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Accepting a Scholarly Identity: Gifted Students, Academic Crowd Membership, and Identification with School

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Abstract

This study examined identification with school among middle school students and its relationship with academic crowd membership, a public expression of one's academic orientation. Of the 127 grade 6-8 students in the sample, 55 reported participation in a gifted program. 44% of these gifted students did not claim affiliation with the academic crowd. There was a positive correlation between identification with school and the importance placed on membership for students in the academic crowd, both gifted and nongifted. The California Bully Victimization Scale was used to determine that no group was more likely to have been victimized. Cluster analysis of crowd memberships indicated that gifted students not in the academic crowd had few other crowd memberships, suggesting middle school may be an important time to encourage a willingness to be viewed by peers as academically oriented through promoting identification with school.

Accepting a Scholarly Identity: Gifted Students, Academic Crowd Membership, and Identification with School

Maintaining engagement with school is critical to later success, academically and occupationally (Steinberg, 1996). A high level of interest, liking, and valuing of school or *emotional engagement* is a key component of academic engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Also referred to as *identification with school* (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997), this emotional connection to school is predictive of academic success (Finn & Rock, 1997) or, in its absence, of dropping out (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Students identified as gifted have exhibited some form of exceptional academic potential, but their identification with school is not assured simply by their abilities. Although much attention has been paid to the importance of cognitively challenging environments for gifted students (Rogers, 2007), less focus has been put on the importance of the social environment. Peers loom large in the daily experience of all students. Their influence on gifted students' identification with school has not yet been studied. To begin this exploration, the present study draws together research on identity, the stigma of giftedness, and adolescent crowds.

Academic Identity in Middle School

Physically, cognitively, and socially, middle school is a time of transition. Just at the time children are becoming adolescents, they are thrust into a dramatically different school environment. No longer are they in the same, nurturing class with familiar peers throughout the day. The typical middle school schedule introduces the child to various teachers, each in her or his own classroom. In many cases, multiple elementary schools feed the middle school, creating opportunities to make new friends, but also forcing a new social order. While we tend to think of schools as places for academic learning, they are also where children receive an informal social

education. In this microcosm of the broader society, students learn group norms and acceptable behavior. At the same time, they are negotiating the adolescent crisis of identity formation (Erikson, 1968).

In the potent social environment of school, the influence of peers in identity exploration can be critical (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). Adolescents can encourage high achievement in their peer group (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2005; Brown, Clasen & Eicher, 1986), but the opposite can also occur. Both Berndt and Keefe (1995) and Shin and Ryan (2014) found an influence of peers on adolescents' grades, high or low, over the course of an academic year. To the student with exceptional potential for academic success, such influence can be pivotal. They may be motivated by their relationships to become more or less academically oriented; to fulfill their academic potential or not. Barber and Wasson (2015) found that friends of secondary students who participated in advanced coursework had a stronger identification with school than did friends of students not participating in advanced coursework. How this relationship manifests among gifted students who do not end up in advanced coursework has yet to be explored.

According to Oyserman's (2007) identity-based motivation (IBM) process model, individuals are motivated to act (e.g., spend time on scholarly activities) if the behavior is consistent with their personal and social identities. Social identities derive from personal relationships with others and from group memberships, "the social categories to which one belongs, …[including] information about what members of one's groups are like, how they act, what they care about, and what their goals and values are" (p. 434). If the ingroup – the social group with which one psychologically identifies as a member– does not value scholarly activities, the motivation to pursue them will be diminished. A similar consequence may occur if one believes that an identity is too difficult to achieve. If ingroup activities are seen as too

difficult, that identity may be rejected. If schoolwork is seen as too difficult or an "awkward fit" with other identities, an academic identity is not likely to be pursued. One's sense of self as an ingroup member alters one's perspective on task difficulty. Behaviors that are challenging "will be interpreted as meaning that the behavior is important, not impossible and, therefore, effort is meaningful, not pointless" (Oyserman, 2007, p. 1003). Identity shapes interpretations of task difficulty, but it is also possible that task difficulty can shape one's identity.

Further complicating the picture for gifted students, the stigma of giftedness paradigm (Coleman, 1985) predicts that adolescents with academic gifts and talents will attempt to manage information about themselves in order to achieve their social goals. If gifted students are not comfortable expressing their academic preferences among peers, the possibility exists that they will behave in ways that work against their academic achievement and identification with school. Adolescents may be unaware of the influence of peers on their academic behavior.

Adolescents Becoming Academics

During middle school, explorations in the construction of identity happen in an atmosphere of intense pressure for conformity (Berndt, 1979; Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986). Clasen and Brown (1985) found strong pressures for peer involvement among 7^{th} – 12^{th} graders. This pressure does decrease with age, but not before middle school-aged adolescents must make the difficult choice between spending time with peers or engaged in their schoolwork. Middle-school aged adolescents are particularly vulnerable to peer influence (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Adolescents spend an increasingly greater amount of time with peers than with family (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), leaving open the possibility of greater influence during these years.

For most adolescents, a sense of self is being developed in an environment not of their choosing (i.e., school; Juvonen & Galvan, 2008), with varying opportunities to develop competence in valued activities, and among peers with whom they may or may not have much in common. The social landscape of secondary schools can be a challenging place within which to develop a positive social identity. Students with exceptional academic potential are likely to have a healthy academic self-concept (Hoge &Renzulli, 1993; Marsh, Plucker & Stocking, 2001; Marsh & Yeung, 1997a), part of their personal identity. Their social identity, however, is dependent on their environment. Effective schools communicate the importance of achievement to students through a strong emphasis on academics by "administrators, teachers, and students themselves" (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000, p. 684). These messages serve as cues to motivate students to focus on their achievement, but are only a part of the environment affecting social identity.

A peer group that values academic achievement will motivate adolescents to engage academically. A peer group that does not value academic achievement will motivate them to pursue other, more valued activities. As a measure of peer acceptance, research on adolescent popularity offers an indication of the values many adolescents hold, particularly in regard to academic achievement.

Academic Ability and Popularity

The relationship between academic ability and popularity changes as children mature. Whereas numerous studies find students with high academic ability are popular at early ages (Farmer & Holloway, 1994; Newcomb, Bukowski & Pattee, 1993; Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989), this does not appear to be a lasting relationship, particularly for students who do not have other valued characteristics, such as athletic ability or "coolness." Over

the elementary years, Adler, Kless and Adler (1992) saw these perceptual changes in the students they observed, such that early academic achievement changed from a positive in peer relationships to a "potentially degrading stigma" (p. 176) by the 5th grade. Perceptions of the characteristics associated with social success changed from sincere and responsible among early elementary students to dominant and athletic among middle school students (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011). In a 1962 study, Tannenbaum created fictional profiles from combinations of positive and negative characteristics. When adolescents (N = 615) were asked to rate their preference for each profile, brilliance was favored only when paired with nonstudious and athletic. In fact, the brilliant, nonstudious athlete was the most preferred profile. In contrast, the brilliant, studious, nonathlete was the least preferred profile. Sixty percent of the 60,000 secondary school students surveyed in the Educational Excellence Alliance study agreed with the statement "Not spending time to socialize and hang out tends to make you less popular" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 238). In other words, spending time studying will have a negative effect on one's acceptance among peers.

A majority of the more than 3,000 Minnesota secondary school students responding to a newspaper contest question, "Would you rather be the best looking, most athletic, or smartest student in your class?" claimed they would prefer to be the smartest student (Schroeder-Davis, 1999) and the percentage with this preference increased with age. Although this seems to reflect well on the academic condition, nearly all the respondents who chose smartest gave reasons related to future outcomes. Only 9 of the more than 1,800 students who chose smartest, or .002% of the total sample, claimed social benefits as the reason for their choice. Many students, including 10% of those who preferred to be smartest, described negative social consequences for being perceived as smart. These descriptions fell into one of three categories:

1. loss of peer social status (popularity and prestige);
2. exploitation (peers demanding homework, group grading within cooperative learning); and
3. impossibly high expectations (adults). (Schroeder-Davis, 1999)

Ninth graders were more likely than 11th graders to judge exclusion of peers based on group membership as acceptable (Horn, 2003), suggesting a developmental progression in beliefs about exclusion. High school students in Leets and Sunwolf's (2005) study felt it is fair to exclude peers who are unattractive due to "any stigmatizing condition" (p. 354), which may include high academic ability. African American high school students were careful to avoid being seen as a "brainiac," which they saw as weak and effeminate (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Among the students in Bishop et al.'s (2004) large-scale study, bullying of academically oriented students was commonplace. A high school student in the study commented, "Well my friends and I always make fun of this one girl; all she does is study. It's like she studies for college already [10th grade] - that's so stupid" (p. 238).

Gifted students have often reported feeling different from peers (Robinson, 1996), particularly in terms of their seriousness about learning and work habits (Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 1993). Attention to peers, focus on appearance, athleticism – these are more valued activities among adolescents than studying. When asked how they would explain a successful exam performance to peers and adults, eighth graders in Juvonen and Murdock's (1995) study would tell adults about the effort they had put into preparation, but peers would hear a different story. To peers, participants would attribute success to luck – "an external and uncontrollable attribution" (p. 369) – rather than admit they had been studious.

Despite a significant anti-intellectual sentiment in many schools, some academically

oriented students manage to maintain popularity. High-achieving popular (HAP) students in Francis, Skelton and Read's (2010) study of British 12-13 year-olds shared certain observable characteristics. Of the 22 HAP students identified, 14 were the most popular students in their classes, dubbed the *alpha* HAP students. All HAP students were notably physically attractive and fashionable. They were highly gendered, experts at "girling" and "laddish" behavior. For example, the girls drew attention to their feminine grooming, while boys were active in sports. The HAP students were confident and extraverted, unashamed of their academic engagement, at least at this age. Although not confrontational with teachers, HAP students were markedly not submissive.

In an examination of the characteristics associated with popularity and teacher preference, Gorman, Kim, and Schimmelbusch (2002) found that students who were both popular and preferred by teachers were less aggressive and higher performing than the highly popular students, but more prosocial and less submissive than the students highly preferred by teachers. In both the Gorman et al. and the Francis et al. (2010) studies, popular high achieving students were not submissive, suggesting that this is a key feature to peer acceptance. In Tannenbaum's (1962) study, it was acceptable to be studious, even brilliant, if one was also athletic. Athleticism may be associated with physical strength and, hence, not submissiveness.

This research suggests that, as adolescents process cues related to peer acceptance, being a high achiever may not appear desirable. As Brown and Steinberg (1990) put it, "High achievers seem to be swimming against the developmental tide of adolescence." (p. 57). If they wish to be accepted by peers who value athleticism or "hanging out" over academic engagement, adolescents will be motivated to spend time in the more valued activities (Oyserman, 2007).

Meijs, Cillessen, Scholte, Segers and Spijkerman (2010) found that in secondary

vocational classes, sociometrically popular students – those most liked – were the ones with low achievement and high social intelligence. In college preparatory classes, however, students high in both were the most popular. In an academically oriented environment, high academic ability can be a valued characteristic rather than a social handicap (Cross & Coleman, 1988).

The Adolescent Crowd

Adolescent values are played out not only in individual interactions. They are evident in a broader context through the peer social structure. The *adolescent crowd* is a social category, less formal than a group, with members who may not even interact with other members of the crowd. *Cliques*, often confused with crowds, are interaction-based groups of 2-12 adolescents. The crowd is a larger, amorphous social construction, whose members may or may not be friends. Crowds are found in most U.S. secondary schools, and they serve two important functions (Cross, 2012). The first is a social cognitive function, allowing newcomers to the social situation to quickly size up their peers. Members may be identified by their dress, musical taste, rebelliousness or conformity, and their academic orientation. The second function is related to identity. Not only can adolescents make assumptions about their peers from their reputation in the school; they can also adopt a persona of the crowd they find most attractive. This *affiliation crowd* signals to others the adolescent's values, including his or her inclination to pursue the rewards offered by peers and/or adults.

Rigsby and McDill (1975) proposed that adolescent crowds represent a value orientation. Behavior in school is influenced by "the formal or scholastic status (reward) system of the school" and "the informal status (reward) system" (p. 58). As crowd members lean towards behaviors rewarded by peers, they approach the *fun culture* described by J. S. Coleman (1961). Those who focus on the formal, adult-approved behaviors are more the studious type. Those

working toward rewards from both peers and adults Rigsby and McDill considered well rounded. Some adolescents have little interest in either the formal or informal rewards found in schools – the uninvolved. Adolescent crowds can be positioned in quadrants based on the degree to which they commit to the poles of the two dimensions (Stone & Brown, 1998). Oyserman's (2007) IBM model suggests that one's affiliation crowd will motivate the adolescent to self-regulate in ways they find congruent with the values of other crowd members – adult- or peer-oriented. The importance adolescents place on crowd membership signifies their willingness to engage in behaviors to fit in.

Although the names of crowds may differ in each school (Erard, 2013), a review of the literature identified five common crowd types found in a majority of studies: Elites (e.g., Preps), Athletes (e.g., Jocks), Academics (e.g., Brains), Deviants (e.g., Druggies), and Others (Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007). In nearly all studies of adolescent crowds, the *Normals* or *Average* crowd is the one with the most members in a school. Cross (2012) proposed that this is not actually a crowd, but a preferred adjective by which most adolescents prefer to be known. Crowd membership can be identified by peers – one's *reputational crowd*; by behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics – one's *behavioral crowd*; by their interactions – one's *interactional crowd*; or by self-report of identification with a crowd – one's *affiliation crowd* (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). Decades of research did not distinguish among these methods of identification, which could each result in different membership lists (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). A successful student may be viewed by peers as a Brain, a Prep, or a Jock, while considering him- or herself to be a Normal. Early research in crowds allowed students to self-identify with only one crowd, but adolescents may identify with multiple crowds. Cross and Fletcher (2010) found that 76% of students in their high school sample had multiple crowd affiliations. A Brain may actually

consider her- or himself to also be a Jock or a Normal, or all three. Multiple crowd memberships offer multiple ingroup models for acceptable behavior, suggesting that patterns of crowd membership may influence adolescents' willingness to engage in academic behaviors.

Crowds begin to appear in middle schools, at the same time the social environment expands. No longer are students with a single group of the same students day in and day out. In middle school, hallways fill with all the students in the school as they move from one class to another. In early middle school, there may be only two crowds – the Elites and everyone else (Brown et al., 1994). Over time, the number of crowds increases (Brown, Lohr & Trujillo, 1990) as adolescents begin to commit to an identity and are recognized by peers for their distinctive characteristics. Identification with a crowd is important to adolescents in middle and early high school, but becomes barely important at all as they approach graduation (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986).

Anti-Intellectualism Writ Large: Responses to the Academic Crowd

As the research on the relation between an academic orientation and popularity suggests, the academic crowd is not highly favored in the peer social system. Status rankings of the academic crowd are consistently at a middle-low position on the hierarchy (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994; Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Cross & Fletcher, 2010; Stone & Brown, 1999); not at the bottom, but also not high. Self-esteem measures were lower among students identified as members of low status crowds in Brown and Lohr's (1987) study. Adults may assume that being a successful student would be an admired characteristic in school, but adolescent behavior indicates otherwise. In their study of more than 8,000 high school students, Brown and Steinberg report that only 10% of the many students with all A's in their major courses claimed to be a member of the academic crowd.

Self-reported members of the academic crowd had the lowest health-risk behaviors (LaGreca, Prinstein, & Fetter, 2001) and exhibited positive psychological adjustment (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001). In a longitudinal study, students who identified themselves in high school as members of the Brain crowd had low levels of anxiety and high self-esteem in childhood, but self-esteem decreased significantly over the years (Prinstein & LaGreca, 2002). The Brains in this study also became increasingly lonely from childhood to high school. While academic crowd members have relatively positive psychological adjustment, it appears they experience social challenges throughout their schooling (Bishop et al., 2004; Schroeder-Davis, 1999).

In developing an understanding of the social environment in their schools, adolescents create "caricatures" from the stereotypical traits of their peers (Brown et al., 1994). The academic crowd member caricature is closely linked to that of the nerd and the rejected loner (Brown & Steinberg, 1990). To some adolescents, strong commitment to the formal, adult-oriented reward system in schools is tantamount to rejection of one's peers, and, it appears, is grounds for rejecting such academic types. The struggle to avoid rejection can lead to behaviors detrimental to academic success. As adolescents navigate the complex social environment of schools, public acceptance of an academic crowd reputation may be a risky behavior.

Gifted Students and the Academic Crowd

From her research with gifted students, Gross (1989) concluded that many are forced to choose between "the pursuit of excellence or the search for intimacy" (p. 189), devaluing their own exceptional abilities after being rejected by same-aged peers. To be known as an exceptional student may mean a lonely existence. The stigma of giftedness paradigm (SGP; Coleman, 1985), has three tenets: 1) gifted students, like all students, desire normal interactions

with their classmates; 2) as others learn of their giftedness, they will be treated differently; and 3) gifted students can increase their social latitude by managing the information others have of them. These "brains" can deny their academic strengths, hide them, or distract attention away from them (Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Swiatek, 2001). An attractive option for the adolescent who wishes to be accepted by peers may be to academically disengage (Coleman & Cross, 2000). The pressure of constantly being a target of upward social comparison (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Festinger, 1954) – the one who regularly performs better than peers – can lead gifted students to downplay their achievements. Some schools deny this option to them, with self-contained classes for students identified as gifted, requiring them to take other action to avoid being "outed." Anti-intellectual school norms are enforced by "jeer pressure" and ridicule; concern that they may be the next target compels conformity (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). Underachievement may be the only path for gifted adolescents who want to avoid recognition for their academic abilities.

The social cost of being identified as an academic crowd member may be too great for at least some gifted students. The inability or unwillingness to take on a public identity as a scholar can result in a loss of potential. Such sacrifices have negative outcomes at the societal level, when society suffers from a dearth of educated, deep thinkers to solve complex modern problems (Gallagher, 2011). When high potential students go underground in order to be accepted by peers, their true potential may never be identified. Academic opportunities will not be made available to students whose abilities are not recognized. No research to date has explored the relationship of giftedness and membership in the academic crowd. It is not known how membership in the academic crowd is associated with identification with school, but full participation may not be possible if one is unwilling to be seen as a member.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship of the academic crowd and giftedness, assuming that this relationship is important to identification with school. Of particular interest were differences between gifted students who identify themselves as academic crowd members and those who do not. To identify environmental factors that may have an influence on a willingness to accept a scholarly identity, the following research questions guided the study:

1) Do gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd have a stronger identification with school than those who do not?
2) Do gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd perceive a greater academic emphasis in their school climate from those who do not?
3) Are gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd less likely to have been victimized by bullying peers than those who do not?
4) Do gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd have a different pattern of crowd membership from those who do not?

Method

Participants

Students in grades 6 (*n*=65), 7 (*n*=27), and 8 (*n*=30) enrolled in a large (> 1,000) rural Northeastern U.S. public school volunteered to participate in the study. Table 1 presents participant demographics. Of those reporting ethnicity, 86% were White (*n*=109), 3% multiracial (*n*=4), and 2% African American (*n*=3). The mean age of the sample was 12.22 (*SD* = .98), with a range from 11 to 14 years. Nineteen students did not enter gender, perhaps because of the item's position on the survey, which was less noticeable than age and grade. Of those reporting

gender, 38% (*n*=48) were males and 47% (*n*=60) females. Fifty-five (43%) students reported previous participation in a gifted program. The high percentage of students reporting gifted participation is presumed to be a result of the procedure, which required parent permission and the sacrifice of a study hour. We speculate that a higher number of involved parents, with students who were able to give up a study hour, resulted in a higher number of gifted students participating in the study than would otherwise be expected.

Insert Table 1 about here

Instruments

The anonymous survey included demographic information, adolescent crowd affiliation, past and current extracurricular activities, and past awards or special program participation. Because participation in gifted programming almost universally requires some form of identification, through exceptional academic achievement or ability test performance or other indicators of exceptional academic potential, self-report of prior participation was used to identify gifted students in this study. Questions about gifted program participation were nested within questions regarding other extracurricular activities to avoid drawing attention to students' giftedness. For example, the survey included questions such as, "Have you ever been nominated for a sports award?" and "Have you ever participated in a summer camp?" in addition to the key question for gifted identification, "Have you ever participated in a gifted program?" Perceptions of crowd status in the school were identified by responses to the statement "At ____ School, this crowd has…" with choices of "Highest Status," "High Status," "Medium Status," "Low Status," and "Lowest Status." The crowd names obtained from student meetings (see Procedure section) were listed. Participants could add any crowd names not on the list. These questions were

followed by the school climate survey to avoid priming of crowd status when asked for crowd affiliation and importance.

Determining students' affiliation crowd, as opposed to their behavioral, reputational, or interactional crowd (Cross & Fletcher, 2009), was most appropriate for this research question and was assessed by responses to the question, "How much do you consider yourself to belong to this crowd?" and the list of student-provided crowd names (see Procedure section). Choices were from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). Participants also rated the importance of membership, "How important is it for you to belong to this crowd?" with choices from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely). Participants could select multiple crowd memberships. Although participants could enter other crowd names for status rankings or membership, only 4% (n = 5) of students did so ("weird," "funny," "friendly," "careful," and "awesome"). These names were not used in the analysis.

Student School Climate Survey. Mitchell, Kensler, and Tschannen-Moran's (2010) 61-item survey includes 5 subscales: Identification with School (10 items adapted from Voelkl, 1996; e.g., "I feel proud of being part of my school," "I enjoy coming to school"), Cronbach's α = .70; Academic Press (12 items; e.g., "Students respect others who get good grades," "The content of my courses is challenging"), Cronbach's α = .81; Discipline (3 items; "Teachers control classroom behavior," "The rules in this school are clear"), Cronbach's α = .52; Student Safety (9 items; e.g., "I feel safe inside the school," "Gangs are a problem at my school" reverse coded), Cronbach's α = .83; and Student Trust (19 items; e.g., "My teachers care about me," "Teachers at this school really listen to students"), Cronbach's α = .95.

California Bully Victimization Survey (CBVS). The CBVS (Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011) was developed using a behavior-based self-report strategy. The

term *bully* is never used, relying instead on questions related to behaviors. The CBVS identifies the components of the three-part definition of bullying: repetitive, intentional, and with an imbalance of power favoring the aggressor. Victims were identified by their responses to questions such as "How often have you been teased or called names in a mean or hurtful way?" with choices from 1=Not in the past month, 2=Once in the past month, 3=2 or 3 times in the past month, 4=About once a week, and 5=Several times a week. Additionally, participants were asked about "the MAIN person or leader who did these things to you in the past month" and "how this person compare[s] with you" in popularity, smartness, physical strength, good looks, athleticism, wealth, and age. Responses were 1=Less/younger than me, 2=Same as me, or 3=More/older than me. A participant was assigned victim status if any of the eight victimization question responses was greater than 2 (2 or 3 times in the past month or more) and any of the seven indicators of power was greater than 2 (more/older than me). Bully status was determined if responses to any of the eight bully questions (e.g., "How often have YOU left another student out of a group or ignored another student on purpose in a mean or hurtful way?") was greater than 2 (repetitive) and any of the power differential items was 1 (less/younger than me). Bully-victim status was given when both bully and victim status were assigned.

Procedure

During the second week of September, the researchers sent a letter to the parents of all of the students who attended the middle school. The letter outlined the purpose of the study as well as the anticipated time required for its completion. Additionally, the parents were requested to provide written permission for their child to participate. Out of approximately 1,000 letters, 190 forms were returned authorizing student participation. Of these, 127 students were able to participate in the survey; approximately 13% of the student body.

Prior to the implementation of the questionnaire, one of the researchers attended a series of separate grade-level meetings, termed the *Principal's Cabinet*. Approximately 12 students from each respective grade attended these meetings, for a total of 37 students. During these meetings, the researcher explained the nature of the study and asked for specifics about the crowds that were part of the middle school culture. From these discussions the following crowd names were identified and later used in the actual survey: Preps, Jocks, Hicks, Nerds/Brains/Smart Ones (the academic crowd), Druggies, Skaters, Normals. The survey also allowed students to enter other crowd names. To accommodate the school's district and state-level testing and to give students time to become acclimated to the social structure of the school, surveys were administered in early December, 2012 during the students' study hour.

Results

To answer the research questions, participants were first classified by their participation in gifted programs and academic crowd membership. The academic crowd (n = 61) was made up of students who had participated in gifted programs (n = 31; 51%) and students who had not (n =30; 49%). An analysis of membership in the academic crowd resulted in assignment of all participants to one of four categories: gifted and a member of the academic crowd (GAC), gifted but not a member of the academic crowd (GNAC), not gifted and a member of the academic crowd (NGAC), and not gifted and not a member of the academic crowd (NGNAC). Table 1 contains category demographics. Participants did not view the academic crowd status differently, but they differ significantly in their perceptions of how important it is to be an academic crowd member (see Table 2), $F(3, 123) = 11.19$, $p < .01$.

Status of crowds in the school was determined by averaging the full sample's crowd status rating. The order from highest status to lowest status was as follows: Preps (M = 3.98, SD

= 1.12), Jocks (*M* = 3.75, *SD* = 1.18), Normals (*M* = 3.56, *SD* = 1.27), Hicks (*M* = 3.13, *SD* = 1.21), Brains (*M* = 3.07, *SD* = 1.19), Druggies (*M* = 2.29, *SD* = 1.38), Skaters (*M* = 2.20, *SD* = 1.12). Hicks and Brains had similar scores in this rural sample.

Insert Table 2 about here

School climate. To answer the first and second research questions, "Did gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd have a stronger identification with school than those who did not?" and "Did gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd perceive a greater academic emphasis in their school climate from those who did not?" multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with school climate subscales (Identification with School, Academic Press, Discipline, Student Safety, and Student Trust) as dependent variables, and academic crowd category (GAC, GNAC, NGAC, NGNAC) as the independent variable. The MANOVA results suggested no significant difference for the four groups of students, F (15, 329) = .75, $p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.91$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, indicating that gifted or non-gifted students who did and did not consider themselves members of the academic crowd did not differ in their responses on any school climate subscale.

To further explore the relationship of school climate and academic crowd membership, an index was calculated by multiplying the magnitude of membership by the magnitude of importance of AC membership. This index could range from 1 (for those who responded *Not at all* to the question "How much do you consider yourself to belong to this crowd?" and *Not at all* to the question "How important is it for you to belong to this crowd?") to 25 (for those who responded *Very much* to the question "How much do you consider yourself to belong to this crowd?" and *Extremely* to the question "How important is it for you to belong to this crowd?"). Bivariate correlations of the academic crowd index were executed for each category.

For GAC participants, academic crowd index and Identification with School (r = .46, p < .01) and Academic Press (r = .36, p < .05) were positively correlated. For GNAC participants, only Discipline was significantly correlated with academic crowd index (r =.41, p < .05). For NGAC participants, Identification with School was significantly correlated with academic crowd index (r = .45, p < .05). No correlations were significant for NGNAC participants.

Bully status. In response to such research as Bishop et al. (2004) or Fordham and Ogbu (1986), in which academically oriented students were bullied or picked on, the third research question asked, **"**Were gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd less likely to have been victimized by bullying peers than those who did not?" Based on their responses to victimization and bullying behavior items on the CBVS, participants were placed in one of four categories: Not Bully or Victim, Bully, Victim, or Bully/Victim (see Table 1). Although many students reported having been victimized at least once in the past month, very few met the criteria of repetitive acts by a peer with greater power (i.e., more popular, smarter, stronger, etc.). A Pearson's chi-square test examination of associations between GAC and GNAC members and their bully category was not significant, χ^2 = 2.91, p > .05. The CBVS allows respondents to choose from 33 options of possible reasons they were bullied. Of the GAC or GNAC members (n = 3) who reported being bullied repetitively in the previous month by a person with greater power, only one GAC student believed the bullying was because "They think I get good grades." Of the 16 GNAC members who reported being victimized even once in the previous month, the most common response (n = 6; 38%) was "They think my friends are weird." A quarter of these students (n = 4) believed they were victimized because "They think I get good grades" or for the other student's perceptions of their appearance (fat, skinny, funny-looking, too short), clothing choices, or "They say I'm gay." GAC students who reported being victimized in the previous

month, but not necessarily repetitively (n = 15), were most likely to report the reason as perceptions that they are fat, wimpy, have weird friends, or are different (n = 6; 40%). A third of these students also reported being picked on for perceptions of their good grades, poor clothing choices, or being wealthy (n = 5; 33%).

Crowd membership patterns. The fourth research question, "Did gifted students who claim membership in the academic crowd have a different pattern of crowd membership from those who did not?" indicated the need to conduct an analysis of the various crowd memberships. Participants belonged to a variety of crowds and placed differing levels of importance on membership. Table 1 lists the number of crowds to which students claimed to be "somewhat" or more a member. To explore patterns of crowd membership, cluster analysis using Ward's method with squared Euclidean distance was performed with the full sample, using the index of crowd membership and importance as cluster variables. Visual inspection of the dendrogram indicated a five-cluster solution as optimal. Five readily interpretable clusters were found: Low Crowd (n=55, no high scores in any crowd index), Rural (n=8, highest Hick index), Prep-Jock (n=14, highest Prep and Jock indexes), Smart Ones (n=12, highest scores in academic crowd index), and Normals (n=38, highest scores on the Normal crowd index). Crowd index means for each cluster appear in Table 3. The distribution of gifted students into the clusters and further descriptive statistics are given in Table 4.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

Low Crowd is the largest cluster, containing 43.4% of the total sample. Students in the Low Crowd cluster had low indexes (membership and importance) on all crowds, indicating they did not feel strongly affiliated with any crowd, including the academic crowd. The Rural cluster was the smallest cluster and the highest crowd index for these students was for the Hicks crowd.

Students in the Prep-Jock cluster had the highest crowd indexes in those two crowds. The Normals cluster (highest indexes in the Normal crowd) was the second largest, with 30% of the students. GAC students were spread across all clusters, suggesting that the academic crowd is only one of several crowds of which many of these students felt a part. Both GNAC and NGNAC students had a much larger presence in the Low Crowd cluster than any other, $\chi^2 = 31.25$, $p < .05$.

A few of the crowd status rankings differed by cluster (see Figure 1). The Prep, Hick, Druggie and Skater crowd status ratings did not differ significantly among the five clusters. Members of the Low Crowd cluster considered the Jock crowd to have higher status ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.12$) than did the Normals cluster ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.13$), F (4, 100) = 3.31, $p < .05$. The Prep-Jocks thought significantly less of the Brain crowd ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.07$) than did the Smart Ones ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.31$), F(4, 106) = 2.75, $p < .05$. The Normals cluster, highest in the Normal crowd index, had a significantly higher opinion of the Normal crowd ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.03$) than either the Low Crowd cluster ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.31$) or the Prep-Jock cluster ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.19$), F (4, 107) = 3.9, $p < .01$.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Non-gifted academic crowd members. Although no research questions were associated with the non-gifted students, half of the AC was made up of students who reported no participation in gifted programs (NGAC; $n = 30$). These students may not have been identified as having exceptional academic abilities, but their membership in the AC indicates a willingness or desire to be a member of an academically oriented social category. It is relevant to consider how these students compared with their identified gifted peers.

The MANOVA of school climate subscales found no differences among the four categories. GAC, GNAC, NGAC, and NGNAC students did not differ in their responses on any school climate subscale, including Identification with School. The correlations of school climate subscales with academic crowd index indicated a positive relationship between NGAC's importance of membership in the AC with Identification with School ($r = .45$, $p < .05$). There was no difference in the probability of being victimized among any of the academic crowd groups, including NGAC students ($\chi^2 = 10.80$, $p > .05$). NGAC students were similar to GAC students in their patterns of crowd membership.

Discussion

The academic crowd provides a context for adolescents' social relationships (Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994). Those who see themselves as a member of the academic crowd take their cues for appropriate behaviors from its members (Oyserman, 2007). Students who have been identified as gifted have good reason to claim membership in this academic crowd. When gifted students do not, there is the possibility that they are not fully academically engaged. Although there were few differences between the GAC and GNAC students in this study, there are two findings with significant implications. First, the GNAC students in this study appear not committed to any crowd in school, suggesting they may be at an impressionable time. Second, the importance of being a member of the academic crowd was significantly correlated with identification for school among all the academic crowd members. Oyserman's (2007) IBM theory suggests that these crowd members are looking to each other for valued behaviors and finding a positive attitude toward school activities. A strong identification with school may be associated with a willingness to be seen by peers as academically oriented and this willingness can be obtained by gifted and nongifted students, alike. In the discussion that follows, we explore

this first examination of gifted students and the academic crowd.

Perceptions of and membership in the academic crowd

A high proportion of students in this sample were either gifted (43%) or in the academic crowd (48%). Other studies find smaller proportions of academic crowd membership (e.g., Brown & Lohr, 1987; Cross & Fletcher, 2010; Urberg, 1992). The high proportion in this study may be due to the procedure followed, which required students to receive parental permission and to give up one study hour. The 13% response rate suggests that a select few students, possibly those with parents who were closely involved in their child's education, participated in the study. Although not planned, this was an advantage for this exploration of gifted students and the academic crowd, but the sample is not likely to be representative of the larger population.

The academic crowd in this sample had a preponderance of younger members, but an almost equal number of students who had participated in gifted programs (n = 31) and who had not (n = 30; see Table 1). Its status was relatively low in the school (see Total line in Figure 1), but not the lowest of the eight crowds identified. Gifted students who could present themselves to peers as academically oriented but did not (the GNAC), did not differ from others in their perceptions of the academic crowd's status in the school (see Table 2), but they did consider it less important to be a member than their gifted peers who saw themselves as members of the crowd (GAC). The GNAC were more closely aligned with their nongifted NGNAC peers in their assessment of the importance of being an academic crowd member. Status of the crowd may play a more significant role in identity formation for students with a particular pattern of membership, such as those in the Prep-Jock cluster. Adolescents may choose to avoid academic crowd membership for a variety of reasons, as we explore below.

Avoiding Academic Crowd Membership

School climate explanations. Attitudes toward school could lead students to avoid academic crowd membership. A simple comparison of students' Identification with School, Student Trust, Academic Press, Student Safety, and Discipline finds no differences among the four academic crowd categories (GAC, etc.). An examination of the relationship of the importance students gave to academic crowd membership with their school climate attitudes provides an interesting perspective on differences among the groups. The academic press of the school – a respect for and commitment to scholastic success among teachers and students, rigor in coursework, and high expectations for achievement – was significantly positively correlated with academic crowd index only among the GAC students. As press increased, these students more strongly felt they belonged and wanted to belong to the academic crowd. The fact that this relationship did not manifest among the NGAC may suggest there is less encouragement for these students' achievement than for the students who have participated in gifted programs.

A moderate positive correlation between Identification with School and academic crowd index existed for both the GAC and NGAC participants. No causation can be assumed from this relationship, but students who value academics may have stronger positive feelings about school in general or, perhaps, students who have positive feelings about their school grow to value academics and the social experience of being recognized as a successful student. In either case, this relationship was not found among the GNAC or the NGNAC. Although GNAC students had participated in gifted programs previously, the association between school connectedness and their desire to be identified publicly as a successful student did not exist in this sample.

Because they were not members of the academic crowd, indexes for the GNAC were necessarily lower than that of the GAC and NGAC. For both GNAC and NGNAC, the academic crowd index was more a measure of the importance they placed on membership. For NGNAC,

no school climate measure was correlated with academic crowd index. Discipline, a measure of the student's perception of the control teachers have and the clarity of rules and fairness of discipline, was the only school climate measure positively correlated with GNAC students' academic crowd index. It is possible that GNAC students had a strong preference for order and this manifested in a belief that it is important to be in the academic crowd, but such inclinations were not discernible from the instruments used in this study. As gifted students, GNAC adolescents could stake a claim as a scholar in the school, but it may be they did not feel this is "who they are" based on their perceptions of who should be in the crowd. Further research is needed to clarify the reasons for this relationship.

Avoidance due to bullying. From the literature review, it is evident that some adolescents may avoid membership in the academic crowd because of anti-intellectual pressure from peers. To test whether this was occurring explicitly, students were asked about being victimized in school. Based on their appearance in the various bully status categories, there is no indication that the GNAC students received more bullying than their GAC peers. The GNAC victims' most frequently reported reason for being picked on was having "weird" friends, with getting good grades reported by 25% of the 16 GNAC victims. If these "weird" friends are members of the academic crowd, this may be an impetus to avoid association. The GAC victims selected more reasons for their victimization. The loss of self-esteem reported by Prinstein and LaGreca (2002) may have its roots in such victimization.

Commitment to any crowd. A majority of students claimed membership in one or more crowds (see Table 1). The most frequent number of memberships for the GAC was three and two for the NGAC. Because they were not in the academic crowd, GNAC and NGNAC had one fewer membership to begin than the other two categories. In both GNAC and NGNAC, the most

frequent number of memberships was one. Nearly a third of GAC students had more than three crowd memberships. As suggested by the number of crowd memberships, a majority of GNAC and NGNAC students were in the Low Crowd cluster, characterized by low indexes on all crowds. Although a number of the GAC and NGAC students were in this cluster, they tended to fall into the Smart Ones and the Normals. Middle school is a critical time for identity exploration, but the GNAC students may not have been prepared to engage in such a search.

Members of the Prep-Jock cluster considered the academic crowd to have low status, whereas members of the Smart Ones cluster considered it relatively high. For GNAC students, being considered lower status may be unappealing. In the future, the Smart Ones may not be able to maintain their beliefs about the high status of the academic crowd, when the students with highest status (Preps and Jocks) in the school believe differently.

Implications and Limitations

It may be naïve of adults to assume that adolescents should consider it important to be a member of the academic crowd. With the powerful social influences adolescents encounter in schools, there are many conflicting decisions to be made regarding one's identity. For some students, wishing to be known as an academically oriented student implies a rejection of peers not so inclined. The results of this study suggest that one's identification with school may be key to social and academic harmony. Educators can address many factors that contribute to disidentification with school, such as helping students feel a sense of belonging by encouraging participation in activities and ensuring success (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997). Increasing participation and identification with school can be accomplished without sacrificing academic rigor, a particularly salient concern for those working with gifted students, who require teachers' attention to the level of challenge and complexity to stay motivated in school (Kanevsky &

Keighley, 2003). Ensuring a match between students' abilities and the level of challenge may also encourage students who are wavering in their commitment to an academic identity. If they perceive academics as too difficult or an awkward fit, they may reject their scholarly selves (Oyserman, 2007). An anti-intellectual environment may be discouraged in a school that attends to academic, social, and emotional success. Fostering students' identification with school may lead to positive group norms, reducing bullying and increasing acceptance of diversity.

The relationship between academic crowd affiliation and actual achievement is unknown. Gifted students who do not identify with the academic crowd may achieve at a level equal to students who do. However, it may be difficult to take advantage of educational opportunities without public recognition of one's academic abilities, potentially leading to a reputation as a Brain. In addition to loss of status, adolescents known as Brains may be fearful of peers exploiting their abilities or the unattainable expectations of adults (Schroeder-Davis, 1999). The research reviewed here indicates that avoiding affiliation with the academic crowd is possible for high achievers by engaging in diverse activities, not being submissive, and, especially, not exposing how much time is spent studying to peers.

The NGAC are a group of particular interest. All students considered "Brains" are not necessarily students who have been identified as gifted. The NGAC may include students who are sufficiently academically motivated for high achievement. Andersen and Cross (2014) found that many of the students in their study who were highly motivated for math or science were not classified by their math achievement test scores as high ability. These highly motivated students may not be identified for advanced educational opportunities, even though they are highly motivated to pursue them. The NGAC may be similarly underserved; willing to do the work, but not identified for their motivation. Schools that provide encouragement and appropriate

challenge for all students would support the maximization of potential among motivated students who may not meet the standard for gifted identification.

Caution should be used in interpreting these findings. The sample was small, with a skew towards highly engaged students. Gifted status was determined by self-reported participation in gifted programming. Future studies would benefit from a whole-school approach, using school records to identify gifted students. It would be valuable to examine these constructs among high school students. Gifted students in high school will have had more opportunities to explore identities, with a greater number of crowd options (Brown, Lohr, & Trujillo, 1990).

Conclusion

Middle school students are in the early stages of finding out who they are. When the possible self of "scholar" is open for all to explore, all students will feel welcome to present their academic selves to peers during their search for identity. Fostering an identification with school among all students through positive interactions with adults in the school, ensured success at an appropriate level of challenge, and an emphasis on students' well-being may be effective in encouraging all students to feel comfortable being recognized as one of the Smart Ones.

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Table 1

Demographics, bully victim status, and crowd status by academic crowd membership

	GAC (*n* = 31) *n* (%)	GNAC (*n*=24) *n* (%)	NGAC (*n*=30) *n* (%)	NGNAC (*n*=42) *n* (%)	Total (*n*=127) *n* (%)
Gender					
Male	11 (35.5)	10 (41.7)	6 (20)	21 (50)	48 (37.8)
Female	17 (54.8)	11 (45.8)	14 (46.7)	18 (42.9)	60 (47.2)
Missing	3 (9.7)	3 (12.5)	10 (33.3)	3 (7.1)	19 (15)
Grade					
6	17 (54.8)	11 (45.8)	16 (53.3)	20 (47.6)	64 (50.4)
7	2 (6.5)	7 (29.2)	9 (30)	8 (19)	26 (20.5)
8	10 (32.3)	4 (16.7)	4 (13.3)	11 (26.2)	29 (22.8)
Missing	2 (6.5)	2 (8.3)	1 (3.3)	3 (7.1)	8 (6.3)
Bully Victim Status					
Not Bully or Victim	24 (77)	16 (66.7)	16 (53.3)	22 (52.4)	78 (61.4)
Bully	2 (6.5)	1 (4.2)	1 (3.3)	5 (11.9)	9 (7.1)
Victim	4 (12.9)	7 (29.2)	12 (40)	12 (28.6)	35 (27.6)
Bully/Victim	1 (3.2)	0 (0)	1 (3.3)	3 (7.1)	5 (3.9)
Number of Crowd Memberships					
0	0 (0)	4 (26.6)	0 (0)	11 (73.3)	15 (11.8)
1	2 (6.7)	10 (33.3)	2 (6.7)	16 (53.3)	30 (23.6)
2	8 (21.1)	3 (7.9)	17 (44.7)	10 (26.3)	38 (29.9)

3	12 (42.9)	6 (21.4)	5 (17.9)	5 (17.9)	28 (22)
4	7 (58.3)	1 (8.1)	4 (33)	0 (0)	12 (9.5)
5	1 (33)	0 (0)	2 (67)	0 (0)	3 (2.4)
6	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
7	1 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.8)

Note: GAC = Gifted in Academic Crowd; GNAC = Gifted not in Academic Crowd; NGAC = Not Gifted but in Academic Crowd; NGNAC = Not Gifted and Not in Academic Crowd.

Table 2

Academic Crowd Status Ratings and Importance of Membership

Academic Crowd	GAC	GNAC	NGAC	NGNAC
Status Rating	3.14 (1.25)	2.91 (1.09)	3.14 (1.16)	3.06 (1.27)
Membership Importance	3.26 (1.51)[a]	2.04 (1.57)[b,c]	2.9 (1.49)[a,b]	1.55 (1.04)[c]

Note: GAC = Gifted in Academic Crowd; GNAC = Gifted not in Academic Crowd; NGAC = Not Gifted but in Academic Crowd; NGNAC = Not Gifted and Not in Academic Crowd.

[a,b,c] Means differ between groups with different superscripts ($p < .01$).

Table 3

Mean Crowd Indexes by Cluster

	Prep Index *M*(*SD*)	Jock Index *M*(*SD*)	Norm Index *M*(*SD*)	Hick Index *M*(*SD*)	Brain Index *M*(*SD*)	Drug Index *M*(*SD*)	Skate Index *M*(*SD*)
Low Crowd *n*=55	1.85(1.36)	2.51(2.31)	2.73(1.77)	1.80(1.54)	2.82(2.61)	1.33(1.01)	1.42(1.04)
Rural *n*=8	1.00(0)	2.63(3.11)	4.50(3.16)	**20.38(5.39)**	4.75(3.73)	1.00(0)	1.25(.46)
Prep-Jock *n*=14	**13.00(6.57)**	**13.14(9.21)**	8.36(5.22)	1.71(1.13)	7.21(6.63)	1.14(.53)	2.14(2.98)
Smart Ones *n*=12	3.92(3.67)	4.17(4.76)	7.08(5.14)	5.67(5.78)	**21.08(3.8)**	1.00(0)	1.67(1.23)
Normals *n*=38	3.34(2.97)	3.05(4.56)	**20.84(4.79)**	4.74(5.61)	8.53(7.11)	1.58(1.91)	2.61(4.99)

Note: Bolding indicates highest index within cluster.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for clusters

Cluster	Total Sample	Gender		Grade			GAC (*n*=31)	GNAC (*n*=24)	NGAC (*n*=30)	NGNAC (*n*=42)
		Female	Male	6th	7th	8th				
Low Crowd	55 (43.3%)	24	23	25	14	13	8	14	9	24
Rural	8 (6.3%)	2	4	3	1	3	2	0	1	5
Prep-Jock	14 (11%)	4	8	6	3	3	5	4	1	4
Smart Ones	12 (9.4%)	6	4	5	2	5	7	0	5	0
Normals	38 (29.9%)	24	9	25	6	5	9	6	14	9
Total	127	60	48	64	26	29	31	24	30	42

Note: GAC = Gifted in Academic Crowd; GNAC = Gifted not in Academic Crowd; NGAC = Not Gifted but in Academic Crowd; NGNAC = Not Gifted and Not in Academic Crowd.

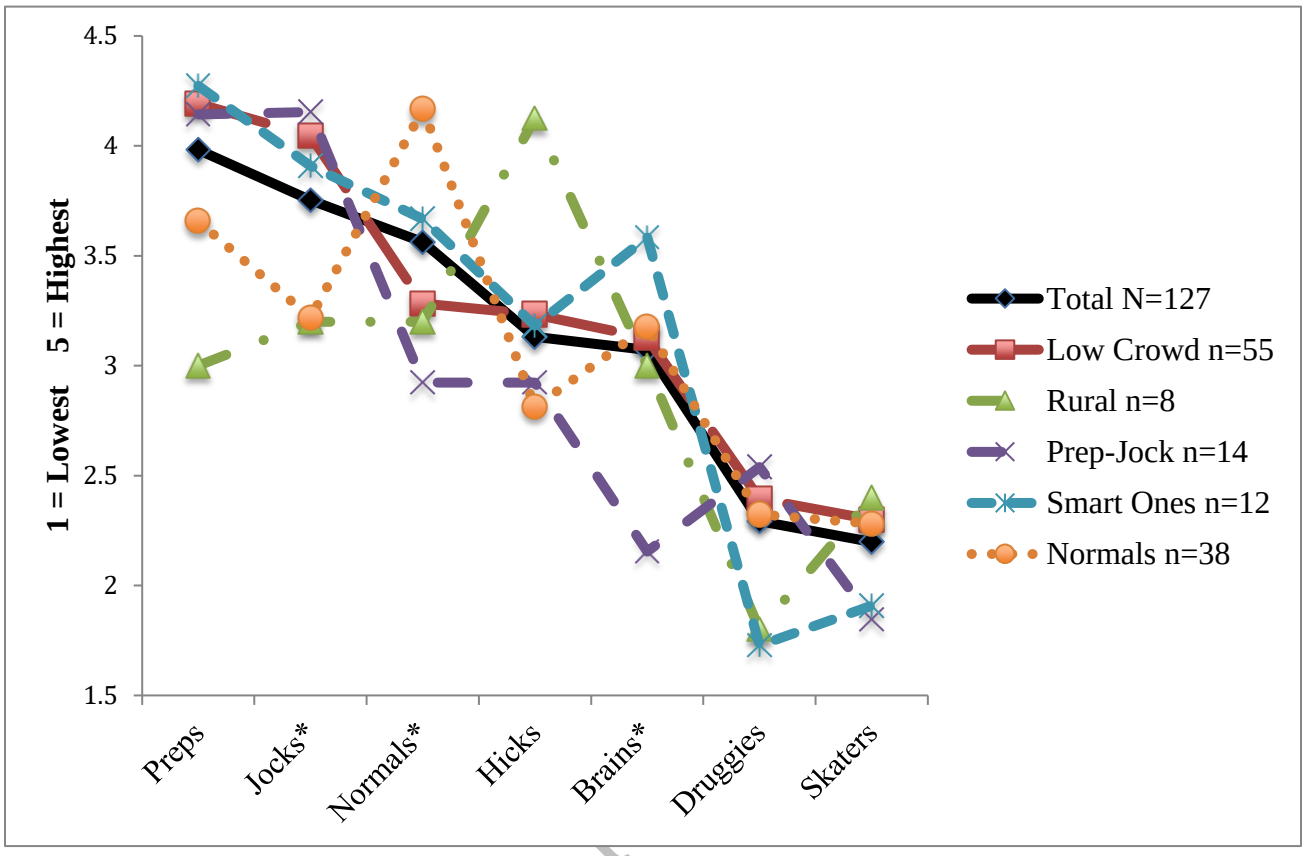

Figure 1. Crowd Status Ratings by Cluster