

Differences Across Gender, Grade Level, and Academic Track in the Content of the Ideal Self-Image¹

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Students from the 5th, 8th, and 11th grades (55 male and 53 female) were asked to describe their ideal self-image. Analyses revealed a number of gender and developmental differences not found with other self-image measures. A greater proportion of females than males mentioned two of the categories related to family life: marriage and improving relations with their family of origin. Mentions of categories surrounding athletics were more prevalent among males. Grade level differences in the content of the ideal self-image reflected cognitive-developmental shifts away from concrete descriptors, changes in physical maturity and the heightened importance of peer relationships around adolescence, and the approach of developmental milestones. Fewer students mentioned physical appearance at higher grade levels. Mentions of athletic abilities and social acceptance peaked at the 8th grade, while mentions of college, marriage, and having children rose at higher grade levels. Differences in the content areas mentioned by average versus advanced track students appeared to reflect differences in both cognitive-developmental level and socialization experiences.

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Self-image research has concentrated almost exclusively on self-esteem. According to one estimate (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976), over 95% of self-concept research has focussed on this single dimension of the self-image. This overemphasis on self-esteem may be a contributing factor in the low yield of differences found in studies of gender and developmental level. In two exhaustive reviews (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1975; Wylie, 1979), the authors conclude by noting the absence of strong or consistent gender differences in self-esteem. Similarly, the examination of developmental differences in global self-esteem has yielded limited and inconsistent results (Wylie, 1979).

A component of the self-image that has received considerably less attention is the ideal self-image. The ideal self-image, or the self as one would like to be, is said to embody personal aspirations as well as parental expectations and societal norms (Bybee & Zigler, *in press*; Glick & Zigler, 1985). The ideal self-image has been portrayed as an arena for imagining oneself in new roles, for constructing goals, and for planning methods for attaining positive endstates (Glick & Zigler, 1985; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals with a high ideal self-image are better adjusted than those who set their ideals lower. Higher scholastic achievement, greater frustration tolerance, better behavioral conduct, and more satisfactory recovery after a life crisis are all related to a high ideal self-image (Bybee, 1989; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Given that the ideal self-image has been construed as an embodiment of societal and parental standards, the ideal self-image might be a particularly sensitive indicator of gender differences in socialization. In that the ideal self-image provides a forum for rehearsing and planning adult roles, differences across gender in anticipated sex roles might also be expected. Research efforts examining gender differences in the ideal self-image, however, have typically compared males and females on a single dimension of the ideal self-image—how high or low ideals are set. Studies examining gender differences on this dimension have produced inconclusive results (Bybee & Zigler, *in press*; Phillips & Zigler, 1980).

With regard to developmental changes, a higher ideal self-image has been associated with increases in such indicators of developmental level as chronological age, mental age, and thought versus action orientation (Katz & Zigler, 1967; Katz, Zigler, & Zalk, 1975; Phillips & Zigler, 1980). This change appears to reflect increases with development in the capacity for cognitive differentiation (enabling the ideal self-image to be distinguished from, and set higher than the real self-image) and in the internalization of external standards (see review by Zigler & Glick, 1986). Other changes with development in the ideal self-image may occur as well. For example, a developmental shift from physical and observable to abstract and internal self-descriptions has been noted in studies of the real self-image (e.g., Damon & Hart, 1982).

Developmental changes in the ideal self-image may also result from differences in physical maturity and distance from developmental milestones.

In that academic track reflects in part level of intellectual abilities, differences across academic track might be similar to differences across age level. Yet higher and average track students would be expected to differ by virtue of distinct socialization experiences as well. Compared to children of average intelligence, brighter children may have greater expectations put upon them by parents and teachers, and may have loftier personal expectations concerning school and career success. Beyond findings that brighter children set higher ideals for themselves than less intellectually able children (Bybee & Zigler, in press; Katz & Zigler, 1967), little is known of differences in the ideal self-image across groups that vary in their level of intellectual abilities.

The present investigation will examine differences in children's ideal self-image as a function of gender, grade level, and academic track. In contrast to past investigations of the ideal self-image that have typically assessed how high or low ideals are set on dimensions provided by the researcher, the present study examines the content of children's own ideal self-descriptions. The value of a spontaneous approach has been demonstrated in research on the real self-image. Analyses of children's own descriptions of themselves have identified a number of content areas not included on standardized inventories, and have uncovered gender and developmental differences where other approaches have not (McGuire & McGuire, 1982; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). Because the ideal self-image is usually measured using items taken from real self-image inventories, further advantages of the open-ended approach are that it focusses specifically on the ideal self and may allow content domains unique to the ideal self-image to be identified.

METHOD

Subjects

Of the 108 participants (55 male, 53 female), 39 were fifth graders (22 male, 17 female), 32 were eighth graders (15 male, 17 female), and 37 were in the eleventh grade (18 male, 19 female). The elementary school served as a feeder school for the junior high school, which in turn served as a feeder school for the high school. The schools were in a predominantly white, middle-class suburban community in the Northeast.

The junior high and high school employed a tracking system with four levels: advanced, above average, average, and below average. Standardized tests administered by school personnel were the sole criterion used by the school system to assign students to academic tracks. In order to compare

students of average intelligence to students with high intellectual abilities, the 8th and 11th graders were drawn from the average and advanced track levels. While the 5th graders were not tracked, scores from the California Achievement Test ($M = 115$) were available for this group. The fifth grade sample was divided at the mean to create the advanced ($M = 126.9$) and average ($M = 101.5$) abilities groupings. At the 5th, 8th, and 11th grade levels there were 20, 16, and 14 students, respectively, in the average abilities group, and 19, 16, and 23 students in the advanced abilities group. The number of males and females represented at each track level was approximately equal.

Measures

Content of the Ideal Self-Image. To obtain the ideal self-descriptions, students were asked to describe how they would ideally like to be. Students were told they could describe how they want to be as an adult, how they want to be next year, or even how they want to be tomorrow. Students were instructed to write descriptions of their ideal self-image on five numbered index cards and to put a new main idea on each card. Five to ten minutes was allocated for the completion of the ideal self-descriptions.

The categorization scheme used to score the ideal self-descriptions was based on a system employed by Bybee, Luthar, and Zigler (1989). The 19 ideal self-image content categories examined are listed in Table I. (Further

Table I. Percentage of Children in the Total Sample Mentioning Each Content Category

Content category	Percentage of children
Occupation	61.7
Marriage	39.3
Wealth	35.5
Self-assurance	32.7
Social acceptance	31.8
Having children	30.8
Physical appearance	25.2
Mental health/happiness	23.4
Intellectual abilities	23.4
Family relationships	23.4
Career success	22.4
Caring/considerateness	21.5
Athletic abilities	21.5
Academic abilities	20.6
Job characteristics	16.8
College	13.1
Material possessions	13.1
Professional athlete	12.1
Car ownership	12.1

details on the content coding procedure are available from the authors by request.) Classification of the ideal self-descriptions was conducted as follows. Content categories mentioned one or more times in the person's five self-descriptions received a score of 1, while content categories not mentioned in the ideal self-descriptions were scored as 0. Total scores presented for each category represent the percentage of participants who mentioned that category in their self-descriptions.

Two raters blind to subject characteristics and to all experimental hypotheses scored the responses. To assess interrater reliability, the responses of 20 randomly-selected participants (10 per rater) were coded again by the remaining rater. For each participant, the content categories receiving a score of 1 by the initial rater were compared to those receiving a score of 1 by the second rater. Eighty-eight percent of the content categories scored by the initial rater matched those scored by the second rater.

RESULTS

Examination of the Proportion of the Total Sample Mentioning Each Content Category

The proportion of children in the total sample mentioning each of the 19 content categories is presented in Table I. Of all responses, 91.7% were coded into these 19 content categories, with only 8.3% uncodable or falling into an unused, low frequency category (mentioned by less than 10% of the total sample), such as wanting pets. As shown in the table, the content area mentioned by the highest percentage of subjects was occupation. Also frequently mentioned were desires to get married and have children, and to be wealthy, self-assured, socially accepted, and physically attractive.

Examination of the Proportion of Students Mentioning Each Content Category as a Function of Gender, Grade Level, and Academic Track

For each of the 19 content categories, a logistic regression was run using the CATMOD program in SAS. Sex, grade, and academic track were entered into the model with mention of the category as the dependent variable. No effects were significant for 7 content categories: (a) occupation, (b) job characteristics, (c) wealth, (d) self-assurance, (e) caring/considerateness, (f) academic abilities, and (g) material possessions. There were significant effects for the remaining 12 content categories. For ease of presentation, differences across gender are presented in Table II, differences across grade level are presented in Table III, and differences across academic track are presented in Table IV.

Table II. Gender Differences in the Percentage of Students Mentioning Each Content Category^a

Content category	Gender		Chi-square
	Males	Females	
Marriage	25.5	53.8	8.19 ^c
Family relationships	12.7	34.6	5.95 ^c
Athletic abilities	29.1	13.5	4.01 ^b
Professional athlete	20.0	3.8	4.51 ^b
Car ownership	20.0	3.8	5.17 ^b

^aNumbers represent the percentage of males versus females mentioning each content category. For all effects, $X^2(1, N = 108)$.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

Differences Across Gender. More females than males mentioned wanting to get married (see Table II). In addition, a greater proportion of females than males wanted to have good family relationships. Females, compared to males, tended to mention physical attractiveness more (32.7% vs. 18.2%, $X^2(1, N = 108) = 2.92, .05 < p < .10$). In contrast, a greater proportion of males than females mentioned wanting to be a professional athlete, wanting to own a sportscar, and wanting to improve their athletic abilities.

Differences Across Grade Level. As may be seen in Table III, mentions of two categories decreased at higher grade levels, intellectual abilities and physical appearance. At higher grade levels, an increased proportion of children mentioned wanting to go to college, get married, and have children. The proportion of students mentioning social acceptance and athletic abilities peaked at the eighth grade.

Table III. Grade Level Differences in the Percentage of Students Mentioning Each Content Category^a

Content category	Grade level			Chi-square
	5th Grade	8th Grade	11th Grade	
Social acceptance	17.9 ^x	54.8 ^y	27.0 ^x	11.38 ^c
Intellectual abilities	35.9 ^x	16.1 ^y	16.2 ^y	6.27 ^b
College	2.6 ^x	9.7 ^{xy}	27.0 ^y	7.23 ^b
Marriage	20.5 ^x	38.7 ^{xy}	59.5 ^y	10.75 ^c
Having children	12.8 ^x	38.7 ^y	43.2 ^y	8.02 ^b
Physical appearance	35.9 ^x	25.8 ^{xy}	13.5 ^y	6.05 ^b
Athletic abilities	17.9 ^x	38.7 ^y	10.8 ^x	8.02 ^b

^aNumbers represent the percentage of students at each grade level mentioning each content category. Percentages with different letters are significantly different from one another at $p < .05$. For main effects, $X^2(2, N = 108)$.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

Table IV. Academic Track Differences in the Percentage of Students Mentioning Each Content Category^a

Content category	Academic track		
	Average	Advanced	Chi-square
Social acceptance	18.4	43.1	7.88 ^c
Mental health/happiness	8.2	36.2	9.73 ^c
Family relationships	14.3	31.0	3.62 ^b
Car ownership	22.4	3.4	6.23 ^c

^aNumbers represent the percentage of students in average and advanced tracks mentioning each content category. For all effects, $X^2(1, N = 108)$.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

Academic Track Differences. Desires for social acceptance, mental health and happiness, and good family relationships all were mentioned by a greater percentage of students in the higher than average track (see Table IV). Compared to students in the average track, twice as many students in the higher academic track mentioned career success (14.3% vs. 29.3%, $X^2(1, N = 108) = 2.97, .05 < p < .10$). In contrast, a greater proportion of average track than higher track students mentioned wanting to own a sportscar.

DISCUSSION

Past investigations of the ideal self-image have typically employed items taken from real self-image inventories. The present findings indicate that a number of ideal self-image categories, such as social acceptance, academic achievement, and athletic abilities, are similar to domains identified in investigations of the real self-image (Harter, 1985; McGuire & McGuire, 1982; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). Yet the most frequently mentioned ideals did not involve the refinement of currently held roles and abilities, but rather the addition and anticipation of adult roles. Many of these ideals surrounded career, family, and financial aspirations. These domains have typically not been examined in studies of the ideal self-image and their disclosure in the present study underscores the advantages of employing a spontaneous approach that focuses specifically on ideals.

The category that students mentioned most often in their ideal self-descriptions was occupation. Findings that a sizeable number of students express desires to feel successful and important in their career, and have specific ideas about characteristics of their desired work environment also underscore the importance of the occupational realm in the ideal self-image. Second only to occupation were desires to get married. Desires to have children and improve relations with one's family of origin were also common. In addition,

many students expressed desires for wealth. Mentions of desires for material possessions and a sportscar also seem related to this category. These findings suggest that students use material objects to define their future selves. Perhaps students view possessions as ego-extensions, or perhaps possessions project an image that they would like others to have of themselves. Alternatively, desires for wealth and possessions may reflect an identification with a particular socioeconomic class. While research to date has not found differences across socioeconomic classes or ethnic groups in self-regard (Wylie, 1979), the possibility remains that certain content domains mentioned by the present sample of white, middle-class children may be different than those generated by other groups.

While gender differences in the self-image have been examined in a number of past investigations, these studies have generally yielded weak and inconsistent findings (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1975; Wylie, 1979). In contrast, in the present study, a number of clear and readily interpretable findings emerged from content analyses of students' ideal self-descriptions. Females were more likely than males to mention two of the content categories concerned with family life—marriage and family relations. An earlier study (McGuire & McGuire, 1982) reported that school-age girls were more likely than boys to mention their role as a family member in defining themselves. In the present study, gender differences in the ideal self-image appeared not only in the mention of current family roles, but also in the anticipated role of husband or wife. Gender differences in the domain of family are also consistent with the tendency of females to emphasize relationship, connection, and expressive functioning as compared to the male preference for agency and autonomy (Gilligan, 1982; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1985; Spence & Sawin, 1985).

Other gender differences were found as well. A greater proportion of males than females mentioned the athletic abilities, sportscar, and professional athlete categories, while females tended to mention physical appearance more. These results are consistent with studies of femininity and masculinity that find beauty to be more central in the female sex role stereotype and physical strength to be more important in conceptualizations of masculinity (Spence & Sawin, 1985). Past studies have suggested that females are more concerned with physical attractiveness than males (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). Yet if the definition of physical attractiveness is expanded beyond physical appearance to include athletic prowess and image-enhancers such as sportscars, males and females both may be seen as preoccupied with attractiveness.

The content of the ideal self-image also varied across grade level. Some of these differences may reflect cognitive-developmental changes. Investigators of the real self-image have noted that, with development, individuals

emphasize physical and observable traits less (Damon & Hart, 1982). Consistent with these findings, in the present study, mentions of physical appearance were less common at higher grade levels.

Changes in physical maturity, increased recognition of limits, and the approach of developmental milestones may also affect the content of the ideal self-image. With physical growth and maturity, once realistic physical appearance possibilities, such as wanting to become taller, may become less likely and less frequently mentioned. An increased recognition of limits may contribute to the declining mention with development of desires for traits that are beyond volitional control, such as level of intelligence. As certain possibilities dim with development, others may become more visible. Increases with development in ideals surrounding college, marriage, and having children may reflect the approach of these developmental milestones for older students. As the time nears when students must make decisions about college and starting, or delaying the start, of their own families, these domains may become more salient.

Influences of adolescence and puberty may be reflected in the increased mention of certain categories at the eighth grade. Desires for social acceptance were more prevalent at the eighth grade than at other grade levels. Mentions of athletic abilities also peaked at the eighth grade, while mentions of wanting to have children rose from the fifth to the eighth grade and then held constant. These findings are consistent with changes during adolescence noted by other investigators, namely the heightened importance of establishing peer and heterosexual relationships, and the need by adolescents to integrate accelerating physical growth and impending reproductive maturity into their self-images (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986).

Differences across academic track were also found. Some of these differences may reflect the emphasis at higher cognitive-developmental levels on abstract personality traits and internal psychological states, rather than concrete and physical descriptors (Damon & Hart, 1982). In the present study, desires for mental health and happiness were more prevalent among advanced track students, while average track students more commonly mentioned wanting a sports car. Differences in the socialization experiences of the two groups may play a role as well. The greater expectations placed on higher track students by parents, teachers, and other adults may be reflected not only in the greater tendency of higher track students to mention career success, but also in their greater mention of social relationships, family as well as peer.

Several content categories did not vary across gender, grade level, or academic track. Some of the categories that showed no differences across subject groups (e.g., wanting to be successful in school, self-assured, and a caring person) are ones that have been emphasized in self-esteem inventories. These values may be so universally inculcated that they are relatively

insensitive to individual differences. A number of ideal self-image content domains, not assessed in self-esteem inventories, were uncovered using a spontaneous approach and did show subject group differences. Indeed, the present abundance of findings contrasts sharply with the paucity of gender and developmental differences in self-esteem revealed in past research.

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