

## Possible Selves and Delinquency

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The relationship between possible selves and delinquency is explored. In this study, 238 youths between the ages of 13-16 who varied in the degree of their delinquency were asked to describe their possible selves. Although many similarities were found among their hoped-for selves, the groups of youth differed markedly in the nature of their expected and feared selves. The balance between expected possible selves and feared possible selves was the particular focus. Balance is hypothesized to occur when expected possible selves are offset by countervailing feared selves in the same domain (e.g., expecting a job, but fearing being unemployed). It was found that the officially nondelinquent youths were quite likely to display balance between their expectations and fears, unlike the most delinquent youth. In contrast, a conventional measure of self-esteem that indicates how people feel about themselves currently did not predict degree of delinquency.

More than any other time in the life course, adolescence is the stage of possibility and of the promises and worries that attend this possibility. It is the time when one creates the self "I could become" (Erikson, 1959, 1974). The surest hallmark of this period is, in fact, the amount of time invested in envisioning, trying on, and rehearsing future or potential selves (Gergen, 1972; James, 1910; Schutz, 1964). Should I become a teacher, a policeman, a doctor, a mother, a rock star? Will I be rich, successful, and popular, or lonely and unhappy? Markus and Nurius (1986) have proposed the term *possible selves* for those elements of the self-concept that represent what individuals *could* become, *would like to* become, or are *afraid of* becoming. In the current study we examine the content of the possible selves of adolescents 13 to 16 years of age.

A consuming life task of the adolescent is to discover or construct possible selves that are personally satisfying and absorbing but that are also coordinate with the responsibilities that confront adults in one's community (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Greene, 1986). Czikszenmihalyi and Larson (1984) argued, in fact, that the adolescent's key to a successful transition to adulthood is learning to attend to and focus on the activities that are necessary for adult life rather than on the immediately pleasurable activities of childhood. For some adolescents this is relatively easily accomplished. For others, most notably those adolescents who come to be labelled as delinquents, constructing a believable and satisfying future, and then working to

achieve it, is a difficult process beset with frustration and failure (Blos, 1967; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Flavell, 1963; Harter, 1983).

As an initial step in determining how possible selves might be implicated in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, this study focuses on youth who vary in the difficulty they are having with this transition. Specifically, we compare the possible selves of adolescents who differ in the severity of their delinquent behavior.

### Delinquency and the Self-Concept

Accurate accounts of delinquency trends over the years are difficult to compile, but it is clear that juvenile crime has become a serious problem in American society. Juveniles are overrepresented in arrests for crime. According to recent statistics, 14- to 17-year-olds constitute only 6% of the total population, yet those under 18 years old account for over 30% of arrests for serious crimes: forcible rape, murder and manslaughter, robbery, aggravated assault, larceny theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson (U.S. Department of Justice, 1986). Not only are juveniles overrepresented in arrest statistics but when researchers have asked youth to report on their own delinquent activities (whether or not these activities resulted in arrests), they have found that a surprisingly large proportion of youth do in fact engage in delinquent activities (Elliott & Voss, 1974; Gold, 1963, 1970; Gold & Reimer, 1975; Hindelang, 1973). Involvement in serious delinquent activity is often short lived, however. Sixty percent of youth report beginning and ending their involvement in delinquency during the course of 1 year (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1988).

The current theoretical explanations for delinquency can be roughly categorized into (a) those emphasizing the general societal structure (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1957, 1964; Shaw & McKay, 1969), (b) those concerned with the nature of the individual's immediate social network (Matza, 1964; Sagarin, 1975; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978), and (c) those focused on individual needs or on social or biological dysfunction (Hirschi, 1969; Reckless, 1961, 1967; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). The growing consensus among delinquency researchers,

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however, is that no one of these approaches can fully account for delinquency (Johnson, 1979; Shoemaker, 1984) and that the approaches should be integrated.

One theoretical element that could be useful in organizing this set of seemingly diverse explanations of delinquency is the self-concept (see also Shoemaker, 1984). Such an integration assumes that differences in adolescents' social environments are reflected in the content and structure of the self-concept and that the self-concept regulates both intrapersonal and interpersonal behavior. The self-concept is an important feature of many explanations of delinquent behavior (Cohen, 1955; Gold & Petronio, 1980; Kaplan, 1975; Matza, 1964, 1969; McCarthy & Hoge, 1984; Shoemaker, 1984). Efforts to assess the delinquent's self-concept, however, have typically relied on measures of self-esteem, and self-esteem alone has not emerged as a powerful predictor of delinquency (Bynner, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; McCarthy & Hoge, 1984).

In this article we argue that the self-concept may indeed emerge as a crucial factor in delinquency, but only if the self-concept is considered to include not just one's global feelings of self-worth but also one's specific thoughts and feelings about the self and what is possible for self in particular domains.

### Possible Selves

#### *An Interface Between the Self-Concept and Motivation*

Recent views of the self-concept formulate it as a complex dynamic entity that reflects ongoing behavior and that also mediates and negotiates this behavior (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Harter, 1983; Hoelter, 1985; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Rosenberg, 1979). In contrast with earlier views that characterized the self-concept as a monolithic or global entity, most current perspectives conceive of it as a multifaceted structure containing a diverse array of self-representations. Not all of the self-representations that comprise the self-concept are alike, however. Some are more important and more elaborated with behavioral evidence than others. Some are positive, some negative, and some refer to the individual's here-and-now experience, whereas others refer to past or future experiences. Following James (1910), some of the most significant aspects of the self are those that reflect an awareness of one's potential, what we term *possible selves*.

Possible selves are conceptualized as the elements of the self-concept that represent the individual's goals, motives, fears, and anxieties. They give precise self-relevant form, meaning, and direction to these dynamics. They are specific and vivid senses, images, or conceptions of one's self in future states and circumstances and are viewed as essential elements in the motivational and goal-setting process. Choosing among competing actions and pursuing the chosen action depends on the nature of one's set of possible selves. Possible selves can thus be viewed as motivational resources that provide individuals with some control over their own behavior (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1982; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985). As such, they are conceived of as the self-relevant, internal structures that embody and give rise to generalized feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), effectance (White, 1959), competence (Harter, 1981, 1985; Phillips, 1984), or control (Burger, 1985; Lefcourt, 1976; Mischel & Mischel,

1977). Furthermore, possible selves contribute to the sense of importance, commitment, or centrality accorded to certain aspects of the self (e.g., Harter, 1988; Hoelter, 1985; Markus, 1977; Marsh, 1986; Stryker, 1980).

Possible selves refer only to that subset of goals, outcomes, or expectancies that are personalized or individualized and given self-relevant form or meaning. The critical element of a goal or threat is an image or sense of "me" in the end-state. From this perspective, motivation is not viewed as an instinctual, impersonal, or unconscious process (see Allport, 1955; Nuttin, 1984). Rather, it depends on the nature and configuration of the self-relevant structures that give specific, personal meaning to more general needs or motives.

Possible selves thus provide a link between the self-concept and motivation. They are hypothesized to serve as incentives for future behavior; they are selves to be approached or avoided. Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that the motivation to carry out all but the most routine and habitual actions depends on the creation of possible selves. It is the sense of one's self in a desired end-state—*me* with an exciting job or *me* with a happy family—that organizes and energizes actions in the pursuit of the end-state. The sense of one's self in a feared or undesired state—*me* in prison or *me* unemployed—is also motivationally significant. It can provide a vivid image or conception of an end-state that must be rejected or avoided. An image of one's self in such a feared or undesired state can produce inaction or a stopping in one's tracks (cf. Atkinson, 1958).

### Balance Between Possible Selves

Expected and dreaded possible selves are elaborated as they engender increasingly specific semantic, imaginal, or motoric representations of the self in the end-state. We suggest, however, that a given possible self will have maximal motivational effectiveness when it is offset or balanced by a countervailing possible self in the same domain. Thus a *feared* possible self will be most effective as a motivational resource when it is balanced with a self-relevant positive, *expected* possible self that provides the outlines of what one might do to avoid the feared state. Likewise, a positive expected self will be a stronger motivational resource, and maximally effective, when it is linked with a representation of what could happen if the desired state is not realized.

At a given moment when a positive possible self, for example, a possible self of "me finishing school," or of "me getting a job" is not particularly compelling, perhaps because of competing short-term possible selves ("me watching TV" or "me playing basketball"), the matched feared possible self of "me failing in school" or "me being unemployed" can be recruited, and the desire to avoid this negative self should strengthen one's flagging motivation to achieve the desired state (see Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985). In a similar way, a vivid representation of one's self in a relevant positive and desired state ("me getting through school") should enhance the motivation to avoid an undesired state ("me doing poorly" or "me dropping out"). Individuals with a balance between their expected and their feared selves in a given domain—for example, personalized representations of the self succeeding and also not succeeding—should then have more motivational control over

their behavior in this domain because they have more motivational resources than do individuals without such balance.

Positive possible selves alone may be quite successful in facilitating or guiding behavior, but if a particular positive possible self is one that may compete for expression with other positive possible selves, then a matched feared possible self can be motivationally useful. The potential interdependencies between positive expectations and fears are currently being examined in a number of areas of psychology. For example, in the coping literature, Rogers and his colleagues (Rippetoe & Rogers, 1987; Rogers, 1983) found that a threat to one's health like smoking will elicit what is called protection motivation (i.e., an intention to stop smoking) if individuals believe they can stop smoking and also believe that stopping smoking is an effective way to avoid disease. From a possible selves perspective, a positive possible self affords an integration of these two disjoint beliefs into a single motivational structure.

### Possible Selves and Delinquency

What is the hypothesized role of negative and positive possible selves in delinquency? A major task of adolescence is to create and define the self one is going to become. Adolescents must be able to construct and have command over a set of positive possible selves that are personally satisfying and absorbing and that can be used as motivational resources in making the transition to adulthood (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Greene, 1986). Those adolescents who are not successful in constructing and maintaining such positive possible selves in the conventional domains of the family, friends, or school are likely to seek alternative ways to define the self. Delinquency can become such an alternative route to positive self-definition because the other avenues—leaving home, finding a job, or getting married—are, for the most part, impractical. Through rebellious activity, adolescents can define themselves as adventurous, independent, powerful, tough, or in control, and success at delinquent activity can bring with it considerable prestige among one's peers (Hirschi, 1969; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978).

Delinquency may also appear as exciting or attractive to youth who are able to construct socially sanctioned, positive possible selves but who have yet to create compelling feared or to-be-avoided selves in their self-defining domains. Such youth may expect to finish school, find a good job, and have friends, but they may not have elaborated self-relevant futures in which they drop out, are unemployed, or suffer the disapproval of family and friends. Expected positive selves (e.g., "getting through school") alone may not provide these adolescents with sufficient motivational control to allow them to turn away from delinquent activity that offers appealing alternative possible selves. Specific images and conceptions of relevant feared possibilities may be necessary to help keep them in pursuit of the desired possibilities.

The specific hypothesis guiding this study, therefore, is that youth who vary in the severity of their delinquent behavior can be distinguished by the configuration of their possible selves, with the most delinquent youth displaying the *least* balance between their expected and feared possible selves. This hypothesis will be compared with a typical self-esteem hypothesis that

predicts that the most delinquent youth will be those with the lowest self-esteem.

## Method

### *Design of the Study*

In this project a total of 238 youths between the ages of 13 and 16 were studied. Youth were drawn from four subsamples distinguished by their degree of officially known delinquency: public school youth, community placed delinquent youth, group home youth, and training school youth. The four groups formed an ordered scale of average severity or intensity of delinquent activities, with public school youth being the officially nondelinquent youth, and training school youth being the most delinquent youth. By selecting all four groups from within the same lower middle-class to working-class area of Detroit, the impact of socioeconomic status and race on processing for delinquent activities was limited. Furthermore, because all youth came from the same region, they were likely to have been processed through the same area judicial frameworks. Thus, any biases inherent in the juvenile criminal system should be uniform across groups.<sup>1</sup>

Youth were interviewed individually from December 1985 through April 1986. Following the initial interviews, a decision was made to reinterview as many of the public school and community placed youth as possible in order to collect self-report delinquency data. Some of the public schools did not grant permission for second interviews, thus 85 of the 108 youth from the public schools were reinterviewed. In the community placed group, administrative staff turnover meant that only 16 of the original 40 community placed youth could be reinterviewed. As a condition of entry into the group homes and into the training school, no identifying information about the youth interviewed was to be retained, therefore a return interview at these sites was not possible. Therefore, 101 (or 68% of the total sample of public school and community placed youth) of the least officially delinquent youth were reinterviewed 3 months after initial interviews. Second interviews focused on gathering self-report delinquency data.

### *Sample*

The total original sample included 141 male and 97 female youths, of which 175 were Black, and 63 were White. Youth were between 13 and 16 years of age, and grade level ranged from 6th to 12th, with 11 of the youths taking General Equivalency Diploma (GED) courses rather than being placed in a conventional grade level. Average grade level was 9th grade, and over 60% of the students were in grades 8 to 10; average age was 14.9. The four subsamples did not differ significantly by age or grade in school. The four subsamples are described as follows:

1. *Public school.* Youth attending seven inner-city Detroit schools ( $n = 108$ , mean age = 14.3 years, mean grade in school = 9.2) formed the officially nondelinquent group. These seven schools were chosen because records from the three officially delinquent subsamples showed a high proportion of their clientele came from these schools.

<sup>1</sup> Recent literature on diversion programs has shown that the least delinquent youth are the youth most likely to be placed in community placement programs such as the one in this study, whereas more delinquent youth (or more seriously delinquent) youth are likely to be confined to more restrictive settings (Osgood & Weichselbaum, 1984). In a recent review of the literature evaluating community-based programs for delinquent youth, it was found that the vast majority of group home programs self-defined as serving youth who were less severely delinquent than youth in closed, training school facilities (Oyserman, 1987).

2. *Community placement programs.* Youth attending area schools of observation, alternative schools, and public school in connection with a delinquency intervention program ( $n = 40$ , mean age = 14.9 years, mean grade in school = 8.4) formed the group with the lowest level of official involvement in delinquency. These youth had been officially processed to the least degree in that all were still living in their home environment. The community placement program is viewed as an alternative to traditional probation, and youth receive more intensive supervision. Schools of observation are set up to be similar to conventional public schools; however, youth in these schools are picked up and brought to school in the morning (to reduce truancy) and are closely monitored throughout the day. The schools receive youth who have been expelled from other schools because of uncontrollable behavior in school: fighting with students and staff, chronic truancy, and minor delinquent activities.

3. *Group homes for delinquents.* Youth living in group homes formed the third group, the group with a moderate level of officially known delinquency ( $n = 31$ , mean age = 15.2 years, mean grade in school = 9.6). All of the group homes were semiautonomously run on a daily basis but were under a single central administration. Group home placement is normally sought after probation, community-based intervention, and alternative school programs have been tried, or if a youth has been involved in a variety of delinquent activities that are frequent enough to warrant further intervention, but not so frequent or so severe as to warrant training school processing.

4. *The state training school.* Youth living in the institution of last resort for juvenile delinquent males in the state ( $n = 59$ , mean age = 15.6 years, mean grade in school = 9.5) formed the fourth group, the group with the highest official involvement in delinquency. The average stay here is 13.8 months. Youth are typically placed in this institution after all other alternatives such as alternative school and delinquency intervention programs, or group homes, have failed or if the other, less restrictive alternatives are viewed as inappropriate because of the danger posed by the youth's delinquent activities.

### Interview Procedure

To maintain respondent confidentiality and anonymity, each youth was interviewed separately in a room within the facility. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hr. The respondent's name was not attached to any of the interview material. A respondent identification number was attached to the public school subsample questionnaires because these youths were interviewed twice.

### Interviewers

The interviewers were trained in the use of the questionnaire and in basic interviewing and empathy skills over a 40-hr training phase that included reading assignments, role play, and interviewing pilot respondents. All interviewers were at least juniors at the University of Michigan, all were psychology majors, all had taken advanced course work in psychology, and had spent at least one semester in the community working under supervision on a one-to-one basis with area delinquent youth through local agencies. Youth in the sample had not participated with the interviewers in these programs. There were seven interviewers (three male, four female), and their ages were between 20 and 34 years.

### The Questionnaire

*Open-ended self-concept measures.* In response to the following open-format questions, subjects were asked to list three hoped-for, three expected, and three feared selves for next year after being provided with a short explanation of the questions. Next-year selves were

chosen because pilot testing revealed that adolescents had difficulties generating specific selves for the more distal future.

1. *Hoped for selves:* "Many people have in mind some things they want to be like in the future regardless of how likely it is that they will actually be that way or do those things. These are the kinds of selves that you would hope to be like. Please list below three possible selves that you most hope to describe you in the next year."

2. *Expected selves:* "Please list below three possible selves that are most likely to be true of you in the next year."

3. *Feared selves:* "Please list below three possible selves that you most fear or worry about being in the next year."

These open-ended self-concept probes yielded measures of the content of expected, hoped-for, and feared selves.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of categorization systems developed by Little (1983), Klinger (1975), and Greene (1986, in press), expected and hoped-for selves were coded into one of six categories, and feared selves were coded into one of seven categories. Coders were blind to the groups their questionnaires came from. Half of the questionnaires were coded by two coders jointly. After coding separately, the two coders compared codes and came to agreement on differences (differences occurred in less than 5% of the cases). The remaining responses were coded by a single coder. The sets of *expected* and *hoped-for* selves were each categorized into the following:

1. *Positive intrapersonal selves:* e.g., happy, stand on my own feet, responsible, attractive;

2. *Positive interpersonal selves:* e.g., have friends, help others, trusted, spend time with my mother;

3. *Jobs:* e.g., have a job, have a part-time job, make money, keep my job;

4. *School or school related extracurricular activities:* e.g., do well in school, go to school, stay in school, play basketball in school;

5. *Material goods:* e.g., have a car, have nice clothes, have a place of my own, have money;

6. *Any negative selves:* e.g., confused, afraid, anxious, depressed, junkie, steal, in trouble with the police.

Feared selves were categorized into the following:

1. *Negative intrapersonal selves:* e.g., depressed, unable to make decisions, ugly, fat;

2. *Negative interpersonal selves:* e.g., no friends, alone, family member dies or leaves, no boy/girl friend;

3. *Poverty:* e.g., poor, no money, no job, can't have nice things;

4. *Do poorly in school or extracurricular activities:* e.g., do poorly in school, not stay in school, not get to play sports, not get to take driver's ed.;

5. *Crime:* e.g., steal, thief, sell drugs, do crime, be in jail, murder, beat up or assault others;

<sup>2</sup> A 3-week test-retest reliability study with introductory psychology students ( $N = 63$ ) revealed that 90% of respondents generated at least two of the expected selves generated 3 weeks earlier, and 45% of respondents generated all three of the expected selves generated earlier. There were no respondents that did not generate at least one expected self that was the same as that generated earlier. With respect to feared selves, 74% of respondents generated at least two of the feared selves generated 3 weeks earlier, and 25% of respondents generated all three. Only two respondents did not generate any of the feared selves generated in response to the first questionnaire.

6. *Drugs*: e.g., be an alcoholic, be a junkie, take drugs, be a "thud";
7. *Death*: e.g., die, be killed, be dead and forgotten, get injured and die.

These categories were labeled by the most common response within each category. For example, the negative interpersonal selves category was labeled *no friends* because this was the most common response in this category.

*Closed-ended self-concept measures.* Closed-format self-concept questions were posed within a matrix format previously used by Markus and Nurius (1986).<sup>3</sup> For each self-descriptor, respondents are asked to rate the extent to which it was

1. Currently self-descriptive: "describes me now,"
2. Probably will be self-descriptive in the future: "think this will describe me in the future," and
3. Is desired or hoped for in the future: "like this to describe me."

The possible self-descriptors used in this matrix were developed from a content analysis of responses to open-format interviews ( $n = 20$ ) in the initial data collection phase. The 16 self-descriptors (8 positive and 8 negative) used in further analysis were common to all subsamples.<sup>4</sup>

Although a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) was provided at the top of the matrix, all analyses were conducted with a recategorized 3-point scale. This was done because recent reports (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984a, 1984b) with national representative samples of high school students suggest that Blacks and Whites differ in terms of their propensity to use the extremes of 5-point Likert-type scales, especially when the scale focuses on extent of agreement (e.g., a scale anchored at *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*). Whites are more likely to use the middle-range agreement or disagreement points, whereas Blacks are more likely to use the extreme points on the scale, irrespective of the content area of the questions. Bachman and O'Malley recommended condensing the 5-point to a 3-point scale to control for this apparent difference in language usage (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984a, 1984b). The responses in this sample do tend to cluster as predicted by Bachman and O'Malley; therefore, 3-point scales (e.g., *strongly agree* and *agree* as a single category, and *strongly disagree* and *disagree* as a single category, with the neutral response remaining in the center of the scale) were adopted. The closed-ended self-concept matrix was divided into six self-concept subscales, Positive Current Self, Negative Current Self, Positive Hoped-For Self, Negative Hoped-For Self, Positive Probable Self, and Negative Probable Self. Each subscale score represents the mean level of endorsement of the items represented in the appropriate portion of the matrix. For example, the Positive Current Self score represents the mean level of endorsement of 8 positive items as "describes me now." Analyses involved only positive and negative expected selves and positive and negative current selves because positive hopes and negative fears were highly correlated ( $r = .50$ ) with positive expected and negative expected selves, respectively; therefore, these measures were dropped from further analyses.

In addition to these self-concept measures, Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem and Optimism for the Future measures were included in the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup>

*A measure of balance among open-ended possible selves.* The original (i.e., prior to categorization) expected and feared self responses were examined jointly by two coders who scored the number of *balanced* pairs of expected and feared selves. A pair of responses (an expected and a feared self) was considered "in balance" if the expected self and the feared self represented a positive and a negative aspect of the same content area. For example, an expected self of "pass 9th grade" might be paired with a feared self of "flunk out of school;" an expected self "have lots of friends" might be paired with a feared self of

"lonely"; an expected self of "get a job" might be paired with a feared self of "can't keep a job."

Expected rather than hoped-for selves were paired with feared selves in constructing the balance measure because expected selves were generated in response to questions that focused the participants on selves that actually could occur or on reality-based expectations. Hoped-for selves were generated in response to questions about selves that were desired regardless of how likely they were. We assumed that hoped-for selves might capture primarily fantasies or dreams. Each respondent received a score from 0 (no balance) to 3 (balance in each of the three possible pairs of expected and feared selves). The coders were instructed to form whatever pairs were possible, but each item could be used in only one pair.<sup>6</sup> One of the coders had been involved in the previous coding, and the other had not. Coders worked independently, each coding all of the responses. Coders compared responses and reached agreement about differences (differences occurred in 10% of the cases). Coders were again blind to the grouping of respondents.

*Self-reported delinquency.* Self-reported delinquency data were gathered in the second interview ( $n = 101$ ) with the two least officially delinquent subsamples only. Delinquent acts during the past 12 months were assessed by using the 20 self-report delinquency items from the Youth in Transition questionnaire (Bachman, Johnson, & O'Malley, 1982). This scale included questions such as "During the last 12 months, how often have you: Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor? . . . Taken something from a store without paying for it? . . . Set someone's property on fire? . . . Smoked marijuana or hashish?" The response scale was a 5-point scale ranging from *never to more than five times*.

## Results

Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were used to determine how possible selves varied with differences in level of official

<sup>3</sup> A 1-week test-retest reliability study ( $N = 80$ ) on the probability ratings given those possible selves yielded .79 for positive items and .82 for negative items.

<sup>4</sup> The positive items were as follows: "work toward goals, happy, have friends, attractive, manage own decisions, interesting, loved, helpful to others"; the negative items were as follows: "depressed, not in control of your life, lonely, stupid, afraid, can't fit in with others, confused, ugly." Negative selves that were piloted among the more delinquent youth but dropped due to low endorsement of these selves included items such as alcoholic, drug user or junkie, thief, murderer, rowdy, and prostitute. It is interesting to note, however, that these selves *did* appear among the selves that the youth generated in the open-format questions suggesting that the two tasks—endorsing selves from a checklist and generating selves using open-ended probes—are not identical in the possible selves that they reveal.

<sup>5</sup> The self-esteem items included were as follows: "I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others," "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure," "I am able to do things as well as most other people," "I feel that I do not have much to be proud of," "I take a positive attitude toward myself," "I wish I could have more respect for myself," "I certainly feel useless at times," "At times I think I am no good at all." Rosenberg's scales are extensively used, and their reliability and validity have been reviewed in Rosenberg (1965) and Robinson and Shaver (1973).

<sup>6</sup> In extensive pilot testing before this study and in studies done subsequently, we have found that allowing no restrictions on the number of possible selves generated does not significantly increase the amount of balance observed between expectations and fears over that observed when respondents are constrained to three expected or feared possible selves.

delinquency. The dependent variables were the possible selves measures (open- and closed-ended), optimism for the future, and global self-esteem; the independent variables were age, sex, and race; and the stratifying variable was a variable representing the degree of official delinquency. Only the self measures that are predicted by official delinquency when controlling for race, gender, and age are presented in the following section. ANCOVAs showed virtually no significant effect for age, sex, and race. In cases in which age, sex, or race were significantly distinguished among groups, this is noted at the appropriate point in the text.

A series of planned contrasts were used to explore the source of significant differences in possible selves among youth who differ in their official delinquency. These contrasts compared (a) public school youth (the officially nondelinquent youth, denoted in the figures as Group a) and the officially delinquent youth in general (denoted in the figures as Group b-c-d), (b) the public school and community placed youth (the two least delinquent, denoted in the figures as Group a-b) with the group home and training school youth (the two most delinquent, denoted in the figures as Group c-d), and (c) the pairs of groups as ordered by extent of official delinquency (denoted in the figures as "a" in comparison with "b," "b" in comparison with "c," and "c" in comparison with "d").

Although no specific hypotheses were established, to explore the possibility of significant interaction effects between age, sex, race, and the extent of official delinquency, we introduced interaction terms in a series of multiple regressions. In these regressions, three dummy variables were set up to code for the four levels of official delinquency. The dummy delinquency variables, sex, race, and age, were entered followed by the appropriate interaction terms. In the two places where interaction terms were significant predictors of the self measures, this is noted.

### Differences in Possible Selves Among the Four Subsamples

#### *Examples of Possible Selves*

The adolescents in this study seemed to have no difficulty describing in their own words what is possible for them in the future: what they *hoped*, *expected*, and *feared* they would be in a year. Their responses were strikingly diverse. For example,

"I expect to be doing better in school, to be almost independent—ready to move out and to have a part-time job. I hope to study more, have a good paying part-time job, and be independent of my parents. I'm afraid I might not stay in school, I won't get a summer job, and I'll be homeless" (16-year-old male; public school).

"I expect to be happy, to be playing basketball in school, and to have a job. I hope to be happy, not have to go to jail, and be allowed on the school basketball team. I'm afraid I might drop out of school and be a nobody, not be able to play basketball, and have a family" (16-year-old male; public school).

"Next year I expect to be in trouble more, but trying to stay out of trouble, and trying to stay in school. I hope to graduate high school, not be in trouble with the police, and start a good job so I won't steal for cash. I'm afraid I might be a thief, in prison, dead—killed breaking into houses" (16-year-old male; maximum-security training school for delinquent boys).

"Next year I expect to be using drugs and alcohol, be involved in crime—break out of [training school] and start fencing again, and be at home. I hope to be in school, legally at home, and stop using cocaine. I'm afraid I might start using morphine or heroin, doing worse crimes like armed robbery, and living on the streets" (16-year-old male; maximum security training school for delinquent boys).

#### *The Content of Expected Possible Selves: The Open-Ended Responses*

Table 1 presents the four most frequently generated possible selves for each of the subsamples. The subsamples are ordered in terms of the degree of officially known delinquency. The top panel displays the possible selves that are *expected* for next year. The most obvious fact is that there is considerable overlap in these expected possible selves. A very frequent expectation for all groups of youth is that they will "be happy." In a similar vein, they expect with nearly equal frequency to "have friends."

The differences among the four groups are most apparent with respect to the more achievement-related responses. Thus, the most common possible self for the public school youth, and the one that accounts for nearly a third of their responses to this question, is "to get along in school." This possible self is nearly as probable for the community placement youth. For the two most delinquent groups, however, "getting along in school" is only the third or fourth most frequent response, accounting for only 13.9% of the responses given by the training school youth. Similarly, the achievement-related response of "having a job," which is the third or fourth most frequently generated possible self for the public school and community placement youth does not appear at all for the two most delinquent groups. Instead, what appears in these positions is a variety of *negatively* valued possible selves: "junkie," "depressed," "alone," "flunking out of school," "pusher," "criminal." Note that these negative selves are generated not in response to the query about feared selves, but in response to expected possible selves.

The amount of official delinquency predicted expecting negative selves,  $F(3, 225) = 9.05, p < .0001$ , expecting to get along in school,  $F(3, 225) = 9.36, p < .0001$ , and expecting material goods such as cars or nice clothes,  $F(3, 225) = 2.77, p < .05$ . Across the four groups, from public school youth to training school youth, there is a decrease in the percentage of youth expecting to get along in school, and an increase in the percentage of youth expecting to have cars or nice clothes and expecting negative selves. See Figure 1 for specific Scheffé contrasts.

#### *The Content of Hoped-For Selves: The Open-Ended Responses*

With respect to the possible selves that are hoped for in the next year, there is more homogeneity among the four groups. As can be seen in Table 1, all groups indicate with about equal frequency the hope to "have friends" and, indeed, this is the most frequently generated hoped-for possible self of the two most delinquent groups. In contrast with the expected selves, "having a job" is a commonly hoped-for possible self for all the groups including the two most delinquent groups. "Getting along in school" is a frequently generated hoped-for self by all

Table 1  
*Rank Ordering of Responses to Open-Ended Possible Selves Probes Within Each Subsample*

Group	<i>n</i> = 106 Public school	<i>n</i> = 40 Community placement	<i>n</i> = 30 Group home	<i>n</i> = 59 Training school
Expected selves (four most frequent responses)				
	Get along in school (31.6)	Get along in school (29.0)	Have friends (23.9)	Be happy (27.9)
	Be happy (25.7)	Have friends (22.4)	Be happy (22.4)	Have friends (22.1)
	Have friends (22.8)	Have a job (21.5)	Get along in school (19.4)	Negative selves: depressed, junkie (20.6)
	Have a job (13.9)	Be happy (18.7)	Negative selves: depressed, junkie (13.4)	Get along in school (14.0)
Total %	(94.1)	(91.6)	(79.1)	(84.6)
Hoped-for selves (four most frequent responses)				
	Get along in school (26.7)	Have a job (26.5)	Have friends (30.0)	Have friends (27.6)
	Have friends (24.3)	Get along in school (23.5)	Get along in school (23.3)	Be happy (17.9)
	Be happy (18.7)	Have friends (18.4)	Be happy (20.0)	Have a job (17.2)
	Have a job (13.1)	Have a car, nice clothes (13.3)	Have a job (15.0)	Have a car, nice clothes (15.7)
Total %	(82.8)	(81.7)	(88.3)	(78.4)
Feared selves (five most frequent responses)				
	Not get along in school (24.5)	Criminal: thief, murderer (22.4)	Criminal: thief, murderer (32.7)	Criminal: thief, murderer (36.9)
	Not have friends (15.9)	Not get along in school (18.4)	Not get along in school (21.1)	On drugs (13.9)
	Be poor (12.1) <sup>a</sup>	Be dead (16.3)	Be depressed (17.3)	Not get along in school (12.3) <sup>a</sup>
	Be depressed (12.1) <sup>a</sup>	On drugs (13.3)	Be poor (11.5)	Be depressed (12.3) <sup>a</sup>
	Be dead (12.1) <sup>a</sup>	Not have friends (12.2)	On drugs (9.6)	Be poor (9.8)
Total %	(76.6)	(82.7)	(92.3)	(85.2)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes ties.

but the training school youth, where it is replaced by the hoped-for self of having certain types of clothes or cars.

There was a significant relationship between the covariates of sex, race, and age and the dependent variable of hoping to get along in school,  $F(3, 224) = 5.15, p < .01$ ; examination of the

covariate coefficients showed that it was race ( $p < .001$ ) that was the significant contributor to the prediction of this hoped-for self. Black youth expressed this possible self more than White youth. Additional variance was explained by the amount of official delinquency,  $F(3, 224) = 4.15, p < .01$ . Scheffé con-

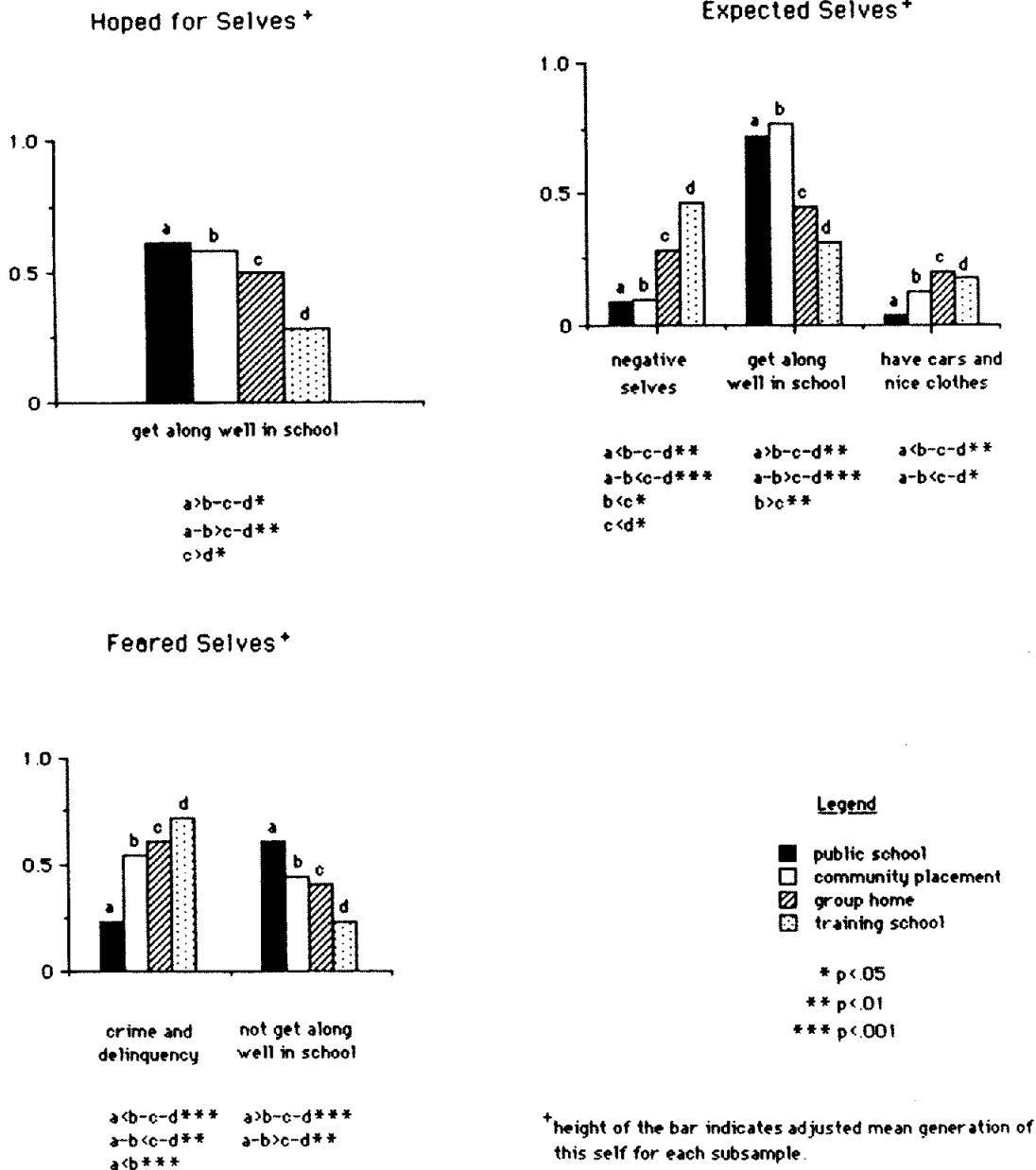


Figure 1. Significant group differences in responses to open-ended possible selves probes.

trasts shown in Figure 1 indicate a general decrease in the percentage of youth nominating this self across the four groups.

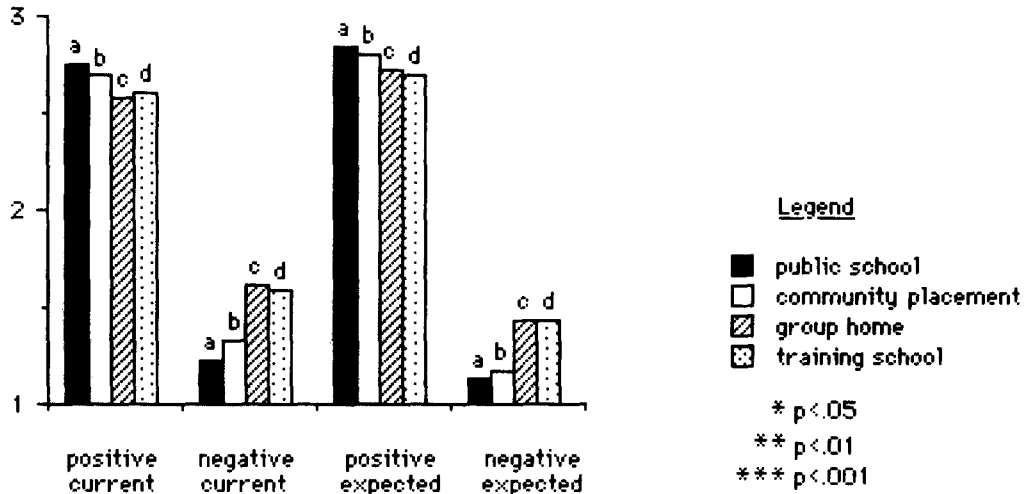
*The Content of Feared Possible Selves:  
The Open-Ended Responses*

The feared possible selves are a more diverse set than the hoped-for selves and, as shown in Table 1, it was necessary to list the five most frequent responses to account for 80% to 90% of the responses to this query. What is most obvious among these feared selves is not the similarities among groups but the striking differences. By far the most frequently generated feared possible self of the public school youth is that of "not

getting along in school." It accounts for nearly a quarter of all responses to this question. For the other three groups, however, the most frequently generated response is the fear of being criminal—a "thief," a "murderer." For the two most delinquent groups this fear explains a third of all their responses. In contrast, the fear of being criminal does not appear at all among the five most frequent responses of the public school youth and only 8% mentioned this self at all.

The amount of official delinquency predicted fearing criminal selves,  $F(3, 224) = 10.98, p < .0001$ , and fearing school failure,  $F(3, 224) = 4.80, p < .01$ . Generally, the percentage of youth generating school failure selves decreased, whereas the percentage of youth generating criminal selves increased across





significant contrasts between subsamples ordered by degree of official delinquency.

a < b-c-d***	a-b > c-d**	a < b-c-d***
a-b < c-d***	b > c*	a-b < c-d***
b < c**		b < c**

† Adjusted mean endorsement of eight positive or eight negative self-descriptors where 1=not at all, 3=very much descriptive.

Figure 2. Group differences in endorsement of positive and negative selves as current selves and expected selves.

groups from public school to training school youth (see Figure 1).

*Closed-Ended Measures of Current Selves and Expected Possible Selves*

Figure 2 displays the extent of endorsement of closed-ended questions about positive and negative current and future possible selves. The amount of official delinquency did not significantly predict the extent that positive selves were viewed as current selves. However, it did predict the extent that positive selves were viewed as future selves,  $F(3, 180) = 3.17, p < .05$ , the extent that negative selves were viewed as current selves,  $F(3, 209) = 11.67, p < .0001$ , and the extent that these negative selves were viewed as future selves,  $F(3, 208) = 9.44, p < .0001$ . These results are simultaneously significant at  $p < .05$  using a Bonferroni  $t$  test (Miller, 1981).<sup>7</sup>

*Balance Among Possible Selves*

As anticipated, differences in the balance of the possible selves of the four groups of youth were observed,  $F(3, 224) = 7.62, p < .0001$ . As indicated in Figure 3, public school youth had the most balanced possible selves, and Scheffé contrasts show more balance in the public school youth than for the community placed youth or all officially delinquent youth. In

addition, the two most officially delinquent groups had less balance than the two least officially delinquent groups.

*Self-Esteem and Optimism for the Future Measures*

Unlike the balance measure, the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem and optimism for the future measures appear not to have a linear relationship with the official delinquency variable. Overall significant differences among the four groups were again found,  $F(3, 209) = 5.17, p < .01$ , for self-esteem, and  $F(3, 207) = 8.41, p < .0001$ , for optimism for the future. However, as shown in Figure 4, for these variables, a U-shaped relationship with severity of delinquency was obtained with public school and training school youth scoring higher than community placed and group home youth. The extent of endorsement of current positive selves was characterized by a similar although not significant pattern (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup>

*Interconnections Between Various Self-Concept Measures*

To explore relationships among the various self-concept measures used, partial correlations controlling for race, sex,

<sup>7</sup> Significant interaction effects were found for one of the dummy variables representing delinquency and the age variable ( $p < .01$ ).

<sup>8</sup> Significant interaction effects were found for one of the dummy variables representing delinquency and the race variable ( $p < .05$ ).

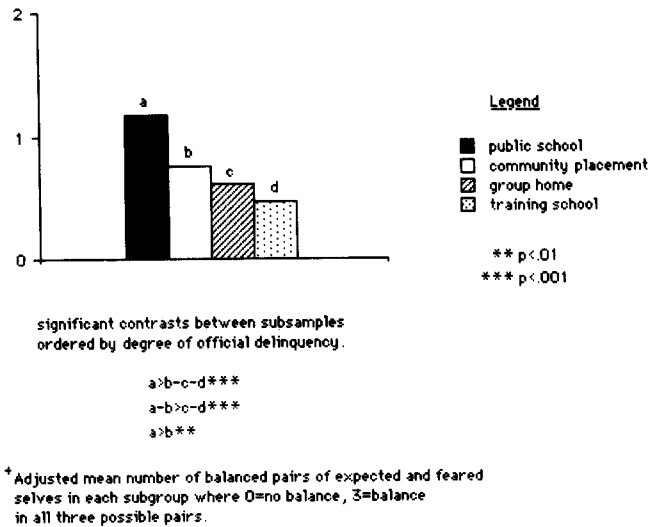


Figure 3. Group differences in extent of balance in self-concept.

and age were examined. Of particular interest is the extent that the various measures correlated with global self-esteem, optimism for the future, and balance. As can be seen in Table 2, for the most part the various measures are significantly correlated. The balance measure has somewhat lower and not always significant correlations with the other measures. Taken together, these correlations suggest that although they tap related underlying constructs, self-esteem and optimism for the future on the one hand, and balance on the other, are not tapping the same variable.

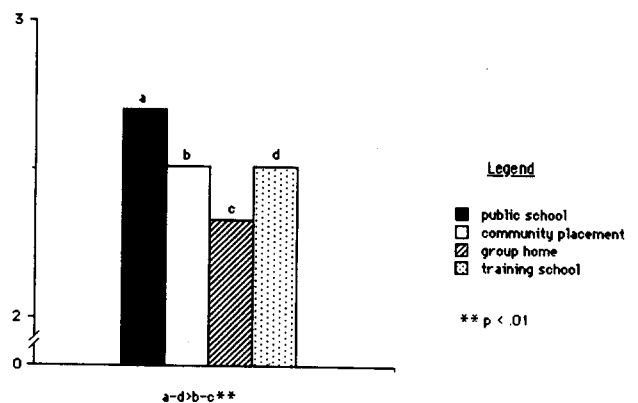
Predicting Self-Reported Delinquency

Self-reported delinquency data (collected 2-3 months after the self-concept measures) were available for 85 public school youth and 16 community placement youth, youth from the least officially delinquent groups in our sample. Because self-report data were not available for the more delinquent youth, we have no method of comparing extent of self-report delinquency directly across groups. However, for the two groups in which self-report data are available, extent of official delinquency correlates highly with self-report delinquency ( $r = .47, p < .0001$ ). The youth self-reported a range from no self-reported delinquency in the past year to frequencies of 3-4 times a year for vandalism and property crimes, and 2-3 times in the past year for drugs, theft, and violent crime items. Across items, overall responses ranged from 1 to 3 on the 5-point scale. The self-report data were used to establish an initial indication of the behavioral impact of possible selves as compared with the conventional Global Self-Esteem and Optimism for the Future measures. Thus two multiple regression equations were set up using self-reported delinquency as the dependent variable. Age, sex, race, global self-esteem, and optimism for the future were the independent variables in the first equation. The first equation was marginally significant,  $F(5, 94) = 2.27, p = .054$ ; examination of partial correlations showed that only sex contributed significantly to the prediction of delinquency in the first equa-

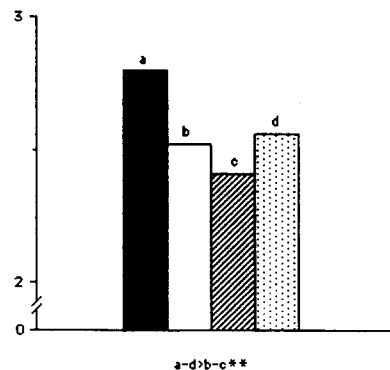
tion ( $p = .02$ ), boys having higher self-reported delinquency scores than girls. In the second equation, balance between expected and feared selves was added to the list of predictor variables. With the addition of the balance measure, the second equation was significant,  $F(6, 94) = 2.95, p = .01$ . Thus, balance, in contrast with the two more traditional global measures of self-concept, was a significant predictor of extent of self-reported delinquency.

In final analysis we used the mean extent of self-reported delinquent behaviors reported by the adolescents as the dependent measure in a multiple regression in which the open- and closed-ended possible self measures (those that significantly distinguished officially delinquent from officially nondelinquent) were the independent variables. The possible selves from the open-ended probe were fearing "not getting along in school," fearing "crime," expecting "to get along in school," expecting "negative selves," and hoping to "do well in school." The closed-ended probes were the extent that positive selves were endorsed as current or as expected selves and the extent that negative selves were endorsed as current or expected selves. Controlling

Group Differences in Self-Esteem<sup>†</sup>



Group Differences in Optimism for the Future



<sup>†</sup> height of the bar indicates adjusted mean generation of this self for each subsample.

Figure 4. Group differences in self-esteem.

Table 2  
*Partial Correlations Among the Various Self-Concept Measures*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Optimism	.63***	—				
2. Balance	.14*	.11	—			
3. Current positive	.35***	.36***	.02	—		
4. Current negative	-.49***	-.51***	-.24**	-.34***	—	
5. Probable positive	.34***	.36***	.17*	.56***	-.30***	—
6. Probable negative	-.37***	-.47***	-.20**	-.30***	.53***	-.29***

*Note.* Correlations are controlled for sex, age, and race. 1 = global self-esteem; 2 = optimism for the future; 3 = balance between expected and feared possible selves; 4 = extent that current positive selves are endorsed; 5 = extent that current negative selves are endorsed; 6 = extent that positive selves are endorsed as probable; 7 = extent that negative selves are endorsed as probable.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

for the impact of positive ( $\beta = .22, p = .03$ ) and negative ( $\beta = .31, p < .002$ ) current selves, there were two other variables that contributed significantly to the extent of self-reported delinquency. Youth who generated "crime" as a feared self were likely to self-report a higher mean extent of delinquent activity ( $\beta = .27, p < .01$ ).

Moreover, balance in possible selves, even among this relatively nondelinquent subsample, was also a significant predictor of self-reported delinquency, even when controlling for the number of negative possible selves generated in response to the probe about expectations for the coming year. Thus, controlling for the impact of expecting negative selves on delinquent behavior balance between fears and expectations significantly predicts the mean extent of delinquent behavior, ( $\beta = -.21, p = .04$ ). This is an important control because it shows that it was not the negativity of expectations but the balance between (positive) expectations and fears that predicts delinquent activities.

## Discussion

### *The Possible Selves of Delinquents and Nondelinquents*

In this study we sought to describe how adolescents conceive of their potential and their future. We focused on characterizing the possible selves of youth who varied in the degree of their delinquency. As expected, these adolescents differed in their possible selves, whether measured in open- or closed-format questions. When given the opportunity to generate their own expected, hoped-for, and feared possible selves, the more delinquent youth claimed "depressed," "alone," or "a junkie" as expected selves. Their fears focused on being involved in crime or drugs, and their hopes were a diverse set that involved relatively few mentions of school or school-related activities such as sports, or alternative achievement selves such as jobs. In contrast, the officially nondelinquent youth typically generated achievement-related selves, expecting and hoping to get along in school, and fearing not getting along or failing in school.

The assumption underlying this work is that the self-system is directly involved in regulating ongoing behavior, and thus the approach or avoidance of delinquency should be related to the nature of this system (see Carver & Scheier, 1982; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985). Possible selves are conceptualized as motivational resources that individuals can use in the control and direction

of their own actions. For example, a student who has been expelled from junior high school several times for repeated bouts of fighting and excessive truancy may still hope to do well in school or obtain a GED. However, using standard motivational terms, before this student can be expected to finish high school he must come not only to *value* this end-state but also to *believe* he is capable of it (e.g., Atkinson, 1958; Bandura, 1986). Translated more specifically into the current perspective, which emphasizes the role of the expected self in the motivational process, this means the student must be able to create a compelling possible self that individualizes or gives personal meaning and substance to this goal. The student must be able to envision or conceive of herself or himself as finishing school. Creating such a possible self is the hypothesized necessary first step in the motivational process. If, in addition, the student comes to fear or be worried about not finishing school, the student will have an additional motivational resource that can further enhance the motivation to achieve the goal of finishing high school.

### *Balance in Possible Selves*

Although there were differences among the groups in the possible selves generated and endorsed, there was also substantial overlap. We reasoned that the relationship between expected and feared selves might further distinguish the four groups. Furthermore, we claimed that a possible self will have maximal motivational effectiveness when it is balanced by a countervailing possible self in the same domain.

When the balance between the expectations and fears of the four groups of youth was examined, the officially nondelinquent youth showed significantly more balance between their expectations and fears than did the most officially delinquent youth. More than 81% of nondelinquents had at least one match between their expected and feared selves, whereas this was true for only 37% of the most delinquent groups. Of the most officially delinquent youth in this sample, 33% to 37% feared becoming criminal. Yet, these feared selves were not balanced by expectations that focused on avoiding crime and attaining conventional achievement. The two most delinquent groups do not expect to "have a job" and only 14% to 19% of them expect to "get along in school." Although these delinquent youth have the type of feared selves that might be associated with the avoidance of delinquent activity, many of them seem to

be missing the expected possible selves that could provide the organizing and energizing vision of how they might avoid criminal activity, and what they might expect if they do.

The Balance measure allowed us to predict degree of official involvement with delinquency. In contrast, a conventional measure of Global Self-esteem that indicates how individuals feel about themselves currently did not predict degree of delinquency. In this study, it was the least officially and the most officially delinquent groups that had the highest self-esteem scores; the youth who were mid-range in terms of delinquency were also mid-range in terms of self-esteem. Moreover, the high self-esteem scores of the most delinquent group are strongly at odds with the number and intensity of the negative possible selves, both expected and feared, that these youth generated. Although some relationship between global self-esteem and the specific content of the self-concept makes intuitive sense and has some empirical support (e.g., Harter, 1986; Rosenberg, 1986), these findings indicate 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.

Some have argued that the high self-esteem of very delinquent youth observed here, and in other studies, is defensive self-esteem (see Gold & Petronio, 1980). We can take these relatively high levels of self-esteem at face value if we assume that very delinquent institutionalized youth may derive considerable esteem from believing they are tough or perhaps heroes to their peers outside on the streets (e.g., Brown, 1988; Rhodes, 1988). This self-esteem, defensive or otherwise, will have relatively little impact on future behavior, however, unless it can be translated into believable possible selves.

As correlational data, the data presented in this study imply a connection between possible selves and delinquent behavior but cannot, of course, be interpreted as showing that differences in the content and structure of possible selves *cause* delinquent behavior. However, in an initial attempt to see possible selves in action, the possible selves measures were used to predict self-reported delinquency in two of the four subsamples. Three months after the possible selves questionnaire was first administered, the public school (officially nondelinquent) group and half of the community placement group were asked about their delinquent behavior. Those with least balance between expected and feared selves were those most likely to report having engaged in delinquent activities.

A lack of balance between expected and feared selves is proposed to have at least two distinct consequences: First, it decreases the potentially positive influence of feared selves on an individuals' actions. Feared selves are hypothesized to be most effective when paired with positive, expected possible selves that provide a specific image or a conception of how to avoid the feared states. Individuals who cannot imagine themselves behaving quite differently than they are currently behaving are likely to become trapped in their current behavioral course. Unable to cognitively counter their worries over being unemployed, alone, depressed, or engaged in crime in a believable, self-relevant way, these adolescents may be less motivated to avoid delinquent activity and to take the directive action necessary to prevent their feared selves from being realized. Moreover, without a balancing set of positive, expected possible

selves that can organize and energize their actions away from delinquent activity, these youth may be more readily influenced by those events and circumstances like drugs or further delinquent activity that seem to offer short-term relief from feared selves.

A second risk associated with an asymmetry between expectations and fears is that individuals may drift from the pursuit of one desired possible self to another and may have difficulty choosing among them at any given time. We propose that relevant feared possible selves provide for persistence in the pursuit of a desired possible self. Many delinquency researchers view the failure to internalize certain standards of behavior as a cause of delinquency (e.g., Hirschi, 1969). The current findings extend this view by suggesting that internalizing a standard may involve the construction and maintenance of a desired possible self coupled with a view of a feared or undesired self that must be avoided if the desired self is to be realized.

This study focused quite narrowly and specifically on adolescents' conceptions of their possibilities. Possible selves can be viewed as the structures that create the link between general beliefs about one's self and any given action or performance. Perhaps clinicians and theoreticians alike have been unnecessarily constrained in their assessments of the self-concept; many other types of measures are possible and may prove useful in developing a more precise understanding of how the self-system functions during adolescence. If one is interested in determining the antecedents and consequences of delinquent behavior, these results suggest that it is important to assess not just global feelings of worth, efficacy or competence, but also to assess the specific images, conceptions, and feelings that adolescents have of their potential and their future.

In extensions of this work it would be useful to explore the relationship between balance in possible selves and other measures that could be taken of self-conceptions, such as their importance, elaboration, centrality, and the degree to which the individual feels committed to them. One might ask, for example, is balance in a specific domain equivalent to saying that the domain is important or central to one's self-evaluation? Our view is that it is the existence of balanced possible selves in a domain that contributes to the individual's sense that this is a central or important domain of self-definition.

One could also ask whether balance in a domain is an indication of the extent of affective or cognitive elaboration in a domain. Balance, however, refers to a specific type of elaboration, one in which positive and negative possible selves are interrelated. Although psychology has traditionally focused on the virtues of positive self-representations (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988), a variety of recent work implies that instead of being detrimental, some negative self-relevant representations may actually be useful to individuals in gaining control over their behavior (e.g., Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Schwartz & Garamoni, 1986; Showers, 1989). The Balance measure is in line with this theorizing and suggests that negative possible selves may be motivationally beneficial when paired with specific positive possible selves that provide the outline of what to do to avoid a negative state.

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