

Ethnic Differences in Adolescents' Possible Selves:  
The Role of Ethnic Identity in Shaping Self-concept

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What do you most hope is true about you when you grow up?

What do you most fear becoming?

Adolescents' answers to these questions are an important part of their self-concept and comprise what Markus and Nurius (1986) have coined adolescents' "possible selves". Another salient dimension of adolescents' self-concepts, particularly for racial minorities, is their ethnic identity: the personal meaning they attach to their ethnicity. Using a sample of 1380 black and white 7th graders, this study investigates the relationship between adolescents' possible selves and two aspects of their ethnic identities. In doing so, it represents the first attempt to empirically examine the link between these two domains. Analyses indicated that the extent to which black adolescents mention *academic achievement*, *sports success*, *jobs*, and *criminal behavior* in their possible selves may depend, in part, on aspects of their ethnic identity.

## Introduction

One's sense of being a teenager shapes the ways in which one negotiates being an adult. This study examines one of the mechanisms that may underlie this process. Specifically, it links two different domains of adolescents' self-concepts: their ethnic identity and their visions of their futures.

Because both theory (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1990) and empirical evidence (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990) support a connection between future selves and actual future behavior, the link between adolescents' ethnic identities and their possible selves warrants exploration.

### **Possible Selves**

This study begins from the assumption that peoples' self-concepts "extend both backward and forward in time" (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Such a dynamic understanding of the self was first articulated by William James (1910). Years later Erik Erikson (1959, 1968) used a similar notion when describing adolescent identity. More recently, dynamic concepts of the self inform current models of identity development. In short, the constituents of the self include the possible as well as the actual.

These forward-looking hopes and concerns are represented in the self-concept in the form of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are both positive and negative: goals for which to strive and possibilities to avoid. For adolescents, possible selves represent a vision of, and hence a guide to, their own impending adulthood.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Just as self-concept is temporally diverse, so too does it contain many social dimensions. One area of socialization receiving increased attention is the development of adolescents' ethnic self-concept, or ethnic identity. This study specifically explores two characteristics of black adolescents' ethnic identities: the *personal importance* that they attach to being black and the *black-identification of the their peer groups*.

## Predictions

### **Ethnic identity and academic possible selves**

Fordham and Ogbu's studies exploring the link between black children's' academic under-performance and the ethos of their minority culture support a specific connection between ethnic identity and academic possible selves. Fordham and Ogbu (1986; Ogbu, 1990) suggest that some black students define academic success as a white students' prerogative. Such students view working hard in school and getting good grades as "acting White", hence undesirable. Thus this study predicts:

1. Black adolescents will describe academically successful hoped-for selves less frequently than their white peers.

Additionally, Fordham (1988) suggests that the closer physical and emotional proximity black adolescents have with the black community, the more pressure they will feel to exhibit "black" identities: specifically, the more pressure they will feel to define what it means to be a successful adolescent in non-academic terms. Accordingly, this study also predicts:

2. Adolescents with salient black identities will express academically successful hoped-or selves less frequently than black adolescents with less salient black identities.

### **Ethnic identity and sports-related possible selves**

One way to understand adolescents' possible selves is as the internalization and concretization of their adult role models. Ethnographic studies examining the aspirations of black adolescents indicate that black youths' role models differ from the role models of their white peers. Specifically, black adolescents have fewer, and less varied, same-race adult role models to emulate than do white adolescents.

One field in which Blacks do dominate is sports. The literature (e.g., Staples, 1991; Stafford, 1991) suggests that because black men dominate sports at both the collegiate and professional level, they are the most prominent symbols of black "progress" for black adolescents. Given the visibility, high salaries and glory associated with being a black athlete, coupled with the lack of visible role models in other fields, this study's third prediction is:

3. Black adolescents--particularly those with salient black identities--describe sports-related hoped-for selves more frequently than whites and more frequently than Blacks with less salient black identities.

### **Ethnic identity and crime-related and job-related possible selves**

Coined and perpetuated by the media (Lamar, Time, 1986; Monroe, Newsweek, 1987), the observation that young black men are an "endangered species" has invaded public awareness. The belief that black males are at exceptional risk of falling into unemployment, under-achievement and violent, criminal lifestyles has direct implications for today's adolescents. If they subscribe to the "endangered species" phenomenon, black adolescent boys will be more worried about their futures than their white peers.

Presuming they concretize these fears in their possible selves, this study predicts:

4. Black adolescents will describe crime-related and job-related feared selves more frequently than their white peers.
5. Finally, black adolescent boys--particularly those with salient black identities -- describe crime-related and job-related feared selves more frequently than boys whose black identities are less salient.

## Method

### **Subjects**

Subjects for the study were 1380 7th graders living in a predominantly middle-class, suburban region of the mid-Atlantic United States. 918 (67%) of the adolescents were black/African-American; the other 462 were white/caucasian. Subjects were equally divided by gender. They ranged in age from 11 to 16 years old, with a mean age of 12.28 years. (*s.d.*=.55). The average annual income of the adolescents' families was between \$45,000. and \$49,999.

### **Interview Procedure**

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews in the adolescents' homes. 59.7% of the interviewers were black; 38.7% white and 1.6% hispanic. 87.1% of the interviewers were women.

### **The Questionnaire**

*Possible selves.* Interviewers asked adolescents to list four hoped-for selves and four feared selves using the following probes:

"Please tell me four things about the kind of person you most hope to be when you are in high school."

"What are four things you do not want to be true of you when you are in high school?"

Each of the adolescent's responses were coded into 1 of approximately 200 categories. A portion of these 200 categories were selectively collapsed to form three global categories of hoped-for selves:

1. academic success
2. sports success
3. job success

and four global categories of feared selves:

1. academic failure
2. lack of sports success
3. job dissatisfaction/failure
4. crime/problem behavior

***Ethnic Identity.*** Measures of the adolescents' ethnic identity were derived from their responses to four Likert scale questions:

"How many of your friends act Black/act White"?  
(1=*none of them*, 5=*all of them*)

"How many of your friends are Black/are White"?  
(1=*none of them*, 5=*all of them*)

"How important is being Black to you"?  
(1=*not at all important*, 4=*very important*)

"How often do you talk in your family about  
being Black"? (1=*never*, 5=*very often*)

These questions formed the components of two variables measuring ethnic identity. The first variable categorically described adolescents' identification with a black peer group: *low* black-identified, *integrated*, and *high* black-identified.

The second ethnic identity variable described how important "being black" was to the adolescents and their families: *low* importance, *medium* importance, *conflicted* (high on "importance", low on "talk in the family") and *high* importance.

## **Results**

### **Ethnic identity and academic possible selves**

Contrary to this study's first two predictions, a t-test indicated that the black adolescents in this sample aspired to academic success more often than did the Whites ( $t_{1378}=2.49, p<.01$ ).

Moreover, a 2 x 3 chi square between importance of ethnicity and mentions of academic hoped-for selves revealed a significantly positive relationship between these two self-concept domains [ $\chi^2(1, n=759) = 3.69, p<.05$ ]. Figure 1 illustrates that adolescents who described their ethnicity as highly important to them mentioned academically successful hoped-for selves significantly more often than adolescents who described their ethnicity as relatively unimportant.

### **Ethnic identity and sports-related possible selves**

Analyses supported the prediction regarding ethnic identity and sports-related aspirations. A t-test indicated that the black adolescents in the study aspired to athletic success slightly more often than did the study's white adolescents ( $t_{1378}=1.9, p<.05$ ).

Additionally, a 2 x 3 chi square revealed a significant positive relationship between having black-identified friends and sports-related hoped-for selves [ $\chi^2(1, n=495) = 7.41, p<.01$ ]. Figure 2 illustrates that adolescents who described having highly black-identified friends mentioned aspirations of sports success more often than their less black-identified peers.

### **Ethnic identity and "endangered species" fears**

Analyses involving the male adolescents' ethnic identities and feared selves provided mixed support for the hypothesis that the "endangered species" phenomenon is influencing black male adolescents' concerns for their futures. T-tests did not reveal any significant differences between Blacks and Whites in the number of times they mentioned either job or crime-related feared selves.

Supporting the "endangered species" hypothesis, a 2 x 3 chi square revealed a significant positive relationship between importance of ethnicity and mentions of criminal feared selves [ $\chi^2(1, n=397) = 3.80, p<.05$ ]. Figure 3 illustrates that boys who described their ethnicity as highly important mentioned



feared selves of criminal activity more frequently than boys in the low importance of ethnicity group.

Unlike the analyses of crime-related feared selves, analyses involving job-related feared selves failed to support the "endangered species" prediction. A 2 x 2 chi square examining the relationship between importance of ethnicity and feared selves of job failure/dissatisfaction indicated a negative relationship between the two constructs [ $\chi^2(1, n=244) = 6.67, p < .01$ ]. Figure 4 illustrates that boys in the low importance of ethnicity group mentioned feared selves of job failure/dissatisfaction significantly more often than boys in the high importance of ethnicity group.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between adolescents' ethnic identities and their possible selves. Analyses of the data revealed significant findings related to each the five hypotheses outlined in the introduction.

Contrary to this study's prediction, adolescents did not appear to subscribe to Ogbu's (e.g., 1986) theory that academic achievement is a negatively-sanctioned form of "acting white". The potential reasons for these surprising results are numerous. One in particular, however, deserves consideration: the possibility that today's black adolescents--at least some of them--are re-defining what it means to be a successful black. Specifically, the adolescents in this study had more inclusive notions of success than those Ogbu and Fordham (1986) suggest. When thinking about their futures, these adolescents envisioned themselves moving into traditionally "white" domains.

The data provide clear support for the hypothesis that black adolescents have more sports-oriented role models than do Whites. Additionally, it was the adolescents with salient black identities who most frequently aspired to athletic success. It is interesting, but not altogether surprising, that the dimension of ethnic identity associated with these sports-related aspirations was the *peer group* variable. The *importance of ethnicity* variable, on the other hand, was not significantly associated with aspirations of sports success. This finding suggests that different, semi-independent, components of ethnic identity affect different domains of adolescents' future selves.

The data provide very limited support for the hypothesis that black males feel they are an "endangered species", at greater risk for negative outcomes than their non-minority peers. The black adolescent boys in this study were concerned with criminal outcomes, and their concern did increase with the salience of their ethnic identities. However, the overall t-tests indicated that white adolescents were equally concerned about criminal feared selves. In fact, white adolescents mentioned crime-related feared selves more than anything else. Thus it seems that for adolescents, the possibility of distinctly negative outcomes is widespread. "Endangered species" concerns do not appear to be limited to Blacks.

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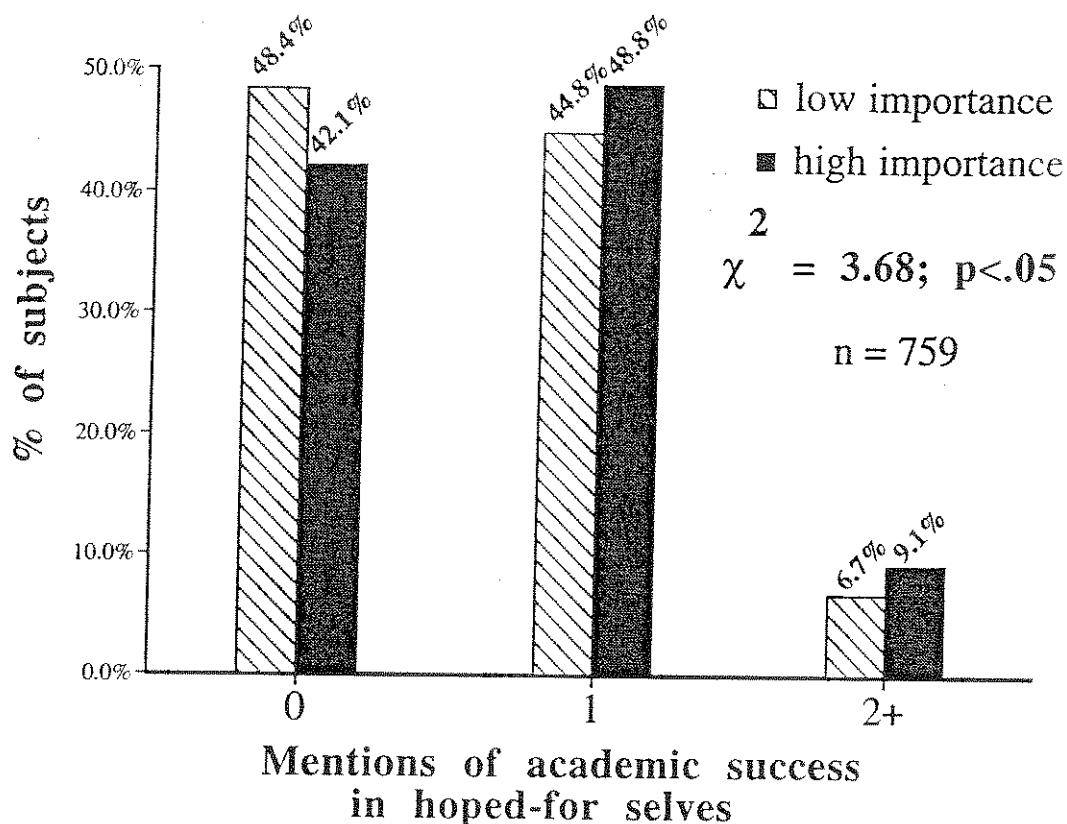
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## Importance of Ethnicity and Hopes of Academic Success

Figure 1



## Ethnic Identification of Peer Group and Hopes of Sports Success

Figure 2

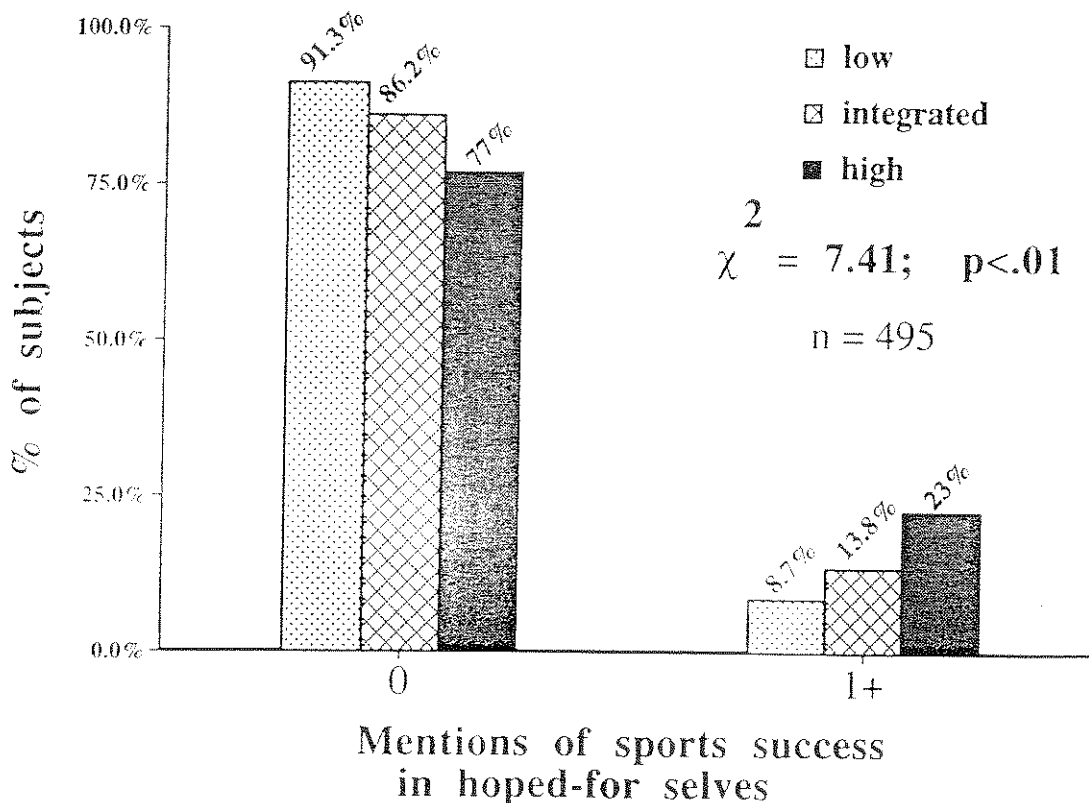


Figure 3

### Importance of Ethnicity and Fears of Being a Criminal

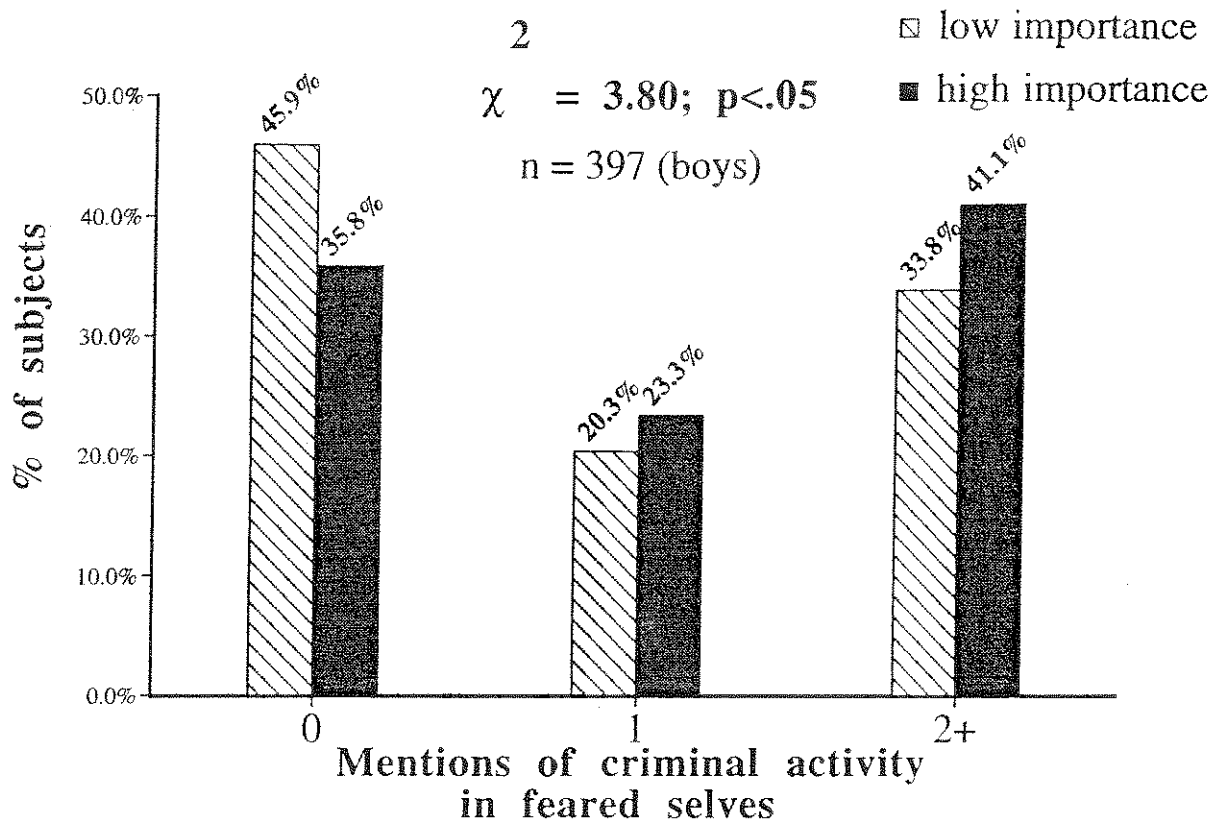


Figure 4

### Importance of Ethnicity and Fears of Job Failure

