

**Experiences of Adolescents as They Navigate the
Competitive College-Going Culture**

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Abstract

A growing body of literature has demonstrated that the college preparation and admissions process is a powerful force in the lives of some high school students. However, mounting evidence illuminates unintended consequences of the college admission pressures on students. This study endeavored to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of adolescents as they navigate the competitive and achievement-oriented college-going culture. The participants' narratives described the ways these students accepted, struggled with, challenged, and resisted dominant cultural messages as they prepared for college. The insights gained from the participants' portraits have implications for school counseling practice and future research.

Keywords: adolescents, achievement-orientation, college preparation process, portraiture

Experiences of Adolescents as They Navigate the Competitive College-Going Culture

In many communities across the United States, the pressure to gain admission to a prestigious post-secondary institution is intense (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, Weissbourd, 2011, Leonard et al., 2015). The road to adult success and security is perceived to begin with acceptance into a competitive college or university (Levine, 2012). At increasingly younger ages, students are acutely aware of the traits that make one more desirable in the eyes of college admissions officers and actively endeavor to mold themselves into the people that their ideal schools seek (Robbins, 2019). The goal for many students is to attain the highest possible GPA, take the most impressive Advance Placement courses, obtain perfect or near-perfect scores on standardized tests, and earn noteworthy accolades in extracurricular activities (Cicolla et al, 2017).

While engaging in challenging academic curricula and diverse extracurricular activities can be growth enhancing for students, the intensity at which they are encouraged to pursue such activities and level of perfection expected can cause extreme stress in some students (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). Young people have described a crushing pressure to succeed, since so much appears to be at stake (Brown, 2016; Walworth, 2015). The literature documents the consequences that some youth face in highly achievement-oriented communities 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 (Cicolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Lyman & Luthar, 2014).

School counselors are uniquely situated within schools to support students during the college preparation and application process (Gilfillan, 2018). With expertise in career development and post-secondary planning, school counselors collaborate with students, families, and educational staff to ensure all students develop a post-secondary plan that reflects their interests, abilities, and goals (American School Counselor Association, 2017). While school counselors are trained to promote growth, health, and wellness in their students, some of the practices that students engaged in the competitive college admissions process may be antithetical to these aims (Blount, Lambie, & Kissinger, 2016; Brown, 2016). Additionally, school counselors may see students in their schools who are experiencing elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion due the pressures associated with the preparing for and applying to college (Jaschik, 2018). To date, there are limited studies that explore the experiences of students as they navigate the competitive college preparation and admissions process, and no studies view this phenomenon through the lens of a school counselor.

Recent research is finding that youth in “high-achieving schools” (HAS) are an emerging at-risk group, with elevated levels of stress that can impact health and well-being (Wallace, 2019). HAS are defined as public and private schools with rich academic and extracurricular options, high standardized test scores, and where graduates matriculate to the top colleges in the country (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019). A defining feature in these communities is often an excessive pressure to excel, typically in academic and extracurricular activities (Wallace, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into adolescents’ experiences of competitive college preparation and the admission’s process within the high-achieving

school context. The literature describes the factors that define the competitive college admissions process, and what students must achieve in order to gain entry into elite institutions. Primarily, students must take a rigorous high school curriculum, obtain high scores on the college entrance exams, and distinguish themselves in extracurricular pursuits (Cicolla et al., 2017; Feld & Shusterman, 2015). Each aspect of this paradigm is briefly discussed below.

College Admissions Factors

In order to succeed in the competitive college admissions process and gain entry to an elite post-secondary institution, students must excel academically. Students often take a rigorous high school curriculum, which generally consists of as many college-level courses (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate) as possible (Princeton University, 2019). Rigorous high school classes, such as the AP, are intended to challenge students and increase college preparedness, and are also seen as ways for students to demonstrate to college admissions officers that they are hard-working and well-prepared for the academic demands an undergraduate curriculum (The College Board, n.d.).

In addition to obtaining strong grades in their classes, students also endeavor to achieve excellent scores on college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT. Students may dedicate hours to prepare for these exams, through individual study or tutoring (Shapiro & Goldstein, 2019). The cost of tutoring can range, with popular commercial courses running upwards of \$1500 per class (Princeton Review, 2019).

Finally, students often seek to differentiate themselves by striving to achieve in extracurricular endeavors (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). The more notable the students'

accomplishments are in sports, clubs, or community service, the greater the impact on the overall college admissions application. Students may go to great lengths, dedicating a tremendous amount of time and energy over the course of their middle and high school careers, to excel in these extracurricular pursuits (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Pappano, 2007).

The popular media and academic literature both document the high levels of stress that students who attend competitive high schools are facing (Brown, 2016; Lyman & Luthar, 2014, Leonard et al., 2015). The pressure to achieve academically and get into a selective college is cited as the main source of stress for students (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015). While high expectations are generally correlated with positive academic outcomes in youth (Fan & Chen, 2001), many adolescents 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 reasons. First, chronic stress is associated with poor functioning and may 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 [APA], 2002; Levine, 2012). They may also develop a strong focus on external development at the cost of stunting internal growth, which may 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 Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the formation of identity is the goal of adolescence (Erikson, 1963). It is a period of "trying on" different values, beliefs, and goals (APA, 2002). With increased freedom and cognitive capacity, adolescents can explore their world more fully, intellectually and emotionally, especially through relationships with others. As a result of this period of testing, reflection, and exploration, a typical young person 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. Erikson's theory posits that identity is a protective factor and that a stable sense of self will give an individual a direction in which to navigate through adulthood (Erikson, 1980).

The literature provides strong evidence that adolescence is a crucial time to explore and discover one's identity (APA, 2002, Côté, 2005; Erikson, 1980). However, youth who develop within the high-achieving school context may be systematically diverted away from activities that allow for an authentic exploration of who one is and who they want to be (Levine, 2012). In many high-achieving schools, the path to "success" is often pre-defined and rigid and may not allow students to make choices outside of a prescribed set of options (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, Walworth, 2015). In

some cases, engagement in the competitive college-preparation and admissions process may promote outcomes associated with achievement over other facets of human growth (Feld & Shusterman, 2015, Walworth, 2015).

The literature reveals the numerous ways that the college preparation and admissions process can affect students, in both intended and unintended ways (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Making Caring Common, 2016). However, students' voices are largely missing from the current analysis. In order to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon and develop a qualitative exploration of adolescents' lived experiences is necessary (Creswell, 2013).

This study explores the complex experience of adolescents as they navigate the external pressures associated with the competitive college preparation process. Adolescents engage this process while they are concurrently refining their own sense of self. Therefore, the research question guiding this study was: How do adolescents navigate a competitive, high-pressure, college-going culture? The researcher used a portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) qualitative methodology to obtain a deep and nuanced understanding of the experiences of the participants in their particular cultural context.

Method

Research Paradigm

The college admissions process is a significant cultural practice that is central to the lives of many young adolescents and their families (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). It may have multiple unintended consequences that are poorly understood by the individuals involved in the process and those who provide essential information and

support during this time, such as school counselors. While the limited scholarly literature in this area focuses on adverse mental health outcomes as a result of the achievement-oriented culture (Lyman & Luthar, 2014; Coren & Luthar, 2014), a more substantial examination of the lived experience of adolescents as they navigate this process is mostly missing.

To achieve an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants and to move away from stereotypes of how students engage with the college preparation process, a qualitative research method was selected to gain an understanding of each participant's lived experience. Portraiture, a unique and compelling method of inquiry, was selected to illuminate the complexities of the participants' cognitive and emotional understanding and experiences in their specific cultural milieu. Portraiture incorporates an artistic esthetic into the research process, seeking 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).

Sampling and Data Collection

Criterion-based sampling was used to select participants who could provide information-rich cases. Criterion-based cases were chosen since the depth of understanding and insight into questions central to this study (Merriam, 2009). Key informants (school counselors) were used to identify possible participants who met all the selection criteria and also would be likely to provide a good deal of insight into their experiences and include depth and richness to their responses.

Potential participants for this study were recruited through a two-tiered process. First, the researcher provided the key informants with information about the research and the selection criteria. Then, key informants contacted students who met the requirements and shared information about the study with the potential participants, along with the contact information of the researcher. If a student was interested in participating, the student contacted the researcher via telephone or email. Once approached by a student, the researcher provided the participant with a letter detailing the selection criteria and outlining the study and the informed consent process. Consent was obtained from one student who was 18 and assent (student), and consent (parent) was obtained from the 17-year-old participants.

A brief demographic questionnaire was developed to obtain participant background information. Questions included race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, annual household income, career goals, personal goals, GPA, SAT/ACT scores, and educational/career information about the participant's parents or guardians. In addition to the demographic questionnaires, the researcher reviewed relevant publicly available documents and artifacts such as the participant's high school profile and census data.

A semi-structured interview guide was created about the central research question. The questions included: a summary of a typical school day and weekend; perceptions of school culture and values; conceptualization of an "ideal" young person in their community; perceived academic, social, and career expectations of their parents, teachers, and peers; where they find meaning and purpose in their lives; and specific questions about their experiences with the college preparation and application process. The interview guide was reviewed and revised after each round of interviews,

with each successive round of questions designed to gain a greater understanding of the resonant themes that emerged from each narrative and across the participants' stories (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). This step was critical for the researcher to process and reflect on the data, and to refine and revise initial understandings. In addition to the semi-structured interview guide, the researcher gave each participant time and space to tell their unique college preparation story in detail, while the researcher paid attention to the harmonies and dissonance in their narratives.

Over the course of six months, the researcher conducted three interviews (75-90 minutes) with each of the participants in public places throughout their community. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted in rounds, with initial interviews being conducted with each of the participants before moving on to the second round of interviews.

Participants

Participants included four high school seniors who were preparing for and applying to four-year colleges and universities. Participants included two adolescents who identify as female: Lea, a prominent athlete who was most interested in attending an Ivy League college or a prestigious military academy; and Greta, a budding social activist who struggled to accept many aspects of the college admissions process. Two of the participants identified as male: Johnny, an athlete and leader who astutely understands and plays by the "rules of the [college admission] game," yet voices loss and yearning for different possibilities; and Henry, a soft-spoken scholar who articulates ways that the college process provides opportunities and possibilities, while also enacting limitations, creating rigid parameters for adolescents' behavior and self-

expression. All the participants self-identified as White, with ages ranging from 17-18 years.

The participants live in Middleton, an upper-middle class suburb of a large city on the Eastern seaboard. Middleton consists of many stately homes, good schools, and a community full of accomplished professionals. In many ways, it can be seen as an *ideal* American community, a safe, prosperous, peaceful, and beautiful place to live and raise children. However, like many communities in the state and nation, it is quite segregated, both along socioeconomic and racial lines. Eighty-five percent of Middleton's population is White, with the population of the community directly to Middleton's south is 72% Black (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). All the participants attend the public Middleton High School.

Interviewer

This study grew out of reflections the researcher had as a high school counselor. In particular, the researcher noticed unintended consequences that her students experienced as what appeared to be a result of the college preparation process and the corresponding cultural pressures. At the time of this study, the researcher was completing her doctoral degree and no longer working as a school counselor. The researcher subsequently completed her degree in counselor education and is currently employed as a counselor educator.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Two primary analytic strategies were used to interpolate the data, including coding and impressionistic memo. As with other qualitative researchers, portraitists use coding as an analytic technique to drive data collection and analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture, coding is an early and ongoing form of analysis.

It is an iterative process that shapes the researcher's perspective and instrumentation for the next round of interviews (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In this study, after each round of interviews, the transcripts were reviewed, and resonant themes were identified. The interview guide for the subsequent series was developed considering the new ideas and new understandings. This iterative cycle continued through the process of data collection. In portraiture, the researcher resists the use of rigid, discrete codes in favor of maintaining the tension and the complexity of the narrative. Particular attention is paid to repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, and institutional and cultural rituals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

During the entire research process, the researcher maintained an impressionistic record. This was a journal that captured emerging hypotheses, interpretations, shifts in perspective, puzzles, and dilemmas (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It allowed the researcher to see the interplay between what she was observing in the field and the emerging themes. This ongoing process between data collection and reflection lasted throughout the entire data collection process. The impressionistic record served as a space to begin to observe and draw out patterns that would be used to generate a thematic framework. This thematic framework ultimately was used to construct each of the participant's narratives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Trustworthiness is essential for any qualitative research study. Trustworthiness was established in several ways. First, the researcher used a reflexive journal to reflect on her biases, assumptions, worldview, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study (Merriam, 2009). This ongoing process allowed the researcher to be visible in the research process. Next, the researcher worked with 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. 8). Finally, by spending a prolonged amount of time in the field, the researcher remained in the data field until the emergent findings felt saturated, with the same content being said over and over again with no new insights coming to bear (Merriam, 2009). Prolonged engagement also allowed time to develop and test alternative hypotheses (Creswell, 2013). 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.

Results

The present study resulted in four fundamental understandings that emerged from the participants’ narratives of their experiences preparing for college. Those themes are: (a) emphasis on grades and test scores, (b) diversion away from self-selected activities, (c) adverse impact on relationships, and (d) questioning of future responsibility to society. Each essential understanding is described below.

Emphasis on Grades and Test Scores

To succeed in the college admissions process, all four participants acknowledged feeling pressure to achieve high grades and test scores. They provided examples of how “focused” “everyone” in the community is on grades and test scores, including parents, teachers, and students who are attentive to both their and their peers’ scores. These grades and test scores were central to how the students viewed

themselves and others and believed that grades and test scores determined the opportunities available to youth.

To obtain the highest grades and standardized test scores, the participants spent vast amounts of time preparing for testing. Lea explains:

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."

Standardized tests were of extreme importance to the participants and occupied a significant place in their lives. It appeared that the significant focus on these tests shift their time and attention away from other growth-fostering activities. Lea goes on to illustrate how important getting a good standardized test score is, as she recounts with joy the day she received her best ACT score result:

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!"

Participants also noted how the outcome of the tests, grades, GPA, or SAT/ACT scores, was often of greater importance than the process of learning or the knowledge that was intended to be gained. Some participants accepted this as part of the college admissions "game" while others struggled with the tension between what they believed it "should be" about (studying to learn and grow) and what it "is" about (striving for the highest grade, scores). The students who felt this dissonance were bothered by this paradigm and were at times voiced frustration and anger. The students who accepted

the status quo did not experience the same tension and were comfortable with and accepting of the process. In the quote below, Greta voices this tension:

Why, like, do I need the A? It's like, I want, I need the A because I want to get into X school, but like, I think, it gets so into getting the grade that it's kinda like, once the test is over, it's like, the information is finished, it's gone, and then it's like, I didn't actually learn, because I was so focused and busy on making sure I got at least a 93 to bring my grade up X points. So it's like, I feel like, sometimes we let the meaning behind it go, and it's too much on the grade.

While several of the participants questioned the process behind obtaining high grades and test scores, they all believed that they were necessary to enter prestigious colleges, universities, and choice collegiate programs such as ROTC and competitive majors. These acceptances were perceived as essential for securing the “best future” for themselves, which included a high-status professional career. Acceptances were also a source of pride and status, differentiating them from their peers who may not have “worked as hard” as them. It was also evidence to parents and teachers of their efforts and dedication. Finally, acceptances were evidence of the larger world of the participants’ academic worth and potential. Lea stated that a degree from an elite college would indicate to a future employer, “This girl knows what she is doing.”

Diversion Away From Self-Selected Activities

While the participants reaped many rewards from a focus on grades and test scores, there were trade-offs, things they had to give up as they pursued their academic goals. As participants dedicated a significant amount of time seeking high grades and test scores, they had limited time to spend on other activities such as pursuing the arts, developing friendships, and trying new activities that did not fit within their strategic plan to position themselves as ideal candidates in the college admissions process. As Lea

described above, by spending “all” of her junior year studying for the ACTs, she may have missed opportunities to grow, learn, and explore in meaningful ways. Several of the participants also described the exhaustion they experienced as they pursued the standards required by the college admissions process.

The female participants described a near-constant level of activity, where practically every waking hour is scheduled with activities such as working out, studying, attending club meetings, participating in sports, and engaging in paid employment. They reported getting less sleep than is necessary for adolescents and provided examples of ways that their rest was affected (either due to difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep) by worries associated with academics or college. Achieving at a high level and preparing for college was nearly all-consuming for these young women and seemed to leave little physical or emotional room to concentrate on much else. They were focused, but also, at times, exhausted and burnt-out.

While three of the four participants reported minimal parental involvement in terms of monitoring grades and offering support and interventions, Henry’s parents were significantly involved in his academic achievement. Henry expressed both gratitude and annoyance at his parents’ attention. He saw his parents’ support as a form of love and concern but also desired autonomy and space to figure things out on his own, even if it meant potentially lower grades. Henry also describes how his parents believe that if his grades fall, Henry should drop a significant extracurricular activity to focus on his academics. Getting good grades to seem paramount to any other activity or commitment, even one that is personally important and meaningful. He describes:

Moreover, again my parents have been very vigilant when the grades come in. It's actually drilled into my mind. My mom's always like, "Oh the grades are

coming in this weekend, and we'll see how it goes from there." And so, sometimes where if I am struggling they'll be like, "Well [what] do we need to drop?" For instance, when I'm doing my shift volunteering, they're like, "Do we need to drop this?"

Adverse Impact on Relationships

The participants described a desire for closeness and connection with their peers, yet detailed obstacles in creating and maintaining relationships with others in a climate where achievement is highly prized. The participants sacrificed time with others in order to perform well academically and athletically. This influenced the quality of the relationships the participants reported with others. Participants also described a sorting of students that occurred as they pursued varying academic tracks or extracurricular activities. This segregation created barriers between students that could be difficult to breach. Lea explains:

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 you 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.

Developmentally, relationships are very important during adolescence (Erikson, 1980). However, the participants described de-prioritizing relationships to focus on navigating the path towards college. Participants described spending large amounts of time alone. Johnny also described difficulty cultivating a deep friendship in his cultural milieu.

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,

[...] 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.

Finally, the nature of the college admissions process itself seemed to strain relationships among the participants. Participants were acutely aware of being measured against each other and at times felt like they or peers were vying for the most prestigious positions in the class (highest GPA, drum major). While they acknowledged this underlying competition, it was generally a taboo topic and not often discussed. Though the process created stress in the participants, they did not have many opportunities to share their challenges and process the pressure. Henry stated:

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. [...] I wish it were something that was talked openly, but unfortunately, I feel like it can't be in this town.

Competition, status, and hierarchy seemed to permeate relationships, seemingly in part due to the nature of the college admissions process. Henry, who was successful in the process, chose not to speak about the admissions process in order to not make his peers feel like he thought he was better than they were. Henry also stated that talking about the college process would bring an aspect of "judgment" into his relationships. While Henry chose not to talk about the college admissions process in order to protect his friendships, he also left a huge aspect of his current experience, the college process, out of his relationships.

Questioning Future Responsibility to Society

All the participants received advantages by living in Middleton and attending a well-resourced school. Each of the participants expressed varying levels of awareness of their privilege. A repetitive question the participants puzzled over was how to best express gratitude for all that they had been given. Johnny shared an impactful interaction with a local diner owner who immigrated to the United States. Johnny recounted the diner owner's advice:

“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.”

Greta also struggled with how to repay the advantages:

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?

Henry stated that he had opportunities that plenty of people would just die to have. The participants expressed a need to prove to others, especially their parents, that they are appreciative for the advantages given to them, and that they will not waste these opportunities. They discussed the importance of making their parents proud and maintaining the standard of living that their parents provided for them. They also looked toward prestigious career paths (medicine, aviation, and law) as, in part, a demonstration of using their advantages in productive ways. Two of the four participants also planned to engage in military service, through either ROTC or a prestigious military academy, as part of their college career. Several of the participants also spoke about

their desire to do something bigger than themselves as a way of contributing to the greater good.

While the participants all, to varying degrees, struggled with the question of how to best use their education and advantages they had been given, they also received individualistic messages about how to fulfill the best future for themselves. Some of the participants reported also receiving signals from their parents to advocate for others and to do something *bigger than* themselves. Several participants reported hearing comments from their parents that they should put their happiness first when selecting a career and designing a future life for themselves. While each of the participants discussed their feelings of obligation to use the opportunities given to them, they had a rather limited conceptualization of what that could look like. Their understanding was largely framed around *working hard* to demonstrate gratitude for what they had been given. Their narratives suggested that the participants were expected by their parents and community to secure the best future for themselves, which primarily translated to a prestigious career path. While some of the participants voiced a desire to contribute to the greater good, none of the participants had a well-formed idea or plan on how to do so.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of adolescents as they navigated the college admissions process within the high-achieving school culture. The findings suggest that as students endeavor to achieve the end game of their secondary education, admission into a highly selective college or university, their paths are shaped, in both subtle and direct ways, by the pressures they

experience. School counselors are uniquely equipped to work with students and advocate for system changes that may support student growth and development.

The participants described a sustained focus over time on the activities that would give them best chances at getting into an elite college or university. They also described forgoing developmentally appropriate activities to pursue their academics and extracurricular activities. School counselors, as experts in human development (ASCA, 2019), may work with parents, teachers, and students to provide education and training on the developmental stage of adolescence, and the normal tasks of this life stage, such as exploration of the world through relationships and identity exploration (APA, 2002, Erikson, 1980). The possible adverse effects of adult-like pressures and expectations without adult cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, or coping skills may be discussed. Through an increased understanding of adolescent social, emotional, cognitive, and biological needs, school counselors, teachers, and families may work together to craft student-centered, developmentally appropriate, interventions to support growth.

Participants wanted to connect more with their peers, but had trouble doing so due to the demands of their academic and extracurricular responsibilities and taboos around discussing important topics, such as the stress of the college admissions process. While the participants in this study shared stories of isolation, loneliness, and individualism, decades' worth of research has documented the benefits of living in connection with others (Miller, 1976; Jordan, Walker & Hartling, 2004).

Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted that youth often learn strategies of coping with disconnection by observing the adults in their lives. The participants in this study may

have also emulated a possible community value of individualism and detachment. While disconnection is troubling at any life stage, it is particularly problematic during adolescence as young people grow within the context of peer relationships (APA, 2002).

While students in this study reported feelings of isolation, school counselors may endeavor to foster school communities that value close social bonds. Mellin, Belknap, Brodie, and Sholes (2015) suggested using a social capital model to increase connection and collaboration among all key stakeholders within a community – students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. School counselors may intentionally work with other school leaders to examine barriers to the connection that are embedded in school culture and practices and break down any questionable practices. For example, school counselors may develop learning communities comprised of diverse members of the school community (students, teachers, custodians, administrators) to focus on a specific community change effort (Mellin et al., 2015).

The study participants benefited from many of the opportunities and advantages that accompany privilege, both racial and socioeconomic. They had limited awareness of the full extent of their privilege, but they recognized that they were freely given something that others in society did not receive. They each felt a responsibility to demonstrate gratitude or to *repay* what had been given to them. While the topic of opportunity and responsibly seemed to be of interest to the participants, they did not appear to have many chances to explore this topic with peers, parents, or adults. The participants seemed keen to have a conversation and eager to figure out how they could make a difference in the larger world. However, in the context of an individualist

culture, it is not surprising that they metabolized their feelings and community's messages into a largely individualistic conceptualization.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors may play an active role in expanding the opportunities students have to explore and discuss crucial topics like responsibility. Research suggests that developing this type of responsibility, and other, critical moral abilities is not achieved in the short term, but through sustained reflection and commitment within the context of adult and peer relationships (Making Caring Common Project, 2016). Transformative service-learning projects may support the moral development of students and help students explore how they can contribute to the greater good. The Caring Community Youth Capstone project (MCCP, 2016) provides guidelines that a school counselor may utilize to implement a transformative service-learning program in their schools.

Finally, youth situated within high-achieving school communities could benefit from ongoing discussions about privilege across the spectrum of identity. Participants were vaguely aware of their privilege but lacked the ability or comfort to discuss it openly. As young people of privilege, ongoing conversations about race, gender, and class can help youth better understand how their actions can serve to maintain or rebuke systems of inequity and oppression (Irving, 2014). A better understanding of privilege may have helped the participants situate themselves in the broader cultural context and clarify how they hope to contribute in the world.

Limitations

As with all research paradigms, qualitative research has its limitations. This study has several specific limitations. First, the results of this study are not generalizable to the broader society, although they may be relevant to some contexts (Merriam, 2009). Second, the size of the study was small, with only four participants. While this size allowed for a continued involvement with each participant, which yielded a depth of data, the experiences of youth other than these four participants were 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. Considering that all the participants are from one metropolitan region of one state, the geographical differences that occur outside the study location were not captured in this study. Finally, given that 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.

Future Research

The findings of this study highlight several paths for future research. This study examined the participants at one point in time, during their senior year in high school. In the future, it will be necessary to understand how youth begin to internalize dominant cultural messages, which seems to occur much earlier in development. By studying youth at several points from late childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood, it may be possible to document and better understand how the pressures and messages that a community sends to its youth are metabolized by the individuals.

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 parents' hopes and fears for their children, and how these aspects factor into their child-rearing choices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how adolescents in high-achieving school context navigate the competitive, achievement-oriented, college preparation and admission process. This topic has been largely unaddressed in the literature; however, there are significant implications related to the lives of individuals and society as a whole. This study offers insight into the lives of four students and highlights the advantages and unintended consequences of engaging in the college admissions process. The implications of this study are relevant to counselors, educators, administrators, and parents. Further research is necessary to meet the needs of this population and to endeavor to dismantle systems that privilege some and restrict the opportunities of others.

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