than their middle- or upper-class peers.[25]

Samura pointed out that researchers often overlook both "the fluidity and mutability of belonging," and "the role of students themselves in their processes of belonging."[26] She found that "belonging was not a state of being to attain; rather, it was a process that involved students remaking themselves, repositioning themselves, or remaking space to increase belonging."[27] Similarly, Vaccaro and Newman examined the differences in the ways privileged and minoritized students make meaning of belonging and suggested that prior studies may be flawed because sense of belonging was approached as if it were the same for all students.[28] Their results indicated there were "vast differences in the ways students from privileged and minoritized social identity groups defined belonging and made meaning."[29] The minoritized students in the study included a variety of racial identities, as well as bi- and multi-racial students, LGB students, students with disabilities, and students with spiritual backgrounds other than Christian. Concepts of safety, respect, and the ability to be one's authentic self, surfaced

repeatedly for the minoritized students, yet ideas related to fun and friendliness dominated the narratives of the privileged students.[30]

Finally, a study of the sense of belonging of students with disabilities, found that these students' understandings of belonging focused on relationship building, academic mastery, and self-advocacy skills in ways that closely aligned with their identity as disabled students.[31] Similarly, research on sense of belonging in lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and queer (LGBPQ) first-year students at a mid-sized public research university and found that their sense of belonging was intricately tied to their LGBPQ identity, evolved over time, and was multi-faceted, that is, students sought belonging at the university, group, and individual friend levels.[32]

Ambient Sociality and Scholarly Gravitas

A variety of studies report students appear to be motivated to study and do academic work by merely being among others with the same intent. This most often manifests in the library, as opposed to other campus study spaces. Crook and Mitchell characterized this as the "ambient sociality" of study space in a library and noted that it "seems particularly potent and under-theorised."[33] Head and Eisenberg reported that students valued the library as place because "they could witness other students engaged in 'hard work,' and this often was contagious for them."[34] Cox emphasized not only the discipline afforded by seeing others engaging in similar tasks, but also the idea of being among friends.[35]

This idea of studying among the presence of other students is often intertwined with the idea that specific campus spaces have specific purposes. This purpose is particularly salient for library spaces. Foster found that even when students in the library were not using library collections and resources, they wanted to study in the library because "they wanted to be in a place with the sort of scholarly gravitas that the library affords; they said it made them more serious."[36] This holds true despite the omnipresence of the Internet and ubiquitous computing. Students in multiple studies have expressed an appreciation of the scholarly nature of the library atmosphere.[37] Cunningham and Walton found that students who used the informal learning spaces other than the library did so because of the convenience of their geographical location, but students who used the study spaces in the library saw it as "a destination of choice, despite a lack of proximity to their department/home."[38] This appreciation of libraries as studious spaces may emanate from the historic image of libraries as symbolic repositories of scholarly knowledge. It could also come through the place attachment built by students as they navigate their educational experience and appropriate library spaces in connection with their academic success. Steele, Cronrath, Vicchio, and Foster nicely summarized the overall understanding of libraries as preferred informal learning spaces: "Students seek spaces that inspire them, stimulate their minds, and help them do their schoolwork through a combination of aesthetics, resources, and collegiality."[39]

Unfortunately, with one exception, each of these studies on students' preferences for and engagement in informal learning spaces were done without regard to student identity differences and without any detailed consideration of the broader ecological factors that may intersect with student identity. This is important because it means we can only presume the results of these studies reflect the privileged majority student perspective. Although Neurohr and Bailey's findings that first-generation students who frequently use the library perceived it to be contributing to their academic success is a good starting point for further inquiry, we cannot assume any of these other studies reflect the experiences of minoritized student populations.[40] In fact, in their quantitative study that indicated African American students generally perceive academic libraries as welcoming places, Stewart, Ju, and Davis, also found that, "libraries are not neutral sites of reading but cultural spaces that reflect the mores of their users."[41] Part of the study reported here is to consider whether the notions of ambient sociality and scholarly gravitas in libraries hold across student identities or are they a luxury of privileged students?

Methodology

A basic qualitative research approach was used to study how undergraduate students of varying social identities interpret their experiences in study spaces and what meaning they attribute to those experiences.[42] This research was approached within a critical constructivist epistemic paradigm. Constructivism refers to the study of "the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others."[43] Adding a critical component to the constructivist paradigm calls for giving weight to the perspectives of the students who identify with minoritized populations and acknowledges the dominance of the privileged within the traditional collegiate culture. A critical orientation refers to an ideology that values the lived experiences of persons and holds power relations, inequities, and social justice as central concerns.[44] Through this lens, this study attempts to identify ways in which dominant cultural norms in traditional higher education institutions are at play within the seemingly innocuous spaces used by students every day, ways in which certain spaces mitigate or accentuate those norms, and the ways students navigate their sense of belonging within those spaces.

The setting for this study is a residential, predominantly white, state-supported research institution located in the rural Midwest. Undergraduate enrollment on main campus is just over 18,000 and the 2017 freshman class entered with an average ACT score of twenty-four. An email survey was distributed to undergraduates eighteen or older with at least two semesters completed on main campus. The survey collected a variety of self-reported demographics and asked students how often they studied, where they studied, and if they had ever experienced feelings of not belonging in a study space. Purposeful sampling was used in an exploration of different social identities, perspectives, and experiences to select fifty-five individuals to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Thirty-one students were interviewed during fall semester 2018. Participants were awarded $20 in acknowledgement of the value of their time and for sharing their experiences and thoughts.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and shared with each participant for member-checking during fall semester 2018. Participants each selected their own pseudonym and the words used to describe their racial, ethnic, and gender identities, and sexual orientations below are their own words. Analysis of the data is iterative and occurred during and after the data collection process. Final transcriptions and demographic attributes from the survey have been and continue to be analyzed in NVivo using multiple cycles of coding.

Preliminary Findings

Key demographics for interview participants can be found in Table 1. The minoritized identities represented by the participants include a variety of racial and ethnic identities, students who indicated that neither of their parents had completed college (referred to here as first-generation), students from low socio-economic statuses, and students with a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. Participants were 72% female and 58% white. While many of the participants identified as first-generation college students and/or as Pell grant recipients, these numbers are close to overall campus ratios. The university reports approximately one third of the student population as identifying as first-generation and 47% of undergraduates as Pell grant eligible.

Additional demographic attributes of participants include one student who was an international student, two students who were athletes, and five students who were part of the university's elite honors program, which enrolls less than one hundred students each year.

Someone Who Looks Like Me

Many students from racially or ethnically minoritized backgrounds expressed a desire to be in spaces where they might "see someone who looks like me," as Tina, a multi-racial sophomore put it. Anita, an Asian-

TABLE 1 Participant Attributes (n=31)		
Attribute		**Number of Participants**
Age	18-22	28
	23-28	3
Year	Sophomore	12
	Junior	11
	Senior	8
Time Studying per Week	up to 5 hrs	2
	5-10 hrs	12
	11-15 hrs	9
	16-20 hrs	3
	over 20 hrs	5
Gender	Female	22
	Male	3
	Nonbinary/Genderqueer/ Genderfluid	4
	Genderfluid Demifemale	1
	Demimale	1
Race/ Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	18
	Black/African-American	4
	Bi/Multi-racial	3
	Asian-American	3
	Latinx	2
	Native American	1
Sexual Orientation	Straight/Heterosexual	16
	Bisexual	9
	Gay	1
	Pansexual	1
	Demisexual	1
	Demi-pansexual	1
	Queer	1
	No answer	1
Parents' Educational Attainment	Either or both have a college degree	19
	Neither have college degree	12
Pell Grant Recipient	Yes	15
	No	14
	Don't know	2

American senior, talked about the positive aspects of studying in an academic building where a lot of international students gather because she stands out less, even though once past the surface, she has more in common with the "white girls" everywhere else on campus. Tameka, a black female sophomore, talked about trying to study in the newly renovated academic building for her discipline:

> I've tried to spend time in [building M] one time. I don't know, I felt out of place. But like I said, it's not a lot of black students who come here… Because at [building M], I don't know. I don't mean to focus on race as much, but as a black person you kind of go somewhere, you look around like is there more of me? Where y'all at? And then I go in there, and I'm like, "Oh, there's no black people."

Rutabaga Pie Sorority and Group Avoidance

Gatherings in study spaces of students who are perceived as representing the stereotypical fraternity life and college party culture have a negative impact on some students' experiences. Students of color, gay men, students who expressed non-conformist gender identities, and even students simply seeking a rigorous study environment reported avoiding or leaving study spaces because of the presence of students perceived to be associated with this sub-culture. Elizabeth, a biracial female sophomore studying communication sciences and disorders, said:

> I feel like the majority of people in [building G] are in nursing. That's all I see is people walking in scrubs, people doing this and that for nursing, nursing this, nursing that. It's like none of the other majors even matter. On top of that, there's no diversity within …well, there's little to no diversity within each of these majors. Especially in the [college name]. If I go into the [building A] and see a bunch of engineering and math majors, they're so diverse. You see so many different kinds

of people and I feel like they're all just …I don't know. I definitely feel out of place. I don't know how to explain it…

It's just like a bunch of people and they're all in Rutabaga Pie sorority - I don't know what they're called anymore. And they're talking about this and that and I just feel like they're all kind of involved with the same things as each other and I'm not…

I like to study in [building G] when it's empty at night so I don't feel like that weird, out of place, like, "I have to be a nursing student and I have to be in Delta Omega whatever." I don't know…

When I'm studying, when I'm focused on academics, I don't want to also feel like I'm not a part of this campus in a way…

There's this culture of partying and Thirsty Thursday and Greek life and… all these things. When you make choices to not do those things, whether it be how you were raised or your culture or just your personal preference, you kind of feel like, since this is a smaller campus and it's not urban… It's just hard to feel like this place is your home away from home when you're not part of the main culture. Do you see what I'm saying?

I don't want to continuously feel, like whether I'm studying or not, that I don't belong here.

Brock, a Mexican-American junior male studying political science started by telling me about the business building:

I've never studied in [building C], but I don't like to go to [building C] because I, just business majors to me are kind of just tools, in a sense. But I feel like if I did study in [building C], I feel like I kind of, I just think I, I feel like I'd stick out. And I'd say that's because of my skin color, and I just don't look like a business major per se. So I feel like, at least in that building, there's kind of like a presence where I wouldn't want to study, or I wouldn't want to go to.

So that's also a reason why I don't study on the second and fourth floor [of the library] because I come in contact with them [business majors] more often. And I feel like the whole vibe they give off is just more rude. I feel like they wouldn't go to the sixth floor because they're always like on their phone and they don't care. I've seen that happen on the fourth floor. So yeah, I feel like the sixth floor, first floor …yeah, I feel like it's more of a place for them, but sixth floor I've never seen a business major on.

Brock also told me about how, mostly through social experiences and campus activism, he has learned to associate fraternity life with business students.

When I'm around business majors in general, I always watch what I say, I'm hesitant on like what I express. I've got pins on my book bag. And like I'm always, I'm not worried but like I'm always thinking when I walk past [building C] or when I'm around business majors, like, "I wonder what they're saying in their head when they see this." I wonder like, yeah, I just wonder what they think. And I don't think that they would, nine times out of ten, I don't think they would really express anything that they'd dislike or disagree with what I think, but I know that there's been times that they've had, I've seen them speak their mind, which makes me very hesitant when I'm up here [in the library] on the second or fourth floor. I'm not like trying to like hide it but at the same time I'm not trying to throw it in their face. I kind of like, want to hide it, I just kind of …I don't want them

to associate me with my political views or anything like that. I just kind of want them to see me as an equal…

I do know if I see a table with kids all working on a cluster or all business majors, I'll go somewhere else. Like nothing that has specifically happened, but just kind of like what I associate with them, it's kind of like a flight thing, it's kind of like get out of there. But not like I'm in panic mode, it's just like, okay, you don't want to be here.

Here is Eliza, a white, working-class and first-generation student, speaking about a space in the library that has a reputation of being populated by students associated with Greek life:

This sounds very judgmental but I'm not going to want to sit by Sigma Kappa whoever who's on their phones talking about the kegger that they're going to. I'm going to take another lap and see if there's a table across the room because that's… I don't want to be around that. And I will do that two or three times if I have to. I avoid the third floor in general.

A number of students spoke about avoiding this particular space. Sarah, a white senior studying nutrition started by telling me about avoiding certain spaces at certain times in the library where she has encountered groups of people who are loud and talk about sexual conquests, drinking, and drugs. She added, "I feel like in a lot of group spaces that happens."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the idea of playing it safe by avoiding spaces where large numbers of students gather, even if it is to study, was reflected in most of the experiences relayed by study participants with non-conformist gender identities. In these cases, participants aren't just avoiding rude, obnoxious, or offensive behaviors and language, but they have concerns about experiencing microaggressions, being confronted, or worse. Wherever larger numbers of students gather, including the study spaces in the library, some students face an increased chance of being harassed. Walt, a gay man studying English spoke about hearing homophobic jokes in study space on the third floor of the library and about concerns regarding walking alone at night restricting his study space options. Similarly, Ash, who prefers they/them pronouns, talked about whispers and looks from groups of students when they were in the library wearing nonconformist clothing. Ash specifically mentioned that when the library gets crowded during mid-terms and finals, they will have to study somewhere else even though studying in the library might otherwise be preferable.

Peer Motivation
A couple of participants in this study from a variety of identity groups did touch on ideas related to ambient sociality and scholarly gravitas in library spaces. Sandy, a Puerto Rican senior honors student said:

So if I am feeling that I need motivation and I feel like pushing something for a long time, one of the main things that I'm looking for, one of the aspects that I emphasize when looking for a place to study is people that are working hard on something. That would motivate me. I still go alone but I want a space where I see other people just working hard too, which is why I often go to the fifth floor [in the library], which is a quiet floor but it's filled with people. I see them doing their own thing and I'm like, "Oh my god, I need to." It kind of puts some pressure on me, maybe a social pressure.

Lauren, a white, first-generation, working-class sophomore said:

I feel like this place, this library, just fosters a sense of …you just want to be focused when you're here. At least, that's how I feel. You look around, and how other people, especially if you're in a quiet

area, nobody else is talking, so you don't want to disturb other people. So, that helps you in return, by not getting yourself distracted.

However, this peer motivation sentiment isn't always tied to the library. When I asked Rain, a black sophomore about why she preferred studying around other people, she said:

Sometimes I think it is for like a motivational kind of thing. Because I think some people are like, if I see other people studying it kind of motivates me to be like okay I need to study too. Or it reminds them of why you're there. Because if you're trying to study in a room full of people, that's like playing around, it's kind of hard. But if it's like you're in a room with other people that are studying too, it's like okay you're getting stuff done.

She has been able to find this at times in the study space in her residence hall and preferred that space her first year to the library because of its convenience.

Discussion and Recommendations
Intersectionality

It is important to note that all of the participants in this study embodied some form of intersectionality. Even the students one might wish to label "privileged" typically had at least one identity that minoritizes them in particular situations. For example, Jack, a white, heterosexual male comes from a working-class background and is in college with the help of a Pell grant. Jack spoke at length about his anxiety issues related to competition when he studies around other people. Sandy, a Puerto Rican female for whom English is her second language, comes from a wealthy background. Interestingly and contrarily to some of the other students' reports about the "Greek spaces" in the library, she told me about how she wished the university would help some of her white, less academically inclined sorority sisters feel as if they have study spaces in which they belong. Sandy said they tell her that they will not go to the library to study because they fear others would judge them for not being good students.

Importance of Belonging in Study Space

The vast majority of the students used library spaces for study at some point in their careers but only a few of the participants in this study talked about the library being an important destination in and of itself. What was important and desirable about being in the library was being among others who were motivating them to succeed. Similarly, finding themselves among students who were not as intent as they were on academic work caused many students to change their behaviors and find new places to study. Additionally, some students reported finding academic sociality in study spaces outside of the library.

Students overwhelmingly expressed their belief that having a sense of belonging in their study spaces was critical to their success as student. Many of them even commented that it was more important than feeling as if they belong in class, especially the large-enrollment courses where it is difficult to connect with the instructor. Summer, an Asian-American female sophomore explained:

I feel like most of classes over freshman year and a couple this year have been really big lecture halls and I feel like in that case, no one really cares. Because there's so many people and the teacher is going on. They don't really care if you are paying attention and it's mostly up to your own initiative. Whereas studying outside [of class], it's more, I guess it's something that's expected for those classes. So feeling like you belong in one of those spaces can impact your productivity which then impacts how you do in the class as a whole.

Sandy agreed that not having a study space where she felt that she could belong would impact her academic performance:

> *If you don't have that space where you can devote time and concentration to do what you're sup-posed to be doing, because I came to [this university] to graduate, have good grades, and if I don't have a space where I can actually do what I came here to do I wouldn't feel like I belong because I would be constantly looking for a place where I can do what I was meant to do, which was graduate with good grades and with honors. Those are my goals… I think I would've otherwise transferred because I think the space affects my grades and my performance, and it would've been reflected in my grades if that sense of belonging was not there.*

Ash spoke about the relationship between having a sense of belonging in study space and having a sense of belonging to the university at large.

> *As much as college is about the social aspect, you're here to study. If you can't feel like you can belong in a place to study, it almost feels like you might not be able to belong. So if you don't feel a sense of belonging in the most basic aspects of college life then how can you expect to feel that sense of belonging in general?*

Similarly, Summer concluded:

> *I feel like, in a way, the people you're around in study spaces and the location of the study space sort of reflects the campus at large. So if you feel like you belong in a study space, it's easier to feel like you belong in campus at a whole because I guess the sense of belonging sort of carries over, even though campus is really big, if you can find a small space where you belong, it carries over. Yeah.*

There is an obvious need for academic libraries to not only create a great variety of spaces, but also to help students find the spaces, in the library and elsewhere, that work for their specific needs. Students spend signifi-cant amounts of time in these spaces and view them as critical components of their success.

It is important for academic librarians at predominantly white institutions to be cognizant of the effect of open study spaces where large groups of students gather. Their behaviors and interactions with others lead some individuals with minoritized identities to avoid those spaces due to fear, which should be unacceptable. Further-more, any large group of "less serious" students can also impact students seeking more studious environments. Offering students safe, isolated environments as well as monitoring spaces with a visible presence may be help to control large, open spaces. Perhaps even more beneficial might be for universities to invest in efforts to help individual students find the type of space they need. Efforts to encourage and even promote student exploration of study spaces on campus could be an effective way to help students find the place where they are comfortable. Asking older students to share their study space experiences with younger students could alleviate some of the anxiety new students have about acceptance in unfamiliar spaces.

Additional themes to be probed in this data include students' willingness to explore campus spaces, the role of students' academic disciplines in their study space experiences, and the relationship between campus involve-ment and the act of studying among others. Future research examining student experiences in study spaces at additional institutions would be beneficial and may shed light on whether social ambiance is unique to libraries at other institutions.

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