

Hopes, Fears, and Making It Through Middle School:
A Longitudinal Analysis of Adolescents' Academic Possible Selves

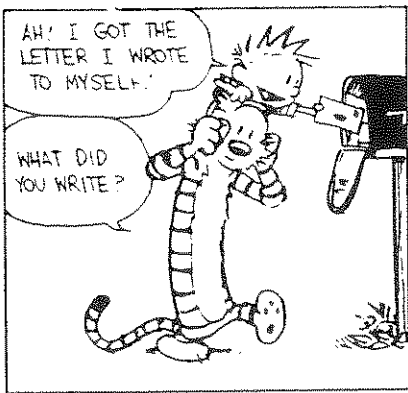
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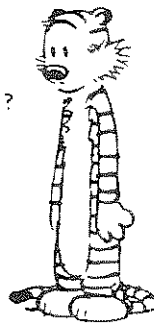
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CALVIN AND HOBBS



DEAR CALVIN,
HI! I'M WRITING
THIS ON MONDAY.
WHAT DAY IS IT NOW?
HOW ARE THINGS GOING?
YOUR PAL, CALVIN.



Abstract

This paper explored the developmental changes and motivational significance of adolescents' academic possible selves. The data for this study were collected as part of the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Contexts Study (MAGICS). Participants were a racially and economically diverse group of 1016 early adolescents who were approximately 12 years old at time 1 (beginning of 7th) and 14 years old at time 2 (end of 8th grade). Half of the participants were male. Log linear analyses of time 1 x time 2 contingency tables indicated that adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves decreased over time, consistent with other literature suggesting that adolescents' interests in academics wane during the middle school years. Further analyses explored role of adolescents' academic possible selves in predicting academic-achievement behaviors in the context of the expectancy/value model of behavioral choices. Hierarchical regression analyses provided partial support for the predictions that adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves would positively predict (positive) academic outcomes over and above the effects of adolescents' academic ability self-concepts, academic expectancies and academic values. Specifically, adolescents' mentions of hoped-for selves (at time 1) significantly, positively predicted having academically-oriented friends at time 2; mentions of academic feared selves (at time 1) significantly, positively predicted GPA at time 2; and matched academic possible selves significantly, positively predicted GPA at time 2. In general, the findings provided support for the construct validity of the "possible selves".

Adolescence, perhaps more than any other time in life, is a stage of possibility. Since the publication of Erikson's (1968) landmark theory of socio-emotional development, psychologists have widely acknowledged that adolescence is a critical period for self-concept development. During adolescence, identity development reaches its normative "crisis" (Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1974), with adolescents taking large steps toward refining "who they are".

Equally important, however, adolescence marks the beginning of young people's significant, self-reflective thought about their futures. The acquisition of new cognitive capacities, coupled with new socio-emotional demands, encourages adolescents to not only synthesize their childhood self-schemas, but also project them forward into a vision of their adulthood. In short, during adolescence, one not only consolidates the self "I am", but also creates the self "I could become" (Erikson, 1974) and, relatedly, the self "I do not want to become". Given the particular dynamism of adolescents' self-concepts, the future-oriented components of self-knowledge are especially appropriate for study during this developmental transition.

This study investigates one conceptualization of the forward-looking self: Markus and Nurius' (1986) notion of "possible selves". According to Markus and Nurius, possible selves represent the temporally dynamic dimension of self-concept: the domain of self-knowledge that extends forward in time and embodies people's vision of what is *possible* for them. As possible selves are possibilities, they can be both positive and negative. *Hoped-for* possible selves represent goals for which to strive; *feared* possible selves, risks and pitfalls to avoid.

Though a substantial theoretical literature describes the possible selves (and other related constructs), there is little research on either the content or the organization of adolescents' forward-looking self-schemas. In particular, we do not know of any longitudinal investigations of adolescents' possible selves. This study begins to illuminate this underexplored dimension of adolescent development by examining the role of adolescents' possible selves in an especially critical behavioral domain: academic achievement. School

experiences not only influence adolescents' feelings of competence (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles (Parsons), Midgley & Adler, 1984), but also significantly impact adolescents' overall sense-of-self (Roeser, Lord & Eccles, 1994). Accordingly, increased insight into the role of the possible selves in shaping academic achievement behaviors is a critical component of understanding self-concept development in particular, and successful adolescent development more generally.

This study has two analytic foci, both of which take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study's data. First, we examine the changes, during the middle school years, in adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves. Second, we examine the ways in which adolescents' academic possible selves shape subsequent achievement-related behaviors. The sections that follow describe each of these objectives in more detail.

Developmental Changes in Adolescents' Academic Possible Selves

The theoretical literature concerning the future-oriented component of self-concept posits a transactional relationship between people's possible selves and their environments. Specifically, theorists suggest that our possible selves influence the ways in which we process environmental information (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1985; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus, 1983; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Srull & Robert S. Wyer, 1986) and, likewise, that environmental demands—including normative developmental tasks—help shape our possible selves (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984). In short, possible selves both reflect and direct developmental processes (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Consequently, it is reasonable to think that adolescents' possible selves will change, over time, as they encounter, and accommodate to, new developmental demands.

One such developmental demand is the transition to the new school environments associated with middle schools and junior high schools. The research on academic achievement indicates that children's interest in school declines as their age increases. Furthermore, one point at which the decline in students' achievement and school-related

attitudes appears most marked is during early adolescence (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1984). Eccles et al. argue that just as young adolescents are becoming more skillful, knowledgeable and competent, they move into schools (e.g., middle schools or junior high schools) that oppress their emerging autonomy and diminish their feelings of self-efficacy. The resulting misfit between young adolescents' developmental needs and competencies, and their school environment, contributes to their academic disengagement.

Based on the theoretical explanations of the possible selves, coupled with the academic achievement research, we expect that, as adolescents proceed through middle school, their possible selves will reflect a declining interest in academics. Specifically, we predict that the frequency with which adolescents mention academic possible selves will decrease between the beginning of 7th and the end of 8th grade.

Motivational Significance of Adolescents' Academic Possible Selves

Though describing the changes over time in adolescents' academic possible selves provides important information on adolescent development, such a description does not take full advantage of the explanatory power of the possible selves construct. Markus and Nurius (1986) initially developed the idea of "possible selves" as a way to conceptualize how people's ideas about their own potential may influence their current and future *behaviors*. Accordingly, the second focus of this study is the behavioral consequences of adolescents' possible selves.

Markus and her colleagues identify the motivational link between possible selves and behavior by noting that the possible selves "give specific, self-relevant form, meaning, and direction to one's hopes and threats" (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 212). Thus a person's possible selves, unlike their more abstract goals, are uniquely personalized: they are a sense of one's *self* actually *in* the desired (or undesired) end state (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a). This personal vision is critical to facilitating a person's pursuit (or avoidance) of the desired (or undesired) end because the anticipation of a *specific future* translates goals into instrumental actions (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990b).

Explaining this process, Markus and her colleagues assert that people's possible selves, like other forms of self-knowledge, influence the ways in which they selectively attend to, interpret, evaluate and respond to information. These processes, in turn, shape people's final behavioral choices. In short, possible selves mediate information processing and therefore partially determine behavior (see Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1985; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Sentis, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Srull & Robert S. Wyer, 1986 for more details). Consequently, Oyserman and Markus (1990b) explain that when people must choose between competing actions, their choice of which action to pursue depends on the nature of their set of possible selves.

Additionally, Oyserman and Markus (1990b) assert that a given possible self is maximally motivationally significant when balanced by a countervailing possible self in the same domain. For example, a hoped-for self of, "I want to get good grades", will have more

influence in shaping behavior if it is accompanied by a feared self of, "I do not want to flunk-out", than if it stands alone without a corresponding fear. Particularly if two hoped-for selves are competing for expression (e.g., "I want to be with my friends" so I won't finish my homework vs. "I want to get good grades"), a matching feared self may tip the balance in favor of one of the hoped-for selves. In short, domain-specific matches, or balance, in people's possible selves indicates the availability of more motivational resources with which to translate their desires and fears into actions (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a).

Extending the motivational link between possible selves and behavioral choices to the academic domain suggests that adolescents with academically-oriented possible selves will make behavioral choices consistent with obtaining academic success. One of the most straightforward measures of academic success is objective academic achievement: students' grades. Accordingly, this study evaluates the relation between adolescents' academic possible selves and adolescents' grades. We predict that hoped-for selves and feared selves in 7th grade will be positively associated with adolescents' GPA at the end of 8th grade. Similarly, we expect that adolescents who generate more matched possible selves about academics in 7th grade will report higher GPAs at the end of 8th grade.

With the expectation that academic possible selves shape school-related attitudes and behaviors in areas other than objective performance, this study also investigates the relations between possible selves and another school-related outcome: adolescents' choices of academically-oriented friends. Given the significance of peers in adolescents' lives, and the significance of peer groups in determining (both positive and negative) developmental trajectories, we explore the extent to which possible selves in 7th grade predict the choice of an academically-oriented peer group two years later. Again, we expect adolescents who report more hoped-for, feared and balanced academic possible selves to describe having more academically-oriented friends.

The Possible Selves and the Expectancy/Value Model

Regardless of the significance of adolescents' possible selves in predicting their academic behavior, describing any behavioral outcome as the result of a single psychological predictor is likely an oversimplification. Rather, research has shown that achievement-related choices—including academic choices—follow from a variety of individual, familial, cultural and historical factors, working synergistically, agonistically and antagonistically to shape behavior. Given the complexity of these relations, it is important to understand adolescents' possible selves in relation to these other salient factors. The critical feature of academic possible selves may be the way they act, and interact, with other important predictors of academically-oriented behavior. Given this possibility, the final portion of this study examines the role of academic possible selves in the context of a more comprehensive model of achievement behaviors: J. Eccles and colleagues' (Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1983) expectancy / value model of achievement-oriented behavioral choices.

Briefly, as figure 1¹ illustrates, the expectancy / value model is a comprehensive mapping of the links determining achievement-related behaviors. One of the links the model posits is between achievement-related choices (e.g., academic outcomes) and ability self-concept. That is, the model suggests that adolescents tend to pursue activities at which they feel particularly competent or talented. The expectancy / value model further posits that the relation between ability self-concept and achievement behaviors is mediated, in part, by both expectancies of success and subjective task value.

The final part of this study locates the possible selves within the series of relations that Eccles et al.'s model indicates. Specifically, it explores the extent to

¹ Figure 1 represents only a portion of Eccles et. al.'s full model. Though an examination of the role of the possible selves within the full model would be quite useful, such an investigation was beyond the scope of this paper.

which possible selves predict academic outcomes in the context of: 1) adolescents' self-concept of their abilities; 2) the degree of academic success they expect for themselves; and 3) the value they attach to academic success.

It is worth noting that the theory underlying the expectancy/value model and the theory of the possible selves suggest slightly different relations between the possible selves and academic outcomes. According to Eccles et al.'s model (presuming the possible selves are a dimension of self-concept), the explanatory power of adolescents' possible selves in predicting academic behaviors will be mediated, at least partially, by both their expectations for academic success and the subjective value they attach to such success. That is, some of the motivational link between academic possible selves and academic outcomes will be explained by the extent to which the adolescents' expect to be, and value being, good at school.

The theory of possible selves, on the other hand, though not contradicting the expectancy/value model, makes additional predictions. One of the salient features of the possible selves is that they are, at least theoretically, qualitatively different from other dimensions of self-concept (such as ability self-concept). Oyserman and Markus (1990b) make the specific distinction: "Possible selves refer *only* to that subset of goals, outcomes, or expectancies that are personalized or individualized and given self-relevant form or meaning" (p. 113, emphasis mine). As such, the theory of possible selves predicts associations between possible selves and academic outcomes over and above the relations Eccles et al. posit in their model. Accordingly, our final prediction is that the significant relations between adolescents' academic possible selves and adolescents' academic outcomes will remain significant while controlling for adolescents' academic ability self-concepts, academic expectancies, and academic values.

Summary

Thus to summarize, this study evaluates the following predictions:

- 1) Adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves will decrease between the beginning of 7th and the end of 8th grade;
- 2) Adolescents who mention more academic possible selves in 7th grade will report earning higher grades in 8th grade than do adolescents who mention fewer academic possible selves;
- 3) Adolescents who mention more academic possible selves in 7th grade will report having more academically-oriented friends in 8th grade than do adolescents who mention fewer academic possible selves;
- 4) The positive associations described in 2 and 3 (above) will exist over and above the effects the expectancy/value model predicts.

Method

Overview

Families were recruited via letters sent home with every 6th grader in the participating school district. The data described below are part of the study's first and third wave of data, gathered during the fall of 1991 and the summer of 1993, respectively. The longitudinal foci of this study restricted analyses to those MAGICS adolescents who generated possible selves at both time 1 and time 2: 96% of the total group of 1060 adolescents interviewed at both time points.

Participants

1016 adolescents living in a predominantly middle-class, suburban region of the mid-Atlantic United States participated in the study. They were in 7th grade during the first wave of data collection (time 1), and ranged in age from 11 to 14 years old ($M = 12.25$; $SD = .53$). The third wave of data collection (time 2) took place during the summer after the participants finished 8th grade. At that time they ranged in age

from 12 to 16 years old ($M = 14.23$; $SD = .49$). Of the participants, 628 (61.8%) were black / African-American; 327 (32.2%) were white / European-American; the remaining 61 (6%) were other racial minorities. Approximately half (51%) of the participants were male. The adolescents' families' average income (at time 1) was between \$45,000 and \$49,999.

Regarding their possible selves, this group of 1016 included: 940 adolescents who generated both hoped-for and feared selves at both time 1 and time 2, 31 adolescents who generated (only) hoped-for selves at both time 1 and time 2, and 45 adolescents who generated (only) feared selves at both time 1 and time 2.

Interview Procedure

These data were collected via face-to-face and self-administered interviews in the adolescents' homes. The interviews took place privately and were fully confidential. The face-to-face interviews lasted approximately one hour; the self-administered interviews, 30 minutes.

Interviewers

The interviewers were trained in the skills of sensitive and empathic interviewing, as well as in the specific use of the questionnaires. For each wave of data collection, the interviewers' training consisted of 30 hours of supervised instruction, including assignments, role play, practice interviewing and feedback from the researchers. The first wave of the study (time 1) employed 62 interviewers: 59.7% black, 38.7% white and 1.6% Hispanic, paralleling the racial composition of the county where the data were collected. 87.1% of these interviewers were female. The third wave of the study (time 2) employed 46 interviewers; of these, 14 had also interviewed subjects during the first wave of data collection.

Measures

Possible selves. At both time 1 and time 2, 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?"²

Two coders, with an agreement rate³ of at least 90%, coded each of the resulting responses into 1 of approximately 200 categories. We then collapsed the categories specifying academic success/achievement into a single category of academically-oriented hoped-for selves. Likewise, we collapsed all categories specifying academic failure/underachievement into a single category of academically-oriented feared selves.

Because the interview requested four hoped-for and four feared selves, adolescents could provide multiple responses in the academic category of possible selves. Consequently, the final variables we used in analyses were counts of the number of times subjects provided responses in the academic hoped-for, and the academic feared, categories of possible selves. Each adolescent received a value, in each category, ranging from 0 (no mention) to 4 (four mentions).

We considered adolescents to have generated a "match" (between hoped-for and feared possible selves) in the academic domain when they mentioned both an academic hoped-for possible self (e.g., "Get good grades") and an academic feared possible self (e.g., "Flunk-out of school"). Furthermore, we computed matches such that a given possible self could participate

² The questions inquired about "high school" selves because prior studies exploring adolescents' possible selves (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990) indicated that adolescents had difficulty generating specific selves for the more distal future.

³ Agreement rate = $a / (a + d)$, where a = number of agreements between raters and d = number of disagreements.

in more than one match. That is, extending the previous example, an adolescent mentioning: "Take advanced classes" and "Get into a good college", in addition to the two responses above, earned three matches: each of the three hoped-for selves "matching" the single feared self. Each adolescent received a value between 0 (no matches) and 4 (four matches) identifying the extent to which they generated balanced academic possible selves.

Academic outcome variables. Adolescents reported their letter grades on their most recent semester report cards at both time 1 and time 2. These letter grades were converted to their numerical equivalent, based on a four-point grading scale (F=0, A=4), in order to compute students' grade point averages (GPAs). Both the time 1 and the time 2 measures of GPA were averages of students' grades in all of their classes.

The second outcome measure used in this study was a series of five closed-ended interview questions grouped into a scale⁴ (Chronbach $\alpha = .73$) measuring the academic orientation of adolescents' peer groups. The scale was based on the solution of an exploratory factor analyses (oblimin rotation) on a conceptual grouping of the interview items. Participants answered the questions using Likert-type response scales anchored at extremes consistent with each question's stem. The scale included items such as: "How many of your friends plan to go to college?" and "How many of your friends think it is important to work hard on schoolwork?"

Variables from the expectancy/value model. This study included one scale (created as described above) measuring adolescents' self-concepts of academic ability ($\alpha = .78$). It included items such as: "How good are you in math?" and "Compared to other kids your age, how well do you do in (other) school subjects?"

Adolescents' expectations for academic success (i.e., *expectancies*) were measured with a single, close-ended item that asked: "If you could do exactly what you

⁴ Complete information about the interviews and the derived scales is available from Kari Fraser, Institute of Behavioral Science #1, Campus Box 483, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 80309-0483 or Jacquelynne Eccles, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48106-1248.

wanted, how far ~~would you like~~ to go in school?" Possible responses ranged from: (1) "8th grade or less" to (9) "get a law degree, Ph.D., or a medical doctor's degree".

This study included two variables measuring (at time 1) the subjective task value (i.e., *value*) of academics. Both variables were scales, created as described above. The first measured the value that adolescents currently placed on academic success ($\alpha = .81$). It included the items: "Compared to other things you do, how important is math to you?" and "Compared to other things you do, how important are other school subjects to you?". The second scale measured the extent to which adolescents described academic success as important to their futures ($\alpha = .69$). It included items such as: "I have to do well in school to be a success in life" and "Even if I do good in school, I still won't be able to get a good job when I grow up" (strongly agree -- strongly disagree).

Demographic descriptors. We derived the demographic variables for this study from the data gathered at time 1⁵. The adolescents' parent(s) identified the adolescents as being either male or female. The adolescents themselves provided self-descriptions of their race in response to the question: "What is your race or ethnicity?" Each adolescent's socio-economic status (SES) was measured using a continuous, composite scale based on the participant's family income, parent(s)' education and parent(s)' occupational status (Early, 1994).

Results

Developmental Changes in Adolescents' Academic Possible Selves

We tested the developmental hypothesis that adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves would decrease over time using log-linear methods of data analysis.

Specifically we analyzed two contingency tables--each taking the general form: time 1

⁵ All participants' genders and races at time 1 were identical to their genders and races at time 2. Adolescents' familial socio-economic statuses at time 1 were highly positively correlated with their socio-economic statuses at time 2 ($r = .91$).

(mentions of) possible selves by time 2 (mentions of) possible selves--corresponding to the two categories of academic possible selves (hoped-for and feared). Following published recommendations (Knoke & Burke, 1980) we used the likelihood-ratio statistic (L^2) to measure the goodness-of-fit of the models we compared.

We identified systematic increases and decreases in adolescents' hoped-for and feared academic possible selves by comparing the symmetry and adjusted symmetry models for the two contingency tables described above. Because the only difference between these two models was that the quasi-symmetry model perfectly fit the total frequencies in the triangles above and below the main diagonal, the comparison identified any net increases or decreases in adolescents' responses (in a given category of possible selves) between time 1 and time 2.

As figure 2 illustrates, the results of the symmetry versus quasi-symmetry model comparisons for each category of possible selves indicated that adolescents mentioned significantly fewer academic hoped-for selves, and significantly fewer academic feared selves, at time 2 than at time 1.

Possible Selves Predicting Academic Outcomes

We used multiple regression analyses to determine the extent to which adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves predicted adolescents' academic outcomes. Anticipating that time 1 GPA would be the single best predictor of time 2 academic outcomes, we included time 1 GPA as a predictor, thereby controlling for its effects, in *all* of the analyses reported below. In other words, the analyses reflect our interest in determining the extent to which academic possible selves predicted academic outcomes over and above the significant effects of time 1 grades.

Individually regressing the two (time 2) academic outcomes on each of three (time 1) possible selves variables resulted in a total of six regression analyses. The possible selves variables emerged as significant predictors in five of these six equations, as follows:

Mentions of academic hoped-for selves were significantly related to both the outcome variables. Both significant relationships were in the predicted direction, such that adolescents who mentioned more academic hoped-for selves (at time 1) reported:

- 1) earning higher grades ($t = 1.93$; $p < .05$); and
 - 2) having a more academically-oriented peer group ($t = 3.91$; $p < .000$),
- at time 2.

Mentions of academic feared selves significantly predicted one of the outcome measures: adolescents' time 2 GPA. The relationship was in the predicted direction as well, such that adolescents who mentioned more academic feared selves (at time 1) reported earning higher grades ($t = 3$; $p < .003$) at time 2.

Finally, academic possible selves "matches" emerged as significant predictor in both of the equations we tested. Again, these significant relationships were in the predicted direction, such that adolescents who generated more academic matches (at time 1) reported:

- 1) earning higher grades ($t = 2.80$; $p < .005$); and
 - 2) having a more academically-oriented peer group ($t = 1.2$; $p < .046$),
- at time 2.

The Possible Selves and the Expectancy/Value Model

Having established those possible selves variables that significantly predicted academic outcomes (as described immediately above), we then used additional regression analyses to determine whether these significant relationships remained significant in the context of the variables that comprise the expectancy/value model. Specifically, we ran the (initially) significant regression equations again, including four additional variables in each: the single variable measuring academic ability self-concept, the single variable measuring expectations of academic success (that is, *expectancies*), and the two variables measuring the subjective task value of academics (that is, *values*). The results of these analyses indicated

which possible selves variables were significant predictors of academic outcomes over and above the predictors the expectancy/value model identifies.

Only three of the five initially significant relationships remained significant in the context of the expectancy/value model's variables. Specifically:

- Academic hoped-for selves continued to significantly predict adolescents' reports of having academically-oriented friends ($t = 2.80$; $p < .005$). See figure 3.
- Academic feared selves continued to significantly predict adolescents' time 2 GPAs ($t = 2.31$; $p < .021$). See figure 4.
- Academic matched possible selves continued to significantly predict adolescents' GPAs ($t = 1.95$; $p < .05$). See figure 4.

Post hoc stepwise regressions indicated that the relationship between hoped-for possible selves and GPA was mediated by ability self-concept and academic expectancies, and that the relationship between possible-selves matches and having academically-oriented friends was mediated by ability self-concept, academic expectancies and academic values.

Discussion

Consistent with the literature on academic disengagement, these results supported the prediction that adolescents' mentions of academic possible selves would decrease over time. Over one third of the adolescents in this study mentioned fewer academic hoped-for selves, and fewer academic feared selves, at time 2 than at time 1. Though this finding is a disappointing reflection on adolescents' relationship with their schools, it also points to a possible focus of intervention. Specifically, extending Oyserman, Gant and Ager's (in press) suggestion of ways to enhance boys' school persistence, these results suggest that encouraging young adolescents to conceptualize more positively what is possible for them in their futures may help reverse their declining interests in school.

As we noted in the Introduction, the theoretical literature presents the possible selves as a unique component of the self-concept—one distinct from simple values, aspirations and expectations. This study provides only partial support for this understanding of the possible

selves. As predicted, the possible selves were positively related to students' grades and their choice of academically-oriented friends. However, analyses also indicated that some of these positive relations were due to the fact that the possible selves were representing the constructs the expectancy/value model describes, rather than a unique dimension of self-concept.

Specifically, the positive relation between adolescents' hoped-for selves and adolescents' GPAs was significant to the extent that the hoped-for selves represented adolescents' beliefs about their academic abilities and expectancies for academic success. The positive relation between adolescents' matched possible selves and adolescents' choice of an academically-oriented peer group was significant to the extent that possible-selves matches represented adolescents' beliefs about their academic abilities, expectancies for academic success, and academic values.

Perhaps most interesting, and consistent with Hooker's (1992) conclusion that the feelings of efficacy surrounding people's hopes and fears differ from one another, are the results suggesting that adolescents' hoped-for and feared possible selves play different roles in shaping achievement behaviors. The hoped-for selves, alone, predicted adolescents' choice of academically-oriented friends. Conversely, the feared selves, but *not* hoped-for selves, predicted adolescents' GPAs. Though the small effect sizes necessitate drawing only tentative conclusions, the results suggest that the hoped-for selves may be most salient in shaping social behaviors, whereas the feared possible selves may be most related to performance.

This finding directly contradicts other researchers' conclusion that feared possible selves, alone, can not regulate task-specific performance. For example, Ruvolo and Markus assert that whereas feared selves can provoke avoidance and inhibition (1992), hoped-for selves are required to organize and initiate proactive behaviors (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). In this study, on the contrary, adolescents' fears seemed to play a critical role in shaping at least one domain of their behavior, whether or not they envisioned success along with failure.

Though the positive relation between students' academic feared selves and students' grades contradicts most of the possible selves literature, it is consistent with Eccles and her

colleagues' (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1984) conclusions concerning the ways that middle school environments negatively impact adolescents' achievement motivation. Specifically, Eccles et al. argue that the systematic changes in school environments associated with the transition to middle school—including comparative grading practices, competitive goal structures and, very importantly, ability grouping—make it difficult for all but the most academically competent students to "feel smart". Thus many (if not most) young adolescents spend their middle school years comparing themselves to their classmates and coming up short. Given this circumstance, and consistent with this study's findings, it is not surprising that adolescents' feared possible selves are more influential than their hoped-for selves in determining performance-based outcomes such as their GPAs. Whereas a child's experience of elementary school may be summarized as "seeing how much I can learn", these results suggest that an adolescent's approach to middle school may very well be "trying not to fail".

In sum, the results of this study indicate that young adolescents' possible selves change, over time, in ways consistent with normative developmental demands. Furthermore, adolescents' possible selves seem to have a unique role in shaping certain achievement-related behaviors. Taken together, these findings attest to the validity of the possible selves construct and suggest that further research, particularly research exploring the differential roles of the hoped-for and feared possible selves, may provide further insight into the development and dynamics of domain-specific motivation.

Further information about this study is available upon request from:

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Model for Achievement-Related Choices

(The Expectancy/Value Model -- Eccles et al., 1983)

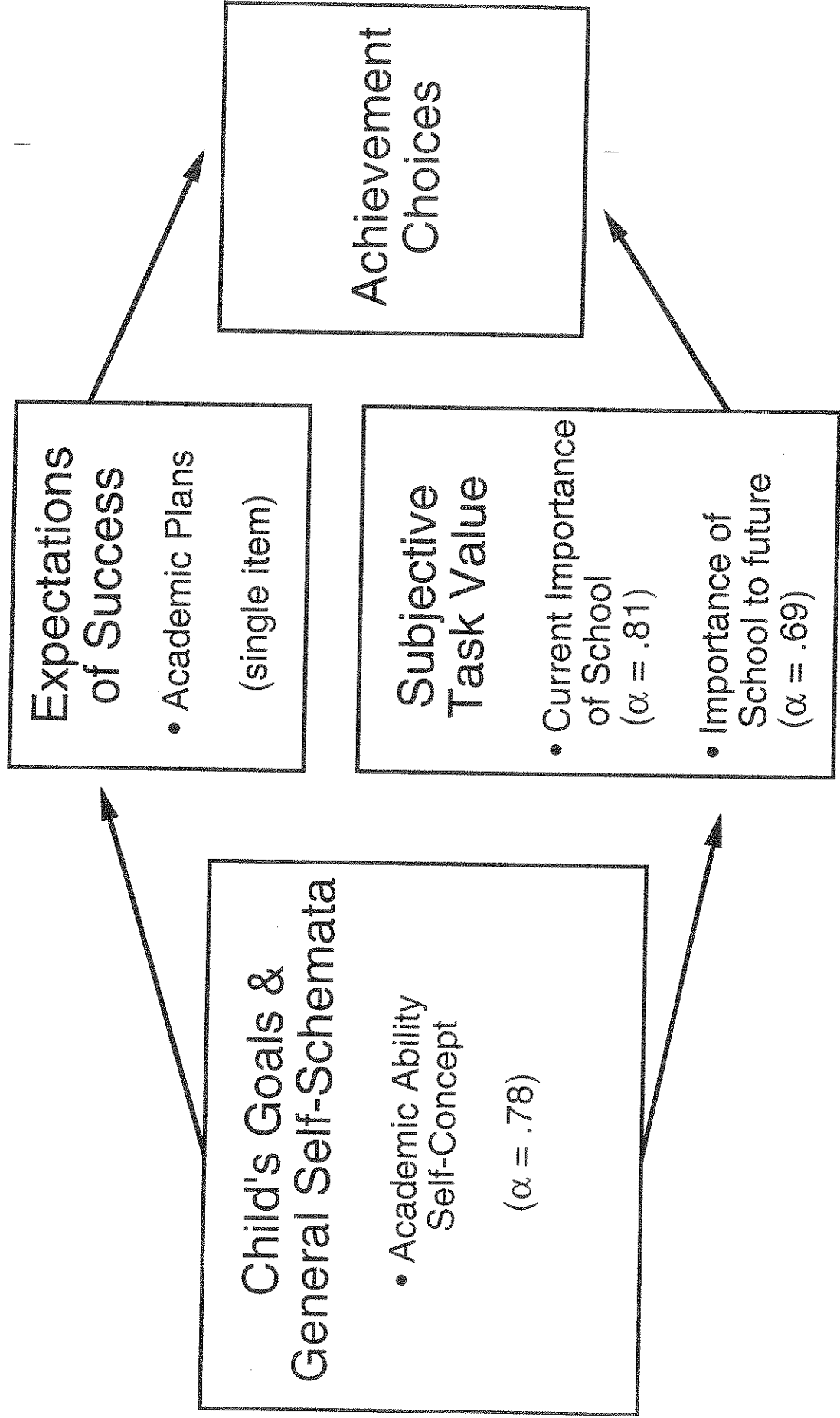


Figure 1

Results #1: Developmental Changes

Academic Hoped-for Selves

Time 2 Mentions (23% ↑)

| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3+ |
|----|-----|-----|----|----|
| 0 | 68 | 104 | 15 | 6 |
| 1 | 141 | 354 | 84 | 18 |
| 2 | 39 | 107 | 31 | 6 |
| 3+ | 10 | 25 | 7 | 1 |

32% (n = 329)

$\Delta L^2 = 16.48$; $p < .000$

Academic Feared Selves

Time 2 Mentions (24% ↑)

| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3+ |
|----|-----|-----|----|----|
| 0 | 183 | 171 | 27 | 6 |
| 1 | 194 | 235 | 43 | 3 |
| 2 | 49 | 52 | 11 | 3 |
| 3+ | 11 | 22 | 5 | 1 |

33% (n = 333)

$\Delta L^2 = 21.88$; $p < .000$

Figure 2

Results #2: Motivational Significance

Mentions of Academic Hoped-for Selves Positively Predict Having Academically-Oriented Friends

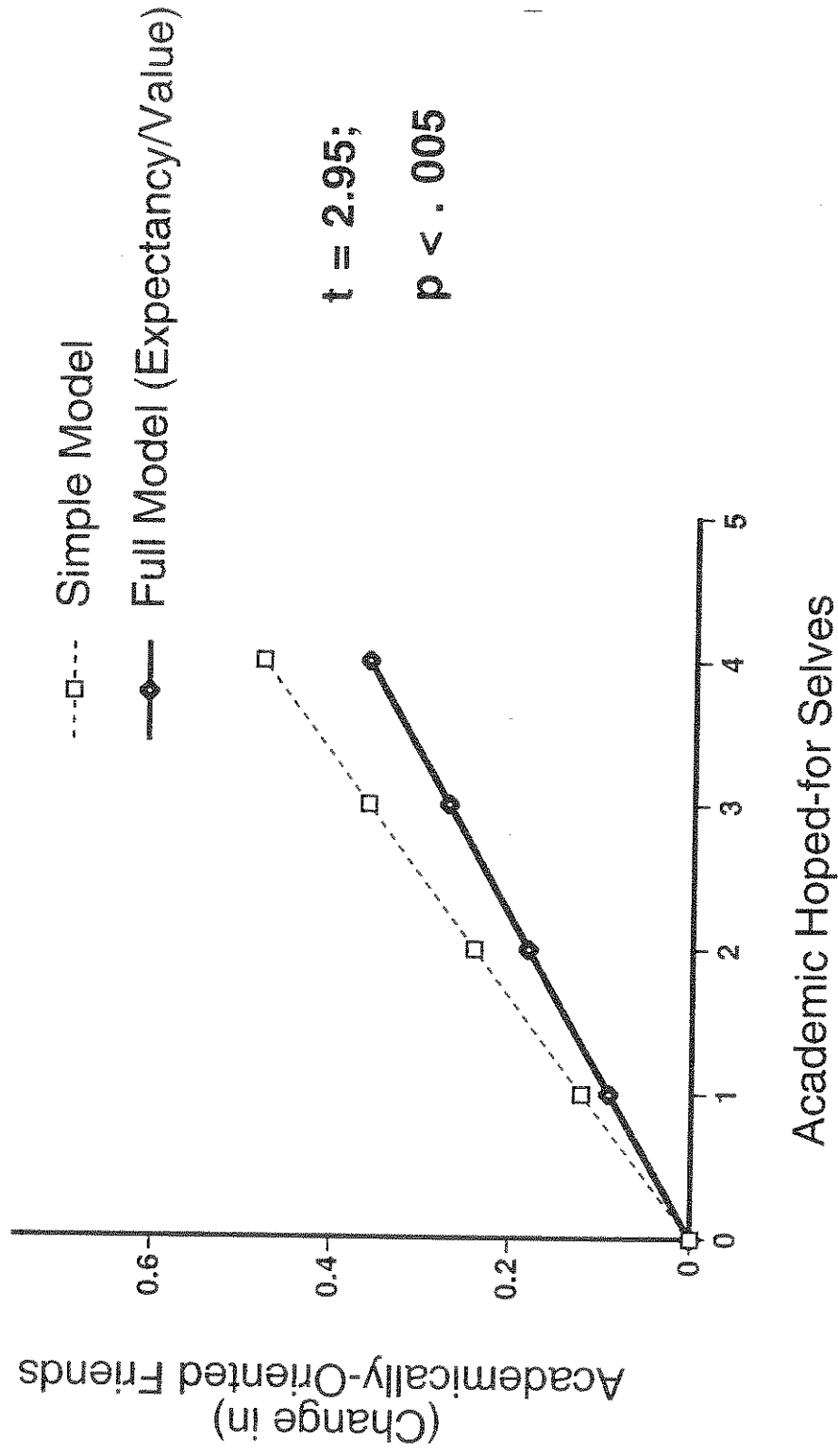


Figure 3

Results #2: Motivational Significance

Mentions of Academic Feared Selves and Matched Selves Positively Predict GPA

---□--- Simple Model
—●— Full Model (Expectancy/Value)

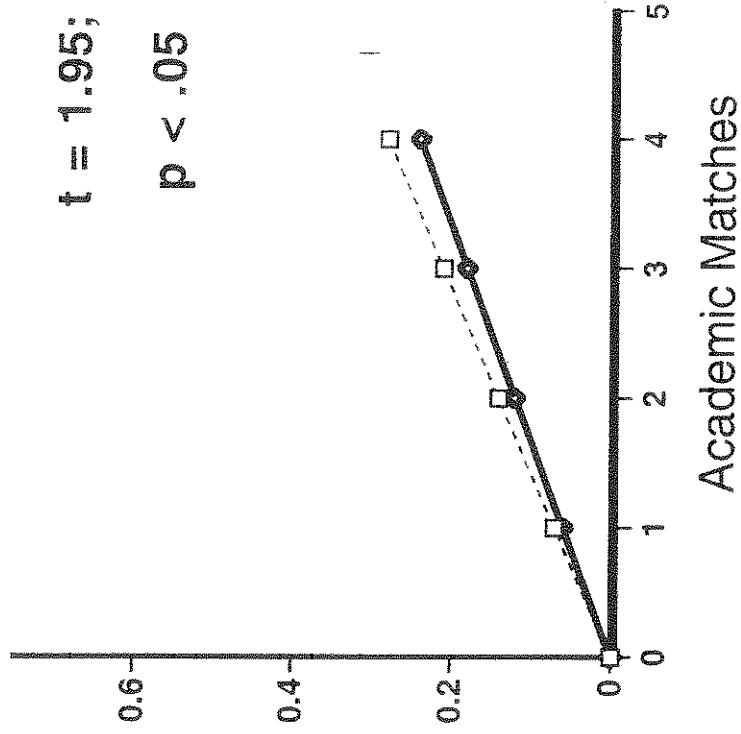
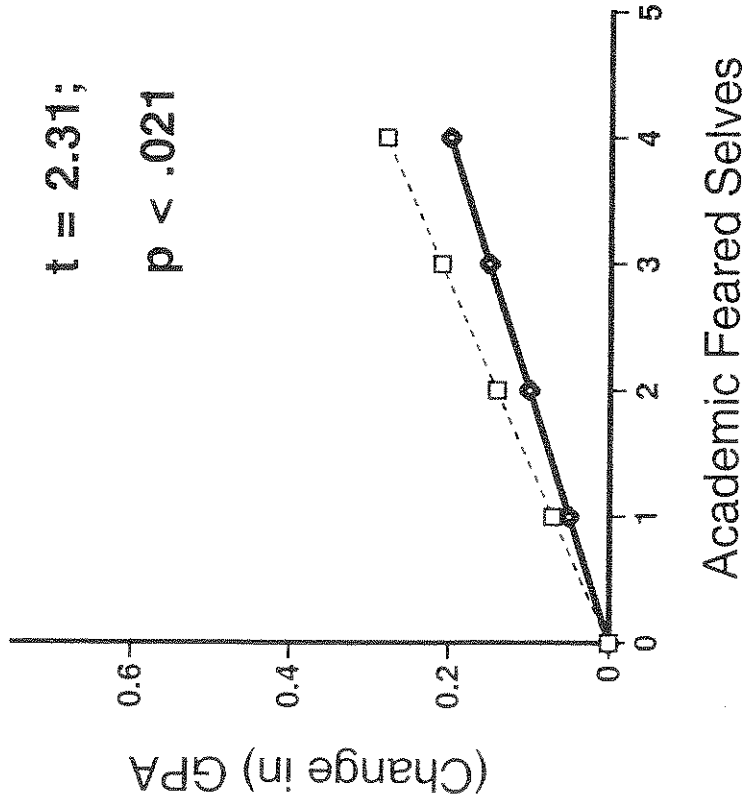


Figure 4