

**Sex, Hopes and Fears:
Gender Differences in Adolescents' Possible Selves**

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Abstract

An adolescent's "possible selves" originate, in part, in their gender socialization experiences. Nevertheless, there are few empirical investigations of gender differences in adolescents' patterns of possible selves. Using a racially mixed, and economically diverse sample of adolescents, this study describes the extent to which differences in adolescents' genders predicted differences in their patterns of hoped-for and feared possible selves, over and above the differences associated with their races and socio-economic status. Girls mentioned more possible selves about interpersonal characteristics and general competence than boys did; boys mentioned more possible selves about wealth/poverty, athletics, job success and criminal activity. The discussion of these findings focuses on the study's partial support of gender intensification theory.

Introduction

Developmentalists widely acknowledge that self-concept formation is particularly salient during adolescence (e.g., Erikson, 1968). The acquisition of new cognitive capacities, coupled with new socio-emotional demands, encourages adolescents to both synthesize their childhood self-schemas and project them forward into a vision of their adulthood. Given the particular dynamism of adolescents' self-concepts, two dimensions of self-knowledge are especially appropriate for study during this developmental transition: adolescents' *hoped-for* and *feared* "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As with many dimensions of self-knowledge, possible selves originate, in part, in socialization experiences. Research suggests numerous sources of variation in adolescents' socializations, including one's "demographic" characteristics. In particular, gender seems to shape social experiences and hence influence self-concept. Though a large body of research investigates differences in certain dimensions of boys and girls self-concepts (e.g., self-esteem), gender differences in other dimensions of self-concept have been ignored. For example, there are few empirical investigations of the specific question: Are there significant differences between boys' and girls' possible selves?

This study investigates this question using a large, racially mixed, and economically diverse sample of adolescents. Specifically, the study describes the extent to which differences in adolescents' gender predicted differences in their patterns of hoped-for and feared possible selves.

Method

Participants

Subjects for the study were 1482 7th graders participating in the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Contexts Study (MAGICS). They were divided equally by gender, and ranged in age from 11 to 16 years old ($m=12.28$, $s.d.=.55$). 62% of the subjects were Blacks/African-Americans; 32%, Whites/European Americans; and the remaining 6%, members of another minority group. Families' annual incomes ranged from <\$5,000 to >\$75,000, with an average between \$45,000 and \$49,999.

Interview Procedure

Data were collected via two in-home interviews: one face-to-face; one self-administered. Each interview took approximately an hour to complete. 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 and four feared possible 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 that you do not want to be true of you when you are in high school?"

Adolescent's responses were coded into 1 of approximately 200 categories. A portion of these 200 categories were selectively collapsed to form seven categories of hoped-for selves:

1. academic success (e.g., "do well in school", "go to college")
2. physical traits & appearance (e.g., "be attractive", "have a good body")
3. athletic success (e.g., "make varsity", "play pro ball")
4. general competence (e.g., "be good at what I do")
5. wealth (e.g., "be rich", "own a Ferrari")
6. interpersonal (e.g., "have lots of friends")
7. job success (e.g., "have a good job", "have a job I like")

and eight categories of feared selves:

1. academic failure (e.g., "flunk out", "not go to college")
2. physical traits & appearance (e.g., "be ugly", "get fat")
3. athletic failure (e.g., "not make varsity")
4. general incompetence (e.g., "be a failure")
5. poverty (e.g., "be poor", "be homeless")
6. interpersonal (e.g., "have no friends")
7. job failure (e.g., "no job", "job I hate")
8. criminal activity (e.g., "be a druggie", "be in a gang")

These categories are consistent with other research in this area (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Demographic Characteristics. Adolescents' race and gender were determined according to their self-description. Their socio-economic status (SES) was measured using a continuous, composite scale based on the adolescent's family income, parent(s) education and parent(s) occupational status (Early, 1994).

Results

Regression analyses indicated that gender predicted significant differences in both adolescents' hoped-for and feared possible selves. Moreover, these differences remained significant while controlling for other demographic characteristics (race and socio-economic status).

Specifically, adolescent gender was significantly associated with possible selves as follows:

Girls mentioned more:

- hoped-for and feared selves about interpersonal characteristics ($p < .000$ for both – figure 1);
- hoped-for selves about general competence ($p < .01$ – figure 2).

Boys mentioned more:

- hoped-for and feared selves about wealth/poverty ($p < .001$ for both – figure 3);
- hoped-for and feared selves about athletics ($p < .000$ for both – figure 4);
- hoped-for selves about job success ($p < .01$ – figure 5);
- feared selves about criminal activity ($p < .000$ – figure 6).

Discussion

These data provide partial support for a well-known theory of gender differences in adolescents' behaviors: gender intensification theory. Gender intensification theory (e.g., Hill & Lynch, 1982; Archer, 1989) suggests that boys and girls develop more gender-stereotypical concerns as they advance through puberty. Specifically, gender intensification theory, and supporting research (e.g., Elliot, 1988; Gavin & Furmin, 1989), indicate that as adolescents mature, girls become increasingly concerned with personal attractiveness and interpersonal relationships. Adolescent boys, conversely, become more concerned with academic achievement and instrumental competence.

The data from this sample suggest that the girls are, in fact, more concerned with interpersonal relationships than are the boys. However, these data do not support the hypothesis that adolescent boys are more achievement oriented than adolescent girls. Rather, the boys in this sample seem to have quite specific--perhaps, concrete-- instrumental goals, whereas the girls' visions of their future achievements are more global and abstract.

Further information on this study is available upon request from:

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Girls mention more...

...Interpersonal Possible Selves

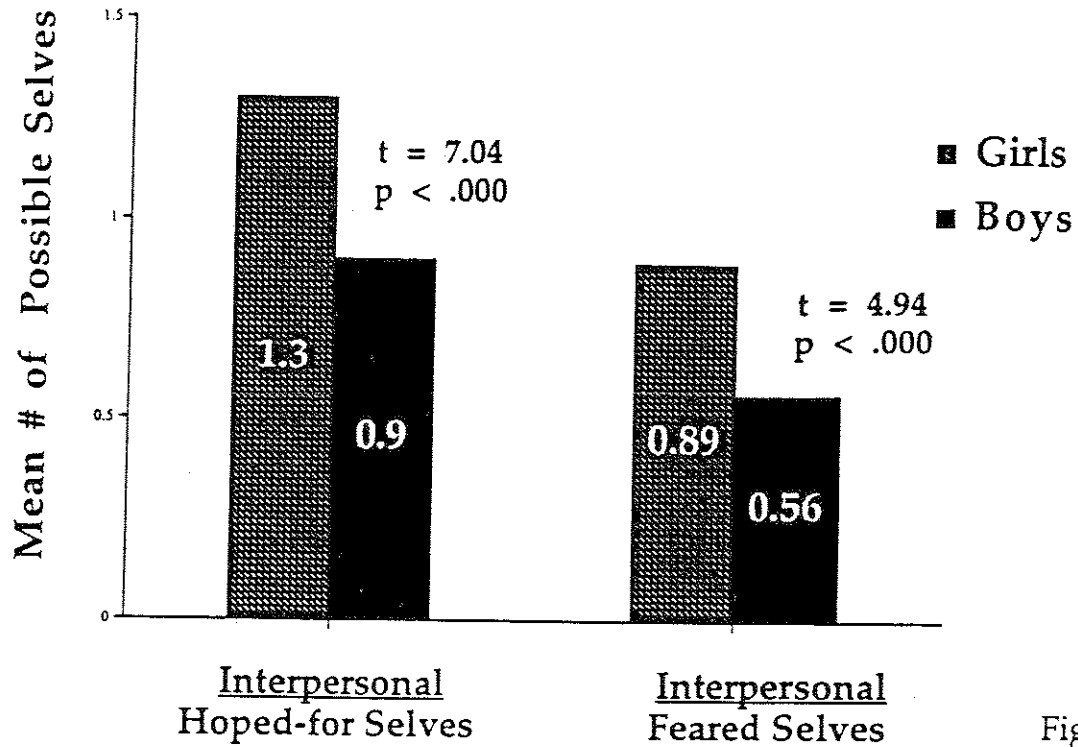


Figure 1

...Hoped-for Selves about General Competence

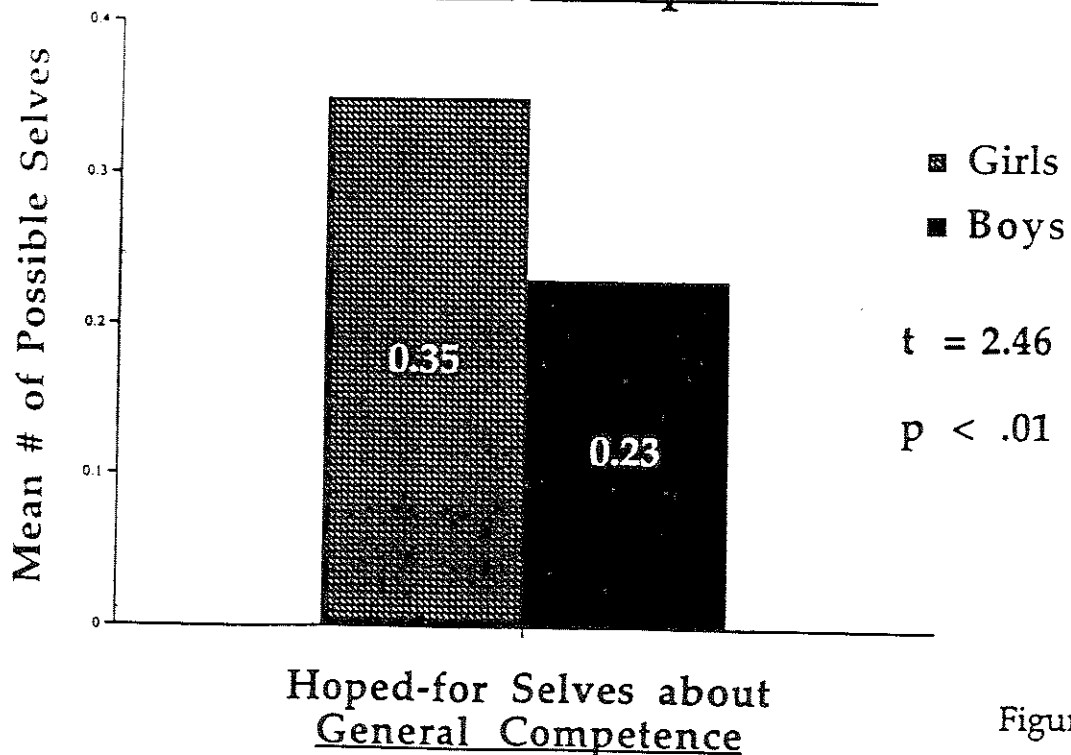


Figure 2

Boys mention more...

...Possible Selves about Money

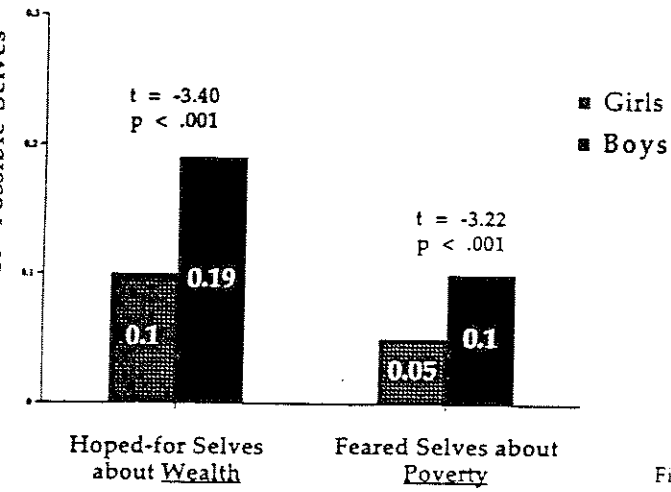


Figure 3

...Possible Selves about Athletics

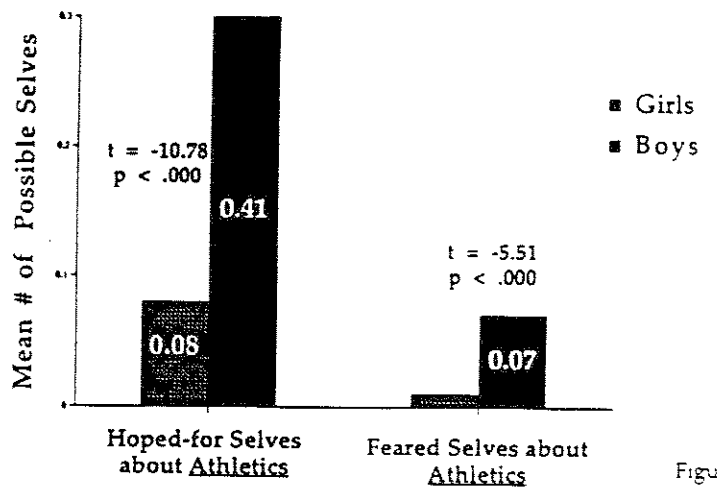


Figure 4

...Hoped-for Selves about Job Success

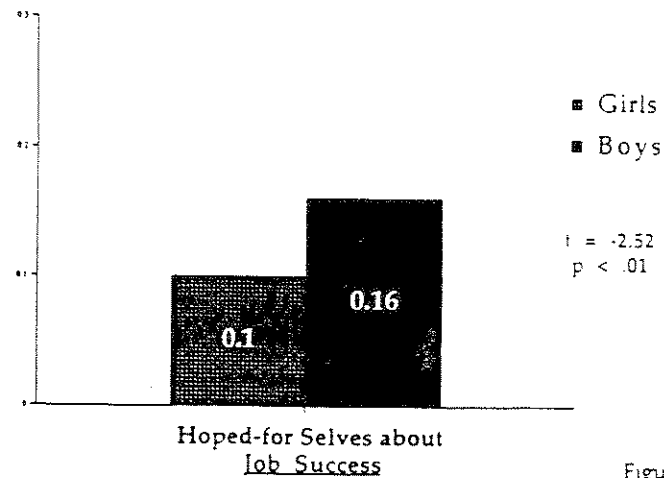


Figure 5

...Feared Selves about Criminal Activity

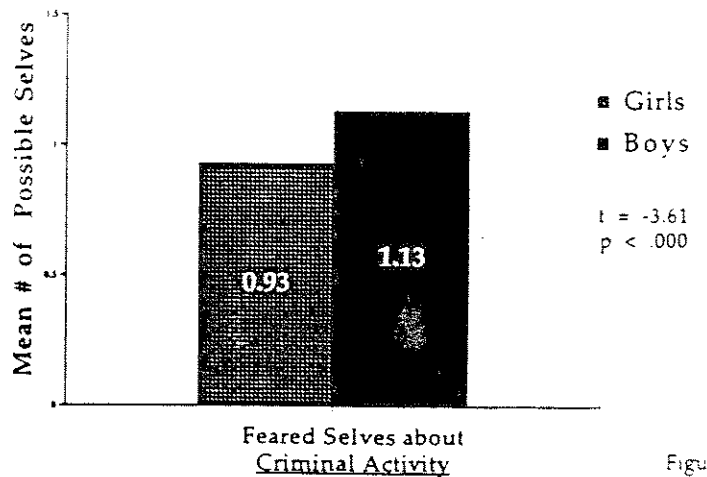


Figure 6