

# *GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENTS' POSSIBLE SELVES*

MICHELE KNOX

Medical College of Ohio

JEANNE FUNK

ROBERT ELLIOTT

University of Toledo

ELLEN GREENE BUSH

Psychological Resources Ltd.

*The purpose of the study was to better understand gender differences in global self-esteem at adolescence by examining the content of and gender differences within adolescents' "possible selves." Possible selves are self-conceptions about both what an individual hopes to become and fears becoming. Results support the hypothesis that adolescents are able to access and report a vast array of possible selves. As hypothesized, female adolescents rated feared possible selves as more likely than boys. Girls accessed more feared possible selves related to relational functioning, whereas boys generated more feared possible selves related to occupation, general failure, and inferiority. No gender differences in likelihood or content of hoped-for possible selves were demonstrated. Results indicate that differences in boys' and girls' self-views may be rooted in the experienced importance and likelihood of feared selves. Implications for assessment and treatment addressing adolescent self-esteem are discussed.*

**Recent research suggests that** upon entering adolescence, girls experience significant disruption in self-esteem and self-concept. For example, gender differences in preadolescent and adolescent self-esteem have been found by several researchers using various self-esteem measures (Alpert-Gillis & Connell, 1989; Harper & Marshall, 1991; Marsh, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Results of such studies indicate that boys' self-esteem is significantly higher than girls' self-esteem. Many studies pinpoint preadolescence and adolescence as periods when girls' self-esteem decreases relative to previous levels (Block & Robins, 1993; Harter, 1993; Marsh, 1989; Simmons &

Blyth, 1987; Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997). Furthermore, self-concept formation may be a particularly arduous process for girls compared to boys (Harter, 1990), in part because girls at this developmental level construct self-views in more life domains than do boys.

Such findings have led to considerable recent speculation and concern about the apparent disruption in adolescent female self-views. This study evaluates adolescents' possible selves, self-conceptions about both what an individual hopes to become and fears becoming. The possible-selves approach is used to gain insight into the nature of adolescent self-concept as well as gender differences in adolescent self-views.

Many researchers have attempted to quantify female adolescent self-views using global self-esteem measures (e.g., Harper & Marshall, 1991; Martinez & Dukes, 1991; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). Global self-esteem refers to the level of general, comprehensive regard that one has for the self (Harter, 1993). Scores on such measures are closely associated with constructs such as positive and negative affect and hopelessness. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, *self-esteem* differs from *self-concept*, which refers to the composite of developmentally relevant, descriptive self-perceptions. That is, whereas self-esteem refers to a globally evaluative rating of the perceived self, self-concept refers to descriptions of the perceived self. Self-esteem scores represent quantitative evaluations of one's overall level of positive or negative self-regard. In contrast, self-concept is a more qualitative description of how one views oneself.

Developmental research has established that the self-concept reaches its most highly differentiated state at adolescence (Harter, 1985; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1992). Because they reflect a consolidation of adolescents' diverse self-views, it is likely that global measures conceal important differences within specific domains of self-concept contributing to self-esteem (Wylie, 1979). In effect, global approaches to self-concept measurement may neutralize significant variation among the domains of adolescent self-concept. For example, a low global self-esteem score may represent low self-evaluations in several domains as well as high self-evaluations in others.

If self-esteem is considered an aggregate of self-views in various domains, then gender differences in the various domains of self-

concept may be obscured by total scores on self-esteem measures. That is, scores in some domains of self-concept may favor girls, whereas scores in other domains may favor boys. Global self-esteem scores may reflect an aggregate of counterbalanced gender differences in more specific domains of self-concept, some favoring boys and some favoring girls (Wylie, 1979). Research addressing gender differences in self-evaluations in different domains indicates that compared with girls, boys tend to have higher self-evaluations in masculinity, achievement, physical ability, appearance, and mathematics, whereas girls have higher self-evaluations in congeniality, sociability, verbal and/or reading ability, school performance, and English (Byrne & Shavelson, 1987; Dusek & Flaherty, 1981; Marsh, 1989). Global self-esteem scores may mask gender differences such as these that exist in a variety of self-concept domains. In contrast to global approaches, research addressing the specific domains of adolescent self-concept may provide a more precise depiction of gender differences in adolescents' self-views.

Results of several studies suggest that meaningful gender differences may exist in the content of adolescent male and female self-views. For example, Block and Robins (1993) demonstrated that adolescent girls' self-esteem is interpersonally oriented, whereas boys' self-esteem is more self-oriented. Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi (1992) found that high self-esteem in men was related to the traditionally masculine quality of seeing oneself as having uniquely superior abilities. In contrast, higher perceived interconnectedness with others was associated with higher levels of self-esteem in women (Josephs et al., 1992). These findings appear to support the self-in-relation theory (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), which depicts female self-concept as developed through girls' and women's relations with others. To more clearly delineate important differences in adolescents' more specific self-views such as these, a multifaceted approach to adolescent self-concept and self-esteem measurement is needed.

### **THE POSSIBLE-SELVES APPROACH**

The possible-selves approach (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is a method that may provide a more detailed description of adolescent self-

views. "Possible selves are a type of self-conception about both what an individual hopes to become and what he or she fears becoming. Hoped-for possible selves are images of how an individual both hopes to be and that he or she believes are possible in the future. For example, an individual might have a successful businessperson hoped-for possible self. Feared possible selves are images of oneself in the future that an individual both fears or dreads and that he or she believes are possible for him or her. For instance, an individual might have a bad-parent feared possible self. In one study, aspects of possible selves were found to be predictive of level of delinquency in adolescents, whereas global self-esteem scores were not. This finding may suggest that "global measures of the nature of the self-concept like self-esteem may mask significant individual variation in the content and structure of the self-concept" (Oyserman & Markus, 1990, p. 123). The assessment of possible selves may provide more detailed information.

Possible selves may be seen as reference points upon which more general self-impressions and evaluations are formed. Individuals experience high self-esteem when they believe they can achieve their positive possible selves. On the other hand, negative possibilities that are highly accessible and perceived as likely are associated with low self-esteem (Cross & Markus, 1991) and depression (Allen, Woolfolk, Gara, & Apter, 1996). Possible selves also function to generate feelings of competence, self-efficacy, and control. For example, when an individual forms realistic hoped-for possible selves and works effectively toward them, he or she may experience enhanced self-efficacy. Alternatively, when an individual develops unrealistic, unattainable possible selves, he or she is more liable to experience failure and frustration, and possibly, self-deprecation.

At adolescence, the ability to think about hypothetical conceptions of the self (Harter, 1990) and envision positive and negative versions of what one might become is developing. Therefore, possible selves may be highly salient during this developmental stage. Possible selves allow the individual to envision change in the self and thereby provide a cognitive link between the current and future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In the attempt to define the self, the adolescent considers hypothetical versions of the self and evaluates how desired and how probable they are for him or her. Frequent experimentation with a

wide variety of behaviors, from delinquency to involvement in multiple clubs or sports to membership in diverse peer groups, is typical of adolescence. This experimentation reflects the rehearsal of possible selves or the trying out of the self the adolescent could become (Erikson, 1959).

However, movement to this new level of thinking about the self can lead to difficulties. When the adolescent begins to have the ability to conceptualize the hypothetical, he or she does not yet have complete mastery. Consequently, until the individual has the opportunity to practice and master this skill, hypothetical self-views can be highly improbable and inaccurate. For example, an adolescent may have a "looks like a fashion model" hoped-for self, a possible self that is highly unlikely for most individuals. Adolescents are particularly prone to overestimating their potential in such ways, and this can ultimately result in failure and self-deprecation when unrealistic goals are not met. In such examples, the discrepancy between the real self and the hoped-for or ideal self is very large. This discrepancy has been found to be greatest during midadolescence and appears to be related to adolescents' low global self-evaluations (Strachen & Jones, 1982).

The self-rated likelihood of achieving hoped-for possible selves may be seen as a function of the discrepancy between real and ideal selves; that is, possible selves are rated as unlikely if they are perceived as highly distant or discrepant from the real self. Conversely, feared possible-selves likelihood ratings are a function of the negative pole of self-evaluation, the perceived distance between feared selves and the real self. Ratings of the perceived likelihood of possible selves have been used by Cross and Markus (1991) to evaluate individuals' perceptions of the probability of realizing their possible selves. Similarly, probability of possible-selves ratings were used by Markus and Nurius (1986) and found to be associated with the global self-esteem of adults. Similar ratings may be particularly useful for the assessment of the self-views of adolescents.

The possible-selves approach is well-suited for the assessment of adolescent self-views because it allows adolescents to name as many different possible selves as are relevant. Rather than eliciting global scores that may ignore the multidimensionality of adolescent self-concept, this approach elicits a more detailed depiction of adolescent self-conceptions. In this way, the possible-selves approach acknowl-

edges the complexity of adolescent self-concept. This is in keeping with James's (1892) definition of self-esteem as a function of one's aspirations in domains considered important by the individual to one's perceived successes in those domains. The possible-selves approach suggests that self-evaluations in the domains that contain possible selves will contribute most prominently to global self-evaluations.

This approach may also be particularly useful for the assessment of female adolescent self-concept because it includes the assessment of undesired or feared selves, which have been found to be associated with girls' self-esteem scores (Ogilvie, 1987). Research by Owens (1993, 1994) suggests that a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of adolescent self-esteem may be derived from measures that assess both negative and positive self-views. The possible-selves approach has potential for obtaining thorough descriptions of adolescent self-views by eliciting both hoped-for and feared possible selves in multiple domains.

In summary, possible selves appear to be a type of self-representation that may be highly salient to the self-concept of adolescents, and a comprehensive evaluation of adolescents' possible selves may provide insight into the nature of adolescent self-concept as well as gender differences in adolescent self-views. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to describe adolescents' possible selves and to determine whether gender differences exist among different aspects of possible selves. Past researchers have examined the likelihood of possible selves in adults, and this variable was examined in this study in adolescents. To examine the affective salience or importance of possible selves, ratings of how much participants hope for or fear their possible selves were added and examined. The following research topics were addressed:

1. Adolescents will generate a large variety of hoped-for and feared possible selves.
2. The types of possible selves generated by adolescents will differ by gender.
3. Female adolescents will rate their hoped-for possible selves as less likely and their feared possible selves as more likely than will male adolescents.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the study were 212 high school students (85 boys and 127 girls) in a metropolitan Ohio area. When asked to list the race with which they most closely identify, of the 212 participants, 203 listed White or Caucasian; 3 listed African American or Black; 3 listed Mexican American, Latino, or Hispanic; 1 listed Asian; and 2 listed other. The mean age of students in the sample was 16.4 years, ranging from 14 to 19. The sample was composed of 45 9th graders, 45 10th graders, 42 10th graders, and 80 12th graders. A broad range of socioeconomic status, as assessed by ratings of occupational status using the Total-Based 1989 Socioeconomic Index (Entwisle & Astone, 1994), was represented in the study. The mean Socioeconomic Index rating was 61.61, encompassing a range from 26.39 to 97.16. Participants' mothers' levels of education ranged from grade school education to completion of graduate degree, also suggesting that a broad range of socioeconomic status was represented in the study (Entwisle & Astone, 1994).

### MEASURES

The Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire was used to elicit information about hoped-for possible selves, and the Feared Possible Selves Questionnaire was used to elicit information about feared possible selves (Cross & Markus, 1991). Participants were asked to list all the possible selves they could think of on the questionnaire provided. These questionnaires also ask participants to rate the likelihood of each generated possible self on a 7-point, bipolar, Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher degrees of likelihood. To examine the affective salience or importance of possible selves, 4-point, unipolar Likert-type ratings (ranging from *not at all hoped for* to *very hoped for* and *not at all feared* to *very feared*) of how much each participant hopes for or fears their possible selves were added. The convergent validity of this approach is demonstrated by the fact that the Possible Selves Questionnaire ratings have been found to correlate

significantly with positive affect and global self-esteem (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents Global Self-Worth Scale (Harter, 1988) was used to evaluate global self-worth (self-esteem). This scale consists of five items addressing one's global judgments of one's worth as a person, including how happy one is with the way one is living one's life, how much one likes oneself as a person, and how happy one feels about the way one is (Harter, 1988). The response format is designed to reduce the influence of social desirability on subscale scores through the use of a forced-choice response format. The internal consistency reliability of this scale, based on Cronbach's alpha, ranges from 0.80 to 0.89. The measure's convergent validity is supported by findings indicating negative correlations between depressed affect and scores on the Global Self-Worth Scale (Renouf & Harter, 1990). Predictive validity is suggested by the finding that scores on the Global Self-Worth Scale distinguish between psychiatric inpatient and nonpatient status (Evans, Noam, Wertlieb, Paget, & Wolf, 1994).

#### PROCEDURES

All students in randomly selected regular education classes in five high schools in a metropolitan Ohio area were asked to participate. All students who provided written assent and gained written parental consent participated in the study. Participants were given raffle tickets and entered into drawings for \$30 gift certificates to local music stores.

The instructions for the Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire and the Feared Possible Selves Questionnaire, described by Cross and Markus (1991), were used. However, the examples of possible selves given were modified to make the instructions more suitable for the younger participants, and participants were asked to rate how much they hope for each possible self. The Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire was read aloud to groups of 11 to 30 students (see Appendix A).

Once the Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire was completed by participants, the examiner read the instructions for the Feared Possible Selves Questionnaire, which are similar to those for the Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire. After these questionnaires were

completed, the examiner read aloud the instructions for the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents Global Self-Worth Scale as described by Harter (1988), and participants completed this instrument. Finally, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire indicating age, grade, gender, the racial or ethnic group with which they most closely identify, parents' present occupation, and their mothers' level of education.

## RESULTS

### QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The mean total score on Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents Global Self-Worth Scale was 15.13 ( $SD = 3.55$ ). Boys' mean total score was 15.57 ( $SD = 3.15$ ), and girls' mean total score was 14.83 ( $SD = 3.78$ ). A two-sample  $t$  test demonstrated no statistically significant difference between boys' and girls' global self-worth scores ( $t = 1.44$ ,  $p < .15$ , effect size = 0.21).

The mean number of hoped-for possible selves reported by participants in the study was 8.00 ( $SD = 4.35$ ), with a range of 1 to 19. The mean number of feared possible selves reported by the overall sample was 5.38 ( $SD = 3.37$ ) with a range of 1 to 19. Participants used the full range of likelihood ratings (1 to 7), and the distribution of hoped-for possible selves likelihood was normal, with a mean of 5.52 for the total sample. Feared possible-selves likelihood ratings were also normally distributed about a mean of 3.30, encompassing a range of 1 to 7. Means and standard deviations for each of these variables, reported separately by gender, are listed in Table 1.

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to test for a main effect of gender among the following possible-selves variables: mean number of hoped-for possible selves, mean number of feared possible selves, mean likelihood ratings of hoped-for possible selves, mean likelihood ratings of feared possible selves, mean hoped-for ratings of hoped-for possible selves, and mean feared ratings of feared possible selves. Using the studywide significance criterion of  $p < .01$ , this procedure resulted in a statistically significant main effect of gender ( $F = 6.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Post hoc univariate  $F$  tests revealed a statistically sig-

**TABLE 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, *F* Values, and Effect Sizes**  
**for Possible-Selves Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Number of hoped-for selves	7.36	3.99	8.57	4.51	3.92	0.28
Number of feared selves	5.00	3.29	5.63	3.32	1.80	0.19
Likelihood of hoped-for selves	5.37	0.95	5.61	0.82	3.49	0.26
Likelihood of feared selves	2.92	1.23	3.56	1.18	14.11*	0.53
Ratings of hoped-for possible selves	2.49	0.41	2.64	0.33	8.36*	0.41
Ratings of feared possible selves	1.94	0.77	2.18	0.60	6.27	0.35

\* $p < .01$ .

nificant gender difference on likelihood of feared possible selves and ratings of hoped-for possible selves. Gender differences on the following variables failed to reach statistical significance: likelihood of hoped-for possible selves, ratings of feared possible selves, number of hoped-for possible selves, and number of feared possible selves. Results of these analyses are listed in Table 1.

#### **TYPES OF POSSIBLE SELVES REPORTED BY ADOLESCENTS**

To identify what types of possible selves are generated by adolescents, an inductive content analysis (Patton, 1990) was used to code each item from the participants' self-generated hoped-for possible-selves lists into mutually exclusive categories. Inductive content analysis was also used for the participants' feared possible selves. A description of these analyses can be found in Knox (1996). These analyses resulted in 14 hoped-for possible-selves categories (Appendix B) and 14 feared possible-selves categories (Appendix C). The reliability of the categorical assignment method developed for the possible-selves data was assessed using two independent raters. This resulted in 90.4% interrater agreement for hoped-for possible selves. Cohen's kappa was calculated and found to be 0.89. For feared possible selves, the interrater agreement was 90.4%, and Cohen's Kappa was 0.88.

**TABLE 2**  
**Relative Frequency of Mention of Hoped-For Possible-Selves**  
**Categories and Associated Gender Differences**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
Other-oriented personal descriptors	.02 (0.07)	.03 (0.09)	0.23	0.07
Self-oriented descriptors	.04 (0.09)	.04 (0.08)	0.05	0.03
Physical appearance	.01 (0.03)	.03 (0.10)	1.89	0.19
Physical health	.03 (0.07)	.03 (0.06)	0.54	0.10
Psychological functioning	.01 (0.02)	.01 (0.04)	0.78	0.12
Education	.12 (0.16)	.15 (0.17)	1.96	0.20
Occupation	.27 (0.28)	.21 (0.22)	3.54	0.26
Material and/or financial descriptors	.10 (0.12)	.08 (0.10)	1.83	0.19
Relationship and/or interpersonal	.23 (0.18)	.26 (0.16)	1.52	0.17
Independence	.01 (0.03)	.01 (0.04)	1.97	0.00
Hobbies	.06 (0.11)	.06 (0.10)	0.18	0.06
Athletics	.06 (0.11)	.03 (0.08)	5.66	0.33
General success and/or recognition	.03 (0.07)	.04 (0.08)	1.60	0.18
Societal concerns and/or religion	.02 (0.07)	.03 (0.07)	0.21	0.06

\* $p < .01$ .

#### **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TYPES OF POSSIBLE SELVES GENERATED BY ADOLESCENTS**

To examine whether gender differences exist among the types of possible selves mentioned by adolescents, the relative frequencies of each hoped-for and feared possible-selves category were calculated. For hoped-for possible selves, the number of possible selves in a given category was divided by the total number of hoped-for possible selves mentioned by that participant. Table 2 lists the relative frequency of mention of each category of hoped-for possible selves separately for girls and boys.

The categories of hoped-for possible selves mentioned most frequently by boys were occupational and relationships and/or interpersonal, respectively, and those mentioned most frequently by girls were relationships and/or interpersonal and occupational, respectively.

The analogous procedure was followed for calculating relative frequencies of feared possible selves. Table 3 lists the relative frequency of mention of feared possible selves separately for boys and girls.

**TABLE 3**  
**Relative Frequency of Mention of Feared Possible-Selves Categories**  
**and Associated Gender Differences**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
Other-oriented personal descriptors	.01 (0.04)	.03 (0.11)	4.55	0.30
Self-oriented personal descriptors	.03 (0.08)	.04 (0.10)	0.90	0.13
Physical appearance	.03 (0.09)	.05 (0.14)	2.29	0.21
Physical illness and/or death	.20 (0.21)	.15 (0.18)	2.24	0.21
Psychological functioning	.03 (0.10)	.05 (0.13)	1.05	0.14
Education	.06 (0.12)	.07 (0.15)	0.06	0.03
Occupation	.13 (0.23)	.06 (0.16)	6.85*	0.37
Material and/or financial descriptors	.05 (0.11)	.04 (0.08)	0.30	0.08
Relationships and/or interpersonal	.15 (0.18)	.27 (0.24)	15.41*	0.55
Dependence	.03 (0.09)	.02 (0.06)	0.99	0.14
Hobbies and/or athletics	.04 (0.10)	.01 (0.05)	6.16	0.35
Sexuality	.05 (0.14)	.05 (0.13)	0.02	0.02
General failure and/or inferiority	.17 (0.22)	.09 (0.16)	9.78*	0.44
External harm and/or victimization	.04 (0.10)	.06 (0.13)	1.89	0.19

\* $p < .01$ .

The feared selves mentioned most often by male adolescents were physical illness and/or death and general failure possible selves, respectively. Girls most often mentioned feared possible selves related to relationships and/or interpersonal functioning and physical illness and/or death, respectively.

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate whether a significant gender by category interaction effect exists in the frequency of mention of hoped-for possible selves. This analysis resulted in a significant gender by category interaction ( $F = 2.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, post hoc analyses failed to reveal gender differences within specific categories that reached the  $p < .01$  criterion for statistical significance.

Multivariate analysis of variance was also conducted to evaluate whether a significant gender by category interaction effect exists in the frequency of mention of feared possible selves. This analysis resulted in a significant gender by category interaction ( $F = 5.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed significant gender differences in the following categories of feared possible selves: occupation, relationships and/or interpersonal functioning, and general failure and/or in-

feriority (see Table 3). Girls mentioned relationships and/or interpersonal functioning feared selves with higher relative frequency than boys, and boys mentioned occupation and general failure and/or inferiority feared selves with higher relative frequency than girls.

## DISCUSSION

Developmental research addressing female self-concept and self-esteem indicates that at adolescence, significant disruptions occur in various aspects of the self. Although studies addressing self-esteem have documented gender differences in global self-esteem, such findings reveal little descriptive information about the nature of adolescent self-concept and gender differences within this highly complex construct. The purpose of this study was to examine the content of and gender differences within adolescent possible selves, a type of self-representation that may be particularly salient to adolescents. The primarily Caucasian sample of adolescents in this study was able to access and report a vast array of possible selves. As hypothesized, female adolescents rated feared possible selves as more likely than did boys. Furthermore, girls accessed more feared possible selves related to relational functioning, whereas boys generated more feared possible selves related to occupation, general failure, and inferiority. Contrary to hypothesis, however, no specific gender differences in the likelihood or content of hoped-for possible selves were demonstrated.

### CATEGORIES OF POSSIBLE SELVES GENERATED BY ADOLESCENTS

The finding that a primarily Caucasian sample of adolescents' possible selves fall in a large number of different domains is consistent with past research suggesting that the self-concept reaches a highly differentiated state at adolescence (Harter, 1985; Marsh et al., 1992). The diversity of possible selves accessible to adolescents may be central to the primary developmental task at adolescence, the formation of postconventional identity. In establishing identity, it may be necessary for the adolescent to try on a variety of possible selves to evaluate his or her potential in a wide variety of life domains.

The free-response format of the protocol used in this study allowed the identification of domains that may not be addressed by traditional self-esteem and self-concept measures. Several categories that emerged in this study, including self- and other-oriented personal descriptors, physical health, psychological functioning, material and/or financial descriptors, independence, dependence, hobbies and/or interests, general success and/or recognition, societal concerns and religion, sexuality, and external harm and/or victimization, are not included on traditional scales. Together, the categories account for 32% of adolescents' hoped-for possible-selves responses. To sample the full range of adolescent self-views, it may be necessary to incorporate these content areas into self-concept measures.

#### **GENDER SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN CATEGORIES OF POSSIBLE SELVES GENERATED BY ADOLESCENTS**

Results of analyses addressing gender differences in possible-selves categories suggest that female and male adolescents generate different patterns of both hoped-for and feared possible selves. Whereas for hoped-for possible selves, these differences are not primarily manifested in a few identifiable categories, results of analyses of feared selves demonstrate significant differences within three categories: occupation, relationships and/or interpersonal functioning, and general failure and/or inferiority. These differences were highly consistent with past research indicating that male self-views appear to be closely associated with asserting oneself or getting ahead of others, whereas female self-views are more closely associated with connecting with or helping others (Jordan et al., 1991; Josephs et al., 1992; Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996). The findings provide indirect support for the self-in-relation theory (Jordan et al., 1991), which depicts female self-concept as defined through girls' and women's relations with others. These findings indicate that traditional views of the self that emphasize autonomy may be more applicable to male and less appropriate for female adolescents.

Results of this study specify gender differences as being primarily manifested in the negative continuum of adolescent self-views, their feared possible selves. The largest gender difference was apparent in the relationships and/or interpersonal functioning feared possible-

selves category. These results suggest that relational feared selves are more accessible for female adolescents, a finding that is generally consistent with research demonstrating that interpersonal functioning is highly germane to the self-views of adolescent girls (Gilligan, 1982; Maccoby, 1990). These findings are also consistent with research by Ogilvie and Clark (1992) that suggests that undesired relational selves are highly salient to young women. In particular, this research confirms findings that suggest that female adolescents are particularly adept at envisioning relational failures (Ogilvie & Clark, 1992). This finding may also be related to the effects of gender-role socialization on female adolescents. Gender-role socialization intensifies at adolescence and frequently serves to draw girls' attention toward aspects of interpersonal functioning, and, in particular, romantic relationships (Eccles, 1987).

The fact that girls are readily able to access feared relational selves may have important implications for research on depression. Rumination, the passive mental review of situations, has been shown to be associated with depression in adolescents (Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Whether relational feared possible selves may develop from or lead to rumination about interpersonal incidents would be an interesting focus of future research.

Feared selves reflecting an all-encompassing sense of failure or inferiority were more often generated by boys than by girls. This finding suggests that possible selves marked by the fear of general failure or inferiority may be more salient to boys. Item analysis reveals that boys' responses coded in this category often took the form of vague descriptions of failure, such as "being a bum," "becoming a loser," or "unsuccessful." Cross and Markus (1991) noted that more than older age groups, the youngest adult participants in their study often wrote down ambiguous feared possible selves. These authors reasoned that this may reflect the fact that the younger respondents may not yet have articulated specific feared selves. Similarly, results of this study may suggest that boys are psychologically less mature than girls at this developmental stage and therefore less able to generate explicit feared possible selves.

This finding may also be related to the effects of gender-role socialization on male adolescents. Superiority, the polar opposite of inferiority, is a characteristic of the traditional masculine gender role.

Another type of self closely related to the traditional male gender role, occupational functioning feared possible selves, was also mentioned more frequently by boys than by girls. Gender-role socialization intensifies at adolescence, likely making these types of possible selves highly salient for male adolescents.

#### **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE LIKELIHOOD AND RATINGS OF HOPED-FOR AND FEARED POSSIBLE SELVES**

Differences in the salience and perceived likelihood of hoped-for and feared possible selves may also provide insight into gender differences in self-concept and self-esteem during adolescence. Although girls in this study rated their hoped-for possible selves as more hoped-for, they did not rate them as more likely than boys did. Conversely, girls rated their feared selves as moderately more feared and significantly more likely than boys did. These findings suggest that previously reported problems in girls', as compared to boys', self-views may reflect negative as opposed to positive self-views. In fact, in this study, girls' and boys' ratings of likelihood of hoped-for selves were similar. Girls' self-esteem may be most negatively affected by the experienced likelihood of feared selves. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Ogilvie (1987), who reported that young women's self-esteem appears to be closely associated with discrepancies between undesired selves and real selves.

These results suggest that differences in boys' and girls' self-views may be rooted in the experienced importance and likelihood of feared selves. Past research has indicated that depressive symptomatology is related to aspects of negative, rather than positive, possible selves (Allen et al., 1996). Whether gender differences in negative aspects of possible selves may contribute to gender differences in rates of depression at adolescence is an important question for future research.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The sample was made up mainly of Caucasian participants, and results are generalizable to only that group. Perceived discrimination has been found to be related to self-esteem of ethnic minority adoles-

cents (Verkuyten, 1998), and racism and other forms of discrimination may seriously affect the possible selves of adolescents. Furthermore, emerging research indicates that youth from different ethnic and racial groups use different standards for judging their self-worth (Erkut, Marx, Fields, & Sing, 1999). Research addressing racial and ethnic differences in adolescents' self-esteem and possible selves was considered to be beyond the scope of this study but is clearly needed.

Hoped-for possible selves were elicited prior to feared possible selves. It is possible that reversing this order by administering the Feared Possible Selves Questionnaire before the Hoped-For Possible Selves Questionnaire may affect the results of research using this approach. Future research using this approach may benefit from counterbalancing these questionnaires to examine this possible effect.

Adolescents were allowed to name any possible selves that came to mind rather than rating each category of possible selves. Consequently, each category of possible selves contained likelihood and hoped-for and/or feared ratings from only a subset of participants. This distribution of possible-selves ratings leaves minimal power to detect gender differences within any one of the 14 categories. Future research would benefit from the use of a larger sample size.

Findings from this study suggest that this sample of adolescents were able to access a variety of hoped-for and feared possible selves. Results suggest that interventions addressing self-concept and self-esteem in similar groups may benefit from addressing negative self-views or feared selves. As Higgins (1987) suggested, rather than focusing exclusively on "the tyranny of the should," emphasis should be placed on "the tyranny of the should-not" (p. 384). In other words, rather than attempting to make hoped-for possible selves more realistic, results suggest that interventions should focus on recalibrating feared possible selves. This approach may prove to be particularly efficacious for female adolescents who rate feared selves as more likely than do boys. Replication is needed to determine the generalizability and additional implications of these findings. Nevertheless, it is clear that the possible-selves approach has great potential for increasing our understanding of adolescent self-views and for identifying practical targets for intervention efforts designed to heighten adolescent self-esteem.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTRUCTIONS FOR HOPED-FOR**  
**POSSIBLE SELVES QUESTIONNAIRE**

---

Probably everyone thinks about the future to some extent. When doing so, we usually think about the kinds of experiences that are in store for us and the kinds of people we might possibly be. Sometimes we think about what we probably will be like, other times about the ways we are afraid we might turn out to be, and other times about what we hope or wish we could be like. One way of talking about this is to talk about *possible selves*—selves we might possibly become.

Some of these possible selves may be images of how we hope to be in the future. Some may seem quite likely, for example, being a parent or being generous. Others may be only vague thoughts or dreams about the future, such as traveling in space or winning the lottery. Some of us may have a large number of hoped-for possible selves in mind while others may have only a few.

On the lines below, please list all the hoped-for possible selves that you currently imagine for yourself. Please list only those things that you believe are possible for you. For each hoped-for possible self you list, rate how likely that possible self is for you. Then, rate how much you hope for each possible self. You do not have to fill up all the pages. Just list all the hoped-for possible selves that come to mind.

---

**APPENDIX B**  
**HOPED-FOR POSSIBLE SELVES CATEGORY DEFINITIONS**

---

*Other-oriented personal descriptors.* Personal attributes or qualities related to how others perceive or experience the person or how one typically relates to others (e.g., sociable, kind).

*Self-oriented personal descriptors.* Personal attributes or qualities that are self-descriptive but do not necessarily refer to how others perceive or experience the person (e.g., confident, intelligent). Also, responses that suggest a sense of satisfaction, happiness, or security (e.g., happy, content).

*Physical appearance.* Responses describing one's outward physical appearance such as improving weight, appearance, or looks (e.g., lose weight, get braces off).

*Physical health.* Responses related to physical well-being, longevity, physical and/or medical health, or avoiding physical illness, suffering, disease, or addiction (e.g., never getting sick, quit smoking).

*Psychological functioning.* Responses related to emotional well-being, sanity, avoiding mental illness, improving the self emotionally or psychologically (e.g., not going crazy, feeling better about myself). Also includes responses related to the establishment of identity or understanding the self (e.g., getting to know who I am).

*Education.* Responses related to learning, attaining knowledge, and any aspect of education, including where, how, and when to get or pay for education or attain success in school and/or classes (e.g., getting my master's degree, passing a class, graduating).

*Occupation.* Responses indicating type of job desired or any quality related to work, occupation, career, or business ownership (e.g., becoming an architect, getting a good job).

*Material and/or financial descriptors.* Responses indicating the desire to accumulate wealth, to be able to support the self and/or significant others financially, or establish financial security (e.g., to be a millionaire, win the lottery). Responses indicating a desire to own specific possessions (e.g., owning a large house).

*Relationships and/or interpersonal functioning.* Responses describing any aspect of romantic, family, or peer relationships. Includes responses regarding establishing, maintaining, repairing, or improving relationships or having children (e.g., going on a date, being a good mother, getting back together with boyfriend). Descriptions of significant others (e.g., parents staying healthy, having two healthy children).

*Independence.* Responses related to establishing autonomy or separateness from others, independence, or decreased dependence on others (e.g., to move out, not have to rely on parents anymore).

*Hobbies and/or interests.* Responses referring to leisure, relaxation activities (e.g., taking it easy in life), hobbies and/or recreation (e.g., write poetry), having fun, travel (e.g., to travel Europe), adventure (e.g., go bungee-jumping), consumption (e.g., eating preferred foods), and geography (e.g., leaving Rossford).

*Athletics.* Responses about sports involvement or athletic goals (e.g., playing varsity soccer, pro hockey player).

*General success and/or recognition.* Responses regarding goal attainment, achievement, mastery, success, superiority, or fame (e.g., being a success, being the best, being famous).

*Societal concerns and/or religion.* Responses regarding helping society, animals, or the environment (e.g., helping abused kids). Responses regarding establishing or fostering religion, faith, or spirituality (e.g., attend church regularly).

---

## APPENDIX C

### FEARED POSSIBLE SELVES CATEGORY DEFINITIONS

---

*Other-oriented personal descriptors.* Responses describing personal attributes that are related to how others experience the person, how one relates to others, or one's attitudes or feelings toward others (e.g., unfriendly, selfish, mean).

*Self-oriented personal descriptors.* Responses describing personal attributes or attitudes that do not necessarily describe how others perceive or relate to the person (e.g., ignorant, indecisive, stupid). Responses that indicate lack of happiness, security, or satisfaction (e.g., unhappy).

*Physical appearance.* Responses describing one's outward physical appearance, including responses regarding height, weight, appearance, or looks (e.g., obese, ugly, major pimple problem).

*Physical illness and/or death.* Responses related to physical well-being, physical health, illness and disease, death, physical suffering, and growing old (e.g., getting cancer, dying).

*Psychological functioning.* Responses related to poor mental health, insanity, low self-worth, and so forth. Include responses regarding either mental or psychological states (e.g., being anxious) or traits (e.g., a depressed person). Responses related to the failure or inability to establish an identity (e.g., never knowing who I am).

*Education.* Responses related to school and/or academic failure or not meeting educational goals, including where, when, and how to get or pay for education as well as failure in school or classes (e.g., not graduating, failing my classes).

*Occupation.* Responses related to job performance, type of job, having to settle for a certain job, characteristics of work or occupation. Responses related to work, occupation, or career (e.g., getting a bad job, working at Burger King, not becoming a scientist).

*Material and/or financial descriptors.* Includes responses regarding financial status, being financially insecure (e.g., having no income, being on welfare). Responses regarding specific possessions (e.g., not owning a nice car).

*Relationships and/or interpersonal functioning.* Responses related to failure to establish relationships, maintain relationships or responses related to quality or quantity of relationships, including romantic, peer, and family relationships (e.g., not dating, never having/meeting grandchildren, being a bad mother).

*Dependence.* Responses indicating failure to separate from others or establish independence (e.g., never moving out, having to rely on others, depending too much on family, spouse, or others).

*Hobbies, leisure, and/or athletics.* Responses indicating failure to engage in pleasurable activities or not fulfilling desire to take part in enjoyable activities. Includes leisure and/or relaxation (e.g., not taking it easy in life), hobbies (e.g., not able to collect stamps), fun (e.g., having a boring Spring Break), travel (e.g., never going to another country), adventure (e.g., never sky diving), geography (e.g., living in this town for the rest of my life).

*Sexuality.* Responses regarding negative consequences of sexual intercourse, including a fear of having children before one is ready, getting sexually transmitted diseases (e.g., teen mom or dad, getting AIDS), fears related to sexual preference (e.g., being gay), and fears of not having desired frequency, type, or quality of sexual experiences (e.g., staying a virgin).

*General failure and/or inferiority.* Responses indicating failure to attain goals, inferiority, or lack of success, fame, or leadership (e.g., being a loser, not famous, being a bum). Responses regarding being a criminal or engaging in illegal activity.

*External harm and/or victimization.* Responses indicating fear of external harm to the self such as crime, accidents, or natural disasters (e.g., raped, shot, murdered, being in a fire).

---

## REFERENCES

- Allen, L., Woolfolk, R. L., Gara, M., & Apter, J. (1996). Possible selves in major depression. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease, 184*, 739-745.
- Alpert-Gillis, L., & Connell, J. P. (1989). Gender and sex role influences on children's self-esteem. *Journal of Personality, 57*, 97-114.
- Block, J., & Robins, R. W. (1993). A longitudinal study of consistency and change in self-esteem from early adolescence to early adulthood. *Child Development, 64*, 909-923.
- Byrne, B., & Shavelson, R. (1987). Adolescent self-concept: Testing the assumption of equivalent structure across gender. *American Educational Research Journal, 24*, 365-385.
- Cross, S., & Markus, H. (1991). Possible selves across the lifespan. *Human Development, 34*, 230-255.
- Dusek, J. B., & Flaherty, J. F. (1981). The development of self-concept during the adolescent years. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 46*, 45-62.
- Eccles, J. S. (1987). Adolescence: Gateway to gender-role transcendence. In D. B. Carter (Ed.), *Current conceptions of sex roles and sex typing* (pp. 225-242). New York: Praeger.
- Entwisle, D. R., & Astone, N. M. (1994). Some practical guidelines for measuring youth's race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. *Child Development, 65*, 1521-1540.

- Erikson, E. H. (1959). Identity and the life cycle. *Psychological Issues, 1*, 18-164.
- Erkut, S., Marx, F., Fields, J. P., & Sing, R. (1999). Gender, culture, and ethnicity: Current research about women and men. In L. A. Peplau & S. C. DeBro (Eds.), *Raising confident and competent girls: One size does not fit all* (pp. 83-101). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Evans, D. W., Noam, G. G., Wertlieb, D., Paget, K. F., & Wolf, M. (1994). Self-perception and adolescent psychopathology: A clinical-developmental perspective. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 64*, 293-300.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harper, J. F., & Marshall, E. (1991). Adolescents' problems and their relationship to self-esteem. *Adolescence, 26*, 799-808.
- Harter, S. (1985). Processes underlying the construction, maintenance, and enhancement of the self-concept in children. In J. Suls & A. Greenwald (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 3, pp. 137-181). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Harter, S. (1988). *Manual for the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents*. Denver, CO: University of Denver.
- Harter, S. (1990). Self and identity development. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 352-387). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harter, S. (1993). Causes and consequences of low self-esteem in children and adolescents. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Self-esteem: The puzzle of low self-regard* (pp. 87-116). New York: Plenum.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self to affect. *Psychological Review, 94*, 319-340.
- James, W. (1892). *Psychology: The briefer course*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (1991). *Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center*. New York: Guilford.
- Josephs, R., Markus, H., & Tafarodi, R. (1992). Gender and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63*, 391-402.
- Knox, M. (1996). *The possible selves of adolescents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toledo.
- Maccoby, E. (1990). Gender and relationships. *American Psychologist, 45*, 513-520.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*, 954-969.
- Marsh, H. (1989). Age and sex effects in multiple dimensions of self-concept: Preadolescence to early adulthood. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 81*, 417-430.
- Marsh, H., Byrne, B., & Shavelson, R. (1992). *A multidimensional, hierarchical self-concept. The self: Definitional and methodological issues*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Martinez, R., & Dukes, R. (1991). Ethnic and gender differences in self-esteem. *Youth & Society, 22*, 318-338.
- Morrow, J., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1991). Effects of responses to depression on the remediation of depressed affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*, 519-527.
- Ogilvie, D. M. (1987). The undesired self: A neglected variable in personality research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 379-385.
- Ogilvie, D. M., & Clark, M. D. (1992). The best and worst of it: Age and sex differences in self-discrepancy research. In R. Lipka & T. Brinthaupt (Eds.), *Self-perspectives across the life-span* (pp. 186-222). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Owens, T. J. (1993). Accentuate the positive-and the negative: Rethinking the use of self-esteem, self-deprecation, and self-confidence. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 56*, 288-299.

- Owens, T. J. (1994). Two dimensions of self-esteem: Reciprocal effect of positive self-worth and self-deprecation on adolescent problems. *American Sociological Review*, *59*, 391-407.
- Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. (1990). Possible selves and delinquency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 112-125.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Renouf, A., & Harter, S. (1990). Low self-worth and anger as components of the depressive experience in young adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, *2*, 293-310.
- Simmons, R. G., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and school context*. Hawthorn, NY: Aldine.
- Simmons, R. G., & Rosenberg, F. (1975). Sex, sex roles, and self-image. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *4*, 229-258.
- Strachen, A., & Jones, D. (1982). Changes in identification during adolescence: A personal construct theory approach. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *46*, 529-535.
- Thorne, A., & Michaelieu, Q. (1996). Situating adolescent gender and self-esteem with personal memories. *Child Development*, *67*, 1374-1390.
- Verkuyten, M. (1998). Perceived discrimination and self-esteem among ethnic minority adolescents. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *138*, 479-493.
- Wylie, R. C. (1979). *The self concept*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Copeland, L. A., Shope, J. T., & Dielman, T. A. (1997). A longitudinal study of self-esteem: Implications for adolescent development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *26*, 117-141.

*Michele Knox, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and the associate director of the Child Inpatient Unit at the Medical College of Ohio Kobacker Center. Her address is: Department of Psychiatry, Kobacker Center, Medical College Hospital, 3130 Glendale Avenue, Toledo, OH 43614-5810; phone: 419-383-3815; fax: 419-383-3098; e-mail: mknox@mco.edu.*

*Jeanne Funk, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toledo. Her address is: Department of Psychology, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606; phone: 419-530-2721; fax: 419-530-8479; e-mail: jfunk@pop3.utoledo.edu.*

*Robert Elliott, Ph.D., is a professor, the North American editor for Psychotherapy Research, and the general vice president for the Society for Psychotherapy Research. His address is: Department of Psychology, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606; phone: 419-530-2721; fax: 419-530-8479; e-mail: fac0029@uoft01.utoledo.edu.*

*Ellen Greene Bush, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Toledo, Ohio. Her address is: Psychological Resources Ltd., 4841 Monroe Street, Toledo, OH 43623; phone: 419-475-2535.*