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## Possible Selves in Balance: Implications for Delinquency

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*An approach to the initiation, maintenance, and cessation of delinquency is outlined in which an adolescent's possible selves play a pivotal role. Possible selves are the individual's self-relevant expectations for the future. They include what a person hopes to become, expects to become, and fears that he or she might become. With respect to action control, a particularly important aspect of adolescents' configuration of possible selves is the balance between their expected possible selves and their feared possible selves. Balance occurs when expected possible selves (e.g., "I will get a good job") are offset by countervailing feared possible selves in the same domain (e.g., "I could be unemployed and on the street"). Without balance between expected and feared selves in important domains, both the initiation and the maintenance of delinquent activity are more likely. The dynamic interaction between the social environment, expectations of the self, and delinquency involvement is highlighted.*

I had a lot of time to think in jail. I thought about how I really wasn't in control of my life. I was in jail, which was exactly where I did not want to be. I promised myself that . . . I would really stay out of trouble. . . . It wasn't long before I was right back into the same old things. I felt trapped. . . . I felt I was going to be killed or sent to jail for the rest of my life. It was only a matter of time. Trouble seemed to be everywhere and I didn't know how I could avoid it. (Rhodes, 1988, pp. 36-37)

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Crime is a problem associated with youth. Juveniles aged 14–17 constitute only 6% of the total population, yet they 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). A recent study found that 30% of males and 10% of females report involvement in some serious violent crime by age 18, while self-reports of less serious, nonviolent crime are substantially higher (Elliott, Huizinga, Knowles, & Canter, 1983). Notably, however, early criminal involvement does not guarantee a life of crime; self-report data indicate that 60% of youth begin and end their involvement in the course of one year (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1988).

Why is it that so many youth become involved in criminal activity? And what distinguishes those involved for a short period of time from those youth who continue their delinquent behavior for more extended periods of time? In this paper we suggest that adolescents' *self-relevant expectations*, what we term their *possible selves*, are critical in answering these questions. Possible selves that are hoped for by adolescents might include "the rich and famous self," or "the rock star self," or "the track team member self"; possible selves that are expected might include "the fighting with my parents self" or "the in the eighth grade self." And feared possible selves could include "the homeless, living on the street self," "the tried in court as an adult self," or "the poor and unemployed self."

This paper explores the role of possible selves in the initiation, maintenance, and cessation of delinquent behavior. In developing these ideas, it draws on a recently completed study (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) of four groups of youth who varied in the degree of their delinquent involvement, and on the autobiographical case histories of two former juvenile delinquents (Brown, 1988; Rhodes, 1988). In the study by Oyserman and Markus (1990), a total of 238 youths between the ages of 13–16 were sampled from four subsamples distinguished by their degree of officially known delinquency. The officially non-delinquent subsample was comprised of public school youth not known to have participated in delinquent acts. The three remaining subsamples covered the range of delinquency from youth who had had at least one contact with the police to those in the state training school for the most severe delinquents. Each respondent was asked to generate his or her three most important expected selves, hoped-for selves, and feared selves for the next year. Other questions probed the nature of their social environment (i.e., how others had been involved in the development and maintenance of their possible selves). Youth who were not confined were also asked about their delinquent behavior during the past year.

We assume here a reciprocal relation between delinquency and possible selves. Possible selves are thought to be significant in the initiation and maintenance of delinquency; the opportunity for delinquent activity, as well as the experience of delinquency is assumed to be instrumental in the creation and

maintenance of possible selves. Thus adolescents' self-relevant expectations both *create* reality and *reflect* the reality of the social environment (Jussim, this volume). The present analysis focuses primarily on one aspect of the interdependent relationship between delinquency and the self-concept. Using the correlational and anecdotal data provided by our survey of delinquent adolescents, we speculate about the role of possible selves in initiating and maintaining delinquency.

This approach to the role of possible selves in delinquency is one of a large family of theories that implicate expectations in the regulation of behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Carver, Blaney, & Scheier, 1979; Eccles, 1983; Jussim, 1989; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Snyder & Swann, 1978). Although individuals may acknowledge all types of goals, expectancies, or expected outcomes, we hypothesize here that only a subset of these goals or expected outcomes become individualized and are given specific self-relevant meaning. Many adolescents, for example, have an expectancy of finishing high school. For some, however, such an expectancy, although expressed as an expectancy for the self, may be at best only a very global or abstract notion that arises largely from the demands or requirements of others in the social environment. By contrast, for others, the expectancy of finishing high school will become a possible self and an element of what James (1890) called the "me part of the universe" (p. 278). The topic here then is expectancies that are linked to the content and functioning of the self-system.

### Possible Selves and Delinquency: An Overview

#### *Possible Selves—A Link Between the Self-Concept and Motivation*

Possible selves are the future-oriented components of the self-concept, the components essential for putting the self into action. They are the selves we could become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Until quite recently, theorizing and research on the functioning of the self-concept focused primarily on those structures of the self that represent one's past and current actions. These self-defining structures have been called self-schemas (Markus, 1977), salient identities (Stryker, 1980), or core conceptions (Gergen, 1968). Social and personality psychologists are becoming increasingly aware, however, of the role that representations of the self in the *future* play in understanding the individual's current behavior (see Cantor & Zirkel, 1990).

Possible selves are conceptualized as specific representations (imaginal, semantic, enactive) of one's self in future states and circumstances that serve to simultaneously organize and energize one's actions. Possible selves work by personalizing and individualizing an expectation, that is, by making an expectation one's own. When a possible self is created, the cognitive and affective

representations of the task confronting the person (e.g., "passing the eighth grade"), and the representation of the self, become integrated into one representation of the person accomplishing the task (Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990; Ruvolo & Markus, in press). It is this sense of one's *self* in a desired end state—e.g., me with a good job—that will facilitate the pursuit of that end-state. The sense of one's self in a feared or undesired state—me in prison—is also motivationally significant. It can provide an image or a conception of an end state that must be rejected or avoided. In short, possible selves are motivational resources that provide individuals with some control over their own behavior (cf. Gollwitzer, 1989; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985).

### *The Self in Theories of Delinquency*

Many theories of delinquency have been proposed, and while summarizing them is beyond the scope of this paper, generally they fit into one of three camps: those emphasizing the importance of the general societal structure (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1957, 1964; Shaw & McKay, 1969), those concerned with the individual's immediate social network (Matza, 1964, 1969; Sagarin, 1975; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978), and those focused on intrapersonal or individual needs and deficits (Hirschi, 1969; Reckless, 1961, 1967; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985).

The most recent empirical studies of youthful criminal offenders suggest a variety of factors that can be implicated in the initiation of delinquency. In prospective longitudinal studies of delinquency, Farrington and his colleagues (1988) found that the troublesomeness, dishonesty, and daring of youth at ages 8–10 are the best predictors of delinquency. A large family size, poor quality parental child rearing, and a high degree of parental conflict and family poverty are also predictors of later delinquency. In a review of longitudinal studies on delinquency, Lutz and Baughman (1988) found that delinquents are likely to be less successful in school, to hold less favorable attitudes about school, and to be less educated than nondelinquents. Also, they are more likely to be from lower-class backgrounds and from inner-city areas. Lutz and Baughman reported, however, that most delinquents arrested for a violent offense at an early age are not rearrested, that most delinquents do not continue to commit offenses as adults, and that a relatively small group of individuals are responsible for a relatively large proportion of juvenile crime.

Given the pattern of these and other findings, it is the growing consensus among delinquency researchers that no one theoretical approach can satisfactorily account for the initiation, maintenance, and cessation of delinquent activity (Johnson, 1979; Shoemaker, 1984). Theorists are gradually converging on the self-concept as a theoretical construct that can be useful as an organizing element in the explanation of delinquency (see Shoemaker, 1984). Early delinquency

research that stressed the importance of the self-concept in "insulating" youths from the criminogenic influences of their environment (Reckless, 1961, 1967) was severely criticized (Sagarin, 1975). At that time, however, there were virtually no theoretical accounts of how the self-concept functioned to mediate and regulate ongoing behavior. The self-concept was viewed as a monolithic entity or as a generalized or average view of the self, and how such a global and static structure could influence or respond to the dynamics of delinquent behavior was never specified.

In contrast, most current views of the self-concept characterize it as a complex dynamic entity that is implicated in all aspects of behavior (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Gecas, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982). The self-concept is thought to describe the universe of one's self-representations (past, present, and future), which may be formed in a wide array of fields or domains. The "working self-concept" is the subset of the individual's array of self-representations that is currently accessible. The structures active in the working self-concept are the basis on which the individual initiates actions, and also the basis for his or her observation, judgment, and evaluation of these actions at a given moment. A significant aspect of the working self-concept is the individual's configuration of possible selves.

Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, employers, members of the extended family, and a variety of others in the neighborhood, classroom, or place of work all contribute to an adolescent's social environment and, together with the media, form the primary source of possible selves. Individuals may differ considerably in the number of others in their perceived social environment and in the diversity of those others. A social environment that contains only same-gender, same-age friends, for example, is more constrained, less diverse, and often less rich in the potential for construction and maintenance of compelling possible selves than an environment including relationships to parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. Youths without ties to parents or teachers and school may lose the opportunity to develop the positive possible selves that involve being loved, worthy, important, deserving of respect, capable, achieving, and accepted by the world of adults.

### *Possible Selves—How Do They Work?*

Adolescence is a stage of possibility. It is the time when one creates the self "I could become" (Erikson, 1968). A consuming life task of the adolescent is to discover or construct possible selves that are at once believable, personally satisfying, and coordinate with the responsibilities that confront adults in one's community (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987). We suggest that adolescents who are able to construct and maintain a compelling set of possible selves will be better equipped to negotiate a relatively smooth transition to adulthood.

Possible selves are hypothesized to serve several important functions. Most importantly, they serve as incentives for future behavior; they are selves to be approached or avoided. *Hoped-for* possible selves provide the individual with futures to dream or fantasize about. Individuals may not view these selves as truly attainable and will not feel a great loss if they are not achieved. When positive possible selves are viewed as attainable and when specific scripts, plans, and behavioral control strategies are attached to them, they become *expected* selves. For example, when an adolescent claims that he expects to do well in school, this possible self may include images of himself being praised by his teachers, coming home with a good report card to proud parents, or bragging to his friends about his accomplishments. While many expected possible selves are desirable ones that youths are working to maintain, others can be negative. Often these negative expected selves are those that are currently self-descriptive and that seem inevitable. *Feared* selves are those the individual wants to avoid, such as "failing in school" and the associated images of "squirming in my seat not knowing the answers to the test," or "the feelings I have when I sit, the hour passing slowly, with nothing to write on the exam page," or "me still in the eighth grade when all my friends go on to ninth." As in the case for expected selves, feared selves can also include those selves the individual wishes to avoid, yet views as inevitable.

In any particular instance of behavior, a variety of possible selves may be implicated. Oyserman and Markus (1990) propose 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 possible self that provides the outlines of what one might do to avoid the feared state (e.g., I could be tried in court as an adult, if I don't get a job and stay off the street). Likewise, positive expected selves will be stronger motivational resources, and maximally effective, when they are linked with feared representations of what could happen if the desired state is not realized.

Although people cannot always control what becomes active in the self-concept, we assume that they often are able deliberately to recruit and deploy possible selves in order to motivate themselves. A vivid representation of oneself in a relevant positive and desired state (me "getting through school") can be used to counter the representation of the self in an undesired state (me "doing poorly in school" or me "dropping out"), and to prevent the inaction that occurs when a dreaded possible self dominates the working self-concept. Without a positive possible self that provides an outline of a desired state that can be realized if the feared self is avoided, one's action will be disorganized and subject to control by a variety of external or situational factors that will remove attention from the feared possible self. Thus, an image of oneself "on the street without a job" or "being tried as an adult" is unlikely to have any systematic



effect on behavior unless a representation of oneself having a legitimate job, or becoming involved in conventionally sanctioned activities, can be recruited to challenge these feared selves.

### **Delinquency Initiation, Maintenance, and Cessation**

The following sections focus separately on the initiation, maintenance, and cessation of delinquency, presenting a series of hypotheses that assign a pivotal role to self-relevant expectations.

#### *Delinquency Initiation—Delinquency as ‘Drift’*

People of all ages are generally optimistic about their future (e.g., Weinstein, 1980). When not pressed for specifics, most youths can readily generate a diversity of extremely positive futures. Oyserman and Markus (1990), in fact, found a striking homogeneity in the hoped-for possible selves of their respondents, regardless of their level of delinquent involvement. Almost all of their respondents disclosed hopes of being well liked and popular and of achieving in conventional, socially sanctioned ways. However, in order to organize and energize actions, hoped-for selves must be translated into specific expected selves. What distinguishes some adolescents is the interest, knowledge, experience, and social support necessary to perform this translation. By providing a personally realizable, satisfying, and believable vision of the self in the future, expected selves give meaning and organization to present activities (see Czikszenmihalyi & Larson, 1984). With respect to the initiation of delinquency, we hypothesize that

1. Adolescents with few positive expected selves that they regard as likely to be realized will show a relatively greater tendency to “drift” into delinquency than those with more positive expected selves.

Matza (1964, 1969) has described some adolescents as “drifting” in their social environment. This implies that they allow themselves to be acted upon by the events, demands, and constraints of the moment rather than acting to carry through their own plans or goals. According to Matza, such “drifting” adolescents are highly susceptible to delinquent involvement, not because they plan to be delinquent or seek out criminal involvement, but simply because as opportunities for delinquent activities arise, these adolescents can find no compelling reasons to resist them.

With other factors held constant, adolescents who have a larger quantity of likely possible selves will be less likely simply to “drift” into delinquency. They will be less likely to ignore the self-defining potential in any particular action or action sequence. Possible selves provide a set of internal standards (Hirschi, 1969) by which to evaluate potential actions. They also guide pursuit of the chosen action

by creating a bridge of self-representations between the "now self" and the "possible self." Without these possible selves, external influences, such as exhortations from peers to engage in various seemingly attractive activities, are necessarily amplified. Oyserman and Markus (1990) found that the least delinquent youths in their sample claimed the greatest number of positive possible selves as likely (e.g., "work toward goals," "happy," "have friends," "attractive," "manage my own decisions," "interesting," "loved," "helpful to others"). In contrast, delinquent youths expected that a variety of extremely negative possible selves—"junkie," "depressed," "alone," "flunking out of school"—would characterize them in the future.

Although youths can and do construct all types of possible selves, the domains of adolescents' current involvement and expertise are the most likely sources of their possible selves. When possible selves are anchored in some well-articulated generalizations about the self, i.e., self-schemas (Markus, 1977), the path to their attainment is more clearly demarcated. Effective performance thus depends on a link between possible selves and self-schemas that contain the relevant plans, strategies, and procedural knowledge for realizing them (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987). A youth who expects to "pass the eighth grade" but has never developed a schema of the self as a "student" will lack the knowledge of what to do, and very importantly what *not* to do, to attain the possible self. Skipping class on any particular day, or not doing homework on a given night, will not automatically be construed as detrimental to the attainment of this self. The full ramifications of any school-related action are less likely to be considered when the youth is without a schema for this domain. Such a youth may engage in a variety of small actions that appear relatively insignificant, in and of themselves, and then may be surprised at the end of the semester to find himself on the verge of failing. Oyserman (1987) found that among high school youth, those who do have a "student" self-schema are less likely to self-report delinquent involvement and school absences or tardiness than those who do not have a "student" self-schema.

A drift into delinquency is also likely for any adolescent who has not developed a personalized sense or belief that delinquent behavior is likely to have negative consequences. Specifically we hypothesize that

2. Adolescents with positive expected selves, but *without feared selves* in the same domains (e.g., those who lack balance in their possible selves), may also drift into delinquent activities.

Delinquent activities may be initiated when a youth lacks feared possible selves that connect these activities to a decrement in the likelihood of attaining positive expected selves in conventional domains. To the extent that the positive possible selves related to delinquency are not balanced by negative, feared possible selves also related to delinquency, an adolescent may lack the motivation to pursue a given action in the face of competing action alternatives. For example, a

youth may expect to "pass the eighth grade" and realize that steady class attendance is linked with this goal. But when the opportunity arises to skip class, use a stolen ID card to buy some beer, and then drink it atop a nearby parking structure, a competing positive expected self of "being well-liked by my friends" may be activated. At the time, this latter possible self may dominate attention because the activity associated with it, i.e., skipping class, is quite effortlessly enacted and momentarily more appealing than the activity of going to class that is associated with the "passing the eighth grade" possible self. However, if the youth has in his repertoire of self-conceptions a feared possible self of "not passing the eighth grade," the thought of skipping class is likely to activate it, and make it available for use in controlling action. As a consequence, a youth with such a feared self may be better able to "shield his intention" of going to class (Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985). The negative consequences of skipping class may also occur to a youth who does not have these feared self-relevant expectations in his repertoire of expectations, but often only *after* he has committed himself to the pursuit of his "well-liked by my friends" possible self, and to the powerful, often entrapping, social situations associated with it.

The motivation to persevere and attain a positive expected self is thus enhanced when the individual has also constructed a feared possible self in the same domain. Balance among possible selves and the intentional control it affords are especially important in situations where there is likely to be competition among positive expected selves, some of which may be associated with more momentarily compelling situations than others. Balance between expected and feared selves in a given domain provides an individual with more diverse motivational resources. It facilitates the effortless and almost automatic consideration of the full range of consequences (from positive to negative) associated with any given action.

Oyserman and Markus (1990) examined the extent of balance between expected and feared selves in their sample of delinquent and nondelinquent youth, and found that delinquent youth were significantly less likely than nondelinquent youth to have such a balance between their expected and feared selves. Further, public school youths who did not generate any balanced possible selves were more likely to self-report delinquent activities such as theft, arson, or vandalism three months later.

In an autobiographical account, Rhodes (1988) described a very positive view of the self-defining potential of delinquent activity unclouded by fears of its negative consequences:

I was 12 years old and in the 6th grade. I was getting good grades in school. . . . I had a big newspaper route. . . . I loved all the money I earned on my newspaper route. Everything in my life seemed to be going so well . . . [Then his 18- and 19-year-old cousins moved in to live with his family.] They were older and seemed so much wiser. . . . We listened to everything [they] told us. . . . They taught us how to steal without getting caught. . . . They taught us how to talk and act like the baddest dude around. . . . I wanted to be just like [them]. . . . I tried to be just like them. (p. 31)

### *Delinquency Initiation—Delinquency as a Chosen Activity*

Although delinquent involvement may be the result of "drift," delinquent activities can also be chosen. Delinquent behavior is sometimes a response *selected* by youths who are finding the task of identity construction within conventional domains to be a difficult one. These youths may be doing poorly in school, experiencing difficulty in developing or maintaining friendships, and having conflicts with family members (Kaplan, 1975). Social comparison with others in school, in the peer group, or at home may leave these youths with very negative views of their talents and abilities. Youth facing failures in the important life domains may incorporate these failures into negative expected selves, and/or feared selves. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that these adolescents will seek out alternative domains within which to create positive self-definitions. We hypothesize that

3. Adolescents who fail to attain positive possible selves in conventional domains may develop negative expected selves. As a consequence they may turn to delinquent activity as an alternative means of positive self-definition.

Oyserman and Markus (1990) reported that the most common expected selves for nondelinquent youths were those focused on achievement in the domain of school or work (e.g., "getting along in school" or "having a job"). In contrast, these positive expected selves were rarely generated by the more delinquent youths. During the period of adolescence, self-definition is often constrained by the social environments of home, school, and peers. Adolescents who cannot develop positive possible selves within these social domains are therefore faced with a difficult choice: Create or discover new socially sanctioned environments; withdraw from social interactions entirely and define themselves as unhappy, friendless loners; or seek positive possibilities within a deviant social environment based on drugs and/or delinquency (see, for example, Kaplan, 1975; Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982). Constructing positive possible selves within a delinquent social environment can be temporarily useful in developing ideas of oneself as adventurous, independent, daring, or tough (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi, 1969). These selves can counteract the "alone," "anxious," "school failure," or "unloved" selves that may result from ongoing interactions with parents, teachers, and conventional peers.

### *Delinquency Maintenance*

Although a drift into delinquency or a more active choice of delinquency is a relatively common occurrence, delinquency is not a stable phenomenon. Most youths begin and end their involvement in criminal activities in the course of one year (Elliott et al., 1988). What distinguishes those youths who initiate some

form of delinquent activity and then retreat from it from those who maintain their delinquent activity? We hypothesize that

4. Delinquent activity will be maintained if it enables adolescents to pursue positive expected selves. It will also be maintained if their positive expected selves do not balance their increasingly negative feared selves.

Delinquency may be chosen as a means of attaining various positive possible selves (e.g., "tough," "daring," "independent"). If adolescents manage to approach these desired selves via delinquent activity, it is likely that delinquent behavior will be maintained. The conflicts with parents, school officials, and police engendered by delinquent activity will foster or affirm a set of negative expected selves that may already have been shaped as a result of not being able to create possible selves within conventional domains (e.g., me as a "loser," a "disappointment to my mother," or "no good at school"). As they become increasingly elaborated, negative expected selves will begin to dominate the less-elaborated conventional positive expected selves. Eventually the only positive possible selves available to these youth may be those that can be obtained through delinquent activity. For example, Rhodes (1988) described how, after receiving a sentence, he continued criminal activity in pursuit of positive possible selves: "I was determined not to get locked up again. I tried to be much cooler and more careful about what I did. I still wanted to be a bad dude, I just didn't want to get caught" (p. 36).

Delinquent activity also gives rise to sets of extremely negative feared selves (e.g., "being chased by the police," "being locked up," "being the kind of kid whose parents won't bail him out," "being tried as an adult"). The lack of well-elaborated positive expected selves that can offset these feared selves has several distinct consequences. It minimizes the potentially positive influence of feared selves on an individual's actions. A lack of positive expected selves implies that images, plans, or strategies for avoiding feared selves have not been personalized. If they are unable cognitively to counter fears over being "a ward of the court," "involved in further crime," or "unemployed," adolescents are often unable to take the action necessary to prevent these feared states from occurring. Without a balancing set of positive expected possible selves that can energize and organize actions away from delinquent activity, these youths 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. Thus in a recent study comparing recidivist with nonrecidivist youth, virtually all respondents reported fearing reincarceration. However, while nonrecidivist youth had developed expected selves focusing on employment as a means to avoid this feared self, recidivist youth viewed reincarceration as unavoidable (Mulvey & Aber, 1988).

A lack of balance between expected selves and feared selves decreases the

extent to which one is able to exert motivational control. Rhodes (1988) reported just this phenomenon in his description of his own involvement in delinquency:

It wasn't long before I was right back into the same old things. . . . I knew I had to do something to make a change in my life. I was only 17, but it seemed that life was going too fast. I didn't know what to do. I felt trapped. I felt I had no control over my life. I felt I was going to be killed or sent to jail for the rest of my life. It was only a matter of time. Trouble seemed to be everywhere and I didn't see how I could avoid it. (p. 37)

Thus Rhodes described a lack of balance in his possible selves; he wanted to avoid his feared selves of being killed or sent to jail, yet he had no positive expected selves to provide an outline of what actions could be taken to avoid these feared selves.

### *Delinquency Cessation*

The preceding discussion suggests that the longer youth continue to engage in delinquent activity, the more difficult it is for them to turn away from it. More and more of their self-representations—past, present, and future—will be rooted in delinquency. In trying to understand why some adolescents are eventually able to manage the transition from delinquency to more conventionally sanctioned activities, we hypothesize that

5. The frequency of delinquent activity will decline to the extent that (a) adolescents come to believe that positive expected selves can be attained in conventional domains, and/or (b) feared selves are developed that balance positive expected selves in conventional domains, thus making it clear that delinquent activities will impede the attainment of conventional possible selves.

In describing how he successfully turned away from delinquent activity, Rhodes (1988) described the development of positive expected selves focusing on the Job Corps as a means of avoiding his feared selves related to crime and delinquency:

I was determined to make it in the [Job Corps]. Night after night I imagined myself graduating from Job Corps. I imagined my name being called and walking across the stage to get my certificate. I imagined that my whole family was in the audience. They were clapping and cheering really loud for me. They were proud of me. The images of their smiling proud faces made me feel good and excited. . . .

I imagined other things too. I imagined how it would feel to get a good job. I imagined how it would feel to hear people saying good things about me. Those thoughts seemed real and made me feel good. I longed for the time when they would come true. . . .

I began doing what I know I needed to do to make these dreams come true. I became a good student. I went to class every day so I could earn an award for perfect attendance. I worked and studied hard, too, so I could earn awards for good class performance. (p. 37)

These positive possible selves were the means of behavior control Rhodes had apparently been seeking. Once he had elaborated these selves, he found he

was able to work to attain them even when situational forces pushed toward continued delinquent involvement. In illustrating the importance of his dreams, Rhodes described a critical event that occurred while at the Job Corps training program. Another youth accused him of stealing a watch and dared him to fight. A crowd gathered urging the two to fight. Rhodes recalls the desire to fight being checked by the knowledge that fighting would interfere with attainment of his expected self. He states:

I didn't fight that day. I learned something very important: I could control what happened to me. I was going to graduate from Job Corps. I had good images of graduating from Job Corps. I was not going to let anyone destroy my chance to make those images become real. (p. 38)

The question that Rhodes (1988) leaves unanswered with respect to delinquency cessation is how he developed the possible self of graduating from the Job Corps. According to the perspective developed here, there are several possibilities. There may have been some significant others in his immediate environment that suggested this possibility, and then helped him to envision it as a satisfying and believable future. Another, perhaps complementary, possibility is that Rhodes was able to recast or reinterpret his self-schema of being a competent, effective person. In the years prior to his determination to finish the Job Corps, Rhodes appears to have viewed himself as competent and effective at being a "bad dude."

Eventually the negative consequences of attempting to be the "baddest dude around" threatened to swamp completely the considerable prestige and esteem that must once have been associated with being a bad dude, and to call into question his competence and effectiveness ("I was going to be killed or sent to jail for the rest of my life"). Rhodes then appears to have begun a search for a way to affirm himself as competent and effective in a conventionally sanctioned, adult domain. He chose the Job Corps as a stepping-stone toward the desired self of being a competent, effective employee. For youths who lack some similar sense of themselves as capable, competent, or effective, the cessation of delinquency and the path back to a viable, conventionally sanctioned life may be exceedingly difficult.

Based on Rhodes' (1988) early descriptions of himself as being good at school and doing extremely well on his paper route, we can assume that he indeed had some rudimentary self-schemas of being competent and effective that reflected some actual abilities, and which contained some procedural knowledge of how to express these qualities or attributes. Apparently he was able to use these conceptions of himself in the service of becoming an effective bad dude, and when the time came, in the service of being a reasonably effective Job Corps participant.

Those adolescents without a clear sense of who they are, and what is potentially important, valuable, distinctive, or special about themselves, will

have problems trying to elaborate a set of satisfying and believable possible selves. We hypothesize that

6. Delinquent activity will decline to the extent that expected and feared selves are endorsed by important others in the adolescent's social environment. These others must support the youth's sense that positive possible selves can be approached and that feared selves can be avoided via conventionally sanctioned means.

For delinquents in social environments where the significant others conceive of them only in terms of their delinquency, the creation and maintenance of conventional possible selves is problematic. Once labeled as delinquents, adolescents run the risk of being responded to solely in terms of this negative identity. Wiley and Alexander (1987) argue, in fact, that certain social roles such as "delinquent" can pervade all of a youth's social interactions, and he or she may be treated as if this role were completely self-defining.

### Conclusions

We have sketched a view of the initiation, maintenance, and cessation of delinquency that is rooted primarily in adolescents' expectations of themselves, i.e., their *possible selves*. This perspective distinguishes personalized or self-relevant expectations from more general expectations. Individuals can and do have many types of expectations, but these expectations do not all have the same consequences for behavior. Thus, a general expectation that "the world is a just place" or that "academic credentials will be useful in career placement" are less likely to provide specific individualized directives for behavior, organizing and energizing it, than are expected possible selves such as "becoming a policeman if I finish school" or "ending up in jail if I don't stop stealing." Underscoring the importance of personalized expectations, a recent prospective longitudinal study of teen pregnancy (Abrahamse, Morrison, & Waite, 1988) showed that, controlling for other risk factors, teens who expected to continue their education after high school were subsequently less likely to have children as single mothers. Moreover, teens who stated that being a single mother was possible for them were, in fact, more likely to have children out of wedlock.

With respect to the *initiation* of delinquency, adolescents are assumed to be vulnerable to involvement in delinquent activity to the extent that they have relatively few positive expected selves in conventional domains, and/or they have positive expected selves that are not balanced by feared selves in the same domain. When feared selves are paired with expected selves, individuals have a more varied set of motivational resources that can be recruited and deployed to regulate their actions, thus minimizing the possibility of a drift into delinquent activity.



For some adolescents, it is a lack of possible selves that facilitates the drift into delinquency. For others, it is the active pursuit of particular possible selves that fosters delinquent involvement. A major life task of the adolescent is to view the self as competent, effective, and individuated (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Erikson, 1968). If conventional domains are perceived as unlikely to allow such development, then delinquency may be perceived as providing an alternative route to the attainment of these selves, at least initially.

Delinquent activity is *maintained* to the extent that it enables the continued pursuit of some positive selves, and/or if the feared selves that necessarily accompany ongoing delinquent activity cannot be realistically countered by positive expected selves in conventional domains. The *cessation* of delinquency requires the creation both of positive expected selves and of a balancing set of feared selves that might be actualized if delinquent activity is continued or reinitiated. Evidence supporting the role of balance in turning away from undesirable activity was reported by Gjertsen (1989), who found that balance between expected and feared selves was a significant predictor of long-term smoking cessation.

Official status as a delinquent is likely to bring with it forced changes in the social environment, as conventional others discontinue contact or change the nature of their interactions with the youth. In many respects, it is no mystery that those adolescents who have been in repeated trouble with school authorities and with the police have a variety of negative self-conceptions. Yet if negative self-conceptions merely *follow* from delinquent behavior, one must still explain why some adolescents engage in delinquent behavior in the first place, and similarly why some, but not others, persist in delinquent activity. In sum, the current analysis suggests that in determining the antecedents and consequences of delinquent behavior, it is important to assess not just global feelings of worth, efficacy, or competence, but also the configuration of self-relevant expectations that adolescents have about their potential and their future.

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