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PORTRAITS OF ADOLESCENTS AS THEY NAVIGATE THE  
COMPETITIVE, COLLEGE-GOING, AND AFFLUENT CULTURE

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

KATHLEEN L. GRANT

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

August 2018

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Dana Heller Levitt

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation  
PORTRAITS OF ADOLESCENTS AS THEY NAVIGATE THE  
COMPETITIVE, COLLEGE-GOING, AFFLUENT CULTURE

of

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## Abstract

### PORTRAITS OF ADOLESCENTS AS THEY NAVIGATE THE COMPETITIVE, COLLEGE-GOING, AND AFFLUENT CULTURE

by Kathleen L. Grant

A growing body of literature has documented the elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use in adolescents who live in upper-middle class communities. The competitive college preparation and admissions process is seen as a contributor to student stress. This study endeavored to gain understanding of the lived experience of adolescents in upper-middle class communities as they navigate the competitive, achievement-oriented, and college-going culture. Using Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture method, the participants' narratives illuminated the ways these students accepted, struggled with, challenged, and resisted dominant cultural messages that were transmitted to them through their experiences as they prepared for college. The analysis of the four portraits elucidated several themes to suggest that these participants experienced a loss of voice as they endeavored to conform to the standards of behavior promoted by community and the college process. Additionally, the participants narrated a clear set of values that they were encouraged to embody, values that are traditionally associated with patriarchal and capitalist cultures. The insights gained from the participants' portraits have implications for practice and future research.

*Keywords:* adolescents, upper-middle class, achievement-orientation, college preparation process, portraiture

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To the four brilliant, kind, funny, and generous young people who took part in this study, I thank you for privileging me with your stories, your thoughts, and your spirit, for which I have been truly enriched. Through this study, I hope that your voices will help readers gain insight, understanding, and appreciation of you and those like you, and that we can grow in our understanding of ways to support you on your life's journeys and help make this world better for all its children.

## Dedication

With profound love and gratitude to John V. Grant. I am forever honored to be your daughter.



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Portraits of Adolescents as They Navigate the  
Competitive, College-Going, and Affluent Culture

Chapter One: Introduction

Upon entering a high school in many upper-middle class neighborhoods across the United States, you will likely see young people who appear to have everything going for them: young, healthy, athletic, bright, and well-mannered — afforded a young lifetime’s worth of advantages that come as part of the “American Dream” and affluence. You would expect these adolescents to be happy, well-adjusted, and looking forward to an exciting and fulfilling future. However, as you begin to chip away at the perfectly crafted exterior and the strategically designed resumes full of sports, music, languages, travel, and “service,” another picture is often revealed. Beneath the surface, many of these children of privilege are acutely suffering (Levine, 2012; Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). The literature documents examples of children who have been afforded many of the advantages that come from affluence, yet are suffering from conditions that are often associated with deprivation (Luthar et al., 2013). Many are depressed, anxious, using substances, and some even contemplating suicide (Coren & Luthar, 2014; Leonard et al., 2015; Luthar et al., 2013).

Three decades’ worth of literature has documented a new “at-risk” population — adolescents in the upper-middle class (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Latendresse 2005b). Just by virtue of living in an affluent community, adolescents in these communities are at higher risk for developing a mental health disorder than their age-matched middle-class peers (Luthar et al., 2013). They also are at high risk for

developing a substance use disorder that manifests into addiction by adulthood, at 2-3 times the rates seen in national norms (Luthar, Small, & Cicolla, 2017). Research suggests that there are factors inherent to living in an affluent, high-pressure, and achievement-oriented culture that make it ripe for the development of mental health disorders in adolescents (Cicolla et al., 2017; Luthar et al., 2013). The pressure and stress on these adolescents is most acute when these students are preparing for and applying to college (Leonard et al., 2015).

The college preparation and application process pushes the American myth of meritocracy to its logical, but often incorrect, conclusion. If in a meritocracy you are rewarded for working hard, then by working the hardest you should get the best and greatest reward, meaning getting into the “best” college. Adolescents in the upper-middle class are often pushed, by well-meaning parents, teachers, coaches, and community members, to extremes in order to achieve high grades, excellent standardized test scores, and athletic perfection (Cicolla et al., 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015). They may forgo a normal adolescence as they pursue the narrow goals that will help them get into an elite college (Spencer, 2017). As they increasingly focus on things that they are told will give them the greatest advantage in the college admissions process (numerous, intense AP classes; SAT/ACT prep classes; extra athletic coaching and lessons), their energy and focus is diverted away from activities that could help adolescents explore what gives their lives unique meaning and purpose, which are important predictors of well-being in adolescence and adulthood, in part because they help provide an authentic framework for



living a fulfilling, satisfying, happy, connected, and altruistic life (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016).

This flawed logic of a meritocracy in college admissions produces many negative outcomes for youth as they push themselves to extremes. The literature documents consequences of the pressure upper-middle class youth face, such as exhaustion, stress, maladaptive perfectionism, and maladaptive coping behaviors, all of which put them at greater risk for developing mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). These negative outcomes are more likely to occur when the purpose of such intense efforts is externally oriented: when the purpose of getting into an elite college is to gain status, wealth, or approval of others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Youth who are intrinsically motivated, where behavior is self-directed, authentically chosen, and inherently satisfying, fare much better in terms of well-being and mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In addition to the negative effects on individual students' well-being, the competitive college preparation process has a number of undesirable social impacts. The upper-middle class typically transmits values systems that prioritize achievement, individualism, and competition (Luthar & Barkin, 2013). Being "driven" and "smart" are admirable, as are working hard to gain wealth and status (Luthar & Barkin, 2013). The development of these traits in and of themselves is not bad, but when the emphasis on these traits is so strong and the rewards are so great, it can come at the expense of developing a civic virtue. Civic virtue is the belief that one has a moral obligation to

move beyond one's self to help others and society as a whole (Malin et al., 2017). As some of the earliest and fundamental texts of American education stated, civic virtue is a crucial trait that our schools imbue in students, as it is necessary for schools to create citizens who are concerned with the common good (Labaree, 1997; Rousseau, 1889). Without civic virtue, these scholars predicted, the corrosive and selfish forces of capitalism will take over and make our democracy much less viable (Labaree, 1997).

Moreover, the focus on gaining admission into a "top" college perpetuates a myth that college admissions is largely driven by "merit." When upper-middle class adults and adolescents fail to recognize the inequity of the system, their actions often serve to maintain the status quo, or systems of privilege and inequity. Adolescents may also develop in a system where they cannot see how their unearned advantages contribute to their success, and may see their success as simply an outcome of their own effort and merit (Putnam, 2015). They may also fail to see how others, at varying locations in the socioeconomic spectrum, also have great merit (Putman, 2015). When the status quo is not questioned and the advantages openly acknowledged and discussed, the status quo is maintained and individuals are less likely to question and disrupt enduring systems of privilege and oppression.

The upper-middle class culture's focus on college admissions adversely impacts individual students, reduces civic virtue in American society, and contributes to inequalities in educational opportunities among socioeconomic groups. This process is largely informed by the upper-middle class definition of success, especially when this definition is applied to adolescents.

### **“Success” in the Upper-Middle Class**

In upper-middle class communities, major signs of success include economic prosperity and social status (Luthar et al., 2013). Adolescents are often expected to strive to attain at least the same, if not greater, economic and social standing as their parents. Economic success is seen as necessary for both survival and happiness (Luthar et al., 2013). In addition, status is generally prized; one of the ultimate status symbols in this community is attendance at an Ivy League college. The road to success as an adult is seen to begin with acceptance into a competitive college or university (Levine, 2012). Therefore, there is a push throughout childhood, but especially in high school, for youth to achieve in a way that will give them the best chance for admission at the most selective colleges and universities. Generally this translates to high grades in honors and Advanced Placement classes, stellar standardized test scores, and participation in a bevy of extracurricular activities at a very high, bordering on professional, level.

While the drive to achieve in itself is not negative, the pressure and competition that this process engenders in upper-middle class communities can be quite difficult for adolescents to navigate (Levine, 2012). Young people describe a crushing pressure to succeed, as so much appears to be at stake. It also can pit students against one another, as each student is vying for the highest GPA and to attain other hierarchical indicators of success (captain of a sports team, drum major in the band). As students are striving for the external markers of success, like the highest final grade possible, the process of learning, along with the intrinsic enjoyment that can accompany it, is often lost.

The voices of these students paint a compelling picture of the suffering they endure as a result of the pressure they face. Carolyn Walworth was a junior at a competitive high school when she wrote a piece for her local newspaper about her experiences:

I could go on in detail about the times I've had to go to urgent care because my stress and ensuing physical pain have been so concerning. I could tell you how I've missed periods because I've had so many tests to study for. I could express what it feels like to have a panic attack in the middle of a thirty person class and be forced to remain still (Walworth, 2015, para. 11).

There are many factors that contribute to the suffering that these students face. But one common thread is demonstrated in the literature: Upper-middle class culture strongly emphasizes achievement with the end goal of admission to a selective college (Levine, 2006; Luthar et al., 2013). This achievement-focused culture often places developmentally inappropriate levels of pressure on students and contributes to a host of negative outcomes at the individual level (Ciciolla et al., 2017).

Students suffer not only due to the pressure associated with striving to achieve in a way that will help them get into college but also as a result of the experiences they lose as they pursue this singular goal of college admission. Their time and attention is diverted away from the traditional tasks of adolescence: figuring out who they are and who they want to be in relation to the world around them (Erikson, 1980). Identity formation is largely tied to the exploration and discovery of meaning and purpose in life, things they

may not have the time to pursue as they chase their culture's definition of success (Burrow & Hill, 2011).

But not every upper-middle class adolescent who attends a competitive high school is suffering. There are students who feel positive emotions as a result of striving for academic success, such as a pride or satisfaction in their work. They may benefit from the high expectations of their parents and teachers and the opportunities afforded to them, such as travel or greater resources to spend on activities such as sports (Pappano, 2007). Some adolescents are able to internalize the positive messages and aspects of their social class while disputing, challenging, or discarding any values that they deem harmful or personally incongruent to their beliefs.

### **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important factors that can contribute to how an activity is experienced by the adolescent. When behavior stems from an authentic or self-authored place, it is intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation in adolescents is associated with a host of positive outcomes — youth who are interested, excited, and confident when pursuing a task which in turn can lead to enhanced performance, persistence, vitality, self-esteem and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is when a behavior is motivated by something outside of the self, a behavior motivated by an external reward such as getting a good grade, winning a game, or getting accepted at a prestigious university (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The pursuit of wealth, image, and status are common external goals. For example, a student who wants to get good grades to make his parents proud would be extrinsically

motivated. Intrinsic motivation is associated with a mastery academic orientation, where students are motivated to develop competence, to improve and to deepen their understanding (O’Keefe, Ben-Eliyahu, & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

For some adolescents, problems can stem from the strong emphasis the culture places on the extrinsic rewards, sometimes at the sake of a greater internal focus (Lyman & Luthar, 2014). Highly competitive high schools may offer students clear “scripts” for success (number of AP classes to take, what are worthy summer activities, what sports one should participate in, when to start SAT tutoring), “scripts” that are crafted with the college admissions criteria in mind, which may provide fewer opportunities for behavior to be authentic or self-authored and limit the amount of time the adolescent has to spend on authentically interesting activity (Spencer, 2017; Walworth, 2015). Most notably, adolescents embedded in the achievement-oriented culture may not be able to explore and discover what will give their lives meaning and purpose, factors that are crucial to well-being in adolescence and adulthood (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011).

### **Meaning and Purpose**

Meaning and purpose are vitally important factors that contribute to well-being, physical health, and longevity in adolescents and adults (Brassai et al., 2015; Brassai et al., 2011; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Hill et al., 2016). There is considerable overlap in the literature regarding the terms meaning and purpose; below I will provide two distinct definitions.

Meaning is the broader of the two concepts; it is the cognitive and emotional determination of the significance of one’s life and all of the components of that life, and

how one fits into the greater world (Negru-Subtirica, 2016). Viktor Frankl, one of the founding existential psychotherapists, posited that the *will to meaning*, the drive to discover and explore the deeply personal factors that make life meaningful, is the primary motivational force for humankind and vital for mental health and wellness (Frankl, 2006). Meaning in life is associated with a range of positive outcomes in adolescents including increased well-being (Brassai et al., 2011), greater health-promoting activities (such as physical activity and healthy eating; Brassai et al., 2015), and positive identity formation (Cote, 2005).

Purpose is the way that one fulfills their meaning. Purpose has been described as the “long-term, forward looking intention to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Malin et al., 2017, p. 1201). Purpose provides the course for life’s tumultuous journey; meaning is the personal significance of one’s life in the greater scope of existence.

There are a host of benefits for exploring meaning and purpose during adolescence, such as increased well-being, greater physical health, and better mental health outcomes (Brassai et al., 2011; Malin et al., 2017; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Exploration of meaning and purpose are believed to be critical in the identity development process, which is largely viewed as a major developmental task of this life stage (Marcia, 1993). Upper-middle class youth may be systematically diverted away from exploring and discovering things that will give them meaning and purpose in life, toward the singular focus activities that will give the adolescent advantage in the college admissions process. For example, in the upper-middle class culture activities and

achievements are generally judged according to their perceived worth to college admissions counselors (Weissbourd, 2011). Instead of exploring their world and experiencing the joys and challenges of adolescence in a developmentally appropriate manner, students in the upper-middle class are taught to make inauthentic choices based on what is deemed valuable by college admissions criteria (Deresiewicz, 2014; Levine, 2012; Pappano, 2017). For example, a student who loves learning languages may forgo taking French III in favor of taking AP Macroeconomics, even if the student has no interest in economics, in order to get the AP credit, which is very valuable on a college application. The adolescent's journey to explore meaning and purpose is stunted when they make decisions based on the external reward versus the intrinsic value. The popular media and academic literature are peppered with examples of upper-middle class adolescents and young adults struggling: adrift, aimless, reliant on adult guidance, suffering from high rates of anxiety and depression, and drinking at extremely high rates (Levine, 2012; Luthar et al., 2013). While the root causes of each of these issues are complex, the literature points purposelessness and lack of meaning-in-life as important factors that contribute to the suffering these young people experience (Hill, Burrow, & Summer, 2013; Malin et al., 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The current cultural climate found in many upper-middle class communities may be problematic for the developing adolescent. A strong achievement orientation, with a competitive, individualistic, and external focus, may lead to poor mental health outcomes and may thwart the adolescent from focusing on the important developmental tasks of



this life stage, including searching for meaning and purpose in life (Levine, 2012; Luthar et al., 2013). The college preparation and admissions process plays a powerful role in creating and maintaining the problematic cultural context. College admissions criteria can signal what are perceived as the “most valuable” traits in adolescents (Making Caring Common Project, 2016). Adolescents and their families often feverishly pursue these items at the sake of all else (Brown, 2016), including diverting time and attention away from the adolescent exploring and finding authentic meaning and purpose, leaving these students without this fundamental protective factor as they enter adulthood (Negru-Subtirica, 2016; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Students and families feel extreme pressure to succeed in college admissions as entry into a “good” college is often believed to be crucial for success in adulthood (Luthar et al., 2013).

Until recently, many believed that wealth largely protected children and adolescents from mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Luthar et al., 2013). However, a growing body of research is disputing this long-held assumption and even suggesting that children of affluence suffer from mental health conditions at the same rate, if not higher, than children and adolescents in poverty, and suffer at much higher rates than national norms (Cicolla et al., 2016; Coren & Luthar, 2014). For example, Coren and Luthar (2014) found boys from affluent communities reported anxiety and depression at rates of more than 5 times the national average. Lyman and Luthar (2014) found inner-city students were much less likely to use substances as compared to affluent youth, and as affluent youth become adults, they are at great risk for developing a substance abuse disorder, with rates of addiction at age 26

2-3 times that of national norms (Luthar et al., 2017). They also found that affluent girls expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies, at a rate more than three standardized deviations above that of inner-city girls or affluent boys.

As this population suffers from mental health conditions at significantly greater rates than the national norms, they are labeled an “at-risk” population, worthy of additional study to better understand the risk and protective factors (Luthar et al., 2013). The literature is providing some insight into the pathways that lead to adverse outcomes and is increasingly linking a strong achievement orientation and particular parenting practices to mental health issues in children and adolescents of affluence (Luthar et al., 2013).

The problematic cultural context may create challenges for the individual but it also creates unfairness and inequity in the system as a whole. When the families in the top-income distributions pour all of their resources—time, money, advanced knowledge about what is valuable in the college admissions process, social connections, legacy status at colleges—into the process of raising their children in a way to make them most successful in the college admissions process, huge inequity will ensue (Deresiewicz, 2014; Lareau, 2015). This process makes it harder for those born in lower social classes to ever truly advance. Finally, the extreme self-focus leaves little room to instill a true civic virtue in students: a moral responsibility to be of service to one’s fellow man, community, and society as a whole (Labaree, 1997).

### **Research Question**

The literature provides strong evidence that adolescence is a crucial time to explore and discover one's meaning and purpose. However, many youth who develop in an achievement-oriented cultural context may be systematically diverted from activities that would allow for this type of exploration. Therefore, the research question guiding this study was: How do adolescents in the upper-middle class navigate a competitive, high-pressure, college-going culture? The secondary question asked: Does cultivating a sense of purpose come into play in their navigation? If so, how?

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of how upper-middle class adolescents who attend competitive high schools pursue a sense of purpose in their lives as they engage with the college preparation and admissions process, or if they do not, why not. While studies have been conducted exploring youth purpose, none have specifically focused on how youth find purpose while engaging with the college preparation and admissions process. The researcher sought to better understand if students who are part of the competitive, individualistic, college-going culture are engaging in the existential work of discovering their purpose in life and, if so, how they are doing so.

Through this research, I studied students as they navigated strong cultural forces in their journey exploring and creating purpose in their lives. I endeavored to make visible the complexities of the students' experience. I specifically focused on how students question, challenge, conform to, or disrupt powerful cultural messages during

the college preparation and admissions process and how this impacts meaning and purpose exploration. I also paid particular attention to if/how this culture impacts the development of civic virtue in the participants.

Through this study, I gained understanding of the whole child in the context of this particular cultural phenomenon and strived to make visible the choices that students made, with their corresponding costs and benefits. The individuals were studied within their unique ecosystem, paying particular attention to the messages the students received from their parents, peers, teachers, and members of the larger community.

Finally, in this study I maintained that the college preparation and admissions process, taken as a whole, is a cultural process that has far-reaching effects well beyond the individual student or family. How the upper-middle class engages with this process impacts inequity, and I endeavored to make examples of this visible through the participants' narratives. Through this study, I gained an understanding of how the upper-middle class activates their resources via the college preparation and admissions process in a way that can impact society as a whole.

### **Significance of Study**

While many upper-middle class adolescents are suffering as a result of the problematic cultural context (Brown, 2016; Coren & Luthar, 2014; Luthar et al., 2013), their voices and experiences are largely missing from the scholarly literature. Several quantitative studies have been conducted that have begun to piece together the complex factors associated with this cultural phenomenon, but the consensus in the literature is that more qualitative study is needed (Luthar et al., 2013). This study will provide voice

to the students who often are rendered invisible (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005a) and call attention to their unique challenges. This study brings student voices to the center of the work and allows a forum for their experiences and interpretation of their culture.

Although the higher education community is beginning to call for change as it acknowledges the adverse outcomes the college preparation and admissions process can have on students, families, and society as a whole (Making Caring Common Project, 2016), the counseling literature—and school counseling literature in particular—is markedly silent on this issue. As school counselors may be instrumental in maintaining or disrupting school cultures, especially in the college preparation and application process (American School Counselor Association, 2012), it is imperative that the field be better informed about the problematic cultural context and the effects it has on students, families, and society as a whole. School counselors and mental health counselors must be informed about this issue in order to better support the children, adolescents, families, and communities we serve. We need to have a better understanding of the mental health issues we are seeing in students in this population and the complex factors that contribute to adverse outcomes. I brought to this study a school counseling background and training; therefore, the study was framed and analyzed from a counselor's perspective. This can help bring valuable and necessary information to the counseling field in school, community, and higher education settings.

Additionally, the role of adolescents discovering and exploring purpose is not generally explicitly discussed in schools and families. However, having a purpose is associated with adolescent thriving and positive contributions to one's community

(Burrow & Hill, 2011; Malin et al., 2017). School counselors, as system change agents, can help inform individuals, schools, and communities about the role of purpose in the lives of adolescents and create opportunities for exploration in curriculum, extracurricular activities, and overall school culture. From an individual counseling perspective, it is important that school counselors understand how purpose impacts adolescent functioning, as a purposelessness can contribute to poor functioning and having a purpose is associated with vitality. This study will provide much needed insights into the role of purpose in the lives of students and help inform counseling practice.

Finally, counselors who work with clients across the lifespan can benefit from increased knowledge about the role of purpose in one's life. When purpose is not discovered in adolescence, clients may present as "adrift" until a meaningful life purpose is found. This study will provide counselors additional information about youth purpose that can help practitioners in their work with clients in identifying purpose and meaning in life.

### **Positionality**

As a qualitative researcher, my own identity and worldview have shaped this research project. It was an ongoing task in the research process to reflect on and make visible my potential biases, limitations, and constraints due to my personal worldview and life experiences. My lens was influenced by my previous work as a school counselor, as a member of the upper-middle class, and as a parent.

I have previously worked as a school counselor with members of the population I met in this study. Many of my students were suffering from mental health conditions that

seemed to be associated with the competitive culture of the middle to upper-middle class high school in which I worked. Some of my students seemed to have internalized the cultural messages they had received about success and were willing to forgo the typical tasks of adolescence in order to obtain and achieve their goals. I saw an inequity among the students with whom I worked: the upper- and middle-class students had many advantages, and their parents activated their social and economic capital in ways to help their children succeed. However, this often left behind students at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. As an emerging counselor educator, I feel compelled to better understand this complex phenomenon in order to better educate my future students. I seek to better understand the complexities behind how schools serve to maintain or disrupt inequity, in order to help future students grow as change agents by identifying inequity and being equipped with specific strategies to engender change.

I consider myself to be a member of the population that I seek to study, as I am in the upper-middle class and a parent. I have many personal experiences, observations, and reflections of the class as a whole and parenting practices. These positions helped guide the inductive process of qualitative research but were also made transparent through my researcher's journal to ensure that my biases were clearly identified in my work. I shared my biases and background with my critical friends and committee members, who reviewed the data and analysis and helped shine a light on any unexamined biases, which I then interrogated as they applied to the study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework provides underlying structure through which the researcher frames her study (Merriam, 2009). My framework is largely based on existentialism, particularly the work of Victor Frankl and Irvin Yalom. Frankl's theory states that the primary drive in life is towards meaning. This drive helps people move towards actualizing their full humanity. Frankl (2006) describes three main ways one finds meaning in the world (a) "creating a work or doing a deed;" (b) experiencing something like "goodness, beauty, truth, nature, culture" or "experiencing someone in their own uniqueness and loving them;" and (c) "by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering" (p. 111).

A major tenet of existential philosophy is that our culture often has a negative, dehumanizing effect on individuals. For a number of reasons, people choose to numb their awareness of life through "apathy, psychic numbing, or hedonism" (May, 1983, p. 9). As an existential counselor, my role was often to walk with clients on the path towards discovering and creating their full humanity, a process which forces people to take responsibility for shaping their existence. This process itself can be stressful because it is often easier to relinquish responsibility and allow the culture or someone else to choose for us.

Finally, existentialists largely ascribe to the idea of self-transcendence. The idea is that, by focusing only on the self, meaning is lost. They believe that we desire to transcend our own interests and "strive towards something or someone outside or "above" oneself" (Yalom, 1980, p. 439). Yalom quotes Martin Buber's words about how



one goes about finding meaning in life: “Human beings should begin with themselves (by searching their own hearts, integrating themselves, and finding their particular meaning), [but] they should not end with themselves” (Yalom, 1980, p. 439). This quote seems pertinent to adolescents: they should begin with themselves, but also be taught how not to end with themselves.

While working as a school counselor in a competitive, achievement-oriented college-going culture, I noticed how there often had to be a “point” to the activities that students pursued. Students did not often pursue activities out of interest or enjoyment; it usually was to advance their standing or improve their college resume. This orientation stands in contrast to an existential orientation that views life as a mystery to be lived, and that finds meaning in internal and interconnected ways such as altruism, relationships, creativity, and culture. The existential framework provided guidance in terms of the questions that I asked of the participants and the lens through which I analyzed the data.

### **Chapter Summary and Dissertation Organization**

Adolescence is a time where students explore who they are and the world around them, develop ideas about who they want to be, and explore what they want their lives to stand for (Erikson, 1980). The competitive college-going culture, inherent to many affluent communities, may thwart this process and direct students and their families towards inauthentic ways of being and relating. Additionally, adolescents of affluence are at-risk for a host of negative mental health outcomes, which may also negatively influence the adolescent’s ability to navigate normal developmental tasks (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). Finally, the problematic cultural context

may have negative consequences not only for individuals but for society as a whole, as it can perpetuate inequity and inhibit the development of a civic virtue in youth. In an effort for school counselors, mental health counselors, and educators to better meet the needs of the youth and families that we serve, a deeper understanding of the experiences of this at-risk population in the competitive college-going culture is needed.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. In this chapter, I have introduced a cultural context, prevalent in many middle- and upper-middle class communities, which can present challenges for the developing adolescent, especially in terms of navigating the important developmental task of exploring purpose. I also briefly discussed how the college preparation and admissions process can be harmful to the individual student and society as a whole. In Chapter Two, I review the college preparation and admission process and explore the effects it can have on developing adolescents and society as a whole. I also review the literature on youth purpose, highlighting the process by which adolescents explore, create, and discover purpose in their lives and the benefits of having a purpose. Chapter Three will provide a comprehensive review of the qualitative methodological approach I used to collect and analyze the data. In Chapter Four, the findings of the study are presented through four individual portraits. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the results of the study, along with the implications for practice, limitations, and areas for future research.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Achievement orientation* - is characterized by a strong focus on academic and/or career success. Individuals, families, or communities with an achievement orientation are motivated by external rewards such as good grades, acceptance into top universities, and financial success (Cicolla et al., 2017).

*Adolescence* - a period of significant physical, cognitive, and emotional growth.

Adolescence generally takes place from age 13 -19 and is considered the transition between childhood and adulthood (Newman & Newman, 2006).

*Civic virtue* - the moral obligation for an individual to contribute to the betterment of society as a whole. Early economic and educational scholars believed that schools must help foster a civic virtue in their students to combat the inherent selfishness of capitalism (Rousseau, 1889; Labaree, 1997).

*College preparation process* - the wide range of activities and choices a student makes in order to prepare to apply to college or to gain competitive advantage in the college admission's process. These activities generally begin in high school; however, may begin much younger in some communities. Examples of college preparation that takes place in high school are: high school course selection, standardized testing, and participation in extracurricular activities (National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2008).

*College admissions process* - the act of completing college applications and supporting documents. Process may require additional activities such as an interview, audition, or

preparation of a portfolio. Generally the process takes place in the fall of a student's senior year but it may begin earlier or later, depending on the student and the colleges/university requirements (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008).

*Meaning* - is the cognitive and emotional determination of the significance of one's life and all of the components of that life, and how one fits into the greater world (Negru-Subtricia, 2016).

*Purpose* - having a "stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (Malin et al., 2017, p. 1201).

*School counselor* - "certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling and are uniquely qualified to address the developmental needs of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program addressing the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students" (American School Counselor Association, n.d., 7/23/2017).

*Upper-middle class* - second-highest social class after the top 1%. Upper-middle-class makes up approximately 15% of the population. The upper-middle class is comprised of professionals and upper-managers, almost all of whom have attended college and frequently have post-graduate degrees. This class highly values education (Gilbert, 2015).

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In these days of assumed meritocracy, where children can be turned into anything, we admire them as displays of remarkable engineering, to be tweaked and fine-tuned into bilingual perfection. What we've lost, perhaps, is a sense that there may be things about them we can't know or understand, and that that mysterious quality, separate from us, is what we should marvel at (Rosin, 2015, para. 67).

The academic literature has begun to draw attention to a problematic cultural phenomenon occurring in affluent communities across the United States. While some adolescents are thriving in affluent communities, others are struggling. Recent research has documented that adolescents in affluent communities suffer from certain mental health conditions at rates significantly higher than national norms (Cicolla et al., 2017; Luthar et al., 2013). Several studies have documented upper-middle class youth suffering from mental health conditions at greater rates than adolescents from low-income families (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005a; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). This may seem counter-intuitive to many: how can adolescents of privilege, who have so many advantages, suffer at such high rates from mental health issues? Affluent adolescents have some of the highest rates of depression, substance use, anxiety disorders, and somatic complaints as any group of youth in the country (Levine, 2006). When a population is seen to significantly deviate from the norms, it is labeled an "at-risk" population, worthy of additional study to understand the factors that contribute to adverse outcomes in youth (Luthar & Barkin, 2012). A growing body of literature has begun to describe a cultural context that is common in upper-middle-class communities—which I will use the term "achievement

orientation” to define—and is now considered to contribute to the suboptimal outcomes adolescents are experiencing.

Adolescence is a rapid time of physical, cognitive, and emotional transformation (American Psychological Association, 2009). From a social-emotional standpoint, many of the changes that are occurring within the adolescent are helping the individual explore and discover their identity — an identity that will be protective in adulthood as it gives life a purpose and a direction. A greater discussion on adolescence as a life stage occurs later in this chapter; to begin this chapter I will explore a certain cultural climate in which this project will be situated.

### **Achievement Orientation**

Adolescents in affluent communities are expected to excel in many domains in their lives. They are often expected to achieve excellent grades in challenging classes, earn stellar standardized test scores, and participate in numerous extracurricular activities such as sports, music, and community service. While high parental expectations are generally correlated with positive academic outcomes in youth (Fan & Chen, 2001), many adolescents of affluence experience a pressure to succeed that goes well beyond what is considered by mental health professionals to be developmentally appropriate (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015). The high stress that these students experience is problematic for two main reasons. First, chronic stress is associated with poor functioning and can cause or contribute to mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Leonard et al., 2015). Second, the pressure to succeed is so great that students forgo the other important tasks of

adolescence, such as developing and refining an identity through exploration and experimentation; cultivating and nurturing close friendships; and learning to manage new and complex emotions, stressors, and conflicts (American Psychological Association, 2002; Levine, 2012). They may also develop a strong focus on external development at the cost of stunting internal growth, which can cause them to fail to develop coping mechanisms, an understanding of sense of self, and direction, purpose, and structure (Coren & Luthar, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Adolescents may find it particularly challenging to do the hard work of adolescence when they are living in such states of deprivation, due to the excessive cultural demands of academic and athletic excellence. In this section, I will provide several characteristics that may help define the achievement-oriented culture in order to provide greater context to the experiences of these youth. These characteristics include a “push towards perfection” when youth sacrifice wellness, especially lack of sleep, rushed meals, de-prioritizing of friendships, in order to meet the high expectations of their culture.

### **“Push for Perfection”**

The literature and popular media describe a push for perfection in multiple domains in adolescents’ lives. For example, athletic participation is not for the purpose of fun and relaxation, but often to become “the best”— the best on the team, in the school, in the conference, or in the state, generally with the hopes of impressing college admission officials (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Pappano, 2007). This can often create large demands on adolescents’ time, when practices may occur before school, after school, on weekends, and on summer vacations. While the adolescents may succeed at becoming

mini-professional athletes, they may have their social-emotional growth impacted. They often spend large portions of their childhoods in adult-driven activities, where everything is prescribed, and all they have to do is listen and follow an adult's directions (Fagan, 2017). This may lead to little time for adolescents to learn other crucially important life skills, skills that are generally learned during adolescence (Cote, 2005) such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills, empathy, and coping skills. Also, adolescents may not have sufficient time to cultivate their inner worlds, specifically developing a deeper understanding of self. A counselor who works with affluent adolescents describes the achievement/status driven culture that she observes and how it affects her clients:

My clients have spent their adolescences putting their healthy development on hold, coached and managed by parents who are so fearful and anxious about helping their children succeed that there is simply no room for their children, my clients, to begin to know themselves. When they arrive at college, the wheels come off. They are so hard on themselves, and as out of touch with what they really care about—discovering their true interests is a foreign concept. There is such a push for perfection that normal life skills are not in place. Substance abuse and other methods of self-medicating are rampant (Fagan, 2017, p. 111-112).

This push for perfection may be especially acute for girls in this population. Girls are often expected to achieve to the same high standards academically and athletically as boys, but they must also meet the culture's standards of perfection in terms of femininity: thin, beautiful, kind, in control of her emotions, polite, and self-sacrificing. These often unattainable standards may contribute to the high levels of anxiety and depression



documented in affluent girls, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Social media may contribute to the illusion of perfectionism in the upper-middle class culture. Adolescents and parents alike share highly edited, beautiful versions of their lives with their friends and their communities. Adolescents especially, with the lack of life experience and depth of awareness, may falsely believe that the images their friends present on social media are an accurate depiction of their lives and then feel like their own lives are lacking (Fagan, 2017). It may also further contribute to a performance orientation in affluent adolescents. Adolescents may focus on the photo, the Instagram image of the event over the event itself, perhaps leading to a shallower and more superficial experience in the moment itself. Social media may reward the adolescent by adopting a certain online image, and in this process, dissuading them from authentic connection with others and exploring activities in a deep and meaningful way, but not as easily sharable on social media. The quality of connection with others and the extent to which one can explore meaningful activity are both predictors of better mental health outcomes in youth.

### **Lack of Self-Care**

The literature and popular media document the lack of basic self-care of many adolescents from affluent communities (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Walworth, 2015). Due to the extreme amounts of time these adolescents must dedicate to academics and extracurricular activities, many high-achieving adolescents of privilege chronically sacrifice basic wellness such as getting enough sleep and eating nutritious

food (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). It is not uncommon for these youth to regularly get 5-6 hours of sleep a night, when developmentally they should be getting 8-10 hours per night (Hirshkowitz et al., 2015). Lack of sleep negatively impacts functioning and mental health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], National Institutes of Health [NIH], National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [NHLBI], 2011). The literature also indicates that affluent adolescents rarely take the time to simply eat meals (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). These adolescents multi-task and often eat meals on the go, or while doing something else such as studying (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Spencer, 2017). The quote below provides a common example found in the literature and popular media of a high-achieving adolescent in the upper-middle class:

For a chunk of her high school career, Emily was one of those who “isolated for academics,” working into the early morning hours on homework and waking up, sometimes before dawn, after only five or so hours of sleep. She skipped birthday parties and lunch to squeeze in more studying. “I was never doing anything for pure fun,” she said. “I put my head down and I was always running somewhere with some purpose” (Spencer, 2017, para. 56).

This quote also highlights how adolescents in high achievement communities may choose not to dedicate time to cultivating friendships in order to focus more on academics.

Friendships are vitally important in adolescence because they assist the process of individualization, the beginning of separation from family of origin, and development of a unique identity (American Psychological Association, 2002). Friendships also provide a context for adolescents to discover who they are, through observing similarities and

differences among friends. They generally provide a safe place for developmental work to be done. Friendships help inoculate all people from depression and without them adolescents are likely to experience feelings of isolation and loneliness. However, some adolescents in these communities may feel like friendships are superfluous, or at least not as important as achieving academically. Adolescents in the high-achieving, upper-middle class may miss opportunities for connection in friendships and also in their families.

### **Role of Families in Achievement-Oriented Culture**

Historically, families and communities have served as buffers of stress for adolescents (Shanker, 2016). However, in many affluent communities, family and community can exacerbate the stress felt by youth (Shanker, 2016). In the family context, many parents place a large amount of pressure on their children to succeed in ways demanded by the culture, such as high pressure to achieve good grades. Parents may feel there is so much at stake in the ever-changing global marketplace that the path to financial security as adults begins with entrance into a competitive college or university (Weis & Fine, 2012). Therefore, parents encourage performance in areas that will give their children the best chances of achieving that goal, such as a strong emphasis on achieving good grades, and excelling at extracurricular activities and sports. Parents may invest resources in tutoring, “enriching” summer activities, and extra sports coaching. Children and adolescents may begin to believe that what they can do, their performance, is more important than who they are. In a study by Weissbourd (2011), adolescent participants indicated that they believed “getting into a good college” was more important to their parents than “being a good person.” While parental support and engagement is

moderately predictive of positive academic outcome (Fan & Chen, 2001), excessive pressure, criticism, and parental conditional regard (which I describe below) may lead to adverse adolescent outcomes and jeopardize the strength of the parent-child relationship.

Unconditional positive regard is a cornerstone of healthy relationships in families (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). This is centered on the premise that love is based on an intrinsic worth and acceptance of the person, no matter what the person says or does. In this context, a parent may be displeased with a behavior, but not the child as a person. Parents who practice autonomy, supporting unconditional positive regard, generally try to understand behavior or emotions from the adolescent's perspective, take genuine interest in it, and use that as a basis for problem solving (Assor et al., 2004). This type of parenting is seen to foster autonomy and self-understanding in the adolescent and is seen to support and strengthen the relationship between parent and adolescent (Roth & Assor, 2012).

Conversely, parental conditional regard is a parenting process utilized by many well-meaning parents in the upper-middle class, but has recently been associated with negative outcomes in youth such as poorer psychological functioning and lower self-esteem (Roth et al., 2009). Parental conditional regard is when a parent provides more love and attention when the adolescent behaves in the desired way and less when the child does not (Roth et al., 2009). Parents may withdraw love and affection not only when an adolescent exhibits less desirable behaviors, such as low grades or poor athletic performance, but also when the adolescent exhibits less desirable emotions, such as anger or sadness (Assor et al., 2004). This parenting practice may lead to introjected regulation,

when the adolescent behaves in ways in order to maintain self-esteem or to avoid anxiety or guilt, such as an adolescent getting a good grade to make their parents proud (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected behaviors are generally not fully accepted as part of the self; they are not authentically and freely chosen.

Autonomy-supporting parenting practices are ideal but require resources on the part of the parent—sufficient time, patience, and psychological well-being must be in place for the parent to engage in deep perspective taking of their adolescent and work with the adolescent to resolve issues and progress through this developmental stage. However, all too often in affluent families, the parents may not have these resources in order to support their children through adolescent developmental tasks (Levin, 2012; Luthar et al., 2013). Research is beginning to document some of the ways that some affluent families are struggling.

While affluent families may seem well-functioning, the internal workings of family may be a bit different. As Marino (2008) writes about the upper-middle class culture: “[they are] working harder than ever just to maintain their socioeconomic status, the affluent, despite all the accouterments of the good life, live in a state of near-chronic stress” (p. 28). This near-chronic stress can affect all members of the family.

Most traditional affluent families consist of a bread-winning or co-breadwinning father (Glynn, 2016), whose job often places great demands on the individual (Weissbourd, 2009). Affluent fathers often have high-pressure jobs, which can create a great deal of stress for the man to navigate. It can require a great deal of time away from his family, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and also prohibits the

development of other activities that would promote wellness, such as friendships, spiritual pursuits, athletic activities, and artistic endeavors (Luthar et al., 2013). The father's sense of worth may be tied to success at work and economic success, so taking a lower-stress, lower-pay job may not be an option. Additionally, most affluent families take for granted that their children will all attend elite, private, and expensive 4-year colleges (Luthar et al., 2013). For example, Middlebury College, one of the most expensive private colleges in the United States, cost an estimated \$69,464 per year for the 2017-2018 academic year. At this rate, one private, undergraduate education would cost \$277,856. Affluent fathers often feel an obligation to pay for an undergraduate education for each of their children; therefore, they may feel like they must strive to maximize their earning potential (Luthar et al., 2013). Mothers who are also breadwinners or co-breadwinners may experience these stressors as well. They may also experience unique stressors.

There are a variety of paths that affluent women take when it comes to paid work. Some women are the breadwinners or co-breadwinners, others engage in part-time employment, while others do not engage in paid work. Some women take a "time-out" period from their careers for a portion of their children's lives, stepping out of the labor force when the parenting demands are particularly acute, and stepping back in when the demands have lessened. While the employment structure of affluent women varies greatly, the cultural demands of these women remain fairly constant, as Luthar et al. (2013) describe:

Within a hyper-achieving, competitive, and materialistic subculture, it requires enormous fortitude to be a “good enough mother,” serving as a steadfast ethical and moral compass (in a winner-takes-all milieu); deflecting each child’s high stress levels; maintaining consistent affection and nurturance for all, and providing firm but reasonable limit setting (amid rampant substance use and rule breaking among community peers). All this must be accomplished while proficiently coordinating multiple busy schedules (p. 1534).

Luthar et al. (2013) go on to describe how all of this is done in the “soul-draining” context of effortless perfection for women in the upper-middle class culture. The culture demands that women must also strive to be thin, beautiful, smart, accommodating, nurturing, and “the equal to any man and yet appealing to men” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1533).

As with fathers, when so much of the family’s resources (time, money, and energy) go into developing the children, mothers may sacrifice their own interests, professions, and friendships for the sake of the children. Mothers in poor self-care may risk mental health issues such as depression. Additionally, mothers and fathers who invest a disproportionate amount of their family’s resources into the development of their children may unknowingly be fostering a sense of entitlement in their children (Levine, 2012).

Many mothers and fathers in the upper-middle class are struggling, often due to the large demands that are placed on them by their culture, careers, and childrearing standards. Individuals and families have varying levels of internal and external supports,

partially based on their cultural (ethnic, religious, racial) norms. However, a prevailing cultural norm in the upper-middle class is that you do not share your struggles or your family's struggles with others (Levine, 2012). This may lead to an emotional isolation of parents with others as they do not feel comfortable sharing their whole self, struggles and all, with others (Levine, 2012). It also can perpetuate an unrealistic view of the trajectory of normal adolescence when the real-life challenges are always "swept under the carpet." Bumps in the road, imperfections, and challenges are all a normal part of the developmental process. Parents, especially mothers, miss out on opportunities for connection and support when they are unwilling, unable, or feel unsafe to share their struggles and the struggles of their growing children (Luthar et al., 2013).

### **Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations**

The achievement orientation generally promotes the development of extrinsic over intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is being motivated by something outside of the self, like an external reward, such as getting a good grade, winning a game, or getting accepted at a prestigious university (Ruan & Deci, 2000). The pursuit of wealth, image, and fame are common extrinsic goals. Extrinsic motivations can also be associated with a performance orientation, where one strives to "prove" oneself and outperform others (O'Keefe et al., 2012). This orientation, however, ties one's self-worth to performance. Self-worth is then highly susceptible to changes based on varying environmental conditions. For example, a young person may be the valedictorian in high school but then when she matriculates to an elite college she may be one valedictorian



among hundreds of valedictorians. If her self-worth is contingent on being the top student, her self-worth may be put at risk in this new environment.

The upper-middle class culture generally places a great deal of emphasis on extrinsic goals (Lyman & Luthar, 2014). The life choices associated with wealth, meaning the choices one makes in order to maintain the affluent lifestyle, may hinder the pursuit of social and emotional rewards such as cultivating friendships, developing spirituality, and artistic endeavors (Csikszentimihalyi, 1999). The youth in affluent communities may observe the behaviors of adults in their lives, which can serve as strong models as to whom they ultimately strive to become and what behaviors they see as admirable. Upper-middle class youth may not observe as many examples of intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of intrinsic goals. A study of affluent youth in high-achieving communities found that the adolescents with more extrinsically oriented values experienced more externalizing symptoms (Lyman & Luthar, 2014). These youth also lacked satisfaction when obtaining their goals and were more likely to strive to present themselves as perfect.

To contrast extrinsic motivation, when one acts in order to gain an external reward, intrinsic motivation is spurred by an authentic interest, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction gained when pursuing an activity. Intrinsic motivation occurs when one acts from an authentic or self-authored place. It is behavior that stems from the self, not from a reaction to an external source. Intrinsic motivation is seen as the natural human inclination towards learning and creativity. When one is acting from a place of intrinsic motivation, they generally have more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn

can promote performance, persistence, vitality, self-esteem, and well-being. Intrinsic goals include behaviors that seek to promote personal growth, relationships, and foster community. Adolescents exhibit intrinsic motivation when they pursue an activity out of a genuine and authentic interest in the activity, not because they hope to achieve a reward associated with that activity. Intrinsic motivation is associated with the concept of “flow,” the losing of oneself in an authentically interesting and pleasurable activity. The literature and popular media suggest that adolescents in affluent communities may not have the time or permission to explore intrinsically motivated pursuits if they are not aligned with the well-worn and generic path that leads towards success in the college admissions game (Luthar et al., 2013; Spencer, 2017). Intrinsic motivation is associated with a mastery academic orientation, where students are motivated to develop competence, to improve, to learn, and to deepening their understanding (O’Keefe et al., 2012), as opposed to being motivated to achieve the highest grade or to outperform peers. By exploring intrinsic pursuits, adolescents’ basic psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and growth are fostered, which leads to increases in happiness and well-being (Cicolla et al., 2017). For example, prosocial behavior, behavior that is intrinsically motivated that is intended to help others, has been linked to lower levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms in youth as well as higher academic achievement and well-being (Cicolla et al., 2017). Extrinsic goals tend not to satisfy individuals’ core psychological needs, and are performed because they are prompted, modeled or valued by an important other in the individual’s life (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The achievement orientation, along with the college admissions process, rewards youth who are extrinsically motivated. In this culture, high grades, strong standardized test scores, and admission into selective colleges and universities are the outward signs of a successful adolescent. However, when adolescents pursue these goals from a place of extrinsic motivation, they put themselves at risk for negative mental health outcomes and develop a self-worth that is contingent upon achieving “success.” While intrinsic goals are not as easily identified, measurable, or possibly valued in this culture, they are associated with numerous positive outcomes in terms of mental health and support healthy identity development. A stronger intrinsic orientation may also help buffer students from the excessive stress that the achievement-oriented culture thrusts upon them.

Students who are intrinsically motivated are driven by the inherent satisfaction they receive from an activity. The activity is integrated with the self, and engagement with that activity generally bolsters well-being. There is a parallel between meaningful activity and activity that is intrinsically oriented. Meaningful activity is defined as “activities that [are] consistent with the core themes and values of the self” (Baumeister et al., 2012, p. 13). Meaningful activity is also activity that springs from the self, not behavior that is motivated by external sources. Meaning and purpose will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

### **Stress in the Achievement Oriented, Upper-Middle Class Culture**

#### STRESS

Clammy hands,  
And a tap-tap-tapping foot.  
Even lying there in bed,

The tests and projects and quizzes,  
And quizzes and projects and tests  
Cannot be forgotten.  
The endless list of deadlines  
Seems to never stop growing  
And the pressure builds up.  
It builds and builds and builds.  
But the release valve  
Is nearly within reach.  
There is a pause;  
A pause used to fantasize  
About a burden-free life.  
And during this pause,  
The pressure swiftly, silently  
Envelops the dreamer  
To ensure that this dreamer,  
This naïve, hopeful student  
Will never cease working...  
Working towards  
Some perverted portrayal  
Of success.

The poem above was written by Eric Sirkovich, a 10th-grade student in Lexington, Massachusetts, as part of a literary arts program to write a poem about what inspires, worries, or matters most to the student. Lexington High School was profiled by the *New York Times* as a typical upper-middle class, achievement-oriented community that is grappling with the “joy-killing, suicide-inducing performance anxiety” (Spencer, 2017, para. 6) in its school and community. Unfortunately, Eric’s personal reflections mirror what many adolescents in these communities experience.

The popular media and academic literature both document the high levels of stress that upper-middle class students who attend competitive high schools are facing. The pressure to achieve academically and get into a competitive college is cited as the main source of stress that students are experiencing (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Leonard et al.,

2015). In a study conducted in a high-achieving private school, Leonard et al. (2015) found that 49% of students reported feeling a “great deal of stress” on a daily basis and 31% reported feeling “somewhat stressed.” The greatest source of stress was schoolwork, grades, and getting into a “good” college (Leonard et al., 2015). Feld and Shusterman (2015) studied physical and psychological symptoms of stress in students at competitive, college-preparatory high schools. More than 20% of the participants reported experiencing constant fatigue, lack of concentration, and inability to begin work almost daily due to stress. More than 40% of students reported mood swings, irritability, restlessness, inability to sleep, and racing thoughts at least once a week due to stress. More than 1 in 10 of the respondents reported having a panic attack at least once a week due to school-related stress (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). Many local school districts in affluent communities are alarmed at the rates of stress and mental health issues and are gathering data on stress in their students in order to better understand and support their students. For example, in Lexington, Massachusetts, 95% of high school students reported being under “a lot of stress” or “extreme stress” due to their classes. These studies are powerful not only because they illustrate that many adolescents in affluent communities are dealing with high, developmentally inappropriate levels of stress, but also due to the departure from decades of previous stress research in adolescents that indicated other non-academic sources as the primary stressors in adolescents (Levine, 2012). The stress the students experience may be influenced by parents; community members, such as teachers, coaches, and friends; and a clear cultural ethos.

While parents and members of the community have historically served as buffers for adolescents, protecting them from stress in the competitive college-going culture, well-meaning adults may fail to protect adolescents and even subject them to additional pressure and stress (Shanker, 2016). Ethan Brown (2016) wrote of the stress he experienced as a sixteen-year-old in a competitive high school: “The adults in my community have coerced me into stressing myself to exhaustion. Grown-ups see me as an academic machine, continually spurring out answers and assignments, rather than a human being with emotional and mental needs” (para. 12). Ethan came to this realization after an interaction with his school counselor who, as he writes, pressured him to take six Advanced Placement classes.

Although some stress in life is normal, excessive stress negatively affects well-being and quality of life in adolescents (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b). Chronic, untreated stress can also contribute to negative mental health outcomes (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005). A growing body of literature is documenting the high rates at which adolescents in high-achieving, upper-middle class communities suffer from adverse mental health conditions, some of which is attributed to or exacerbated by the stressful cultural environment (Leonard et al., 2015; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). This literature shows that affluent youth across the country—in cities and the suburbs, in public and private schools—are two to three times as likely to engage in substance use, suffer from anxiety and depression, and to take part in serious rule-breaking activity than national norms (Luthar et al., 2013) These findings have been replicated in numerous studies across three decades (Ciciolla, et al., 2017; Luthar &

D'Avanzo, 1999). As upper-middle class adolescents from achievement-oriented communities experience mental health conditions at consistently higher rates than national norms, this population has been labeled “at-risk” (Luthar & Barkin, 2012). Adolescents in these communities, just by virtue of living in these towns, are at greater risk for adverse mental health outcomes than their middle-class counterparts (Lund & Dearing, 2013). Researchers are being called to study this population to better understand how to minimize risks and foster resilience among these youth and their families (Luthar, 2017).

### **Mental Health Concerns for Upper-Middle Class Adolescents**

Affluent adolescents suffer high rates of mental health issues, including substance use, anxiety, and depression. Some of the stressors that these adolescents experience are different across the spectrum of gender (Ciciolla, Curlee et al., 2017). While great strides have been made in understanding the nuances of gender identity and expression, the literature in this field still classifies adolescents in the traditional, binary method. As the rationale behind this chapter is to review the relevant literature, and the literature available studies boys and girls only, I will discuss gender as a binary concept when reviewing these sources. However, it is important to recognize that gender occurs on a spectrum, that many adolescents may not fit into one of the two gender categories, and many adolescents' experiences may not be reflective of their assigned gender at birth.

The literature in this field documents the ways that adolescents who identify as boys and girls may internalize and externalize the symptoms associated with stress differently (Lyman and Luthar 2014). Below I will discuss the mental health issues of

boys and girls in separate sections. However, the substance use literature on this population provides more similarities than differences in use between boys and girls; therefore, I will address substance use issues for both boys and girls together below.

### **Substance Use**

Substance use is relatively common among adolescents. By the time they are in twelfth grade, approximately 70% of adolescents will have tried alcohol and 50% will have experimented with an illegal drug (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). While alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana are the substances most used by adolescents, prescription drug abuse is of growing concern among adolescents. National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014) cites 8.7% of high school seniors have used amphetamines (such as Adderall) and 7.1% have used prescription painkillers (such as Vicodin and OxyContin). Chronic substance use in adolescence can have dire consequences on the developing brain, with potential consequences including a greater propensity for addiction in adulthood, a negative impact on self-control and judgement, and an impact on the brain's ability to experience pleasure from non-drug related activity (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). In marijuana users, IQ scores are impacted by heavy use (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014).

Many factors contribute to whether an adolescent experiments with drugs and alcohol. The home environment is important: mental health issues, drug/alcohol use, violence, and physical and emotional abuse increase the likelihood that an adolescent will use drugs and alcohol (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). The community setting can confer risk if there is an availability of drugs and alcohol in the neighborhood and



school (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). Peer use also increases the risk that an individual will use drugs and alcohol (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). Finally, the individual's unique makeup can create vulnerability. For example, mental health issues, like anxiety, depression, or ADHD, and personality traits such as risk-seeking or poor impulse control, can increase the risk of use in adolescents (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014).

Adolescents in affluent communities use substances at greater rates than national norms (Patrick et al., 2012). In a study of affluent high school students conducted by Luthar and Barkin (2012), over half of the girls and almost two-thirds of the boys reported being drunk at least once in the past year, compared to one-third of youth in the age-matched, national normative data. In a study of boys in a competitive school setting, 45% of the boys reported being drunk in the past month (Coren & Luthar, 2014). Well over one-third of the participants in Leonard et al.'s (2015) study of affluent adolescents in a highly competitive high school reported being drunk or high within the past 30 days, which is a rate one to two times greater than national norms.

A recent longitudinal study documented the alarming frequency with which affluent young people develop substance use disorders. The study followed affluent adolescents from senior year of high school into college and two years post college. By the age of 26, the rates of addiction were 2 to 3 times the national norms, with diagnostic criteria met by 23-40% of the men and 19-24% of the women. The authors hypothesize that upper-middle class youth may be among the groups at highest risk for alcoholism and addiction in adulthood (Luthar et al., 2017).

The literature proposes several themes as to why affluent youth drink alcohol at greater rates than less affluent peers. Leonard (2015) found that adolescents in their study appeared to use substances as a coping mechanism for the extreme, adult-level pressure they experienced. Adolescents who experienced adult-level pressures and burdens reported that they felt entitled to adult-level rewards. Luthar and Barkin (2012) had a similar finding, that affluent adolescents believed they should “party hard” to relieve the stresses of “working hard.” Participants in Leonard et al.’s (2015) study reported a lack of enjoyable, age-appropriate, options for getting away from stress. This lack of access may contribute to the use of drinking in this community as a way to blow off steam and have fun. Finally, substance use has also been theorized as a way to self-medicate among some affluent adolescents, which is particularly concerning as this type of use is more likely to lead to disordered use in adulthood and may inhibit the adolescent from learning healthy coping behaviors (Leonard et al., 2015; Levine, 2006; Luthar & Sexton, 2005).

Parents play a critical role in influencing the substance use of their adolescents. When students perceive lenient consequences for their substance use, adolescents are more likely to use and to use at higher levels (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar et al., 2017). Parents may also be less likely to detect substance use as their kids might be able to maintain impressive academic and extracurricular performance, despite using (and in some cases because of it, as stimulants may be used to aid academic performance; Luthar et al., 2017).

**Boys in Achievement-Oriented, Upper-Middle Class Communities**

Boys from upper-middle-class communities that value high achievement suffer from several mental health conditions at higher rates than national norms (Luthar, Barkin et al., 2013). The literature documents elevated rates of both internalizing disorders and externalizing disorders. Internalizing disorders are problems that affect the adolescent's internal psychological environment such as anxiety and depression (Liu, 2004).

Externalizing disorders refer to problems in the adolescent's outward behavior where the adolescent negatively acts out on the external environment, such as aggression and delinquency (Liu, 2004). While the specific causes of any disorder are complex, psychosocial stress is believed to be a significant risk factor for the development of both internalizing and externalizing disorders in youth (Liu, 2004).

Boys in the upper-middle class experience internalizing disorders at higher rates than age-matched norms. They suffer from anxiety and depression at rates up to five times the national norms (Coren & Luthar, 2014). Coren and Luthar (2014) found an association between anxiety and depression in affluent boys and maladaptive perfectionism, defined as "overly high performance standards accompanied by critical evaluations of one's performance" (p. 932). Maladaptive perfectionism is often driven by parental criticism, where adolescents strive to meet unrealistic expectation and goals, fueled by fears of failure and criticism along with low self-esteem (Coren & Luthar, 2014). Youth who believe that their parents will punish or belittle them for their perceived failures are at particular risk for internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Coren & Luthar, 2014).

Boys from affluent communities are also at risk for externalizing disorders. Boys from affluent neighborhoods are more likely to report higher delinquency (such as lying, cheating, stealing, and committing anti-social acts) levels than middle-class peers (Lund & Dearing, 2013; Luthar & Goldstein, 2008). A study by Luthar and Ansary (2005) found that upper-middle class boys had comparable rates for delinquency as boys from very low socioeconomic, urban communities. Luthar and Goldstein (2008) found that one quarter of their sample of boys from upper-middle class communities reported rule-breaking at rates above clinically significant levels, which are three to four times the rates of national normative samples. Rates were higher when the boys anticipated less stringent consequences for their actions from parents. Consequences, whether consciously or subconsciously acknowledged, are seen by the adolescent as their parents' commitment to their well-being and as an indicator of being a high priority in their parents' lives.

Narcissistic traits in boys are more common in this population than in national norms. Affluent boys may have a preoccupation with activities that portray power and status, such as sex and wealth (Luthar et al., 2013). Boys with strong narcissistic tendencies may have difficulty forging authentic, intimate relationships with others, leaving them more vulnerable for conditions associated with lack of connectedness (i.e., depression, substance use; Coren & Luthar, 2014).

Several factors have been linked to adverse outcomes for boys in this population. As discussed above, parental criticism is a particularly salient factor, as it can lead to feelings of alienation from parents which in turn puts adolescents at risk for a range of adjustment issues (Coren & Luthar, 2014). Estrangement from parents is also linked to

poorer outcomes. Lyman and Luthar (2014), in a study of inner-city youth and affluent youth, also found that affluent youth felt greater feelings of alienation from their parents than inner-city youth, upending the harmful stereotype that wealthy families are happy and poverty generally leads to poor parent-child relationships. Additionally, parental depression (depression in mothers and/or fathers) is seen as a factor that puts this population at greater risk for mental health issues (Coren & Luthar, 2014; Lyman & Luthar, 2014).

### **Girls in Achievement-Oriented, Upper-Class Communities**

Girls in the achievement-oriented, upper-middle class communities also experience a range of unique issues. The rates of depression are twice as high in affluent girls than national norms (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Sexton, 2005). Anxiety rates are also two to three times higher than those of girls living in less affluent neighborhoods (Lund & Dearing, 2013). Body dissatisfaction is common in adolescent girls. Body dissatisfaction is associated with emotional distress and preoccupation with appearance (Ohring, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). In nationally representative studies, body dissatisfaction increases the risk of onset of eating pathology (Killen et al., 1996). Body dissatisfaction has been associated with sociocultural pressures and a lack of social support (Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

Girls from affluent backgrounds experience body dissatisfaction at high rates. In one study, the female participants were dissatisfied with their bodies at a rate more than three standard deviations above values for inner-city girls and affluent boys (Luthar &

Barkin, 2012; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). This body dissatisfaction puts them at greater risk for developing an eating disorder and also suggests a strong cultural pressure to be thin.

Girls from this community often experience a large number of stressors, which can make the experience of being a girl quite difficult to navigate. Girls are often expected to meet the same high standards as boys in terms of high academic performance, but they also must meet an often unattainable standard in terms of physical appearance (thin, beautiful, fashionable, and alluring to the boys but not too provocative). They are also expected to operate within a narrow range of emotional expression (always nice, happy, and helpful) and behavior expression (considerate, polite, and well-behaved), as they receive more disciplinary consequences from parents for rudeness and delinquency than their male counterparts (Luthar & Barkin, 2012). The complexities that come along with their humanity including a range of feelings, hopes, dreams, and desires, are often couched into a sometimes quite narrow range of acceptable feelings and behavior. They have strong needs for relatedness with their peers, but in the culture of intense competition, relationships may be more difficult to maintain and nurture.

Recent studies are providing more context to this population and the issues that they face. For example, Lyman and Luthar (2014) found that the experiences of envy, extrinsic goal-orientation, and perfectionism in these girls are associated with both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Cicolla et al. (2017) also found that affluent girls had more internalizing symptoms when their mothers were achievement-oriented and critical.

### **Supportive Factors for Upper-Middle Class Adolescent Development**

As previously mentioned, the cultural context in which adolescents in the upper-middle class develop confer specific risk factors on youth. Several factors have been identified to particularly support these adolescents in this cultural context. When youth in affluent communities had parents with a low to neutral achievement-emphasis, they generally had better school performance, higher self-esteem, and lower psychological symptoms (Cicolla et al., 2017). Parents who prioritize intrinsic and prosocial values at least as much as, if not more, than academic performance and external achievement generally have psychologically healthier children (Cicolla et al., 2017). Emotional closeness with parents, especially mothers, is also seen to be a protective factor in upper-middle-class adolescents (Luthar & Landresse, 2005a). All adolescents, not just those in the upper-middle class, stand better odds at psychological health and wellness when engaged in the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional tasks of this life stage.

### **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. At no other time in the human lifespan, other than infancy, does so much growth take place (Newman & Newman, 2006). Changes are occurring on the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive levels. At the same time, the adolescent's culture begins to view the individual differently (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). Parents, teachers, and community members all begin to place different demands and requirements on the adolescent, creating a dynamic interaction between the adolescent and their culture, all shaping their growth during this time.

The upper-middle class culture, in particular, places unique demands on the developing adolescent, which will often times influence growth. The culture's values are influenced by the college admissions process and youth are often reared in a way that will give them the greatest chances of success in the college application process. These steady, consistent messages about who/what has value, merit, and is worth pursuing can quietly impact many facets of the adolescent's development. This section will detail the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional developments that occur in adolescence and how the upper-middle class culture may interact with the normal developmental process.

### **Cognitive Development**

As defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, cognition is "the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses." Cognitive development occurs across the lifespan but a major developmental leap occurs during adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2006). Cognitive developmental theory examines how knowing emerges and then is converted into logical, systematic capabilities for reasoning and problem solving (Newman & Newman, 2006). Two of the major cognitive theorists are Jean Piaget and L.S. Vygotsky, whose work I will briefly describe below and apply to the population and question for this study.

Jean Piaget proposed four stages of cognitive development. The first stage, sensorimotor intelligence, begins at birth and lasts until approximately 18 months of age (Newman & Newman, 2006). This stage is characterized by the creation of increasingly complex motor and sensory schemes that allow infants to organize their environments (Newman & Newman, 2006). The second stage, pre-operational thought, begins when the



child learns language and ends at around 5 or 6 years of age (Newman & Newman, 2006). During this stage, knowledge is tied to the child's own perceptions. Children gain the ability to use tools, such as language, imitation, and play to represent things symbolically. The third stage is concrete operational thought. During this stage, which begins around age 6 and lasts until 11 or 12, children learn the logic of causal relationships. They can manipulate classification systems, categories, and hierarchies in groups. They are more competent at solving problems that are tied to physical reality than at developing hypotheses about abstract concepts (Newman & Newman, 2006). The transition from the third, concrete operational thought, to the final stage, formal operational thought, often occurs during adolescence. This broadening of consciousness allows young people to develop the ability for higher-order thinking; specifically, they develop in their abilities to think abstractly, theoretically, and complexly (Newman & Newman, 2006).

As adolescents grow in their abstract reasoning, they are better able to think about the future and possibilities for themselves. They can develop ideas about what they want their future to look like (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). They begin to be able to think hypothetically, which allows them to anticipate the consequences of their actions as well as be able to take another person's perspective (Newman & Newman, 2006). The latter, along with a growth in the emotional domain, will contribute to the development of empathy, a crucial factor necessary for healthy adult relationships (American Psychological Association, 2002). During this time, adolescents learn how to think complexly. They are better able to understand complex social and moral issues,

understanding nuances, and not just comprehending on a black-and-white level (Newman & Newman, 2006). These cognitive developments give adolescents the tools for a better understanding of self, others, and the world around them.

Piaget stated that knowledge is constructed through active engagement with an individual's environment (Newman & Newman, 2006). The environment may provide discrepancies between what was previously known and new experience; these discrepancies work to promote cognitive development (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). Observed differences of opinion, behavior, and experiences all promote cognitive growth when the adolescent examines what fits in current cognitive schemes and what needs to be modified to make room for new dimensions of knowledge. Formal operational thought is also believed to be spurred on by a heterogeneous peer group. When adolescents engage with students from different backgrounds (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation) from their own, they are able to recognize how their experiences are shaped by the values, families, and neighborhoods from which they come (Newman & Newman, 2006). Once cognitive schemes are formed, it is often challenging for adolescents to abandon their views in light of new information (Newman & Newman, 2006).

Vygotsky added to Piaget's theory by expanding on the role that culture plays in cognitive development. His theory states that culture actually mediates the cognitive development of an individual and that the individual and their culture are intricately interwoven (Newman & Newman, 2006). While Piaget focused on the social environment and peer group, Vygotsky noted that one's culture transmits a vast amount of knowledge to the individual — the culture dictates what is valuable to know (Newman

& Newman, 2006). While adolescence is a time where the brain is primed for learning and cognitive growth (Newman & Newman, 2006), this can be impacted if the culture provides a narrow range of information, experiences, and people worthy of knowing about. Vygotsky's theory also suggests that one's culture will direct an individual's effort and attention to culturally-sanctioned activities (Newman & Newman, 2006). More information is needed to better understand the role the upper-middle class culture plays in the cognitive development of its youth.

Both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories highlight the importance of exposure to heterogeneous people, ideas, and things in order to promote cognitive growth (Newman & Newman, 2006). While no studies have been conducted to examine the effects of highly socioeconomically segregated social environments and cognitive growth, one could espouse from these theories that the effects would be deleterious. As upper-middle class youth are often described to be living in a "bubble," or a community where the vast majority of residents have great economic resources and are highly educated (Murray, 2013), one may question how this impacts their cognitive, as well as social and emotional, growth when exposed to people, cultures, and values different from their own. Growing up in a "bubble" may impact an individual's ability to deeply understand, value, and appreciate cultures other than one's own. This "bubble" may also lend some individuals to see their own culture as normative and, in some cases, superior (Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins, 2008).

Another facet of cognitive development is moral development. Kohlberg defined three levels of moral development. The first level, pre-conventional morality, takes place

from approximately five to twelve years of age. During this time, behavior is determined by consequences. Right action is determined by authority figures and the child acts in a way to avoid punishment or to advance their personal interests (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). The next stage, conventional morality, forms around the age of 13-16. During this stage, behavior is directed by conforming to society's norms. The adolescent makes choices based on others' approval or to maintain social order (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). The final stage, post-conventional morality, occurs in some adults. In this stage, instead of behavior being determined by deference to a checklist of rules, it is determined by the logical application of universal, abstract, and moral principles (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010).

The growth of moral reasoning skills is strongly influenced by the ability for perspective taking and interactions with peers. When youth are able to discuss moral issues with peers, they are more able to think carefully about their ideas and to advance their reasoning abilities (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). As with Piaget and Vygotsky's theories, a diversity of thought and experience can help spur cognitive growth, in this case, moral.

Most adolescents are at the second level of moral development. They seek to be "nice people," adhering to rules, maintaining social order, and obtaining approval of others (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). Kohlberg's theory helps contextualize the developing adolescent and understand their behavior. Given this context, it may be more difficult for an adolescent firmly in this stage to question social norms, and more comfortable for them to "go with the (cultural) flow" and internalize dominant cultural norms.

The cognitive growth that occurs during adolescence should provide some of the tools needed to pursue the developmental tasks of this life stage (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). For example, as adolescents are better able to think abstractly and complexly, they are better able to explore who they are and what they want from their lives. Important work around identity, career, and relationships often takes place during this time (Erikson, 1980). However, some research and popular media reports suggest that many upper-middle class adolescents may struggle in some of these domains (Luthar et al., 2013; Spencer, 2017).

### **Emotional Development**

During adolescence, youth begin to experience a wider range of emotions and more emotional complexity (Kang & Shaver, 2004). A major task of this life stage is gaining insight into one's own emotions and also expanding one's capability for empathy with the emotions of others (Hoeksma, Oosterlann, & Schipper, 2004). Adolescents must learn not only how to identify one's own emotions but also to accept them, without guilt, shame, or attempts at suppression. Research suggests that adolescents who are highly sensitive to cultural expectations are more likely to experience shame about unwanted emotional states and may try to excessively control or defend oneself against unwanted feelings (American Psychological Association, 2002). However, adolescents who are able to experience and accept a wide range of emotions are more likely to be open to experience, empathetic, and adaptable (Kang & Shaver, 2004).

There are a number of ways that the upper-middle class culture can influence normal emotional development of adolescents, two of which I will describe below. First

is the susceptibility for affluent adolescents to push themselves to extremes. Researchers have noted the emotional exhaustion that these adolescents experience due to the heavy workload and multiple demands for their time (Leonard, 2015). If adolescents live in a chronic state of emotional exhaustion, they may have little room left to pursue the normal emotional tasks of adolescence.

Another factor that can influence emotional outcomes in affluent youth is the emotional closeness or distance to mothers and fathers. Emotional closeness to mothers, for both boys and girls, is critical to emotional well-being in affluent youth (Luthar & Landresse, 2005a). Emotional distance from fathers predicted internalizing and externalizing symptoms in affluent girls and externalizing symptoms, substance use, and narcissistic tendencies for boys (Coren & Luthar, 2014). Some affluent parents may be less present in their children's lives due to working long hours, which can put their children at greater risk for poorer emotional outcomes. Additionally, this research suggests that the quality of relationship between parent and child is of great importance in the context of emotional development. Well-meaning affluent parents may feel pressure from their culture to tend to a certain stream of needs for their children, mainly externally oriented. These parents may unintentionally forgo developing a deep and meaningful (and protective) emotional relationship with their adolescent.

### **Identity Development**

One of the major emotional milestones of adolescence is the refining of one's identity. Adolescence is a time of experimenting with different ways of being, appearing, and behaving (American Psychological Association, 2002). It is a period of "trying on"

different values, beliefs, and goals. The non-linear process of testing, retaining, and discarding traits continues throughout adolescence. Adolescents explore intellectually and emotionally, through relationships, through culture and art, and physically through movement and athletics. Through this period of testing, reflection, and exploration, the youth develops and refines a sense of self that is autonomous, yet connected; a person who recognizes their strengths, talents, limitations, and vulnerabilities and has a basic understanding of who they are and who they want to be, which are the foundations of identity.

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development divides the lifespan into eight stages, each categorized by a specific task that the individual generally focuses on during this stage. The psychological health of the individual, in Erikson's view, was based on successfully navigating the "crisis" that each stage presents (Erikson, 1980). While this dissertation focuses on the fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion, a summary of all eight stages is provided below for context.

Broderick and Blewitt (2010) provide a comprehensive summary of Erikson's stages which I will recap below. The first psychosocial stage is trust vs. mistrust, which occurs during the first year of life. During this time, the child establishes a basic sense that the world is a safe and reliable place based off of sensitive caregiving. The second stage is autonomy vs. shame and doubt, which takes place from one to three years. In this stage, children develop a sense of independence through new cognitive and physical skills. The third stage, taking place from age three to five or six is initiative vs. guilt. During this stage, the child tries to act in ways that are more responsible and "adult."

The fourth stage, industry vs. inferiority, takes place from age six to twelve. The importance of learning academic skills is central during this stage. The fifth stage, which this dissertation is focused on, is identity vs. role confusion, taking place from approximately twelve to twenty years of age. The adolescent must establish a sense of self through making choices about values and career goals. The sixth stage, intimacy vs. isolation, occurs during early adulthood. The adult must share self with others and commit to relationships and partnerships. The seventh stage, taking place during middle adulthood, is generativity vs. stagnation. During this time, the adult makes a contribution to the next generation, such as: rearing children, expert work, or service to others. The eighth and final stage is ego integrity vs. despair, taking place in late adulthood. In this stage, the adult accepts life's successes and failures, while realizing the dignity of one's life.

According to Erikson, the fifth stage of human development is identity vs. role confusion. In this stage, adolescents develop their identity through an exploration of their values, beliefs, and goals (Erikson, 1963). Erikson's theory posits that identity is protective, that a stable sense of self will give an individual a direction in which to navigate through adulthood (Erikson, 1980). Identity can be seen as a road map, framing who you are, what your life stands for, which then drives the choices that one makes, all the while providing a sense of stability.

According to Erikson, the psychosocial goal of adolescence is to develop a sense of who one is as an individual — connected to family and culture, yet an autonomous being. The process by which exploring and challenging old beliefs and values is often



challenging and can create new vulnerabilities in the adolescent as old perspectives can be changed or transformed. Role confusion occurs, on the other hand, when the adolescent does not establish a sense of identity during this life stage. The individual may be unsure of themselves and their place in society.

Marcia (1993) added to Erikson's work by expanding on the process by which one establishes their identity. Marcia's theory examines whether one has struggled with or explored their identity and whether they have committed to an identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Marcia describes four identity statuses that are derived from the coupling of identity exploration and commitment (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Identity achievement is the most advanced form of identity development and is characterized by both exploration and commitment. The three remaining statuses are: moratorium (exploration, no commitment), foreclosure (commitment, no exploration), and diffusion (no commitment, no exploration).

In Marcia's theory, in order to achieve an identity, one must go through a period of exploration, where their old values are challenged and examined (or a crisis), and then commitment, where an individual develops unique, self-selected goals, values, or roles for the future. Identity achievement is associated with many positive outcomes including the greater ability to form adult relationships, more psychological flexibility, and more stable self-esteem.

Not establishing an identity in adolescence could lead to negative outcomes, such as being "adrift." Cote (2005) argues that those who are unable to establish a secure identity are at risk for a passive form of identity formation, where the easily accessible,

predominant values of the culture are internalized by the individual, such as an identity largely influenced by capitalism and consumerism, and easily manipulated by the vast marketing machines in America. Cote (2005) goes on to state that these individuals are less likely to function at higher-order levels of cognition, morality, and ethics, and are less likely to become agentic and able to resist or act back upon societal obstacles.

Without an active form of exploration and commitment to an identity, affluent adolescents are at risk for passively internalizing an identity based on prevalent cultural norms, which in the upper-middle class will likely be based upon achievement and materialism.

Recent scholars have also linked identity formation with the search for meaning and purpose in life: adolescents form a healthy identity through the search for, and acquiring of, meaning in life (Marcia, 1993). Identity development is one of the primary tasks of adolescence. The search for meaning and purpose is expressly linked with factors that support and mediate the development of identity in adolescence (Hill et al., 2013).

### **Meaning and Purpose**

Being human always points, and is directed to, something or someone, other than oneself — be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter.

The more one forgets himself — by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love — the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself

(Frankl, 2006, p. 110-111).

Meaning and purpose are critical constructs to this study. First, they are embedded into the research question itself, as the study seeks to understand how adolescents explore

the existential concepts of meaning and purpose in a very externally-oriented, competitive culture. Also, as described in Chapter 1, the lens through which I theoretically framed this study is based on the concepts of existentialism. The section below will describe the relevant data on meaning and purpose in adolescence, and also highlight the key existential theoretical assumptions underpinning this study.

Meaning in life and purpose have both been identified as protective factors for adolescents (Brassai et al., 2011), supporting positive psychological and physical development and health. For at-risk youth, such as adolescents from achievement-oriented, upper-middle-class communities, it is important to identify what can help support healthy growth and development in a potentially harmful climate in order to better educate parents, teachers, and community members and to design programs. No studies have been published to date that examine the role of meaning and purpose in this at-risk population.

Meaning and purpose are terms that are often used interchangeably. Although there are conceptual differences between the two terms, no empirical studies clearly delineate meaning and purpose. Yalom (1980) uses the terms interchangeably in his seminal text, *Existential Psychotherapy*. For the purposes of this study, I will explore both constructs conceptually, but they may be used interchangeably at points by both the participants and me, as there is overlap in the terms.

### **Meaning-In-Life**

“The question of life’s meaning is the most urgent question of all” — Camus

Why do we live? What do we live for? What do we live by? What is the meaning of my life? These are all fundamental, essential questions relating to our existence. While these questions are explored throughout the lifespan, they take on a special importance in adolescence, as the youth struggles to develop a stable identity, informed by reflections to these existential questions.

Meaning-in-life, or meaning, is the comprehensive, personal conceptualization of one’s place in the world. Negru et al. (2016) defined meaning as “a coherent worldview, anchored on personal reflections regarding the significance of one’s life in general, and specific considerations of one’s place in the broader scope of existence” (p. 1928). Individuals feel meaning when they have an understanding of themselves, the world around them, and their fit within the world (Brassai et al., 2011). An individual explores meaning-in-life by reflecting on their past, present, and hopes for the future. It is a cognitive and emotional process to determine what has value in one’s life (Baumesiter, 2012).

Meaninglessness, according to existential philosophers and counselors, is one of the most common sources of suffering in modern American society (Frankl, 2006; Yalom, 1980). In our agricultural past, meaning was imbued into the fabric of everyday life. Our ancestors lived close to the earth, as they contributed to the creation of life of

plants and livestock, with a sense of connectedness and belonging to family and community — and, importantly, this work was intrinsically worthwhile. The industrialized world, without a strong religiously based meaning system, lacks the same built-in regular opportunities to experience meaning. Without a sense of meaning, life may feel senseless, aimless, empty, flat, or colorless.

Affluent adolescents today often do not have the same opportunities to contribute to their families and communities the way their predecessors did — especially in the upper-middle class context where many of the material needs of the family can be met due to the sufficient economic resources. Additional needs may be “outsourced” (e.g. nannies, landscapers, housekeepers, tutors) so the adolescent does not have to contribute to the family in a way that in the past, would be normal roles for a teenager in a family. Well-meaning affluent parents may encourage their adolescent to focus on the narrow list of activities that are deemed valuable in the college admissions process and stay away from those activities that are not seen as worthy, such as caring for a younger sibling or mowing the lawn.

Frankl (2006) described a condition called “Sunday neurosis,” when individuals may feel a void or discontent that the busy week is over. They may feel like there is nothing that they want to do, that they find no zest or fullness in life. This neurosis can be conceptually applied to affluent adolescents who are externally- and achievement oriented; when what the adolescent is working towards is attained, what is left for the adolescent? The college preparation process provided a clear map for “success” for these adolescents; however, if this comes at the sake of exploring and developing a deep and

complex inner landscape, along with some authentic purposes that will give life meaning and direction, affluent adolescents may be at greater risk for negative outcomes, both in the present and the future.

Frankl (2006) also described the existential vacuum, that symptoms rush in to fill the void we feel when our lives do not have meaning, like depression, anxiety, alcoholism, obsessions, delinquency, or risk-taking. People may work compulsively as a “vehicle of meaning,” but this is considered a “false centering of life,” as when the work is gone, the same void is still present. Without the presence of meaning, individuals are more likely to engage in comfort-seeking or hedonistic behaviors. Given the high rates of anxiety, depression, and alcohol use in upper-middle class adolescents, along with the excessive external and achievement orientation, it is possible that adolescents in these communities suffer from the existential vacuum when their basic, intrinsic needs for meaning and purpose are not met.

Affluent youth generally attend schools that focus on externally oriented achievement at the expense of more intrinsically oriented, authentically interesting, and freely chosen activities. These youth may be vulnerable to the same boredom, apathy, and emptiness that these scholars describe. When individuals do not engage in the search for meaning in their lives, they will either conform, and do what others do, or submit to totalitarianism, and do what others want them to do (Frankl, 2006). The upper-middle class and consumerism offer ready-made identities to those who are unwilling or unable to do the challenging work of exploring meaning and purpose and establishing an authentic identity (Cote, 2005). While some adolescents may be struggling to find

meaning in their lives, those that do generally benefit from a host of positive benefits, both in terms of their physical and emotional well-being (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016).

A growing body of literature is documenting the positive effects that meaning has on adolescents (Brassai et al., 2011; Brassai et al, 2015; Negru-Subtirica, 2016). Meaning-in-life in adolescents has been positively linked to well-being, self-esteem, positive affect, optimism, happiness, and life satisfaction (Negru-Subtirica, 2016). Meaning-in-life is also associated with protecting youth from physical health-risk behaviors, such as heavy drinking and drug use, and associated with promoting healthy behaviors such as diet-control and physical activity (Brassai et al., 2011; Brassai et al., 2015). Finally, meaning-in-life may serve as protection against a number of mental health concerns, such as depression, substance use, and poor psychological well-being.

### **Purpose**

Purpose can be viewed as the specific goals one chooses to fulfill their meaning. It can help organize and direct behavior, which provides forward momentum in each stage of development (Malin, Reilly, & Damon, 2013). As with meaning-in-life, purpose also serves important functions in adolescence. Having purpose can provide a framework for behavior, goals, and identity formation (Malin et al., 2017). It is associated with a host of positive outcomes in adolescents, including better academic performance and self-regulation (Yeager, 2014); more socially responsible behavior (Malin et al., 2017); and more hope, happiness, and positive affect over time (Burrow & Hill, 2011). It has been defined as a developmental asset, a trait that is linked with positive outcomes in youth (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Purposeful youth generally are more agentic and are better able to

manage life's obstacles and avoid the "deepest pitfalls" that may impact their peers (Hill et al., 2013).

Three factors have been identified as necessary to have a fully purposeful activity. First is an intention, the desire to move towards a personally (authentically chosen by the individual and not by parents, teachers, or peers) meaningful goal (Bronk, 2012). Next is engagement, the active dedication of time and energy to pursue a goal. It is important to note that purpose comes through a breadth and depth of experience — generally prolonged, intense involvement over time (Malin et al., 2013). While most adolescents generally begin purposeful activity with a minimal time commitment, purposeful activity grows over time. The final component of purposeful activity is the desire to connect beyond the self (Malin et al., 2013). This is similar to the existential idea of self-transcendence, that one must give of oneself to something outside of the self in order to find meaning-in-life (Frankl, 2006). All three factors must be present for activity to be purposeful.

Exploring purpose has a host of positive benefits in adolescence, is associated with thriving, and is an important construct as it is for healthy adults. Purpose can support the development of an identity; it helps youth start to define who they are and also provide a direction for the youth to move (Hill et al., 2013). However, purpose is not regularly addressed in schools or by families. In a study on youth purpose, few participants identified school experiences as most relevant to their development of purpose (Malin et al., 2013). Cultures that ascribe to an achievement orientation also may divert students away from focusing on this important developmental issue.



Meaning and purpose are important factors in the lives of adolescents. Young people that have, or are searching for, meaning and purpose in their lives generally have better mental health outcomes and experience greater well-being than youth who do not. This study is framed by the existential concepts, especially the role that meaning and purpose play in healthy human functioning. Existentialism served as my theoretical lens and influenced the design and analysis of this study.

### **Civic Virtue and Inequity**

“It may be an easy thing to make a Republic but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion.” (Mann, 1872, p. 689).

“The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing” (Wallace, 2005, para. 14).

Up until this point, this chapter has largely focused on the possible impacts the college preparation and admissions process, as metabolized by the upper-middle class, can have on affluent adolescents. This section of the chapter will continue to examine the effect on adolescents but also widen the focus to include the negative impact the college preparation and admissions process can have on communities and society as a whole, specifically in regards to civic virtue and inequity. The college preparation and

admissions process' ramifications are felt on both the individual and systems level, and the outcomes, in many ways, are intertwined.

### **Civic Virtue**

The American education system is rooted in the idea of civic virtue (Labaree, 1997). The fundamental role of schools was to imbue a sense of civic virtue, or a moral responsibility to contribute to one's community and society through community and political participation, in its students (Labaree, 1997; Rousseau, 1889). Early educational and political scholars viewed civic virtue as a crucial component for all Americans to have in order to combat the selfish and corrosive forces of capitalism (Labaree, 1997). Without civic virtue, the scholars predicted, our democracy would be much less viable, with wealth and power in the hands of the very few (Labaree, 1997).

Education is a public good (Labaree, 1997). The reason we educate youth, the reason education is publicly funded, is not solely for the advancement of the individual themselves. We educate youth because an educated citizenry *benefits all members of society*, especially as they are able to fulfill their duties under our democratic system of government (Labaree, 1997). When students somehow come to believe that the sole purpose of their education is for individual advancement, the fundamental obligations we have to each other, to our communities, and to society as a whole may descend in importance. From an existential perspective, the striving for self-transcendence, the "basic craving to transcend one's self-interest and to strive towards something or someone outside or "above" oneself" (Yalom, 1980, p. 439) is how we seek meaning and connection in life. Existentialists suggest that focusing on one's self will lead to a shallow

existence and may invite mental health symptoms, where a life that focuses on things outside of the self will bring greater meaning and well-being (Yalom, 1980). From an existential perspective, an individualistic focus on education will lead to negative outcomes in youth.

The college preparation process, as metabolized by the upper-middle class, leaves little room for adolescents to explore and develop civic virtue. As the individual focuses on achieving high grades, standardized test scores, and athletic achievement, often little time remains for engagement with community and authentic service to others. The values the upper-middle class promote, fierce individualism, external-orientation, competition, and achievement, stand in contrast to those values associated with civic virtue. Moreover, many upper-middle class adolescents often live in idyllic, extremely socioeconomically segregated communities, where practically everyone in their neighborhoods are also in the upper-middle class (Florida, 2014). The isolation from other communities and people may provide affluent adolescents with the false sense of normalcy; issues of poverty, equity, merit, fairness, and justice loom large when one has interactions regularly in communities other than one's own.

Frankl's (2006) theory states that meaning is found in giving of oneself, to either a cause or a person to love. By engaging in civic life, adolescents have enormous opportunities to explore meaning, experimenting with what gives their lives meaning and purpose and seeing how they can be of service to others. The individual and societal benefits of civic virtue are lost when adolescents, especially affluent adolescents, are systematically diverted away from this type of engagement.

### **College Preparation and Admissions Process Contributes to Inequity**

The competitive college-going culture can be harmful not only to individual students but also to society as a whole. The college preparation process is a vast cultural juggernaut, greatly influencing how upper-middle class youth are raised and also how huge amounts of resources are spent. These resources are expended to raising the upper-middle class youth in a way that will give them the greatest odds to succeed in the college admissions process. Music lessons, sports equipment, and tutoring, for example, all require sums of money that those outside of the upper-middle class may not be able to allocate. Children who are not raised with the same financial resources, social capital, and, perhaps most importantly, educated in private schools or top public schools (also known as “super-zips,” that is, enclaves where families have high net-worth and educational attainment; Mellnik & Morello, 2013) have a distinct disadvantage in the college process, as the benefits upper-middle class children have accrued over time and ultimately lead to distinct advantages.

The Ivy League consists of eight of the most prestigious universities in the United States. The admission rates at these schools range from 5-14% (Cornell, 2017, Harvard, 2017). The schools included in the Ivy League are Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth University, Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and Yale University. The seats in the Ivy League classes are highly coveted by many members of the upper-middle class, as it confers a high social status and is generally assumed to increase the student’s odds at obtaining high income professions (Levine, 2012).

At some Ivy League colleges, up to 40% of the seats in each incoming freshman class are reserved for legacies, recruited athletes, and children of large financial donors (Cole, 2011; Hernandez, 2015). The preferential admissions treatment to legacies has been called “affirmative action for the rich” (Kahlenberg, 2013, para. 2). At these schools, between 10-15% of the class are legacies, children of parents who attended the same college (Edmonds, 2016; Snow, 2017). These students have a distinct advantage in the admissions process expressly due to the lineage of their birth; in a review of admissions data published in *Economics of Education Review*, legacies had 45% greater chances of admission than non-legacies (Hurwitz, 2011). Even in the ultra class-oriented United Kingdom, Oxford and Cambridge have long since done away with giving admission preference to legacy applicants (Mandery, 2014).

In the Ivy League, up to 20% of the class are recruited athletes (Cole, 2011). While being in athletics may seem like a level playing field, many of the sports at these schools are generally only played in upper-middle class communities (e.g., crew, fencing, field hockey, golf, rugby, sailing, skiing, and squash). Students outside of the upper-middle class will not have the same access to be a recruited athlete if they have never been exposed to the sport, let alone have the resources to pursue the sport at a semi-professional level for years of their childhoods.

The Ivy League and other elite colleges and universities restrict social mobility. As opposed to mitigating the class system, the Ivy League reproduces it (Deresiewicz, 2014). The preferential admissions criteria for legacy and developmental donor applicants is one way the Ivy League systematically confers advantage for the already

economically privileged. However, the Ivy League through the general application process also seems to favor children in the upper-middle class. For example, in 38 elite schools, including five Ivy League, more students are from families in the top 1% of the income distribution than the bottom 60% (*The New York Times*, 2017). At Brown University, the median family income is \$204,200 and 70% of the students come from families in the top 20% of the income distribution. This is not due to a dearth of high-achieving low-income students; research indicates there are many qualified low-income students that never apply to selective colleges, partly due to lack of social capital they need to navigate the process (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). While many Americans believe in the meritocracy, that anyone who is bright enough and works hard can have their share of the American Dream (Cooper, 2015), the Ivy League admissions data paints a different picture: elite colleges are not the engines of social mobility as generally assumed. For example, at Brown University (all of the Ivies have similar statistics), 1.5% of the students today will come from a poor family and will become a rich adult (*The New York Times*, 2017).

Affluent families pour an enormous amount of resources (e.g. time, money, social capital) into a process that maintains and potentially exacerbates class differences. They are buying into a system, consciously or not, that often preserves privilege for themselves and perpetuates oppression and inequity for those born into lower economic classes. While very few parents will systematically forgo providing advantages to their children when they believe it will help their growth and future opportunities, the upper-middle class often fails to acknowledge how the college admissions process creates winners and

losers, not based on merit but based on class and privilege, and their children systematically end up on the winning side. The extent to which privilege is embedded and taken for granted by the upper-middle class is an important construct to examine in this study, as so many needed societal changes depend on the ability of this class to question the status quo and work to effect change, promoting equality and the democratic principles that make our country strong and viable.

### **Chapter Summary**

The upper-middle class culture may place great demands on a developing adolescent, which can deter the adolescent from the normal developmental tasks of this life stage. As the college preparation and application process is of great importance in this culture, adolescents may be raised in ways that give them the greatest chances for success in the admissions process, but may place developmentally inappropriate levels of stress on the adolescent, which can possibly lead to poorer mental health outcomes. Additionally, the strong external orientation the culture often promotes may thwart the developing adolescent away from the normal tasks of this life stage, such as establishing an identity through an exploration of the unique factors that will give their lives meaning and purpose.

The cultural practices the upper-middle class employ to confer advantage on their youth has implications for the individual adolescents and also society as a whole. The highly individualistic class practices may impact the development of civic virtue in youth; the moral obligation of each citizen to contribute to the well-being of others and one's community. Additionally, the cultural practices often serve to maintain and

perpetuate privilege, ensuring advantage is maintained for the upper-middle class youth, sometimes at the expense of social mobility of youth from the lower socioeconomic classes.



### Chapter Three: Methodology

This study seeks to understand the complex, lived experiences of adolescents in the upper-middle class as they navigate the external pressures associated with the competitive college preparation process. These adolescents undergo this process while they are concurrently refining their own sense of self. The study examines whether upper-middle class adolescents explore meaning and purpose in this cultural context, and if they are, then how. This study also situates the developing adolescent within a specific cultural context and makes visible the ways the student interfaces with the culture, highlighting where adolescents internalize dominant cultural norms such as perceptions of success, value of achievement, and validity of the “meritocracy,” and where they resist, question, or struggle against prevailing cultural norms. This study endeavors to paint a complex, rich, and detailed picture of each student, moving beyond the stereotypes of this population. In this chapter, I will detail the methodology I used to explore the main research question and sub-questions of this study:

- How do adolescents in the upper-middle class navigate a competitive, high-pressure, college-going culture?
  - Does cultivating a sense of purpose come into play in their navigation?  
And if so, how?

These research questions are best studied through qualitative inquiry, which I will describe briefly below.

### **Research Paradigm**

As this study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences and how they make meaning of the prevailing cultural messages, a qualitative research method is appropriate. Qualitative researchers focus on how people make meaning of their experiences and their world. The primary purpose of qualitative research, as described by Merriam (2009), is to "achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making... and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 14).

Qualitative research focuses on meaning-making and gaining understanding of the lived experience of the study's participants. This type of research is particularly helpful when there is a lack of theory regarding a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). While the popular media highlights the intense pressure that many upper-middle class adolescents face as a result of the college preparation process and many of the class-based practices that, conceptually, could be harmful for the developing adolescent, we have very little information on how students make meaning of this complex culture, especially how it can impact their social-emotional and cognitive growth, and how it impacts their journey towards adulthood. This study will give needed insights into the participants' lived experience, which can be used inductively to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories that can help us better understand members of this population (Merriam, 2009).

The participants in this study—adolescents in the upper-middle class—as a group are understudied (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b). The long-held assumption has been that

wealth protects individuals from negative outcomes, and that financial resources can ameliorate any services necessary to support the healthy growth and development of individuals (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b). While a body of literature has dispelled this myth, as the high rates of mental health conditions in this population have been well-documented, the group still remains understudied and stereotyped (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Racz, McMahon, & Luthar, 2011). There is little qualitative data in the scholarly literature, which is necessary to understand the complexities of this population and to hear the voices of the adolescents themselves. The research method that I employed endeavored to illuminate the humanity of the whole child and not reduce the participants to well-worn stereotypes. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture approach was selected as it is designed to "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3).

### **Portraiture**

Portraiture is a research design that seeks to join science and art to capture the complexity, nuance, subtlety, and beauty of human life (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It is rigorous, systematic, and thorough in its methods and also deeply descriptive and expressive; it has been described as a "painting with words" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). The participants' spirit is captured and described with the "evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). This approach allows the researcher to gain new understandings and new insights into people, institutions, and cultures (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and

Davis (1997) write that the portraits are designed to appeal to a wide audience of readers, with the intent to “deepen the conversation” (p. 10), and “inform and inspire” (p. 10) readers.

The portraits were created from thematic, in-depth interviews with the participants, with a primary methodological goal of seeking the “holistic, complex, contextual descriptions of reality” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 13). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) describes portraits as:

Detailed stories...told in order to illuminate more general phenomena...a piece of writing that conveys the tone, style, and tempo of [a person or institution]...Words are chosen that try to create sensations and evoke visions for the reader. It is a palpable form, highly textured...referred to as “life writing” (p. 16).

The writing is designed to promote an intellectual understanding as well as an emotional response (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). This line of inquiry seeks to cultivate an in-depth understanding of the “lost voices” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 8) in academia; the voices of students who are central to the educational system are often reduced to abstractions and assumptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). My ongoing reactions to the participants were captured in my researcher’s journal. Where the participants showed and shared their emotions are also included in the ongoing analysis.

As with most qualitative designs, participants in portraiture are seen in the context of their culture and historical time period (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The context gives the researcher greater understanding as to how the participants negotiate

and make meaning of their experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This line of inquiry fits very well with my question, as I sought to understand my participants in the context of their unique culture and historical time period.

As with other qualitative methods, the researcher herself, in portraiture, is the primary research instrument. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the voice of the researcher as follows:

In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and the framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choice of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. Voice is the research instrument, echoing the self...of the portraitist—her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic....[But]...the portraitist's work is deeply empirical, grounded in systematically collected data, skeptical questioning (of self and actors), and rigorous examination of biases—always open to disconfirming evidence...working against the grain of formerly held presuppositions, always alert and responsive to surprise (p. 85).

As the researcher herself is the most important research tool, it was important to be aware of how the self can influence the research.

### **The Listening Guide**

While Portraiture was primarily used in this study, the lack of literature conveying how to analyze the data using this method is limited. Carol Gilligan's *The Listening Guide*, which Lawrence-Lightfoot indicates that she herself uses as part of the Portraiture

method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), seemed to be a natural accompaniment to the originally planned design, and provided me with more structure and tools that I used in the data analysis. This *Listening Guide* is a method designed to use “the power of listening as the route to knowledge” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 76). Gilligan proposes three distinct listenings as a way in to gain greater understanding of the participants (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). I “listened” to the voices of the participants several times, each with a different focus, which I describe below.

I summarize Gilligan and Eddy’s (2017) three listenings below. The first, Listening for Plot, listens to the story being told, attends to any emotional “hot spots” (Gilligan & eddy, 2017, p. 78), and listens for the researcher’s response to the process. The second listening is Listening for the I, and pays attention to the first-person voice of the participant. An I poem is used to strip away some of the “noise” in the narrative and gain a greater understanding of how the individuals speak for themselves and also takes into account how the mind can dissociate or push knowledge and feelings out of our conscious awareness. Finally, the third listening is Listening for Contrapuntal Voices, where I listened for the participants’ “different voices and their interplay or harmonies or dissonances within the psyche, tensions with parts of itself. This step [...] is also sensitive to what is not being said or what is being silenced” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 79).

### **Positionality**

As described above, my own identity and worldview shaped this research project. It was shaped by my assumptions, observations, professional and life experiences, theoretical perspective, and understanding of pertinent literature (Lawrence-Lightfoot &

Davis, 1997). It was an ongoing task in the research process to reflect on, and make visible, my potential biases, limitations, and constraints due to my personal worldview and life experiences. My lens was particularly influenced by my previous work as a high school counselor, and as a parent in the upper-middle class.

During my career as a high school counselor, I worked with members of the same population that I studied in this research project. Many of my students were suffering from mental health conditions that seemed to be associated with the competitive culture of the middle to upper-middle class high school in which I worked. Some of my students seemed to have internalized the cultural messages they had received about success and were willing to forgo the typical tasks of adolescence to obtain and achieve their goals. I saw an inequity among the students with whom I worked: the upper- and middle-class students had many advantages, and their parents activated their social and economic capital in ways to help their children succeed. The less privileged students did not know the “rules of the game” that would lead towards success in the college preparation and application process. Both groups paid a price: the privileged students had advantages but experienced a huge amount of stress and pressure and the less privileged students did not have the social capital necessary to succeed in the college process. The inequities and issues these students experienced were hardly ever talked about or acknowledged by students, parents, teachers, or administrators. This puzzle underpins my research: I am curious as to the path towards educational equity where the “costs” towards the students are minimized and where the realities of an unequal system are recognized and addressed.

As a parent in the upper-middle class, I have many personal experiences, observations, and reflections of the class as a whole and parenting practices. These positions helped guide the inductive process of qualitative research but also were made transparent through my researcher's journal to ensure that my biases are clearly identified in my work. I also shared my biases and background with my critical friends and dissertation committee members, who reviewed the data and analysis and helped shine a light on any unexamined biases, which I then interrogated as they applied to the study.

### **Research Design**

This study sought to better understand the lived experience of high school students in the upper-middle class, specifically during the college preparation process, as the prevailing cultural messages are particularly pronounced at this time in an adolescent's life and this can be a natural time for adolescents to take inventory of who they are and what they want in life. This study was designed to understand whether students explore meaning and purpose during this time, and if so, how they do this. Using Portraiture, a complex and detailed narrative "picture" of each participant was painted. The unit of analysis is the individual student, and how that student engages with his/her culture as they explore meaning and purpose. The following section describes the sampling and selection process of the participants.

### **Sampling and Selection**

Based on the criteria that has been identified, key informants (school counselors) were used to identify possible participants who met all of the criteria and also would be likely to provide a depth and richness to their responses. School counselors were



provided background information about the study and the selection criteria by the researcher. They selected students who met the criteria and shared information about the study with potential participants. If the student was interested in participating, they contacted the researcher via telephone or email to obtain further information.

The selection criteria of the study were:

**Grade.** I sought to understand the lived experience of adolescents, particularly in regards to the college preparation and admissions process. Senior year is when students are engaging most with the college admission process; therefore, high school seniors comprised the population of this study. Also, with each year of high school, students grow in their capacity for cognitive and emotional complexity, so, in general, older students are able to produce more insightful responses than younger students.

**Socioeconomic status.** The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experience of adolescents in upper-middle class communities; therefore, the participants must reside in affluent towns. I used the metric designed by political scientist Charles Murray, which gives each town a score based on median household income and educational attainment, to identify communities that will likely embody the privilege and pressure that is described in the literature (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Weissbourd, 2011). I recruited adolescents from a community with a score of over 95 (on a scale from 1-100) on the Murray scale.

In addition to living in an affluent community, at least one parent must be college educated and be a white-collar professional. A demographics form was distributed to participants to ensure that their family meets the education criteria. I asked school

counselors to only refer students from families that they believed came from families with incomes above \$140,330, the lower-bound of the upper-middle class (Kane, 2015).

Many of the recent studies conducted focus on affluent youth who attend private schools (Coren & Luthar, 2014; Leonard et al., 2015; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). These studies cite a number of reasons for focusing on youth in private, not public, schools. As some literature suggests that the greatest amount of affluence confers the greatest risk among adolescents, private schools often educate the most affluent youth in our nation. Additionally, authors suggest that when parents must pay for education, and often quite high private school tuitions, this adds to the pressure and stress affluent students experience, that they need to prove they are making the most out of their parents' financial investment in their education (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

While the scholarly literature has focused on affluent students in private schools, the mass media has profiled many public schools in affluent neighborhoods and have reported on the overwhelming stress and mental health issues that these students experience (Rosin, 2015; Spencer, 2017). This study seeks to understand the experience of affluent adolescents in public school, as there is limited data available in the scholarly literature on this population, and as public school students make up a statistically greater proportion of youth in America than private school students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). There is a need to better understand the experiences of adolescents in public schools.

The participants were recruited from one county in the state that is highly segregated by race and socioeconomic status. About half of the districts in the county are

affluent, and the other half are at or close to the poverty line. The affluent districts are largely white, and the poorer districts are primarily students of color. Students for this study were recruited from an affluent district in the county.

**Gender.** The literature indicates that the lived experiences of adolescent boys and girls are quite different across the spectrum of social class. In order to get a perspective of the similarities and difference of adolescents in regards to gender, two female and two male participants were selected.

It is important to note that I did not select participants based upon race. While this is an important line of study, the upper-middle class communities that I drew from have very little racial diversity and I was not able to locate a racially diverse pool of participants given the demographics of the affluent areas. The lack of racial diversity proves to be an important consideration in the analysis of the data and the implications for practice and future research.

### **Participant Recruitment**

School counselors from the affluent high schools in the county were provided information about this study. Of the five districts contacted, only school counselors from one district were willing and able to participate. They identified potential participants, based upon the recruitment criteria and students who they believed would be able to describe a depth and complexity of their experience. The school counselors shared the recruitment letter with these students. If the student was interested in participating, they contacted the researcher for more information. If the student agreed to participate,

underage students provided assent and their parents provided consent via a signed form.

Overage students provided consent.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews with the adolescent participants. An interview guide was used to direct the questions and can be found in the appendix of this proposal. A total of three interviews with each participant took place, with the duration of each interview approximately 60-90 minutes. All interviews took place at public places throughout the community. Each interview was audio recorded.

The relationship that is created between participant and researcher is of importance in Portraiture. The researcher works to ensure the encounter is trusting and respectful, in order to create authentic encounters over time (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Portraiture seeks to deeply explore and understand the richness of the participant's lived experience, "hoping to capture more universal themes" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 22). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) states the research process includes: "collecting data, writing impressionistic memos and emerging hypotheses, conducting data analysis, and composing interpretive narratives" (p. 24).

### **Data Analysis**

In Portraiture, socio-cultural context is of vital importance to understand behavior. "[W]e do not know the intentions, motivations, and meaning attached to people's behaviors unless we see them embedded in context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 22). I asked about, listened for, documented, and mapped the context that surrounds the

adolescents in the study. I also included observations of the students' physical environment, such overall community and surrounding towns. Other documents that were of interest to this study to add to the depth of understanding of the student's experience (such as school website, school profile, school handbook) were reviewed.

The transcriptions of each interview, impressionistic memos, artifacts, my reflexive journal, and the revealed socio-cultural context were used to compose a portrait of each participant. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) writes, "the portraitist seeks to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience... hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it...[and] the reader will discover resonant universal themes. The more specific, the more subtle the description, the more likely it is to evoke identification" (p. 14). The four portraits will be presented in the next chapter.

### **Trustworthiness**

Ensuring quality and trustworthiness of the research project are of utmost importance to the study design. There are a number of ways that I established trustworthiness of this study. I engaged in reflexive journaling, worked with critical friends and committee review, and ensured a prolonged engagement with the participants.

**Reflexive journaling.** Reflexivity is "an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 2). A reflexive journal allowed me to keep track of all my methodological decisions and the rationale behind them, as well as my own reflections throughout the research process. The reflexive journal helped to delineate the process by which themes ultimately emerged, so that the

reader has a clear, transparent understanding of the process that led to the construction of those final outcomes.

A reflexive journal is also a place where I kept track of myself in the research process. Any reflections on the research question, insights, and biases were expressed, explored, and interrogated in this space. This process helped bring the unconscious to the conscious level, where it was examined. Additionally, the reflexive journal is a place where my thoughts, feelings, fears, desires, and needs were captured, allowing me to better understand how the self of the researcher impacts the interviews and the project as a whole (Ortlipp, 2008). For example, one topic I spent time writing about in my journal was power. I examined the power differential between the participants and adults in their lives, and how that imbalance impacted the path the students ended up on. When exposed to similar examples of this power structure, whether it be in my life as a parent in the upper-middle class, in literature, or in theater, I would relate these works to the ideas I was generating in my study, which helped me expand and deepen my understanding of the topic of power in the lives of youth.

Qualitative researchers often report how their “preconceptions, beliefs, values, assumptions, and position may have come into play during the research process” to enhance the trustworthiness of a study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 14). The reflexive journal is where I continued to dialogue with these facets of myself and how they impact the research process, which became part of Chapter Four of this dissertation so that the reader can examine and better understand how these items factored into the research process.

**Critical friends and committee review.** The involvement of other scholars in this research project, both faculty committee members and doctoral-level peer critical friends, provided a system of supporters who helped interrogate the research methods, raw data, analysis, and emergent themes. Involving peers and mentors in this process fostered a dialogue, which supported the development of “complementary as well as divergent understandings...and provide a context in which researchers’ often hidden beliefs, values, perspectives, and assumptions can be revealed and contested” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 11). My critical friends and committee members have an understanding of this research project through ongoing conversations we have had over the course of this project. These peers and mentors utilized a high level of intellectual and academic rigor when examining, questioning, and evaluating this project. Critical friends and committee members reviewed my interview guide, excerpts from the transcripts, analysis, and emergent themes.

**Prolonged engagement.** During the course of this study, I spent a significant amount of time with each participant, with the goal of remaining in the field until the data and emergent findings felt saturated or when the same things were being said over and over again with no new insights coming to bear (Merriam, 2009). Prolonged engagement also allowed me time to develop and test alternative hypotheses (Creswell, 2013). I looked for variation, data to support alternative explanations, and data that may “confirm or challenge...[my] expectations or emerging findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). The combination of adequate time spent with the participants and the active search for alternative hypotheses helped build credibility for the study’s ultimate results.

### **Significance**

As introduced in chapter 1, this study is significant in several ways. On the individual adolescent level, the voices of students themselves are often not given space in the academic literature. This study provides a forum for the experiences of adolescents themselves, and their intellectual and emotional reflections, to be heard in the academy. With a deeper and richer understanding of these students themselves, parents, teachers, counselors, policy makers, and researchers will be better equipped to meet the needs of these young people.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, scholarly research does not generally focus on privileged populations. While the privileges of this population are protective in some ways, they can also confer risk in others. Additionally, this population has unique challenges, struggles, and strengths that are worthy of inquiry and understanding.

Finally, the college preparation and admissions process, a vast cultural process that consumes a large amount of energy, money, and time, is rarely challenged or critiqued in the school counseling community. This study is significant as it calls into question some of the practices associated with this process and how this process as a whole impacts economic and social inequality in this country. With a better understanding of some of the unintended consequences of this process, both on the individual and systems level, the profession will be better situated to understand and reform the process, where necessary.



### **Chapter Summary**

Portraiture is an appropriate qualitative research method for this study to understand the complex, lived experiences of four adolescents in their specific cultural context. Portraiture seeks to combine science and art to capture the complexity of the human experience and broaden the conversation to include those outside of the traditional scope of the academic literature (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). The overall research design was described in this chapter, along with the steps I took to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. In the next chapter, I will present the findings of the study.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### **Introduction to the Portraits**

On a cold and bright December morning, I drive to meet my first participant. The journey to her town takes me through Columbus, a working-class community that neighbors her affluent suburb. Columbus is dull and grey, due to the color palette of the structures, the cars and trucks lining the streets, and the lack of vegetation. I pass a bus depot, a scrap-metal yard, and several bodegas with flashing neon “open” signs and posters in the window advertising rates of phone cards to distant places in the world. The center of town is marked by two converging highways, flanked by a fast food restaurant and a gas station. Here brown-skinned day-laborers congregate, dozens upon dozens, huddled in groups to ward off the cold. Burnt-out light bulbs in traffic lights sit dormant and not replaced, leaving motorists to engage in an intricate ballet to navigate the intersection unscathed. A grey chain-linked fence surrounds a new, deserted playground.

As I continue through a final, harrowing intersection, the road splits, narrows, and veers off in the direction of Middleton. The unkempt power lines disappear, and the road opens as I travel uphill. Parked cars move off the streets and into driveways and attached garages. The faces transform from black and brown to white. The homes, modest at first, grow larger and larger as I progress into town. The sky, which I hadn’t noticed until now, expands and captures my full attention, a dazzling, brilliant blue. Old-growth trees frame the street and accompany me on my journey through Middleton.

As I drive, I am struck by the stately homes. One more beautiful than the next, each architecturally fascinating, full of charming details such as slate-roofs, stained-glass

windows, porticos, and multiple chimneys. The homes are in an array of styles, Late-Victorian, Georgian, and Gothic but there is a harmony, symmetry, and order among them and with the natural surroundings. The lawns and gardens of these homes are equally impressive. The winter's chill has long since killed off any flowers, and the yards have been stripped clean of any unsightly remnants. The leaves have been neatly raked into manageable piles at the curb. No home in the community stands out as having a low standard of care; each adheres to the same meticulous standard of beauty and perfection. I note how the multitudes of colorful mums that adorned the lawns a month earlier have been ripped out of their beds and have since disappeared.

The center of town includes a train station which ferries commuting residents to and from a large city on the eastern seaboard. A single shingle hangs outside of the station, with the word "Middleton" emblazoned in big, gold letters. Across from the train station is the middle school, a magnificent Romanesque-revival structure, with a terracotta roof, massive arches, and grand columns. This building looks more like a museum than a public school that houses 10-14 year-olds. A wrap-around drive leads up to the school and adds to its refined sophistication. An old spruce tree adorns the lawn, providing shade. My mind wanders and imagines a youth reading a book outside underneath this tree, its majestic branches and leaves protecting the child from the noonday sun.

The following four portraits illuminate the vast cultural process that prepares affluent youth for college and, in doing so, reinforces a certain American ideology, rooted in patriarchal and capitalist values, such as meritocracy, competition, and individualism.

The patriarchy is a term for cultures that are headed by fathers, or some fathers, who control access to truth, power, knowledge, or God (Gilligan & Richards, 2009). Not only does the patriarchy privilege men, usually white men, over women and people of color, it also promotes a system of values that maintains the current patriarchal structure.

Domination, individualism, self-interest, hierarchy, competition, materialism, and maintenance of the status quo are all patriarchal values. These values are being enacted so that traditional “male” values, such as an emphasis on individualism and competition, and ways of being are privileged over more traditional female ways of being, such as an emphasis on connection and emotions. Both males and females in Middleton are rewarded if they perform specific “male” values well. All people, both women and men, are harmed by the patriarchy as it limits the range of our human expression. Patriarchal values stand in contrast to those that are associated with feminism, such as equality, empathy, ethic of care, vulnerability, connection, resistance, and transformation.

The portraits also illuminate how a number of strands of values, in addition to values associated with the patriarchy, are transmitted to these youth through their schooling and the college preparation process. The values associated with capitalism also prominently figure in the participants’ stories. Their narratives convey how they are being prepared for professional occupations in the upper-middle class, which may require them to quiet their own needs and wants in order to produce what the larger community is asking of them. They also are receiving messages that their financial security and success should be prioritized, and the participants seem to be making life decisions to ensure that they are able to meet this stated goal.

Finally, the American Dream ideology, specifically rooted in the concept of meritocracy, factors prominently in the participants' narratives. This framework suggests that those who reap the greatest rewards in life are those who are the most gifted and work the hardest (Knight, Roegman, & Edstrom, 2016). Knight et al. suggest that "merit" in a meritocracy is particularly linked with "working hard" and the participants in this study strove to demonstrate their merit by the herculean efforts they applied to their academic and extracurricular endeavors. However, the American Dream narrative largely ignores the structural factors that provides advantages for certain groups of individuals over others (Stewart, 2018). The structural advantages that the participants have benefited from their entire lives and that continue to privilege them remained largely invisible to these four adolescents.

In the following portraits, I am listening for and documenting how these values are transmitted, along with how the participants accept, reject, question, and struggle as they are asked by their culture to conform to these patriarchal and capitalist standards. The participants also benefit from adhering to these values; they are in the privileged position in society and are positioned to reap great rewards if they "play by the rules" in this system. I also strive to make the process of disconnection, from themselves and others, transparent where it is occurring in their narratives. Finally, these stories illustrate how privilege is reproduced, and what the benefits and costs are to the individuals.

There are three main voices in each of the portraits. First, the voice of the culture speaks in each of the portraits. The portraits illuminate how the culture acts on the individual, molding the adolescent in its desired image. Second is the voice of the

adolescent. Their voice is being acted on by the culture, but has agency, and can accept, question, dispute, and resist the cultural pressures. Finally, my voice as the listener is woven into the portraits, questioning and dialoguing with both the adolescents and the culture.

These stories are embedded in a larger question: what are our collective values that we want the next generation of leaders and citizens to embody? How do we transmit those values to our high-achieving, privileged youth? Can we envision a future for them where they stay in connection with themselves and others, and feel a deep responsibility to share their privilege with others and the greater community, which seems especially difficult given the growing economic uncertainties? These larger questions will be addressed in Chapter Five.

### **Middleton: The American Dream**

Each of the four participants live in Middleton, one of the most desirable suburbs in which to live in the state. Middleton boasts gorgeous homes, good schools, and a community full of accomplished professionals. In many ways, it can be seen as the “ideal” American community, a safe, prosperous, peaceful, and beautiful place to live and raise children. However, just like many communities in the state and nation, it is quite segregated, both along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Several participants noted that the reason their parents moved to Middleton was for the high quality schools. The school appears to be the hub of the community, where many parents volunteer their time and contribute financially to support the school’s mission. The high school offers many opportunities for adolescents to grow and learn,

including numerous Advanced Placement classes; many athletic teams and extracurricular activities; one-to-one laptops; and several annual trips, often to locations outside of the United States. Students are encouraged, by both parents and teachers, to take advantage of the many opportunities provided to them in Middleton.

Many of the childrearing and schooling practices seem designed to give youth access to privilege, unearned advantages that will help youth succeed in academic, professional, and social settings in their adult lives. Youth in Middleton have access to capital that will help maintain their position in the upper-middle class as adults, such as financial resources (well-funded schools, tutoring, sports, music lessons, travel), social capital (i.e. relationships with people in positions of power or influence), and cultural capital (education, speech patterns, manner of dress). As Middleton passes these traits from one generation to the next, the children of Middleton stand a good chance to remain in the same class as their parents before them, and the status quo of social class will be reproduced.

Youth in Middleton, like most places in the country, are taught that America is a meritocracy, and those who are the most talented and work the hardest get ahead. They are taught to strive for excellence, through hard work, competition, and sacrifice. However, like in many places, the role that unearned privilege plays in ensuring their success is not discussed and therefore, the role that these advantages play in the lives of Middleton youth are largely invisible to them, and are not questioned or acknowledged.

**Middleton: Demographics**

The four participants in this study all reside in Middleton, a small suburban town on the Eastern seaboard of the United States, located 45 minutes outside of a large city. According to census data (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) the annual median family income in Middleton is \$172,000, compared to an annual median U.S. income of \$50,502. According to census data, 85% of the population is White, 8% is Black, and 3% is Asian. Columbus, the town directly south of Middleton, has an annual household income of \$44,645 and the population is 72% Black, 12% White, and 10% “other races.”

Preparation for college seems to be central to the lives of Middleton youth. The Middleton school profile states, “Students understand and value their educational experiences as an opportunity to prepare for the most competitive colleges and universities.” As this is the framework that is guiding the efforts of the school, academic success is seen as an essential goal for youth to strive to attain. From the participants’ stories, it appears that those adolescents who reach the pinnacle of success in high school are promised the brightest and most financially secure futures.

According to the school profile, 94% of Middleton students go on to a four-year college or university. Students also score “well above” the state and national averages on standardized tests. The school has been recognized by many organizations such as *US News and World Report*, *The Washington Post*, and others as one of the “best” and “most challenging” high schools in the country.

From the stories the participants communicated, it appears that one of the main tasks of Middleton is to prepare students to be successful in competitive, challenging, and



high-profile institutions of higher education and occupations in American society.

Middleton also appears to have a “hidden curriculum,” which introduces and normalizes cultural values and beliefs that are also necessary for success in these arenas. The “hidden curriculum” consists of lessons that are not openly intended to be taught but are conveyed through the values, beliefs, and norms transmitted in the classroom and by the larger school and community culture. The participants communicate a hidden curriculum, which normalizes a high-stress, achievement-oriented, and individualistic path and persuades them that the sacrifice they make are “worth it” in terms of the rewards. If the students internalize these values, they will be more likely to succeed in the affluent educational, professional, and social cultures; however, their stories also convey losses that they experience as they question, push back, and reject parts of their culture.

Middleton is preparing students to gain access to some of the most privileged spaces in society — elite colleges; prestigious careers; and high-profile, affluent communities. The cultural conditioning that they are receiving will help provide access to these spaces but also, to the participants in the study, comes at a cost. The “American Dream” ideology factored prominently in the participants’ narratives, that those who worked the hardest reap the greatest rewards, without acknowledging that some people have unearned advantages that allow them easier access to “success.”

At points, the voices of the participants communicate a disconnection — a disconnection from each other and also a detachment from their own voices and emotions. Their narratives illustrate ways in which they had to suppress their thoughts and feelings to succeed by their cultural standards. The young women seem to voice

more resistance; they openly question and challenge the conventional cultural narrative more where the young men seem to question it less; however, the disconnection is still evident.

This may be in part due the different ways that boys and girls are socialized. In early childhood, boys are often pressured by their culture to separate from their mothers, and disconnect with aspects of themselves that are “feminine,” in order to meet the male standards of being in society. Boys often disconnect from their authentic ways of thinking and feeling at this time. This process happens later with girls, during early adolescence, when many girls experience pressure to meet societal standards of a “good (young) woman,” one who is selfless and kind, and the girl learns to reject and fear feelings and behaviors that do not meet the cultural ideal of young womanhood. Therefore, when looking at the gendered experience of these participants, the boys may have learned to disassociate from their authentic selves and silence their voices much earlier in their lives, whereas the girls have just gone through this process. Therefore the girls may still have some awareness of what their culture is pressuring them to do, and may be able to more actively resist the dominant cultural messages.

### **The Portraits**

The following four participant portraits are presented in the following section. First, the portrait of Lea; second, the portrait of Greta; third, the portrait of Johnny; and finally, the portrait of Henry.

**“Lea”**

I pull into the vast, empty parking lot of the cafe where I am to meet Lea. It is surprising that Lea, at 17-years old, chose to meet me at 9am on a Saturday morning, the day before Christmas Eve. Aren't many adolescents still sleeping? Isn't she transitioning into vacation mode? But I am grateful that she is making time for me, and she was the one to choose the time. I enter the unusually quiet cafe and set up, while loud music blares overhead. Nearby a white woman is speaking loudly into her cell phone while tapping on her laptop. Two older white men sit silently, side-by-side, and work on laptops. The bright colors and loud music of the cafe stand in stark contrast to the quiet December morning.

I see Lea through the window as she approaches the cafe. She is tall and thin, dressed in black leggings and a cropped, fitted down jacket. Her medium-blond hair has gentle, natural waves that neatly, naturally go hither-and-fro, and come to rest on her narrow shoulders. She wears one small, delicate, moon-shaped stud in each ear. Her eyes are striking, blue-green with streaks of gold. As she introduces herself to me, she comes across as both a self-assured young adult and a self-conscious teenager. As I get to know Lea, I come to know her as a kind, generous, ambitious, gentle, sweet, and determined young woman, one who strives to make the most of the opportunities presented to her.

Over the course of our time together, Lea shares stories of how she has navigated her high school experience and prepared for and applied to college. Her stories illuminate how she came to make this important life decision, which has far-reaching consequences regarding who she will become.

Growing up in Middleton, she is part of a wealthy community, where, as she puts it, many members live a “very comfortable lifestyle.” She says that living in Middleton “fosters” the pursuit of wealth. She sees the cost of keeping up with that lifestyle, and wants to be able to provide for her future family in the same way that she was provided for as a young person. She feels pressure to be on a path that will lead to a well-paying job as an adult, so she will be able to maintain the socioeconomic status that she is a member of now.

Lea also wants to attend a prestigious college or university next year. She notes: Really big name [colleges] that's what works with students here in Middleton. Because a lot of people do go to really great, big schools. I want to have a name, it's unfortunate, but I want to have a school on there that when someone reads it they're like okay, “this girl knows what she's doing.”

Lea believes that a “big name” college will give her a level of creditability in the adult world. She recognizes that having a focus on the “name” of the school is “unfortunate” but is able to firmly vocalize that the brand name is important to her and will be important in her future. The road to a prestigious college is not an easy one, as she must meet extremely high standards in order to be a viable candidate. She describes working late into the night and sacrificing activities that she finds meaningful as she strives to gain the credentials that will allow her to apply to “good” schools.

While Lea works tirelessly to achieve academic, athletic, and college admissions success, she questions the trade-offs that she must make in order to succeed to meet her goals. While Lea struggles with and sometimes questions the traditional American

narrative that it appears her community supports, one of meritocracy, hard work, determination and independence, it appears that she ultimately accepts these values and plans to continue on the well-worn path as she makes her college admissions decision.

Lea seems particularly aware of the multiple messages, the contradictions, and the choices that are entailed in crafting a “successful” life in the upper-middle class. She acknowledges that there might be multiple paths that students can take. There is a tension between the awareness of multiple paths, and the pressure to make certain choices that may be seen as more acceptable or “right” in the eyes of her community.

While Lea sees this next step in her life through a very career-oriented lens, the path that she chooses will not only impact her career trajectory but will also surely shape her in many ways that she cannot see or comprehend now. She is making choices in terms of how she is going to use the gifts she has, and how she will use her larger life in the world. These choices will influence not only how she acts upon the world, but how the world acts upon her, such as the people she will be surrounded by, the values of the institution she attends, and the subjects she will study will all mold her. The choices will shape who she will be as an adult; as an individual, a member of a family, a citizen, a community member, and shape how she sees her path to contribute to the greater good.

**Dreams deferred.** In preparation for the high-stakes college admissions process, Lea and her peers must be strategic about what classes they will take in high school. In order to get the highest possible GPA, they need to ensure they maximize the number of Advanced Placement (AP) classes they take, as AP classes accrue more points than Honors or College Prep classes. The subject matter of the class itself may not be as

crucial as the AP designation. This path may force Lea and her peers to make trade-offs, choosing an AP class over a class that they have authentic interest. Lea explains, “I love to draw. And I took Art up until sophomore year but come junior year I didn't have room [in my schedule] for an Art class because I needed to take another AP.” Although Lea “loves” creative endeavors, she opts to drop Art in favor of adding another academic class that will make her a more viable candidate in the college admissions process.

Lea is carefully attuned to the practices that will help her gain acceptance into an elite college, such as selecting courses that will give her the greatest odds at a high GPA. She understands what is required to attain entry into a high-profile college and makes the appropriate decision to best position herself to reach this goal. In doing so, she is closing the door on other paths that may be more authentically interesting to her. She seems to understand that getting into a “good” college is what she is striving for, and as she describes this trade-off to me, does not seem to deeply question the choice that she is making, she seems to accept it as necessary in order to achieve her higher education goals.

Lea is also picking up messages about what careers and life paths are available to her, as she describes below:

I always wanted to be an artist my whole life. And when people would ask me about that, they would almost laugh because they're like, “You're going to make no money.” And, so, I guess, that kind of subconsciously helped me switched, well, it didn't help, but it forced me to switch to pursuing a career that was more feasible. So now I'm less interested, I still love the arts, and I would love to do

them, but I know that I really can't make a stable living off that, so I've decided not to pursue it. And that's kind of sad because I really enjoyed making art and being creative and stuff.

Lea appears to be receiving direct messages, such as the example above that she will “make no money” in the arts, and indirect messages, as she looks around her community and sees who is successful, that a career in the arts may not be the best choice for her. She is a product of this community, which does value financial success, and she wants to succeed by the community's standards, but a part of her questions this path. The ability to earn an income that will maintain her standard of living and job security become very important factors in her future career decisions.

I think Middleton kind of fosters that. I know a lot of people are very wealthy and they're used to a very comfortable lifestyle, so that's what they want to continue in their future. Why would you ever want to stop living the way that you do?

In this quote, Lea speaks from the “they” instead of “we.” She is becoming part of the “we,” she is making choices that are moving her closer to the Middleton “ideal” as an adult, like choosing a financially stable career over a financially uncertain career in the arts. But this language suggests that she sees herself outside of the larger community, separate from them.

The bar of a “very comfortable lifestyle” in Middleton is high. The financial costs associated with living in an affluent community like Middleton are staggering, with median home prices around \$700,000 and average annual property taxes close to

\$20,000. The “lifestyle” often includes nice cars, vacations, high-end clothing. If a youth who lives in the upper-middle class wants to stay in the upper-middle class as an adult, the price of doing so is quite high. This cost will limit the potential careers that are open to them, as they must select a career with a high enough salary to support this lifestyle.

While she is receiving strong messages from her community about what is the appropriate path for a young person of her status and ability, she does question the prevailing narrative:

But then that does put this little feeling of doubt in your head like, “Why is it bad that I’m not earning all this money [if I pursue a career in art]? Do I really need to be doing something where I can just make money? Is that all that matters in life?” I started questioning that when I was so young. So crazy to me, I don’t know. And so now I’m starting to realize that art might not be what I earn my living off of, but it’s something I definitely wanna keep pursuing. So I definitely am not gonna limit it for my life.

Lea must be learning in her community that she has to focus on earning a high income. There is such a strong emphasis on attaining financial security, that she questions it and asks, “is this all that matters in life?” Her voice is saying that it is “crazy” to focus so much on income, but she immediately disconnects from this statement. By saying “I don’t know,” suggests that she is questioning whether her thoughts and feelings about this topic are valid. She makes a strong statement, then tempers it with “I don’t know,” then her voice shifts to a rationalization of the situation.



Over time, Lea shifts her career plans away from art and towards engineering. She sets a goal to receive an appointment to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Admission to the Naval Academy is highly competitive and requires the same stellar grades and standardized test scores of other elite post-secondary institutions, and a host of additional requirements including a Congressional nomination. If she is accepted to the Naval Academy and decides to attend, she will spend four years taking courses such as naval science, engineering, navigation, and weapons systems. Her training will also focus on character development, to instill in her the core naval values of honor, courage, and commitment. After these four years, she will then have to serve in the Navy for 5 to 8 years in active duty. If she decides to focus on aviation, she will have an 8-year obligation; she will then be 30 years old before she can contemplate returning to civilian life, if she so desires. Who she will be at the end of her training and service commitment will likely be quite different than who she is now. She shares with me one of the trade-offs of this commitment. “And I’m such this hopeless little romantic like I always wanted to live in Paris and do that stuff. So I’m like, I’ll be 30 by the time I’m done with all of this. You know?” Lea has hopes of living in Paris and pursuing artistic endeavors, which she hopes to be able to do someday, but has deferred these dreams for some point in the future, most likely after she is settled on a stable career path. She shares with me how she comes to find her more practical and acceptable plan for her life.

**Exceptionalism.** The motto of Middleton High School is A Tradition of Excellence. After spending time in the town and with the students, I understand the perception is that Middleton graduates go on to be successful people in society, both

today and across the course of its over 100-year history. The informational brochure about Middleton, designed to give colleges a sense of the school and community, states that the school provides a “comprehensive” education that emphasizes college preparation. According to this document, students from Middleton are prepared to attend the most competitive colleges and universities in the nation. The brochure states Middleton students score well above state and national standardized test score averages and that over 90% of the student body is involved in extracurricular activities. Additionally, it says that a high percentage of Middleton parents are leaders in the fields of business, medicine, and law.

Lea appears to strive for excellence in everything that she does. Whether it is as captain of the state-championship winning soccer team; in her Advanced Placement classes; or as a Peer Leader, the elite group of seniors chosen for their upstanding character and leadership ability to mentor and guide 8th graders as they prepare for high school. She endeavors to meet the standard of success in the eyes of the community. She believes that, in the eyes of her community, “You have to be that, you have to be that student, you have to be the fun social person, too. You need to have it all, to be the complete person at Middleton.” It seems like her community — her parents, peers, teachers - are encouraging her to focus her efforts in particular ways, to become the “complete person” in Middleton. The purpose of her efforts transcends the here-and-now; these particular efforts can be viewed as a training ground to prepare her for a certain type of “successful” life. Part of the message that she is receiving is to “work hard now,” and that it will “pay off later.”

Lea described what it means to her to “work hard.” Several times a week, she wakes up at 5am to work out before school. If she has a test the following day, she may stay up until 1am. She describes feeling like “there is nowhere to turn” when the stress from her school work, college applications, and other responsibilities build up. She feels that “literally all eyes are on you” and that “everyone’s judging everyone in Middleton.” She states, “there is no room to be yourself. You have to fit the social mold in Middleton.”

Lea describes the pervasive pressure to achieve in Middleton, that at times, it appeared that her needs had to be ignored in order to pursue an academic or extracurricular goal. For example, I met Lea a couple of days after she had been in a car accident. She was visibly shaken, and talked about the accident with a quiet voice and downcast eyes. She told me she wasn’t getting any sleep and that “mentally” this week has been “terrible.”

The whole [college] application process forgets that we are people too. So really, this week I was struggling so much with all this pressure; [and] on top of that, the accident happened and that brought it to a whole other level of pressure.

Lea seemed to need time and support to process what she had been through and physically and emotionally heal from this frightening experience. Yet, when she returned to school, some teachers were less than supportive:

I missed school and I just came school the next day, I emailed my teachers what happened and then, one of my teachers was like, "Oh you missed a quiz, do you want to take it now?" *I'm just not ready for that.* Like one of my teachers was

angry that I missed some work and didn't do my homework while I was out so, that, like things like...

Lea and I talked about why her teachers responded to her the way they did. She said that some teachers have an “attitude” that their “class is more important.” This appears to be a not-so-subtle lesson from her teachers to suppress her own feelings and needs in order to continue to work hard to achieve academic success.

Lea questions her teachers’ expectations for her and also struggles to understand who the college admissions officers would like her to be. She also recognizes that she needs to stand out in the applicant pool, and differentiate herself from others, by participating in unique and interesting activities. She indicates that she tries to figure out what the admissions’ officers want in a candidate, but this process is filled with doubt, as she describes below:

Does this really matter? Like if I do this internship, are they really going to care? And then a lot of my friends are doing these really cool things, like doing these internships abroad, and I'm a sailing instructor in Delaware, so, like, I was a little worried coming into this process, what's going to make my application stand out as opposed to the people who went to Europe and went to Uganda and did this and that? How are they going to look at mine and be, like, okay? So that was a question, does this all really matter?

**Competition.** Lea describes an unspoken understanding that she is competing with other members of her class for the best grades, top GPA, and highest standardized test score. The universe of colleges and universities that the students of Middleton apply

to is small, and there is an excellent likelihood that students will be competing with each other to earn a spot at the same institution. This often leads to Lea comparing herself to others, to understand how she can “better” herself over others to have the best chances of acceptance. She aptly reflects, “You can't help but compare yourself to everyone else. You can't help it. You know that's what the admissions board is doing.” While she recognizes the constant comparisons may not be ideal, she believes they help her to push her to try harder, become “better,” and achieve more.

In Lea's account of the college admissions standards, the way she would “better herself” is to gain higher grades, better standardized test scores, or better performance in athletics or extracurricular activities. The examples that Lea provided about “bettering herself” for purposes of the college process primary relates to external achievement.

Lea describes several commonplace, everyday ways that the competition is evident, as the following exchange between Lea and a peer. “But it's like, ‘Oh, what APs are you taking?’ Like, oh, ‘You're taking five?’ Like, ‘Shoot, your GPA is going to be higher than mine.’ Like, ‘Maybe I should take five.’” She also describes how comparisons enter her mind during a college tour:

It's like when you are touring a school, and you're in a tour group you can't help but wondering (whispering, under her breath), “Ok, what are these people scores?” like “How do I stack up against these other applicants?” You just can't help it. I was at the Naval Academy I met a bunch of people that were also applying, and they were like, “What's your score?” I'm like, “Are you really, like, right here, [are we] really going to compare ourselves?”

It appears that Lea's experience of comparisons and competition may not end when she leaves Middleton. This exchange with a potential future peer at the Naval Academy suggests that a spirit of competition may color her experiences in higher education as well. As a midshipman, her commission after graduation will be based on where she ranks in her class, with the most desirable positions going to the midshipmen with the highest class ranks. Her experiences with comparisons and competition in Middleton may prove to be a good training group for her future education and post-academy career.

In the above quote, Lea questions the conventional narrative that supports comparisons. On the one hand, she recognizes that these numbers are reductionistic, and incredulously questions and challenges this narrative with me. On the other hand, she is beholden to play by the "rules" of the college admissions "game" to succeed, to gain entrance at many of these institutions. She needs to understand where she falls among her peers, in terms of class rank and standardized test scores, in order to accurately gauge how good her chances will be to gain admission to colleges and universities, especially when applying to the same institution as a peer. This information helps her decide where she needs to work harder, whether that is getting a higher standardized test score or taking more AP classes. While she can challenge the competition and comparisons with me, it appears that she does not see another viable path for herself. It may ultimately be easier for her to conform to these practices, as they are so embedded into her everyday experiences, than to take a huge step outside of the norms of her community and not engage in these practice. That decision could reduce her chances at acceptance at an elite school, possibly jeopardizing her future as a member of the upper-middle class.

Lea describes how her relationships have been impacted by the high-achieving path she is on. She is aware of some of the “costs” associated with this path. She details school-sanctioned segregation that occurs starting in middle school when the “honors” students are divided into different classes than the general student population. This practice may encourage the “honors” youth to see themselves as special and achieving, while also providing them with a prescribed, narrow path toward success.

I lost a lot of relationships because I've been more focused on my school umm...and then as we mentioned earlier when you take an AP class you are with the same people... so it's either you, your friends are either the people in your classes or sports you are playing and if you don't have a sport with someone and you don't have classes with someone you really don't talk to them. Because your really just come home, do your work, and go to bed. So, umm, [I've] lost some close friends; we just grew apart because we didn't have classes together.

Lea delineates how academic tracking has influenced her relationships. As she is on the prestigious “honors” track, she seems to lose contact with some of her peers who are not on that track. It seems like it is a “cost” of attaining academic success, to lose some friendships. While she is still friends with the other students in her honors classes and sports teams, the loss of other relationships is palpable in her voice.

As Lea strives for her community’s version of “ideal” young womanhood, which in her eyes means a young person who takes “all AP’s,” is active in sports and clubs, and is “social” and “cool,” and who gets into an elite college, it appears that she is also disconnecting from people and things that would impede her from reaching this standard.

Lea is moving out of relationship with some of her peers, in order to meet her community's definition of success. For example, she recognizes that she has "lost" many relationships over the years because she was unable to maintain friendships with peers who were not in the same AP and honors classes as Lea. However, from a relational perspective, the way that we grow psychologically is when we are connected to others. As Lea disconnects from peers to pursue success, she may miss out on important opportunities to grow.

Within the context of my relationship with her, at times I felt confused as to where I stood with her. One evening after our first meeting I received a text from Lea, with a photo of her and her school counselor, whom I know. The text following the picture read, "We ♥ ☐ u!" The next time we meet I expect a greater closeness in our relationship, but there was a distance that I did not understand, given the depth of our previous meeting and the texts she had sent. Over the course of our time together, I had a hard time figuring out where I stood with her, as there were confusing fluctuations in the nature of our relationship. I felt her getting closer to me, then pulling back. She would give a glimpse of vulnerability but then attempt to brush it off and negate whatever she shared.

**Status in higher education.** Lea is considering applying to some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. One school on her list is the Naval Academy, which, according to Lea, has less name recognition in Middleton than other institutions:



I didn't want to tell people I was applying to the Academy because I'm like, they don't really know anything about it, they're going to think it's really weird. I'll just tell people I'm applying to Harvard and that sounds much better.

Lea sees the Naval Academy as a somewhat less culturally-sanctioned option for her higher education; however, she has been exposed to this path through her father. He attended the Academy as a young man, but had to leave due to family obligations and an injury. Lea states, "He tells me every day how much he regrets leaving. He thinks that if you get into the academy, it's like getting a golden ticket. That's what he thinks." Lea's father has encouraged her to explore the possibility of attending the Naval Academy, which seems to be what brought a somewhat unknown institution into Lea's list of potential colleges and universities. The fact that her education at the Naval Academy would be fully subsidized by the United States government is appealing to Lea:

Well, one thing that's really making me feel secure about going to an academy is just the cost aspect. And that shouldn't be the primary reason why someone goes to a service academy but it's definitely really appealing, 'cause I have some friends who are thinking about taking out loans and stuff. And they're like, "Yeah, I'm gonna be 35 and still paying off loans."

While the Naval Academy is a lesser-known post-secondary option in Middleton, in the larger U.S. college-going community, it is generally regarded highly and seen as a prestigious institution. Institutions that do not have the same cachet do not fare as well in the eyes of some members of the community. Lea picks up on subtle and not so subtle

messages from her peers, parents, and community members about which schools are acceptable, and which schools are unacceptable. She describes one example below:

She [Lea's friend] just got into Coastal Carolina University, but she's on the waitlist at University of Maryland... she's really excited about Coastal Carolina, she's been telling her mom that, but her mom is like, "Coastal Carolina's bad. Do you know who goes there? Like, dumb people that go there." And literally tells her this up front. And she's really pushing her to stay onboard with Maryland, but she's only on the waitlist[...]. It's just this pressure to go to somewhere that's the better school, and to do the better thing...but now she's afraid to go there because she doesn't want people to think that she's dumb, or like she can do better.

This is an instance where the messages from the parents in the community align with those of the school. These strong messages from members of the community, even members that are removed from Lea's immediate circle of family and friends, contribute to her ideas of which future paths are viable and which are not. When we were talking about her ideas about what makes one successful, she stated:

Someone who got the most out of what they did, I think that's success. So one of my friends' moms went to Marist, and, like, in our town, that's like not a very highly respected school, unfortunately [...], like it's not considered one of the best, but she works for *The New York Times* and she travels and takes photos. I think she's so successful because she took that education and has made the most of it.

Lea is impressed by the ability of this woman to take what is considered a less than superior education and still manage to get a prestigious job. In her cultural calculus, people from Marist are not supposed to rise to the highest and most prestigious positions in our society, but this woman, presumably through her hard work, was able to; therefore, she is successful.

It is interesting that Lea provided this example of someone who did not take the prescribed path but has become successful. She is aware of a discrepant script; she finds it noteworthy and impressive. While she is rooted in her community's vision of the path to success, which suggests that attendance at an elite college or university is necessary in life, she recognizes there may be another way.

**Meritocracy.** High standardized test scores are necessary to gain acceptance at “good” colleges and universities. Students like Lea, from top socioeconomic communities, tend to have a significant advantage in college entrance testing than lower-income students and students of color. Even with this advantage, students from neighborhoods like Middleton often spend a considerable amount of time (and sometimes money) preparing for these high-stakes tests. These practices help ensure that Middleton adolescents stay on the path towards success. The studying often does not have any broader applicability; the time spent preparing for the test is only done for increasing an individual's score and increasing their chances of admission to the colleges of their choice.

Lea describes the vast amount of time that she dedicated to studying for the ACTs. “I don't think it should be this way, [but] like, all of junior year, all I wanted to do

was get the score on my ACTs. It's like, that's all I did junior year, was like study, take practice ACTs, and then do it." On one hand, Lea is questioning the legitimacy of this process, and feels that it shouldn't be that way. On the other hand, she recognizes how crucially important it is to do well on this test, and reports dedicating much of her junior year to this test.

Lea goes on to recount, with great excitement and enthusiasm, the rest of the story behind her standardized test score. She eagerly tells me that after she got her initial ACT score back, she knew she could do better. With pride and relief she describes taking the ACT again, and, as she walked out of the exam, she knew she did well and wouldn't have to take it again. She describes to me the day she got her ACT scores back from her second test:

Working hard for my ACT score and then finally getting what I got *was one of the best days of my life* [italics added]. We were skiing, and I pulled out my phone on the ski lift and my friend's like, "Did you check your ACT score?" And I'm like, "No." So I go and check it online, and we're going around, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh!...Look!"

Lea's pride in her score is evident. She is proud that her hard work paid off, the many hours she dedicated to this exam resulted in an excellent score. She voices the relief to have a good score — that the studying for this exam is done. She also seems positively joyous to have achieved this score. While she questioned dedicating much of her junior to this test, she sees that time as well spent, as now she has an ACT score that will significantly improve her chances at admission at an elite college or university.

This passage also highlights the centrality of this number in her life. Even in the midst of a lovely leisure activity, she is outside, on a ski lift on a mountain, with a friend, the score takes center stage and seems to supersede the moment itself. This one number is of tremendous importance to Lea.

Perhaps this number is so important to Lea because she sees it as a reflection of who she is, in the eyes of the college admissions process. Lea states that “where your GPA and ACT score line up on the scatterplot is who you are.” She understands the rules of the college admissions process that to gain entry into the elite schools she must have a certain GPA and ACT score.

Lea’s ACT score is excellent, near-perfect. It will give her access to the most prestigious schools in the country. Her grueling hard work is paying off in post-secondary opportunities, which can open doors to success regarding career and social connections. We spent some time examining the flip side, students from her school who do not get into prized elite colleges.

When asked about how she thinks her peers that do not get into the elite colleges feel, she says, “We all kind of realize that if we worked for the opportunity to apply to a better school, then we’ve earned that chance. And I guess those other students might not have worked as hard.” Here Lea is exposing an internalized script, one of meritocracy. While she has shown some awareness to the contrary, she appears to have digested this ideology and has made it part of how she views the world. She is working under the logic that those who work the hardest on the prescribed path (high grades in rigorous classes, high standardized test scores) “earn” the chance to apply to the most prestigious colleges

and universities, thereby opening doors to future success. If you are not in a position to apply to these institutions, maybe you did not work as hard as those who did.

**Certainty.**

You spend your whole time searching. And I've known people that are in their second year [of college], and I'm like, "What are you majoring in?" and they're like, "I don't know yet." That's kind of scary. It's really scary to be unsure about what you're doing when everyone else around you is so sure. That's, it's so daunting to enter into something that's like, I'm doing this track, I'm doing that. It's like, that was me for the longest time, too. And now finally I've kind of settled down, like okay, I think I like this. But I'm still not sure yet.

Lea has spent most of her life with clear parameters for success. As long as she followed the adult-direct path and worked hard, she was guaranteed some amount of security in her choices and positive acknowledgment from her community of her efforts. As she looks to life after high school, the path appears somewhat less clear, and there are many more choices and decisions for her to make. She is nervous about wasting time, about not being on a clear career path that will lead towards economic security. She was fearful about the cost of college, which amplifies the consequences of making a "poor" choice:

And it's so crazy that I'm worried about that right now. I used to spend whole nights in the summer laying in bed, thinking about, "Okay, how am I going to pay for this school? What am I gonna do then?" You know?

Lea described a period of acute stress when she did not know where she should apply to school, what to study, or how she would finance the cost of her education. As the cost of four years of tuition and room and board at an elite, private college or university can easily exceed \$270,000. Even affluent families often have difficulty paying for college, especially in families with more than one child. This discomfort was an impetus to return to organized religion:

And everyone in the church just tells you keep praying, and you'll find your answer. And for the longest time, I wasn't very strong in my faith, but I did it anyway, like, "If there's anyone out there, where am I supposed to go to college?" And then that's when the things started popping up, and I started seeing more Navy and more this, and that's when I really started to feel this calling, this is probably what I'm supposed to be doing.

Honestly, I was really just desperate for an answer. I was so unsure, like, "Please help me." And at that point, you're like, "I'll turn anywhere for some reassurance." Like, "Help me."

I could hear the desperation in Lea's voice as she recounted this period in her life. Fear seemed to dominate her experience because she did not know her path. Lea describes the comfort she felt after receiving a "call" from God to pursue military service and training at the Naval Academy. She states,

"It was just, mentally, it just was reassuring [to receive a call]. It must be really scary to go out there and be like, this whole future is laying ahead of me.

Whereas I can go out into the world and be like, I have a plan, there's a plan for me...

Lea finds comfort in finding a plan for college and her future. It is concerning that Lea seems to come to this plan for her future without much exploration of the various options for her life. She states:

I think that a 17-year-old should not be making the decision of what they're going to do for the rest of their life at 17. I think we should all have the opportunity to try out different fields and experiment and figure out what we like and what we don't [...] My school didn't really give me those opportunities [...] Because I personally was scared, I said I'm engineering but what if I go to engineering school and realize that's not what I want? And then I'm stuck in this school, and there's nothing else to do [...] I don't know, I don't think it should be the time to make a definite decision. It should be more of an exploration.

Lea is voicing that she may have needed more time to come to a decision about her future path. However, the path that she does select, towards military life, may seem less risky for Lea. Her father introduced her to this path, and seems to hold it in high esteem, calling acceptance at an academy a “golden ticket.” Some of the values and structure of military, such as its clearly-defined parameters of how one advances and succeeds, is familiar to Lea, as it framed her high school experience. She knows how to navigate a meritocracy and how to achieve:

And like, your hard work pays off, and you see that. It's this particular scale of how you improve yourself. You know that if you don't work for it, you're not



gonna get it. You're self-motivated, and you know what you need to do. That's nice to me, too.

Military life seems appealing to Lea because she understands the values that define life in both Middleton and the military; hard work, determination, personal sacrifice, meritocracy, and competition. She is also drawn to the purpose she sees imbued in military life.

**Purpose.**

It's kinda funny because I'm not this super, rah-rah military girl, but I have this nature that I wanna do something bigger than myself. I wanna be living my life with a purpose. I wanna be doing something constructive. I don't know.

Lea mentions at several points throughout our time together about the urge she has to ensure her life has a purpose. She sees her faith as providing the foundation of this belief. "I feel like a Christian has the mindset that they are living for a purpose, regardless. Because they live for God, and that's like they're living to serve Him. So I guess that's a service aspect in itself." In this case, it appears that she did not have many avenues available to her where she could live a life of purpose, especially while attaining her goals regarding economic security and social status. The military's ethos of service is appealing to Lea in this regard. Her efforts would be supporting the greater good.

I don't wanna work in an office. I wanna do something that's really meaningful.

And then also it is this, it's literally a calling. There are people that feel obligated to serve, and for some reason, I just feel that desire.

Lea's desire to make a difference in the world and be of service is being funneled into a patriotic duty, shrouded in the American ideals of meritocracy and exceptionalism, to serve her country, just like her father did. I wonder if Lea had been exposed to other ways that adults can manifest these values, perhaps ways that include some of her other interests such as art and creativity, if this would have yielded different possibilities for Lea's future.

**The payoff.** Lea views her high school experience as positive one, full of hard work and stress. Now that she has been accepted into "good" colleges the pressure has lifted.

And then sophomore year started, and it [stress] just built, and built, and built, and built, and then now was when I'm feeling the relief. So there really was no rest between that period.[...] My parents are so noticing now, they're like, "Oh, you're so happy now!" And I'm like, "Well I'm not stressed anymore, you guys!"

They definitely notice a change, too, in how I'm feeling and stuff.

The pressure was both a positive and negative force in Lea's eyes. She appreciated how it motivated her to work hard and succeed, but she recognizes that the levels of stress may have been unhealthy at times. With the goal of admission at an elite institution achieved, now Lea has time and space to do things she did not previously have time for:

Well I mean, as I told you many times, I'm super determined. When I see an opportunity to do well, I'm going to try to do the best that I can. I think there are some students that are really good at working the system and they know how to get by. They know how to get the Bs, they know how to sneak by. But I never

liked to just pass something, I'm always doing my best. And I guess that's just who I am, that's my personality, even since I've been little, I'm very competitive. And I'm always going to give it 110%. I'm never going to give it any less than that. I just don't know how.... But it's funny because now Senior-itis is kicking in and I'm like, wait a minute, is this how I'm supposed to be living my whole life? Am I not supposed to be going this hard all the time?

With the pressure lifted, she has an opportunity to see an alternative path and to question which path is the “right” path to be on. However, she recognizes that this period of peace will be short-lived. She will graduate high school on June 15th. On June 28th, she will be on her way to boot-camp for the summer, where she will undergo a rigorous physical and mental training, the purpose of which is to transform her from a civilian into a midshipman. We talk about what she wants to do during this period of freedom:

But I might be going to boot camp June 28. [...] I really need to get strong so lifting wise, I'm definitely going to be training and doing things. Spending more time with my friends is a huge one. On a Friday night, like last night, okay on Thursday, my friends and I all went and played kickball. On a random Thursday night. Tell me we would have done that any other time? No. Way. Yeah, I'm really loving it... [But] I'm not going to have a summer at all.

Lea speaks with exuberance as she shares this story about spending time with her friends. She seems lighter, and has a brightness and energy when she speaks of this experience. Despite Lea's abundance of joy, I feel sadness in this moment with her. The majority of the stories she has shared with me have an underlying theme of pressure; she has been

striving for so long to meet perhaps developmentally inappropriate expectations of success. As the college admissions process is coming to an end, she finally has some relief from this pressure, time to turn her attention away from attaining “success” and just be a kid with her friends, to do things for pure enjoyment and fun. But this time will be short-lived, as she will be back on the pressure-laden track, perhaps even more intensely, at the Naval Academy.

**Summary.** In many ways, Lea embodies much of what we hope for in our youth. She is one of our “best and brightest,” and she has a strong desire to use her life in ways that are “bigger than” herself. However, she seems to be ushered down a path where she is learning to ignore her own needs, question her thoughts and feelings, silence her intuition, and defer her hopes for her life in order to excel and achieve according to Middleton’s standards of success, which include striving for affluence and status. Not only is she disconnecting from parts of herself, she is also disconnecting from others and learning to compete with others, to excel and attain the best GPA and acceptance into the most prestigious post-secondary institutions.

Lea’s disconnection from herself and others resembles what feminist scholars have documented occurs during the development of young women. Feeling pressure from their community to “fit” within the narrow definition of womanhood in society, young women often disconnect from thoughts or feelings that would be problematic in attaining the ideal version of a woman. As they try to distance themselves from these ways of being, they lose the ability to authentically understand their own experience in the world, and are unable to authentically relate to others, as one cannot be in connection with others

if they are not in connection with themselves. This disconnection is adaptive in some ways, protecting the young woman from the shame and rejection she may feel from members of her community if she does not live up to the standards for young women, but it also can have high psychological and interpersonal costs over time, such as an inability to know what she knows, and inability to be aware of and accept the range of human emotions that she feels, and challenges in creating authentic connections with others. Feminist psychologists see this disconnection as the root of many mental health issues in our society.

What Lea is experiencing may be analogous to the disconnections that feminist scholars describe. In striving to attain the “ideal” version of a young person in Middleton, she is learning that some of her thoughts, feelings, and relationships do not fit with the cultural logic one needs to adhere to in order to perform well in Middleton. At the time of our interviews, she has accepted some of the values and logic of life in Middleton, but we can hear many ways in which she is still questioning, struggling, and resisting the pressures to disconnect. However, by making the choice to enroll in the Naval Academy, she may experience even more pressure to quiet her voice in order to become part of the collective and to accept the values of the Navy.

### **“Greta”**

I meet Greta at a noisy coffee shop off of an ugly, grey road in between Middleton and Columbus, the neighboring urban community. The windows of the shop overlook a crowded parking lot and a decaying liquor store across the street. The cafe sits in the shadow of a vast, old church that no longer serves its intended purpose as a place

of worship. It has been converted into a charter school, giving parents in Columbus an educational option other than their “failing” public school.

As I enter the cafe, I am overwhelmed by the cacophony of sounds. I hear the whoosh of the espresso machine, the whirl of the blender, the crinkling of cellophane being unwrapped, and some unidentifiable banging of metal upon metal. Generic, adult-alternative music plays in the background. Voices raise to be heard over the collective cacophony. I am both consumed and irritated by the noise.

I sit on an uncomfortable, steel bar stool as I observe the room. The muted, grey color palette gives the space a cold, unwelcoming, and industrial feeling. There is a diversity of customers; a white man reads the paper, two young women in hijabs giggle in the corner, a woman of color sits in front of a compact shopping cart full of stuffed plastic bags. I make faces at a baby of Asian descent next to me as his mother feeds him out of an orange jar.

The cold, dark, and generic atmosphere of the coffee shop stands in contrast to the kindness, warmth, and the authenticity of Greta. She arrives at the cafe and greets me with a broad smile. Her dark, auburn hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail and frames her porcelain skin. I am struck by her wide, probing eyes; pools of brown in brilliant white. Over our time together, I often feel her eyes on me. In our conversations, her intense gaze captivates me, draws me in. It is as if she is searching for something in the context of our discussions, a desperate understanding that she is trying to will into existence by the strength of her gaze. I am not quite sure whether she is urgently trying to

understand her experience or if she is intensely imploring to be understood. She latches onto something in me, and I feel the basic human yearning to be seen and to be heard.

Greta's stories illuminate the intense pressure she feels as she strives to attain excellence, to live up to the expectations of her family and her community. Adhering to this standard will open the door to many opportunities in life, especially in terms of career, however, there are costs associated with this path. Greta describes an acute exhaustion, a questioning and doubting of herself when she struggles, and a narrowing of her experiences as she reduces the time she can spend in self-selected activities and with others.

While she feels intense pressure to succeed, her stories also convey a deep yearning to contribute to the world in a meaningful way. She tells me that she hasn't found exactly what that is, but that in life she wants to, "[do] something for a better cause, that is bigger than me because I know I am such a small part of something so much bigger but I don't know what it is yet (laughing). I know that it is bigger than me." Right now, she feels the most meaningful thing she can do is, "being there for the people who need me to be there and knowing what I need to do without being asked. So, really, just watching out for people." Greta begins by describing who she feels her community encourages young women to be.

**Ideal girl.** Through observation of older students, covert and overt messages from her parents, teachers, and peers, Greta has crafted an idea of what an "ideal" teenager looks like in the eyes of the Middleton community. The "ideal teenager" highlights Greta's impression of what traits the community values in young women. This "perfect"

image provides a difficult standard to meet, and perhaps a narrow vision of who young women should be in society. She describes the “perfect Middleton girl” as follows:

Probably captain of one of the sports teams, [...], umm, straight-A student, *great style* [playfully], umm, somehow has free time to go on runs, and gets into, early, into schools, like does the early action/decision, and gets into school, and still succeeds and does a great job at school the whole time.

Greta’s “perfect Middleton girl” has an air of effortless perfection, that she can do it all and do it all well. This “perfect girl” meets both high academic and physical standards. I challenge her to consider that there may be more going on beneath the surface for the “perfect” girl, that perhaps that perfection came at a cost. She has a hard time conceptualizing that, and she states, “There are some people who really just have it all.” The expectations do not end there. She goes on to elaborate that there is an expectation of both quantity and quality of an individual’s pursuits:

Everyone has to be doing a million things, and doing them great, so like you have to be a good student, and you have to be, like have some sort of extracurricular where you are like, the president or where you are a very active member of, or where you win awards, like, there is always something else that you can be doing.

She goes on to state that the ideal teenager is also “happy” and able to find “the perfect balance between everything.” Upon reflection, she says, “That is a lot a pressure for a kid.” Greta details the extremely high bar of “success” for adolescents in Middleton. As she describes, there is an expectation to do “a million things, and doing them all



great.” Not only does one “have to” strive to be a good student, physically fit, successful in the college process, and accruing accolades in extracurricular activities, one must make it look easy while they are doing it. They have to maintain a “happy” and “balanced” disposition in the face of adult-level expectations of performance and success. It appears that Greta has not only a high performance standard but also a high emotional standard of what feelings are acceptable to convey or feel.

Part of what it means to be an “ideal” teenager in Middleton is to successfully navigate the college admissions process and get into an “amazing” college or university. Greta narrates the challenges of this process, speaking in a fast paced, breathless tone:

It has been, uh, quite the stressful thought [college admissions process], just even thinking about it makes my heart race, and like, it just, cause it is, it's like, especially in our town and in our school, everyone is so, competitive, and so, like, we are very, like grades and academically-oriented, like it is very important to everybody. So it's assumed that you are going to go to a good college, and like that is going to be an amazing college, and it's sort of like, the only thing anybody talks about in school and in conversations, and it's like, really, really important, and we get that, but it's like drilled into our heads that it is such an important thing and like the school needs to be good, and our grades need to be good, and yeah.

Greta’s fear around the college process is evident in the passage above. Greta describes how central the college process is in the lives of Middleton students. It is “the only thing anybody talks about.” As the school is already “competitive,” the college process gives

students a clear outlet for the competitiveness fostered in school, as it is easy to measure one student's "success" against another in the black-and-white terms of GPA, standardized test scores, and college rankings. Also, the school itself gains accolades when its students do well. The community judges how well the school is doing partially based on how many students get into elite colleges. This creates a pressure for teachers and administrators to ensure their students gain entry to these schools, increasing the pressure they place on the student.

While Greta states that she understands how "important" the college process is, there is a hint of questioning in her statement, that "we get that" and that it is "drilled into our heads." She is questioning the emphasis on the college process. She also questions her community's definition of a "good" college:

It's sorta like, what is a "good" [Greta uses air quotes] school and what is a bad school? It's like, me and my friends, we are like the only two, that believe, that it should be a thing, like it should be the experience...(voice trailing off) but everyone has drilled into their head like a good school is a hard one to get into.

Greta is wondering if the emphasis that her community places on the brand name of the college, the status, is that important. I outwardly wonder what would happen if a Middleton student decided to veer from that path. I ask Greta to consider what would happen if a Middleton graduate decides not to go college right after high school, to take time off to write poetry, for example:

That would be seen as a shock, like some sort of rebellious thing (laughing).

Like, I know one guy last year who graduated and went to trade school, and

everyone was talking about it. Everyone was talking about it. And like, “Good for him!” [...] I don't know, that made us all think for a second, like, “Oh, there are people like that?” (laughing).

Greta goes on to clarify that “everyone” knew that school was “not for” this student who decided to go to trade school. This example highlights how narrow the path is for students at Middleton. Even students who are not successful in high school are expected to attend college; following an alternate path is seen as noteworthy or unusual. However, the mere presence of an alternate path causes Greta and her peers to think about and reflect on this option. It appears that Greta took note of how this student diverged from the traditional path and that it made an impression on her.

**Exhaustion.** Greta strives to meet the standards of an ideal teenager in Middleton. She is a high-achieving student who takes a rigorous schedule of honors and Advanced Placement courses, in what she considers an academically-intense high school. She describes her routine after attending school, categorizing it as “exhausting:”

Like, when I get home from school, I close my eyes for five minutes, like, my timer is [set for] five minutes, and then it is like, sit and do an hour of AP physics until I know exactly what I am doing and I don't get [any] wrong, and then, like do like an hour of math, and then an hour of this, an hour of that, thirty minutes of this, I don't know if it's me, but I make my lists, and I get super crazy with this at this time, and this here, and this now, and I have this whole list of things I have to get done, and when it is done, like, it's done, and then it is the next day.

I begin to feel stressed as Greta anxiously recounts a normal day after school. I feel her burden of hours of homework to do after a full day of school. I wish for something different for her, but both she and I understand that in order to get into an elite college, and perhaps even be prepared for the demands of a prestigious job in the professional class, this grueling path may be the best preparation for her.

At several points during our time together, Greta stresses how “focused” “everyone” is on the “numbers” of GPA and standardized test scores. Greta is working as hard as she possibly can to get the highest “numbers.” Greta is surrounded by peers that are also engaging in the same academic practices, perhaps making it hard for her to see any other viable options for a teenager. Also, Greta's parents and teachers do not seem to question her workload, further normalizing it.

When Greta is not able to meet her high standards for herself, she becomes disappointed with herself:

And sometimes it does get tiring, and like, I have to be honest, it's not always like that. Just this month has been so insane, and I haven't been on top of everything, and I have been letting things go, and letting them slip (sighing), and I know that it's human and that it shouldn't be like that...(voice trailing off). It is good and bad.

The high level of exertion seems unsustainable for Greta, as it would be for most adolescents and even adults. There is regret and distress in her voice when she is not able to meet her very high expectations for what she can produce. When she is not able to

work at her full capacity, her attention turns inward, and her disappointment in herself is evident:

Yeah, there is like this overwhelming, like, disappointment of like, "Oh, I didn't get this done. I didn't get to do it." And then it's so upsetting, and it makes me be even more stressed out, and then you get in your head, sometimes it turns into a snowball, and it just gets worse, and bigger, and worse, and then there are deadlines, and other things, like there is just so much...

During our time together, Greta shares several examples of how when one something goes awry, everything unravels.

Like you'll get a bad grade on a test, and then like, everything feels like, that's why when I, if I, do bad on a test, it feels like everything is completely falling apart because I've been doing, doing, so much, that when it doesn't show, like if I do get a 70 on my anatomy test, it's like, "Oh my God, this is wrong, this is wrong," like, a million other things in my mind are wrong.

Greta is upset when she feels like her efforts were not enough. She is frustrated that her extraordinary efforts don't "show," when her grade does not match the time and energy she is putting into her academics, especially since the "numbers," grades and GPA, are so important.

Greta's academic struggles really impact her; she does not seem able to brush the disappointment off and keep moving. As her school and family place such a high emphasis on academic achievement, and that achievement is the way to demonstrate your

worth in the community, I can understand how devastating it must feel when things go awry. For Greta, I feel like these academic challenges shake her to her core.

Greta's fear of not doing enough drives her to constantly do more and more. She explains, "[I am] constantly doing something, having something to do, never saying no, to anybody, getting a new project, a second, a third, doing everything." She describes how her sleep is impacted by her vigilance to ensure she has completed all of her tasks for the day, "I'm constantly thinking about what needs to be done, what I need to do, and I can't sleep unless I check everything off." Greta describes a lack of ease in her day, as she is stressed that she will forget to do one of her many tasks. The college process adds to this anxiety, as there are more tasks to be done, more items on her list.

"Oh my God, what if a deadline is coming up next?" And then when I get home, I'm going to have to go through every single one of them [applications] and make sure, "No nothing is coming up, it's February 1st."

As Greta describes her need to take on more work and her anxiety from missing a deadline, I feel like I am listening to an early-career professional list off her job stressors, not a 17 year-old adolescent. The demands that her school and the college application process are putting on her seem to be preparing her for potential challenges of her future career. As she increasingly takes her place as a burgeoning successful young adult in a capitalist economy, I wonder what effect the near-chronic stress is having on her, along with the developmentally-appropriate tasks that she must forego in order to achieve her community's version of success.

Greta's near-constant motion and anxiety of "missing" something are evident in our discussions. She explains what happens if she takes a break from the effort and worry. In this passage, she discusses what happens when she took a short hiatus from working on her college applications:

Over break, I pushed it under the rug and didn't really look at it, and then I had a complete, like, freakout, breakdown in school because, I was like, "Oh my God, I have no idea what's happening!" When in reality, I knew what was happening, and I knew I didn't have to do anything, but, oh my God, if Ms. Lawrence [school counselor] shows you her emails from me, I'm like (in a frantic, high-pitched, breathless voice), "Help me! I need help! I need to come in right now!"

(Laughing) Because, I felt like, "Oh my God, there is a deadline approaching."

Greta has a crisis-of-confidence during this "freakout," "breakdown." She communicates being flooded with self-doubt. She is unable to voice what she knows, and appears disconnected from what she knows (that nothing is due). She is unable to ease off the pressure, perhaps because a large part of what she does is dictated by the image of who she believes she must be. She acts "as if" the ever vigilant, never resting, "ideal" American student and eventual worker. Her needs, in this case her need for rest and enjoyment, must be ignored in order to remain vigilant and dedicated to the college application process. This may be good training for what may be expected of her in a future professional job.

Greta shared with me an essay she wrote for English class on teenage stress. This paragraph sheds light on where Greta feels the pressure comes from:

This pressure and stress on teens comes from a feeling of *not being enough* [italics added], not smart enough, pretty enough, not enough likes on a selfie, not cool enough and then constantly tirelessly working to be *more than above-average* [italics added], meanwhile we should be focusing on uplifting each other for the simple tasks, the process, and as the great Hannah Montana once said, “It’s all about the climb.” How about we climb together?

Somewhere Greta is learning to feel that she is “not enough.” While that feeling must push her to work harder, strive for greater accomplishments, she may be learning that her value as a person is based off of what she does, what she achieves. In some ways this attitude may actually help her succeed, but perhaps at a great personal cost.

**McGill University.** Greta’s college admissions story was largely impacted by the events surrounding her application to McGill University, located in Montreal, Canada. McGill’s deadline to receive mid-year transcripts was February 1st. However, academic calendars of U.S. and Canadian high schools differ. Greta knew that her mid-year grades would not be ready by this date, as the second of four marking periods would not be complete until February 6th. Greta called McGill and verbally confirmed that her high school could send her mid-year transcript several days after the deadline, as her grades would not be complete until then. The representative from the University said no problem and indicated that with U.S. schools they understand the timeline is a bit different. The school counseling office at Middleton sent Greta’s midyear transcript on February 6th.



Several weeks later, Greta took a trip to the campus over spring break. She visited with an academic dean to talk about a program of interest, walked around the school, and was happily envisioning herself there as an undergraduate student. She decided to stop by the admissions office to check on the status of her application. The admissions officer reviewed her file on her computer and then stated, “You are an inadmissible student. We would love to have you, but your transcript came five days late, so you are academically disqualified.” Greta tried to reason with the staff in the admissions office, to no avail. She shares this devastating news with me matter-of-factly. Greta seems to be playing by the rules of the admissions process, and the rules stated her grades had to be in by a certain date and hers were not submitted. In Greta’s narration, it makes sense to her, it is black and white. It does not seem to matter much that she called McGill to confirm that her high school would get her grades in a couple of days later. In her estimation, she “broke” a rule, she missed her opportunity, and there were plenty of others in line to take her seat. She does not speak negatively about her high school (for example, “Why couldn’t they send my grades earlier?”), or McGill (“They told me that I could send my grades in a few days later!”), or anyone. She accepts the decision, sees it as a personal failing, and turns inward.

Greta does not share this news with many people. She texts with her friends but does not talk to them about it. She does not ask for help from other adults to advocate for her to get the admissions decision reversed. She chooses to walk this path alone, and sit with her disappointment, frustration and anger by herself. She accepts the school’s explanation that the “seats are completely filled up” and “we just can’t do anything for

you.” I wonder if Greta accepts this decision because she feels at part to blame. She believes that she should have done more to prevent this from happening, and that in some way, she deserves this outcome due to her lack of vigilance.

Greta was devastated by “losing” her chance to attend her first-choice school. While this unfortunate turn-of-events appeared to be completely out of Greta’s control, she did everything she was supposed to do as an applicant, Greta’s parents interpreted Greta’s responsibility differently. Her parents said not getting into McGill was her “fault” and that she should have done more to prevent this from happening. Greta agreed with her parents’ assessment that she should have done more. The I Poem below conveys her parents’ reaction to the news of her rejection and her internalization of this event:

I was  
I was a disappointment

I was careless

I should've done more  
I should've  
I could've  
I agree  
I agree  
I wish

I felt like  
I was not eating  
I was in a daze  
I was like, "Oh my God."

I just tossed it away

I didn't push hard enough.

Greta is in a place of despair and grief after receiving the rejection. Her parents' reaction is striking to me, that instead of comforting her or advocating on her behalf, they blame her for the logistical error and suggest that she "did not work hard enough." Her parents' reaction keeps her out of connection with them, as her deep hurt and emotional pain is not seen and validated. A connection with them would have been an opportunity for Greta to explore her feelings and get in more significant contact with them. However, this chance was lost, and the message she received instead was "You deserve to be feeling this way" and "You should have prevented this."

Greta completely accepts her parents' assessment that it was her fault that she did not get into McGill. She dissociates from any possible questioning that she did everything that she could. There is a helplessness in what she "should've" and "could've" done. Her statement is riddled with guilt, in what she should have done, and her total agreement with her parents. Her acceptance of her parents' version of the event, which lays the blame solely on Greta, causes Greta acute distress and somatic symptoms. She describes being a "ghost person" who is "in a daze" and "shutting down." She is unable to eat. In her eyes, her failure is too much to bear, and she knows that she could have done more. It is as if her entire spirit collapses under the weight of this unfortunate circumstance, which was truly out of her hands. Given this logic, every outcome in life will always be her responsibility alone, that if she pushes "hard enough" she will get the outcome she desires. This logic is faulty, there are many things in life we cannot control, and things go wrong even when we worked hard.

Greta shares with me that she was outraged after receiving the news from McGill. She says, “I was just so angry at so many things, and I never vocalize anything, and my way of being angry is just shutting down. So I just was so angry at everything.”

I think it is okay to express anger. Personally, I really don't. I just never been that person. Like I know, I grew up around people who were very vocal about their anger, very expressive, and I guess expressing my anger, my way is I go to my room, I close my door, and I just, I'll sit by myself. I am very good at just sitting alone. I really like it. Just to be alone. That is my way of expressing my anger; I don't lash out, [I don't] explode, I don't yell (laughing).

There is a lot for Greta to be angry about. She has worked so hard and has sacrificed so much to be an excellent candidate for admission at McGill. She has visited the campus no less than four times, she has met with an academic dean, and has been in contact with both her school counseling office and the university admissions office about the timeline discrepancy. She has demonstrated a commendable level of interest, maturity, and foresight in this process. However, through a mistake, Greta does not get into her “dream” school. She is angry. But her anger is unable to be directly expressed, she “has never been that person.” She physically and emotionally removes herself from the others, isolating herself and disengaging, when these difficult emotions emerge. I can feel how infuriating this situation must have been for Greta; I want to yell for her. But she doesn't yell; she doesn't explode, she turns the emotions inward and shuts down.

Greta keeps this story mainly to herself the next couple of days. She only shares it with her close friends over group text. When Greta returns to school after spring break, she shares this story with a trusted teacher.

I was telling her, and I was crying telling her, I was like, it was the first time I was actually saying what has happened and it just made me feel awful. And she was like, tearing up too; she was like, "This is awful!" "Oh my God, why did this happen to you?" (emphasis on you). She was really upset for me, so then she emailed Ms. Lawrence.

Greta did not get emotional support from her parents, or mainly from her friends, as they provided simplistic platitudes over text and could not see the depth of Greta's suffering, or offer commensurate support, over a text message. However, Greta did persist; she tells another adult and finally gets a different reaction. Greta's teacher offers a safe space for Greta to feel her feelings, despite Greta's discomfort, and was able to empathize with her, support her, and connect with her in her suffering. She also was able to help advocate for Greta.

Greta's school counselor calls McGill on Greta's behalf and strongly expresses her dismay at the situation. Several minutes into this call, Greta's admissions decision is changed from rejected to accepted. Greta's voice drastically changes, as evidenced in the I poem below:

I learned  
I know  
I have worked  
I deserve it

I did fix it

I was like  
I do deserve  
I did work

I should've worked

I know  
I am going to that school  
I can kinda  
I don't need  
I'll just push myself along (laughing).

After the external situation changes, when Greta is granted admission to her top choice school, her voice dramatically changes. It becomes more active and assertive. She can see the hard work she put in; she can feel that she deserves to go to the school, she can say what she knows. Her orientation towards herself drastically shifts, although her efforts have not changed from the first to the second I poem, just the outcome has changed. She can break free of her parents' version of the event, and actively dispute it, although a slight hesitation remains ("I should've worked").

In both versions, there is an element of isolation, in which Greta is on this path alone and she only has herself. In the first version she says, "I didn't push hard enough" and in the second version she says, "I'll just push myself along." In the second version, even though she has attained the ultimate achievement, entrance into her first choice college, she still envisions a future where she has to "push" herself along. The emphasis is on the effort, the pushing, and the individual nature of her road. These statements of her reality differ from her fantasy of what life could be. She ends her essay for English class with, "We should be focusing on uplifting each other for the simple tasks, the process, [...] How about we climb together?" In this idealized version of life, she speaks

of being connected with others, not in isolation. It also differs from the lonely path, as this road appears to be in supportive community with others. Greta has a remedy for the challenges she sees in Middleton; however, it is difficult for her to create given the strong norms that help maintain the status quo.

**Deeper meaning.** Greta and I spent some time talking about where she found meaning in her life. This is an important question on her journey towards higher education and adult life, and I am interested to see how this factors into Greta's thinking. Despite the many ways her mission is an individualistic, achievement-oriented one, she found meaning in connection with others and contributing to the greater good:

The times that I feel, like, best about what I am doing, is when it does not involve me, it involves me doing something *with someone else or for someone else* [italics added], that's the time, I don't know, that's when it is like, "This is good, this is what I should be doing." If it is organizing a walk-out or organizing a young voters' club at my school, it's something, and there are a lot of little things that I will find meaning in too, which are important to me.

She is conveying, with textbook level precision, things that we know help increase well-being for individuals, getting outside of the self to help others or contribute to one's community. There is a hint of disconnection from what she knows; she caveats this statement with an "I don't know;" she cannot confidently assert this belief. Here Greta is moving away from the acceptable script; I ask her where she developed these beliefs:

Ummm...(pause). Yeah, just, like, parents. 'Cause they, my mom, has been through a lot. She, you know, she lived in the war, and she got herself out, she,

she had a crazy life, she needs to write a book, it's actually insane. Umm...but I see that she, like, she takes her entire life, just for working for other people. So, just growing up and seeing that, that was all I knew. She was taking me to the women's shelters when we were little and just watching her do good things and important things, I guess, it just got ingrained in my head.

In the story Greta tells about McGill University, it appears that Greta's parents adhere to the traditional narrative about how one succeeds in society (hard work, perseverance, vigilance). However, it seems that Greta's mother has modeled some values that differ from the primary Middleton ideals. Greta's mother has made a long-term commitment to the service of others, and has made time for this amid a life full of paid work, caring for children, and running a household. She is involved in community service work that is not glamorous, like organizing charity galas; she is in the trenches, supporting women and children in crisis, who are living in shelters. As Greta tries to make sense of what will give her life meaning, she looks to the service her mother has provided to others.

Her mother's life experiences, the adversity and suffering she endured living through a revolution, and her commitment to serving others, provides an alternative narrative to the conventional path that is exemplified through life in Middleton. Greta seems to struggle to merge these two realities, Middleton and her mother's story, to develop a worldview that is informed by both.

Greta's statement above is full of hesitations and stammers. She is not as well-versed on this part of her story as most of the other parts that she shared with me. She



goes on to tell me that only two of her friends know that her mother “lived in the war.” I ask her why she does not share this part of her history, her mother’s story:

Sure, I guess, it is just like, my mom never talks about what she goes through either, and I don't know if it is because it is too painful, or if, but I think she also, she doesn't, I don't know. She doesn't want that to be the focus of attention. Or she doesn't want to say it, and people be like, "Oh my God! Did that really happen?" Because when she does tell stories of what happened, everyone just sits there and like, cries. Like, she is a really good storyteller too, so that doesn't help (laughing) but yeah, that's what happens, and everyone is like, "Well, okay, that was a lot to take in." She doesn't really talk about it that much.

The specter of this past life hangs over the present, quietly impacting Greta’s path. Greta’s proximity to suffering, her awareness of the fragile nature of life through her mother’s story, makes Greta think differently about her life. Greta compares the horrific circumstances of her mother’s young life to her life of comfort and security in Middleton. Greta feels a responsibility to make the most of the opportunities she has. She says:

Like, I have been so lucky, I am so grateful for everything I have, it makes me feel a little bit like, not guilty, but a little. Like how can I now help someone who didn't get the chances I have, every opportunity, what can I do? How can I repay that?

Greta is struggling to conceptualize a way she can “repay” the things that have been given to her. With her privilege comes a responsibility to use the opportunities afforded to her, but she is hazy regarding the ways that she can do that. She seems to need to prove

to herself and others that she has made the most of the opportunities she has. She also voices a desire to help others who have not had the same privileges she has, but she is also unclear how to do that.

Greta has two competing narratives to try to integrate. She is a product of Middleton, and has a strong desire to prove herself, to work hard, and to achieve a high standard of professional success. She also has the life story of her mother, who lived through harrowing circumstances, came to the United States, and now works to help others and her community. Greta is just embarking on this process, and does not yet have a clear vision of who she is in light of these two realities. During her senior year, however, she begins to drift from the well-trodden path and explore working as an advocate in her community, following her mother's example.

**Finding a voice.** During the second semester of Greta's senior year, the Parkland, Florida school shooting occurs. Seventeen high school students were killed, and seventeen more were wounded at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. This tragedy sparks a national student movement to reform gun laws. Greta starts up and leads the campaign at Middleton. This event is an example of how she strays from the conventional Middleton narrative and explores what can give her life meaning and purpose.

Greta, along with several other students, organizes a school walk-out, although the school administration discouraged students from participating. Greta remembers, "Our administrators are not too pleased about it, they don't want to make a political

statement.” Greta is veering from the expected path and is receiving pushback from the adult leaders of her school.

Greta’s mother has served as an advocate for women and children in social services. It is notable that her mother did not advocate for her with the McGill admissions decision. It is hard to understand why exactly she did not advocate for her daughter — perhaps she believed that her daughter is coming from a very privileged community and has had many advantages. Both Greta’s mother and father grew up in places the “polar opposite” of Middleton, and they are successful in large part due to hard work and sacrifice. Maybe they believe that Greta should have done more to ensure that her documents all arrived to McGill on time. Nevertheless, Greta’s mother’s example as an advocate and support of the cause helped Greta advocate for gun reform.

Greta is also able to resist her administration’s pushback because she was already accepted into college. Greta believed that if her high school ended up reporting a disciplinary action against Greta, the university would not hold it against her, which helped buffer the risk. She also was able to advocate as she was doing so with her friends. Greta reflects on the pleasure she gains in organizing the walk-out with her friends:

I think it is just the satisfaction of just being able to share something with someone, now that I think about it, maybe that is like, my way of communicating and connecting with people when we can do something as a group. Like me and my friends Brin and Grace we did that walkout together as we organized it, and it happened, and it was so satisfying to have those other people to share it with.

Greta is finding meaning in this act of advocacy, as well as the connection that is occurring among her friends through this experience. The organization of this event appears to be an expression of self, which is her “way of communicating and connecting with people.” Through this action, she seems more connected to herself and others. She has not had many opportunities to contribute and connect in this way previously in her high school experience, and it appears that the adult leaders of her school would have preferred that she not have this growth-inducing experience either.

Greta’s advocacy gains the attention of one of her U.S. senators. Greta is invited to and attends a roundtable discussion with her senator and several other high school student leaders. It is ironic that the behavior that her school administration initially dissuaded brought such positive attention from one of its most esteemed community members, a U.S. senator. During the meeting, she shares her thoughts and ideas. While I experienced Greta as articulate and highly verbal during our time together, Greta sees herself as more reserved in most settings. Both Greta and her mother were surprised by how vocal Greta was during the meeting:

Um, so like, in being a young activist or whatever, I feel like that is the *one place* [italics added] that I have never been reserved or held back, like when we had that table discussion with our senator, like, my mom was in the back of the room, but she was like, [mouth agape]. Afterward we were both like, "Oh my God! I spoke!" And what I said, I don't think I ever, like, be like, "Oh my God, like I actually did that justice." Like, so like, that one time, so like everyone was like...like so, I don't know, maybe it is a sign that that one path is very

comfortable for me but that is where I can find, you know, where I don't look back, and I say what I am feeling and I let it be emotional, and I let it be connected in my life, stuff like that.

Greta seems to have a hard time fully expressing what this experience meant to her, as evidenced by the numerous “likes” punctuating her narrative. However, she seems to be speaking from an authentic place during the roundtable meeting. She can speak, without reservation, with emotion, and without regret. She can “say what I am feeling,” can “let it be emotional,” and can “let it be connected to my life.” These attributes seem to be missing from her experience at Middleton, however; in this forum, where she is advocating for others, she seems to be able to find her more authentic voice.

I can hear her surprise at being able to speak so well in such a high-profile context. She seems shocked by her voice; its ability to carry the depth and emotion necessary to impact others in such a setting. She also conveys pride in herself, for speaking authentically and performing well. She does not appear utterly confident in her new assertions about herself; she is still making sense of this experience and trying to see how it can fit within the current structure of her life. Greta feels like she did well, she received accolades from her mother and the senator, but still was unable to fully communicate what she thinks and feels about this event. I ask her why she was able to speak so assertively at the roundtable. She said:

I think it was like, something inside of me is like, this has to happen, and I will so regret it if I don't do this. Like if I had gone to that table discussion and not said

anything I would be kicking myself, so I think it is also like, no regrets, just do it, that sudden spur-of-the-moment, have to do it, pressure.

At the moment, Greta was able to speak with grace and authenticity. Perhaps since she was also out of her community, away from her peers, and away from the norms that may have governed her behavior differently, she was able to speak in a different voice, whereas she was not able to advocate for herself in the college admissions process. Also, she was able to speak on behalf of others, not directly for herself. Moved by the power of her story, I assumed that she would want to replicate this feeling in other aspects of her life. When I asked how she sees advocacy factoring in the future, she said, “[I’ll] keep up with what I can do.”

**Summary.** Greta appears to be gaining training in how to be a successful adult in the upper-middle class. Individualism, hard work, competition, hierarchy, perfection, and a meritocracy are encouraged, and students who personify these traits stand the greatest chances of success in the upper-middle class. The more Greta can accept and portray these values, the more she can ignore her own needs and work until exhaustion, the more likely she will earn a privileged place in the school and community hierarchy: first gaining acceptance at highly competitive colleges and universities; and next the prestige, social status, and wealth that comes along with a distinguished professional occupation.

The costs of “playing by the rules of the game” are evident in Greta’s story. She must learn to live with the stress, anxiety, exhaustion, disappointment, and anger, and detach from those feelings where possible. She is encouraged to focus less on her

developmental tasks of this life stage and lead a relatively cloistered, focused life, refraining from questioning the status quo.

While the pressures of Middleton appear to be encouraging Greta to behave in certain ways, Greta is also able to give voice to hopes for her life that fall outside of the conventional, capitalist narrative. She hopes to make a difference in the world, to contribute to something greater than she is, while she doesn't know what that is yet. Connections to others seem vitally important to Greta in her narratives. She believes that the best way she can find meaning in her life now is to be there for her friends when they need her. She is finding meaning and connection with others in advocating against gun violence, although this work was initially discouraged by her school leadership. I wonder how Greta will make sense of the varying, and sometimes competing, messages she has received from her family, school, and community and how this will impact her life choices in college and adulthood.

### **“Johnny”**

Johnny walks towards me. He is wearing a blue-and-white gingham pressed collared shirt, unbuttoned at the top button, and khaki pants. He has stunning, almost white, blonde hair, which is combed to the side and arranged into a short, subtle pompadour. He is tall, slim, and fit. As he approaches he smiles at me broadly; I catch a glimpse of his perfectly aligned and symmetrical bright white teeth. His eyes squint as he smiles, making it hard for me to see his blue eyes. He arrives at my table, looks me in the eye, shakes my hand firmly, and utters, in a deep, gravelly, masculine voice, “It’s good to meet you, Kathleen.”

He sits down at my table, which is next to a family of four. I look at the family; they appear to be of Central-American descent and are each overweight. They all squeeze into one side of the restaurant booth; mom, dad, and kindergarten-aged son all next to one another. A cute, curly haired toddler is seated on the mother's lap and munches on a piece of bread. The son stares into an iPhone, which is loudly blasting, "Where is my nose? Where is my nose?" over and over again. An apple from their table rolls onto the floor. Johnny picks it up and hands it to the boy. A "thank you" and "you're welcome" are exchanged, without eye contact or a smile. The parents sit motionless, eating in silence, gazing deep into the back of cafe.

Johnny is a student who embodies success at Middleton. He is the captain of the hockey team, takes many honors and AP classes, and is a peer leader. He was awarded an Air Force ROTC scholarship; he will attend a civilian college, study mechanical engineering, and participate in the ROTC program. While he has accomplished a lot in his young life, he hopes to "just keep goin' up" regarding his success in life, which may mean pilot school after college graduation. While Johnny has an apparent career plan, he had a hard time voicing dreams for his future in other domains of his life. He did not directly answer any of my multiple questions about future hopes for a family or relationships.

I come to know Johnny as a cool, calm, collected, and articulate young man. He is highly verbal and can communicate a nuanced and descriptive understanding of his experiences in Middleton. He provides quick responses; he has an answer for all of my questions. While he can describe his community, and be critical of it, he has a harder time



sharing with me ways that he has struggled. He also provides a very cerebral and intellectual understanding of his community, but shies away from an emotional description of his experience. His demeanor may reflect the gendered ways in which many boys are socialized, which can limit their ability or comfort to be vulnerable or emotionally expressive. He also lives in a community that values perfection, and he may not be comfortable sharing ways in which he feels less than perfect. This created an interesting tension: I was interested in hearing ways that he has struggled, and he seemed invested in making sure I did not see this side of him. He may live in a community that does not reward adolescents, especially male adolescents, for being vulnerable. This could make it difficult for Johnny to share these parts of himself with me, especially as I am basically a stranger to him.

When our conversations were focused on achievements and accomplishments, I found it hard to connect with Johnny. He did not appear to be presenting his authentic self; instead it felt like a performance of the “perfect” Middleton teenager. As I felt like he was not presenting his authentic self to me, it was hard for me to act authentically. I found myself feigning interest or enthusiasm about his accomplishments. At times, I felt he was not interested in my responses in our conversation, that he was just eager to answer the question and get his point across but the interaction seemed less important. Overall, our lack of emotional availability impacted the quality of our communication.

Even though he did not show much vulnerability, he did have astute insights into his experiences and community. Perhaps he has had more practice gaining an intellectual understanding of the world around him versus an emotional understanding. He questions

things, and recognizes discrepancies between the values and actions of members of his community. While he openly questions, he often accepts things as “the way they are” and generally does not ruminate on how change can occur. For example, he sees higher education as a business. He states that this is “unfortunate” but he “understands.” He does not get caught up in this idea; he accepts this institution for what he sees it as, the limitations and all, and does not become emotionally invested. I imagine other students being visibly upset if we deconstructed the business side of higher education and that it is not all about the altruistic and noble goals that are sold to young people. They might even rally against the injustice and unfairness of a college as a business. But Johnny seems to accept it and move on.

His ability to see and accept some problematic components of his community and not get “caught up” by them seems protective in a way. He does not seem too personally impacted by them. He understands the “rules of the game” and is able to play by them. He can see and accept the strengths and weaknesses of his community, and seems to be able to generally enjoy his experiences in Middleton. Johnny shares with me his stories of his road towards college, shining a light on the values and norms that guided his behavior and decisions.

Johnny’s stories convey central tensions between competing ways of being in the world. He is influenced by Middleton’s pressure to achieve, and gains status and confidence by succeeding according to the cultural standards. But he recognizes the losses that occur. In Johnny’s narration, he focuses on the loss of relationship, and the

challenges he has forming authentic relationships with others given the pressures and inauthenticity that seems to be a norm in his community.

**Questioning expectations.** Johnny conveyed a clear understanding of what is expected of adolescents in Middleton. Over the course of his childhood and adolescence, the members of his community, his parents, teachers, school administrators, and friends have directly and indirectly communicated what youth must do to be considered “successful.” Johnny’s statement below captures the “standards” that he and his peers strive to live up to:

I think there are really high standards at our high school, so, I think, when you picture a good senior, it’s definitely, varsity sports, you know, a lot of AP classes, good SAT scores, you know, people, like, talk about that stuff, like it gets around really quickly, like you tell one person what you got on the ACT and like, everyone knows, I think, people know what the ideal successful teenager is definitely, at our school.

Johnny has a clear vision of what he needs to do to be considered successful in Middleton. Students are often encouraged to strive in certain ways that will help them in the college application process. In the ACT example, Johnny describes how the cultural values are being reinforced and replicated. Johnny and his peers learn how important these scores are as it seems to be a significant conversation topic, spreading throughout the network of students.

In the quote above, Johnny also illustrates how public the college process is in the community. The gaze of the public may intensify the stress the students feel and add to

the power that these expectations have over students, amplifying the pressure to do well. Johnny narrates the pressure that comes from “everyone” knowing and “everyone” judging his performance. This pressure, the public scrutiny, may help to reinforce the competition the students feel, with themselves and others, to do well and prove themselves in the eyes of the community.

I think there is definitely [...] It is a thing at Middleton, I think that kids will act nice like that but there's definitely a lot of talking behind the back, "Oh, you got a 720 on your math [...], that's good." And then go to the other person like, "Oh my God, they only got a 720! That's not..."[trailing off]. I think there is a lot of that.

Johnny interprets the exchange above as an example of how kids at Middleton can be “fake” or disingenuous. He appears to be functioning in a world where inauthenticity may be the norm. The students appear to be “checking” each other; they are enforcing the “rules,” like what is a “good enough” SAT score. They are in competition with each other, and using the score to gauge where they and their peers fall on the hierarchical, standardized test score number line. But as they uphold these standards with each other, their ability to be in supportive, close, authentic connection with each other is compromised.

Johnny appears to be questioning the unrealistic bar for standardized test score achievement that students in Middleton are held to. He seems to know that a 720 is a good score, and questions why others would suggest otherwise. The “people” in the background that deem that score as less than desirable are speaking for the community,

and are enforcing the community's version of success. When the "people" speak with the community's voice, this disrupts the relationship that the adolescents can have. Johnny questions the speaker on two levels — first, by suggesting that a 720 is not a good score, and secondly, that the speaker will say one thing to someone's face and another behind their backs. He then sees the speaker as "fake," when the message the speaker is conveying, and how they are conveying it, are all according to the culturally-sanctioned script. There is a sense of disconnection from his peers when they act in this "fake" manner; however, his peers are just giving voice to the expectations of them in a culturally acceptable way. While Johnny is critiquing his peers' enforcement of these expectations, he also participates in enforcing the expectations of others.

Johnny provides an example of the pressure at Middleton to be good at everything. He describes:

I think you definitely feel the pressure if you don't do well at something. Like, even in gym class...like I was in sophomore year, and we were doing softball and we had all of the varsity baseball players, so, (laughing) like, not being a varsity baseball player then trying to go to softball, like, just small things like that, at a small, school, definitely you feel the pressure.

While Johnny did not indicate pain or discomfort due to this event, I can imagine it may have been uncomfortable or a difficult period in gym class to be the younger, less skillful member of the physical education class. However, when I brought up this scenario again, he indicated he was looking forward to being a senior in gym class, and said, "I cannot wait for spring. I'm just ready to crush them." While he recognized the dynamic in gym

class when he was a sophomore may not have been ideal, as a senior he is ready to take his privileged place in the cultural hierarchy this year and “crush” the underclassman.

Johnny questions the pressure of being good at everything, even gym class. But on the flip side, he seems to enjoy when he is the successful one, or in this example, the older, stronger, and more skillful student in gym class. In his examples, there may be more questioning and empathy when he is on the less powerful side, such as when he may have questioned his standardized test scores, when he was the younger boy in gym class but when he is in the dominant position, in these examples, he may be a little less likely to see the side of the weaker person.

Johnny is both questioning the culture and participating in it. He questions the high standardized test score expectations, the pressure to be good at everything, and the disingenuous manner in which his peers interact. But he also strives to live up to the high expectations of success, and competes in gym class, hoping to “crush” the underclassman. While he desires connection with others, the values of competition and comparisons drive a wedge between Johnny and his peers.

In many ways, Johnny is a product of his culture. But, Johnny also has agency to resist and question his culture. At this stage of life, adolescence, his values and worldview are more fluid than they will be later in adulthood, as he is still working to make sense of himself and the world around him. He is able to speak up and challenge the expectations when they are unkindly directed towards a family member, Johnny’s brother.

**Lacrosse: Questioning the cultural script.** As a boy, Johnny loved playing lacrosse. He said he loved to play, he loved being outside, and he loved being with his friends. But the high expectations and demands of being on the high school team were unsettling to Johnny. He questioned the values of the team, as he describes below:

So then it was a startling thing to go to lacrosse, where it felt more like a football team, like, “Freshmen, get the balls!” and seniors are on top, like hoo-ah! Our shirts said, “Brothers Forever,” and I’m like, “All right,” everyone just took it way too seriously, and so I was just like, “This sucks.” Like, “Johnny, get the balls!” All right, dude. Even the coach [...], [let his] five-year-old son [say], “Freshmen, these ball buckets aren’t going to move themselves!” I’m like, “Are you kidding me, buddy? You weigh 70 pounds soaking wet; you’re really doing this?”

As a freshman, Johnny questioned the values conveyed on his lacrosse team. There was a clear hierarchy, with freshmen at the bottom. Even the coach’s 5-year old son had more of a voice and power than the freshman boys. Johnny was outraged as he told this story — he fiercely disagreed with the power structure of the team. He feels the inequity and, with me, is able to speak out against it. Johnny is also able to spot the false sense of brotherhood, or connection among the members. He seems to know what real, meaningful, relationships look like, and perceives these relationships as false.

He goes on to describe why he finally quit the team:

And, the final straw for me was my brother had played, he didn’t even want to be a starter, he played because his friends played and he liked it, he didn’t play

because he wanted to be top guy. So he was totally chill, just staying on the sidelines hanging out with his friends. So, after the final game [...] I go and talk to him and he's like, "You really got to start coming to our winter workouts." I'm like, "I have hockey during the winter, that's a little tough." He was like, "Well, if you want to be on varsity, you got to come to those, and was like I'd hate to see you end up like your brother." Like, "I'd hate to see you turn out like your brother turned out?!" Like, oh yeah? All right, bye. Like, you are too blind to even realize that my brother didn't care about varsity, and frankly now neither do I. And if you're going to say stuff like that I'm out of here.

Johnny ultimately quits the lacrosse team when the coach makes a disparaging comment about Johnny's brother. As Johnny tells this part of the story, he shows the most emotion that I see from him over the course of our interviews — he is angry at the coach, disgusted even. It appears that the need to protect his brother, to stand up for him, to defend him, stirs his emotions and motivates him to take action.

The coach does not seem to "see" Johnny's brother accurately. The coach dismisses Johnny's brother, as he doesn't have much value to him, if he isn't striving to be the best player. When Johnny hears the coach dismissing his brother so easily, Johnny is outraged. Johnny recognizes and appreciates the larger narrative to his brother's lacrosse story, where the coach cannot. He can envision a space where his brother can just play and be with his friends. He seems to be upset with the coach for reducing his brother's value to the simplistic logic of whether he was willing to give everything to be the best possible player. This protection of his brother, the acknowledgement of more of



his humanity, stands in contrast to the sense of “brotherhood” that was encouraged by members of the lacrosse team.

Johnny questions and rejects some of the values of the lacrosse team (the false sense of “brotherhood,” the hierarchal nature, and pressure to sacrifice other things that are important in order to succeed). However, as he is planning on joining an ROTC program in college, he recognizes that the military shares some of these values, but he hopes they perform these values differently. Johnny chooses a career path but is not sure if the institution he is joining promotes the values that he questions. However, a military career has many aspects that are appealing and familiar to Johnny. He appreciates the clear path to a good job, the money for college, and the opportunity to “lead people.” The military seems to also provide a path to purpose and an identity for Johnny.

**Choosing military service.** Johnny describes his rationale for considering a job in the military:

But, I'm going to be completely honest. The original reasons for me were not because I want to serve. I do, and that is a part of it. My father being in the Coast Guard I definitely want to emulate him, and my grandfather being a vet. So, there's a lot of people in my family that have made that commitment and service to this country, and I really emulate that and that's something I want to do. But then, if it was just about that I would enlist [...]. A big part of it too is for my future. I want to have a good job after the military, and to have a meaningful position in the military leading people. So that's why I'm doing Air Force and having a job after college, and getting money to go to college. So, service

definitely is a huge part of why I'm doing it, but a lot of it too is so I can fulfill the best future for myself.

Johnny chooses to embark on a path that leads to a career in the military for several practical reasons. College is expensive, and can be difficult to pay for, even for affluent families. The possibility of having the government pay for college is appealing to Johnny. Also, Johnny is drawn to military service in order to have a job after college. It seems appealing to him to have this clarity now; while he is only still in high school, he wants the certainty that his time and effort in college will pay off with a job after graduation. In high school, he has been given a clear path that will lead to "success." I wonder if having a clear path, without much ambiguity, is also appealing to Johnny in terms of his college and career choices.

Johnny speaks of selecting the military as a career path in order to "fulfill the best future for myself." He is someone connected with his father and grandfather in this future path, as they both served their country, yet his words convey an individualistic focus. I was a little surprised by how openly he was able to tell me, when I was asking him about service, that service was a lesser component of his choice, that he was primarily focused on his individual goals. Service is one of the main values of the military, and the breaking down of the individual in order to form a unit will be one of the first objectives of his military training. While certainly understandable, that he is working to create what he hopes to be the best future for himself, his statement reflects the social acceptability in his culture to claim such an individualistic view in the world.

Military service is also appealing to Johnny as he will get to “lead people.” I was struck by this language. There is something hierarchal about leading, that someone is in the privileged position to lead others, and that there is something perhaps exceptional about the person who is in the position to lead. Being a “leader” is also something that many boys are socialized to do, that they should strive to be dominant and powerful. Yet, he also seeks the camaraderie of the military, the “brotherhood.” There seems to be tension between these two desires; to find connection and “brotherhood” but also to do so in a way that conveys power, as a “leader.” I wonder if he can find the type of connection he is looking for when he also wants to hold a position of power over others. White, affluent youth are often groomed to “lead;” subtly taught that they may have special ability or knowledge that predicates them to be in a leadership position over others. This stands in contrast with more egalitarian values that acknowledge that all people bring important traits into a situation or setting and that other people may have voices worth listening to.

Johnny is living in a culture where authenticity is not valued; the adherence to the cultural script of achievement, performance, and perfection is most important. He seems to struggle between these two poles, and is pulled in both directions. He wants to be the “leader” in the military, but he also wants to have the connection with others, a “brotherhood.” It appears that the one place that Johnny feels like he can be his most authentic self is far outside of the Middleton city limits, at a sleep-away summer camp several states away.

**Camp connection/disconnection.** Johnny contrasts the competitive nature of his high school with the peaceful and authentic experience of attending sleep-away camp. Johnny has attended the same sleep-away camp every summer since he was 8 years old. Johnny states that his family has a long history of attending this camp, and seem to value its non-competitive, laid back nature. Johnny indicates that people in his school are not “genuine,” but at camp, he feels closer to others and also himself, as this is where he feels his most authentic. He still attends camp, and is returning this summer before college, to work in the kitchen. When I asked him what was it about camp that allowed him to feel like his true self, he stated:

It's all boys, and there's not that pressure to look cool in front of girls. Definitely, we can be more genuine with each other, because no one's trying to show off. I think because we don't have schoolwork there or sports and stuff, everyone's literally there just to have fun, I think nobody's facing pressure, so everyone's a lot less stressed and just can have a better time. When everybody's lovin' it, it makes it a lot better than here. [At Middleton] Say hi to someone in the hallway, and they just got a 40 on their test, and they ignore you, it's like, “Alright.”

The lack of pressure, the lack of rigid gender roles and expectations, and the exposure to nature and human connection is a compelling experience for Johnny. He is free of the high performance standards and competition of Middleton. In this all-male environment, he also seems freer to be himself. The “mask” that many boys have to wear seems to come down; he does not have to strive to “show off,” assert dominance, or “look cool” and confident in front of girls. These draining acts of performance do not seem to have a

place at camp, allowing him to experience more of his authentic self. Also, his stories at Middleton describe a distance between him and his friends but at camp, there seems to be room for warmth, connection, and closeness.

This exposure to another path, to another way of living, perhaps living closer to the earth, closer to his friends, and closer to himself, seems to be sustaining and nurturing, even for the majority of months that he lives at home. He talks about his time at camp fondly. He states that he does not know who he would be without this formative experience of camp, and he does not want to know who he would be without it. In the passage below, he describes the essence of his relationships at camp, and attributes the closeness he feels to the other young men as a result of the amount of time that they spend together:

[In Middleton] Even on a sports team, you're with the people a lot, but you're with them for an hour or two. [...] But when you're living with ten guys in a cabin for a month, it's just a tight bond that you get with them. And if it's those same people for nine years, as it was in my instance, you get really close.

Johnny describes an intimacy of his relationships with other boys at camp. He describes the act of living in the same bunk with friends; it must be much harder to hide your humanity, your hopes and fears, in that type of close environment. This stands in contrast with Middleton, where the emphasis seems to be on doing everything it takes to keep up a veil of perfection. There is also a stripping away of the accoutrements of an affluent life, no technology (cell phones, computers) is allowed, the campers live in a minimalist

bunk; there seems to be an ethos of simplicity and equality. Whereas in Middleton, wealth and status symbols abound.

Older boys at camp serve as role models for Johnny and provided an example of who he would like to be in the world. [The] “role models at camp [were the] nicest, most genuine people I’ve had the pleasure to spend time with.” He is deeply impacted by the experience of knowing these young men.

Johnny greatly values his experience at camp and feels an obligation, in part because not everyone has a chance to go to camp, to share what he learned at camp with others. He strives to be an “ambassador” and spread the “message” about what he has learned to others, and to help others “feel good about themselves” and to spread the message of the camp’s motto “Seek the Joy of Being Alive.” It is interesting how deeply impactful this experience is and how this seems to mobilize Johnny to share the message with others. He is seeking connection; camp seems to be providing a template on how to do that; however, it is not so easily re-created in everyday life, especially in upper-middle class America.

The warmth and connection at camp stands in stark contrast to the competition and disconnection in Middleton. This theme of disconnection comes up several times during our interviews. When asked about what he would change about his high school experience, he stated that connection with others was one thing that he would change about his time in Middleton:

I don't have too many regrets that I can think of, maybe that is just my personality, umm, one thing, maybe. Spending a little more time with my friends,

and that is just, I love, like chilling, and hanging out at my house, like, I love my alone time, so, I don't, like where my sister, needs to go out every day with her friends, like, I just don't feel that, that need. But then on the flip side of that, because I don't go out that much, like, I have a kinda core group of friends, but I wouldn't say that I have a "best friend" so it is kinda that dynamic. So, I'd say if there was one thing that maybe I'd do, I'd spend a little more time with other people.

Given the chance, the one thing Johnny would change about his experience at Middleton would be the nature of his friendships. In particular, he is looking for a "best friend," potentially someone with whom he could establish an emotional intimacy, somewhat like he experiences at camp. He wants a deep relationship with friends; it is the first and only thing he mentioned when asked what he would change. However, he even hedges this statement, going back on it by saying he would simply want to "spend a little more time with people." He also states that he "doesn't need" to be with his friends in the way his sister does. He is conveying that others, perhaps girls and women, "need" relationships, and "need" connection, but that is something that he does not "need." A traditional patriarchal value suggests that relationships are restricting, and prevents people from attaining greatness, which contrasts the feminist view that relationships are one of the primary sources of human growth (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

When I asked Johnny to reflect on why he does not have a best friend, he states:

I think part of it actually was going to camp, having really close friends and then coming back to school, it's hard because you have such a high standard and then

having your friend just being on their phone and stuff, it's like, "Come on, guys." While I formed amazing relationships at camp, it actually made it a little harder to really enjoy my friends here too. Because it's like, "You guys..." [...] Yeah, it's definitely weird coming back here and seeing my friends from home and it's nowhere near the same level of that closeness, definitely.

The environment at camp seems to permit the development of close friendships, which seems more difficult to happen in Middleton. The experience of having close friends, knowing what that looks like, is both good and bad of Johnny. He recognizes that closeness is possible but yearns for something that cannot really be in his culture. He does, however, admire certain boys in Middleton from afar, picking up on their positive attributes and hoping to emulate them:

Two other brothers [...], and one of them was my peer leader, and him and his younger brother are, even though I wasn't on a sports team with them, like didn't go to camp with them, they're two people I kind of look up to as success stories of Middleton, like people that came out of Middleton the way I want to of not being superficial or caring all about grades. They're two really good kids, so even role models like that that may not be direct, and they don't even know, I haven't even told them. But, just seeing people around you that have those traits and saying that's someone I want to be like.

When I asked him what made these young men stand out to him, he stated:

Like I had one of them as a peer leader, and he was someone that made us all feel important in the class, and even when he's back from college, and I play street



hockey with him and my brother[...]. People that make you feel good about yourself and bring out good attributes in you, I think seeing that and being like, “Wow, I want to be able to do that for someone else or be that person for someone else.” So I think it's if you have a strong role model and you see the effect it has on you wanting to continue that chain of passing on the traits.

Johnny is studying the people in his culture and determining who he wants to be in the world. He is rejecting certain ways of being, like the young men on the lacrosse team, and accepting others, like these brothers. He seems to be questioning and rejecting some of the aspects of his culture that he identifies as being “superficial,” and “caring all about grades” and is seeking to connect and support others. He is deciding how he wants to contribute to the world and part of that contribution is that he would like to “make people feel good about themselves.” Johnny seems to be questioning and rejecting some of the more traditional values and yearning for a life characterized by connected, caring, and nurturing relationships.

**Managing the pressure.** Out of all of the participants, Johnny appeared to be the one who was navigating the college process with the least amount of stress and anguish. While he was quite aware of the high expectations of adolescents in his community, he experienced the pressure as motivating, not stressful:

I think definitely going to Middleton there is a lot of, and especially because it is so small, there is a lot of comparisons, people are always comparing themselves to each other, so, I think, there is a lot of pressure that is part of going to Middleton, but I think I have experienced the up-side of that, that when your

friends are pushing you to do better, and there is, kinda, that friendly competition, I think it really encourages everyone to work harder, so I really had good experiences with the kinda competitiveness of Middleton, and you know, as I said, not too much pressure from my parents, but, I think any pressure I feel is stuff I put on myself, like goals, I am trying to reach.

Johnny recognizes that there is pressure to succeed in Middleton, but he reports that it does not bother him. He says that it motivates him. While he did not give any indication of being negatively impacted by the immense cultural achievement pressure, I wonder if he does experience consequences of the pressure but is unable to share this with me. His orientation towards the achievement pressure, his ability to resist the message that he must work until exhaustion, may be an adaptive, protective form of resistance.

Johnny provides a number of examples of how the pressure manifests in his life, and how he is able to manage it, such as being the goalie for the ice hockey team:

For hockey, I definitely would not be playing the position of goalie if I couldn't deal with the pressure. It's a lot, but I like it. Having the game rest on my shoulders is part of what gives me the adrenaline rush.

He contrasts his experience as a goalie to one of his friends

There was another goalie actually from [his club team], and if he let a goal in, you could tell it got to his head, he was angry at himself, how he let it in, and [if] you score one goal on him, you could score three more right away because he was just so [...] Being able to put whatever happened behind me was huge for

my success in hockey, but like I said [...] I'm able to do that, he wasn't, but since I have been, it's been really helpful.

Johnny's ability to stay focused and in control is serving him well in school and sports. He speaks of being about to "put whatever happened behind me" and move on to the next challenge. This orientation towards stressful situations seems to have helped Johnny navigate the high-pressure arenas in Middleton. He seems to just keep moving, not letting a setback or undesirable outcome derail him.

It is notable that Johnny does not feel intense pressure from his parents to succeed; they do not seem to be actively involved in every day-to-day decision and outcome. However, as Johnny has stated, they do not need to be as long as he is making "good" decisions. Being the middle child, he may also experience a bit less pressure than the first child to go through the college admissions process. During our interviews, he repeatedly says that his parents give him a "long leash," meaning they allow him to manage and direct his life, and only step in if he goes drastically off-course. I am struck by the idiom he uses, a "long leash." He is using it to convey that his parents give him a lot of freedom, yet the term also refers to what is used to keep a dog under control. Johnny is given freedom when he is making the "right" choices according to his family's standards; however, his parents are holding the "leash" and are ultimately the ones in control and directing Johnny's path. A "long leash" conjures a strong image of who has the power in a relationship, and who is the dominant party and who is the subordinate party.

During our time together, I continually tried to understand what helped Johnny navigate his culture, and what allowed him to take the best of the culture and reject any deleterious parts. One notable feature of Johnny's story is his approach to his schedule. His schedule has time for rest, for play, for family, and has known authentic relationships at camp, which is unique among the participants in this study. He communicates his love for hockey that he really loves to play and looks for opportunities to play wherever he can, including his club team, his high school team, and even pick-up games in a men's adult league. This activity does not seem to be in his life to add a line on his resume; it is in his life for the joy he gets from playing. In creating space in his life for activities he truly enjoys, he has to take a different outlook on his academics:

I'm big on balance [...] That extra time it takes to get the A minus instead of the B plus, to me, is it really worth putting that time in, or should I balance that with a little more hockey or a little more hanging out with my dad?

Johnny rejects adopting an all-consuming approach to academics and makes time for family and play. Johnny seems to "play" hockey — it appears to bring him joy. It also is a fun, stress-relieving activity and also has helped him develop an orientation towards academics. He describes a lesson he learned from an elite hockey player, who shared a story with Johnny:

Whenever he let a goal in, he always said to himself, "Have to get the next one." Even if it was just warm-ups, taking a shot, "Have to get the next one," if it went in. So, I started with that mentality in hockey, of like, "If I let a goal in, I'll lose the game," [and transitioned to], "Got to get the next one." [...] I started to see it

really translated well into school, like I said, if I didn't finish with the grade I wanted, "Gotta get the next one." So, I think having that mentality of being able to rebound quickly is huge, and it started with hockey, but in everything now, if I don't get where I want, that being able to bounce back and get the next one has been huge.

He contrasts his mentality with one of the other goalies on the team:

There was another goalie actually from Bradford and if he let a goal in, you could tell it got to his head, he was angry at himself, how he let it in, and you score one goal on him, you could score three more right away because he was just so [...]. Being able to put whatever happened behind me was huge for my success in hockey, but like I said ... I'm able to do that, he wasn't, but since I have been, it's been really helpful.

Through hockey, Johnny has learned several strategies that he can apply to life outside of sports. When presented with a challenge, such as a goal getting in, he can control his emotions, and amplify his focus in the face of increasing pressure, and thrive and succeed. He indicated that he learned this strategy through hockey and now applies it to his academics. I can see how this mentality will serve him well in other competitive, high-pressure environments like the military, corporate America, and even everyday life in affluent communities. It seems like this mentality, his ability to boundary himself from external pressures, may have been protective and helped Johnny navigate his adolescence in Middleton.

While all of the participants in this study hold multiple privileges in society, Johnny appears to be coming from the most privileged background, in terms of privileged identity statuses. Johnny may feel that his position in society is less vulnerable than others, perhaps making it easier to ease off the pressure and trust that “it will all work out.”

**Business side of schooling.** Johnny appears to be a realist. He seems to accept many things about his culture and world as “the way it is” even if, on some level, he recognizes that “the way it is” is not ideal. His ability to accept things for the way they are and keep moving, not to get caught up in it, seems to serve Johnny well. He recognizes things for the way they are, accepts them, and does not seem to get emotionally invested. This orientation appears to be quite protective and helpful as he navigates his culture and the college preparation process.

An example of this approach to his culture is the “business” side of college admissions, higher education, and even secondary schooling. Johnny sees higher education as businesses, with colleges and universities concerned about their profits and rankings. In a way he recognizes that it is “unfortunate” but ultimately accepts that it is the way it is:

The more kids that apply, the better their acceptance rate is, so, I mean, at the end of the day, colleges are basically businesses that wanna get, so it is understandable, it is unfortunate, but, I understand.

He goes on to reflect on his experiences with the College Board and the ACT. He openly questions the cost of taking the ACT multiple times, at \$62.50 per test, and the cost of

sending extra score reports to colleges. He questions the cost of the AP exams, at \$94 per test, that he is mandated to take by his high school for each AP class he takes, regardless of whether he feels he will score high enough to “pass” the exam or if he will be able to even use the AP credit at the college or university that he attends. He sees the AP exam scores as a way that his high school can make itself look better, as a percentage of students taking an AP test factor into its ranking. Johnny believes this is why his high school makes students take AP tests. Johnny indicates that even a teacher of his says of the College Board “They’re a business, they’re profit run, it’s too bad.” Johnny comes across as an astute realist, who is able to “read” the system well. With this, he may have learned how to “play the game” without worrying about it too much, which is quite protective in his culture.

Johnny is describing a process where he is a cog in the capitalist wheel. Where the purpose of his efforts are not for himself alone, for his development and education. His efforts all serve an ulterior motive — to make his high school look good, increase their rankings, ultimately making the property in the town more desirable due to the “good” schools; the cost of standardized tests that he has to take multiple times, and pay to have extra score reports sent to schools; and the need for colleges to have a high number of applicants to decrease their acceptance rates, to make themselves look better in the rankings. Johnny questions these facts of schooling with me, but generally accepts them as the way things are. But I wonder how this exposure to the reality of the “business” or capitalist side of education, subtly influences how he views the purpose of schooling and education and the manner in which organizations and people work to get ahead.

Johnny sees the college admissions process as reductionistic. He notes that the application does not reflect who he is as a person and as a student. “It’s tough like, you are sending in like, numbers, and you can get there with your essay, they see some of you, but other than that, it is really a numbers game, that impersonal aspect of it is tough.” In the college admissions process, which is seen as being so crucial in determining the path of one’s life, Johnny does not feel like he can convey who he is. This reductionistic process, which he sees as motivated, in part, by profit, is a bit of a capitalist and pessimistic way of looking at his first step into higher education. The noble goals of becoming educated, growing personally, learning about others and the greater world; the development of a sense of what will give his life meaning and purpose, seem to get a bit lost in his description of higher education. However, his ability to see things for the way they are, and not the way he wishes them to be or they “should be” is astute and may be protective.

Johnny describes the ideal admissions process for him. This process would include an interview, which would allow him to be “seen,” literally and figuratively, and give him a better opportunity to communicate who he is. He enjoys talking to people and believes that he would do well in an interview setting, as he describes below:

And [an admission’s officer] can get a sense [...] of how they’ll fit into the college. If it’s an Ivy and they show up to the interview dressed poorly, in a baggy sweatshirt, aren’t looking the person in the eye, is that an Ivy person? So, I think for the admissions officer, from their standpoint, it’s also good to get more of a sense of if that person fits into the college community, as they say.



Johnny had a clear sense of who college admissions officers want on their campuses. His vision of who colleges wish is a young person with privilege, indeed some level of socio-economic privilege to be able to dress well and social privilege, to be versed in the dominant culture's way of interacting in an interview setting, as looking someone in the eye, especially an elder or person with power, is not appropriate in some cultures. The college admissions process, as Johnny experiences it, is reinforcing cultural values of who has merit and value in our society, and why.

**“Don’t mess it up.”** Johnny shared with me a story of one Sunday morning. He explains:

Sunday mornings I play [men’s league adult hockey]. All the guys I play with are big business guys. They're all bankers, and all they do is complain about their job. They're like whether they're trading stocks or whatever they don't necessarily like it, but it pays.

Through his interaction with the men in his hockey league, Johnny is exposed to one possible life path. He hears that they “hate” their jobs, but it financially provides for them and their family. Johnny questions this choice and states that life is short and he does not want to waste it doing something that he does not enjoy.

After the game on Sunday, the players go to a local diner for pancakes. Johnny engages with the owner, who shares with him a story:

The guy who runs the restaurant, it's this old Greek guy, so funny, but he was telling me basically his life story about growing up poor in Greece and moving

here and stuff. And, it was just funny, who would have thought this great piece of life advice would come from a diner owner on like a Sunday?

He was dirt poor in Greece, moved to Athens to get a job where he didn't even get paid but just got scraps of food because he couldn't even eat. And like he lost his parents in the war, World War II, and he lived near the embassy, and met a girl from Denver, Colorado, and moved to the U.S. They've been married for, like, 50 years. Originally I asked how he got the restaurant, and he was saying to own a restaurant you kind of got to start from nothing because it's such a tough business.[...] And he was like, "Just listen, you got a mom, you got a dad, you live in a nice town, don't waste it because if you do, you're going to have to work your butt off every day and it's a tough life." So, I was like, like, I said I came here for pancakes, and I got this great, great little life lesson. So, it was funny you don't know where stuff's going to come from.

Johnny finds this story necessary to share with me. He uses it to illustrate that he, in ways, understands the advantages that he has, especially compared to this man. He recognizes that he must work hard not to "waste" the opportunity that has been given to him. I also sense a part of him surprised that someone like this man could impart such a valuable lesson, and in a setting such as a diner on a Sunday morning. I asked Johnny to discuss what this man's message meant to him:

Don't mess it up because some people aren't as lucky. Like, "I was living in a box, and just to even move to the U.S. I had to work, and work, and work." He's like "you have this opportunity, you use it. Do something good with your life,

don't throw it away because there are people that would love to be where you are.”

I can feel the pressure that is on Johnny not to “mess it up.” Growing up in affluence, Johnny has not had to struggle in the ways the man at the diner had to. He may feel like he has had so many opportunities compared to most, and that he must do something regarding his career that is commensurate with these opportunities he has been given. But that could feel like a lot of pressure, that could be a high bar to try to reach. The military, with values such as discipline, self-sacrifice, and hard work may be familiar to Johnny, having grown up in an achievement-oriented culture, but may also feel like a way to pay back all that has been given to him. The path he is choosing, if he is successful, may plainly demonstrate to himself and others that he has made something of himself and the life that he was born into.

The diner owner’s narrative illustrates the profound privilege that Johnny has. This man had to work hard to pull himself out of poverty, something that Johnny does not have to do; he was born in affluence. Part of what Johnny communicates to me is that he needs to work hard to stay here, to stay in this position, not to “throw away” what he has. A larger discussion of what his responsibility is to others and to the world is largely missing from his analysis of his discussion. The diner owner says to “do something good with your life.” Johnny wants to do something good with his life, and he wants to be in connection with others. He is still forming what that vision will look like, but at this point, his ultimate goal is to complete his education and military training.

**Summary.** During his college preparation process, Johnny moves through and experiences various cultures. The diversity of his experiences seem to help give him a more nuanced understanding of his life in Middleton. While he generally accepts the “rules” of life in Middleton and the college preparation process, his acceptance seems to make his path easier than other participants who actively struggled and resisted the forces influencing their path. His ability to live up to the expectations of his community without letting the pressure consume him will certainly be helpful in college, the military, and life as an adult in the upper-middle class.

There is a central tension in Johnny’s narrative between his striving for connection with others and the pressure he feels to be an independent, capable, and autonomous young man in Middleton. He yearns for connection, but he also strives to embody the ideal young man, who is, in some ways, disconnected from others, who doesn’t need relationships, who can achieve a lot but still be cool and composed. While he seems able to give some voice to his hopes for connection in his life, he also seems to be unable to envision what that could look like in his future life as a young man. He is much more able to clearly articulate a map of his career ambitions and plans.

Johnny has a strong desire to be a role model, to be a leader, to “make the most” of the opportunities that have been given to him. Of the opportunities that Middleton has provided him to actualize these desires, he is making the best possible choices, as he is a peer leader, captain of a sports team, and tries hard to be an upstanding member of the community. However, the strong competitive, hierarchal, and individualistic values that his community promotes seem to make it more challenging for Johnny to achieve these

goals for himself. Finally, while he is aware of many of his advantages in life, he seems to view the responsibility that comes along with these advantages through a very individualistic lens — as he appears to aim to show gratitude for these advantages by working hard and attaining career success.

### **“Henry”**

I met Henry at the Middleton public library, entering through a hidden alleyway off of a bustling road. As soon as I walk through the door, peace and serenity wash over me. The quiet of the library is calming; the refined elegance of the room is soothing and pleasing to my eyes. Heavy velour curtains hang alongside enormous, paned windows which filter in a hazy, golden light. I find a hidden spiral staircase that leads to the second floor. As I climb the stairs, my hand is guided by the smooth mahogany banister.

I see Henry. He is a handsome young man, with blonde hair that swoops to one side, blue eyes, a fair complexion, and a hint of stubbly facial hair. He is wearing an orange-colored plaid shirt and jeans. He warmly shakes my hand and looks me in the eye as he introduces himself. He comes across as sweet, easy-going, gentle, and kind. Together we find a quiet space in the children’s reading room. We sit across from each other at a table surrounded by children’s books.

Henry is a bit more reserved than the other participants and seems a little more nervous. While I catch several nervous gestures, like touching his face, fingers fidgeting with the cuff of his jacket, in other ways he seems like a model of adolescent perfection. He is handsome, well-dressed, personable, intelligent, and mature. During our time

together, I am impressed by his kindness, his thoughtfulness, his lack of ego or narcissistic traits that sometimes can characterize young men of this age.

Henry is able to provide astute insight into his college preparation and admissions process, and frames the college process as “the biggest thing that happens in this town; it’s the most important part.” He also sees the pressure of getting into a “brand name school” as the “biggest stress” for students in Middleton. He talks about a quiet, invisible pressure that he feels molding him into the ideal young person in the eyes of his community, which he seems to understand as both helpful, as he will be better prepared for college and career, and harmful, as he states that there is a restriction of activities he is allowed to explore the world around him.

While Henry can provide a perceptive narration of his culture, his own voice gets lost in his story. His voice gets muddled with the voices of his parents or his peers, and he has difficulty speaking directly about his experience. For example, when I asked him to elaborate on the idea that his community was molding him, shaping him based on their ideas about what is best for him, he answered by talking about what “parents” in general do, not his parent specifically. He talked about how “kids” respond to this pressure, but not he himself. This happened throughout our time together, making me wonder if he has a hard time directly expressing his thoughts and feelings. This also made it harder for his portrait to reflect his lived experience versus his larger commentary on his community and the college process.

Although at times I felt like I was having a hard time hearing Henry’s authentic thoughts and reflections, there were other moments where he provided profound and

astute commentaries on his culture and the college preparation and admissions process. He also was trying to make sense of the advantages that he has in life, and trying to understand how he can “make the most” of those advantages, and what responsibilities come along with those advantages. Like all of the participants, he seemed to have an acute desire to make his parents proud of him.

Henry shares with me his path to college acceptance, one that is carefully guided by his parents’ firm hands. Through his narratives, it is hard to see where his parents’ hope for their son’s life end and where Henry’s dreams for his existence begin. They appear to be active participants in his story. The connection between Henry and his parents is clear in some of the language he uses, the lines between his parents and himself become a bit blurred. When discussing academic or college planning work that he needs to do, he states that his parents say “we,” in terms of what “we” need to do as opposed to what “you” need to do.

**Parental involvement.** Henry’s parents have been very active in his academic development. They provide expectations for his performance, monitor his grades, and arrange and pay for tutoring if Henry does not meet their educational aspirations. He explains how he might need to drop an extracurricular activity or a sport if they were interfering with his academics:

And again my parents have been very vigilant with the grades come in. It's actually drilled into my mind. My mom's always like, "Oh the grades are coming in this weekend, we'll see how it goes from there." And so sometimes where if I am struggling they'll be like, “Well do we need to drop?” for instance...when I'm

doing my shift for EMT, they're like, "Do we need to drop this?" That's been the conversation that's been on-going where if I've been struggling they're like, "We need to pick that up for now." But that's why I haven't had to do that; I'll go talk to them, they'll say, "Let me handle this for now. We'll see how it goes."

Henry's parents seem to be actively managing his experience, tweaking his schedule, minimizing activity where need be in order to maximize his academic performance.

Henry's autonomy appears to be restricted, as his parents are so involved in managing his experience in the world. The close "vigilance" his parents provide may limit the opportunities that Henry has to direct his own life, to try, to fail, to fix his mistakes, and to grow through the experience. This is one way adolescents learn how to cope with the stressors of adult life, and deal with the difficult feelings that emerge when things do not go our way. However, if the expectation is that adolescents achieve near perfection, as that will give them the best odds at "success" in the college process and in life, then parents may need to step in and assist their children, and perhaps hamper parts of the normal developmental process. Henry will be off at college in a few months; I wonder whether he is equipped with the skills to manage his academics and the accompanying pressure without his parents.

In the passage above Henry describes his parents as speaking in the first person when referring to Henry's responsibilities, such as: "Do we need to drop this?" and "We need to pick that up for now." They do not say "do you need to drop this?" These linguistic choices suggest that there may not be a clear delineation between parent and child and that the parents assume part of Henry's responsibilities and decision making



when it comes to his choices. Henry interprets his parents' actions as a way that they show that they care about him.

Henry's parents seem to be very interested and involved in many aspects of Henry's education. They are quite connected, and supporting Henry's academic strivings. Henry thinks that his parents' actions could be seen a bit as "helicopter" (a type of parenting style where parents pay extremely close attention to their children's education; usually has a negative connotation) but he sees his parents' efforts as supportive, and evidence of the concern and care they have for him.

Henry's parents seem to have an ultimate say as to what he is allowed to do with his time. If his grades take too much of a dip, they may ask him to stop his EMT work, something that he enjoys and finds meaningful. He says that this is standard practice in the town:

Yeah, I feel that kind of pressure where the academics kind of sometimes determine what you're allowed to do. It's ridiculous; it's like it's you're not following through with academics sometimes, like, "Okay, you can say goodbye to sports or goodbye to whatever club" or something like that. That's how it is I feel with some parents here.

Henry is voicing resistance to, what he sees as, an unfair parenting practice of Middleton. While he is not directly speaking about his parents here, and just referring to "parents" in general, it appears that he is referring to the earlier example that his parents mentioned that he may have to drop his EMT work due to his grades. He questions why parents are able to exert such control over their kids, when they are "not following through with

academics.” The language that he uses to describe the attitude of parents in town, is particularly striking. “Say goodbye” to something you care about seems to convey parents as strict, powerful, and somewhat uncaring about what may matter to their children. Henry recognizes the control that his parents and parents in the community have on their children:

I feel like there is still always this over this controlling pattern with the parents. They may not feel they might want to, but I feel like in the end the parents will always kind of have the last say. They have the last say.

Henry’s life seems to be, in some ways, controlled and directed by his parents. These authority figures may be making choices based on what *they* think is right for Henry; however, there may be unintended consequences for their actions. If Henry’s efforts have often been guided by the steady hand of his parents, how is the process of knowing himself and what he cares about impacted? However, his parents, successful members of the Middleton community, have a keen awareness of what Henry needs to be able to do in order to also be successful in high-profile professional careers and general life in the upper-middle class. Their guidance, the lessons that they are teaching Henry about where to focus his efforts and their support to help him achieve, may be seen as a valuable training for what will be expected of Henry in the future in his career and community life.

Henry seemed to acquiesce some responsibility for his academic performance; he seems to welcome his parents’ involvement and feels “lucky” to have such support:

I'm sure other people might find it annoying, but I find it helpful. [...] A lot of students don't have that opportunity for parents or making sure that their students

stay on top and sticking on course. So as frustrating as it may be, I feel like it's kind of...I'm lucky enough to have that support system.

Henry feels considerable pressure to succeed in his very academically oriented, competitive community. On the one hand, Henry's parents are doing their best to make sure Henry can thrive in this environment. They may be easing some of Henry's heavy burden by managing some of the logistics and helping him focus on what they feel is most important. However, their involvement may impact his ability to develop feelings of autonomy and competence, essential traits that are necessary for psychological well-being. I asked Henry what would happen if he ended up getting a D in a class in college:

I would be sure that they would step in right away. I would think they would take charge right away. If I were getting a D myself, they would walk right on the campus and make sure I'd go to it myself. They would hire a tutor to come to my door.

Henry describes the continued level of parental support he expects if he were to struggle in college. They would intervene if he struggled. His parents would provide a wide safety net for him, perhaps, in his mind, even traveling to campus and arranging a tutor to come to his door.

In this hypothetical example, it seems that there would be little space for Henry to solve his own problem, to "clean up after making a mess." He acknowledges that his parents would take the lead in helping him solve this problem. As the stakes feel so high in this culture, that academic success is seen as the gateway through which safety and economic security spring, it is understandable to mobilize resources within the entire

family to ensure success for youth. However, the opportunities may be reduced to learn from mistakes and to learn how to cope with the inevitable failure that occurs in life.

Henry is motivated to succeed to make his parents proud. He recognizes the conflict that can occur when his parents' views and his own conflict, "You want to do something that stirs your passion, then your parents might step in, or if you do something solely for your parents, then you have no say in you. So it's hard to get in the middle." While his parents and the larger values of Middleton may have influenced many of his decisions in adolescence, towards the end of our time together, he begins to question making decisions to make his parents happy versus making decisions to make himself happy:

We all have this; I already have this structure, this road to follow, but what if I do this, "Will this make them happier?" We should start to steer away from less of that and more of "Will this make myself happy?"

I think the key is, that's the key to that whole thought process. It's kind of becoming [less] of what makes my parents proud, more of what am I proud of. Henry is acknowledging that external sources, in this case his parents, are acting upon him, molding him, influencing him. But he is also beginning to question this, and wondering if he should shift towards what will make him happy.

**Access.** Henry's academic motivation seems to be influenced by his parents' expectations, but it also appears to be guided by something else, something he describes as "access." He understands that he has opportunities that "plenty of people" would "just die to have." This realization seems to, in part, drive his behavior. He states:

Again, because you may have more access and more availability to these academic opportunities, I find that even with that there's still, you're still like 13, 14 growing up in high school. There's still a lot of stress with those ideas. I think the con would have to be just [...] I mean, we're fortunate to have that access, but then it also creates a lot of stress when you have that access and it pushes you to like, all right, you have this, you have to take it you know?

Henry feels a responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities presented to him, even if it causes him a great deal of stress. He goes on to state:

So when I do have those moments where it's like, the stress or the intensity is getting to me, I think when it comes down to it I am very fortunate and aware that this is not something I really should be complaining that much about.

In the statement above, one can hear the tension between two voices, the voice of the culture telling Henry that he is fortunate and needs to take advantage of what he has been given, and Henry's own voice, which expresses the pressure and stress that he feels as a result of taking advantage of these opportunities. I can see how the cultural voice can impact Henry's ability to listen to his own voice, and in this case, acknowledge his own limits and needs.

While Henry recognizes that "plenty of people" would "just die to have" the opportunities that he has, it does not appear that his community has encouraged him to think about or create space for the examination of his privilege in relation to society as a whole. He recognizes this privilege, and to show acknowledgment and gratitude for it, he must make the most of the opportunities given to him. He seems to see his privilege

through a very individualistic lens; that he has been given this access, and he needs to work hard. It does not appear that Henry's culture has encouraged him to think about his socioeconomic privilege in a more nuanced way.

Henry is aware of and grateful for some of the opportunities that Middleton affords him, but he also sees drawbacks that come along with these possibilities. He finds the "access" that his town provides limiting, in some ways, because it pushes him down a predetermined path. He reflects on what he thinks it is like in other communities that do not have the same academic pressure:

I definitely think it changes the process of growing from maybe another environment because again, when you have that access it kind of forces you, or it really kind of encourages you, to take advantage of that. Whereas if you didn't have that, you had more time just to do whatever you wanted to do. You could choose whatever interested you; you didn't feel stressed to make the most out of it. Whereas here if you had that access, you need to take the advantages as much as you can. Yeah, I'd say it kind of becomes an obstacle because then it kind of forces you or it kind of pushes you to the max of doing it. Whereas if you didn't have that you wouldn't feel the pressure, you would be able to do what you wanted to at just a reasonable pace. Instead of kind of feeling pressured to do what you want to do at a really hard pace.

Henry seems to be longing for a place where he has the "access" without the pressure. We do not discuss what the possible trade-offs would be in a community like this, or communities where the pressure is lower. The pressure and clear path are playing an

important role in preparing Henry for a career and life in the upper-middle class, but he is giving voice to a personal trade-off in this paradigm, a loss of freedom to choose for himself and an intense pressure to succeed.

Henry is aware that he has some incredible advantages that others do not have. This makes it hard for him to acknowledge and accept the difficult feelings that can accompany those advantages. He feels like he should not “complain” about the pressure he feels that stems from pursuing these opportunities. In a way, it seems like he is silencing his voice that questions the culture, that can suffer due to the pressure he feels, because “plenty of people” would “just die to have” the opportunities that he has. He is one of the lucky ones who has these advantages, which may lead to an intense pressure to achieve and a loss of freedom, but Henry is learning not to question those challenging feelings because he recognizes that he is gaining something that others want but much more difficult for them to obtain. His gut seems to be telling him that the pressure is too much, and that he is losing the chance to pursue certain things that interest him, but he seems to try to override those thoughts and feelings, because he may not see another way to proceed.

I asked Henry what an ideal community would look like:

I think it would give them a lot of resources to find their interests and once they do find what they are passionate about, I would want the community to have a source of motivation and passion for that. So interested in making their passion about science, I would want them to go to a school that encouraged them to follow that, and there wouldn't be so much of the academic pressure or somewhat

of the peer pressure from others. I'd kind of want a school where everybody feels comfortable with themselves, and it's more about encouraging everybody to follow their own interests instead of so much of making sure it looks best by what makes them look best. If that makes sense.

Henry's ideal community lacks the pressure of Middleton and also allows for more authentic exploration of interests. In this ideal world, he would still have the "access" to opportunities, but without accompanying pressure. It seems like there is an element of appearance, of making choices based on how they would "look" in the eyes of others. This additional pressure may further limit Henry's freedom to make a decision that veers off the acceptable cultural path. Henry's peer community also influences the trajectory of his growth.

**Cliques.** Several times when I was asking Henry about the academic competition he felt among his peers, he directed the conversation towards the social competition he observes in his school. While he sees his friend group as a source of support in his achievement-oriented high school, he notes there is a lot of tension among the peer groups in his grade. The cliques in the school seem to provide an insight into the more significant cultural norms and values that are impacting the students of Middleton. Friendships affect Henry's growth, as they provide windows into worlds of people outside his own family. Henry describes being limited in who he can be friends with and explains why there is minimal movement among the social groups in his grade.

Especially with our grade, social cliques have really just become prominent. It's interesting because you'd think it's more of an 8th grade or, something like that,



but it's interesting to see how, recently coming into senior year, the friend groups become very competitive with one another I'd say.

Henry aptly recognizes that social segregation tends to peak in middle school, and often breaks down somewhat by the end of high school. It is unusual to still have such social boundaries at this point in high school. While social groups can give adolescents a sense of safety and support, "exclusive cliques" (Henry's term) may create structures of hierarchy and segregation among Middleton's students.

It's more of like; you're either in this group or that group or this group. And so with that, it's not a fun experience [for people] who don't want to be forced to a concrete "This is a group I have to be in." It makes it even more difficult at times where you have that academic pressure, but then also you have the social pressure to be with these people for your whole high school career. And sometimes you may feel like you don't want to be with that group, and everybody knows about it. It's hard to kind of feel comfortable.

Henry communicates to me the costs of moving out of a group, that it is likely you will be "shunned" by that group, and you may very well not be allowed into another group; therefore, you will be left "floating" for the rest of your high school experience, without a group to protect and support you. From Henry's description, he seems to state that it is better to stay with a group of people who you do not have much in common with than to risk moving out of that group and ending up alone and isolated. Henry notes that the cliques have gotten "more competitive" with each other over time, and that middle school years were relatively peaceful in terms of issues among friend groups.

Cliques, groups of people separated by a common interest or “type” (smart kids, cool kids, drama kids) provide spaces where youth can find acceptance and belonging, as well as explore their own identities as they compare themselves to others to better understand who they are and who they would like to be (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). However, exclusive cliques, where the boundaries are rigid and the competition among the cliques fierce, can be detrimental to adolescent development, especially in terms of the ability to connect with those who are different than them. As Henry is already in a community that is highly segregated along socioeconomic and racial lines, and then is further segregated socially, his and his peers’ ability to interact and connect with those different than them may be significantly impacted by these cliques. The segregation and exclusivity that Henry feels the students of Middleton are creating may be reflective of the segregation they see in their own community in relation to the neighboring districts.

There is a great deal of pressure for the students of Middleton to perform the role of the “perfect” young person. The groups may each be trying to embody their vision of what “perfection” looks like. For one group to be perfect, others cannot be perfect, so the “social competition” that Henry speak of may be the competitive group striving to be the best, and best achieve perfection in the eyes of the community. Also, groups can organize around the principle that they are clearly not perfect, and support and accept each other emotionally in this state (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

**Prescribed path.** Like the other participants, Henry has an explicit idea of his parents’ and community’s expectations of him. He experiences the pressure as internalized — that he knows what his parents would want and he acts accordingly. He

gives the example of taking certain classes to “make them happy” and “on their behalf.”

He states that there are clear guidelines one must follow in Middleton:

I feel there is in this town; you need to have this certain structure, it's very structure-based, very step-by-step. There is a process that we need to follow, and I feel in this town particularly, you don't have this step-by-step process and people start to get uncomfortable, and they don't like the unexpected. They don't know the unknown, like what we talked about earlier, the fear of that. So I think there is a big general trend of you have this whole, you have this structure, and we tell them, and its okay, you can do what you want to do, but there's this internal feeling like you should follow this.

He states there is a transparent process to follow, and that others get “uncomfortable” when one does not follow the path. He talks of the “fear of the unknown” and that you do not know where an alternative path is “going to lead you.” He states that the parents in Middleton have a path in mind, that they know that “this is the way to be successful” and are suspicious of other roads a student may take. This attitude may impact the ability of students to explore the numerous ways of being in the world, and also gives a lot of power to the parents in the parent/child relationship. It also seems as if this is a way that the culture is perpetuating itself — in a strong bias against other paths. Then I asked Henry what his parents would think if he chooses a different path:

Personally, I think if I did take a veer off course, I think they, with my personal experience, I think they'd be okay with it as long as there was some safety, as a safety net with it. I think, again, even if they're okay with it, I think in the back of

their mind, if I were to totally veer off course and there was no plan whatsoever, then I think there would be some consequence for that.

For a second time, Henry mentions “consequences” that his parents may impose. In this case, if he does not follow an appropriate course of action, without a proper backup plan, he may face the consequences imposed by his parents. This explicit knowledge of what is appropriate and inappropriate may subtly guide his behavior. It appears that his parents are subtly guiding his behavior, encouraging him to live up to their and cultural expectations, by imposing consequences if he veers off path.

Henry continues to describe the fear that may contribute to keeping adolescents on the “right” track:

I think the fear of mostly the unknown of like, "what happens now?" Like your scenario, you don't go to college, and you become a poet, of course, there might be those availabilities. I think there is that fear of well you don't know where this is gonna lead you. You need a step-by-step process to have some security in mind where if you were to go to the off-course, that unknown, the unexpected, it wouldn't be able to be financially stable.

Henry seems to be communicating that he needs to follow the path that has been laid out for him. Veering off that path, towards the unknown, seems scary, unsafe, and financially dubious. It seems like there is a good deal of pressure to stay on the prescribed path, as moving away from it is fraught with fear. Just like the earlier example of how his parents would intervene if he did poorly in college, he may not be allowed to have the opportunities to discover that if things go wrong, it is rarely fatal and we learn from these

experiences. However, having such clear expectations and a plan may be the most expeditious route to professional success and affluence; Henry is advantaged to know exactly what he needs to do to succeed. Also, having a clear path may ease some of Henry's struggle to finding his place in the world, as the options for him may have been so clear.

**Hurt.** Henry communicates how central the college admissions process is to the people of Middleton. He says, "The college process is the biggest thing that happens in this town, it's the most important part." He calls it the "end game" of one's education; it is the accumulation of the years of schooling and resources bestowed on Middleton's youth. He talks about the pressure that is associated with the process, and the desire he has to talk about it and share the process, but generally does not discuss it with his peers.

I wish this were a process where we can all just talk about, just with the whole college process in general, I wish I can go up to people and just talk about it without either them feeling uncomfortable or me feeling uncomfortable. Because it always helps when you get to talk it out with people and just kind of talk about how the process has been for each other. Then there is a feeling of competitiveness with it; when it comes down to it there could be the chance of one kid getting in and one who's not. I wish that there was a feeling of just total openness where you can talk about it, but I don't know if it's just the system in general of just the application process like nationally. I don't know. It's just the idea of somebody getting in; somebody isn't. I wish it were something that was talked openly, but unfortunately, I feel like it can't be in this town.

Henry seems to know that a disruptive voice is not “allowed” here, that it will not be heard, so Henry keeps his thoughts to himself. Henry’s ability to give authentic voice to his experience with the college process is restricted. He yearns for the ability to just talk about the challenges associated with preparing for and applying to college. I ask him why people do not talk about college admissions. He says it is because he does not want to “hurt others” or “be hurt by others.” The college that one gets into carries so much power; it seems to be a testament to the worth of the individual. It seems that the college that one is accepted into almost verifies everything that these students have been working so hard to attain — it’s the accumulation of a young life’s effort. It is understandable that acceptances and rejections can bring such a range of emotions for young people. However, since there is such a taboo around talking about college admission decisions (and grades in general, as Henry shared with me), Henry needs to keep a large part of his experience out of his relationships with others.

The college preparation and admissions process has been filled with hard work, competition, pressure, and self-doubt. Henry is doing a good job accepting it for what it is as he continues on his journey towards adulthood. He seems to be learning a lesson that he will be able to apply to adult life in a high-profile profession — that challenging times and feelings will come, but he should just keep moving. It is part of life, and no one really talks about it. It seems to be good training for the future — to quiet those thoughts and feelings and keep working.

Henry goes on to explain:

I feel like it's with a lot of the students they might feel that, they may interpret it as well this person overall quality wise is better than you or something. So I feel in a way they are being judged by their merit.

Henry is receiving the message that those who get into more competitive colleges may be “better” “overall quality-wise” than him. The converse that he is “better” “overall quality-wise” than other students that do not get into as high of a ranked school is also concerning. He describes the logic:

They may view themselves a little differently maybe because they both were given the same environment, the same school, and then they feel like they may not [have] taken advantage of it as the other person has, so with that, trying to keep it from their point of view that might kind of take a toll on them, they view themselves.

Henry is conveying the traditional American ideology, that those who work the hardest, and take advantage of the many opportunities offered to them, will succeed. I am frustrated by the fact that it does not appear that his schooling has presented any information that could make this logic more complex and nuanced. For example, colleges balance classes out by a range of factors (legacy status, ability to pay full tuition, special talents), and are not only looking at grades and test scores. Also, the process is not only evaluating credentials, the outcome is also based on how well students can “play the game” — such as paying for standardized test tutoring, having the right “strategy” when selecting courses and extracurricular activities, the resources the adults in the student’s life has that can help support and enhance the student’s high school experiences. It

appears that Henry is not learning about the many ways that students can be valuable and worthy that are not measured by the college admissions process (not focusing as much on academics to help a sick or elderly family member, spending time thinking deeply and profoundly about one or two topics instead of doing what it takes to get good grades in all subjects). I worry that students will internalize the message that there is a direct correlation between the results of the process and the worth of the individual.

Henry is also communicating self-worth that is highly contingent on external achievements, such as the acceptance into a selective college. He perceives situations where students could experience a significant “toll” on how someone views themselves as a result of the admissions decision. While it is certainly understandable to be upset at a rejection, a questioning of the self is concerning. Henry goes on to state, “It's hard to make a topic like that to talk about it so casually when a simple yes or no can affect how people may view themselves.”

**Summary.** Henry is an insightful, kind, bright, and generous young person. The stories that he shared with me illuminate how he is being trained to be a successful member of the upper-middle class and how the college process, in particular, is aiding in that task. He describes the need to take himself out of connection with others in order to have relationships. For example, he is not able to share what he is thinking and feeling about the college process to maintain relationships with his friends. Henry's parents provide a lot of support to help him trod the path towards college and adulthood, helping him grow in ways that will be beneficial in a future high-profile career, but there may also be unintended consequences that may impact Henry's development. Finally, there



appears to be a palpable restriction in Henry's stories: his voice — his thoughts, feelings, dreams, and needs seem to fall out of focus as he works to attain success in Middleton.

### **Chapter Summary**

The portraits of these four participants illuminated the college preparation and admissions process in an upper-middle class community in the United States. The stories of these four bright, funny, and kind young people highlight the weight of the expectations that have been placed on them; the pressure to achieve that brings both difficulties and advantages. The expectations bring high, sometimes developmentally inappropriate levels of stress but, living up to these expectations grants them a privileged status in their community and affords them access to apply to some of the most competitive and prestigious colleges and universities in the country (and beyond), which is seen as a way to secure a safe and financially secure future. The specific pressures they face are molding them and preparing them to succeed in high profile professions and navigate the large social world of the upper-middle class. As they journey towards their community's version of success, we hear ways they question, struggle with, or accept the expectations placed on them. For each of the participants, we can hear a silencing of their authentic thoughts and feelings, where they do not fit with the conventional narrative of success.

These portraits also highlight ways in which dominant cultural values, such as certain patriarchal and capitalist values, are transmitted to these youth. There are clear consistencies in the narratives of the participants, with strong themes of meritocracy, competition, power differentials, independence, prosperity, and self-interest running

through each of their portraits. The stories illustrate how the participants are being trained to be good workers, most of whom are able to work until exhaustion, ignoring their own needs and desires in the process. While this training will help ensure success in college and career, the losses are palpable.

While the participants are learning the “rules of the game” in terms of privileged identities, learning what one must do in order to obtain and maintain a privileged status in society. They are working and are learning and mastering these traditional rules, versus largely reinventing the rules or creating a new path. In that process, the participants are at risk for losing themselves, losing touch with what is important to them, losing their authentic voices, and losing the ability to authentically connect with others.

In Middleton, they are in a community that, in some ways, the adults use their power to encourage the participants to follow the traditional path. There is an imbalance of power, with the adult having more power; the adult is in the dominant position and the adolescent is in the subordinate position. Adults can wield their power in ways that are either oppressive or liberating. If adults are able to exercise their power in ways to give children skills to become self-defining and self-actualizing, their use of power is liberating. If parents use their power to control or limit the self-determination of their child, it can be seen as an oppressive use of power (Isasi-Diaz, 2005). Parents in Middleton may use their power to control their child’s path because they feel they know what will give them the greatest chances of success in society; however, as the societal norms are entrenched in dominant cultural values, they may be unknowingly reproducing these values in their children and limiting their ability to strive towards self-

determination. Additionally, holding power over these students may be teaching the participants important lessons about who is allowed to have power in society, and how power is meant to be wielded. When these youth are in privileged positions of power as adults, how will this Middleton training inform the decisions they make in relation to others?

Finally, each participant conveyed a strong desire to show gratitude for the advantages they have been afforded in life. In most of the stories the participants shared, the best way they could convey their gratitude was to work hard to take advantage of the opportunities given them, to make the most of what they have received. The participants tended to have an individualistic view of how they will use what has been given to them, with some exceptions. The participants seemed to have a rather simplistic understanding of the privileges that they have, and had a hard time articulating what their accompanying responsibility is to others and their larger community. In Chapter Five, I will further discuss the themes that emerged from the portraits, present implications for counseling practice, and discuss possibilities for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was designed to gain an understanding of how adolescents in the upper-middle class navigate a competitive, high-pressure, college-going culture and whether cultivating a sense of purpose factors into their experience. In this chapter, I will discuss the key takeaways that emerged from the participants' portraits in the context of the relevant literature, present practical implications of the findings, review the limitations of the study, and consider areas for future research.

### **Key Takeaways**

The key takeaways of this study emerged from the four participants' portraits. The portraits themselves developed through a lengthy process, much of which is documented in my reflexive journal. This journal delineated the creation of the portraits and mapped the construction of my knowledge of the participants in their unique cultural context. I used this space to reflect on my research question and study as I engaged with the world; reflections that occurred to me as I read articles, observed others in my community as they lived out life in the upper middle class, ruminated after listening to a piece of music or viewing a work of art, all seemed to spark some new understanding or way of looking at the participants and study. Most of these moments are included in my reflexive journal and aided in my understanding of my participants, myself in relation to them, and increased my awareness of, and access to, my own values and biases.

College admission criteria provide a framework that schools and families use as a guide during adolescence, as they signal what traits are "most valuable" for students to embody (Making Caring Common, 2016). These standards signal what students should

strive towards and how they should invest their time. Members of the upper-middle class mobilize their multiple forms of capital to help their children be best prepared for college admissions. This study was interested in how students make sense of the messages from their community, how they make choices in light of these messages, and what are the costs and benefits of adhering to these messages. While each participant has free will and agency, they are also products of their community and each strive to live up to the expectations placed on them by parents, teachers, and community members.

The four portraits in this study illuminate the multiple scripts that the participants see for themselves as they journey towards college and adulthood. They can identify the culturally sanctioned version of success that they are mainly being directed towards, and can recognize what is promised to them if they stay on the path, such as financial security, a prestigious career, and status within the community. The participants also narrated losses that occur as they continue on this path, such as loss of relationships and reduced time for self-selected activities, and rest.

The sub-question of the study was: does cultivating a sense of purpose factor into the participants' experience? While each of the participants were striving towards finding purpose, there were systemic barriers that seemed to hinder this development. Getting into college, and the tasks associated with that, were of greatest significance to the participants and did not seem to leave much room for this exploration. Cultivating purpose was not an especially salient theme in the participants' portraits; however, it is most relevant to the third theme, ethic of responsibility.

Four key takeaways emerged from the participants' portraits: the perpetuation of patriarchal and capitalist values, a loss of voice that occurred as the participants endeavored to become the "ideal" adolescent in their community, an evident ethic of responsibility that each participant shared, and the impact of the college preparation process on the exploration of purpose. The perpetuation of patriarchal and capitalist values seemed most relevant and will be deconstructed to a greater extent than the other two themes below.

### **Perpetuation of Patriarchal and Capitalist Values**

In the analysis of the participants' stories, several themes were repeated throughout the interviews. When these themes were extracted from the data and examined, it appeared that the ideas were consistent with the values of patriarchal and capitalist societies. Participants were encouraged, both directly and indirectly, to embody these traits, to prepare to move through a community that is based on these ideals. It appears that this is a way that these values are transmitted to youth, allowing these ways of being to be reproduced, or passed from one generation to the next.

Patriarchy is defined as a system of domination where men, generally wealthy white men, have authority over all others. These men hold power in the political, social, and moral realms. This hierarchal system also privileges "masculine" ways of being, such as reason, competition, and individualism over "feminine" ways of being, which are seen as more focused on emotions and relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). While there was no data in this study to suggest that their community favored the male participants over the female participants, the Middleton school and community seemed to encourage

the participants of both genders to embody many traits that are typically associated with a “masculine” role. For example, participants were encouraged to dedicate themselves entirely to their school work, even if it cost them relationships and time spent in self-selected activity; they were encouraged to compete with themselves and others to gain the highest grades and standardized test scores possible; and they were encouraged to maintain a highly individualistic view of the world as a method to succeed. Several of the values associated with the patriarchy will be discussed below, as they apply to the portraits.

The concept of the meritocracy is that those who are the “best and brightest” and who work the hardest will gain the greatest rewards, generally in socio-economic terms, in society (Weissman, 2013). In this system, the individual alone determines success and failure and any larger factors that contribute to an individual’s outcomes are rendered invisible (Kennedy & Power, 2010). The belief that one’s success comes from their efforts alone then serves to justify one’s privileged place in society, as it is based on one’s own “giftedness;” therefore the rewards that one receives in society are justified (Kennedy & Power, 2010). Conversely, when individuals do not succeed, the blame is squarely placed on their shoulders, as if it is due solely to their own limitations or deficits (Young, 2004).

Through the participants' narratives, it was clear that the concept of a meritocracy was entrenched in the college admissions process. For example, when Lea is reflecting on how students feel who are not able to apply to highly selective colleges, she states, “We all kind of realize that if we worked for the opportunity to apply to a better school, then

we've earned that chance. And I guess those other students might not have worked as hard.” While hard work and ability certainly factor into success, many of the students at the top of the class also benefited from a range of unearned privileges that supported their success. Examples of privileges include financial resources for SAT or academic tutoring, family resources that allow youth to focus exclusively on academics (and not have to engage in paid work, for example), and cultural capital to understand the “rules of the game” to get ahead. The participants had a limited understanding of a range of unearned advantages that supported their achievements and ensured greater odds at success in the college admissions process.

The meritocracy myth can suggest that some people have less in life simply because they did not work hard enough and that the “American Dream” is available to all. This can be seen as a way that the upper-middle class can protect its privilege and status because the system of advantages that benefit its members, because it provides a logic to their affluence and a reason why it is okay for them to have more than others. However, the structural factors that serve to maintain class divisions, that make it hard for anyone in the lower classes to advance, are rendered invisible.

Several of the participants’ statements made me wonder if the logic associated with the meritocracy, which is reinforced by the competitive college process, creates and maintains a limited way of seeing value in people. Lea believed that she “earned” her chance to apply to an elite college and that those who did not just didn’t work as hard. According to this logic, there may not be a need to be concerned with others’ lack of opportunities because, by this calculus, it may be their fault for not earning it, for not



working hard enough. Also, students who choose not to play by the rules of the game, and students who are not able to follow the rules of the game, are not allowed to gain the reward of attendance at elite universities. What does it mean if a student chooses against spending all of junior year studying for one high stakes test? What does it mean if a student has to engage in paid work to support their family, or has to take care of a young or elderly family member, or dedicates the majority of their time pursuing an authentic interest — what is the value of these paths? The values associated with the college process seem to shape how the participants view themselves and others.

Another patriarchal value is to not question the status quo, defined as the existing state of social affairs. To maintain this system of dominance, members are taught to stay comfortable with their privilege and not to question how others may fare with an unequal system (Gilligan & Richards, 2009). By relying on the concept of meritocracy, the participants come to believe that many of their advantages are merely a product of their hard work, instead of having a more nuanced understanding of how unearned privilege contributes to their success. With a few exceptions, the participants in the study did not appear to have had opportunities to gain awareness of their privilege or the impact unearned advantages have had in their lives. When the community does not question the status quo, there is no need to break down systemic barriers and norms that prevent some individuals in society access to socio-economic mobility.

**Competition.** The college preparation and admissions process seemed to foster a spirit of competition in the participants. They indicated they were competing against peers to achieve the highest GPA, the best standardized test scores, and the most

impressive resume of extracurricular activities. Each participant seemed to make sense and express this spirit of competition differently, and most questioned why it was necessary to compete with one another. However, several did mention that the competition was beneficial, as it pushed them to achieve more than they would have without that pressure. The participants also discussed a tendency to compare themselves. This seemed to be an adaptive tool to “keep track” of where they were in the academic hierarchy, and make adjustments as necessary. The constant comparisons appeared to take a more significant toll on the young women than the young men. For the young women especially, a self-critical voice was apparent. I heard this voice when the girls expressed disappointment or regret for not living up to the expectations placed on them. The participants also were able to narrate places where peers were not living up to the cultural expectation and could be critical of these peers in the process. This competitive drive that the participants expressed, while detrimental in some places as it pushed them away from self-acceptance, self-care, and acceptance of others, will most likely be adaptive and beneficial in post-secondary education and the competitive, high-profile professional world.

**Individualism.** There was an evident spirit of individualism in the participants’ narratives. They seemed to be encouraged to be self-reliant, independent, to focus on their own goals and career plans particularly. While meaningful stories of interconnectedness and community involvement were shared by the participants, these seemed to occur at the margins, or outside of the participants’ everyday experiences, such as Greta’s community organizing for gun reform that was discouraged by her school’s

administration or Johnny's deep and meaningful connections with others at camp that he was unable to replicate in Middleton.

Relationships within the patriarchy are not ascribed much value, as they are seen as "feminine" and it generally falls within the purview of women to nurture and maintain (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Within the patriarchy, a relationship can sometimes be seen as an impediment to personal achievement and success. Although the participants gained support and joy from their relationships with others, they seemed to signal that their individual efforts toward success superseded the connections with their peers. The participants shared stories of prioritizing their school work over time with friends, letting relationships fade with peers that were not in their honors-tracked classes, and limiting time with family due to academic demands. While not particularly probed for in the interview guide, none of the participants once brought up dating or romantic relationships in their narratives.

The lack of focus on relationships by the participants is notable, given the importance of relationships from a developmental perspective. Connection with others not only increases well-being in adolescents, but relationships are also seen as a central context for identity development (Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012). How adolescents develop their sense of who they are happens, to a large extent, in the context of interpersonal relationships. The lack of time spent in relationship with others may have implications for the adolescents in terms of their overall well-being and identity development.

Feminist scholars contend that primary human motive is to participate in connection with others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Rather than seeing relationships as limiting, relationships are the source of growth and are of the utmost importance to ensure mental health and wellness (Miller & Stiver, 1997). However, authentic relationships are not possible in a system based on power rather than mutuality. As Miller and Stiver (1997) write, “A dominant group cannot encourage empathy in its members, or it cannot remain dominant” (p. 58). Mutuality in relationships is challenging to create, especially in a community with a patriarchal power structure where member seek dominance, and that relies on values of meritocracy to produce clear “winners” and “losers.” However, mutuality is essential in order to have healthy, authentic relationships with others. The “rules” that the Middleton youth in this study describe they are encouraged to live by may hinder the participants’ ability to create and nurture authentic relationships

**Patriarchy and democracy.** The word “democracy” is derived from the Greek word *demokratia*, which means “the rule of the people.” A healthy democracy gains strength by the full participation of the populace in civic life, and this full engagement leads to the protection and service to meet the needs of all people. However, much has been written about how our American democracy is in trouble, and that it now is a system “of the 1%, for the 1%, and by the 1%” (Stiglitz, 2011, p. 1).

The patriarchy, with its consolidation of power in the hands of the privileged few, is at odds with the ideals of democracy, which is based on the ideals of equality (Gilligan & Richards, 2009). The participants are being encouraged to focus on attaining their

individual goals, taught that the meritocracy is valid and that the “winners” and “losers” can be separated by who works the hardest, and are not encouraged to gain an awareness of their privilege and accompanying responsibility to others and society that comes with that privilege. These values may hamper the development of civic virtue and perpetuate the dominant patriarchal economic and political structures that perpetuate systems of dominance and oppression.

**Capitalist values.** Through the participants’ narratives, it appeared that they were being prepared to be members of a capitalist system. Capitalism is “an economic system in which resources and means of production are privately owned, and prices, production, and the distribution of goods are determined mainly by competition in a free market” (Merriam Webster, 2012). The values of capitalism govern our American economy, and they have also infused the everyday existence of many Americans. Materialism, striving for wealth, and self-interest can be seen as byproducts of a capitalist system.

The portraits of the participants conveyed the many ways in which they are being prepared to become members of a capitalist society, especially as a worker and a consumer. Each of the participants described a demanding pressure they felt to “produce,” such as achieving good grades, and excelling in extracurricular activities. The purpose of making money or maintaining wealth was also a prominent goal in the lives of each of the participants. It is important to recognize that the many members of the upper-middle class, like many across the socio-economic spectrum of American society, are working harder than ever to maintain their lifestyles in the face of growing economic

uncertainty. The participants' drive to be "good workers" seems to come from a place of ensuring safety and survival, not as a means to merely accumulate more material wealth.

The primary goal of business within a capitalist model is to make money, which is called the profit motive. The critics of a capitalist system argue that in a capitalist economy, businesses work to extract as much labor as possible from a worker, to maximize profits. The workers who are best able to disconnect from their own needs, as these needs can only slow production, may reap the rewards in this system. The participants were able to articulate how they were expected to quiet their needs for rest, interpersonal connection, or self-selected enjoyable activity to pursue a narrow version of success in Middleton, primarily centered around achieving high grades.

Critics of capitalism also believe that capitalism can estrange workers from their humanity as they are directed towards goals that are dictated by the business to gain the maximum profit out of the worker. When one gives up the right to their labor, they give up their ability to transform the world, which is seen as a profound, spiritual loss.

The participants in Middleton seem to be "selling" their labor in the market of higher education. They describe making trade-offs to be better prepared to succeed in the college admissions process. The losses that they expressed, loss of relationship, loss of time with family, loss of time for rest, also seem to be the beginnings of estrangement from their humanity. However, they will be rewarded with well-paying jobs and lives of material comfort if they can continue to succeed in this paradigm.

While all of the participants seemed to question the "business side" of higher education, Johnny, in particular, spoke at length about this topic. He discussed how

colleges are largely concerned with “profit” and “rankings” and that it was his job as an applicant to fit within this system. For example, he believed that the colleges want students with high standardized test scores, to increase their rankings, which will in turn increase their enrollment, and drive “profits.” This logic seemed to factor into his understanding to why he has to make certain choices in the college admissions “game.”

I was struck by Johnny’s “realism” about the college application process. He matter-of-factly explained to me the “business” side of the admissions process. He, along with several of the other participants, discussed an identity that was, in part, defined by where they fell on the “scatterplot” of standardized test scores and GPA. The participants did question the reductionistic nature of the college admissions process, as it is based largely on GPA and standardized test scores, and they wanted to be “seen” for more than just those numbers. However, they also seemed resigned to the fact that this is the way the process is, and they cannot change it. However, this process is sending them strong messages that who they are, and their value in this process, is closely linked to these numbers. In this process, they appear to be defined by what they can achieve and what they can produce, which is also how member of a capitalist society are in many ways judged.

The logic that the participants conveyed is troublesome on several levels. When one’s self-worth is contingent on external achievements, such as GPA and SATs, it is fragile and vulnerable to changes in the environment. From a psychological perspective, it is protective to see an equal, inherent, and infinite worth of the lives of all people. Nothing that one could do, no matter how spectacular the accomplishment or epic the

failure, can change an individual's worth. However, this egalitarian viewpoint, while psychologically protective, may counter capitalist values. Additionally, a self-worth based on external achievement forces the participants to be constantly vigilant, as they subconsciously seem to realize they are only as "good" as their last accomplishment. This may drive the participants to constantly work harder, to continue to rack up achievements to prove their self-worth.

### **Loss of Voice**

In each of the portraits, the participants seem to disconnect from what they know and feel to act in ways that are more culturally acceptable. The participants strove to be the ideal, "perfect" teenager in order to be accepted by their community and also to succeed in the college admissions process. They were doing their best to live up to their community's expectations of them. At points along the way, they questioned what was being asked of them, such as Lea expressing how much she loves art but wondering why it is not acceptable to have a career in this field. However, through their narratives, one can hear the students often wrestle with these ideas but then come to land on the culturally-acceptable, well-trodden narrative, as Lea comes to believe that art can be a part of her life, just not as a career. The participants' portraits illuminate ways in which the student's authentic voice is being hushed to give space for the conventional narrative to be heard. Over time, I wonder whether these participants will still have access to these authentic thoughts and feelings or whether the conventional storyline will automatically emerge.



Gilligan (1996) writes about this process, the loss of voice, as it occurs in early adolescent girls. She states how “honest and direct voices are corrected and dismissed” because, if they were not, “what they see and say must be addressed” (Gilligan, 1996, p. 96). Brown and Gilligan (1997) documented the process by which girls lost access to their thoughts and feelings over time, as they recognized these aspects of themselves did not fit within the narrow range of acceptable female behavior. The girls in their study also grew to fear emotions or thoughts that were out of the realm of “acceptable.” This appears analogous to what is occurring with the Middleton participants. As the Middleton participants were adapting to who their culture wants them to be, which is largely defined by the values associated with the college admissions process, there seemed to be a need to suppress what they honestly think and feel.

There were many examples of honest and dissenting voices in this study, the voices that questioned the norms of their community, such as “Why should I have to make all this money?”; “Why can’t I have a career in art?”; “Why am I not allowed to do what I want to do and must defer to what *you* want me to do?” and “Why do these peers stand in judgement of my performance; why is that okay?” However, the dissonance created tension in the participants; they struggled with these ideas, struggled to make sense of their authentic thoughts and feelings in a community that strongly valued certain ideals (perfectionism, individualism, “success,” inauthenticity). In some ways, the more students could resign themselves to these “truths” about their community, it appeared that this could help them function in this community with less stress and tension. Johnny, for example, accepted the most about the values and norms of his community and seemed to

suffer the least because of it. However, in order to accept the “truths” about the community and function within this society, the participants had to rationalize away the challenging parts of these messages, and suppress challenging emotions or thoughts. When the participants were expressing dissonance, they were emotional, they challenged conventions, they expressed complicated thoughts and emotions; they generally appeared more complex and expressed a greater range of, sometime difficult, emotions. When the participants accepted the conventional narratives, they were emotionally steady, they appeared calm and collected, and they seemed to be in complete control, and were a picture of the “model” affluent teenager.

Brown and Gilligan (1997) also illustrated how challenging it was for the girls in their study to form authentic relationships with others. They were able to have relationships, but not find a genuine connection as they had to keep large parts of what they thought and felt hidden, as it was socially undesirable to share these parts. Since they could not be their authentic selves, they could not be in authentic connection with others. This mirrors the disconnection that the participants described, such as Johnny explaining how youth in Middleton are “fake” as they pretend to be kind to you, but will enforce rigid behavioral expectations behind your back. It also seems to be difficult for some of the Middleton participants to be authentic with their peers, to share the reality of their experience, in the joys and the sorrows, if it does not “fit” in the cultural script. Greta’s portrait illustrates how she keeps hidden parts of her experience, like her mother’s wartime struggles, or not reaching out to connect with friends when she is devastated about her rejection from McGill, other than a group text message. In keeping

large parts of herself out of relationship with others, she limits her ability to authentically connect with her friends and peers. Chronic disconnection is a risk factor for mental health conditions in adulthood (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

### **Ethic of Responsibility**

Each of the participants conveyed some awareness of the advantages they had in life and expressed a responsibility associated with having these advantages. Johnny talked about “making the most” of the opportunities given to him and that he should “Do something good with [my] life;” when speaking of her advantages in life, Greta asked, “How do I repay that?” Henry stated that “plenty of people” would “just die to have” the opportunities he has, and Lea states that she wants to do something “bigger than herself.” Many of our discussions about responsibility occurred organically and were not in response to a specific prompt by me.

While the extent of the participants' privileges remained mostly invisible to them, they did seem to have a strong desire to do something useful with the advantages that they have been afforded. Some of the participants talked about their advantages in the context of meaning and purpose; that it would give them meaning in life to use the advantages they have been given. However, all of the participants had a limited idea of how they could use what they have been given. Most of their conceptualizations centered around “working hard” to demonstrate their acknowledgment and gratitude for their opportunities. A broader sense of obligation to others or the larger world seems to be missing from their analysis. However, a strong sense of purpose outside of the self and in

connection with others has been linked to many positive mental health outcomes for individuals.

It appears that the participants were struggling with some essential questions about how best to use their lives. However, they all had a relatively undeveloped sense of what that could mean, which suggests that they have not been exposed to many paths or broader discussions of what that can look like, as it may be seen as diverging from the traditional route. As they are making important life decisions, where they will go to college, what they will study, what their goals are for their future, they seem to be at a critical period in their lives to figure out how the sense of responsibility fits into their grander life plans. I wonder whether this already quiet sense of responsibility that the participants communicated will grow more silent and fall out of focus in the coming years as these youth begin to pursue their college and career goals diligently.

The participants were looking for meaning and purpose in their lives, and it appeared that this ethic of responsibility helped push them in the direction of contributing to the greater good. However, it appeared that activities that would help them grow in this area were not valued as much, in terms of college admissions standards, as other criteria. Therefore, these altruistic activities were seen as less worthy of the participants' attention than striving for good grades and standardized test scores.

Through a capitalist lens, there is little that the upper-middle class can gain by promoting its youth to focus on a sense of responsibility to others. A sense of responsibility to others may divert the individual's attention away from working to become the best future worker possible and may also call into question some of the

practices that maintain the status quo. For example, if an individual feels a responsibility to the poor in the neighboring community, then they may need to examine some of the practices that support them remaining poor, which may ultimately mean the affluent may have to give up some of their privileges and advantages to make the system more equal. The youth in the study seem to be diverted away from focusing their attention towards social responsibility, although this work could help benefit themselves, as there is a host of literature that supports positive mental health outcomes for those who engage in these activities, and the people and communities around them.

### **Impact on Purpose**

The sub-question of this study asked whether cultivating a sense of purpose factored into how adolescent participants in the upper-middle class navigated the competitive, high-pressure, college-going culture. The four portraits suggest that these participants were systematically diverted away from an authentic exploration of purpose and shepherded in a conventional and culturally-sanctioned direction. Each participant provided examples of how their dreams or desires for their lives were impacted by expectations that were placed on them. Lea describes community members “almost laugh[ing]” at her when she said she wanted to be an artist; Johnny beautifully shares his hopes to live in connection with others but details the cultural barriers that prevent him from doing so; Greta describes her near-chronic state of stress and exhaustion due to her academic demands, which limits the time and space for authentically selected activity; and Henry delineates the number of ways that his parents direct his activity away from

“something that stirs your passion” in a direction that they believe will help him achieve success.

The literature states three conditions that must occur for activity to be purposeful: authentically chosen, engaged in over time, and meaningful to the self and the world outside of the self (Malin, 2017). The participants were met with challenges on each of these three fronts. Their activity often was chosen by others outside of themselves, and was not freely chosen by the participants. The college admission framework guided many of their decisions about how to invest their time and effort. While they each spent large amounts of time engaged with school work, it often seemed that the outcome, in terms of grades and GPA, was more important to the participants than the learning itself. Additionally, most participants described spending a significant amount of time studying for standardized tests in order to boost their chances of gaining admission at an elite college. Lea specifically said that she spent “all of junior year” studying for the ACTs. This activity, that consumed a year of her life, does not meet the conditions to be purposeful and in spending so much time studying for the ACTs, she consequently diverted her attention away from engaging in activity that may have been personally meaningful and helped her explore and discover purpose in life. For Johnny, the ACTs contributed to the culture of inauthenticity and judgement in Middleton. He describes how one’s score is a status symbol and adds to the sense of hierarchy among students as they prepare for college.

The participants provided examples of where they found meaning in life, and these examples often involved doing things with and for other people. The college

preparation process, however, seemed to encourage the participants to focus on themselves almost exclusively. The act of engaging with the world beyond the self, in a meaningful and sustained way, did not seem to be valued by the college admissions process, as these participants interpreted it, so they did not see an incentive to focus their energy toward the life beyond the self. While the participants each seemed to yearn for connection with others and for meaning, they each seemed to have limited opportunities or permission to explore this part of themselves and the world around them.

### **Implications**

The portraits of these four participants give us insight into how the broad cultural process of college preparation and application impacts students and how it helps to shape how they see and feel about themselves, how they view the world around them, and what they see as their place in that world. The findings of this study have broad implications for the field of counseling, especially the intersections among school counseling, primary and secondary education, higher education, and community counseling.

### **School Counselors**

High school counselors are uniquely suited to address the issues that emerged in this study as one of their core responsibilities. According to the American School Counselor Association, school counselors are strive to help students prepare for college and career (American School Counselor Association, 2017). As they are the school official generally most closely connected to the college preparation and application process, they are perhaps best situated to drive change. Additionally, school counselors

are educated to understand adolescent development, along with the role that culture plays in influencing an individual's growth over time.

School counselors can work to spearhead cultural change within their school systems. While the detailed plans of how school counselors can work with administrators, teachers, parents, and students are outside of the scope of this study and will be addressed as a target for future research, the overarching themes for exploration within school systems by school counselors are presented below.

**Challenging meritocracy.** The concepts of meritocracy seemed to be internalized by all of the participants and were reinforced by the college admissions practices. However, this firm belief in a meritocracy created problems for the participants, as it reinforced a sense of self based upon strong external orientation. The participants saw a large part of who they were through the lens of what they could achieve. A belief in meritocracy is not only potentially harmful to the individual student, but also society as a whole, as it fails to recognize the system of unearned advantages that privilege some over others, which serve to maintain economic inequality and strong social class divisions.

School counselors, as system-change agents, can work to raise awareness among administrators, educators, parents, and students to the myths of the meritocracy, and how this ideology can be harmful to individual students and society as a whole. They can also help those who work with youth to understand how a strong achievement orientation impacts students. School counselors can discuss the benefits of supporting growth in a variety of developmentally-appropriate ways that shifts the focus away from a strict reliance on traditional metrics of student success (GPA, SAT scores) towards a more



comprehensive, holistic view of young people that keeps the humanity of the adolescent in the foreground. School counselors can work with the large school community to expand the definition of who has merit in society and why.

Also, the lifetime of privileges that the participants have been the recipients of are mostly invisible in a meritocracy, so the participants come to believe that their efforts alone have to lead to their success. This belief structure left unchallenged will also serve to reinforce the status quo. Part of the work of challenging the meritocracy is making visible unearned privilege and understanding how these privileges help individuals succeed in society. School counselors can create and implement programming to illustrate these concepts. One existing experiential program entitled, *The Game of Social Life*, (Bramsfeld & Good, 2016) attempts to educate players to the ideas of unearned privilege, and the role that oppression impacts individuals with minority identities in society. In this activity, participants are assigned a character that has credits that match their social class. Characters with more privileged identities have more credits than those with fewer privileged identities. The players have to make decisions that each come with consequences. The game is designed to highlight how intersecting systems of privilege impact the lived experience of members of society and impact structural inequality (Bramsfeld & Good, 2016).

School counselors can work with the large school community to expand the definition of who has merit in society and why. School counselors can work with educational leaders to review the curriculum to ensure that a wide range of people and types of contribution are highlighted in school lessons. School counselors can also

advocate for social justice lessons and experiential activities to be infused into the curriculum, to help students in affluent communities gain an understanding of relevant social issues in society and ways in which their efforts can bring about change, in order to expand civic virtue in their students and also combat the one-dimensional version of meritocracy. Community service activities have been documented as beneficial to students, most notably for increasing agency, connection to others, and as an opportunity to serve something more extensive than the “self.

**Combating individualism and disconnection.** Decades’ worth of research has documented the benefits of living in connection with others. The participants in this study communicated many ways in which they yearn to be in connection with others, but are pushed towards individualism, as a means to succeed in high school and the college admissions process. The participants also appeared to experience disconnections, as an adaptive strategy to keep parts of themselves that question the cultural logic suppressed, making it difficult to act authentically and therefore, difficult to truly connect with others. School counselors can help educate key stakeholders in school communities to some of the potential hazards of individualism and disconnection and look for opportunities to foster connection throughout the school experience.

Brown and Gilligan (1997) noted that youth often learn strategies of disconnection through observing the adults in their lives. If we hope for our youth to be able to forge authentic connections and thrive in relationship with others, we, especially as parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators, must understand what prevents us from engaging authentically with others. School counselors can help educate adults in

affluent communities about their role in maintaining systems of disconnection. School counselors can provide psychoeducational resources to help adults understand more about the consequences of disconnection with self and others and strategies to more authentically engage with oneself and the world.

**Alternative visions.** The adolescents in this study had a relatively clear idea of who their community was encouraging them to be and what types of careers were suitable for them to pursue. However, the participants seemed to yearn for space and time to explore potentially meaningful activities, especially as this would apply to future career paths. School counselors can help communities explore, identify, and validate other paths that students can follow. Additionally, school counselors can work with community members to help recognize and acknowledge the vast range of ways students can be in the world and that students can contribute in the world. School counselors can help community members deconstruct the messages about who has value and why.

School counselors can help the community engage in an ongoing conversation about what adolescents want from their lives, what teachers and parents want for the youth, and what are the best methods to achieve these life goals. Do youth want to discover joy, connection, and purpose in their lives? If so, what are some of the ways that they can do that and that the school as a system can support that growth? It is not clear from the data if the participants' parents and teachers were aware of the trade-offs these youth were making in order to achieve "success," as many of these trade-offs were hidden from view and culturally-sanctioned. For example, did parents know that their children were forgoing relationships with others in order to achieve academically? If the

student and parent take a step back, is that an acceptable choice? School counselors can work with communities to illuminate the trade-offs that occur in an achievement-oriented community in order to help raise awareness and help students and parents make clear and informed choices in high school.

The participants appeared driven to make decisions that would maintain their socioeconomic status. School counselors can help students and parents engage in traditionally stigmatized discussions around money and wealth, to help students and parents better understand their own views, biases, and life goals. School counselors can help challenge the message that, as the participants stated, that making a lot of money is the main goal in life. While school counselors should not impose their values on students and parents, they can help all key stakeholders engage in a conversation around this taboo topic, which appears difficult to talk about in these communities, yet it may be an “invisible hand” that influences many of the decisions that Middleton youth and families make during the college preparation and admissions process.

In addition to naming the alternative paths for students, communities must explore ways to make alternative paths less risky for students to follow. Adults and youth must together explore what their hopes and fears are for life, what are their preconceived ideas and biases about careers and life choices, and how they can tolerate the uncertainty and ambiguity that may accompany veering off the traditional path. School counselors, with training on career development models, can facilitate these discussions or train teachers on ways to facilitate these discussions in their classrooms.

Adolescence is generally a time where youth explore who they want to be in the world. It is a time of “trying on” various identities to see what “fits.” It is an examination of who one is to family and friends — deciding what traits they would like to accept and emulate and which characteristics they do not agree with and want to reject. When a youth engages in this process over time, they arrive at a self-selected, authentic identity. When youth do not participate in this process, they risk identity foreclosure, where they forego identity exploration and take on the traits of parent and friends (Marcia, 1993). Adolescents in the upper-middle class need time and space to do the work of identity exploration, and not merely adopt a generic, ready-made identity.

The participants in the study presented themselves as practically perfect versions of upper-middle class adolescents. It appeared as if they were embodying the vision of an adolescent that their community provided to them - a polished, beautiful, high-achieving, and polite young person. School counselors, in conversation with parents and educators, must highlight the importance of giving adolescents space to be themselves, which at this life stage especially can be messy and complicated, not polished and perfect. While it may be easier for us, the adults in their lives, if young people perform the role of model adolescent flawlessly, we know from a developmental and relational perspective, that they must suppress and disconnect from large parts of who they are to do so. Adults in upper-middle class communities must be informed as to ways that inauthentic behavior is promoted and explore ways of being, both for themselves and their children, that are more authentic. The ways that inauthenticity can be both protective and harmful to individuals in upper-middle class communities can also be explored. It appeared that the

participants in the study felt most “themselves” was when they were in authentic connection with others. Additionally, school counselors can help educate students, teachers, and parents to the typical developmental tasks of adolescence and the tenets of human relationships that are authentic and growth-fostering.

### **Community Counselors**

Counselors in affluent communities may see adolescents and families in their practices who struggle in ways highlighted in this study, such as youth struggling with consequences of a strong achievement orientation. Counselors can work with both adolescents and their families to address challenges and work with their clients to achieve health and wellness. Counselors can work with clients and families to explore the stressors of an achievement orientation, with the pressure to succeed, individualism, and focus on meritocracy. As disconnection from self and others may be an issue for adolescents and family members, counselors may consider using Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) as a tool with clients. RCT contends that the dominant culture idealizes power over others, independence, and success through competitive achievement, which separates people from the basic human need to participate in the growth of others and to be supported and changed ourselves by others (Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, 2018). Good connection is also found through creating change together. RCT also states that relationships reproduce the culture that they are embedded within. For example, a counselor might consider working to break the cycle of disconnections within a family, and help the clients engage in a style of connection rooted in mutual empathy and mutual empowerment.

**Advocacy**

Counselors who work with students either preparing for college or counselors in higher education may consider advocating for revisions to college admissions practices. The portraits in this study highlight some of the significant ways in which adolescent growth is directed as a result of adhering to, what students believe, are the standards that will result in the best chances of getting into an elite college or university. The participants seemed to experience a narrowing of who they were “allowed” to be as a result of their interpretation of the standards. Counselors can advocate for college admission standards to be revised to incorporate a more holistic review of candidates. Some have suggested that Ivy and elite colleges and universities move to a lottery-based system for students who meet the requirements for entry, in hopes of alleviating some of the pressure to achieve at such a stratospheric level. Additionally, practices that open up a prestigious college education to more diverse populations, especially students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as people from these groups are grossly underrepresented in highly selective universities and the upper-middle class and rich currently encompass the vast majority of seats in each Ivy League class.

**Counselor Educators**

This study highlighted how upper-middle class youth internalize the values of the dominant culture, including meritocracy, individualism, and competition, and performed in the college admissions process. Counselor educators must help future counselors understand how problematic dominant cultural values impact the development of

individuals and how institutions, such as secondary and higher education, metabolize and enact these values.

The upper-middle class as a population, generally, does not gain much attention in counselor education programs; however, as a class, their choices are crucial in maintaining systems of domination and oppression. From a social justice perspective, it would be beneficial for future counselors to increase their awareness of what privilege in the upper-middle class looks like, learn to question such privilege, and be able to deconstruct systems that perpetuate privilege (such as a belief in meritocracy, that the upper-middle class deserves greater rewards due to their greater merit and contributions in society). As the impact of the college preparation and admissions process is enormous, both for individuals and society as a whole, future counselors can benefit from a better understanding of how this system confers advantages and disadvantages on people, sometimes due to factors mostly out of the individual's control.

### **Limitations**

As with all research paradigms, qualitative research has its limitations. This study has several specific limitations. First, generalizability or how much the findings of this study can be applied to the broader population. While the results of this study may not be able to be directly involved in the entire broader society, the findings can be transferred to other contexts (Merriam, 2009). While all of the participants were from the same town, it is more challenging to identify if some of the findings were specific to Middleton itself or applicable to the broader upper-middle class.



Additionally, the size of the study was small, with only four participants. While this size allowed for a prolonged involvement with each participant, which yielded a depth of data, the experiences of youth outside of these four participants was not captured. Further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to reproduce and validate this study's findings.

Another limitation of this study is the diversity of the participants. As all of the participants are from one state, and from a metropolitan region, the geographical nuances that may occur in this population outside this particular state and metropolitan community are not captured in this study. Additionally, as the sample is relatively homogenous (regarding race, religion, disability status), the study does not reflect the diversity of the adolescent population in the United States.

While there are many benefits of portraiture, including the ability to convey the participant's experience in a rich and deep manner, there are also limitations. The lack of literature that details the method to analyze the data is particularly challenging. Further research is necessary to delineate the process of data analysis and how this analysis then is used to develop the participant's portraits.

### **Future Research**

This study examines the impact the college preparation and admissions process has on adolescents in the upper-middle class. The college preparation and admissions process is a broad cultural process that has mostly remained unexplored in the literature. The findings of this study highlight several paths for future research, including longitudinal studies of youth in this population; studies examining the role that parents

play in influencing the choices of youth in the upper-middle class; an examination of outliers, adolescents and young adults who are able to resist the pressures to conform to the traditional ideals for youth in the upper-middle class; and how to deconstruct and challenge the concept of meritocracy by those in the upper-middle class.

This study examined the participants at one point in time, during the second semester of their senior year in high school. In the future, it will be necessary to understand better how youth come to internalize dominant cultural messages, which seems to occur much earlier in development generally. By studying youth at several points from late-childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood, we will be able to document and better understand how the pressures and messages that the upper-middle class as a community sends to its youth are metabolized by the individuals and how it impacts the development of youth over time. Also, we will be better able to understand the outcomes of the choices the students make; do their decisions have the intended issues and are there any unintended consequences of their choices. The results of this study suggested that the participants experience a loss of voice over time as they strive to become the “ideal” young person in the eyes of their community. In a longitudinal study, this process can be tracked over time, and the field can gain a better understanding of how this occurs and how students resist this process.

The parents of the participants figured prominently in the study. Their voices and desires for their children factored significantly into the choices the students made and seemed to be one of the most important factors influencing their children’s development. Future researchers can explore upper-middle class parents’ hopes and fears for their

children, and how these aspects factor into the child-rearing choices they make. More needs to be understood about how parents in the upper-middle class transmit values to their offspring, explicitly surrounding privilege, connection, and responsibility, and how this perpetuates privilege among affluent youth. The literature has documented the challenges that parents in the upper-middle class have, especially in domains of perfectionistic strivings and disconnection from others. The counseling profession needs a better understanding of adults who can navigate the upper-middle class society in an interconnected and authentic way, especially regarding parenting practices and help youth gain a greater understanding of how they resist harmful messages and promote interlinked ways of being.

This study examined the lives of four adolescents in the upper-middle class who, though there are examples of resistance and questioning, mostly ascribe to the values of their class. The in-depth study of cultural outliers, those youth and adults who can defy the traditional cultural norms in the upper-middle class, could be helpful to understand better how individuals can resist dominant cultural norms and messages. It would be particularly beneficial to study adolescents and young adults in the upper-middle class who are also able to maintain their authentic voices and stay in connection with themselves and others, despite powerful forces pressuring them to do otherwise. It would also be helpful to understand how these outliers can transform the usual conversation, and document that process in affluent communities.

Finally, the concept of meritocracy factored prominently in the four portraits that comprise this study. It seemed to be tightly woven into the fabric that comprises the

values and beliefs that are passed on to the youth in Middleton, and is reinforced by many adults in the community, such as parents, teachers, administrators, and school counselors. Further examination of how the belief in meritocracy can be disrupted and challenged by those who stand to benefit the most by it, the upper-middle class, could benefit individual adolescents, like those in this study, and help move communities toward greater social equality, a factor necessary for a healthy democracy.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how adolescents in the upper-middle class navigate the competitive, achievement-oriented, college preparation and admission process. This topic has been largely unaddressed in the literature; however, there are significant implications of this process on the lives of individuals and society as a whole. This study offers insight into the lives of four students as they navigate the college preparation and application process, and highlights the advantages and unintended consequences of engaging with this process as an adolescent in the upper-middle class. In particular, four takeaways were gleaned from the participants' portraits. First, it appeared that the values associated with patriarchal and capitalist systems were promoted to help students succeed in the college preparation and admission process; second, the students experienced a loss of authentic voice as they strove to become the "ideal" adolescent in their community's eyes; third, the participants communicated a strong sense of responsibility to show gratitude for the advantages that they were the recipients of; and finally, the college preparation process appeared to impact the students' exploration of purpose. The implications of this study are relevant to counselors,

educators, administrators, and parents and further research is necessary to meet the needs of this underserved population better and to work to dismantle systems that privilege some and restrict the opportunities of others.

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## Appendix A



**Institutional Review Board**  
School of Nursing & Graduate School Building  
Room 333  
Office: 973-655-7583  
Fax: 973-655-3122

Nov 8, 2017 2:55 PM EST

Ms. Kathleen Grant  
Dr. Dana Levitt  
Montclair State University  
Department of Counseling and Ed. Leadership  
1 Normal Ave.  
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number: **IRB-FY16-17-659**  
Project Title: **SS Portraits of Upper-Middle Class Adolescents as they Navigate the Competitive, High-Pressure, College-Going Culture**

Dear Ms. Grant,

After an expedited review:

- Category 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this protocol on **Nov 8, 2017**. The study is valid for one year and will expire on **Nov 8, 2018**.

All active study documents, such as consent forms, surveys, case histories, etc. , should be generated from the approved Cayuse IRB submission. (The IRB no longer stamps approved documents.) Should you wish to make changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests via a Study Modification in Cayuse IRB.

Please note, as the principal investigator, you are required to maintain a file of approved human subjects research documents, for each IRB application, to comply with federal and institutional policies on record retention.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Closure submission.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5189, [cayuseIRB@montclair.edu](mailto:cayuseIRB@montclair.edu), or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Katrina Bulkley  
IRB Chair

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide

#### **Section A**

1. What does a typical school day look like for you? (Follow up: how are you feeling throughout the day? Stressed, relaxed, happy, worried, excited, bored, etc. What contributes to your feelings?).
2. What is the climate of your school like? What would I observe other students doing/teachers/administrators? What do you think teachers/students/administrators care most about?
3. What does a typical weekend look like for you? What would I see you doing? How are you feeling over the course of the weekend (relaxed, happy, worried, excited, bored, etc)?
4. How did you get involved in the activities you describe? Why are you involved? What do you get out of these activities?
5. Do you do anything for fun or pure enjoyment? If so, what?

#### **Section B**

1. Can you share with me what your thoughts on preparing for the college application process? Have you done anything to become better prepared to apply? What is important in the process? Have you had to give anything up in order to be better prepared in the process? What have the challenges been for you/what do you expect them to be?
2. What do you think your parents /teachers/community members/friends hope for you in this process? How have they helped/supported you? Have they presented any challenges in your journey?
3. What feelings does thinking about the college application process bring up in you?
4. What has been challenging/stressful?
5. Do you think the process is fair? Why or why not?

#### **Section C**

1. What does a successful teenager, in the eyes of your community, look like? Do you agree with their definition? What does a successful adult, in the eyes of your community, look like? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. How important to you is it to be successful? How important is it to your parents that you are “successful”? Your community?
3. How does one become successful in the world?
4. Is there anything you feel like you have had to “give up” (in pursuit of success)?
5. What do you think your parents want for you? Teachers? Members of the community?

#### **Section D**

1. What are your current goals? Why? What helped you develop these goals?

2. Do you have a sense of what makes life meaningful to you? What? How has this developed?
3. Do you have a mission in life? If so, what is it? If not, are you looking for one? What has contributed to the development of a mission? If not, what has contributed to not developing one?
4. What do you hope for from your life? Why is this important?

**Section E**

1. Essex county has areas of great economic privilege and areas of great poverty. What are your thoughts about this?
2. Do you think people should “give back” to society? If so, why? How? If not, why?



