Academic Alienation and Adolescents’ Possible Selves: How School Experiences Shape Visions of the Future

Kari Fraser
University of Colorado, Boulder

Jacquelynne S. Eccles
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which academic alienation influences the forward-looking dimension of adolescents' self-concepts: their "possible selves". 1373 7th graders, divided equally by gender, participated in the study. 61% were Black/African-American; 33%, White/European-American; and 6%, members of another ethnic minority group. Participants in both predominant racial groups represented a range of (familial) socio-economic status. Analyses indicated that adolescents' possible selves varied significantly depending on an adolescent’s degree of academic alienation, over and above variations associated with adolescents' races, genders and socio-economic status. Specifically, adolescents reporting higher levels of academic alienation also reported: 1) fewer hoped-for selves about academics and general competence; and 2) more hoped-for selves about physical traits, wealth and athletics than did their more academically-engaged peers. These findings illustrate the far-reaching consequences of academic alienation during adolescence.
Introduction

Since the publication of Erikson’s (1968) landmark theory of socio-emotional development, psychologists have widely acknowledged that self-concept formation is one of the central tasks of adolescence. Echoing William James’ (1910) notion of a temporally dynamic self, Erikson (1968) described adolescence as the stage during which children begin to project their childhood “sense of industry” forward in time. As such, adolescence is a period when children’s feelings of self-efficacy readily influence their visions of their own adulthoods.

Though adolescents derive feelings of competence from many domains, one of the most salient is their school experiences (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Adolescents’ perceptions of school, and their academic successes and failures, significantly impact their overall sense-of-self. For example, Roeser, Lord and Eccles (1994) identified a “broad portrait” of adolescent academic alienation: academically-alienated adolescents appeared more angry, more depressed, less socially connected and less resilient than their academically-engaged peers. Relatedly, other research exploring adolescent academic underachievement (e.g., Fordham & Ogbo, 1986) suggests that students who feel disengaged from mainstream academics may seek to define their senses-of-self through other, possibly maladaptive, activities.

This study explores the extent to which academic alienation influences the forward-looking dimension of adolescents’ self-concepts—their future selves. Specifically, this study describes the associations between different degrees of academic alienation and different patterns of adolescents’ hoped-for “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Predictions

This study predicts that adolescents’ hoped-for possible selves will vary significantly depending on the adolescents’ degrees of academic alienation.

Specifically, presuming that academic alienation diminishes adolescents’ feelings of self-efficacy, both with respect to school and more generally, this study predicts:

1. Academically-alienated adolescents will mention fewer possible selves related to academics and general competence than their more academically-engaged peers.

Additionally, presuming that academically-alienated adolescents may derive visions of their future success from alternative domains, this study predicts:

2. Academically-alienated adolescents will mention more possible selves about sports and wealth than their more academically-engaged peers.
Method

Participants

1373 7th graders, living in a mixed-class, sub/urban region of the mid-Atlantic United States, participated in this study as part of the larger Maryland Adolescent Growth in Contexts Study (MAGICS). Half of the participants were female. Approximately 61% were Black/African-American; 33%, White/European-American; and the remaining 6%, members of another ethnic minority group. Participants in the two predominant racial groups represented a broad range of (familial) socio-economic status.

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 possible selves using the following probe:

"Please tell me four things about the kind of person you most hope to be 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 six general 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”)

These categories are consistent with other research in this area (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990).
**Academic Alienation.** Adolescents' academic alienation was measured using a composite scale created from measures of school-related attitudes (enjoyment of school, engagement in school, and subjective importance of academics) and school-based behavior problems (suspensions, expulsions, failing grades). All scales, including the composite scale, were reliable (α > .72). Adolescents' scores on the composite scale placed them into one of the four following academic alienation groups:

1) LOW Academic Alienation (lowest quartile) -- n=345  
2) MEDIUM Academic Alienation (middle quartiles) -- n=653  
3) HIGH Academic Alienation (highest quartile) -- n=313  
4) HIGH Alienation WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS -- n=62

**Results**

Regression and chi square analyses indicated that adolescents' hoped-for possible selves varied significantly depending on the adolescent's degree of academic alienation. Moreover, all of these patterns remained significant when controlling for socio-economic status and race. All but two of the patterns (those involving hoped-for selves about sports and wealth) remained significant when controlling for gender as well.

Specifically, the results revealed a negative linear relationship between academic alienation and adolescents' hoped-for selves of academic success and general competence, as follows:

- Academically-alienated adolescents mentioned fewer *hoped-for selves of academic success* than did more academically-engaged adolescents (p < .002 -- see figure 1);

- Academically-alienated adolescents mentioned fewer *hoped-for selves of general competence* than did more academically-engaged adolescents (p < .03 -- see figure 2);

Conversely, academic alienation was positively related to adolescents' hoped-for selves about physical characteristics, wealth, and athletics, as follows:

- Academically-alienated adolescents mentioned more *hoped-for selves about physical characteristics* than did more academically-engaged adolescents (p < .000 -- see figure 3);

- Academically-alienated adolescents mentioned more *hoped-for selves of wealth* than did more academically-engaged adolescents (p < .003 -- see figure 4);

- Academically-alienated adolescents mentioned more *hoped-for selves about athletics* than did more academically-engaged adolescents (p < .01 -- see figure 5).
Discussion

These results indicated that adolescents' possible selves varied significantly depending on their level of academic alienation, and confirmed both of the study's main predictions. Consistent with Roeser, Lord and Eccles' work (1994), academic alienation appears to have far-reaching consequences for adolescents. Specifically, this study indicates that adolescents' feelings of academic alienation reach beyond their current experiences and shape their future selves.

In so far as the hoped-for possible selves reflect goals and aspirations, academically-alienated adolescents appear less invested in "traditional" means of success, such as doing well academically and being generally competent, than do those adolescents who report being engaged in school. Instead, academically-alienated adolescents seem to turn to alternative domains for self-definition: they indicate that doing well in sports, being rich (and owning material goods) and being physically attractive are the most salient components of their visions of their futures.

Further information on this study is available upon request from:

Kari Fraser
Institute of Behavioral Science #1
University of Colorado
Campus Box 483
Boulder CO 80309
fraser@colorado.edu
References
Academically-alienated adolescents mention...

...Fewer **Academic** Hoped-for Selves

![Bar Chart](chart1)

- Low
- Medium
- High
- High w/ Problems

\[ \chi^2 = 9.68 \]

\[ p < .002 \]

...Fewer Hoped-for Selves about **General** Competence

![Bar Chart](chart2)

- Low
- Medium
- High
- High w/ Problems

\[ \chi^2 = 4.60 \]

\[ p < .03 \]
Academically-alienated adolescents mention...

...More Hoped-for Selves about Physical Characteristics

\[
\chi^2 = 12.37 \\
p < .000
\]

Figure 3

...More Hoped-for Selves about Wealth & Material Goods

\[
\chi^2 = 8.80 \\
p < .003
\]

Figure 4

...More Athletic Hoped-for Selves

\[
\chi^2 = 6.45 \\
p < .01
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