THE MEANING OF BEING SMART: AN IDENTITY STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR HONORS COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION

by
Amanda N. Neuber Haggerty
May 2019

Examining Committee Members:

Avi Kaplan, Advisory Chair, Psychological Studies in Education
James Byrnes, Psychological Studies in Education
Annemarie Hindman, Teaching and Learning
Timothy J. Patterson, External Member, Teaching and Learning
ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be “smart?” Being identified as intelligent, gifted, or high-achieving affords students stimulating experiences, motivating social environments, and advanced educational and career opportunities. However, research has also identified potential negative psychological and social costs to being labeled smart. These are particularly apparent during transitions. Many “smart” students begin college while expecting to continue to achieve highly. But, the first-year of college is a time of intense change, with new peers, different requirements, and unfamiliar standards for success that can raise questions about how smart one really is. Students respond differently to such challenging experiences and questions; some are intimidated, some prevail, others even thrive. Why? The current study investigated the meaning of being labeled smart as part of the identity and experiences of honors students in the first year of college. Twenty-four first year Honors students at a large, urban university were interviewed about the meaning of being smart and their experiences in the first year in college. Data analysis was framed deductively by an emerging identity model—the Dynamic Systems Method of Role Identity (DSMRI)—and inductively by an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The dissertation presents six cases that were purposively selected to display variability in students’ meaning-making about being smart, identity, and experiences. The results demonstrate how each student’s meaning of smartness has been incorporated into her or his identity system within the particular educational context, and how it framed their experiences, decisions, and coping with challenging situations. The findings further demonstrate the differences in the ways individual students made meaning of the smart label, the multiple values of being smart particularly in regards to
peer relations, complex negative psychosocial implications, and the important role of educational contexts in these meaning-making and identity formation processes. The findings can inform educators and researchers who aim to investigate and address students’ maladaptive beliefs and behaviors and to support their healthy identity development.
Dedicated to
The “Smart” Ones
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Avi Kaplan, for inspiring and pushing me. You have changed the way I think, teach, and write; understand the world, and myself. Thank you.

To the members of my committee: thank you for your critique and support. Especially Dr. Jim Byrnes, for guiding me through this doctoral program since day one.

They say it takes a village, and that is true for raising children and writing a dissertation. I am eternally grateful for mine: Lorraine, my personal dissertation yoda – I am forever grateful for your listening ear, perspective, motivation, check-ins, hugs, and snacks; Ishwar, my sounding board during analysis; Shali, for helping me transcribe; Lauren, Dana, Denae, and Suzanne for commiseration, encouragement, and forced writing time; Musu, for understanding all the things, no words necessary. Special shout out to the Temple University Writing Center staff for letting me write about 90% of this dissertation in their space.

My Temple Honors Family: Thank you for your patience, flexibility, and reminders that I am competent on days I felt anything but. Especially Ruth, for her fierce and unwavering confidence in my ability.

To my Mom and Dad: Thank you for your love, generosity, and compassion; my education, and for never pressuring me. My sisters, Felicia and Lucia: Thank you for your constant optimism and understanding, and always keeping me grounded. Team Neuber for life.

To my incredible husband, John: I don’t know what I would do without you. Thank you for being my partner through every minute of this program (literally!) This
degree is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for never ever making me feel guilty. You have been my rock and my cheerleader. Words can’t express my appreciation.

    To my little Lillian: I might have given up on this a long time ago if not for you. Everything I do, I do for you.

    To my literal sidekick during the last 8 months of writing: I can't wait to meet you. Thank you for keeping me company on the longest days of this process.

    I would be remiss if I did not recognize the real heroes of this dissertation: coffee, Spotify, Evernote, Penzu, Mendeley, Google Drive, and the Pomodoro method.

    Finally, to my beloved Honors students, who continue to inspire me every single day. I am most appreciative of those that have shared their stories, both inside and outside of this research, and brought true meaning to my work. Thank you for constantly reminding me that it matters.

    This dissertation has been 13 years in the making. From the moment I walked into the Honors lounge, I have been changed. Thank you to everyone that has been a part of it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why “Smart”?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework: The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “smart” label</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Identity</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Integrated Perspective of Identity</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of the Role-Identity System</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological and Epistemological Beliefs</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Goals</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Perceptions and Self-Definitions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceived Action Possibilities ................................................. 18

Control Parameters ................................................................. 18

“Smart” Culture ....................................................................... 19

“Smart” in context .................................................................... 20

“Smart” in domain .................................................................... 20

“Smart” in Disposition ............................................................... 21

Integration of the Components and Parameters ......................... 22

Related Research .................................................................... 22

Achievement Goals ................................................................... 22

Academic Self-Concept ............................................................... 26

Self-regulation of learning ......................................................... 28

Major Selection ........................................................................ 30

Mindsets ................................................................................. 30

Honors ..................................................................................... 33

Implications and Conclusion ..................................................... 34

3. METHOD ................................................................................ 37

Research Design ...................................................................... 37

Overall Approach ..................................................................... 38

Participants .............................................................................. 40

Sampling and Recruitment ....................................................... 40

Mid-Atlantic University ............................................................. 44

Procedures ............................................................................... 46

Interview Protocol ..................................................................... 47
Other Data Collected.................................................................49

Participant Selection..............................................................49

Data Analysis..............................................................................50

Trustworthiness & Validation.....................................................53

Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations..................54

4. RESULTS AND DISUSSION.......................................................58

Case Analyses............................................................................59

Sasha: The Teammate...............................................................59

Valentina: The Competitor........................................................66

Joseph: The Relator.................................................................74

Divya: The Challenger..............................................................81

James: The Strategist...............................................................83

Keval: The Reformed...............................................................95

Discussion of Themes..............................................................102

Students’ Personal Meaning of Smartness is Framed by Cultural
and Contextual Meaning and Processes.................................103

Cultural Meanings Of Smartness Frames Students’ Personal Meaning..104

Educational Contexts Play An Important Role In Meaning-Making......105

Social Comparison Is A Main Mechanism For

Determining Smartness..........................................................106

There Is A Hierarchy Of Smart By Domain.........................107

Pre-College Educational Contexts Affects Formation Of Academic
Role-Identity Components......................................................108
Transition To College Triggers Change In Various Identity Components…………………………………………………….110

Students Hold Competing Ontological Beliefs…………………………………….112

There Are Personal Values And Costs To Being Smart…………………………113

Smart Has Cultural Capital……………………………………………………114

Smart Is Both A Social Benefit And Liability………………………………….116

Being Smart Comes With Pressure………………………………………………118

Engaging in Maladaptive Behaviors to

Protect the Smart Label…………………………………………………………120

Summary………………………………………………………………..120

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS…………………………………………...121

Summary of the study………………………………………………………………121

Implications for theory……………………………………………………………124

Smart Labels and Identity development………………………………………..124

Achievement Goals……………………………………………………………..126

Self-Concept……………………………………………………………………126

Self-Regulation…………………………………………………………………127

Major Selection…………………………………………………………………..128

Mindsets………………………………………………………………………..130

Honors…………………………………………………………………………131

Limitations………………………………………………………………………131

Implications for future research………………………………………………..133

Interventions to thwart maladaptive behaviors and emotions………………..133
Toxic High School Environments...........................................133
The complexity of smart students, not just the category............134
Institutional type........................................................................134
Further investigations on the Race-, Gender - and
Socio-economic- roles...............................................................135

Implications for practice

Role of College Faculty and Academic Advisors.........................136
Need for change in our broader socio-cultural
understanding of smart.............................................................138

Closing Remarks........................................................................139

REFERENCES CITED....................................................................141

APPENDICES

A. INFORMED CONSENT FORMS...............................................159
B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL..........................................................166
C. DSMRI CODEBOOK...............................................................168
D. ADDITIONAL CODEBOOK.....................................................175
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Demographic Information</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organizing Structure of Superordinate Themes and Emergent Themes</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From an early age, students learn that being smart is important. Children as young as five years-old are given intelligence tests and placed into gifted programs. From elementary school through high school, students are tracked and grouped by ability. Standardized tests place students on a comparative curve of scholastic aptitude and serve as the main entry card to desirable higher education institutions. Being labeled as intelligent, gifted, or high-achieving affords students stimulating experiences, motivating social environments, and advanced educational and career opportunities. However, what are the implications of being labeled smart? Is it really beneficial for students’ self-perceptions, motivation, and wellbeing? Might such labels also carry risks? Furthermore, what does it actually mean to be smart?

Throughout early educational experiences, the importance of being smart is reinforced through continued success and external recognition. Each achievement brings expectations from parents, teachers, and peers for further and higher achievements. Through all of this, it would not be surprising if being smart became an important part of their self-definition—their identity. Eventually, majority of these labeled smart students graduate high school, leave the familiar settings in which they were raised, and enter institutions of higher-education where they choose to major in a domain in which they will be expected to excel (Subotnik, 2009). But the first-year of college is a time of intense transition—new peers, new requirements, new standards for success. Particularly for students entering a highly-selective institution or honors program, studying with peers who are perceived to be as smart or even smarter may be threatening. Social comparison
can raise questions about how smart one really is, with potential consequences to self-worth. Who among these students is intimidated by such experiences, who prevails, who thrives, and why?

Although feelings of competence can boost self-esteem and increase motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 1985), research has shown that praising students for being smart can lead to challenge avoidance, competitive outlooks which value performance over learning, and decreased self-esteem when encountering failure situations which threaten their conceptualization of intelligence (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Kamins & Dweck, 1998). However, students are not just being praised as smart, they are being labeled, which forces them to make meaning of being placed in such a category.

In this dissertation, I pursued the implications of being labeled smart on overall identity and resulting actions and well-being among honors students in the first year of college using a complex dynamic systems model of role identity. My expectation is that the way in which a student makes meaning of being previously labeled smart, and how this self-definition has been incorporated into the identity system within a particular context, will frame how they interpret experiences, make decisions, and cope with challenging situations in the first year of college. Understanding different identities of “smart” students, how they make meaning of the smart label, their choices, and their emotions in the first year of college can equip educators and researchers with the knowledge to combat potential maladaptive beliefs and behaviors.
Why “Smart”? 

The term *smart* is used in everyday, colloquial language. In research, it is often presented as high-intelligence, high-ability, gifted, high-achieving, and Honors. Although there are variations in nuance with each concept, these terms suggest a network of meanings related to high academic abilities that come with a host of cultural expectations. To capture the richness of these meanings among students, I have decided to use the all-encompassing albeit simplistic term “smart” in the current research. “Smart” bridges personal, social, and cultural assumptions associated with the commonly used concepts in research and allows for integration of a wide range of theory and previous findings.

There is no one commonly accepted definition amongst experts or the general population of “intelligence” (Sternberg et al., 1981). But even though individuals hold their own implicit understanding of what the meaning of smart is, there are established educational practices that rely on several widely accepted and commonly used markers in the United States for who is smart, including entry to gifted programs, access to AP and Honors courses, and obtainment of high standardized test-scores (Steinberg, 2000). Through these practices, children learn to place importance on measurable and demonstrated intelligence.

Currently, very little is known about how students make meaning of the smart label, how the identification as smart may be internalized as part of their self-definition, and how it is incorporated into their overall identity. Since identity influences motivation, decision making, and wellbeing (Kroger, 2007; Schacter & Rich, 2011), understanding how students make sense of being considered smart can and should be understood at each stage of a developing young person’s life. However, it is particularly important during the
first-year of college -- a time of major academic and social transition when a student's previously established self-definitions, beliefs, and identity may be confronted or tried.

Context of College

College is viewed as a “developmental testing ground between adolescence and adulthood”, and affects students’ cognitive skills, intellectual growth, attitudes, and values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 60). Students who have been recognized for being academically talented enter college with the assumption they will meet traditional standards of success in the first year: high grade-point averages; swift if not accelerated academic progress; involvement and leadership in co-curricular pursuits. However, previously labeled smart students are not immune to the changes that affect all students in the first-year of college. In fact, a previously labeled smart student who was wooed to attend a specific institution based on prestige, money, or Honors may face even more unexpected stressors. The expectation is that they will continue to perform at a high level, but the reality is some will struggle (Dunlosky, et al., 2013). Self-perceptions and identification as gifted, high-achieving, or smart, may be threatened for the first time.

The first year of college is a “culture shock” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 61), marked by intense transition and rapid desocialization of previously learned behaviors. Students must learn a fresh set of social norms, both in and out of the classroom, and negotiate their previous identities in a new environment where there is a much larger pool of peers to compare one’s self. Challenged by the change in comparison group, the lack of familiar support systems, and external and internal pressures to succeed, a student’s previous personal identity as smart may begin to lose stability, and
with it, an associated decline in perceived opportunities and positive self-esteem (Crocker, et al., 2016).

Research regarding traditional-aged gifted, high-achieving, or high-ability populations in college often compartmentalizes constructs and investigates simple relationships - for example, perfectionism and achievement motivation (Neumeister, 2004), implicit beliefs and self-handicapping (Snyder, et al, 2014), locus of control, self-concept, and dishonesty (Rinn, et al., 2014). However, investigations which isolate factors perpetuate a limited, unidirectional understanding of complex phenomenon (Overton, 2013), resulting in disparate or inconclusive findings, and more questions than answers. In the remainder of this dissertation, I make the argument that organizing existing theory and research under an integrated identity perspective allows for a greater understanding of many of the aforementioned issues.

Theoretical Framework: The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity

This study used a recent theoretical model based on assumptions of complex dynamic systems: The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). This comprehensive theoretical model brings together diverse and seemingly divergent theories and perspectives under a holistic and contextualized framework that aims to capture the rich content, structure, and process of identity (Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

Instead of attempting to examine facets of identity in isolation, this model embraces the concept of holism, in which the whole defines the parts, the parts define the whole, and the “analysis of parts must occur in the context of the part functioning in the whole” (Overton, 2013). The DSMRI highlights the individual’s contextualized role
identity as the primary unit of analysis, and examines the psychological processes related
to identity content, structure, and process that interact and motivate action within a
particular context (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). The interacting components of the DSMRI
are constructed within certain control parameters and result in different potential stable
systems. If one element is disrupted, it is reverberated throughout the entire system –
creating a negative feedback loop which must be resolved. Whether the resulting actions
are adaptive or maladaptive, and the emotions connected, depends on the rest of the
identity system.

Research Questions

The purpose of the current study was to investigate Honors students’ identities in
the first-year of college with particular attention to how they make meaning of being
smart. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do first-year Honors students make meaning of being smart?

RQ2: What experiences, both pre-college and during their first-year of college,
have shaped this meaning?

RQ3: How does being smart figure into the students’ identity system?

RQ4: How do identities based on various meanings of being smart connect to
different decision making and well-being profiles and inform further identity
development in college?

Significance of the study

Across educational systems, students are being labeled smart. Yet, we know very
little how such labels affect students’ beliefs about who they are and who they want and
can be—their identity and motivation. These same students enter college with existing
identity systems that are likely to be challenged. Particularly as education aims to prepare students for life in and beyond college, a focus on students’ identity and identity formation is paramount (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). However, there is currently no research that investigates how students internalize the smart label as part of their dynamic role-identity system.

This study integrated prior relevant research under the framework of the DSMRI to generate a holistic framework of the student experience and meaning making around being smart. It applied this framework to investigate these processes during a developmental transition to college (Horowitz, 2009), which is known to be challenging and that provides opportunities for effective interventions. The results provide researchers, educators, and college administrators with theoretical and practical knowledge for the design of impactful interventions and general classroom practices to support these students’ motivation, well-being, and further identity development. Finally, this study highlights students’ voices to enhance understanding of the phenomenon of being smart.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following section describes the comprehensive theoretical framework selected for this study and conducts a review of current related research. I will first examine implications surrounding the construction and label of “smart” as it currently understood. From there, I will articulate why an identity framework should be used to investigate how first-year Honors students make meaning of the label. Next, I will elaborate on the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity and provide a snapshot of current research that can be situated and better understood through the model.

The “smart” label

Both gifted identification and ability grouping begins in early grades (Subotnik & Thompson, 2010; Maaz, et al., 2008). The earliest common practice is usually within-class separation by reading and math levels (Maaz, et al., 2008). In middle- and high schools, course-level grouping becomes more common with the distinction between regular, Honors, and advanced placement classes. If school choice is an option, some students are even tracked by which high school they have the opportunity to attend - general vs vocational vs college preparatory (Maaz, et al., 2008). If a student is identified as gifted, they may participate in full-time or part-time differentiated education, depending on the availability and resources within available schools of the child (NAGC, 2009).

The practice of tracking students by ability has been under debate for decades (Maaz, et al., 2008). Ability tracking often begins in elementary school with within-class achievement groupings (i.e. reading groups) and later, in middle school and high school, with course-level grouping, where students are assigned or placed in different levels (i.e.
Advanced Placement, Honors, general education) or even with school-level tracking (i.e. magnet schools) (Maaz, et al., 2008). It is meant to allow for differentiated instruction that fits the needs of specific students and allow environments to provide the appropriate level of challenge (Becker, et al., 2014). But despite its prevalent and widespread use, tracking of all forms is criticized for mixed and inconclusive evidence supporting effectiveness for actually delivering appropriate challenge and boosting student achievement (Becker, et al., 2014). Additionally, there is great concern for what implicit messages about ability and potential it sends to students, namely those placed on a low ability track, and the difficulty to move fluidly between tracks. The separation and categorization sends messages to students about their ability at all levels, both overall and in relation to those around them.

Labeling a student affects not only how they are perceived by others, but how a student sees themselves (Freeman, 2010; Gates, 2010). Educators, school psychologists, and administrators often label students in hopes of assisting others in quickly identifying a particular student’s needs or strengths (Gates, 2010). As is with much research, there are mixed results when attempting to understand the implications of labeling a student as smart. For example, some research has found that identification as gifted instills a sense of pride and offers students a healthy challenge to reach their fullest potential (Freeman, 2005). Additionally, being identified as gifted or high-ability allows certain students to receive adequate educational resources to support their academic need, reduce boredom, increase motivation, and strengthen the love of learning (Lo, 2014; Borland, 2005; Makel, 2014). However, even a socially desirable label, like smart, gifted, or high-
ability, can carry longstanding, complex consequences for the labeled individual (Lo, 2014).

In her 30 years of research on gifted individuals, Freeman found that for some individuals, the label of gifted was seen as a burden; precipitating unhealthy expectations and a constant fear of failure (Freeman, 2005). In addition, the gifted label has been found to emphasize an entity view of intelligence (Dweck, 2000; Graham, 2009; Matthews, 2009), where high effort actually implies less ability, an outlook that becomes stronger as students age (Graham, 2009). The label has also been connected to perfectionism and a constant pressure to perform; feelings of inadequacy, feelings of isolation, emotional problems, and depression (Plucker & Levy, 2001). There are strong arguments to remove the label of gifted all together in attempts to deconstruct the social definition and the consequent stigma of the term (Borland, 2005).

There is often a stigma attached to being identified as smart, with students often reporting an overwhelming sense of being different (Hertzog, 2003; Neihart, 1999), odd (Freeman, 2005) a nerd, and stereotyped (Hertzog, 2003). Schwartz, Kelly, & Duong (2013) found that orientation towards school during the adolescent years can bring significant social costs. In an exploration of media stories about gifted children, O’Connor (2012) found that while athletes or musicians were often wrote about positively, stories about academic prodigies were characterized by pity.

Talented individuals can struggle to adjust socially (Neihart, 1999), not because they do not have strong social skills (which is often the misinterpretation), but because often they have increased feelings of being different than most of their peers (Meadows & Neumann, 2017), or are met by envy, jealousy, and resentment (Plucker & Levy, 2001).
which leads to ostracism (Tannenbaum, 1983; Lo, 2014). In a high school ethnography, Steinberg (1999) found that the labeled “high-achievers” in high school were most unhappy with their place in the adolescent society. And although being seen by authority figures as smart is related to other positive character traits and more positive expectations, there is an associated tendency for adults in the student's life to ignore happiness and wellbeing for emphasis on achievement outcomes (Peterson, 2006; O’Connor, 2012)

Still, gifted education researchers argue the need to identify and label in order to match instruction with individual need (Makel, 2014; Serpell, 2000). However, an additional complicated criticism is that granting a student a smart label also provides an unfair advantage and establishes power differentials in classrooms and schools (Hatt, 2011). So much so, that some parents push to have their child recognized as smart simply for the status symbol (Elkind, 2001).

In her book Self Theories, Dweck (2000) tells a story from her own childhood when her 6th grade teacher sat the class in IQ order. This sent a very clear message to the low IQ students, despite the fact they had been achieving just fine through grade school. However, the seat order also had costs for high IQ students. "They had to keep proving themselves. Every standardized test held the threat of dethroning them" (Dweck, 2000, p. 26). Dweck’s chosen language of “dethroning” illustrates this often-ignored consequence of labeling students as smart: the perpetuation of a hierarchical culture of privilege and message of superiority for those that are considered smart. Not only does it often mean access to better classes, teachers, and enrichment opportunities, but larger social, academic, and career opportunities. Since the United States is a meritocracy, if you are
someone that society considers smart you seemingly have a ticket to success. And schools propagate this mentality through emphasis on test-scores, pride in rankings, and treatment of the smart students. In social psychology, work examining the halo effect shows the connection between the perception of intelligence and other desirable traits including leadership and morality (Thorndike, 1920), thus increasing the amount of trust and autonomy smart students often receive by authority figures. Furthermore, if teachers and parents perceive a student as smart, they are more likely to set higher, more positive expectations for the student, which in turn, influences more positive performance from the student (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). As Serpell (2000) frames the problem: “[There is an] elitist premise that instructional resources should be invested in those persons with the greatest potential payoff (Serpell, 2000, p. 562).

Missing from most research is how students themselves have come to make meaning of being labeled smart, as told through their own experiences and their voice. Investigating this meaning-making through an identity framework may help us better understand why the smart label may influence actions and emotions that indicate it is a burden, a status symbol, a motivator or means nothing at all.

Overview of Identity

Generally, identity answers the question "Who are you?” (Vignoles, et al., 2011). The psychological study of identity has focused on an individual’s development of answers to this question, which emerges from the confluence of many factors, including context, culture, family and personal backgrounds, disposition, and developmental capabilities. Research has paid much attention to the complex content, structure, and process of identity to understand how people make decisions, set and meet goals, and
interpret experiences (Kroger, 2007; Schacter & Rich, 2011; Berzonsky, 2003; Eccles, 2009).

Identity development has been described as a “continuous process of participation and validation that is co-regulated by personal, cultural, and social influences and the relationships among them” (McCaslin, 2009). Prior to adolescence, self-based identifications are formed through interactions with adults and other models around them. Although initial self-identification often comes from parents, it continues through interactions with peers, teachers, and other influential adult figures in educational settings (Hatt, 2014). It is during these early, formative years that many students are first labeled smart, encounter experiences which either confirm or contradict the label, and make initial meaning of it in some way. Through puberty and the onset of adolescence, there is a sharp increase in the cognitive awareness of self (Kroger & Marcia, 2011) and developing youth begin the process of reevaluating early childhood associations in order to resolve who they are, what they believe in, and where they fit in the social structure (Kroger, 2004; Coleman et al., 2015). This self-identity is formed through the interaction of biological need, ego organization (who I think I am), and social context (who can I be in this context) (Kroger, 2004). Many previously established identifications carry over into their now consciously-aware self-definition, especially labels which carry significant stakes or value for both themselves and important figures (Kroger, 2004).

The main difference between pre-adolescence and post-adolescence self-identification is the enhanced cognitive and emotional capacities and changes in cultural expectations that enable and trigger identity exploration. However, not all adolescents engage in identity exploration. Some may simply foreclose on labels granted by others,
strongly committing to label as part of their identity, while others not at all. For example, as stated specifically by Vignoles, et al. (2011), being intelligent doesn't necessarily give someone an identity of an "intellectual." Characteristics such as intelligent or smart only becomes part of the identity to the extent the individual interprets it to be personally or socially meaningful (Vignoles, et al., 2011).

Meaning making is guided by identity, particularly when encountering new experiences in new environments. Information is perceived, processed, and understood not only through how it relates to previous knowledge, but also through constructions of personal identity (Schacter & Rich, 2011). Often times in these novel situations, previously constructed identities may become salient to the individual (Kroger, 2004), perhaps for the first time. And if those identities are threatened or challenged, it can bring into question the student’s self-definition, affecting academic achievement, motivation and well-being. Therefore, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in how identity and meaning-making in educational contexts affects adaptive learning and educational engagement (Schacter and Rich, 2011).

An Integrated Perspective of Identity

Identity research is vast and positioned in multiple disciplines and domains. Although there are several views on how to approach an understanding of identity, from personal and developmental perspectives (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) to social and contextual (Berzonsky, 2011; Burke & Stets, 2009, Holland & Lachicotte, 2007), there has been a recent push to integrate the multiple views on identity in order to give space to the valuable insights they all provide (Schwartz, et al., 2011; Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Vignoles, et al., 2011; Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Instead of dividing the field of identity
research on multiple seemingly dichotomous fault lines, Vignoles et al. (2011) concluded in their integrative review of identity perspectives:

…identity is simultaneously a personal, relational, and collective phenomenon; it is stable in some ways and fluid in others; and identity is formed and revised throughout the lifespans of individuals and the histories of social groups and categories, through an interplay of processes of self-discovery, personal construction, and social construction, some of which are relatively deliberate and explicit, whereas others are more automatic and implicit. (Vignoles, et al., 2011, p. 8)

In line with this push, an integrative perspective on identity is used in this dissertation. Melding together well-established, empirically driven theories through the lens of a complex dynamic systems model of role identity provides a better understanding of how first-year Honors college students make meaning of being smart and implications for further identity development, motivation, and well-being. Students deserve a holistic understanding of their complex identities. Therefore, it is imperative to use theoretical framework that allows the complexity and essence of being smart to emerge and be seen.

The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI)

Kaplan and Garner (2017) have developed the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI), a comprehensive, metatheoretical framework that synthesizes multiple perspectives in order to better understand the iterative nature of identity, its various developmental processes, and its formation within social-cultural contexts. The model serves as an organizing framework for integrating other theories, such as self-concept, implicit theories of intelligence, achievement goals, and so on, often used to study this phenomenon and their findings.

The DSMRI conceptualizes role identity as a complex dynamic system, anchored in action and its meaning to the actor. According to Kaplan and Garner, an individual that
possesses an aligned and stable role identity will “engage in actions that they perceive as available, appropriate, and effective for pursuit of their goals in light of their beliefs about the nature of the situation and about their own relevant characteristics and attributes within that situation” (Kaplan & Garner, 2017, p. 2041).

The elements of the role identity system are built on Maehr's Personal Investment Theory (1984), and include four highly-interdependent, contextually constructed components: (a) ontological and epistemological beliefs relevant to the role; (b) purpose and goals in the role; (c) self-perceptions and self-definitions in the role; and (d) perceived action possibilities in the role. These four components are constructed within four control parameters: social context, culture, disposition, and domain.

Figure 1. presents a visual representation of the DSMRI. The purposeful overlapping of each component with all others, contained within a sphere representing the control parameters, shows the reciprocal interactions of each component. This illustrates an assumption that the phenomenon of identity cannot be reduced to any single component but must involve the interdependence of all four components (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). The whole consists of the sum of its parts, and these parts grow and develop together over time and cannot be understood in a vacuum (Overton, 2013).

The DSMRI highlights three facets of the identity system: identity content, identity structure, and identity process. Identity content refers to an individual’s ideals, knowledge, and institutions by which they identify or commit (Schachter & Rich, 2011). Identity structure refers to the way the various contents of identity are embedded and relate (Schachter & Rich, 2011). For example, if a student is a black, high-achieving, female, she may encounter tensions between identities, forcing her to foreground one
salient identity over the other to alleviate dissonance (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Identity processes refer to how one comes to identify with certain ideals, internalize them, and see them as part of their self-definition (Schachter & Rich, 2011). In addition, it includes how or why identity structures become more coherent or complex (Schachter & Rich, 2011).

Elements of the Role-Identity System

**Ontological and Epistemological Beliefs**

This component refers to the ontological beliefs an individual has relevant to the world within they occupy a role, and whether the causes are stable or controllable, internal or external (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Whereas one student may implicitly believe that intelligence is a fixed trait that they cannot change, another may hold the idea that intelligence is malleable and can grow with effort (Dweck, 1999).
Purpose and Goals

This component refers to the individual’s concrete goals while in the role and can be intrinsic or extrinsic, individual or social, specific or global, self or other oriented (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Goals give energy and provide direction to actions (Ziegler, 2005). For example, two students may have the goal to earn an A in a course, but for different reasons. For one student, the A may signify the successful acquisition of new knowledge and personal growth. For the other, the A signifies performance over classmates and demonstration of high ability compared to others.

Self-Perceptions and Self-Definitions

This component considers the actor’s self-knowledge, context-salient and personally valuable group memberships and social identity. It also includes their overall self-concept and self-efficacy (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). A student that has been previously labeled “smart” by adults and peers may incorporate “smart” as their most valuable and salient self-definition. Or perhaps it is only one of their social identities, and they may put equal importance in their self-definition as a musician or an athlete.

Perceived Action Possibilities

This component comprises of the perceptions of available action possibilities as appropriate for pursuing goals. This component includes a student’s chosen behaviors and self-regulated learning strategies in a given situation (Kaplan & Gardner, 2017). A core feature of SRL is that students monitor the effectiveness of their learning strategies through feedback loops (Zimmerman & Labuhn, 2012), thereby strategies that result in perceived success are more likely to be repeated.
Control Parameters

The control parameters of the DSMRI provide the boundaries in which an identity system is formed. Role-identities are domain-specific (e.g. school, science), emerge within sociocultural context mediated by cultural meanings, and are influenced by an actors implicit dispositions (personality, repressed emotions, unconscious motives) (Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

“Smart” Culture

Sternberg and Detterman (1986) asked experts to define intelligence. Although a few common themes were found, including adaption to the environment, basic mental processes, and higher order thinking (Sternberg, 2000). A similar question was asked to everyday Americans on a train platform and at a supermarket (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, and Bernstein, 1981). Results showed themes similar to the experts, including practical problem solving and verbal ability. The one consistent finding between both studies: individuals widely differ in their conceptions and meanings of intelligence.

Instead of a shared societal and empirical definition of intelligence, what these studies showed was that people use their own internal theory of intelligence to evaluate the ability of others as well as themselves (Sternberg, et al., 1981). In everyday situations, we assess the smartness of other people based on our own understanding of what smart is and evaluate ourselves comparatively¹.

These implicit theories of smartness are driven by cultural constructions (Sternberg, 2007; Serpell, 2000) and reflect the social thinking of the time (Sternberg, et al., 1981; Higgins, 1996). Culture can be viewed as a “system of meanings in terms of

¹ While reading this dissertation you will judge how smart you think I am based your own implicit understanding of smartness, and then compare your own smartness to mine.
which the nature of intelligence is formulated” (Serpell, 1994, p. 158). And although outstanding performance is praised in all societies (Callahan, 2000), different cultures have different views on what constitutes intelligence (Sternberg, 2007; Serpell, 2000). In traditional Taoist thinking, character is closely linked to intelligence (Yang and Sternberg, 1997, as cited in Sternberg, 2007). A study in Kenya found the conception of intelligence includes knowledge, respect, initiative, and ability to handle real-life problems (Grigorenko, et al., 2001). Serpell’s seminal study with an indigenous population in Zambia indicated a value in wisdom as the overarching concept of intelligence, further broken down into cognitive quickness and cooperative social responsibility (Serpell, 1994).

At present, there is a very common practice for formally distinguishing who is intelligent in developed countries, including the United States: grades, standardized measures of IQ or achievement test scores (Sternberg, 2007). Conceptualizations of what it means to be smart, talented, or intelligence widely differ, and yet, administrators, educators and researchers often rely on a single, numeric measurement to tell them who is more capable than others.

“Smart” in context

What or who constitutes as “smart” also relies on context. In a social environment individuals will recognize ability differences between themselves and others (Nicholls, 1990). An individual may be recognized as talented simply because they are the most talented in that particular setting. However, if placed in a different situation, they may only be average (Freeman, 2010). Borland calls it "geographical giftedness", the possibility of being smart in one setting but not smart in another (2005, p. 7).
“Smart” in domain

The most likely domains in which a student can construct their role-identity that includes smart as an important self-definition could be school or academics in general, or in a particular field of study (i.e.: I’m a “math” person). However, some researchers point the notion that once a student is old enough to participate in a specific domain trajectory, his or her level of giftedness is defined by the domain (Subotnik, 2009). Consequently, gifted students who were identified in K-12 general education systems are expected to choose a field of study in college in which society expects they will become expert and then eminent (Subotnik, 2009; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). But there is no promise that early identification of giftedness is predictive over time (Horowitz, 2009), and just because a student sees themselves as a smart math person in middle and high school, doesn’t mean that will continue into college.

Smart can also be constructed within the domain of family. Whereas a student may not be the “smartest” in their school (one specific context and domain), they are perceived to be the smartest in their family (i.e.: first-generation college students).

“Smart” in Disposition

In various studies regarding overall achievement and success in college, the Big Five personality trait of conscientiousness tends to emerge as the strongest predictor of academic success (Butsato, et al., 2000). Although more positive facets of consciousness include self-efficacy and self-discipline, a more precarious facet of conscientiousness is perfectionism. Neumeister, et al. (2015) examined the relationship between perfectionism and goals with a high-ability, college sample. Perfectionism was separated into self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), where students set unrealistic standards and expectations
for themselves, and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), where individuals perceive others as placing unrealistic expectations or standards for them (Neumeister, Fletcher, & Burney, 2015). Authors point out that parents and educators often see self-oriented perfectionists as motivated and high-achieving. Nevertheless, repeated success and subsequent praise may have developed tendencies in these students to tie their self-worth to their performance, avoiding risk and relying on maladaptive learning strategies, in order to protect their self-esteem (Neumeister, et al., 2015).

**Integration of the Components and Parameters**

When elements of a dynamic system and are aligned and stable within the control parameters, actors will engage in actions they perceive as available and effective in light of their goals, their beliefs about the situation, and about their own self-attributes within the situation (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). When the system is stable, these states are called attractors. Attractor states provide positive feedback loops amongst the elements, reinforcing behaviors and feelings. However, there are states in which the system tends to self-organize away from, called repellors. In identity, these can be seen as identity threatening situations which affect one of the four-interdependent elements. Internal and external negative feedback loops create tension within the system which must be resolved (Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

**Related Research**

Many existing theories and robust areas of research can be situated under the elements and control parameters of the DSMRI. By organizing them under one metatheory, we can create a much richer, more nuanced understanding of how different
role-identities of first-year Honors students may emerge and impact decision-making and well-being.

**Achievement Goals**

One example of a highly researched theory regarding the role-identity element of purpose and goals is Achievement Goal Theory (AGT). AGT is focused on the motives and personal strivings that direct behavior towards a goal (Maehr & Zusho, 2009), and not necessarily the objective to be achieved (Kaplan & Flum, 2010). The foundational theory developed in the early 1980’s designated two overarching types of goals: mastery or performance (Maehr & Zusho, 2009).

Mastery goals refer to an orientation towards developing competence, learning for the sake of learning and for personal growth, and has been connected to adaptive interactions with one’s environment, investment of effort on tasks, exploration, collaboration, intellectual risk taking, and imaginative problem solving (Nicholls, 1989; Kaplan & Flum, 2010). Success under a mastery goal orientation includes grasping new knowledge and skills, or improving past performance. Furthermore, mastery goals are not connected to validating or protecting self-worth, but instead can lead to self-improvement and self-actualization (Kaplan & Flum, 2010). Performance goals are used to demonstrate competence and validate one’s ability as compared to others (Grant & Dweck, 2003). For students who adopt a performance goal orientation, their individual self-definition of “smartness” is determined by their context, specifically the people around them.

Research on how performance goals affect motivation and achievement has been inconsistent. For example, performance goals have been found to be associated with
surface-level learning strategies, self-handicapping, cheating, avoidance of challenging coursework and lower grades for college students (Middleton, et al., 2004; Meece, et al., 2006). In other research, performance goals were found to result in higher grades (Grant and Dweck, 2003), higher academic efficacy, and academic self-regulation (Middleton, et al., 2004).

To rectify inconsistencies in research regarding performance goals, a trichotomous model of achievement goal theory was developed and further divides the performance goals into performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals, each with different associated behaviors (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Performance – approach goals refers to the orientation towards demonstrating high-ability; a focus on success over others and positive presentation (Grant and Dweck, 2003). Performance-avoidance goals refers to an orientation towards avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability (Middleton, et al., 2004), unfavorable judgment (Meece, et al., 2006) or the avoidance of a failure (Grant and Dweck, 2003). Otherwise stated, performance-approach goals are used to make sure others think you are competent, whereas performance-avoidance goals are used to avoid unfavorable judgment (Meece, et al., 2006). Whereas performance-avoidance goals are associated with maladaptive beliefs and behaviors, higher anxiety, lower levels of interest and low achievement (Kaplan & Flum, 2010; Maehr & Zusho, 2009), research regarding performance-approach goals continues to have mixed results, including positive outcomes of high self-efficacy, positive emotions, and high grades (Kaplan & Flum, 2010).

Achievement goals have been found to be somewhat stable over time (Middleton, et al., 2004). They are less stable when moving from one learning environment to another
(Anderman & Midgley, 1997). As contexts change, individuals reevaluate where they stand. Students that were considered smart or even the smartest in their high schools are likely to experience an increase in their social comparison when moving to college contexts. If they are also students who have tended to hold performance goal orientations in the past, they may rely on approach or avoidance goals even more (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). For example, early-identified gifted students who performed well in a secondary educational system that rewarded performance goals (i.e.: high test scores) rather than mastery goals (i.e.: critical thinking and making interdisciplinary connections) may struggle when the orientation shifts in college, and they are additionally expected to regulate their own learning (Dunlosky, et al., 2013). They may start off employing the performance-approach goals that have made them successful thus far. However, when faced with an obstacle, and their “smart” identity becomes threatened, they may turn to performance-avoidance goals.

A performance-goal oriented student who enters a highly-selective college, an Honors program, or a traditionally competitive STEM major, is likely to experience an increase in their social comparison and therefore rely on performance-oriented goals even more (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Performance goals may have been successful for them in high school, but any potential gain from performance goals is unlikely to be long lasting and could easily turn to avoidance in the face of obstacles (Maehr & Zusho, 2009).

In college, there are more students to compete with and the methods they used to succeed in high school may not benefit them here. and performance-focused learning situations benefit only a select few (Nicholls, as cited in Maehr & Zusho, 2009). It is not only that contexts for comparison change, but there is possibility that the achievement
orientation of the environment and the measures of success also change during the transition from high school to college. In most traditional high schools, there is great emphasis on performance. Earning high grades and above average standardized test scores are the understood keys for admittance into selected colleges. In addition, with nationally set testing standards and higher-stakes related to testing performance of classes, more teachers feel it necessary to teach to the test. In doing so, smart students may have developed ineffective learning strategies such as rote memorization and regurgitation that, over time, serve very useful in achieving the high school measures of success. But strategies and goals that have made them successful in the past may not work in college with a more mastery-oriented learning environment where you are expected to conceptually understand, apply, and critically analyze information. Grades, previously seen as an indicator of success (even if there is an implicit goal to learn) may not matter to the institutional goals of college, but for a student that has always seen high grades as proof of their smartness, new cultural standards such as bell-curve grading or “no one gets an A” philosophies could be shocking to them.

This switch from performance-approach goals to performance avoidance goals could be particularly important for understanding the complexity of previously high-scoring students.

Perhaps students that have been labeled smart their entire life never had to cultivate the necessary higher-level thinking skills critical to success in college. When the “smart” identity becomes threatened, they may turn to performance-avoidance goals, which have been associated with higher levels of anxiety, and lower levels of interest and achievement (Maehr & Zusho, 2009).
Academic Self-Concept

A major theoretical framework of academic self-concept, which can be positioned under self-perceptions and self-definition, is the Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect (BFLPE) (Marsh, 1987).

The main assumption of BFLPE is:

equally able students will have lower academic self-concepts in higher-achieving or selective schools or programs than in lower-achieving of less selective schools or programs, largely due to social comparison based on local norms. (Dai & Rinn, 2008, p.283)

To use the metaphor of fish more explicitly, if a student perceives oneself to be a smart fish in a less-smart pond, they will have a higher academic self-concept than if they perceived themselves to be a less-smart fish in a smarter pond. Even for Honors students, the shift from high school to college generally includes changes in the overall ability level and size of the comparable peer group. The central theorist behind BFLPE, Herbert Marsh, argues that a shift in academic self-concept based on comparison groups has major consequences for general psychological well-being and motivation (Dai & Rinn, 2008).

There has been mixed support for BFLPE in high-achieving populations (Becker et al., 2014; Dai & Rinn, 2008; Makel, Lee, Olszewki-Kubilius & Putallaz, 2012). Although Marsh (1987) has found that a student’s academic self-concept negatively relates to the achievement level of the comparison group, even after controlling for individual achievement, more recent investigations have found that this adverse relationship is not equally strong for all students, but moderated by the individual (Wouters, et al., 2015).
Rinn (2007) sought out to see if gifted college students who were enrolled in an honors program had lower academic self-concepts than gifted students who are not enrolled in an honors program. According to the principles of BFLPE, honors students, being part of a higher-average ability group, should have lowered self-concepts. However, she found the opposite. Students enrolled in an Honors Program maintained higher levels of academic self-concept. What this result may indicate is the supportive and protective nature of Honors Programs. In an additional study, Rinn and colleagues found that negative or lowered beliefs about one's academic ability was related to an increase in academically dishonest behavior for previously high-scoring students (Rinn, et al., 2014).

*Self-regulation of learning*

Self-regulation of learning (SRL) refers to the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning processes (Zimmerman, 1986), and can be organized under perceived action possibilities. An additional core feature of SRL is that students monitor the effectiveness of their learning strategies through feedback loops (Zimmerman & Labuhn, 2012), thereby strategies that result in perceived success are more likely to be repeated. Commonly examined SRL approaches include goal setting, study strategies, time management, adaptation, and help-seeking (Zimmerman, 2002).

Limited research has been done investigating differences between high and low achievers in college (see McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Difrancesca, et al., 2015; Artino, et al., 2011; Nandagopal & Ericsson, 2011), with achievement traditionally operationalized through course grade or overall grade-point average. Results
often indicate that high-achievers use more SRL strategies, and those they use more adaptive, effective and higher-level as opposed to simplistic or surface-level (Difrancesca, et al., 2015; Nandagopal & Ericsson, 2011).

Since experiences of academic challenge can be delayed for high-achieving students until they enter college (Balduf, 2009; Snyder & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013), some students may be underprepared to deal with demanding coursework in college, having never adequately been academically challenged, never needing to develop study or time management skills, and never needing to put in the amount of effort that would seem proportionate to their high-achievement (Balduf, 2009).

Additionally, low GPAs alone cannot be relied on as the indicator for trouble with previously labeled smart students. Scager, et al., (2014) showed that when perceived levels of challenge in an Advanced Cell Biology undergraduate course were high, the learning gain was also high, but confidence in ability was low. In Monteira et al.’s (2012) investigation of the top 1% of engineering students in an extremely competitive learning environment, participants suffered great loss in motivation and interest when the perceived challenge was high but were still able to perform (measured by course grade) at a very high level. There is a large possibility that students who have learned how to perform academically can still engage in high levels of SRL and maintain academic functioning while overall motivation and well-being are negatively affected. If this population of students does not display the same warning signs that other students would show when dealing with loss of motivation and interest, it will be important to look beyond high grade-point-averages in order to make sure student’s academic and personal needs are supported.
As mentioned, help-seeking is seen as a SRL approach. It is possible that over time, students who have internalized their smart label, in addition to possible entity beliefs and performance goals, may not see help seeking as an action possibility. In a popular JNCHC think-piece, Richard Badenhausen (2010) makes a commonly held assumption amongst educators and professionals who work with Honors students daily: Honors students are less inclined to ask for help because they see it as a sign of weakness. They are ashamed, they don’t want to risk losing their status as an Honors student, or they have never been in a situation where they have needed help before. They simply don’t know how (Badenhausen, 2010). His understanding as to why: because it threatens their identity.

The first challenge honors students face in asking for help is the fact that their self-concept is so grounded in the idea of academic achievement that seeking assistance calls their very identity into question. (Badenhausen, 2010, p. 28)

Major Selection

During socialization within a particular institutional environment, internalization occurs when a student learns via conditioning what behaviors are appropriate or not (Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). A simple example is what behaviors are and are not appropriate in the classroom. A more complicated example may be what college majors are and are not appropriate for smart students. It is important to understand how students identify which fields are available to them and which majors they perceive as possible.

In a white paper on the state of gifted education and research, Subotnik, et al. (2011) made the claim that the purpose of gifted education should be to groom gifted students to reach eminence in the field for which their talents are best suited and to which they can make the greatest contribution. In a response to the paper, Jung (2012),
applauded the idea and suggested career counseling for these students begin at a young age in order to direct students to the options they are most likely to achieve in, even if that option is not the choice that would make them the happiest.

Mindsets

Pioneered by Carol Dweck (2000), researchers theorize that there are two implicit theories of intelligence. First, intelligence is incremental, meaning it is malleable and can change, specifically with effort, hard work, learning new things, or experience. Individuals that hold this implicit belief have been found to see barriers as challenges to overcome and can increase resiliency and self-efficacy through effective self-regulation and goal persistence (Dweck, 1999). Together, this combined set of meaning systems is more commonly known as the growth mindset.

The opposing implicit belief is that intelligence is an entity; a fixed, stable trait that cannot be changed, regardless of time or conditions. Individuals with this belief have been found to avoid difficulties and employ maladaptive strategies to self-preserve, including cheating, plagiarism, self-handicapping, or giving up all together (Dweck, 1999). Students with an entity mindset are less likely to seek challenging coursework and more likely to miss out on important learning opportunities (Korp, 2011). This combination is more commonly known as a fixed mindset.

These mindsets determine in students how much control they have over situations and dictate to a student what they believe is needed for success in school (Dweck, 1999). They are developed over time and are strongly impacted by the educational environment, specifically feedback from teachers (Dweck, 1999; Korp, 2011), peers, and parents, and most notably in the praise of being “smart.”
The results of five empirical investigations indicated that students praised for intelligence only, and not effort, were more likely to avoid challenging problems, endorse goals that are more performance based instead of competency based, report low enjoyment for learning difficult tasks, more helpless responses, not attribute success to effort, and even led to poorer overall performance (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Where intelligence praise created vulnerability, effort praise created hardiness (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Dweck, 2000). Further studies have shown that reinforcing entity beliefs is associated with academic procrastination, disengagement, lower levels of active coping behavior in the face of exams, decreased effort and persistence in the face of challenge (as cited in Snyder, et al, 2013).

Consider a student that was under challenged academically throughout their educational experience and did not have to exhibit much effort in order to earn high grades. This student was then congratulated, given special privileges, told by teachers that they were “smart.” Therefore, they learn that being smart means not having to try and still being successful - for that reason, it must be something internal. These students learn to associate effort with lack of natural ability. Then, when first presented with a real academic challenge, they may engage in avoidance or self-handicapping behaviors (Korp, 2011; Clinkenbeard, 2013) in order to protect their belief.

In a variety of studies, mostly with college-aged participants, Dweck and colleagues have found that students with entity mindsets entered college with higher SAT scores but did not translate to higher achievement in college. In addition, entity theorists had lower levels of self-esteem over all 4 years of college (Dweck, 2000). To them, it
was devastating to realize that “their claim to fame--being smarter than everyone else-has disappeared” (Dweck, 2000, p. 122).

Mindsets orient the person towards action and similar to the DSMRI, include a network of perceptions, goals, self-worth concerns, and response patterns. The main difference is that mindsets are not attached to a role, and they are not dynamic.

**Honors**

Despite the vast amount of research done on identified gifted students in the k-12 setting, most research done with academically high-achieving college students happens within the context of Honors Colleges of Programs (Hebert & McBee, 2007; Neumeister, 2004; Rinn, 2007). Although Honors education has existed since the 1930s, the trend of creating specific and separate Honors colleges and programs became popular in the 1980s as way to ensure high-achieving students that they could receive a high-quality education at state public universities (Sederberg, 2008).

The research done regarding Honors Program and College students is sparse and lacking in empiricism and rigor (Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Balduf, 2009; Rinn, 2007; Scager, et al., 2013). In a review of research on academically talented undergraduates, Rinn & Plucker (2004) were left with the final conclusion "Educators simply do not know as much about gifted college students as they do about gifted children or even gifted adults" (p. 62).

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), the professional association of undergraduate Honors programs and colleges, (NCHC, 2017), the purpose of an Honors education at colleges or universities is:

for devising and delivering in-class and extracurricular academic experiences that provide a distinctive learning environment for selected
students. The honors college or program provides opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its students than are available elsewhere in the institution; these opportunities are appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. (NCHC, 2013, np)

Perhaps part of the reason why there is little research on Honors populations is because the association’s journal, JNCHC, does not emphasize the need for empirical study. The journal calls for articles that “may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education” (NCHC, 2017, np). Therefore, majority of the articles in the journal are primarily best-practice or opinion based.

Studies indicate student participation in an Honors Program results in positive effects, both academically (Seifert, et al., 2007; Rinn, 2007) and socially (Herbert & McBee, 2007; Rinn, 2007). Herbert & McBee (2007) conducted a qualitative study that examined the experiences gifted college students had in honors programs, and how their involvement affected their intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development as young adults. They found that students that were labeled smart experienced isolation as adolescents, but at college through Honors Program participation, they discovered an intellectual and social network with other gifted individuals (Herbert & McBee, 2007). Seifert, et al. (2007) investigated the impact of honors programs on student experiences as well as cognitive development in the first year of college. Results indicated that Honors Program participation had significant positive effects on critical thinking, mathematics, and composite cognitive development. Rinn (2007) examined the academic achievement, academic self-concepts, and aspirations of gifted college students who are
enrolled in an honors program and of gifted college students who are not enrolled in an honors program. Honors students were found to have higher academic achievement and higher academic self-concept when controlling for SAT scores.

Despite the fact many students see benefits being an Honors student in college, there are also potential for continued problems, namely, the fact that being selected into an Honors program perpetuates issues an already addressed: it is an additional label on a student.

Implications and Conclusion

Academic outcomes, such as grades and evaluations by teachers, are related to global self-esteem and self-worth. If a student hinges much of their self-worth on their academic competence, threats to their ability, perceived or real, can cause instability in self-esteem and increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety (Crocker, et al., 2016).

Eagan et al. (2015), reports on a national survey of college freshmen that showed rates of depression have hit an all-time high, and emotional health has hit an all-time low (Astin, 2016) There has recently been a variety of special news reports investigating the increase in mental health issues and campus suicides, specifically at Ivy League and other prestigious institutions. These articles point specifically to the idea that the pressure to perform, the anxiety that they face, and the high-stakes learning environment mixed with the cultural expectation to present as calm and put-together puts students at great risk (see Lozada, 2017; Volk, 2014; Scelfo, 2015; Cohen & Italiano, 2017; Spencer, 2017).

Certainly, there is value in intelligence. Educated citizens should have strong vocabularies, reading comprehension, and mathematical skills (Astin, 2016). Western schooling advances academic knowledge and serves as the foundation for the
development of several important life skills, including critical thinking (Ceci, 1996). However, it cannot continue to be assumed that the “smart” kids are ok.

A significant amount of research has attempted to understand why students who are predicted to succeed in college end up underperforming (Balduf, 2009). This research attempts to find answers to only one potential problem and perpetuates a common assumption amongst higher-education educations and administrators: the students who are achieving academically are not in need of the same types of services or attention (Freeman, 1999).

But as demonstrated through the review of related research, many students can hold maladaptive beliefs, engage in destructive behaviors, and be struggling emotionally while still achieving academically at very high levels. And although perspectives on identity hold a major position in many theories of college student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), “smart” is not often explored as a construct that is part of and influences identity itself, but rather, as a category of students, separated out as a homogenous population (Gross, 1998). Thus, to investigate how students make meaning of being smart and the implications during the first-year of college, a complex dynamic systems framework of identity was used to capture a holistic understanding of individual student experiences.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

To examine how students make meaning of being labeled smart and how this meaning manifests in the identity of first-year Honors students, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used in conjunction with the DSMRI. In this chapter, I will describe the philosophical assumptions and methodological choices of the current dissertation study. First, I will describe the research design and overall approach. Second, I will discuss strategies for participant recruitment and sampling. Then, I will explain the data collection methods, including issues of access, trust, and rapport. Finally, I will position myself in the research and describe data analysis procedures that will additionally address trustworthiness and credibility.

Research Design

As the Associate Director of the Honors Program, I am responsible for programmatic assessment and evaluation. Through multiple years of analyzing our incoming-student survey, I became attuned to an unexpected theme that kept emerging in the data: how a student’s smart identity seems to influence transition to the University. I decided to follow this thread for my credit-bearing, research apprenticeship in order to collect additional data, originally thought to be only for program enhancement and potential intervention. Initial approval from the Institutional Review Board was granted in July 2016 to collect data through an online, structured questionnaire. Initial analysis of the survey results showed a lack of richness and depth. Therefore, I decided to modify the IRB in February 2017 to include interviews with first-year students. These interviews were conducted in April and May, 2017. The study was re-certified in June 2017 to allow
for the collection of more data if necessary. A copy of the IRB approved informed consent forms are attached as Appendix A.

Overall Approach

My aim was to investigate the content, structure, and processes of meaning making underlying students’ identity. In order to adequately conduct an investigation of the individuals’ reality, I have employed qualitative methods that collect data on the participants’ own words and meaning making processes (Creswell, 2013).

One of the five most common approaches to qualitative inquiry is phenomenology, an approach aimed at examining the conscious understanding of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Holloway & Brown, 2012). The term often used when describing the goal of phenomenological research is to unearth the “essence” of a phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013). The philosophy of phenomenology was first introduced by Husserl (1970) and has been adapted and expanded to several approaches (Creswell, 2013). The specific approach selected for data collection in the current study is interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA (Smith, 2004). The aim of an IPA approach is to gather information in a way that will allow the researcher to explore in detail how a participant perceives and makes sense of their personal and social world (Holloway & Brown, 2012; Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2007). A main tenant of the approach is the active, dynamic role of the researcher. In IPA, meaning making is two-fold. First, the participant makes meaning of their lifeworld cognitively, and then attempts to express their understanding verbally to the best of their ability. Second, the researcher attempts to take an insider perspective by interpreting the words of the participant, while also taking
into consideration the idea that people often struggle to articulate thoughts and feelings. Therefore, in IPA the researcher must employ both empathic and questioning hermeneutics in order to understand the perspective of the participant while still asking critical questions of the texts including “Is something leaking out here that wasn’t intended?” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 53). I chose IPA for this specific study specifically because of the role of the researcher. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter, I have had a long-standing relationship with both the phenomenon of interest and the student population. Therefore, it was important to choose a method that celebrated and utilized the role of the researcher in an active way.

Since a main research question of the current study is to explore how students make meaning of being labeled smart, it made sense to use a qualitative, phenomenological approach that allows the student to articulate their individual viewpoint using their own voice. In describing when it is a suitable approach, Smith and Osborn (2007) encourage IPA “when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world.” (p.55)

Although the method has been most often used in psychology (Smith & Osborne, 2015), its reach has grown into other disciplines over the past few years, including education (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Recently, IPA has been used to examine the inclusion of visually impaired high school students (Thurston, 2014), stress and coping in first-year undergraduates (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013), and identities of college students with psychiatric disabilities (O’Shea, 2016).
Participants

Sampling and Recruitment

When selecting participants for an interpretative phenomenological study, it is most important to be certain that a participant fits the criteria of the phenomenon being examined (Smith & Osborne, 2015). For this study, that meant identifying students who were labeled smart at some point during their development and were also first-year Honors students. Since the designation of “Honors” is a smart label, all first-year Honors students enrolled at university where the research was to take place were invited to participate in the study. This sampling reflects LeCompte and Preissle’s (1993) criterion-based selection technique where the researcher lists the attributes essential to the success of the study and then proceed to find a unit matching the list (Merriam, 2009). Much of the existing research on gifted, high-ability, or high-achieving college students can be critiqued for using convenience sampling within an Honors Program, specifically because enrollment in most Honors Program is determined by high school academic qualifications and should by no means serve as indication for future college success or expectations. Sampling in this way re-emphasizes the tautological thinking that only smart students participate in Honors Programs and Honors Programs have only smart students. However, since the major purpose of this study is to examine how students make meaning of being labeled smart, participants need to have had the label imposed on them. The fact that they have been accepted into an Honors Program is, in and of itself, a label of smartness. In this case, using Honors students is not a choice of convenience, but a way to guarantee they fit the study criteria. All eligible students were invited and self-selected to participate.
Eligible participants for this study included students enrolled as first-time, first-year Honors Program students at a large, public, state-affiliated institution in the Northeast. Acceptance to the Honors Program is based on a holistic review of the student’s application to the university, which does include high school GPA and standardized test scores (SAT or ACT). The Honors Program also accepts students that apply to the University through a test-optional program. These students complete a series of short-answer questions designed to assess their motivational and developmental readiness for college. The evaluation of these essays takes the place of their standardized test scores in the holistic review. Despite the fact this study did not establish achievement score cut-offs as inclusion criteria, I have included such data for each participant in Table 1 for context.

Table 1

*Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Standardized Test Score</th>
<th>HS GPA</th>
<th>First-Year GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>1380</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1420</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keval</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Undeclared-Liberal Arts</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Anne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Undeclared-General</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bioengineering International</td>
<td>1590</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Test Optional GPA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Musical Theater</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Music Education</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>- Asian</td>
<td>Applied Mathematics</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merideth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1370</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Neuroscience</td>
<td>1360</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Neuroscience</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In August 2016, prior to matriculation, 749 incoming first-year Honors students were invited to complete an online survey about being “smart”. A total of 81 students completed the online survey. I acknowledge that those who completed the survey may be different on characteristics that may influence the manifestation of the phenomenon, such as motivation or conscientiousness.

The following spring 2017, the 81 students who completed the survey were invited via individual email to participate in an interview to further discuss their
experiences being smart. (See Appendix B for recruitment emails). A total of 22 students expressed interest by completing a short, online Google form. These students were emailed directly to schedule an interview. Twenty students completed the interview. Two students did not show up for the interview, did not respond to follow-up emails, and thus, were removed from the study. Again, it should be acknowledged that students who agreed to participate may differ from students who did not on characteristics that may influence the manifestation of the phenomenon.

During the data collection phase, a small amount of snowball sampling also occurred. Four additional students became aware of the study through friends and asked to participate. Often in qualitative research, more than one approach to sampling can be used in order to ensure the inclusion of information rich cases (Patton, 2002). Therefore, I scheduled interviews with these four students and enrolled them in the study. All four completed the interview.

A total of 24 students participated in interviews. In qualitative design, sample size is flexible, with the emphasis being on the depth, richness, and diversity of the cases (Patton, 2002) and not on the number of participants. The standard goal for sample size in qualitative investigations is to sample until the point of redundancy in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For interpretative phenomenological research, anywhere from 5-25 cases is normative (Smith & Osborne, 2015).

The participants were all first-year, traditional-aged students and members of the University Honors Program. Each participant entered the University directly after graduating high school. Nine males and 15 females were interviewed, representing 20 different majors. One African American student, 1 Asian American student, 1
International student, 1 Hispanic student, and 20 white students participated. See Table 1 for more details about each participant.

Studies with gifted or high-achieving students often treat the population as homogeneous (Herbert & McBee, 2007; Scager, et al., 2007; Rinn, 2014). However, the sample used in this study was diverse on meaningful dimensions. Investigating the phenomenon in light of these variations allowed me to see both individual differences and common patterns that emerged, resulting in a more comprehensive conceptualization of the phenomenon than it would have been with a more homogenous sample (Patton, 2002).

**Mid-Atlantic University**

Since context is a control parameter in the DSMRI which provides boundary conditions for the emerging identity systems (Kaplan & Garner, 2017), and could be related to some assumptions made prior to data analysis, it is important to understand the shared context of Mid-Atlantic University and the Honors Program.

Mid-Atlantic University is a large, public, research institution situated in a densely populated urban environment within a major metropolitan city. It is ranked just outside the top 100 schools in the nation according to US News (2019), and has an acceptance rate of 57%. In 2018-19, total undergraduate enrollment was around 28,000 students. It has one of the lowest tuitions available for in-state students compared to its peer institutions and holds a national reputation its diversity.

The Honors Program accepts only 6-7% of the applicants to Mid-Atlantic University each year. Total undergraduate student enrollment in the Honors Program is
around 2,200. It is a University-wide honors program with students representing all schools and colleges and a widespread variety of majors.

In the first-year, students will take at least three Honors classes, typically with an assortment of majors in the classroom. Students can take as many Honors classes as desired but must take a minimum of three in their first year. The University has a general education program that all students must complete, and the option is available to Honors students to complete these foundational and breadth classes within the Honors Program. In addition to courses, the Honors Program offers individualized academic advising, a shared community space, student organizations, and specialty programming. Additionally, over 85% of first-year students choose to live together in a living-learning community (LLC) in a suite-style residence hall.

When asked in a program related survey, about 50% of Honors students indicate that Mid-Atlantic University was not their first choice school. Many of these students were not accepted or could not afford to attend Ivy League or other perceived elite schools, and therefore, chose to attend Mid-Atlantic University in part due to the generous academic merit scholarships and acceptance to the Honors Program. Over 99% of the Fall 2016 Honors Program cohort were granted academic merit scholarships. Each of the selected participants in the current student were awarded one of the top three levels of academic merit scholarship, ranging from half- to full-tuition coverage. Students must maintain a 3.0 to keep their scholarship and a 3.25 to stay in the Honors Program.

Some honors caliber students, depending on context (e.g., Ivy League schools), might not come to college expecting to succeed with the same ease as they did in high school. However, since Mid-Atlantic University does not have the national status for
being highly academically competitive, it can be assumed that most Honors students expect to maintain levels of accomplishment similar to what they achieved in high school based on this reputation relative to other schools. Aware of this phenomenon, the Honors Program strives to create a holistically supportive environment that emphasizes intellectual curiosity, social courage, and collaboration over competition. Once here, students indicate high levels of satisfaction with the Honors Program and their overall Mid-Atlantic University experience on student surveys and feedback forms.

Procedures

IPA emphasizes the use of in-depth, in-person semi-structured interviews as the main source of data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, all students enrolled in the study participated in a one-time, in-person, interview which included a mix of more and less structured interview questions with a bend towards flexibility (Merriam, 2009). The interviews took place towards the end of the Spring semester of their first-year of college. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours and took place in neutral locations around campus, either in conference rooms or classrooms.

On the date and time of the interview, I greeted students in the hallway. Upon entering the room, participants were asked to choose their seat, offered a bottle of water, and invited to read and sign the informed consent form. Afterwards, I explained to each student that I was going to ask them some questions about their experiences, thoughts on being smart, and their time at university. I informed them the interviews would be audio recorded. At this time, students had the opportunity to ask any questions off the record.

Before recording, participants were asked to engage in a short activity to set the stage and break the ice. The goal of this activity was to get them thinking about
themselves, and allowed me to collect data on which aspects of their identity were most salient at the time of the interview. I asked students to finish the sentence “I am…” with as many qualities, characteristics, or identities that they felt best represented themselves on a piece of a paper. They could list words, bullets points, phrases. After they completed the list, I asked them to star or circle the three or four that were most important to them. After this activity, audio recorders were turned on and the semi-structured interview began.

**Interview Protocol**

Since the goal of IPA is to understand how participants make sense and meaning of things that happen to them, a more flexible instrument is required (Smith & Osborn, 2007). An interview protocol was constructed with broad questions to explore how students make meaning of being smart, their role identity as Honors students, and educational experiences pre- and in the first year of college. The interview protocol is attached as Appendix C.

The development of the interview schedule (a term used to describe the protocol by Smith & Osborn, 2007) was an iterative process. Schedule questions were initially drafted and then piloted with a few upper-class Honors students in order to receive feedback on wording and tone (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Since rapport is crucial to gathering valid data in qualitative research (Smith & Osborn, 2007), it was important that questions were nonjudgmental and, as recommended by Spradley (1979), offered “participants a frame and canvas” to “paint a word-picture of their experience (p. 85).” This included grand tour questions, mini-tour questions, example questions and experience questions. Question wording was intentional and often asked participants to
reconstruct experiences, not just remember. The example used in Siedman (2013) was “ask ‘what was your elementary school experience like’ - instead of ‘do you remember your elementary school experience?’” (p. 90). This is due to the idea that reconstruction is partially based on what the participant now feels is meaningful or important about the past (Seidman, 2013).

The schedule was open and flexible enough to change during the data-collection process as my understanding of the phenomenon grew deeper (Creswell, 2013). Wider, open-ended questions permitted the participant to choose the direction of the conversation (Siedman, 2013) and allowed the process to feel more like a dialog (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

When determining the order of questions for the schedule, I used the suggested strategy of Smith and Osborn (2007). First, I asked myself “What is the most logical order in which to address these areas?” and second, “Which is the most sensitive?” It is advised to start with a general question, use more detailed prompts only when needed, and scaffold to more sensitive questions (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As is common practice with IPA, the interviews were guided rather than dictated by the schedule (Smith & Osborn, 2007). During the actual interviews it was important to modify the order and inclusion of some question based on participant responses. This allows the investigator to further build rapport through the practice of active listening and not allow the conversation to feel redundant or disjointed. IPA also gives the investigator the freedom to go off schedule and explore important areas as they arise (Smith & Osborn, 2007), continuing the feel of a natural relaxed discussion. Furthermore, this style of approach aims to follow the participants’ meaning-making processes and reduce the role of the
interviewer’s meaning-making and agenda, in order to generate data that is as reflective of the participants’ meaning-making as possible.

Other Data Collected

I collected additional data for each participant, including high school grade point average (HSGPA), SAT/ACT scores, gender, race, age, city and state, fall semester first-year grade point average (FGPA), spring semester grade point average (SGPA), cumulative first-year grade point average (CGPA), and whether or not a student was retained from first year to second year. ACT scores were converted to SAT scores using the ACT-SAT Concordance Table developed in partnership with College Board (owners of the SAT) and ACT (act.org, 2017) in order to simplify the amount of data fields. All information was obtained for the consenting students from the university’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

Participant Selection

Six of the 24 participants were chosen for in-depth analysis and presentation. After all interviews were thoroughly transcribed, these six were selected based on a preliminary analysis that identified them to reflect a range of demographic characteristics and student identities that manifested diverse cases of the phenomenon of interest. Sex, race, geographic location, and major were some of the first characteristics identified to narrow down the cases. Then, with the consultation of an expert, I conducted a first-round analysis of the transcripts in an attempt to choose students that were also diverse in their meaning making of smart. The final participants selected for analysis were Sasha, Valentina, Joseph, Divya, Keval, and James.
Data Analysis

Since a goal of qualitative research is to give voice to those being studied (Lichtman, 2013), analysis should rely first and foremost on the words of the participants. Therefore, the most important data source was the transcripts of the interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim using online transcription software called Trint (trint.com). Trint automatically transcribes audiofiles uploaded through their secure servers for a small fee. Since participants do not disclose their names or other identifiable information during the interviews, there is no risk of identity disclosure during the transcription process through the online service. Final transcripts were downloaded, saved on hard drive, and deleted from the service. A graduate student outside the University was hired to complete the first round of transcription cleaning. After she was finished, I also listened to each of the audio files while checking the accuracy of the final transcriptions, pausing for editing and note-taking, and making sure the record includes all semantic data, including laughter, filler words (uh, um), significant pauses, etc (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The analysis followed the spirit of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to allow for overall establishment of the essence of the phenomenon, but more specifically, followed the analytical steps as outlined in the DSMRI codebook (Kaplan & Garner, 2017) to explore the unique systems of role identity in individual students.

IPA analysis is focused on the content and complexity of meaning, which forces the researcher to have a deep, engaged, and sustained interpretive relationship with the transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The goal of analysis through the DSMRI is consistent with this approach with the addition of organizing the rich content according to
the structural features of the model. Therefore, after the data are accurately transcribed and checked, files were downloaded into word documents for note taking and coding. First, I engaged in open and free textual analysis while reading each transcript several times, identifying the various role-identities expressed by the participant (Kaplan & Garner, 2017b) as well as emerging interesting or significant utterances, comments, or general notes.

For each participant, next I conducted an analysis for each central role separately, starting with role that is the focus of the research question: being a smart student, and following with the other roles in order of significance (Kaplan & Garner, 2017b). Third, deductive coding within meaning-units according to the components in the DSMRI occurred for each role. Some segments of data were double-coded.

From this point, the narrative began to emerge, and further inductive thematic analysis occurred through the identification of themes, narrative structure, and the framing parameters within which the role identity was constructed including the cultural context, social interactions, and implicit processes (Kaplan & Garner, 2017b). After themes were discovered, they were listed out on a separate page. Here, themes were organized, connections were made, and clusters formed under superordinate categories or concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As the clustering happened, I referred back to the transcripts to confirm source material supported the findings. Since I was interpreting the words and meanings of others, it was important to constantly check what is construed with that was actually said (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

A fellow graduate student with no prior knowledge of the population of students involved in the study served as a critical peer. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest the
incorporation of a disinterested peer to engage in peer-debriefing in order to increase trustworthiness and validate the results. This fellow researcher was unfamiliar with the participants and context and only had the data of the interviews. He read the transcripts of each of the six cases and conducted his own, independent analysis. After which, we would meet to discuss findings for each case and overall themes. Any discrepancies in findings were cause to return to the source material in order to determine appropriate solutions.

An analytical summary of basic profiles regarding the smart student role-identity that includes its content, its structure and its process was constructed, indicating the span of the role-identity across sub-roles and/or sub-contexts (Kaplan & Garner, 2017b). Finally, an overall, analytical summary that integrates the various role identities of each student and emergent themes present throughout the narratives was written (Kaplan & Garner, 2017b). The inclusion of final themes was not decided entirely by frequency in the data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), but also by the richness of the specific evidence or passages that highlighted the theme and how the theme helps understand the overall essence or lived experience of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Smith and Osborn (2007) recommend a set of guiding questions for the researcher in conducting this process to achieve a holistic and integrative conceptualization of the analysis: "What is the person trying to achieve here? Is something leaking out here that wasn’t intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?" (p. 63) The complete DSMRI codebook is included as Appendix D.
Trustworthiness & Validation

The methods defined above follow recommendations (e.g., Creswell, 2013; Smith 2004) for valid qualitative research that concerns rigorous data collection in a natural setting. It is common in IPA to only engage participants in one-time interviews and there is no recommendation to hold more, although other approaches exist (e.g. Seidman, 2013). Since one is attempting to examine the essence of a lived phenomenon in a particular moment in time, it is not seen as necessary to engage in multiple interviews.

Since qualitative data collection uses the researcher as a tool, I understand there may be question as to whether or not I was unbiased in my interpretation. A common practice in phenomenological research is to engage in “bracketing” (Lichtman, 2013). This involves the investigator being transparent about his or her own thoughts and feelings about the topic at hand and practicing *epoche*, the deliberate suspension of judgement (Holloway & Brown, 2012). Many do not agree this is necessary, including Lichtman (2013), because there are no details on how to do this readily available and most believe it is impossible to achieve completely. In fact, my prolonged engagement with the phenomena has been described by Lincoln and Guba (1986) as a technique to increase credibility. However, I practiced transparent, reflective analysis so that my interpretation took more, while clearly not complete, account of my positionality. To further increase trustworthiness of my findings and combat any potential bias, I engaged in negative case analysis, where I actively searched for negative instances related to the emerging findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and, as described earlier, peer debriefing, a method in which I exposed myself to a disinterested professional peer to “keep [me] honest” (p. 19) and obtain emotional catharsis, as well as to engage in collaborative
critical analysis. Furthermore, I employed the critique of an expert on the theoretical interpretation, identification of themes, and comprehensiveness of the emerging conceptualization as another procedure to enhance trustworthiness. Finally, to increase the transferability of the data, my results section includes thick descriptive data so that outside judgments may be made by those who wish to apply the results elsewhere.

**Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative research, reflexivity is a consistent acknowledgement through the research process of the researcher’s background, attitude, and relationship related to the investigation or phenomenon at hand (Malterud, 2001). In the case of this dissertation, it is important to address both my personal and professional relationship with smartness.

I attended private, Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. I did not participate in any designated gifted programs but was consistently ranked in the top 5-10% of whichever comparison group I belonged. In addition to being smart, I held other salient role identities including competitive cheerleader and a variety of leadership positions. Therefore, if you had asked me in high school or college who I was known as by my peers, I probably would have said leader over smart, although being smart was certainly important. In my family dynamic, I was and, to this day, am, considered the *smart one*. As a first-generation college student and the oldest of 19 first-cousins in a hard-working, blue-collar family of (loud) Italians from New Jersey, I have been recognized for my intelligence for as long as I can remember. I certainly felt the expectation to succeed, but never explicit pressure. I consider myself lucky in that regard; they have always supported and encouraged me in what I perceive as a healthy way. It is hard for me to know how much of my self-esteem or self-worth is contingent on my
academic achievement, because, like many high-achieving students, I have been able to persist through academic challenges and succeed to my own liking. That being said, through my doctoral education I have been made aware that I do hold strong achievement goals alongside mastery goals.

In 2006, I was hired as an academic advisor and later promoted to Associate Director in the Honors Program through which this research was conducted. In the personal statement that I wrote for entry to this doctoral program I wrote:

*I have seen students present themselves as sharp, motivated, and talented. By all measures, they are examples of success. However, despite long resumes of accomplishments, high GPAs, and even an intrinsic love of learning, there are also deeply rooted maladaptive ideologies that manifest in anxiety, perfectionism, pressure to succeed, and unrealistic expectations.*

I applied to this doctoral program knowing that through the process I would learn how to better serve the students I cared so much about. And yes, through this doctoral program, I have acquired a significant amount of knowledge and have undergone great epistemological and philosophical growth. My own identity has been explored and affected. However, the burning question that has followed me for six years has remained the same: how do students make meaning of being smart? I sought answers in every course and related article. But I grew frustrated with the lack of information available. I first came to the understanding that that the question might be best answered using an identity framework after taking a course in Identity. But it all really clicked when Ford got sick.

In April 2015, a 19-year-old college freshman that I taught and advised, Ford, was diagnosed with stage 4 T-cell Lymphoma - a rare blood cancer. Due to the nature of the disease and the aggressiveness of its spread, the plan for treatment included targeted treatment...
chemotherapy to multiple areas, including his brain. Upon hearing the news, Ford’s first question to the oncologist was not about hair loss, nausea, or other unpleasant side effects - but whether he would lose IQ points.

In an email sent to me in October of that year, after 6 months of intense treatment, Ford revealed, “I care more about my status as a smart person than probably anything else. That's why the whole brain-chemo thing was so terrifying to me. Being considered smart is a huge part of my identity. If this was ‘Inside Out’ I'd have an amazing Abu Dhabi -styled Smart Island.”

It was an ah-ha moment. Through my doctoral work, I had been discouraged by the existing research regarding gifted/honors/high-achieving/high-ability students for its inability to provide answers to questions I was asking in my everyday work. I came to realize that the answer wouldn’t be found in the isolation of factors, but in the holistic understanding of who students are; their essence - their identities. Ford made that clear to me. Like so many students that have been considered smart throughout their young lives, he had internalized his “smartness” as integral to his sense of self. So much so, that the threat of losing it was more troubling to him than the treatment needed to combat a life-threatening illness. For many students, being smart is inextricable to their identity. It is who they are.

The experiences I have had with Honors students over the past 13 years has certainly influenced my sub-conscious agenda. But recognizing this forced me to seek disconfirming evidence wherever possible. I understand that my experience working

---

2 *Inside Out* refers to the 2015 animated Pixar movie. In the mind of the main character, there are “Islands of Personality” which represent the individual’s identity (i.e. Family Island, Hockey Island, Goofball Island).
closely with the students I studied may influence my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I recognize my potential bias and the risk of projecting my experience on the interviewees. My personal relationships with students may have guided my question asking and eventual interpretation of what they say. In addition, I may have inadvertently asked leading questions in the semi-structured interview that reflected my assumptions and potential bias. However, it is also my personal, pre-established relationship with some of the students that allowed me to break through the apprehension stage (Spradley, 1979) fairly quickly and dive deep into the interview, gathering information-rich, honest data.

The Honors Program I am proud to be employed by strives to create an environment that is non-stressed and collaborative, where the staff builds relationships with students and disarms their worries with humor, warm rapport, and a light-hearted approach to learning and college. Evidence to this may lie in the fact that 4 of the 24 participating students asked to take part in the research. I have built a reputation where students feel comfortable talking about this with me. It also shows the importance of this work. Students wanted an opportunity to have their voices heard.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following chapter will present the results of the in-depth analysis of the interviews of six out of the 24 participants. These participants were selected for presentation because their interviews demonstrate different ways by which the meaning of being smart manifests in the role identities of first-year Honors students. In each case, I begin by providing a short background on the student, then describe the overall findings from the analysis regarding the participant’s understanding of smartness and how it manifests in his or her identity. I follow to elaborate on the analysis of the student’s main role identities in the interview, which always included the past role identity as a high school student and the current role identity as a college student, and how these reflect the content and structure of the role identity components: ontological beliefs, purpose and goals, self-perceptions and self-definitions, and perceived action possibilities. I end each case with a summary of the main insights from the analysis of the participant’s interview that, later, I integrate into general themes.

Following the presentation of the six cases, I describe the themes that have emerged through the analysis and that address the study’s research questions: how the students make meaning of being smart, how they construe prior experiences as having shaped this meaning, how being smart figures into their identity system, and how these identities frame their decision making and well-being. The themes are considered in light of the understanding that the findings are contextualized, as all the students shared the context of an honors program in a particular, large, urban, research intensive, Mid-Atlantic University.
Case Analyses

Sasha: The Teammate

Sasha is a 19-year-old female, African American, theatre major from out-of-state (< 2 hours). She is a member of a gymnastics team, acting groups, the black student union, and the Honors Program. Sasha applied to Mid-Atlantic University as a test-optional student, choosing not to submit her standardized test-scores for admissions consideration. Her test-optional evaluation combined with her 3.7 HSGPA resulted in receiving the second highest academic merit scholarship, covering three-quarters of her out-of-state tuition costs. Sasha was not in her district’s gifted program but started taking Honors classes in 7th grade at the encouragement of her mother. Her high school was both a local neighborhood public school which offered trade programs and a magnet performing-arts school which also offered an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. At Mid-Atlantic, Sasha is on the University’s Division 1 team gymnastics team. Sasha’s overall profile can be described as a teammate, always wanting to work with others in the pursuit of continual improvement. Her cumulative GPA after her first-year was a 3.77.

Overall findings. Sasha’s interview focused on her past role identity as a high school student and current role identity as a college student but included also mentioning of secondary role identities as a gymnast and an actor. Sasha’s ontological beliefs about smartness were that smart means working hard and constantly improving. She considered being smart to be controllable and viewed becoming smart to be driven by internal motivation and goal engagement. For example, throughout the interview, Sasha reiterated multiple times that she believes smart is domain based, “...like a specialized thing. It's
like you're smart in that area,” and is determined by hard work and willingness to continually improve and reach self-set goals: “I equate being smart to um working hard and ... you're working towards a goal that you set for yourself in being able to like achieve that goal.” Sasha also self-defined as smart in high school. She enjoyed challenging herself and working with others collaboratively, pushing and learning from her peers. When faced with obstacles, she coped by engaging in various action possibilities until she achieved her goal. She reported on aligning her ontological beliefs about smartness with intentional and strategic perceived action possibilities in various domains and role identities, including her roles as an athlete, an actor, and a student. The analysis did suggest, though, some social tension for her in her role identity as a peer. Notably, whereas Sasha seemed to have an aligned role identity around smartness, with adaptive ontological beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, and action possibilities, she also perceived that her personal ontological beliefs about being smart do not align with the prevalent cultural definition of smartness. She noted that others recognize smart as demonstrating high-achievement with little effort and that there is a domain hierarchy related to smartness in which science is the most difficult and therefore serves as a sign for being the smartest, whereas the arts—her own major—is low on the hierarchy. This led to tension and frustration when others did not assume that she was smart because she was majoring in theater: “So like people don't really consider like arts people super smart. And I think, like, I consider myself smart, but I choose to like use like the way my brain works in more creative ways, so instead of like math because I just really don't like that.” Sasha’s identity system that manifested in the interview comprised two main role
identities of past high school student and current college student. In addition, Sasha also
referred to two secondary role identities as an athlete and an actor.

Past Role Identity as High School Student

Sasha’s self-definition as a high school student was framed by membership in two
social groups—the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) students and the Arts
students: “I would put myself in that arts farts category.” Her ontological beliefs about
smartness and consequent self-perception of being smart in high school were framed by
contextual meanings and social positioning through placement in high-achieving and
challenging classes (in her case, IB classes) and her high level of participation in those
classes. When comparing herself to her high school peers, Sasha noted that her smartness
was not salient in the IB classes because everyone was considered smart. However,
outside of the IB environment, she noted that she was classified as smart because she
liked being in the IB program, liked participating, and did the work. This type of
evidence to her self-perceived smartness reflects her ontological beliefs that what made
her smart, and different from many of her peers, was her agency, intentional and
controllable actions, and intrinsic motivation.

The configuration of role identity components that include ontological beliefs
about smartness as based in intentional effort and motivation, self-perceptions as smart,
and action possibilities of assuming agency over one’s learning and investing effort
manifested also in an incident Sasha described in which she took a non-IB class. Sasha
reported feeling frustrated by the lack of challenge in the class; but rather than attributing
the lack of challenge to the teacher, she focused on her classmates, which she described
as “lazy.” Relative to the perceived lack of agency of her peers, Sasha’s own action
possibilities of taking ownership over her learning and investing effort provided her epistemological evidence for her smartness: “Their laziness made me feel smart.”

Sasha’s beliefs, goals, and action possibilities related to hard work and agency in high school might be a reflection of an integration of her high school student role identity with her other salient role-identities as a gymnast and an actor. Training for both gymnastics and theater typically involves the development of persistent self-regulation, determination, constant improvement, and working together as a team while practicing collaborative critique.

Not surprisingly, this configuration of role identity components was not without social cost in high school. Sasha indicated that there were social ramifications to her behavior in her peer group as she was perceived to be a teachers-pet: “they kind of labeled me as maybe something like uh (pause) teacher's pet even though the teacher liked me because I did the work and I did it well. So, I guess that's what labeled me as smart doing the work and doing it well.”

The social challenge also manifested when interacting with peers. Sasha relayed an example of how she engaged in constructive criticism of her peers, which was not received well: “if I accidentally correct your grammar or something when you're talking to me it's just, I don't know, It just crossed my mind I'm not trying to be an ass.” This discrepancy between Sasha’s student role identity and her perceived peers’ role identities also manifested around the action possibility of help seeking. For Sasha, help seeking is an available action possibility when one is struggling, as it is aligned with the ontological beliefs about smart as being motivated and investing effort. Not so among her peers: “...a couple of my friends like were struggling...and I'm like, you know, I never say like,
oh it’s because... because you're not smart. I'm like, well if you're struggling in a class like and you need help, just ask for help and that could possibly make it better. So, I feel like, um, and I tried to help. It wasn’t like taken the same way because I was like supposed to- school came easy for me or something like that.”

College Student Role Identity

Sasha’s college student role identity was originally formed closely on the basis of her past high school student role identity. Sasha reported feeling initial negative emotions during her transition to the new academic environment of college: “I felt like I was like being thrown into this like abyss where I was like ‘oh I'm on my own.’” She reported attempting to apply the same action possibilities, primarily learning techniques, that worked for her in high school, but receiving low grades early in the semester. While experiencing this tension, however, Sasha was able to rely on her ontological beliefs that her ability is based on agency, motivation, and controllable actions, and she reported on self-regulating and exploring alternative learning techniques that seem to match better her new ontological beliefs about college as leaving one on one’s own: making quizlets, rewriting notes, meeting with professors, focusing on her time management, paying close attention to details, and keeping a planner and a schedule.

Similar to the integration of her role identities as gymnast, actor, and student during her high school years, Sasha also reports integration of her athlete, actor, and honors student during college. Once Sasha figured out new action possibilities that are aligned with her goals and with the new ontological beliefs about the nature of the college environment, Sasha describes across her role identities the ontological beliefs about the college environment as involving affordances and support, which are aligned
with her persisting ontological beliefs about success or failure as based in agency, motivation, and controllability over experiences: “As an athlete and an honors student like there's so many advisers so many resources that I have available to me that if I failed it will be because I wanted to.” Importantly, the peer tension that Sasha experienced in high school has been alleviated in the college context, allowing her to integrate her peer role identity with the other salient role identities.

In her academic studies, Sasha’s now explicitly aligns in her college student role identity the ontological beliefs about motivation and agency with the goals of learning new things and developing interests—a mastery goal orientation: “I just want to know more things, like I want to know knowledge on like the things I'm interested in.” Similar to her experiences in high school, but even more explicitly, this role identity frames her adaptive coping with situations of failure, not knowing, and temporary experiences of not being smart. In such situations, Sasha does not feel negative emotions; instead, she perceives them as opportunities to learn something new, work harder, and practice. For example, Sasha described her experiences and action possibilities when she hears fellow students use words she does not know. Instead of feeling intimidated, she pursues the goals of learning and employs aligned actions of investing effort, finding out knowledge, and practicing, which in turn, restores her self-perceptions of being smart: I'll look them up and then try them out on just regular people and see how it works [laughter] and then I feel smart again.”

A final characteristic of Sasha’s identity as a first-year Honors college student that emerged in the analysis concerns her identity exploration. Sasha remained committed to her role identities as good student, athlete, and actor. Like her commitment to being a
good student, her decisions to become a student athlete and to pursue a major in theater did not involve identity exploration. Her reasons for pursuing becoming a student athlete is that she has always been a gymnast, and her reasons for majoring in theater are that she has always been a performer: “I've just always been performing, and I really like the art of like um the performance art. When asked if she had ever considered other majors, she said no: “Mhm. Mm (pause) Not Really.”

But the analysis also suggested that Sasha is beginning to explore other role identities in the college context. For example, she has begun to explore her racial identity, and has decided to pursue an African American Studies major. She also noted her newfound goal to become an activist, exploring how she can incorporate activism into her art: “I kind of want to uh tie that into like um activism and uh (pause) using art as a way to empower people. So yeah. How, um I haven't quite figured it all out.”

Summary of Sasha’s Analysis. Overall, Sasha’s interview analysis suggests that her ontological beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, and action possibilities were aligned and integrated across the role identities of gymnast, actor, and student. These role identities shared a belief about smartness (or ability) as based in motivation, effort, and pursuit of self-set goals; goals of improvement; self-perceptions as smart, hardworking, and creative; and action possibilities of effort investment, collaboration, constructive critique, and help-seeking and self-regulation when faced with obstacles. Overall, Sasha’s identity system was characterized by agency and active control over experiences and attributes. The two areas of tension in Sasha’s role identity was social cost she paid in peer relations when her student role identity was not aligned with those of her peers, and when her ontological beliefs about smartness and self-perception as smart were not aligned with
those of others who might not perceive her as such, mostly because her choice of arts as a major. There is also the possibility that Sasha’s attempt to compensate for the threat to self-worth that may have been instigated by this tension manifested in expression of superiority over people who are not smart; for example, referring to her non-IB classmates in high school as “lazy”, and referring to “just regular people,” which insinuates that she, herself, is not “regular.”

Valentina: The Competitor

Valentina is a 19-year-old female, white, biology major from a local suburb (<1 hour). She earned a 1440 on her SATs and held a 3.83 high school GPA. She was awarded the second highest academic merit scholarship, covering three-quarters of her instate tuition. Valentina tested into her district gifted program in first grade, but her mother wouldn’t allow her to participate until the 4th grade. Valentina attended her local public high school, which she considered very rigorous.

Valentina described herself as highly competitive. Through early schooling and high school, she was proud of her ability to outperform her peers through academic performance. While in college, Valentina is struggling with her grades, which has directly affected her self-esteem. As a result, her mental health and well-being is waning. She earned a 2.03 cumulative GPA in her first-year.

**Overall findings.** Valentina’s interview focused on her past role identity as a high school student, current role identity as a college student, and role as a daughter. Valentina holds the ontological belief her smartness and intellectual ability allows her to stand-out against her peers. Her self-esteem is contingent on her ability to achieve over others and perform as smart. She described herself as highly competitive with strong performance
and extrinsic goals. She believes intelligence is malleable, and that if she works hard enough, she will continue to achieve to her desired level.

Valentina’s measurement of success is dictated by how she views her performance compared to her peers. This tendency to compare began at a very young age and has been rewarded in her various educational contexts, the high school environment most of all. Valentina entered college expecting previous behaviors would continue to result in success and high-achievement. However, the effortful actions that originally aligned with this belief started resulting in unwanted outcomes, namely failing grades. This caused significant tension in her ontological beliefs and her self-definition as a smart student. Since her perceived action possibilities were limited and exhausted, she felt helpless. She started seeing a therapist as a result. Despite saying she believes smart is malleable, her attributions for failure center on uncontrollable and fixed forces. As her analysis will demonstrate, Valentina has struggled emotionally and psychologically in her first year of college, resulting in major tension and subsequent changes to her overall role-identity as a student.

*Daughter Role Identity*

Valentina’s salient role identity as a daughter provides additional insight into how various aspects of her student role identity components developed from a young age. Valentina perceives much of her personality is inherited by her father, which has influenced her self-definitions. For example, she directly attributes her ability to think critically, her competiveness, and her careful attention to word choice to her dad: “My dad is very very particular about his words. He- he corrects me all the time when I say - if I incorrectly say something and then I'll say, ‘oh I'm just kidding’. He's like ‘No you
weren’t kidding you were mistaken.” Valentina provides several examples of additional ways her father dictated and corrected her behavior. Valentina’s mother influenced her future perceived action possibilities and goals by inspiring her to attend Mid-Atlantic University and to become a doctor. (Her mother attended nursing school at Mid-Atlantic.) Valentina said she was raised in a way that was not pressurized. However, the short examples above lend evidence that this may not have been the case. Although she may not have perceived it as being explicit, the expectations and values instilled have led Valentina to put pressure on herself, which we will see further manifest in her high school and college role identity systems.

Past Role Identity as High school Student

When asked to talk in general about her high school experience, Valentina immediately mentioned positive emotions: “I love my high school. I miss it dearly.” She perceived her high school as having a very strong focus on academics with an emphasis on performance. Since she was known in high school as a high-achieving, smart student, Valentina felt pressure to take advanced courses, earn high grades and standardized test scores, “It was expected you took six or more AP... and you did well on all the standardized tests... I- for me - it definitely was a very very um, not necessarily negative, but high-pressure-to-perform-well-academically kind of environment.” When asked what being smart meant in her high school, she stated getting A’s, taking Advanced Placement classes, and preforming well despite the pressure, “Like who was smart and who wasn’t was just who could perform under pressure.”

Valentina relayed multiple stories that demonstrated she felt a great sense of pride when she was outperforming or outpacing her peers. She reiterated her self-perception as
competitive and that she enjoyed that other people considered her smart. When asked
where this might come from, she attributes it to an uncontrollable factor, her personality:
“It’s all very like internal - I need to be better, I need to have that top grade in the class.
So, I think a lot of it honestly might just be my inherent personality.”

In her AP Calculus class, Valentina told the story of how her teacher would hand
back exams facedown except for the students that earned a 100. The students with 100s
would get their tests handed back face-up and the teacher would lead the class in a round
of applause for those students. Therefore, Valentina worked tremendously hard for each
exam to get the grade and be clapped for, even though she had the belief that math was
not her best subject, “Math isn’t my strongest suit.” Her perceived action possibility was
to intensely study for the exams in order to reach her goal of earning a 100. The
significant epistemological evidence of a 100 resulted in praise from her teacher and
peers, which reinforced her self-definition of smart, her ontological belief of what it
meant to be smart, and the perceived action possibilities she needed to employ to be
smart, “I would study my butt off for those tests so that I would be able to be one of those
people.”

Valentina’s actions and emotions while preparing for the SATs further illustrates
the state of her role-identity components in high school and demonstrates integration of
her high school student role-identity and her daughter role-identity. Her explicit goal was
to earn a high score on the SATs. The motivation was college acceptance, an academic
merit scholarship, and to meet the expectations of adult figures: her parents, teachers, and
college counselors, “There was so much talk of needing to perform well...because I'm
considered a smart kid.” Valentina’s actions included working with a private tutor,
studying daily over the summer, and taking repeated practice tests. She perceived these actions as being more than what others had done and was proud of herself for it “I took it, compared to some people, to like insane measures to prepare for that test.” Valentina earned a 1440 and was relieved, “So, I was satisfied with that thank goodness.” Since her parents paid for the private tutor, Valentina expressed that if she didn’t get a score she was happy with, she would have felt guilty for not meeting expectations and for wasting her parents money, “If I didn’t perform well, I probably would have just been crushed. I would have felt so guilty.” Similar to her AP Calculus class, she felt significant pressure to perform to meet the expectation of others, and the only action possibility available to succeed was to engage in what she perceived as very demanding and rigorous preparation: “I was expected to perform well so I needed to put myself through such rigorous training for it because I just there was no um failing. I just it was not an option. So, I needed to do that.”

Throughout Valentina’s high school experience, her self-definition as competitive and smart, her ontological belief of smart equaling demonstrated performance, and her goals of high-achievement and outperforming her peers through engagement in limited perceived action possibilities were continually reinforced, keeping her high school student role identity system in harmony. Despite feeling immense pressure, she was able to perform in a way she and important adult figures were satisfied with – therefore, she remembers and speaks very fondly of her high school experience.

**College Student Role-Identity**

Valentina’s college student role identity was originally formed closely on the basis of her past high school student role identity—a transfer across contexts that did not
work in the college environment and involved experiences of intense tensions. Valentina
explained that she came to college expecting to succeed, but was surprised by the level of
challenge: “*I didn't think it was going to be and I'm so stubborn... I did not think it was
going to be nearly as hard as it has been.*” At the onset of our conversation about her
college experience, she immediately mentioned she had been struggling with her mental
health.

Her negative experience in her first-semester Honors Calculus class seemed to be
the pivotal point in which significant tension arose in Valentina’s student role identity
system. For the first time in her education, Valentina was putting in what she considered
significant effortful actions without receiving positive reinforcement via high grades.
Because of this lack of epistemological evidence which has long supported her
ontological beliefs, her self-definition of smart was threatened and precipitated a decline
in her self-esteem. The following quote illustrates the tension in her ontological belief,
her self-perception, the fact she perceived limited action possibilities, and the overall
negative emotional toll:

> That was the first time in all of my schooling that there wasn't a direct correlation
between the amount of time I was putting into a class and the grade that I was
getting. So that was like incredibly frustrating and it really was a big shot to my
ego as a student. I felt like almost like helpless in that situation because I didn’t, I
didn't know what else to do because I felt like I was doing everything I had
learned over the years that made me like a quote good student. And uh I still
wasn't seeing the results that I wanted.

Valentina said she ended up a B in the class (future analysis of her transcripts showed she
earned a C.) When asked directly how she felt about that grade, Valentina stated intense
negative emotions and reactions: “*Awful. I cried so much because of that class I had
panic attacks when I like went in the room to take exams like I... yeah that class was*
torture for me.” The action possibilities that made her successful in earlier schooling were no longer working, but instead of discussing new strategies, she seemed to surrender to the idea it was out of her control. “To um realize and really be able to cope with the fact that I, it's just not my thing and that I'm not going to do as well as anybody else in that room because you can't be the best of everything.”

Because she was no longer earning high grades, Valentina discussed a shift in her conceptualization of intelligence away from smart as demonstrated achievement. However, she falls back on her tendency to compare herself to others, “But I do think that I have a certain degree of intelligence and um in different areas that might be higher than the average student here like things like things like Creative Intelligence and like interpersonal intelligence and things like that like maybe not necessarily my chem grade or something but uh different kinds of intelligence as I think”. Her use of hesitant language that shows she is feeling epistemological uncertainty that smart is no longer strictly performance based.

The experience in her Calculus class did motivate Valentina to start seeing a therapist and gain perspective, “And uh I get to it honestly, it's like talking to a therapist and like getting the perspective on how I was viewing this course and inflating it to be like my entire education.” Certainly, seeking therapy is a positive, adaptive, help-seeking strategy to address psychological issues. However, the problems faced in her Calculus class reverberated to all other courses both in her fall and spring semesters. In her first semester, she earned a 2.47 GPA. At the time of our conversation, there was only a few days left in the semester before finals. Valentina did not mention she was failing Chemistry. At the conclusion of her spring semester, she failed 5 credits worth of classes,
earning a 2.0 GPA. Valentina finished her first year with a 2.26 cumulative GPA, lost her academic scholarship, and was dismissed from the Honors Program.

Summary of Valentina’s Analysis. Although Valentina mentioned therapy has helped her cope, she still believes the attributions of her failure were outside of her control. An additional example was when she discussed how some student’s low GPA’s result from “luck of the draw with professors and sections.” In addition, instead of acknowledging her agency in the situation, she shifted her meaning of smart to totally different domains - interpersonal skills and creativity - and did not indicate growth in resilience or acknowledgement of her action possibilities regarding academics. In addition, she did not seem open to much identity exploration. When asked about a possible major switch, she discussed potentially changing from Biology to Neuroscience, but felt confident about staying on a pre-med path because not accomplishing her goal would make her a hypocrite, “And I think I’d be a hypocrite if I were to just have the ideas and the agendas that I do and then not be one of those people just because I was like scared or I thought that I wasn't good enough.”

The challenges faced in her first-year of college triggered Valentina to expand her definition of smart, but not in an adaptive way. She has adjusted her self-definition, but is still comparing herself, still seeking the domain and areas she can be better than other people. She came to college with the ontological belief that grades were the indicator for success, and if you put in the work, you can get the grade. This belief was reinforced in high school. However, in college, significant tension arose when she was putting in the same amount of work, but not getting the grades. This caused disruption in the identity system, which significantly altered self-perceptions and emotions.
Joseph: The Relator

Joseph is a 19-year-old male, white, secondary education major from a local suburb (<1 hour). Joseph earned a 1440 on his SATs, a 3.94 high school GPA, and was awarded the second highest academic merit scholarship, covering three-quarters of his in-state tuition. Joseph’s parents told him he was smart at a young age and teachers reinforced this message throughout his schooling. He did not take part in his district’s gifted program. It is worth noting that Joseph attended the same local public high school as Valentina. Like Valentina, Joseph perceived the high school environment as intense and competitive, but dissimilarly, he did not enjoy it. In college, Joseph felt liberated from the intensity of his high school and is pursuing a major that he is passionate about.

Central to understanding Joseph is to recognize the strength to which he values relationships. In each of his role identities, his goal is to stay connected to others, not to disappoint people, and not allow relationships to change or be negatively affected. His profile can be described as a relator, always thinking about how he is or is not linked to those around him socially and intellectually. He finished his first year of college with a 4.0 cumulative GPA.

*Overall findings.* Joseph’s interview focused on his past role identity as a high school student, current role identity as a college student, and role as a son. Secondary role identity as a peer/friend is woven throughout. Joseph primarily understands his smartness by how it connects or disconnects him to others. Therefore, he struggles with wanting to follow his own goals but also meet the expectations and goals of those around him so not to be isolated or ostracized. Joseph discussed multiple examples of these struggles while in high school. With these now seemingly resolved, he hasn’t experienced too many
challenges to his college-student role identity but articulated that his son role-identity has experienced some tension.

Past Role Identity as High school Student

Joseph’s self-definition as a high school student was framed by membership in the high-achieving social circle. For example, in his interview, he mentioned Valentina as one of his friends and fellow smart students. Joseph perceived his high school academic environment as being very competitive. He also held the ontological belief that your peer associations determine how others perceive you: “who you hang out with defines who you are on an intellectual level.” Therefore, being part of the intellectual social circle, but not feeling as though he was the smartest, framed his self-concept, goals, and perceived action possibilities. His goal was to maintain his place in the high-ability group he valued. So, Joseph engaged in perceived action possibilities that would allow him to do so. Based on his understanding of his high school culture, “My high school had a huge emphasis on you know taking honors and AP courses”, and his ontological belief that group associations determined how you were perceived as an individual, “you could be smart if you were around people who liked to take the academic courses” Joseph felt he had no other option than to take AP courses “So, obviously, I would go for those.”

At times Joseph’s goal of maintaining his position in the academic groups conflicted with another of Joseph’s goals: being true to himself and his inherent values. When these two goals were in conflict, he felt tension. For example, Joseph chose to take AP Music Theory instead of AP BC Calculus despite receiving criticism. “I got um you know I got a lot of negative feedback from people who at the same time were taking um second level AP calculus.” When asked why he received disapproval, he discussed the
perceived domain hierarchy related to smartness, “You know. Because there is um a
different weight placed on those two things.” In this example, Joseph engaged in actions
that aligned with his goal of perusing interests over his competing goal of maintaining
smartness. He indicated that AP music theory has been his favorite class to date and felt
affirmed in his choice.

Despite this positive example, Joseph told another story about his experience in
AP Chemistry which resulted in performance goals, maladaptive actions and emotions,
and significant tension in his identity system. After doing well in Chemistry his junior
year, Joseph decided to take AP Chemistry his senior year. At the same time, he was
trying to decide what his action possibilities were for choosing a major in college. Based
on messages received by his high school context related to the domain hierarchy of
smartness, and wanting to maintain his placement within the smart social circles after
graduation, Joseph chose to apply to colleges as an undecided science major, “Ok, I
might as well continue doing it because um you know, smart people are doing
chemistry.” However, he had trouble in the class and started earning low grades, which
affected his self-concept of being good at Chemistry. In an attempt to alleviate the
tension, Joseph engaged in maladaptive actions and felt intense negative emotions: “I
kind of broke down and pretty much killed myself over you know that course…” Joseph
also engaged in unhealthy peer comparison which exacerbated the issue, specifically with
one boy named Robert. Joseph viewed Robert as being unkind and elitist. “He just put
other people down because he knew he was, you know, smarter.” In order to resolve the
tension of feeling outperformed, Joseph leaned on a different role identity, his peer/friend
role identity, and brought to the foreground his self-definition as a good friend to make
himself feel better through comparison. Despite this attempt, his self-definition in his friend role-identity did not integrate into his role-identity as a student. The following quote illustrates his attempt to foreground his friend role identity to relieve his animosity towards Robert, which was affecting his student role identity:

I knew that in every area of my life except for like chemistry and being smart, I was superior to this person, right? I had friends who I cared about and who cared for me…And I was generally happy. Robert was not happy. But what he was very smart and he had that one thing over me and that that really destroyed me because I felt like in so many ways I was setting myself up to be a great person. But he, he surpassed me in chemistry and in a way, I guess I equate, I took that as being that he was just in every way, better than me...

Additional stories showed how closely Joseph’s integrated his peer/friend role identity with his student role identity, which is understandable given his ontological belief that group membership equates perceived intelligence. In these examples, any change to one role identity resulted in change or tension in the other. For instance, late in his senior year, his friend group, consisting of class high-achievers, started to dismantle. Joseph attributed this to the fact some students were accepted to Ivy League schools and Joseph, along with others (including Valentina), chose Mid-Atlantic University, a school with significantly less perceived prestige. The most meaningful relationship was with his friend Stacy, who seemed to instigate the separation: “she and I were really close, and she just started getting kind of distant ever since she got accepted... And that hurt a little bit because there is a stigma and there still is about Mid-Atlantic.” Again, conflicting goals forced Joseph to choose between social-perceptions and his external group membership and his internal needs and values. Joseph described how difficult the decision was to attend Mid-Atlantic, because of the negative reputation held by peers and authority figures, “So um me the kid who supposedly smart going to Mid-Atlantic, um is
you know not a great thing.” However, he named family financial constraints as the most important contributing factor in his final decision, “the number one reason why I went to Mid-Atlantic… is the cost of attendance.”

College Student Role Identity

As a potential result of the negative experiences at the end of his senior year of high school, Joseph did not form his college student role identity closely to that of his high school student role identity. This is best exemplified by the fact Joseph decided to switch his major from undeclared science to Secondary Education with a concentration in English at his college summer orientation. When asked why he decided to change, Joseph discusses the realization his choice of science as a major was influenced by external pressures and wasn’t what he valued. “I realized that I was being kind of silly. Um I was doing science because um it just it just felt like kind of what was expected of and my parents liked it.” He goes on to discuss how much he enjoyed his high school English and music teachers in high school, that he was not only good at English, but he really liked it, and most importantly, “I think education is really really emphasis on really important. So, I switched, and it's been good.”

As he did in high school, Joseph reassessed his self-definition of smart when he entered college based on peer comparison. He was accepted to the Honors Program, which served as an entry card to the academic group he desired, but in order to determine where he fell on the smart-hierarchy, he used the epistemological evidence of merit scholarship instead of grades. Even though Joseph was awarded a generous merit scholarship, he met other students that were awarded larger ones, which made him evaluate his position in the smart crowd. “I'm like, what? [laughter] What is that? What
does that make me?” The meaning he made of this was similar to his self-concept in high school: he was smart, but he wasn’t the smartest. “And I questioned um that label a lot and again when I came here. Uh There are so many um smart people here.”

Joseph’s previous high school ontological belief transferred across contexts and have been stable thus far in his college student role identity: smartness is a way to connect with other smart people. The label of Honors student gave him confidence to connect with peers he considers intellectual. Specifically, in the context of Mid-Atlantic University, he has appreciated that fellow Honors students are approachable and relatable. “The greatest benefit of being in Honors has just been the people that I've met.”

In terms of his behavior, a change that Joseph discusses is that he has become more active in the college classroom than he was in high school. He mentioned not liking to participate in high school, perhaps because of the ultra-competitive environment, but now feels more comfortable. “Now I like to talk in discussions because I want to be a part of an intellectual discussion. Um And it's fun. It's good.”

As mentioned, significant identity exploration and decision making happened just prior to entering college and, at the time of the interview, Joseph still felt confident in his decision to major in secondary education with an English concentration, even if he has received negative feedback because of it.

Son Role Identity

Joseph was first labeled smart by his parents at a young age. At first, he was proud of this label “It's a good thing to be labeled as smart... Maybe that makes me better than people. Maybe that means I'm special.” But over time has struggled with the role of
“smart” within his family structure. Unlike in high school where he did not feel the smartest, in his family dynamic, he is the smartest, a role that Joseph sees as a barrier. He mentions his relationship with his parents has been strained since he’s been at college and that has affected his emotions as well: “Sometimes I’ll be talking with them and they will get frustrated at not being able to keep up with what I’m saying. And I don’t mean to do that in conversation but that—that kind of makes me feel bad.” In addition to not wanting a barrier in their relationship, Joseph also wants to meet the expectations.

A significant amount of negative feedback related to his new choice of major was given by Joseph’s parents. They were overtly pleased with Joseph’s initial decision to major in science but demonstrated disappointment when he decided to change his major to education. Over Thanksgiving during his first-year of college, Joseph recalled being in the room when his parents were discussing the switch with other adults: “and you know they say, ‘oh you know he was doing science but now he’s doing education.’” Joseph felt negative emotions regarding this experience, “I felt kind of betrayed.” The following quote demonstrates how Joseph felt about having to negotiate between his goals and the goals of his parents. “But it still bothers me sometimes that they won’t be completely happy with that because I want them to be. I want to meet their expectations and I feel that I have in many ways but maybe not in the studies that I’m pursuing.”

However, as mentioned, he feels resolute in his decision, “Not that I’m going to change it for them because I that education is what I want to do and what I will continue doing.”

Summary of Joseph’s Analysis. These experiences, AP Chemistry combined with strains on friendship dynamics, were major catalysts which set the standard for Joseph’s eventual college-student role identity. Not long after these negative experiences, Joseph
decided that majoring in science was not his goal, re-evaluated his self-definition of smart, and came to accept his loss of friendships.

When asked if it is important to Joseph that other people think he is smart, he mentions not his own value in the label, but in the value that society puts on it. “Um, it's important to me. Yes but because of the weight that being smart has in society. I think that asserting yourself as smart um carries a weight because there is also a privilege that comes with being smart.” However, he also discusses how the smart label can create an obstacle when you are trying to connect or relate to other people:

Labels can put a barrier on how you interact with them. When you're smart. The expectation is that you will communicate with smart people and you will always carry that through your life. Um If you're communicating with somebody who is perceived as not being smart then um there is there's an instant disconnect. Um because you have to defy the expectation in order to connect with them. And um in a society where being smart is considered so important you don't you don't want to defy that expectation.

Divya: The Challenger

Divya is a 20-year-old female, international student from India, majoring in computer science and mathematics. She earned a 1480 SAT score and a 3.55 high school GPA. She was awarded the second highest academic merit scholarship, covering three-quarters of her academic tuition. Divya attended a private, Catholic high school in India where her mother worked. Divya’s pre-college stories focused on how she contended with cultural and contextual constraints related to being a female in her home country. In the United States, her status as an international student was very salient as she formed her college student role identity.

Her profile is that of a challenger; one who rebels against labels and limitations, including that of “smart”. However, this character also seems to serve as a defense
mechanism that covers anxiety and insecurity. She ended her first-year with a 3.57 cumulative GPA, but her second semester GPA was a 3.1.

**Overall findings.** Divya’s interview focused on her past role identity as a high school student, current role identity as a college student, and role identity as a daughter. Secondary role identities as female and Indian are also mentioned. Divya’s personal ontological beliefs about smartness are related to hard work, effort, and leadership. She holds a generally positive self-concept when it comes to academics and enjoys learning. However, she has strong negative emotions tied to being labeled and perceived as smart by others.

In India, she felt constrained by what she perceived as the culturally permitted action possibilities for a female. Additionally, as will be demonstrated in her high school role identity analysis, components of Divya’s identity system were negatively affected by pressure and expectation felt in her high school context. Therefore, she set the goal of only attending college in the United States. At Mid-Altantic, she feels less pressure and is exploring options and future possibilities. Her perception of cultural associations of smart in the United States is more in line with her self-perception and she has seemingly resolved some prior held issues with the label. However, at the end of her second semester she is feeling some tension due to worry about her anticipated second semester GPA. Performance is important and salient because of the actual high-stakes associated: her academic merit scholarship and position in Honors.

**Daughter Role Identity**

Divya is an only child, raised by her mother and father in India. Divya perceived other Indian parents as putting significant amount of pressure their children in regard to
academic achievement “that's just like a way that the society works back home” but reiterated several times that she did not feel pressure from her parents “my parents were always super chill about everything.” Divya appreciated their laid-back approach and focus on her health and well-being over earning perfect grades. “My parents focus more on my, like, mental health because, like, they wanted me to have a fun childhood as well.”

The behavior of her parents may stem from Divya’s behavior in 6th grade. At that time, Divya sought to convince her parents that a decline in her grades during the transition to middle school was not due to lack of effort, but because she was not smart. Prior to this experience, Divya felt pressure from her mother to achieve academically. Instead of adhering to her mother’s expectations, she sought to have the expectations lowered. Her perceived success in doing so alleviated tension and allowed her to feel less burden to perform. “I had to convince her, and I did and so then she laid off.” She was proud of this accomplishment.

Divya perceived significant negative feedback received by her parents in India because she is their only child and is female. She told stories of older men encouraging her father to have more children in hopes having a son, and that sending Divya to college was a poor use of money. “My parents spending so much money to send me here is a big no for the society because I'm a girl and I'm not going to give anything back to my dad.” Divya’s response to these examples showed her conviction and determination to challenge societal beliefs: “Yea watch me.”

Because Divya held such strong ontological beliefs about the constraints and lack of afforded opportunities in her culture, she perceived very few action possibilities for
what her life could be if she stayed in India. “In India, it's like, if you're a girl you become a doctor.” Therefore, she set the goal of attending college in the United States, despite her parent’s skepticism and protest. To appease them, she took a gap year, but then only applied to U.S. schools against their wishes, reasserting her disposition as determined: “It was kind of stupid to not have a backup plan but I don't know I was just like really determined that I would work out and get in and I'm here.”

Past Role Identity as High School Student

As a high school student in India, Divya perceived the culturally accepted definition of smart meant you earned high grades. There was no alternative to this definition: “Strangely like, in India, you're smart only if you have good grades. Like you can you can have a really nice personality, or you can like really good at sport, but you will only be smart if you have A’s.” As demonstrated in her daughter role identity, Divya connected worrying about grades to diminished mental health. Therefore, she actively combated the smart label by not incorporating it willingly into her self-definition as a high school student. A meaningful experience that exemplifies this is when Divya earned a 100 on a national standardized Math exam.

In 10th grade, Divya was one of two students to earn perfect scores on a national Math exam. This was also the first time any student had done so in the school’s history. Divya looks back on this event with much negativity. First, she exhibited feelings of inferiority to the other student who earned a 100, Sid. Divya perceived Sid as being academically gifted “that dude's a genius.” Even though she earned the same score, she did not feel equal compared to how she perceived his level of intelligence: “Yes, so people started comparing me to him and I don't think I'm even like close to as smart as
intelligent as he is.” The evidence of her lack of ability compared to Sid came in the form of his demonstrated effort, “His hobby is studying physics, math and chemistry.” Divya was not proud of earning a 100. Instead, she felt labeled and exposed, “...was a time when I was labeled smart, like stamped, sealed, packed then thrown away like ‘she's smart.’”

Divya felt a tremendous burden to repeat the performance in 12th grade when they took the exam again. One teacher even gave her the nickname “my 100.” As the exam approached, she became anxious. The following quote illustrates Divya’s perception of the expectation to perform and how it resulted in intrusive thoughts:

The entire school and not not my parents so much but like every single teacher in the school considered me like they just took it for granted that I would score 100 in 12th grade as well... Everyone expected me to score 100 like that would constantly be in my head that I cannot lose a single point, I cannot lose a single point.

Divya earned a 92 instead of a 100 and considered it a failure. As a result, she felt depressed and a decline in self-worth, “That was a huge blow to me. Really big. And I was actually, like depressed about it and after... I don't cry like I rarely cry ... I cried... when I did bad- bad on my math exam. I'm kind of ashamed of it because I let that thing overpower me so much.”

As a result of the pressure surrounding her Math exam, unwanted smart label, and the resulting negative emotional toll, Divya began to disobey in school and engaged in small acts of defiance. She gave several examples, each retold with great energy and pride. For example, she jumped out of a first-floor window during a Chemistry lecture, cut class, and was scolded for hanging out with not-smart students. When discussing these stories, she would qualify with statements about how the adult figure associated did
not like her. For example: “There was one professor who did not like me, I mean like he made he made it sure that I knew that that he didn't like me. So, I mean it was mutual.”

Again, Divya seemed proud when talking about the teachers and administrators she perceived as having a negative impression of her. Seemingly, Divya found a way to combat the pressure placed on her by the educational context, culture, and teachers: rebel.

**College Student Role Identity**

Divya’s college student role identity was formed in opposition of her past high school student role identity. Although her transition to a new country was challenging (i.e. new grading structure, new accents, new washing machines, and getting used to people driving on the opposite side of the road), her initial emotions connected to college are positive “I love Mid-Atlantic, the experience here.” As a college student, Divya’s ontological belief of the cultural definition of smart has expanded to include multiple intelligences, like her friend that can play 22 musical instruments or another that is very good at baseball. She feels comfortable with this perceived cultural definition, which now aligns with her own ontological belief that she is smart because she works hard and is determined. Divya is seemingly more open to incorporating smart into her self-perception based on the change in culture and context, and that her perception of the cultural definition aligned with her own ontological definition.

Divya indicates enjoyment of the freedom that being in the United States has afforded her. Correspondingly, she indicated an openness to identity exploration and signs of developed self-authorship illustrated by her goal of discovering her passions apart from her previous perceived cultural and contextual restraints (“I learned to not listen to anyone else”). Divya has chosen to major in math and computer science. The
fact that this fits into the stereotype of being Indian irritates her, but she also feels
confident in her choice after having explored other possibilities, “It’s just that really
annoys me because I've become a part of the stereotype as well because I'm brown and
I'm doing computer science but it's not because my parents forced me to do it but because
I genuinely like it.” She was still uncertain what career path to follow but displayed
confidence in what she did not want to do: education, computer engineering, or law.

Divya did not feel the same cultural pressures related to being female in the
United States as she did in Indai, even though she noticed very few females in her
computer science classes. Instead of attributing this to American stereotypes or cultural
restraints, she assumed girls are just not interested in the subject: “In my computer
science class I'm- we just have like four girls. But that's just how it is um. I'm guessing
girls are not interested in that major as much but that's like, no one says that you cannot
do good at it, like no one ever says that.”

Summary of Divya’s Analysis. Although Divya is attempting to endorse mastery
goals and seems to genuinely enjoy what she is studying, the importance of earning a
high GPA to keep her academic merit scholarship and place in the Honors Program
looms “it’s still there in the back of my head.” At the time of the interview, Divya was
worried about her GPA. She discussed that this semester has been harder than the first.
She is taking a heavier course load, four Honors classes, and is working for the first time.
In addition to the actual possible repercussions, her slip in GPA is causing tension in her
self-concept that she has recently rectified. Although her ontological belief is that smart is
working hard, her epistemological evidence is still grades. During this time of tension,
she is adhering to performance based academic notions of smart, which her previous
experiences has shown us that she does not respond positively to. However, in this regard, there are actual risks associated to maintaining a specific GPA.

James: The Strategist

James is a 19-year-old male, white, computer science major from a historically disadvantaged southern state, far out-of-town (>10 hours). He earned a 1540 SAT score, a 3.91 high school GPA, and was awarded the highest possible academic merit scholarship covering full out-of-state tuition. James earned entry into his district’s gifted program in elementary school and participated in a middle school program for high-achieving students. James attended a public high school that was both a magnet school for the counties highest-achieving students and a traditional, local high school. James did not see his high school as academically competitive, despite the magnet program. He was the first student to attend college out-of-state from his high school in three years.

James’ overall profile can be described as a strategist. He cares about being smart primarily because of the opportunities and special privileges it provides him. James ended his first year with a 3.28 cumulative GPA after earning a 3.05 GPA in his spring semester.

Overall findings. James’s interview focused on his past role identity as a high school student, current role identity as a college student, and role identity as a son. Overall, James is highly motivated by extrinsic goals. As a student, he held strong ontological beliefs that being perceived by others as smart results in privilege. His primary action possibility is to perform his smartness by way of demonstrated achievement in order to receive privileges and accomplish extrinsic goals. James believed being smart meant you are successful in reaching your self-set goals, no matter what. He
attributed his own successes to his ambition and hard work. However, in college, James experienced tension in his identity system after exerting effort and not achieving in the way in which he was accustomed. Instead of adjusting his self-definition or ontological beliefs, he developed disregard for the value of smartness as an internal self-perception but maintained the importance of being *perceived* as smart in society, further motivating him to perform and capitalize on the socially desired label, “*To me, it's a matter of privilege. It's the privilege of being labeled as smart and what that gets you and what that entails. So, I don't think there's any intrinsic value. It's all in the perception of what someone believes that to be.*”

The control parameter of context seems to play a significant role in all of James’ emergent role identities. First, the influence of growing up in a low-income southern state with a complex history of limited resources and opportunities, and now the fact that he is living in a large, urban metropolitan.

*Son Role-Identity*

James discussed growing up in a household with a lot of structure where his father was strict about grades and accomplishments, “*The environment I grew up in was very structured and very tough like my father was very strict on us and he always wanted us to do the best we possibly could and he wouldn't accept less than that.*” James attributed his internal disposition of “*ambitious*” to the his household environment and family dynamics, which he also believed is the primary reason others perceive him as smart, “*And I think that's the biggest part of why I'm labeled as being smart is my ambition to do more than what everyone else does.*”
When asked about his role in the family dynamic, he mentions holding the role of the smart one; the one whom others tease will support them in the future “My whole family is like oh he's the smart kid. He's going he's going to take care of us when he's older. He's going to be the one paying for us.” Despite indicating he grew up in a strict household which valued ambition, James mentioned not feeling pressure from his parents. He attributed this to the fact his brother did not perform well in school, which drew negative attention away from James. Therefore, James learned that achieving extrinsic goals perceived as important by others was a way to avoid scrutiny and pressure.

*Past Role Identity as High school Student*

James’ high school student role identity was framed through his ability to demonstrate achievement which resulted in receiving special benefits. All of James’ explicit goals were performance orientated and extrinsic. James mentioned repeatedly that he worked very hard towards his goal of outperform his peers in order to receive external gains: access to special programs, entry to prestigious colleges, and other perks and privileges that came along with being smart. James gives evidence that part of the reason these goals emerged was due to his context. Growing up in a rural southern state, James saw a lot of disadvantage around him. He briefly mentioned this when he discussing the stigma surrounding students from his area that work hard and try to achieve in school:

there's stigmas around people, like, ‘oh you try hard.’ You you do well in school like, you don't understand what your priorities are like. There's things more to life than school. I think that was a bigger deal back home. Like because there are a lot of people that like have much bigger issues than you know getting a good ACT score.
James’ initial perceived action possibility on which college to attend was determined by his context: the wealthy students attended the more expensive flagship state school, the other college bound students attended one of the other two more affordable state institutions. “And that's where nearly every single kid's like it's between those three and there's basically no variance...it's it's usually a pretty big deal if anyone does anything different.” Not wanting to be constrained by these options, James set the goal to attend college out of state, to set himself apart from those around him, “Because I wanted to be variance [laughter] I did not want to have the same experience as everyone else. I was the first kid in three years to go outside the state.” In order to achieve his primary goal, he needed a scholarship, “So I had an objective which was to go to school for free.”

James’ only perceived action possibility to earn a scholarship was to get a high enough score on the ACT. Therefore, he started taking practice ACT tests in his first year of high school. “I first started really taking it in freshman year. And so, I, basically, for four years was taking it like each year to try and get the best score I could and worked really hard on that.” When he accomplished the goal of earning a 34, his minimum acceptable score, he felt a great sense of pride. This pride was enhanced by the fact it also meant he outperformed his peers on a task with social significance: “the ACT score was like well this is great because you know I-I did better at this than everyone. So (laugh) and and it's something that matters so that was um a concrete way to measure.” However, James did feel frustration when other people attributed his accomplishment to his innate intelligence and not his ambition and hard work. “People don't see that kind of
stuff, so they see oh like oh wow you just went in there and took it and got a perfect score.”

His aligned student role identity was threatened in high school when he didn't get accepted to any of the Ivy League schools he applied to. According to James, it was the first time he had not been able to meet an academic achievement he worked for: “that's probably the only time really that I've like truly been like not met academic standards...based on intelligence.” He attributes his failure to uncontrollable causes, namely, the system of higher-education admissions, “Like I understood like it was those are crap shoots at best. Like there they accept no one.... And I had no control over that stuff.” He did not discuss his emotions related to the event. As a result of not being accepted to Ivy League schools, James chose the college that offered him the best merit scholarship and overall financial package, Mid-Atlantic University.

James left high school with his student role identity in a stable, attractor state. He accomplished his goal of earning a high ACT score and attending college out of state. Although he did experience a perceived failure by not getting into an Ivy League school, he felt justified in attending Mid-Atlantic University because of his full academic merit scholarship.

**College Student Role Identity**

James’ college student role identity was originally formed by integrating components from his past high school student role identity. However, the transfer did not work in the college environment. James struggled while transitioning to a new academic, social, and regional environment. He discusses the saliency of being so far from home, feeling different than his peers, and that it took a while to make friends “not only do I not
know a single person within 400 miles of here...I'm different from everyone up here. You know? The second I say something to someone ‘oh where are you from?’ so that kind of deal.”

James came to college holding the same ontological belief that being smart is the ability to perform and accomplish your goals: “The way I've put it before is being smart is the ability to achieve something you want.” Through his transition, his epistemological evidence of achievement has expanded to include his ability to get research and internship positions,

Um I think there is more of an emphasis on what you achieve now in college like because you know kids are going out getting internships getting you know research positions like that is more considered, like besides your grades and doing well on a test, that's considered like ‘oh that kid's doing well he's smart’.

The inclusion of research and internships and the slight brush-off of grades may be due to the fact James has not been performing well in some of his classes.

When asked what his GPA was first semester, James said a 3.7. In a later analysis of his transcript, it was discovered he earned 3.59 GPA. He mentioned feeling negative emotions around earning a few B’s but did not mention that he also withdrew from a major class. He attributes his performance not to his lack of effort, but again, to the system: “Like just the whole college rating system in the first place is even more convoluted and wrong.” James attributes his success to internal, controllable causes (hard work and effort), but his failures to external, uncontrollable causes (a convoluted system). Additionally, James is struggling with maintaining motivation in classes because his goals are extrinsic and performance based. For example, in discussing strife with his English class, “I don't have any inherent value you know in writing an essay on Shakespeare, but my teacher does and I value what grade she gives. So yeah.”
His second semester GPA was a 3.05, due to earning a D in a major class. His cumulative first-year GPA was a 3.27.

In terms of group membership in college, enjoys being in Honors because he has always been in the smart groups “Like you know we’re the Honors kids, you know as I was a magnet or AP classes in middle school or high school.” But when asked if being in Honors matters, he only mentions the tangible perks and privileges: priority registration and smaller class sizes. But after that, he says it holds no further meaning.

James has engaged in very little exploration in terms of perceived action possibilities for future careers. His goal when choosing a major was extrinsic; to choose an option that would best set him up for future success, namely getting a well-paying job. He chose Computer Science. He indicated he has interest in the field, but the main deciding factor was job prospects. The only other major he has considered is business. In fact, he says he may actually prefer business, but, again, selected computer science because the jobs are better right now.

**Summary of James’s Analysis.** James holds the ontological belief that you are not born with intelligence, “it's not because I was born and knew how to do Pythagorean theory,” but is developed through hard work and effort. However, his epistemological evidence is still demonstrated achievement, earning high grades, getting special privileges and outperforming peers. He says he doesn’t care or self-define as smart, but that others perceive him that way because of his effort and ability to perform. “I was going to take care of whatever I was going to do.” Up until this point, he doesn't seem to have been adequately challenged academically. So now in college, he is exerting effort and not achieving the way he is used to. He is attempting to relieve the tension by
indicating he doesn’t actually care about grades, just the value society puts in them, again reiterating the system that he has learned to use to his advantage: *And even if it was flawed in and of itself I still took advantage of the opportunities I had. And even if a school’s determination of who's smart and who gets in the honors college if that's flawed, I still saw that as an opportunity and I wanted to be a part of that.*

In all of his discussions of wanting to work hard and perform, he never mentions that he wants to learn. He is entirely focused on his ability to demonstrate achievement. He seems quite antagonistic in regard to the smart label, but could that be indicative of instability in his role identity right now. Either he is just now becoming aware of systemic privilege for smart kids, or, he no longer feels smart and is trying to alleviate dissonance that he feels. By removing the label of smart from his self-definition, he keeps the control in his hands.

Keval: The Reformed

Keval is an 18-year-old male, Asian, Political Science and Global Studies major from out-of-state (< 2 hours). Keval earned a 1510 SAT, a 3.85 high school GPA, and was awarded the highest possible academic merit scholarship which covered full, out-of-state tuition. Keval’s earliest memory of being smart was when his parents enrolled him at a local Kumon center when he was in kindergarten. He did not indicate whether he participated in his districts gifted program. In college, Keval’s profile can be described as a reformed “grade-addict.” Nevertheless, being smart is still important to his identity. He ended his first-year of college with a 4.0 GPA.

*Overall findings.* Keval’s interview focused on his past role identity as a high school student and current role identity as a college student. He also discussed the
secondary role of peer/friend. Keval’s pre-college ontological beliefs about smartness were that that smartness meant demonstrated performance and outpacing peers. “I was kind of ahead of the curve a lot of times.” The epistemological evidence that supported the development of this belief was that when he demonstrated those behaviors, others took notice. “I think we had the um time math tables and so I'd always you know get them done really quickly hand them in and people would be like, huh, like He's already done.” Because of this, he felt positive emotions related to being someone others considered smart, which reinforced the incorporation of smart into his self-definition: “People think I'm smart, that's cool.”

Upon coming to college, the meaning of smart has shifted away from comparison to content mastery and becoming an expert in your field. He still held “smart” as integral to his self-definition but feels less pressure to maintain the label for social status as he did in high school. He has experienced a major change in goal orientation, shifting from performance-avoidance goals in high school to mastery goals in college. When faced with academic difficulties, he feels negative emotions initially but then engages in healthy coping strategies and seeks appropriate action possibilities to overcome. Grades still matter to Keval, but now symbolize validation for hard work, effort, and the ability to master material. Keval’s identity system that manifested in the interview comprised of two main role identities of past high school student and current college student.

*Past Role Identity as High School Student*

Keval’s self-definition as a high school student was framed by his self-definition of being a smart student, the inclusion he felt being a member of the high-achieving social circle, and his perception of his high school as being academically competitive
with a focus on demonstrated achievement. Based on these perceptions of his high school context and culture, he developed the ontological belief that smart in his high school meant earning high grades, and thus his self-concept as smart was threatened in his freshman year, “my confidence did waver a little bit there because like ah, these kids are really smart.” Kevel’s primary goal became to earn high grades in order to maintain his reputation and self-perception as a smart student. “And I feel uh (pause) the pressure only got higher because of like … I have to stay smart you know? I can't not be smart anymore.” His peer group reinforced this goal through prevalent grade comparison. Keval told how he and his friends had a text chain where they would compare grades and standardized test scores. “We actually had a chat. It sounds so nerdy. We had a chat it was like, it was like... ‘oh Zach got a uh 100’ on a test like ‘oh crap’ ...like ‘I got to step up’ or you know? In hindsight, Keval felt mixed emotions about this practice. He stated that it created healthy competition but that it also made him feel uncomfortable.

Even though Keval’s goal was to earn high grades, it wasn’t with the intention of establishing superiority over his peers. Instead, Keval endorsed more performance-avoidance goals to preserve his self-definition of smart and so that he could maintain his reputation and his friend group. The following quote demonstrates how Keval felt pressure to perform so that he would not be ostracized from his friends: “But um I guess it kind of made it more intimidating to be smart and more difficult to be smart because you don't want to be the one that fell behind, or you know uh got a bad grade on a test... you can be - you'd be looked down upon or you'd be like in, you know, you didn't get a good grade on the test like what's up with that?”

Based on Keval’s understanding of his high school environment, he had to
maintain the reputation of smart by performing in a way that would satisfy the expectations of both peers and teachers. He believed that teachers knew who the smart students were, and if he didn’t perform he would be a disappointment: “the teacher would always expect, I guess, the smarter kids to do good on tests or if you didn't do good it kind of felt like you were letting them down almost which was which is ridiculous but um that's what it felt like.”

Keval’s ontological belief that smart meant earning high grades, perpetuated by goal of maintaining his status to keep friends and meet the expectations of adult figures, led Keval to hold perceived action possibilities that enabled him to protect the label. When his self-perception of smart was threatened, it caused tension in his role identity system. Since Keval saw few perceived action possibilities other than earning high grades to prove his smartness and keep his status, he engaged in actions that were maladaptive to maintain harmony in his role-identity system. An example was a time he plagiarized. As demonstrated in the passage below, the emotions connected to this action were not positive, but he also engaged in self-protection by comparing his action to more egregious choices made by his peers, perhaps to alleviate some cognitive dissonance he still felt at the time of the interview.

I think morality does begin to slip a little bit when you want to when you want to maintain that smartness. I did borrow a handy bit of information … from one source…but it still didn't feel right… but I know people who you know they cheated of course um uh they uh got answers to the tests before. And these weren't like bad kids or anything of course not, but I guess in order to maintain or to uh to keep your smartness you would cheat on tests or do things that you wouldn't normally do.

*College Student Role Identity*

Keval did not indicate much transfer of his past high school student role identity
when he transitioned to Mid-Atlantic University and formed his college student role identity. Instead, he indicated almost immediate change, most notably in his ontological beliefs of what it means to be smart. In his pre-college educational experiences, Keval understood his smartness through comparison to peers, an understanding perpetuated by his peer group and his high school educational environment. However, in college he indicated that his ontological belief of smart shifted from high-achievement to mastering content in a specific domain. “Back then I was like if I can do my math tables better than anybody else, I'm- I must be really smart. But now it's it's really different, especially in college...It's, I don't think there's one definition, I think it's just if you're knowledgeable in one area in a certain area, you're you're smart.”

Keval enjoys college because he feels relieved from his prior need to compare, which was driven by his perception of his high school environment. The goal in context has shifted from needing to perform to wanting to learn. This change in perceived educational goal structure motivated him to put forth effort not only for grades, which he still perceived as important, but also to learn as much as possible. The following quote demonstrates his clear shift to a mastery goal-orientation: “I want to learn all I can in my major and just it's much better that way I think... it pushes me to do more ...um before I just, ok I just have to do this to get the grade. That's it I'm done. But now...I guess learning is, I mean, that's what I'm going for. That's mainly what I want to do. Not the grade.”

Keval’s perceived action possibilities have also changed since high school. He feels as though he must work harder in college, mostly due to an increase in the amount of and difficulty level of content “there's much more information, it's much harder.” He
attributed his increased motivation to exert more effort to the fact he feels humbled in college, which has relieved the stress he used to feel in high school to perform, and forced him to evaluate his previous self-regulated learning strategies: *I think it's it's really helped me um to know that uh to be taken down a peg... you need to work much harder now to do the same thing that you were doing in high school which is really good. I mean it's helped me um you know rethink my learning strategies and just rethink alright how how do I have to adapt to this new environment, how do I learn?* When asked to discuss a time when he did earn a low grade, Keval discussed feeling strong negative emotions initially. But then, he illustrated positive, adaptive self-regulation strategies to deal with the situation, not allowing it to spiral or effect his self-esteem. He took ownership of his failure and engaged in adaptive coping strategies. *“The first thing I do is I guess I try and figure out what went wrong, I talk to the teacher. See what happened. I'd go outside go for a run, hit the gym, do whatever take my mind off of it come back a day later... I'd go back. I'd read over the stuff. I've learned now in college to sort of destress and just don't worry about it for a day come back to it. See what's up. And then no stress.”*

A final characteristic of Keval’s identity as a first-year student concerns identity development. Keval demonstrated meaningful exploration in his decision to choose a major. His original action possibilities included math and science, but though self-reflection, Keval realized that he would not be emotionally fulfilled in those fields. He felt confident that his choice of political science and global studies align with potential future goals. Although he has not committed to a future career path, he has thought of a variety of options that are each meaningful to him in some way. For example, he is considering possibilities such as joining the Peace Corps, becoming a political analyst,
working for a think tank, and a big-picture future goal would be to work for the National Security Agency.

**Summary of Keval’s Analysis.** Keval was competitive in high school perhaps because he felt like it was the only action possibility afforded to him in the environment. After years of performing his smartness by way of demonstrated achievement, he is finding it hard to completely remove the goal of earning high grades. “I’m like I’m a grade addict. It’s it’s a little high like oh I did really good.” However, based on his perception of his new educational context, Keval has noticed that he has not been as concerned about grades and is feeling less stressed out because of it.

But one might wonder if part of the reason Keval’s college student role-identity system was in a stable state was not only because of the adaptive changes that were occurring, but because he was still earning high grades which provided him the epistemological evidence he needed to feel as though the changes in his behavior were validated. Everything remained aligned because his self-definition was never truly threatened and because he was not experiencing the tension it allowed himself to do some identity exploration.

Overtime, he has learned to understand his position as smart due to outpacing and outperforming peers. He sought to maintain this status in high school primarily because he did not want to be separated from his peers. He now demonstrates that he cares about learning for content as opposed to learning for achievement and to maintain appearances of smart. Nevertheless, being smart is still a self-described important aspect to his identity. Even after experiencing adaptive changes related to his ontological beliefs and goals, Keval still places great importance on his smart label and feels that he would go
through an identity crisis if the label was taken away. “intelligence is a big part of that so I kind of feel (pause) I’d kind of feel a little lost because I l- I I don't have a part of me essentially.”

Discussion of Themes

The overarching conclusion from the analysis of the interviews of the entire sample is that the meaning of smartness varies among honors undergraduate students, with meaningful implications to their role identities, sense of self-worth, coping with challenges, and well-being. This conclusion corresponds with theory and research in the achievement motivation literature, particularly in the domain of achievement goal theory (e.g., Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984), that emphasized the motivational implications of adopting different definitions of ability and success—learning and improving through investment of effort and self-regulating strategies versus high relative performance that is achieved with little effort.

The in-depth analysis of the six diverse cases presented in this dissertation provided further insight into the way first-year Honors students make meaning of being smart, the experiences that shape this meaning, how it figures into the students’ identity system, and how these identities connect to decisions, well-being, and potential future identity development in college. This analysis suggested two main superordinate themes and various subordinate themes within them about these processes. I generated the themes inductively on the basis of the combined deductive-inductive analysis of the interview transcripts that employed the DSMRI as the deductive frame.

One of the two superordinate themes correspond to two control parameters of the DSMRI that emphasize the roles of culture and social context in framing the emergence
of students’ role identity. The other superordinate theme reflects smartness as capturing central dimensions within the emergence of students’ role identities—personal values and costs. Of course, following the DSMRI, these themes maybe conceptually distinct, but are interdependent and partially overlapping in students’ meaning-making and role-identities. Table 2 presents an organizing structure of the themes and subordinate themes.

Below, I discuss each of the themes in more detail.

Table 2
Organizing Structure of Superordinate Themes and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Students’ Personal Meaning of Smartness is Framed by Cultural and Contextual Meaning and Processes | • Cultural Meanings Of Smartness Frames Students’ Personal Meaning  
• The Role of Educational Contexts In Meaning-Making and Role Identity  
• Pre-College Educational Contexts Affects Formation Of Academic Role-Identity Components  
• Transition To College Triggers Change In Various Identity Components  
• Students Hold Competing Ontological Beliefs |
| There Are Personal Values And Costs To Being Smart                                | • Smart Has Cultural Capital  
• Smart Is Both A Social Benefit And Liability  
• Being Smart Comes With Pressure  
• Engaging in Maladaptive Behaviors to Protect the Smart Label |

Students’ Personal Meaning of Smartness is Framed by Cultural and Contextual Meaning and Processes

The first superordinate theme consists of five subordinate themes. These themes demonstrate how a student’s understanding of the cultural meaning of smart in relation to their personal meaning within their individual contexts is inextricable. The themes speak
directly to the first two research questions: How do first-year Honors students make meaning of being smart and what experiences, both pre-college and during their first-year of college, have shaped this meaning?

Within cultural and contextual boundaries, all the students constructed their own personal meaning of smartness. Interestingly, each student believed their definition of smart to be unique. Often when discussing what it means to be smart, they would differentiate their own personal definition from their understanding of what is the culturally accepted or public definition of smart. Participants engaged in the fundamental attribution error where they felt as though their understanding of smart was complex, nuanced, and different from the norm. As Sasha’s answer to the question ‘What does it mean to be smart?’ illustrates: “Uh, to me or like to other kids?” Characteristics most often attributed to their personal definition of smartness were hard work and sustained effort. The following discussion of superordinate themes related to culture and context will show how this personal meaning has been framed by larger meanings and processes.

Cultural Meanings Of Smartness Frames Students’ Personal Meaning

Students have had to make individual meaning of being smart within the sociocultural definition that is prevalent within their individual contexts. This theme will first isolate the role of culture as much as possible, understanding that culture and context are intertwined. The widely held belief was that the cultural meaning of smart was related to performative and demonstrated achievement (i.e. high grades and test scores) and an ability to achieve with little effort (both perceived and actual).

Students indicated that smart as a concept is hard to define when deliberately thinking about it but found it easy to identify who is (and is not) smart within the culture
at large. This lends evidence to the idea that the cultural assumptions have been normalized and engrained so deeply that “smart” has become a know-it-when-you-see-it phenomenon prominently characterized by demonstrated achievement and seemingly effortless ability. Students often used the cultural understanding of smart to recognize their own smartness, for better or worse. As shown in the following exchange with Divya, it was difficult for her to articulate why she didn’t feel as smart as Sid:

Divya: I’m not even like close to as smart as intelligent as he is.
Interviewer: Why?
Divya: In academics he's just gifted.
Interviewer: What does that mean?
Divya: Um So he's um his hobby is studying physics math and chemistry. And um (pause) it's just that there's something different about him.

The cultural assumption that students felt the most obvious frustration with was being smart means achieving with little effort. They felt this irritation when others perceived their own accomplishments to be gained with no effort (i.e., James and Divya). Despite being frustrated, and explicating alternative meanings of smartness that involved effort, students still perceived others who succeeded without apparent effort as smart, perhaps even smarter. This manifested, for example, in Joseph’s description of Robert: “[He] is a super intelligent person... he got um a perfect score on the AP calc exam... he could so effortlessly get hundreds.” This frustration with how the cultural belief affects self-understanding yet is used to understand others is also the first example of how students hold competing beliefs about various aspects of being smart.

Educational Contexts Play An Important Role In Meaning-Making

The cultural belief that smartness is demonstrated by high achievement was the most prevalent conceptualization of smart, most notably in pre-college educational contexts. For example, each student believed that being smart in high school was strictly
defined by your performance. Valentina explained that in her high school, being smart meant: “To get fives on AP tests... to have over a 4.0...and yeah that was pretty much it.” This finding spanned the different types of high schools represented in the interviews (city, rural; competitive, non-competitive; U.S. vs India). This was not isolated only to high school environments but seemed more prevalent. College understandings of smart were broadened to include more domain specificity and accomplishments outside of grades. This leads to two additional sub-themes that emerge when attempting to understand the mechanisms and factors related to the role of context in meaning making: social comparison is heavily relied upon for determining smartness and there is an accepted cultural view perpetuated by educational contexts that there is a domain hierarchy of smartness.

Social Comparison Is A Main Mechanism For Determining Smartness. Socio-cultural environmental cues teach students what language to use and what evidence to see regarding smartness. Students are compared to one another through educational practices and are separated by ability as measured by grades and test scores. Most students established their self-definition in high school based on comparison to others because the environment allowed for easy evaluation of this comparison. Sometimes this behavior is driven by the peer groups, other times, it is perpetuated by teachers and administrators. Thus, students themselves learn to compare themselves against others and see ability as measured by grades and test scores. Participants in this study each used other people to measure their smartness against, sometimes despite alternative personal ontological beliefs about the meaning of smart. In high school, Keval and his friends had a group chat to post and compare grades, and Valentina’s teachers made it known who was and was
not earning the highest test scores. Divya and Joseph both told meaningful stories of one particular peer in high school in which they compared their self-concept of smart against; a student that they explicitly said they did not feel as smart as. The pressure to compare on achievement tended to be somewhat alleviated in college, but only because it became harder to do so due to contextual characteristics, namely, students are typically isolated in closer, physical confines pre-college. However, the replacement for grade comparison to determine the smartness of others in college became levels of scholarship (i.e. Joseph), successes by way of internships or research opportunities (i.e. James), and choice of major (i.e. Sasha and Valentina).

_There Is A Hierarchy Of Smart By Domain._ The idea that choice of major becomes an indicator for smartness in college contexts is related to a perceived hierarchy of smart in relation to domain prevalent in the culture, with STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) reserved for the smartest. This idea was prevalent across all educational contexts. For example, when asked why he received negative feedback from teachers and peers when he chose to take an AP Music Theory course over an AP Calculus course, James replied “um there's a different weight placed on those things.” He went on to describe how disappointed his parents were when he chose majoring in education over chemistry. Sasha discussed negative social feedback for choosing theater over math or science. Keval indicating toying with the idea of majoring in a STEM field because it was an area he excelled, but had enough self-awareness not to be swayed by the cultural value: “why would I choose something that I might I might do better in, something math related, but it just it would just kill me every day.” Even within the domain there is possible ranking. For example, Valentina, who holds the strongest
contingency of self-worth on academics and a fixation on competition and comparison, would not even consider nursing as a viable alternative major option to her chosen pre-med track because of its lower cultural status.

*Pre-College Educational Contexts Affects Formation Of Academic Role-Identity Components*

Although parents introduced the label, socialization within contexts shape and reinforce it. For example, development of early ontological beliefs related to who was or was not considered smart was based on the separation of students and placement into different academic groups reserved for the smart students. Students discussed instances of this happening as early as kindergarten. James and Valentina were part of their districts gifted programs, Sasha and James participated in specialized magnet programs, and all students were on the AP and Honors tracked classes in high school. James discussed how segregated his academic environment was in middle school: *It was very much like segregation like it was. They literally called us the magnet kids and they were called traditional. So, it was...very distinctive between the two. It was like, we did not see traditional kids they did not see us. We did not have classes with them ever.*

Even though the six participants came from five different educational systems (recall that Valentina and Joseph attended the same high school), they each discussed ontological beliefs that were influenced by their high school environment. Even if they did not perceive their high school as particularly rigorous or competitive (ie: James), students still felt environmental pressure to achieve. This contributed to performance-based definitions of smartness. Every participant indicated that being smart in high school meant earning high grades and demonstrating achievement in a performative way,
especially compared to others in their context. The epistemological evidence for this was
that they all achieved, others called them smart, and this came along with value. These
environments perpetuated performance focused goals, to get good grades and keep
achieving.

Teachers exercised their power to praise students for displaying conventional
(grade-based) smartness and punished mistakes or behaviors they felt unsuited for the
smart students. For example, Valentina’s example in her AP Calculus class where the
teachers would have the class clap for perfect exam scores. An additional anecdote she
shared was another teacher that would hand back unsatisfactory papers with fake blood
dripped on them. Divya’s teacher publicly called her “my 100” after the national math
exam, and James’ teacher congratulated him on his ACT score in front of other students,
making his score public:

He just went like ‘oh James I see you did well on the ACT’. And I was like ‘yeah
I did all right.’ And he said [the score] out loud. And like kids were like ‘What?’
And that kind of just started and like it was literally like gossip, like people started
telling people, like I would come up to people I haven't talked to in months and
they are like ‘What did you get on your ACT’ like. It's just like that's comically
like stupid in high school.

This public spotlighting is not always wanted or well-received. Divya’s case illustrates
how it could lead to students rebelling or rejecting the label, in an attempt to relieve the
pressure.

Participants also saw teachers as role models. Joseph found confidence to change his
major to secondary education because of positive interactions with specific high school
teachers. Students also valued their teachers’ opinions of them, and, similar to wanting to
please their parents, also wanted to live up to their teachers’ expectations as well. Keval
didn’t want to disappoint teachers who thought highly of him:
The teachers would always expect I guess the smarter kids to do good on tests or if you didn't do good it kind of felt like you were letting them down almost which was which is ridiculous but um that's what it felt like. It was always the expectation of you have to live up to those expectations.

Transition To College Triggers Change In Various Identity Components

Change in Ontological Belief. Upon transitioning to a new educational context, most students experienced a change in their explicit ontological understanding of smart during the first year of college. Overall, students’ understanding of smart in college is broader than in high school. For instance, although it still exists, there is much less emphasis on comparison and grades. The college context also allows more emphasis on effort, hard work, learning for mastery as opposed to performance, and increased knowledge within a specific domain.

Change in Self-Perception. Students have found that it is much harder to compare oneself to others in college, which for some, allows for a healthier self-definition related to being smart to emerge within the college context. In high school, they seemed to know where they stood academically because of explicit rankings or comparison within the insulated environments. Some feel relief because they don't have to live up to the same pressures or competition. Keval calls the experience humbling: *You're not even the smartest kid in your class you're not even the smartest kid in your row you know it's, it's humbling but it's it's very it's very helpful and I enjoy that actually.* However, Valentina, who was in constant competition and engaged in harmful comparison of others in high school, continued to seek ways to compare herself to others in the college context even though she could no longer use grades. The inability to do so, connected to the fact she was not earning the grades she wanted to, caused tension in her self-perception and significant decrease in her self-esteem:
my ability to distinguish myself from the average student and know that I'm trying harder and doing better than um the average person. The fact that I didn't have that was devastating. And I I really I never quite realized how much worth I put into um having that distinction until I didn't have it anymore and uh at least I felt like I didn't have it anymore and then that kind of just ripped the carpet out from under me and was like you have to learn that there is more than just that. Because if that's all you're if that's all your self-confidence is made of then what happens right now when you don't have that.

*Change In Perceived Action Possibilities and Goals.* Participants discussed how self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies and overall work and effort has changed since entering college. They expected to come in from high school and engage in the same SRL strategies that allowed them to be successful in high school, but expectations did not always meet reality, and, in most cases, students adjusted accordingly. As Joseph illustrates:

Um In high school. I could sometimes I wouldn't even have to study in high school. Um And then when I did have to study, I would just do what my teachers recommended and never a little extra because I always felt confident in my abilities to um perform well. And like I said college has been manageable but um I'm studying for hours and hours a week. Hours that I did not spend studying in high school.

Prior to college, there was little agency and limited options in perceived action possibilities related to students’ academic role-identities. Often, they were following the curricular paths laid out for them (i.e. taking as many AP classes as possible). Valentina discusses taking classes in high school that she did not necessarily want to take: “*But there are a ton of really hard classes that I took not because I wanted to be taking them but because I thought I should uh, so yeah.*” This is also demonstrated in Joseph’s initial understanding of the options available to smart students being limited to STEM majors: “*Smart people do chemistry.*”
Students also indicated much more limited goals in high school. The only goals that were emphasized in high school were earning high grades, high-test scores, and going to college. For these students, not going to college was never a discussion or option. The goal was fixed and stable, and they perceived very few action possibilities to accomplish that goal. In truth, based on current practices in college admissions, they are correct. And this goal and these action possibilities are further narrowed by the messages they receive from teachers and peers.

In college, participants have felt more options available to them and a change in the goal orientation. There is more emphasis on learning for the sake of learning and exploring major possibilities and extracurricular activities.

*Students Hold Competing Ontological Beliefs*

Whereas each student had a somewhat unique personal definition of smartness, the epistemological evidence they used to evaluate smartness was shared and to conform to the cultural and contextual meanings and criteria. In both pre-college and in college educational environments students continued to rely on grades to support their ontological beliefs. Although students would explicitly say grades don’t matter as much in college, despite expectations (“*I thought it would be much more...way more focused on grades*” – Keval) they still use it as evidence to their own success and smartness or towards their understanding of other people’s. Even Sasha, who expressed a broad, purposeful-effort and intrinsic motivation-based definition of smart, and critiqued the subject domain hierarchy of smartness, still considered her brother the smartest person she knows; her evidence was the fact he is a scientist, scored high on standardized tests, and earned the rank of class salutatorian.
Despite the fact most students were acutely aware of how intelligence and smartness is understood differently in high school environments versus college environments, it appeared to be hard for them to shake the predetermined understandings that has been conditioned through early educational experiences and shift the focus and goal away from earning high grades. So much so that the lack of epistemological evidence in terms of grades can cause tension in the identity system, regardless of the ontological belief, goals, or perceived action possibilities. For instance, the three students worried about the state of the GPAs, Valentina, James and Divya, each displayed tension in their identity system at the time of their interview. Thus, the findings suggest that students’ role identities include competing ontological beliefs about smartness, some more deliberate and conscious that focus on agency, effort, self-regulation, and improvement, and others more implicit and emotional that focus on external-comparative grades and normative hierarchy of subjects that are tied to self-worth. These sets of beliefs seem to be aligned with different goals, self-perceptions and self-definitions, meaning-making strategies, and actions. The two sets of beliefs may to be triggered into salience under different conditions – the former when the student has the emotional focus to be deliberative and agentic, and the latter when situational cues, like one’s own performance, a peer’s grades, or a teacher’s comment, or contextual cues, like an evaluative situation, or a new social setting that calls for categorizing people into smart and less smart, trigger them.

There Are Personal Values And Costs To Being Smart

The second superordinate theme consists of four subordinate themes and relates to the final two research questions. These themes establish the pros and cons of being smart,
culturally, socially, and psychologically. In light of and in spite of both the personal value of being smart and the social costs, students intentionally and subconsciously process how being smart and the label of smart figures into their identity system. As the following themes reveal, identities based on various meanings of being smart connect to different decision making and well-being profiles.

Smart Has Cultural Capital

Students’ ontological beliefs include the high awareness that being smart matters to people and, therefore, that there is privilege in being smart. Specific social signifiers of smartness emphasize this understanding, such as ability related cohorts and group membership (i.e. gifted programs, magnet programs, Honors programs) which create psychological and physical distinctions between students from their peers. Often times, being in such groups and having the label provides social capital. Joseph discussed how the smart students received preferential treatment from teachers: *They would uh treat me differently than other students they would...they would always cite the work I did or the responses I gave as um exemplary for the rest of the class.* Valentina discusses the automatic trust and perception of capability the label of Honors student provides when applying for external opportunities:

I think there's just more of an automatic sense of trust almost uh like I know I would assume that if I were to go into an interview and the top of my resume says Mid-Atlantic Honors student and somebody else just doesn't have honor student written that somebody would automatically then just assume I'm going to do a better job.

Because of the cultural value placed on smart, students know there are real gains to being smart. For example, students in particular groups with a smart label have access to special classes (i.e., AP classes, Honors classes), granted academic merit scholarships,
and given priority class registration. The academic merit scholarships were of particular importance in the context of the University. This ontological belief that smart provides privileges and opens doors was prominent in the role identities of several of the participants, with implications for their goals, self-perceptions, and action possibilities. Several students discussed the fact their academic merit scholarship allowed them to attend college.

James, for example, expressed the notion that being considered smart involves encountering and coping with others’ expectation of future success and its consequences. His family often teases “He's going to be the one paying for us.” As a consequence, such expectations influence self-perceptions, goals, and perceived action possibilities. James not only is contending with the pressure of such expectations, he internalized them and expects such success from himself. His action possibilities, such as choosing a major, involved consideration of future job prospects that would correspond with such expectations, always mindful of the next external opportunity to capitalize on his perceived smartness.

This cultural value and special attention from others can lead to positive motivational value as well. Students indicated that being smart is something that sets them apart, gives confidence to achieve goals, and can be a source of pride. In asking Joseph how he felt about the special attention from teachers: “It felt really really good. And when I got that response that was um an encouragement to do more.” However, not all students felt positive about the label, despite benefiting from it. For example, Divya did not like or want the special attention the smart label provided her and started rebelling and acting out as a result.
Smart Is Both A Social Benefit And Liability

Through the separation and classification of students based on ability, educational contexts are not only creating environments where students should be receiving appropriate levels of academic challenge and opportunities, they are also stratified social settings within which students make friends and create social networks. This contextual process leads to the integration of the student role identity and the peer and friend role identities. The students in the current study noted how being part of high academic groups afforded them friendships, feelings of belonging and social connectedness. For example, after struggling socially in high school, where her student and peer role identities were in tension, Sasha has found the small, intellectual community within the university Honors program to have made making friends easy: “...and just discuss within one another and like be able to talk and like make friends is easier.” Being perceived as smart admits a student into certain social circles. Moreover, research demonstrates how friends influence each other’s motivation and self-perceptions and coach each other in coping strategies (Shin & Ryan, 2014). This ontological belief about the social value of smartness permeated all participants’ different manifestations of the smart identity. Once a student has established that group membership, social status, and friend circle, it reinforced similarity in self-perceptions and self-definitions across role identities.

Whereas the themes of cultural, instrumental, and social values of being smart were prominent in students’ role identities, their narratives also reflected themes of risks and costs. In particular, the high social-relational value of being smart and its centrality to self-definitions involved the risk of loss—losing the label of being smart involved also losing membership in the group, with threat to sense of self-worth and to social
relationships. This ontological belief was aligned for participants with the goal of avoiding jeopardizing their label and relationships, which, in turn, was aligned with action possibilities for keeping external indicators of being smart. Losing the label involves stigma and psychological and tangible social consequences.

The theme of smartness as having possible social liability manifested in various ways in participants’ role identities. Some students were concerned with keeping their smartness in order to stay with their friends and peers in the smart groups. This finding again demonstrates the integrated nature of social and student role identities in this group of students. In this case, their Honors student role-identity and their peer/friend role-identity became contingent upon each other, which drove the stakes of maintaining the label and placement within the group higher. If one becomes threatened, so does the other. Divya’s great worry about her GPA, which she needed to maintain her place in the Honors Program, was inseparable from her fear of losing her social group: “Since my like all my friends are in Honors.... And I love the Honors program so. I want to stay in it. So yeah. And also, um it, it is kind of a pressure.”

A complementary process involved the ontological belief that being smart can also create barriers in relationships. Joseph illustrated this in two ways, each in a different role identity that was implicated by him being academically smart: losing a friend when he was perceived as not smart enough, and family tensions when he was perceived as too smart. The experience of having his friend Stacy accepted to an Ivy League school when he wasn’t, elicited in Joseph the belief that she saw him as inferior, and he broke up the ties and lost a good friend. In a parallel manner, Joseph discussed how being perceived as the smart one in the family has created tensions in the family
relationships. Sasha also described social tensions between being smart academically and social relationships with peers. She felt social isolation when they would call her *teacher’s pet* and did not respond as she expected when she attempted to provide academic constructive criticism. Finally, Divya perceived that she couldn’t be open and honest with non-academically focused friends because they couldn’t relate to her stress over grades, and she described losing a romantic relationship over a similar issue:

> I would just like tell him that I did horribly on the exam, and he would say the same thing. And…when we would get the results, I would be at a 96 and he would be at like a 65 or 70 or something like that. And then he just get annoyed by it and he started saying that I'm lying to him because I'm saying that I'm not doing good on my exam…. And just yeah that's so it just went down so we broke up.

**Being Smart Comes With Pressure**

Although participants indicated multiple values to being smart, including some boosts to social relationships and motivation, they also perceived being smart as involving de-motivational and maladaptive consequences. Every participant discussed feelings of pressure, both internal and external, by others’ expectations, and instances of fear of failure and anxiety over losing the label. Students reported perceiving pressure to perform and to continue demonstrating achievement, primarily as ontological beliefs about expectations from parents, teachers, and peers. Joseph described: “It's coming from all the adult figures in in the lives of the students. Parents generate that pressure, teachers encourage students to move in that direction. And then when students feel pressured, then they unintentionally pressure each other.” Eventually, the pressure becomes internalized as self-perceptions and selfDefinitions, making it significantly harder to change or break. As Sasha indicates: “when a lot of people put like pressure on you, you in turn like put pressure on yourself.”
The pressure to perform in college manifests in internal goals (e.g., self-worth) and external goals that may have high-stakes, external consequences. For example, academic merit scholarships have GPA requirements. For a student like Divya, this scholarship made attending college in the United States a possibility. She said: “And now the pressure is just to like keep up my scholarship.” Losing it may mean having to leave the university and go back to India.

Aside from the pressure to perform in order to keep tangible benefits, students also discussed pressure out of the fear of letting other people down. When asked if there were any negative consequences to being considered smart, Sasha described feeling disappointed when she was unable to meet the expectations of others: “It's the worst feeling when you let it like you let yourself down but it's like really even bad like when you feel like you let other people down.”

Students with different smart role identities cope with the negative implications in different ways. Some cope with agency, like Sasha, and others, like Divya, cope with defensive pessimism through avoidance.

Most of the students’ earliest memories of knowing they were smart was based on labels granted by parents. However, for the most part, students in this study did indicate feeling overt pressure directly from their parents to continue performing as smart. This trend could be unique to the specific population of students included in this study, but it was reassuring to see there was little discussion of obvious or sustained pressure displayed by parents. Instead, the role of son or daughter seems to come a long with emotional guilt related to the students self-inflicted burden to live up to parental expectation, even though very few of the students explicitly mentioned feeling direct pressure from their parents. Students don’t want to disappoint their parents. Sasha,
Valentina, Divya, and Joseph discussed feeling guilty if they let their parents down because their parents are paying for them to be here. Sasha says, “I'm letting them down like extremely especially because they're paying for me, they're sacrificing a lot to pay for me to come here. And like I just feel like my only way to repay them is to uh meet their expectations.” James didn’t say it explicitly but based on his understanding of his father’s strictness and the fact it was such a big deal that he went out of state to attend college, it wouldn’t be surprising if he felt similarly.

*Engaging in Maladaptive Behaviors to Protect the Smart Label*

With the ontological experiences of internal and external pressure to succeed, coupled with self-perceived fear of losing both the smart label and its associated benefits, including social connections, the students described resorting to action possibilities that included maladaptive behaviors aimed at the goals of protecting or proving their smartness. Keval described plagiarizing, Valentina told about extreme preparations for the SAT: “I took it compared to some people like insane measures to prepare for that test;” and Joseph described how he made himself sick over AP Chemistry:

I secluded myself. I was in complete isolation. I sometimes I just I'd take five minutes to break down crying and then I just get back right back on my homework. I'd stress out the night before I'd stay up all night um even if I felt I knew the material. I'd take the test and then I'd stay up the next night because I was so stressed out. Even though I couldn't do anything about it.

*Summary*

The superordinate themes that emerged from the cases analyses indicate that students personal meaning of smartness is framed by cultural and contextual meanings and processes. The personal values and costs associated with being smart are understood and internalized differently by different students, and thus, result in different profiles of smartness.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of the study

Many students are told they are smart at a young age. Across different cultures, parents use different indicators to determine the smartness of their children (Serpell, 2000). Yet, once children enter formal schools, systemic indicators of smartness become almost uniform—high achievement relative to one’s age group on teacher-designed tests, and even more strongly, standardized assessments (Sternberg, 2007). These assessments combine with changing zeitgeists about the hierarchy of subject domains that are more difficult and require innate capacities, in which success, therefore, indicates higher ability and smartness. The ubiquity of these cultural notions and practices in the formal education system results with messages to students about being smart that are reinforced over time. Whereas research has demonstrated that conceptions of intelligence as innate and fixed (an entity theory) or as modifiable and given to change through effort (an incremental theory) are related to patterns of less adaptive and more adaptive coping among students (Dweck, 2006), little is actually known about how perceiving oneself as being smart and being labeled smart are integrated into a student’s identity system, the broader meaning they make of the term, and the way it impacts their identity development, coping, and wellbeing in contexts with different characteristics.

In this study, I focused on a relatively understudied group of students, many of who have been receiving message about being smart since early childhood—college honors students. Moreover, I have decided to focus on the experiences of these students during a telling period—the intense transition and resocialization of the first-year of
college. In order to investigate the research question about the meaning of smartness for these students and the way it integrates into their identity and frames their experiences, actions, and wellbing, I combined an established interpretative phenomenological approach with a new meta-theoretical model of identity—the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (Kaplan & Garner, 2017; Kaplan, Neuber, & Garner, 2019).

The phenomenological analysis of participants’ telling of their experiences in the first year in college suggested several insights about the phenomenon. First, students’ personal meaning of smartness is framed by cultural and contextual meaning and processes. Although students believed their personal definitions of smart to be unique and nuanced, these conceptualizations were framed within prevalent cultural assumptions and contextual socialization. The commonly accepted cultural indicator of smart defined by effortless demonstrated achievement was emphasized and reinforced through educational socialization which resulted in implicit understanding of a domain hierarchy and practices of social comparison to construct one’s own self-concept. Pre-college educational environments played a key role in the formation of academic role-identity components through both systematic and casual practices of separation and labeling and endorsement of performance goals, by teachers, parents, and peers. In this study, the transition to Mid-Atlantic University triggered change in various student identity components, some of which may be the result of the particular context. Nevertheless, students indicated change in ontological beliefs, self-perceptions, perceived action possibilities and goals. Some of these changes instigated significant tension within the college student role identity system that was still not resolved at the time of the interview and had begun to negatively impact emotions and behaviors. In the case of Valentina, it
had already caused a substantial decline in mental health and well-being. Despite these changes, both positive and negative, students hold competing ontological beliefs. Alongside the more “incremental” beliefs there is still indication of persisting “entity” ontological beliefs. As a result, students continue to rely on deeply engrained socially-determined indicators of success as evidence.

Second, this study adds to the complex understanding that there is both personal value and cost to being smart. Part of how students make meaning of smart is related to the value they themselves place on the cultural capital in light of their understanding of the weight it holds with others. This allows greater insight as to how students figure being smart into their identity system. Some students want to maintain the label for the associated cultural benefits and privilege, or the group membership and social inclusion, making it more valued. Others are impacted by the social liability and the perceived barrier labels and perceptions of smartness create when forming relationships. Regardless of the different ways students internalize smartness into their identity system, they are profoundly aware of the pressure and the expectations. These feelings can lead students to engage in maladaptive behaviors to protect the smart label and their self-definition.

In this final chapter of the dissertation, I will consider the implications of these findings to the theoretical literature on labels and identity development; achievement goals; self-concept; self-regulation; mindsets; and the context of college honors programs. I then note limitations of the current study and follow to suggest directions for future research that would advance understanding of this phenomenon further. I end with recommendations for educational practices that the findings suggest may promote adaptive development and wellbeing of honors students during their first-year of college.
Implications for theory

The following section connects a variety of existing theories to findings within the current study, highlighting what corroborates or complicates previous understandings. Overall, it should be noted that this study celebrates the heterogeneity of experiences and meanings across students, and the complexity and interdependence of identity processes. An auxiliary goal of this study was to organize existing theories under one metatheory, the DSMRI, to allow for integration of cultural-societal-contextual processes with idiosyncratic processes to explain the phenomenon among individual students who share an educational context. In using an integrative perspective on identity and an integrative understanding of existing theories organized by the DSMRI, a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon has emerged.

Smart Labels and Identity development

A common criticism of tracking and gifted identification is the message it sends to students: who is smart and who is not is based on social comparison among peers on normative criteria that are determined by cultural and institutional systems and structures (Maaz, et al., 2008). Additionally, the labels associated, both formal and informal, can impact identity development (Lo, 2014). The current study supports that criticism. Students pointed directly to practices of separation within educational contexts as part of the evidence that taught them they were smart. However, this study also demonstrates that students learn they are smart in a variety of ways, not just through formal classification. It is through subtle and overt messages from individuals, contexts, and cultural practices around them that, most commonly, build on social comparison with peers, inside and outside academic settings. These messages about individual smartness
are mostly reinforced and sometimes challenged overtime as contexts, cultures, and comparison groups change and students develop self-awareness and self-authorship.

Research by Dweck and colleagues found that even after one isolated experience in an experimental condition, being praised as smart could have negative effects (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Kamins & Dweck, 1998). In today’s educational contexts, high achieving students are not only being praised for being smart, they are classified, categorized, labeled, and treated differently because of their perceived smartness, and are the target of persistent expectations from parents, teachers, peers, and eventually, themselves, in ways that integrate into their identity and sense of self-worth across the academic and social domains.

Social and personal struggles that have been found among “smart” students in previous research are supported by this study, including feeling intense pressure (Plucker & Levy, 2001), fear of failure (Freeman, 2005), and feeling different than others (Hertzog, 2003; Neihart, 1999). However, findings from this study also included the complicated results of smart being a connector; a way in which students find their friends (Herbert & McBee, 2007; Rinn, 2007) and an avenue for gaining cultural capitol, which forces students to also assess their individual value of the smart label.

Labels, formal or informal, overt or implied, force a student to decide whether to integrate the marker into their self-perception or self-definition. And although a student may maintain their self-definition of smart through change and transition, they may not always be classified, labeled, or seen as smart by others. When an individual’s identity is challenged or threatened, often then it becomes most salient to the individual (Kroger, 2004). Related to this issue, Borland (2005) has called for the removal of the label
“gifted” from educational practices. However, even if we take away one label in the context of formal education, there will be others to replace it, both inside and outside the vernacular of the classroom.

*Achievement Goals*

Prior research on achievement goals has been inconsistent in relation to outcomes for high-achieving students (Grant and Dweck, 2003, Middleton, et al., 2004). One assumption made based on the literature was that high-achieving students who hold performance goals may rely on approach or avoidance goals even more so when transitioning to a new learning environment (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). However, student’s stability in particular goal orientations varied in this study. For example, Valentina and James continued to rely on performance goals when entering college. But Keval, who held performance-avoidance goals in high school switched to a mastery goal orientation at Mid-Atlantic. In addition, it was somewhat expected that students in the study would be more likely to employ performance goals in college overall, but that was not the case. Divya, Joseph, Keval, and Sasha all demonstrated orientations towards mastery. That doesn’t mean they didn’t compare themselves to others, but their central goal was not to outperform.

*Self-Concept*

Central to Marsh’s (1987) Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect (BFLPE) theory is the tenet that a student’s academic self-concept negatively relates to the achievement level of the comparison group. However, additional research advances the idea that changes to self-concept based on group comparison is individually moderated (Wouters, et al., 2015) and potentially protected by supportive environments (Rinn, 2007). Participants in this
study did engage in a significant amount of social comparison in order to determine their smartness in relation to others, but they reacted in different ways, supporting Wouters, et al. (2015) findings. For example, the new comparison group didn’t always result in a negative decline in self-concept. Keval for instance felt relieved and positively humbled to no longer be considered one of the smartest. Rinn, et al. (2014) found that negative or lowered beliefs about one's academic ability was related to an increase in academically dishonest behavior in college. Keval again demonstrated the opposite. He engaged in academically dishonest behavior in high school when his academic self-concept was high but fragile, contingent on achievement to maintain status.

Self-Regulation

Existing research on self-regulation in high-ability students use the idea of effective self-regulation as a defining characteristic of the population, especially in comparison to low-achieving counterparts (Siegle, McCoach, & Roberts, 2017). For example, Ruban & Reis (2006) set out to identify similarities and differences in self-regulatory strategy use among high- and low-achieving undergraduate college students. Authors concluded that low-achievers lack self-regulation and are unable to use self-control effectively. In this comprehensive examination of only students who would have been classified as “high-achieving” using the parameters set forth by Ruban & Reis (Honors Program students), there was wide variation in strategy use, and not all students were seemingly successful.

Participants in the current study indicated that they attempted to integrate the same SRL strategies that they used in high school to their new college learning environment. Despite the level of success, each student indicated the need for adaptation
and reassessment of their learning strategies. It seems as though even these highly-successful students have been using low-efficacy study strategies. However, since the strategies worked in a high school environment, they never had to develop more sophisticated tactics. Divya illustrates this when she discusses how in high school she would basically re-write the textbook. This worked for her in a setting where memorization of content would result in success. Yet, in college where conceptual understanding and application is emphasized over memorization and regurgitation, that strategy has not been effective or efficient and she has had to adapt. Valentina did not give any indication that she attempted to change strategies, just emphasized that what worked for her in the past was no longer. She kept trying until eventually her self-worth and mental health became affected. before and eventually it will work (i.e. Valentina).

Numerous high-ability students enter college having never experienced an academic challenge and therefore, having never had to develop higher level SRL skills. Even if they discussed their high school as being competitive and challenging, they all mentioned not needing to work as hard in high school as they do now in college.

It should not be assumed that students’ that are part of perceived high-achieving cohorts do not need to be trained on sophisticated self-regulation strategies. Additionally, there is a need to prevent negative emotions from emerging related to necessary changes in self-regulated learning and the threat it may give to a student’s sense of self. Students need to be given feedback on their learning progress and be helped to recognize successful and adaptive gains they have made (Dweck, 1999).

Major selection. Students are socialized and conditioned to learn which behaviors are appropriate or not (Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). This can extend to smart students
learning through messages both overt and subtle which domains are appropriate for them to choose. A significant finding in the current study with implications related to major selection, career counseling theory and academic advising was the of the limited perceived action possibilities and the hierarchy of smart by domain.

Theories in career development point predominately to individual psychological factors such as abilities, interests, values, and personality as the driving forces for major selection (Jung, 2012). However, often underestimated are the social learning theories, which consider external social and cultural influences on decision making (Jung, 2012). Germeijs, et al (2012) identified decision making profiles of students who choose a major in higher education. They found that students who were highly committed to their major but not open to engaging in exploratory activities scored lower on career decision self-efficacy assessments.

Three of the six students in this study were majoring in a STEM related field, two after engaging in very little identity exploration. The other three each discussed external pressure from influential adult figures to choose a STEM field in college. According to CollegeBoard’s 2018 Annual Report on the SAT, 34% of all high school graduating test-takers indicated they were intending to major in a STEM field in college, with 19% ($N = 333,289$) choosing “Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences.” (CollegeBoard, 2018). It is imperative to know whether they are making major and career related decisions based on their own interests and identity or based on perceived pressures and societal expectations (Subotnik, 2009).

True, these students may be talented in many different domains, including those of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. But the goal of educators should
be to balance the talents and interests of the students based on identity and personal well-being, and not drive them into majors and career paths that social norms dictate as prestigious, legitimate, and only accessible to the smart; fields that they are capable of succeeding in, but that they might not find fulfilling or meaningful.

**Mindsets**

Along with implications related to general practices of labeling, further implications could be considered as they relate to research on implicit theories of intelligence, otherwise known as growth vs fixed mindsets. In the current study, a few of the student’s ontological beliefs or implicit theories, in connection with their self-definitions and perceived action possibilities, could be classified under Dweck’s category of growth mindset. Additionally, regardless of ontological belief, all participants in the current study discussed the importance of hard work and effort and felt that intelligence was malleable. However, what constitutes hard work and effort is relative. It is easy to hold a growth mindset when your personal conceptualization of what constitutes “hard work and effort” is paying off in the way in which you want it to.

As evident in the current study, students can simultaneously demonstrate characteristics of a growth mindset, while also demonstrating other maladaptive tendencies, including performance related extrinsic goals. For example, James felt as though being smart was a result of his ambition and hard work, but was still fixated entirely on extrinsic goals. Valentina also believed that her self-concept as intelligent was something she could continue to maintain so long as she tried and worked hard, until the actions that have served this mindset failed.
Honors

Research on high-achieving college students most often happens within the context of Honors Programs, but even that literature is sparse and lacking in rigor (Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Balduf, 2009; Rinn, 2007). Therefore, this study will hopefully be a meaningful contribution to the fields limited knowledge. Also, most studies done using Honors populations use the term as a category to draw overarching conclusions about the group that does not also consider heterogeneity of students (Herbert & McBee, 2007; Seifert, et al. 2007). In this study, Honors is more so used as a context and an additional smart label that students chose whether or not to make meaning of.

Within the specific context of Mid-Atlantic University, students found value in the Honors Program due to the social group membership. They perceived being part of Honors as allowing them to make friends easier in the first year of college. This does align with some previous findings (Herbert & McBee, 2007; Rinn, 2007).

Limitations

Using students that participate in honors college or programs as the framework for investigating gifted college students excludes students that do not participate in Honors programs or attend schools that do not have Honors programs. Doing so may also exclude the most high-achieving: students that attend Ivy League institutions and other highly-selective colleges in which the entire student body could be considered “honors.”

Since this study relied heavily on assessing meaning making through self-reporting, the validity of results may be compromised due to social desirability, primarily since I am an administrator in the Program. However, multiple tools to increase trustworthiness and validity of the results were employed including bracketing
(Lichtman, 2013), collaborative critical analysis with a disinterested peer and the critique of an expert.

It is possible some students still might not face challenges to their identity or come to an understanding of the role being labeled as smart has played in their first-year of college. First-year Honors students may still be naïve thinkers, incapable of deep self-reflection in an interview setting. Nevertheless, I feel confident that the data I collected is of high-enough quality that I was able to gain insight into this, especially through the focused analytical guidelines of the DSMRI and the spirit of IPA.

The fourth control parameter of the DSMRI, personal dispositions, did not manifest as much as others, probably because of the chosen semi-structured interview method as opposed to in-depth, life story narrative. The use of the latter would have allowed more opportunity for unconscious repeating patterns to emerge and should be considered for future studies.

Finally, as previously mentioned in Chapter 3, this study did not employ classic purposive sampling, and therefore, the sample may be circumscribed by certain dimensions that limit the data (e.g., potentially, motivation, conscientiousness). Additionally, students who chose to participate in the study may be different on characteristics that may influence the manifestation of the phenomenon, such as motivation or conscientiousness. Future research should aim to recruit participants with other characteristics as well.
Implications for future research

Interventions to thwart maladaptive behaviors and emotions

More research should be done to design an intervention targeted specifically for first-year of college Honors students and/or students that have otherwise led lives of high-achievement. Since Academic Advisors are typically the only professionals in the University setting that are expected to have four-year constant contact with students, perhaps an advising focused intervention should be designed. Advisors can employ an identity intervention, using a scaffolded questioning technique in light of the DSMRI, to induce identity-seeking tension while also providing support with the goal of students developing self-awareness of their actual interests, passions, and future careers.

Academic Advisors should not only be prescribing classes but serve as agents and critical friends to these students as they strengthen their ego identities in a way that is both mindful and meaningful (Schachter & Rich, 2011). This should be a primary focus of first year advising in particular, since interventions have been found to be more effective during developmental transition points (Horowitz, 2009), including shifts in context, or movement from adolescence to young-adulthood.

Toxic High School Environments

This study focused on students in the college context, but students talked extensively about their high school experiences. In doing so, troubling perceptions of their high school environments were discussed. More research should be conducted into how the high school educational environments shape smart student identity development, especially the encouragement of toxic goals, beliefs, and behaviors. Specifically, the results of this study call for a deeper examination of how teacher role-identity and actions
interact with the development of components within the student role-identity. How do students perceive the role of teachers in their lives and development of self?

*The complexity of smart students, not just the category*

This study shows the complexity of Honors, high-achieving, gifted, high-ability students. Most research uses these terms as a category of students without attempting to examine the differences within the group. Each student in the current study knew they were smart at very young age and each made meaning and interpreted their smartness differently, which resulted in six different profiles with differing actions and emotions. The synonymous terms that we use to classify students for research is too reductive. It should no longer be assumed they are a homogenous population to be examined as a category.

*Institutional type*

There are several aspects related to different school contexts that could affect smart college student development, including institutional type, institutional culture and goal structure. Institutional type and school size have not yet been explored in regards to smart college students. Rinn (2007) found that previously high-achieving students may have more positive educational outcomes if they participate in an Honors Program while attending a large University than if they don’t. However, what happens if the school they attend doesn’t have an Honors Program? As demonstrated in this study and prior research, school culture, reputation, and goal structure could have major impacts on the development of smart college students’ academic beliefs, affect, and behavior (e.g., Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Further investigations such as this one should be done in
different contexts, especially at Ivy League institutions and other socially perceived prestigious colleges and universities.

**Further investigations on the Race-, Gender - and Socio-economic- roles**

Besides internalized labels, self-concept, and self-efficacy, another important aspect to consider within the self-perception and self-definition component would also be the intersection of students’ other identities and how they may relate, positively or negatively, to their role as a smart student. For example, when attempting to understand the complex identity of smartness, we need to also consider issues related to race, such as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and model minority myths (Lee, 2006), gender, such as implicit gender stereotypes (Miller, et al., 2015), and socio-economic status.

Research points to idea that Black and Hispanic students in particular receive messages from the environment that indicate they cannot be both a student of color and high achieving (Griffin, 2006; Davis, 2018). In the current study, Sasha was the only black participant. Race was salient to her but did not seem to create a same barrier to a healthy resolution of a smart identity that has been found in research. This may be due to the fact she was balancing several salient identities in addition to smart and black. Nevertheless, there is a need to examine the issues students of color may have when attempting to also incorporate academic identities.

The model-minority myth is the pervasive stereotype that Asian populations are more academically successful compared to other racial minorities because of the cultural emphasis on hard work and achievement (Atkin, Yoo, Jager & Yeh, 2018). An internalization of this myth can lead to increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression.
The two Asian student participants in this study did not indicate explicit internalization of this myth. Keval did not discuss his racial identity at all, and Divya, a student from India, only discussed the cultural constraints felt in her home country. She did mention annoyance with the fact she is an Asian student majoring in computer science and thus, fulfilling a stereotype, but did not seem particularly affected. Nevertheless, it is certainly an area for additional research.

This also relates to general issues of access and equity, and who gets to be considered smart. There is considerable research that shows most standardized test scores are highly correlated with income and race (College Board, 2018). If being smart is solely connected to high grades and standardized test scores, then coming from underrepresented backgrounds automatically means a student will be less likely to be considered “smart.” Most of the students that participated in the study were white and came from households where both parents held college degrees or higher.

**Implications for practice**

*Role of College Faculty and Academic Advisors*

The roles of the college professor and academic advisor may be the key to fostering the successful academic transition and further development of smart students. Interaction with faculty members impacts students’ perception and satisfaction of their college experience (Pascarella & Taranzini, 2005), while successful academic advising increases retention, graduation rates, and overall student success (NACADA, 2019). Part of the issue is how student success is measured in the college setting.

Most early warning systems rely on grades and GPA as indicators for trouble. Certainly, a decline in performance is one possible indicator, but the threshold is relative.
Although Valentina earned a cumulative GPA low enough to raise alarm (>3.0), both Divya and James showed a steep decline from fall to spring that had no academic standing implications, meaning, they would not have appeared on traditional warning lists. Previously labeled smart students have learned how to achieve, and therefore, may not display the same warning signs that other students would show when dealing with loss of motivation and interest. It is important to look beyond just grades in order to make sure student’s academic and personal needs are supported.

Previous research on high-achieving and high-ability populations have found that these students value a challenging environment (Monteiro, et al., 2012) but also value quality relationships (Monteiro, et al., 2012), positive reinforcement (Scager, Akkerman, Pilor, and Wubbels, 2013), and feelings of relatedness (Nordmo and Samara, 2009). The current study demonstrates the importance of educational contexts, especially messages sent by teachers and administrators. The way in which professors and advisors send messages to these students can aid in the thwarting of negative feelings and behaviors (Snyder, et al., 2013). Especially in light of the fact this study demonstrated that smart students can feel constrained by limited action possibilities, especially if they ascribe to the socially determined messages that they have received over time: you must go to college, you must have perfect grades, you must major in a STEM field if you are smart. These limited perceived action possibilities can serve as a barrier to healthy career exploration and identity development and should be counteracted by openness, challenge, and support (Sanford, 1962).

Faculty, advisors, and administrators should encourage exploration and mastery goals, de-emphasize the importance of grades and extrinsic achievement as much as
possible, and do what they can to prevent comparison. The first year of college is a time of intense transition and acculturation. Students need to be challenged to engage in honest self-reflection on the state of their identity components, and then supported while they are dealing with awareness and changes that cause tension. First-year seminars could provide a safe-place to engage in students in sometimes difficult identity work, while also providing them peer social support through collaborative community development preferably lead by peer-instructors and approachable teachers.

Need for change in our broader socio-cultural understanding of smart

Currently the US education system is fixated with demonstrated smartness, particularly in the form of high-test scores. Federal laws for K-12 public education such as No Child Left Behind and its more recent replacement Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) which mean to shrink the achievement gap but instead implement required high-stakes testing, putting pressure on teachers, administrators, and especially students to perform. Furthermore, current practices in college admissions are not helping, with most institutions of higher-education relying most heavily on achievement scores in their decision making. It is hard to change ontological beliefs of smart equating demonstrated achievement when students are being rewarded with tangible and intangible benefits, which strengthens epistemological beliefs and has implications for self-perceptions, goals, and future action possibilities.
**Closing remarks**

News spreads quickly in the Honors Program. Once students became aware of my research, many came to discuss their own stories of smartness long after data collection concluded. One student in particular decided to focus her final paper in Adolescent Development specifically on being smart in high school, and the pressure and expectation students feel to achieve. She titled her paper, “*Are We Burning the Smart Cookies?*” In short, I believe the answer is yes.

Changing the longstanding broader socio-cultural, knee-jerk understanding of what it means to be smart - moving the needle away from smart equals effortless, demonstrated performance - will be difficult. However, educators, administrators, and researchers can inspire change in contexts so that at least one of the control parameters that affects the formation of a role-identity is supportive of adaptive goals and growth in ontological beliefs which do not rely on grades or achievement for epistemological evidence of success or self-worth. Engaging in program assessment which seeks answers to questions such as “What messages are we sending? What goals are we endorsing?” is a small place to start. These questions could also be answered of individual educators and administrators themselves, increasing an awareness of their own role identities and how they impact the identity development of our students.

Finally, we must acknowledge that “smart” is a label. Overtime, students are forced to make meaning of it in some way. Not all students identified as such incorporate it willingly into their identity, but, in this study, all participants still felt as though the general classification and related value was important because of the weight it holds in society. We always need to remind students and remember ourselves, they aren’t only
just *smart*. They are musicians, artists, athletes; gay, straight, bi; black, white, Asian; males, females, trans; funny, nerdy, real. Identity is messy and complex. We must appreciate it and continue to investigate each of the parts, along with the context, their emotions, their previous experiences, to gain a full, comprehensive picture of those we serve.

Being smart is just the start.
REFERENCES CITED


The Lived Experience of Being Gifted in School: Capturing the Students’ Voices.


http://doi.org/10.1177/0162353215607322


https://reports.collegeboard.org/sat-suite-program-results, March, 2019


http://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-008-9071-x


*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, 19*(2), 47-71.


Elliot, A. J., Harackiewicz, J. M., Barron, K., Carter, S., Church, M., Dean, R., …


http://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep4102


http://doi.org/10.1207/s15327930pje7402_3


http://doi.org/10.1080/02783199809553885


http://doi.org/10.1177/001698620304700204


http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521831040.005


Horowitz, F. (2009). Introduction: A Developmental Understanding of Giftedness and


Kaplan, A., & Garner, J. K. (2017b). Dynamic systems model of role identity (DSMRI)
Analysis guide & codebook.


Lo, O. C. (2014). Labeling and Knowing: A Reconciliation of Implicit Theory and

http://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2013.807490


http://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2011.11.018


http://doi.org/10.1080/02783199909553991

http://doi.org/10.1177/0016986204048000306


Scelfo, J. (2015, August 2) Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection. The New


Smith, J. A. (2004). Qualitative Research in Psychology: Reflecting on the development
of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), 39-54.


Trint.com (n.d.) Available: https://trint.com/


Educational Psychology, 35(2), 252–270.
http://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2013.822963

http://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015


http://doi.org/10.1080/13598139.2012.736221


APPENDIX A.

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS
Title of research: Exploring what it means to be “Smart”

Investigator and Department:
Principal Investigator: Dr. James P. Byrnes, College of Education
Student Investigator: Amanda Neuber Haggerty, Graduate Student, College of Education; Temple University Honors Program

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?
You have been invited to participate in this research study because you are an undergraduate student that has been identified as being academically talented.

What should I know about this research?
• Someone will explain this research to you.
• Whether or not you take part is up to you.
• You can choose not to take part.
• You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
• Your decision will not be held against you.
• You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to about this research?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact the research team by phone by calling or emailing Amanda at 215-204-0716 / amanda@temple.edu or by emailing the primary investigator at jpbyrnes@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu for any of the following:
• Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
• You cannot reach the research team.
• You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
• You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
• You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of the present study is to learn more about the experiences of academically talented students and their motivation and well-being in college. This research study uses an online survey to collect information in hopes of better understanding how students make meaning of being labeled “smart” and what effect this meaning may have on college outcomes.
**Permission to Take Part in a Human Research Study**

**How long will I be in this research?**
We expect that the survey will take between 20-30 minutes to complete. You may be asked to complete the survey again at a later time. You will remain enrolled in the study for the entirety of the 2016-2017 academic year.

**How many people will be studied?**
We expect anywhere between 175-500 students to participate.

**How do I know if I’m eligible to be in this study?**
We are inviting students that have previously been identified as smart and/or gifted to participate in this study. Since you are a member of the Temple University Honors Program, you have already been recognized as academically talented. For the purposes of this research, if you are not a member of the Honors Program, you are ineligible for this study.

**What happens if I agree to be in this research?**
You will independently complete a 20-30 minute online questionnaire. You will also be asked to provide your Temple ID number. This number will be used to obtain some FERPA protected information, specifically your college GPA high-school achievement scores (SAT/ACT scores, HSGPA), race and sex. This information is being collected to explore relationships between survey answers and achievement, and also to examine any between group differences. It will not be shared with anyone other than the investigators listed above. Upon your request (because you are an adult student), the educational agency or institution will provide you with the copy of the records being disclosed as part of this research.

**What happens if I agree to be in this research, but I change my mind later?**
If you decide to leave this study, there will be no negative consequences and it will not affect your status in the Honors Program. Your choice to participate or to withdraw is confidential and will not be shared with other participants or the Honors staff. If you decide to leave this research after completing any of the stages of data collection, contact the research team so that the investigator can remove your data from consideration in the study.

**Is there any way being in this research could be bad for me?**
You may experience limited discomfort or inconvenience related to your participation in the study. Recounting particularly challenging experiences while taking the survey may cause minimal emotional or psychological discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable, or would like to discuss the questionnaire further, you may contact the research team by phone by calling or emailing Amanda at 215-204-0716 / amanda@temple.edu or by emailing the primary investigator at jpbymes@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**
To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, Temple
Permission to Take Part in a Human Research Study

University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information.

To secure the data, and keep it as confidential as possible, all electronic files will be downloaded on a password-protected computer and stored in a private, password-protected folder on the researcher's personal computer which is housed in a locked office. Your TUID will be used to match your survey results to your educational record, and will remain connected to your survey results until the completion of data collection by all participants. At that time, your TUID will removed from your data and replaced with a randomly generated identification number.

Your choice to participate in the study will remain confidential and your real identity will not be shared with other participants, staff in the Honors Program, or published in the final report. Final aggregated results from this study may be shared with the director of the Honors Program upon request and will be reviewed with the primary investigator, but will not be associated with your name or any other immediately identifiable information.

What else do I need to know about this research?
If you are interested in the results of the study, you may contact the student researcher via email at amanda@temple.edu for more information in fall 2017 once the study has concluded and the report is completed.

Signature Block for Adult Subject Capable of Consent

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

______________________________  ________________
Signature of subject            Date

______________________________  ________________
Printed name of subject         Date

______________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent

______________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent and Date Consent Obtained

Document Revision Date: March 24, 2017
**Title of research:** Exploring what it means to be “Smart”

**Investigator and Department:**
Principal Investigator: Dr. James P. Byrnes, College of Education
Student Investigator: Amanda Neuber Haggerty, Graduate Student, College of Education; Temple University Honors Program

**Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**
You have been invited to participate in this research study because you are an undergraduate student that has been identified as being academically talented.

**What should I know about this research?**
- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

**Who can I talk to about this research?**
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact the research team by phone by calling or emailing Amanda at 215-204-0716 / amanda@temple.edu or by emailing the primary investigator at jpbymnes@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu for any of the following:
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Why is this research being done?**
The purpose of the present study is to learn more about the experiences of academically talented students and their motivation and well-being in college. This research study uses an online survey and interview to collect information in hopes of better understanding how students make meaning of being labeled “smart” and what effect this meaning may have on college outcomes.

**How long will I be in this research?**
We expect that the interview will take 60 minutes to complete. You will remain enrolled in the study for the entirety of the 2016-2017 academic year.
How many people will be studied?
We expect to interview 20 students.

How do I know if I’m eligible to be in this study?
We are inviting students that have previously been identified as smart and/or gifted to participate in this study. Since you are a member of the Temple University Honors Program, you have already been recognized as academically talented. For the purposes of this research, if you are not a member of the Honors Program, you are ineligible for this study.

What happens if I agree to be in this research?
You will participate in a one-time, 60 minute interview that will be audio recorded. There will be no visual recording or photography. At the time of the interview, you will be assigned a pseudonym. The researchers will never connect your legal name to your interview results.

What happens if I agree to be in this research, but I change my mind later?
If you decide to leave this study, there will be no negative consequences and it will not affect your status in the Honors Program. Your choice to participate or to withdraw is confidential and will not be shared with other participants or the Honors staff. If you decide to leave this research after completing any of the stages of data collection, contact the research team so that the investigator can remove your data from consideration in the study.

Is there any way being in this research could be bad for me?
You may experience limited discomfort or inconvenience related to your participation in the study. Recounting particularly challenging experiences during the interview may cause minimal emotional or psychological discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview, you may stop the interview at any time. If you would like to discuss the interview further, you may contact the research team by phone by calling or emailing Amanda at 215-204-0716 / amanda@temple.edu or by emailing the primary investigator at jpbynes@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

What happens to the information collected for this research?
To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, Temple University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information.

To secure the data, all electronic files will be downloaded on a password-protected computer and stored in a private, password-protected folder on the researcher's personal computer which is housed in a locked office. To protect your identity, legal names and any personally identifying or sensitive information about you will be kept separate from your data from the study.
Permission to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Your choice to participate in the study will remain confidential and your real identity will not be shared with other participants, staff in the Honors Program, or published in the final report. Results from this study may be shared with the director of the Honors Program upon request and will be reviewed with the primary investigator, but will not be associated with your name or any other immediately identifiable information.

What else do I need to know about this research?
If you are interested in the results of the study, you may contact the student researcher via email at amanda@temple.edu for more information in fall 2017 once the study has concluded and the report is completed.

Signature Block for Adult Subject Capable of Consent

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

__________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of subject                          Date

__________________________________________  ______________________________
Printed name of subject                       Date

__________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent         Date Consent Obtained

__________________________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent
APPENDIX B.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before we begin, I’m going to have you participate in a little activity. I’m going to ask you to complete the sentence “I am” with as many different definitions of yourself as you can think of. Circle the ones that are most important to you.

- What is the definition of smart?
  - Is there a difference between being smart and being intelligent?

- How were you identified or labeled "smart" during elementary, middle, or high school?
  - Did you participate in gifted programs? Dual enrollment? What ages?
  - How did you feel about being considered smart as a young child?

- Tell me about your High School experience?
  - What did it mean to be “smart” in high school?
  - How were the smart kids treated?
  - Can you give me an example of a time when your smartness was evident to you?
  - What was the environment like at your high school? In the classroom and with peers?

- What has the first year of college been like for you?
  - What has the transition been like?
  - What were your Expectations of college vs what the reality has been?
  - What does it mean to be "smart" in college? Has the definition changed since high school?
  - Can you give me an example of a time when the difference was evident?
  - How would you describe the academic environment here at Mid-Atlantic?
  - How has learning changed for you since you came to college?
  - How have you friends or family said you have changed or are different since college?

- Can you think of times you were treated different because you were labeled smart, wither positive or negative?
  - (both college and pre-college)
  - Do you think being smart has impacted any relationships? Which ones and how?

- Imagine one day you woke up and were no longer considered smart. How would you feel?
  - Was there ever a time or a situation where you weren’t considered or didn’t feel smart - can you tell me about it? how did you feel? how did you react? what did you do?

- What meaning does being smart have for you?
• How do you feel about being considered smart?
• How important is it to you to be considered smart?
• how important is being smart to your sense of who you are?

• What are the positives to being labeled smart?

• What challenges have you faced because you are labeled smart

• Have you ever felt pressure to maintain the smart label? Can you tell me about it?
  o Has the pressure to maintain the label ever affected your behavior? Your feelings?

• Can you tell me about a recent experience in which you felt very successful and proud?
  o What do you think caused your success? Why did this particular event make you feel proud?

• Can you tell me about a recent experience in which you felt that you had failed?
  o What do you think caused the failure? What did you do as a result of the failure?

• Why did you choose your current major?
  o Who or what may have influenced your decision?
  o What do you plan to do with it?
  o Have any of your plans changed since high school?
  o Did you ever consider any other major?

• What other things have you gotten involved in on or off campus while starting college?
  o Why did you choose to join these activities? / Why haven’t you joined any activities?

• Here at Mid-Atlantic you are a member of the Honors Program.
  o Do you think being part of this group and being labeled “smart” in college has impacted your college experience? How?
  o Would you have come to Mid-Atlantic if you hadn’t get into the Honors Program?

• In research, there are a few different terms used to define "smart" students.
  o tell me what you think each means / what connotations they hold
  o how you would feel about being labeled each of these.
  o which you would prefer:
    ▪ gifted
    ▪ high-achieving
    ▪ high-ability
    ▪ honors
DYNAMIC SYSTEMS MODEL OF ROLE IDENTITY (DSMRI)

ANALYSIS GUIDE & CODEBOOK

Avi Kaplan\textsuperscript{1} and Joanna K. Garner\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}Temple University
\textsuperscript{2}Old Dominion University

Please address correspondence regarding this manual to Avi Kaplan, Psychological Studies in Education, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA; akplan@temple.edu; or to Joanna K. Garner, Center for Educational Partnerships, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA; akplan@temple.edu
CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

This Guide and Codebook was developed to guide researchers in analyzing oral or written narratives according to the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI). A visualization of the model appears below in Figure 1. The theoretical basis for the model is described most extensively in Kaplan and Garner (2017). Briefly, the DSMRI integrates understandings from multiple perspectives on identity and motivation to capture the rich, complex, dynamic, and contextualized nature of identity phenomena while anchoring it in established identity and motivational constructs. The model’s primary unit-of-analysis is the ‘social-cultural role’ (e.g., teacher, student, principal, parent, friend). The DSMRI portrays role identity as comprising four continuously emerging and reciprocally influencing components: (1) ontological and epistemological beliefs; (2) purpose and goals; (3) self-perceptions and self-definitional; and (4) perceived action possibilities. The DSMRI follows assumptions of the Complex Dynamic Systems approach. It highlights the unit-of-analysis of the role identity as residing within the person, but its formation as continuous, iterative, and emerging through dialogical relations with the person’s other role identities and with the role identities of others. This process of continuous emergence occurs through intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions that employ cultural mediating means. Thus, the DSMRI assumes that identity and motivational processes emerge within a cultural context and the social-cultural community of practice around a subject domain while being also shaped by implicit characteristics of the person (e.g., personality dispositions, self-worth concerns) that serve as control parameters for the identity system.

The DSMRI attends to the role identity’s three facets of content, structure, and process of formation; emphasizes the central roles of knowledge and emotion in identity; highlights the interdependence of elements, and hence the irreducibility of the role identity to its components; and portrays the non-linear and non-deterministic nature of identity change and its emergence as afforded and constrained by cultural as well as individual-dispositional characteristics.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The ultimate goal of the analysis is to “re-tell” the narrative using the theoretical language and structure of the DSMRI. Therefore, the foundational steps of the analysis involve a combination of deductive and inductive procedures. The deductive procedures involve applying the unit-of-analysis of the “role-identity” and the components of the DSMRI to code the narrative. The coding attempts to identify as much of the narrative data as possible as reflecting the theoretical categories and processes of the DSMRI. The next step of the analysis involves the synthesizing and integration of the coded data into a description that follows the DSMRI assumptions about the content, structure, and process dynamics of identity and motivation. The inductive procedures involve identifying themes regarding content, structure, process, and context that underlie and frame the narrative (e.g., content themes, narrative structure, contextual influences).

ANALYTICAL STEPS

1. Read through the narrative transcripts or written product and identify the various role-identities expressed within (e.g., teacher, participant, student, daughter, colleague, employee).

2. Conduct an analysis for each central role separately, starting with the most prominent role, or the role that is the focus of the research question, and following with the other roles in order of significance.

3. For each role, inductively identify meaning-units (e.g., an activity, a domain, a period in life), and deductively code the statements within that meaning-unit according to the components in the DSMRI, following the definitions below. Double-code segments of data as appropriate.

4. Conduct the inductive thematic analysis of the narrative, identifying themes, narrative structure, and the framing parameters within which the role identity was constructed including the cultural context, social interactions, and implicit processes. Consider other sources of data for this analysis (e.g., curriculum).

5. Write an analytical summary of each role-identity that includes its content (i.e., the beliefs held, the goals pursued, self-perceptions and definitions that are expressed, and actions and strategies noted, and the emotions tied to the role and the components); its structure (i.e., the harmony or tension within components such as goal conflict and associated emotions, alignment and misalignment between components such as conflict between ontological beliefs and self-perceptions such as values, and the associated emotions, and the “maturity” or sophistication of the alignment—the strength and self-constructed nature of the commitment to the content); and its process (i.e., indications of change, reflectivity, questions, exploration), indicating the span of the role-identity across sub-roles and/or sub-contexts.

6. Write an overall analytical summary that integrates the various role-identities throughout the narrative.

7. Credibility and trustworthiness can be promoted through either calculating inter-rater reliability in steps 1 and 3, and/or through using an auditor to critique the analysis.
### DSMRI COMPONENTS

*The examples are from the domain of teaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological beliefs</td>
<td>Statements that indicate knowledge (e.g., theory), beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and conceptions that the person expresses as true about the world.</td>
<td>“Group work doesn’t work in chemistry.” “It’s so important to be positive about student contributions even if it’s not exactly what you wanted to hear.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological Beliefs</td>
<td>Expressions that indicate the level of certainty, credibility, and complexity of the person’s ontological beliefs. Often expressed in questions, or in hesitation regarding the definitiveness of statements.</td>
<td>“Do they have experiences that are relevant to what they are learning? Maybe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Goals</td>
<td>Statements that express the person’s purpose for action in the role, as well as goals and objectives in the role. This category includes general goals of the role/domain/profession, personal goals, as well as specific objectives in particular contexts and situations.</td>
<td>“One of my teaching goals is to show students the importance of chemistry as a field.” “I want them to understand this deeply.” “I aspire to make my students better human beings, not just better students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Perceptions and Self-Definitions</td>
<td>Statements that include reference to the self in relation to the role. This includes how participants define themselves in relation to the domain/profession, what participants think about themselves in the role and as part of a role-related community, and how they think about their own functioning in the role (e.g., self-perceived abilities and efficacy, personal values, interests, personality attributes, self-characteristics and definitions).</td>
<td>“I’ve always been an experientially oriented teacher.” “I’ve always been interested in science.” “I’m a math person.” “As an African American...” “I became an instructor because I have passion for my area of expertise.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Possibilities</td>
<td>Statements that indicate internal (e.g., thoughts, planning) and external behavior in relation to the role. This code includes practices and strategies that one is aware of as possibilities or that one has put into practice, as well as indications for those actions that the person perceived as not possible for him or her to enact.</td>
<td>“I break the students into smaller groups and have them talk in smaller groups about the particular readings and their feelings and attitudes towards the readings, and then we come back together and talk as a bigger group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony and Alignment</td>
<td>Statements that indicate a relation between two or more of the model’s elements (e.g., two goals) and/or components (e.g., an ontological belief</td>
<td>“As students gain knowledge best in various ways due to different learning styles [ontological beliefs], I make”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and an action; an ontological belief and a
goal; a goal and an action).

**Integration**

Statements that indicate a relation
between two or more role identities (e.g.,
parent-professional; ), including between
past and present role identities, and
between present and future role identities
(e.g., high-school student and college
student; pre-service teacher and teacher).

"In college, my analytical
chemistry teacher took interest
in my life outside of class, often
giving me some career and life
advice. Without these teachers,
I do not think I would have
been molded into the person I
am today, which is why I make
every effort to have a personal
relationship with each
student..."

**Change (and Transfer)**

Statements that indicate any change in
elements (e.g., beliefs, practices,
aignments or self-conceptions), or in
their relations (e.g., change in harmony
of content, alignment between
components, or integration between
roles). Transfer refers specifically to an
explicit change involving increased
integration of elements (e.g., beliefs,
goals, strategies) between two role
identities (e.g., teacher PD-participant
and professional; pre-service teacher and
teacher).

"One of the things that I have
decided to do in the future is
be more transparent with my
students about what I’m
teaching, why I’m teaching it,
and why I’m teaching it the
way that I’m teaching it..."

**Emotion (a sub-
aspect of each component and of
their relations)**

Any statement referring to an emotional
experience.

"I enjoy teaching
tremendously" [self-
perceptions]; "I get frustrated
when I’m required to lecture"
[ontological beliefs about
context and action possibilities]

---

**Additional useful codes (desirably to double code with DSMRI-based codes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Knowledge</th>
<th>Statements that refer (implicitly or explicitly) to specific subject content knowledge that the person has in one or more components (most commonly in ontological beliefs).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;We read about how the brain actually worked and how individuals process information and the different domains of learning and the different learning styles that people may have&quot; [ontological beliefs]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience in</th>
<th>Statements that describe knowledge of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;There was about fourteen...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>context and experiences in the context.</td>
<td>students I want to say and they were all teaching in the humanities. Half of them were religion students so it was kind of really geared towards, the examples people made were geared towards the stuff that I would end up teaching so it was extra helpful...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordances and constraints</td>
<td>Specific statements that indicate perception of affording or constraining factors to components of the role identity (e.g., action possibilities). (Commonly, to be double-coded with ontological beliefs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D.
ADDITIONAL CODEBOOK

Additional Codebook for Dissertation Research
Amanda Neuber Haggerty

The Meaning of Being Smart: 
An Identity Study of First-Year Honors College Students

Preliminary coding used the codebook created by Kaplan and Garner (2017) for analysis of the DSMRI. See Appendix C. Through additional inductive analysis, supplementary themes emerged and thus additional codes were created. Some codes are related to DSMRI components and control parameters but are presented here with more specificity; others are new and were created inductively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Student Role Identity</td>
<td>Umbrella-code to separate when students were discussing their college experiences.</td>
<td>“I think that maybe it has to do with the college environment but I'm maybe a more active learner.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Student Role Identity</td>
<td>Umbrella-code to separate when students were discussing their high school experiences.</td>
<td>“But I mean in high school I was also considered smart so it didn’t go away.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son/Daughter Role Identity</td>
<td>Umbrella-code to separate when students were discussing family dynamics specifically related to parents and parental relationships.</td>
<td>“And a lot of that comes from my dad. My dad is very very particular about his words.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer/Friend Role Identity</td>
<td>Umbrella-code to separate when students were discussing peer relationships and friendships. Sometimes double coded with student role-identities.</td>
<td>“I was just like busy with my friends all the time so I didn’t study at all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain / Subjects</td>
<td>Statements related to discussion about specific subjects, domains, courses.</td>
<td>“I really struggled with calc here um and I took honors calc”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain*Hierarchy</td>
<td>Statements related to specific domains that also indicated hierarchy, importance, prestige, etc.</td>
<td>“So like people don’t really consider like arts people super smart.” / “smart people are doing chemistry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context: Classroom * Pre-College</td>
<td>Any events or situations described as occurring in an academic classroom or other formalized learning space, pre-college</td>
<td>“My AP Calc teacher for example would pass out all of the hundreds first.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context: Classroom * College</td>
<td>Any events or situations described as occurring in an academic classroom or other formalized learning space, in college</td>
<td>“Am I really worthy of being in this honors class like?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student-Teacher Interactions * Pre-college</strong></td>
<td>Describes communication or interaction with teachers in formal or informal academic spaces</td>
<td>“but like every single teacher in the school considered me like they just took it for granted that I would score 100”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student-Professor Interactions * College</strong></td>
<td>Describes communication or interaction with professors or advisors in formal or informal academic spaces.</td>
<td>“I don't have any inherent value you know in writing an essay on Shakespeare but my teacher does”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Choice</strong></td>
<td>Statements related to how they chose Mid-Atlantic University.</td>
<td>“the number one reason why I went to Mid-Atlantic... is the cost of attendance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honors: Experience</strong></td>
<td>Any events or situations described as occurring within the context of the Honors Program.</td>
<td>“I'm taking an Honors special topics which means that's one of my only classes where I encounter a lot of upperclassmen.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honors: Pros</strong></td>
<td>Positive statements, feelings, or experiences related to participation in the Honors Program</td>
<td>“Since my like all my friends are in Honors.... And I love the Honors program so. I want to stay in it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honors: Cons</strong></td>
<td>Negative statements, feelings, or experiences related to participation in the Honors Program</td>
<td>“I don't feel like it matters whatsoever to other kids you know that I'm in honors”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Definition: Gifted</strong></td>
<td>Statements related to the term “gifted”</td>
<td>“I loved the gifted program because I always had fun there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Definition: Smart</strong></td>
<td>Statements related to the term “smart”</td>
<td>“Like who was smart and who wasn't was just who could perform under pressure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Pro</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart”</strong></td>
<td>“People think I'm smart that's cool.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Con</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart”</strong></td>
<td>“There was a time when I was labeled smart like stamped sealed packed then thrown away like she's smart.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived Success</strong></td>
<td><strong>Any events or situations described as successful, achievements, or accomplishments</strong></td>
<td>“I just got um one of my final papers back from English I got a 98 and I was super super excited about that. You feel really proud of that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived Failure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Any events or situations described as a failure or disappointment.</strong></td>
<td>“Applying to Stanford and Harvard. That was a failure.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Pro * Relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart” and includes relationships with others.</strong></td>
<td>“...and just discuss with one another and like be able to talk and like make friends is easier.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Pro * Value/Perks</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart” and includes tangible or intangible perks, value, rewards, or special treatment.</strong></td>
<td>“It's the privilege of being labeled as smart and what that gets you and what that entails.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Con * Pressure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart” and includes feelings of pressure (internal or external), meeting expectations of self or others.</strong></td>
<td>“And now the pressure is just to like keep up my scholarship.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smart: Con * Relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative statements, feelings, or experiences related to the term “smart” and includes relationships with others.</strong></td>
<td>“Sometimes I'll be talking with them and they will get frustrated at not being able to keep up with what I'm saying. And I don't mean to do that in conversation but that- that kind of makes me feel bad.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choice: Major</strong></td>
<td><strong>Statements related to how or why students chose current major; also</strong></td>
<td>“And you know it's one of the best majors right now”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice: Extracurricular</td>
<td>Statements related to how or why students chose extracurricular or outside the classroom activities; also includes explanations related to activities not chosen.</td>
<td>“I chose to be on the gymnastics team because like I've been doing gymnastics for like 15 16 years and it was like, I just couldn't really imagine life without gymnastics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Action Possibilities: Adaptive</td>
<td>Statements that indicate internal and external behavior in relation to the role that are positive, healthy, adaptive, or result in positive emotions.</td>
<td>“I would I guess study more I would talk to the teacher. I'd go outside go for a run hit the gym do whatever take my mind off of it come back a day later.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Action Possibilities: Maladaptive</td>
<td>Statements that indicate internal and external behavior in relation to the role that are negative, self-sabotaging, maladaptive, or result in negative emotions.</td>
<td>“I took it compared to some people like insane measures to prepare for that test”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions: Self-Esteem, Self-Worth</td>
<td>Statement referring to an emotional experience that also includes reference to one’s own worth, abilities, confidence, pride, or morale.</td>
<td>“It's a good thing to be labeled as smart... Maybe that makes me better than people. Maybe that means I'm special.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>