

Background

The ways students embrace and feel like they fit at their college environment has implications for their psychological and academic well-being (e.g., Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Nafziger, Holland, & Gottfredson, 1975). We were interested in considering students' autobiographical narratives of **self-defining events** (important, emotion-heavy experiences) and whether students mentioned fit with or belonging at their current college as a possible indicator of how students feel they belong at the current college.

Method

- In a secondary analysis, self-defining memories were collected and analyzed from 269 undergraduates attending a mid-Atlantic university (*M* age = 19.46 years; 79.9% women; 46.1% first-year students).
 - Students recalled self-defining experiences and self-reported the ways these memories continued to elicit emotions in the present (i.e., shame, pride).
 - Reports of pride (*M* = 4.07; *SD* = 2.32) and shame (*M* = 2.22; *SD* = 1.73) were collected on a 1-7 scale.
 - The authors co-designed a three-point **coding scheme** to rate these memories for spontaneous evaluations of the current and alternative college (positive or negative) in self-defining memories (interrater reliability on 25% of cases, ordinal gammas = 1.00). Codes for the current college are presented below:
 - 1 = the current college was mentioned, but the student's feelings toward the college were negative.
 - Ex. "I'm really regretting being at Kansas. I don't fit in here at all."
 - 0 = there was no mention of the student's current college at all or the college was mentioned, but without reflection.
 - +1 = the current college was mentioned and regarded positively by the student.
 - Ex. "I really feel like I tapped into my potential at Mizzou."
- Students also reported on their **sense of belonging** at the current college (Goodenow, 1993; [1-5]; $\alpha = .90$).

Results

Current College Evaluation Counts Alternative College Evaluation Counts

	Current College Evaluation Counts	Alternative College Evaluation Counts
Negative Evaluations	2	3
Positive Evaluations	21	5
No Evaluations	230	245

- Overall, spontaneous evaluations of the current college environment in self-defining memories were sparse (mentioned in 9.1% of self-defining memories).
- ANOVAs compared these evaluations with student outcomes.
- Students did not differ in reports of college belonging by their self-defining memory evaluations.
- Students who had positive evaluations of the current college reported feeling the highest levels of pride from their self-defining memories, whereas students who had negative evaluations of the current college reported feeling the highest levels of shame from their self-defining memories.

	SS	df	MS	F	p
College Belonging					
Current College Evaluation	.93	2	129.70	1.23	.295
Alternative College Evaluation	.30	2	.47	.40	.672
Error	94.21	248	.15		
Total	95.45	252	.38		
Pride from the Self-Defining Memory					
Current College Evaluation	98.35	2	49.17	9.69	.000
Alternative College Evaluation	17.68	2	8.84	1.74	.177
Error	1257.98	248	5.07		
Total	1384.09	252			
Shame from the Self-Defining Memory					
Current College Evaluation	57.33	2	28.67	10.14	.000
Alternative College Evaluation	7.75	2	3.88	1.37	.256
Error	700.80	248	2.83		
Total	764.99	252			

Figure 1: Reported Pride from Self-Defining Memories

Tukey-corrected post-hoc contrasts showed that students who framed self-defining memories with positive, spontaneous evaluations of their current college reported their memories as eliciting significantly more pride than either students who did not mention their current college or those who mentioned the current college in a negative light ($ps < .001$).

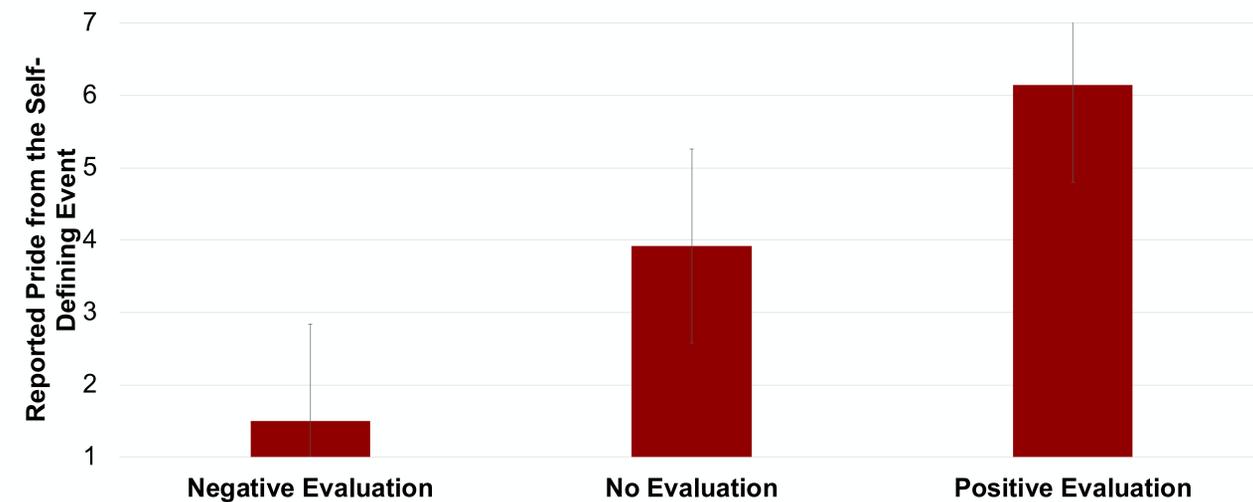
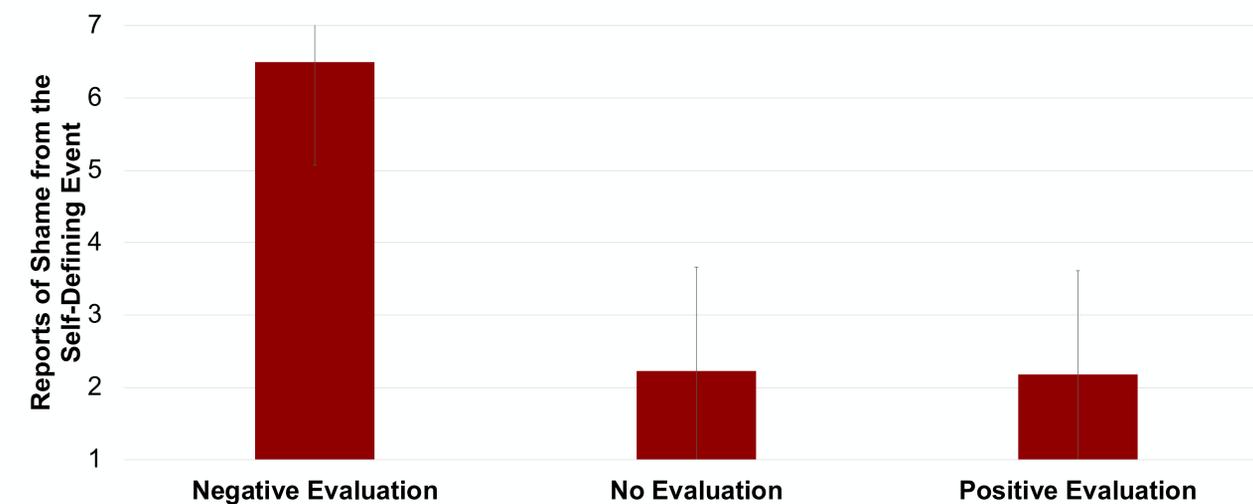


Figure 2: Reported Shame from Self-Defining Memories

Tukey-corrected post-hoc contrasts showed that students who framed self-defining memories with negative, spontaneous evaluations of their current college reported their memories as eliciting significantly more shame than either students who did not mention their current college or those who mentioned the current college in a positive light ($ps < .001$).



Discussion

- It was rarer for students to explicitly mention the ways they felt about their current college or the process of being accepted to/moving to their current college. It was especially rare for them to mention other college settings (i.e., places they did not gain admittance to or wish they were attending instead).
- Surprisingly, students' positive or negative mentions of their college in self-defining memories were not associated with reports of belonging at that college.
- However, students who had positive, spontaneous evaluations of their *current* college tended to feel stronger feelings of pride from self-defining memories, whereas those with negative evaluations of the current college reported stronger feelings of shame in self-defining memories.
- This data can be used to better understand the college experience and ways students might feel about the environment they're in.
- Moving forward, it would be beneficial to expand the study to other types of elicit emotions to get a more well-rounded outlook on students' experiences at college. As college administrators attempt to understand and improve the early college experience, asking students for an open reflection on their experience may be especially beneficial.