

Anticipating Academic and Career Future among African Undergraduate Students in The United States: A Focus On Student Possible Selves

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Abstract

Steering one's own course by mastering own destiny is one of the powerful theorems often used to motivate individuals' power to elating their future. Academic and career preparedness among undergraduate students in the twenty-first century is strengthened by student possible selves. While the American educational culture upholds this concept in higher education institutions, ethnic marginalization may explain why African undergraduate students in the United States have limited individual choice and control. The purpose of this study was to investigate the degree of student possible selves among undergraduate students in the United States with attribution to their academic and career future. This study was undertaken using descriptive and multiple regression methods in the Spring Semester of 2007. The study involved undergraduate students registered in any of the semesters in the Spring semester, 2007 and the year 2006. They had to be African students with both parents having been born in Africa and have a willingness to participate in the study. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) Version 12.0. The found out that during the middle school years, students and teachers in the United States focused on performance goals and less on mastery goals than in other years, however, the case was not the same for African students enrolled in college. This study informs educators and policy makers about African undergraduates in USA whose minority status may affect their achievement in school and stereotypically may group them into one of the marked identities that elicit vulnerability to academic under-achievement. School admission administrators and officials need to be cognizant of the motivators and future beliefs of the students they admit. It would help in providing the support and counseling required as the students move along the academic and acculturation trajectory in the United States.

Key words: Academic achievement, Career, Goal orientation, Possible selves, African undergraduates

1. Introduction

Possible selves increase motivation by having students examine and think about their future goals. In doing so, students describe their hoped-for possible selves, expected possible selves, and feared possible selves setting goals, creating plans, and working towards them to achieve future careers.

Of the nearly 38 million people classified by the United States Census Bureau as *Black, African American*, approximately one million are African born (Eissa, 2005). Although there are a significant number of African immigrants in the United States, there is little research literature about African immigration to the United States; especially when compared to the research literature about European, Asian and Hispanic immigration. In the available literature, the majority is comprised of case studies on the causes for migrating, demographics and social conditions of the immigrants in America (Bangura, 2005), and little has been written about the education of African immigrants in the United States (Traore & Elcock, 2003).

This difference is important because academic achievement is associated with employment opportunities (Muslow & Murry, 1996). Educated individuals stand a better chance in competing in today's job market. African born residents in the United States are highly educated (Butcher, 1995), urbanized, and have one of the highest per capita incomes of any immigrant group. Three quarters have some college experience and one in four has an advanced degree (Speer, 1994). These figures even surpass the figures for African Americans. These academic differences have been shown to depict a difference in earnings. For example, the median income for African immigrants is over \$40,000 per year compared to about \$20,000 per year for African Americans (Rodriguez, 2003).

Given these socio-cultural differences, it is surprising that African-Americans and African Immigrants continue to be grouped together. Even more surprising, however, is the general dearth of research about African immigrants in general. There is a substantial research base about European, Asian, Hispanic and even Caribbean

immigrants (Park, 1998; Zhou & Kim, 2001), while African immigrants have been overlooked in research. The existing research about African immigrants has, primarily, focused on economics (Kallerberg & Griffin, 1988), leaving a disproportionately low volume of work on education although most of these immigrants come to the United States to pursue education.

1.1. Literature Underpinning

1.1.1 *The Self and Identity*

The Self, according to James (1890), can be defined as the sum total of what one can call his/hers. Deci and Ryan (1991) saw two features that characterize the self in empirical psychology. First, the self is a reflection of social evaluations. Second, the self is conceptualized as a set of cognitive appraisals and schemas.

Self-schemas are organized networks of information and cognitive representations about ourselves in the present. They originate from our past experiences, feedback from others, and physical objects that we use. They include our self-concept: one's perceptions, attitudes and feelings about him or herself (Marshall, 1993) and set of beliefs about the kind of person we believe ourselves to be. Self-schemas are also domain specific (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), and enable the prediction of future behavior in that domain (Markus *et al.*, 1982). Students with high self-schema in a domain have higher aspirations for, and expectations of, future success (Eccles, 1983). This leads to higher task goals and educational achievement than students with lower self-beliefs (Pajares & Cheong, 2003).

The presence of a schema for a behavior is critical to future participation in a domain of pursuit. A self-schema can serve as the foundation for possible selves because self-schemas create future expectations, aspirations (Cross & Markus, 1994) and conceptions of the self in future states (McElwee & Dunning, 2005). Possible selves are aspects of the self-system directly related to behavioral change. Abrams and Aguilar (2005) using Stein and Markus's (1996) behavior and self-concept change framework, while examining adolescent male offenders hoped for and feared selves, analyzed responses from a questionnaire on their treatment experiences in the correctional facility. Using Stein and Markus' (1996) behavior and self-concept change framework, Abrams and Aguilar (2005) examined hoped for and feared selves of adolescent male offenders in correctional facilities by analyzing their treatment experiences in correctional facilities. They found that almost all the men had strategies of achieving their possible selves. It is conceivable that possible selves can offer a useful perspective for understanding academic performance and framework for educational relationships and learning (Oyserman, 2006).

Some theorists have used other terminologies to capture similar conceptions of the temporal aspects of self. For instance, Gjeme (1983) defines temporal orientation as an individual's predominant tendency to focus attention on either the past, present, or future. He suggested that future time orientation produces academic success. Raynor and Entin (1983) also posited that people who are future oriented are more likely to have higher levels of achievement motivation.

The temporal dimension helps distinguish between the past, present, and future selves. Future orientation has been defined as a collection of schemata or attitudes based on previous experiences that interact with incoming information from the individual's environment to form expectations of the future (Nurmi, 1991). Closely related with the temporal orientation construct is the Construal level theory (CLT). The CLT, according to Trope and Liberman (2003), propose that temporal distance changes people's responses to future events by changing the way people mentally represent those events. The greater the temporal distance, the more likely are events to be represented in terms of a few abstract features that convey the perceived essence of events (high-level construals) rather than in terms of more concrete and incidental details of the events (low-level construals).

Other theorists have used "time perspective" as a way of looking at time orientation (see Carstlensen, Issacowitz & Charles, 1999;). Lens and Moreas (1994) defined time perspective as the past, present, and future time that is part of an individual's psychological life space, and the degree to which and the way in which the chronological future is integrated in the present life space. Their research indicates that this future time perspective has a high motivational significance; it originates in motivational processes and it affects goal oriented striving.

Some theorists have argued that there is a cognitive and a dynamic aspect of FTP (Future Time Perspective). De Volder and Lens (1982) intimated that the cognitive aspect of FTP makes it possible to anticipate the more distant future; to dispose of longer time intervals in which one can situate motivational goals, plans, and projects, and to direct present action toward goals in the more distant future. The dynamic aspect involves ascribing high valence to goals, even if these goals can only be reached in the distant future.

Focusing on the future has, consistently, been found to foster human motivation. Van Casten, Lens, and Nuttin (1987) posited that enhancing a student's future perspective would increase their motivation to study only when they had a positive outlook on their future, but would actually decrease school motivation when they had a negative outlook. De Volder and Lens (1982) found a positive correlation between 11th grade students' motivation and length of FTP. They also found a positive correlation between the length of FTP and anticipated value of goals, the perceived instrumentality of study behavior to reach future goals and hence the product of value and instrumentality. Conversely, fearing what failure might cause one to become can act as a negative student motivator. Future conception perspectives of the self-assume that people's conceptions of the future act as motivators. For example, they assume that students' conceptions of the future have a real and significant influence on their beliefs and motivation to learn that, in turn, affects their achievement positively. Accordingly, a future time perspective influences one's attitudes about and goals towards academic tasks (Kauffman & Husman, 2004).

The possible selves construct was used for the following reasons: (1) it is relevant to young people, who spend a lot of time contemplating what the future might hold for them (Lobestine *et al.* (2001), (2) it does not limit the individual to rating the self only in the traditional masculine, feminine or other preconceived domains, (3) it has been found useful for assessing self-concept during adolescence, the developmental stage when self-concept is at its most differentiated stage (4) it allows adolescents to name as many different possible selves as are relevant (Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1992) (5) research has demonstrated that it is a strong predictor of school persistence and academic success (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1990) (6) it has also been used cross-culturally with success (Oyserman, Harrison & Bybee, 2001).

1.1.2 Future Self Conceptions and Goal Orientation

Goals refer to "potentially accessible, conscious cognitive representations" (Pintrich, 2000a, p. 454). They are an important aspect of human functioning (Brunstein, 1993). Numerous researchers have proposed that self-concept is at the center of nearly all cognitive processing including goal formation, motivation and behavior (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001;). According to Locke and Latham (2002), goals affect performance through four mechanisms: (1) they serve a directive function by directing effort and attention toward goal relevant activities and away from goal irrelevant activities (2) they have an energizing function (3) they affect persistence and (4) they affect action indirectly by leading to arousal, discovery, and/or use of task relevant knowledge and strategies.

Three broad types of goals were identified by Pintrich (2000a) as shown in the literature: general goals, task specific (target) goals and achievement goals. General goals include possible selves and any other broad goals. Task specific goals are geared towards specific outcomes. According to Pintrich (2000a) achievement goals could otherwise be referred to as goal orientation.

Goal orientation refers to the goals that are implicitly pursued by individuals while attempting to attain or achieve a certain level of performance (Breland & Donovan, 2005). Achievement goal theory has become a major framework in the research of students' achievement motivation. It generally identifies two types of goals. The two types of goals have been labeled differently though the connotation has been similar. The labels include the following names: mastery and performance goals (Ames & Archer, 1988), learning and performance goals (Elliott & Dweck, 1988), task-oriented and ego-oriented goals (Nicholls, 1984), task-involved and ego-involved goals (Jagacinski, 1993), intrinsic and extrinsic orientations (Pintrich, 1989), and task and ability goal orientations (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). For consistency purposes, the mastery and performance terminology will be used in this study.

Grant and Dweck (2003) identified three types of performance goal orientations: outcome goals that are focused on obtaining positive outcomes, ability goals that are linked to validating one's ability and normative goals that include social comparisons. Elliot (1997) and Elliot & Church (1997) have further identified two types of goals by dividing the performance goal, performance avoidance goals and performance approach goals. Performance-avoidance goals occur when students are focused on avoiding looking incompetent whereas performance-approach goals occur when students are interested in demonstrating their ability.

Pintrich (1999) further subdivided goals into four types: performance-avoidance, performance-approach, mastery-approach, and mastery-avoidance. Mastery-approach students focus on increasing their levels of competence by acquiring the skills that the task develops. Mastery-avoidance students emphasize mastery through engagement with the task with emphasis on avoiding mistakes, failures or diminution of existing skills. Performance-approach students emphasize the desire to demonstrate their ability relative to others by

outperforming them and publicly displaying their task relevant knowledge or skills. Performance-avoidance students also focus on public display of competence than on developing new knowledge or skills but rather than seeking to best their peers, they seek to avoid looking incompetent or less able to handle the task successfully.

These goals motivate current behavior to the extent that people can link their present condition to these potential outcomes through a set of self-representations that lead to the goal (Markus, Cross & Wurf, 1990). Positive and detailed possible selves have been linked to academic performance and persistence (Leondari, Syngollitou & Kiosseloglou, 1998). When students are mastery goal oriented, they engage in academic work in order to improve their competency or for intrinsic motivation. These students also tend to attribute failure to lack of effort, choose moderately challenging tasks, and use deep processing and more self-regulating strategies (Ames, 1988; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Urdan, 1997). Students who set performance goals tend to focus on demonstrating their abilities to outside observers prefer less challenging tasks and use surface processing (Ames, 1992; Midgley, 1993).

The addition of performance-approach as goals has been questioned by Brophy (2005) in some circumstances. He argued for the phasing out of this type of goals citing two reasons: 1) because of their low incidence in the natural classroom situations 2) although the goal theory research had established that performance goal adoption was positively associated with subsequent task performance the relations were correlational and likely to be epiphenomenal rather than causal.

Future orientation, identity formation and cognitive skills which support decision-making and introspection foster the development of self-determination. Black and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory suggested that the degree to which behavior will be motivated will depend on whether the task is perceived as autonomous or controlled. Autonomous behaviors have an internal perceived locus of control (de Charms, 1968) while controlled behaviors have an external locus of control (Ryan, 1982).

Research is replete with literature showing the relationship between possible selves, extensions of the self, future time perspective/orientation and motivation. This motivation has been known to translate to achievement in academics and other changes of behavior. Exceptions have, however, been found between possible selves, future time perspective (orientation) and performance (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry (2006). Their explanation was that improved academic performance was likely only when a possible self could plausibly be a self-regulator. In other words, in situations where positive possible selves are found and there is no improvement in academics then there is a problem of self-regulation.

The study of the relationship between self-concept and human behavior has exhibited a divide between those researchers who argue that self-concept influences actual performance and achievement (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and that achievement is influenced by self-concept (Marsh, 1990). Others believe that achievement and self-concept are interdependent (Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991). Anderman *et al.* (1999) suggested that goal orientation and self-schema studies may inform each other and broaden our understanding of achievement. Hoyle and Sherrill (2006), however, argued that the possible selves construct has always been linked to motivation and behavior through the process of self-regulation and any attempts to see it away from the self-regulation process would not work.

Goal orientation relates with possible selves because possible selves have been conceptualized as personalized representations of goals (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). Future goals and picturing oneself in the future can have a positive or a negative motivation depending on what one sees. This happens as people compare their actual selves and ideal selves. Nurius (1989) posited that based on information-processing models of cognition, possible selves described self-concept as "an interlocking system of knowledge structures about the self that is the basis of how we store and retrieve information from memory". Focusing on possible selves, according to Markus and Nurius (1986) is broadly seen as an effort to relate the self-cognition to motivation. This in turn relates the self-cognitions to self- feelings.

Accordingly, possible selves give specific cognitive form to our desires for mastery, power, or affiliation, and to our diffuse fears of failure and incompetence. These cognitive forms from possible selves motivate students to produce cognitive strategies that involve meaningful (elaborative) processing (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke & Akey, 2004). This elaborative processing leads to greater performance on achievement. Greene *et al.* (2004) showed that student academic motivation is positively influenced by the cognitive strategies they employ to guide their learning. Possible selves are, therefore, thought to influence the motivation process in two ways. First, they provide a clear goal to strive for – if they are hoped for selves and to avoid if they are feared for selves (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). They also energize individuals to pursue the actions necessary for attaining the

specific possible selves. Possible selves give form and direction, specificity and imagery to an individual's goals, aspirations and fears. This imaging and elaboration was found to act as a positive self-construction bridge to the distance between the current state and the desired end-state (Rossiter, 1999).

Thus, the close relationship between possible selves and goal orientation cannot be overstated. Whereas Pintrich and Degroot (1990, p.33) defined motivation as “a force that energizes, sustains, and directs behavior toward a goal,” Markus and Ruvolo (1989) defined possible selves as personalized representation of goals. They emphasized that though motivated behavior depends on one's attributions, the referent of those attributions is the possible self.

2. Materials and Methods

In the Spring Semester of 2007, the author collected relevant information that informed this study on the academic and career future of African undergraduate students living in the United States. The target population thus included undergraduate African students registered in any of the semesters in the Spring semester, 2007 and the year 2006.

This study was done in order to examine the possible selves in relation to academic and career future of African undergraduate students in the United States. The study used descriptive and multiple regression methods in form of percentages, frequencies, and inferential statistics. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) Version 12.0 (SPSS, 2003). Coding for possible selves measures were done according to specifications by Oyserman (2004). They were measured by counting the possible selves with strategies and balance between expected and feared selves as Oyserman and her colleagues (2002) did. Thus, total number of balanced possible selves were the number of pairs of expected and feared possible selves that contain opposite sides of the same issue in the same domain.

Those students without balance were coded as 0 possible self. Possible selves with balance have been found to have maximal motivational effectiveness (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Furthermore, among goal theorists the concern for quality of motivation is higher than that of absolute amount of motivation (Urdu, 1997).

Data from the PALS was in three sub-categories; mastery, performance-approach and performance avoidance goals. All items were scored on a 5-point likert scale with 1= not at all true and 5= very true. Responses were grouped according to the sub-categories. There were 5 Mastery (MGO) items, 5 performance approach (APGO) and 4 performance avoidance (AVGO) items. Scores from each sub-category were counted and their means calculated accordingly.

The study used descriptive and hierarchical regression analysis methods. This method helped not only in understanding the possible selves of this group but also to further understand the relationships between the population's possible selves and their goal orientations, racial ethnic identities and genders by controlling for their majors, length of stay and sponsorship method in the United States. Possible Selves from the collected data were used as the independent variable while the dependent variables were Academic and Career future of the African undergraduate students. The influence of the students' length of stay and sustenance in the United States were used as background variables and controlled for, thus ensuring that any of their contribution in explaining their academic and career future would be accounted for. The level of significant was established at 0.05 (alpha).

It was further expected that participants with more balanced possible selves would be more goal oriented and that those with less balanced possible selves would have more performance approach and avoidance goals.

3. Results and Discussions

This study sought to examine possible selves among African undergraduate students living in the United States and establish how this was a measure for their academic and possible future. The study relevantly follows Oyserman's *et al.* (1995) recommendation to examine the role of possible selves in academic achievement with ethnic and social groups other than European and African Americans.

Research by Oyserman and her colleagues (1995, 1998, 2002, 2004.) found possible selves, whether they used a simple count of the number of expected or feared possible selves or, they used balanced possible selves, to have means with a wide range of possible selves from 0.42 to 3.23. Findings from this study fall within this range. The range is however quite wide considering that possible selves are calculated on a four-point scale. More research is needed to understand these varied responses. For example, in a study of African American and Latino

students, Oyserman *et al.* (2002) reported a mean of 3.10 for balanced possible selves, considerably higher than the balanced possible selves reported in this study. It is not clear whether this discrepancy represents cultural differences or problems with the way African students completed the questionnaire.

3.1 Relationship between Possible Selves and Goal Orientation

To identify the relationship between possible selves and goal orientation, and to examine whether this relationship varied by racial ethnic identity and gender, several hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. The first analysis consisted of three steps. In the first step, the possible selves construct was regressed on the significant demographic variables identified in the previous section: length of stay in the United States and being enrolled in a four-year university. Only the significant demographic variables were used to increase the power of subsequent regression analyses. Consistent with the previous regression model, results indicate a significant model and both variables were significant predictor variables (see Table 1).

The second step regressed possible selves balance on racial ethnic identity constructs (Connectedness, Embedded Achievement and Awareness of racism) and gender to examine the relationship between possible selves and the two variables: racial ethnic identity and gender. The results revealed no main effect. This means that the racial ethnic identity constructs and gender do not predict balanced possible selves.

The third step regressed possible selves balance on the goal orientation sub-constructs of mastery goal orientation, performance approach goal orientation and performance avoidance goal orientation. This produced a significant main effect with mastery goal orientation as the only significant predictor variable of balanced possible selves. This finding is inconsistent with Anderman and colleagues' (1999) findings that possible selves were related to performance approach goal orientation and not mastery goal orientation. They explained their finding by claiming that during the middle school years, students and teachers in the United States focused on performance goals and less on mastery goals than in other years. These findings indicate that this is not the case for African students enrolled in college.

Results indicate that the longer a Kenyan stayed in the United States the greater the number of balanced possible selves implying enculturation into an individualistic society. The educational institution that Kenyans attended was also found to affect the number of balanced possible selves. In particular, attending a major university significantly increased the number of balanced possible selves. The combination of length of stay and the educational institution one attended would seem to match an immigrant profile that sees their time in the United States and the place where they study as opportunities to realize a greater number of possible selves.

In addition to the growing African immigrant population, Oyserman *et al.* (1995) suggest that further research is required to examine the role of possible selves in academic achievement with ethnic and social groups other than European and African Americans. Since Western individualism is notably lacking among Africans (Riley, 1992), this study provides a markedly different context in examining the relevance of possible selves and academic and career future of the students to identity. The relationship between possible selves and goal orientation has recently become prominent in scholarly works (Behnke, Piercy & Diversi, 2004; Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2006; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Yowell, 2000). Oyserman, et al. (2006) posited that possible selves are associated with other cognitions that relate to the possible selves implied in behaviors. They argue that when these cognitions undermine confidence, the behaviors are not sustained over time or even performed at all which leads to a reduction in the motivation for the achievement of the possible self.

Table 1: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Demographic, Racial Ethnic Identity, and Goal Orientation Variables Predicting Possible Selves

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	ΔR^2
Step 1				
Length of Stay in US	.45	.09	.36**	
Four Year University	.37	.14	.19**	
Step 2				
Length of Stay in US	.45	.09	.36**	
Four Year University	.37	.14	.19**	
Connectedness	-.04	.14	-.03	
Embedded Achievement	.02	.16	.01	
Awareness of Racism	-.01	.08	-.00	
Gender	.06	.14	.03	
				.002
Step 3				
Length of Stay in US	.46	.09	.37**	
Four Year University	.40	.14	.21**	
Connectedness	-.14	.14	-.09	
Embedded Achievement	.04	.16	.02	
Awareness of Racism	.02	.08	.02	
Gender	.08	.14	.04	
Mastery Orientation	.47	.17	.21**	
Perform. Approach Orientation	.06	.09	.06	
Perform. Avoid. Orientation	-.06	.07	-.07	
				.043*

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

Step 1: $R^2 = .167$, $F(2,167) = 16.699$, $p = .000$

Step 2: $R^2 = .168$, $F(6,163) = 5.492$, $p = .000$

Step 3: $R^2 = .211$, $F(9,160) = 4.748$, $p = .000$

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that students with more balanced possible selves tend to have higher goal orientation thus an objective academic and career future. It was also established that the length of stay in the United States and possible selves which would be indicative of the students' continued enculturation into an individualist society positively affects the degree of balanced possible selves among African undergraduate students in the United States. There is need for educators to understand Black immigrants (Vickerman, 1999). As

Rong and Brown (2002) also observe, there is a need for research that focuses on the development of beliefs and attitudes affecting African Black immigrants' self-perceptions about race, ethnicity and identity, and the reason that some are successful and others not so successful. This view has policy implications. For example, the social workers' discourse could be informed by this study so that there would be a change from viewing immigrants as an alien problem, a refugee problem and a border problem (Park, 2004). The research of Potocky (1997) indicates that although there has been an emphasis on cultural sensitivity, social workers who work with immigrants continue to ignore the need to respond to rising racism and neo-assimilation ideology. This study identifies the motivational characteristics of African immigrants and tests for socio-cultural differences across these characteristics.

5. Recommendations for Future Research

This exploratory study presented a baseline for future comparisons. Replication of this study including outcome variables such as GPA, school retention and graduation rates is recommended. This would yield more important additional information regarding this group. Other future research suggestions on this group include observational and other qualitative techniques which would enhance the interpretation and utility of the findings. A mixed approach method would allow for a more meaningful interpretation to be assigned to the numbers in quantitative methods.

It is acknowledged that this study focuses only on Black African undergraduate students, a very specific subset of the population. The results of the study cannot be generalized to other races and school levels because of its specific focus. Although data was collected from students of other countries, it was eliminated because there were too few to make reliable and valid conclusions. The sample also combined the first generation and second generation Kenyan groups. It is conceivable that there would be differences in possible selves and goal orientations between these two groups considering their different cultural generational environments.

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