

Achieving College Student Possible Selves: Navigating the Space Between Commitment and Achievement of Long-Term Identity Goals

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This study explores the possible-self construction and achievement process in students of color from low-income communities by investigating these processes in 28 college students. Findings suggest that while parental encouragement of college aspirations may affect age at which the college student possible self is constructed and expectancy level, development of schematic possible selves is more crucial to achievement of possible-self goals. Furthermore, findings point out a need to include conceptual schemas, in addition to procedural schemas, as potential predictors of possible-self achievement.

Keywords: possible selves, students of color, motivation, college students

Students' aspirations for success have consistently been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of their academic achievement and persistence (Dweck, 1991; Gamoren, 1987; Wentzel, 1991). Students' desires to be successful in school have been consistently correlated with academic success. Goal theorists claim this positive relation between academic aspirations and academic success is linked to the behaviors in which students engage when they have strong aspirations (Ames, 1992; Berndt & Miller, 1990; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Locke &

Latham, 2002; McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Aspirations are conceptualized as achievement goals, and as students develop these goals, they construct purpose for engaging in activities related to goal achievement. Because of this purpose, as students move from commitment to achievement, they regulate their behaviors such that they are likely to achieve their goals (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; McGregor & Elliot, 2002; Wentzel, 1991).

Research on the relation between aspirations and achievement of low-income stu-

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dents and students of color, however, shows that such students often have a larger discrepancy between childhood aspirations and actual attainment of educational achievement than their higher-income and White peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Cook, Church, Ajanaku, Kim, & Cohen, 1996; Yowell, 2000, 2002). While students of color and White students have similar aspirations, their achievement is drastically different (e.g., Cook et al., 1996).

Investigation into this achievement gap typically has focused on why the gap exists (e.g., Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987, 1991, 1994, 1991, 1994). In this research the gap between students of color and White students, and especially between low-income Black students and White students, has been attributed to the impact of racially based discriminatory practices on Black achievement. According to this literature, Blacks, and especially lower-income Blacks, have responded to their history of being discriminated against by seeing educational success as unattainable, and so expending low amounts of effort on educational endeavors (Ogbu, 1991). Or they associate academic success with acting White, and so feel that to do well in school or be committed to educational aspirations is to "sell out" their culture (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Milner, 2002). This research suggests that community-level change, with a specific focus on changing Black responses to treatment by Whites, may be a viable path toward enhancing academic achievement by creating a culture that values school (see Ogbu, 1987). But other research shows African American academic performance remains depressed even when these students are intrinsically motivated to succeed (e.g., Cokley, 2003; Cokley, Komaraju, King, Cunningham, & Muhammad, 2003).

Given the latter finding, it seems important to identify additional variables that may help explain the aspirations-achievement gap for low-income students of color. This study begins such identification by investigating whether and how possible selves (i.e.,

long-term identity goals) and their associated cognitive schemas may help explain the disparities between academic aspirations and achievement for low-income students of color. Unlike goal theory, possible selves are explicitly related to a long-term developmental goal involving goal setting, volition (via adherence to associated schemas), and goal achievement, but are larger than any one or combination of these constructs. As such, the possible-self lens seems particularly relevant for making sense of how some low-income students of color are able to successfully overcome the well-documented aspirations-achievement gap.

Possible Selves

Markus and Nurius (1986) defined possible selves as what we would like to become, what we could become, and what we are afraid of becoming. Our possible selves are clearly linked to identity goals then, as they are related to who we may become. Possible selves are also representations of long-term goals, because they are "the cognitive manifestation of *enduring* goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats" (p. 954) that compel us to act in ways that will either keep us from becoming a particularly feared self or on the road toward becoming a particularly desired self.

Possible-self development is a two-part process: (a) construction of possible selves, and (b) successful achievement or avoidance of constructed possible selves (Dunkel, 2000; Wurf & Markus, 1991). In the first piece of the process, Markus and Nurius, and others (Cross & Markus, 1991; Dunkel, 2000; Yowell, 2000, 2002) claimed students construct possible selves based on past experiences and ideas about the future. The construction of hoped-for, expected, and feared possible selves in this stage is important, because it points out how aspirations and expectancies are separated within the construct of possible selves. Students' aspirations are represented in hoped-for possible selves, while their expected possible selves

represent what they think they are likely to become. Recognition of this split is important when considering low-income students of color, as it may help explain the aspiration-achievement discrepancy. The relation between what students want to become and what students actually become may be mediated by what students feel they are able to become (i.e., expected possible selves).

The literature on adolescence suggests adolescents regulate their behaviors to fit in with peers, rather than regulating their behaviors to consistently work toward a particular internally defined goal (e.g., Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986; Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002; Pombeni, Kichler, & Palmonari, 1990; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Given that low-income students and students of color are more likely than their peers to be in peer groups in which college attendance is not an understood developmental step and academic achievement is not necessarily valued (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Johnson, 1994; Lopez, Ehly, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2002; Milner, 2002), these students may have a difficult time achieving their hoped-for selves. Without models, they lack resources on how to become a college student. And they may either feel compelled to fit in with their peers who do not have college aspirations, or feel that given their peers and community they do not have a chance of attaining their hoped-for selves, and so they settle for their expected selves (Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1991). Thus, the second phase of possible-self development, actual realization of aspirations, may be affected by environmental factors that separate hoped-for and expected possible selves.

Schemas and possible selves. Retention and achievement of college student possible selves may be linked to whether the students possess schematic possible selves. In their study of schemas and possible-self achievement, Cross and Markus (1994) found students with schematic possible selves were more likely to perform competently and achieve their ideal possible self than aschematic students because of the difference in

procedural knowledge about movement toward the goal. Schematic students possessed schemas for their possible selves—information about how to effectively move toward achievement of their possible self. Aschematic students, on the other hand, lacked information on how to effectively move toward achievement of their possible self.

That low-income students of color have difficulty achieving their aspirations may be explained by these possible-self schemas. Since these students typically do not have models, and/or they lack environmental support for the realization of their hoped-for possible selves, in this case becoming college students (Brantlinger, 1993; Johnson, 1994; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001), it is likely that they also lack schemas. Without rich, networked information about how to achieve their hoped-for possible selves, it may be challenging for them to create schematic possible selves, hence the aspiration-achievement discrepancy. In other words, the mere possession of a college student possible self may not help low-income students of color achieve their goals, just as Cokley (2003) found that intrinsic motivation did not relate to academic performance for African American students. In order for these students to move from goal setting to achievement, possession of schematic possible selves may be necessary.

The present study was an exploration into how low-income students of color developed and achieved their college student possible selves. The chosen sample allowed for examination of how students overcome the aspirations-achievement gap in a particularly marginalized subgroup of students. Because existing codes for this phenomenon do not exist, constant comparative analysis seemed an appropriate method for code building (Boyatzis, 1998). Then, since the goal of the study was to look at common patterns in college student possible-self development and achievement, grounded theory allowed for the building of themes and ultimately theory rooted in common patterns across participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Method

Participants

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, purposeful sampling techniques were employed (Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants were recruited from support programs for institutionally identified high-risk students (students identified as more likely to withdraw from or fail out of college than their peers, based on academic background, and/or personal characteristics [e.g., students of low socioeconomic status]) at a large, public, Midwestern university during the fall 2002 semester. These programs were designed to help students transition to university life and study.

Almost half of the 28-person sample was female ($n = 16$). The racial and ethnic breakdown was: Black/African American = 16, Asian = 1, Hispanic or Latino/a = 8. An additional 3 students identified as more than one race. Twenty-seven of the participants were first-year students. All participants will be referred to by the pseudonym they chose.

Procedures

Data were collected via interview. Each student participated in a 1-hour, semistructured interview. All interviews were piloted on two students in order to assess the comprehensibility of the questions. These two students were invited to be pilot student-participants because they were high-risk, first-year students with whom I was acquainted and who, therefore, would not be participants in this study. The pilot interviews were both tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, but were not analyzed in detail, as the purpose was not to generate a priori codes for subsequent interviews but rather to aid in the development of questions that were most likely to be accessible to participants and provocative enough to elicit rich responses. Although their reac-

tions may have been affected by our existing acquaintanceship, I believe these process-analysis conversations helped me be more sensitive to students' stories and their associated emotions. These conversations also made me more thoughtfully aware of the ways in which my power and privilege as a low-risk, high-privilege Asian researcher may affect the ways in which my participants chose to interact with me.

The hour-long interview was semistructured to ensure all students were asked the same main questions, but flexibility was allowed so students' individual experiences could be explored in sufficient depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 1991). The interview focused on students' precollegiate and early collegiate experiences and conceptions of self. The goal was to understand how each student developed and worked toward achieving this possible self (e.g., I'd like you to take a moment to think about your life before college. How did you come to be a college student?). The interview centered on experiences and decisions they identified as important.

This method of asking students to describe in detail experiences important in forming their possible selves builds on the possible-self interviews typically used in investigations of possible selves. Because existing surveys and interview protocol typically aim to understand students' future aspirations and expectancy levels (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Yowell, 2000, 2002), they were not the most appropriate measures given the retrospective nature of my study. Because I was interested in how these college students succeeded, it seemed more appropriate to focus specifically on students' construction and achievement of their college student possible selves. Following the interview, demographic information was collected via questionnaire. Students completed this questionnaire in a private room after their interview.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Patterns, themes, and ultimately codes were constructed through constant comparative analyses of the interview

transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Paying attention to patterns and themes in the types of formative experiences associated with the birth of students' college student possible selves, and then how students worked to overcome obstacles to their possible selves seemed particularly important. Constant comparative analyses yielded a large set of codes that were then used to code the interviews. To check the trustworthiness of my interpretations, two colleagues coded three interviews each. Their coding substantially agreed with my own. Following any disagreement, the coding scheme was revised, and later trustworthiness checks yielded no major differences in code interpretation.

The coded data suggested these students' college student possible selves typically emerged as a way of avoiding feared possible selves, and that although achievement depended on some degree of expectation of achieving the college student possible self, the expectancy-achievement relation was ultimately mediated by schematism.

Findings

The findings from this study helped clarify how such students not only construct but also achieve their possible-self goals. These findings also serve to further elucidate what is meant by possessing schematic possible selves.

From Feared to Hoped-for Possible Selves

Becoming a college student was not something these participants initially hoped for or knew about. Neither their parents, nor many people in their community ever attended or planned to attend college. As Dion said, "When I was little, no I just did not picture things like that [going to college]. Where I'm from people just do not go to college." The birth of a college student possible self came through students' desires to rise above the standard of living typical of

their communities. In fact, both Cosette and Karina described their college student possible selves as rooted in their desire to "increase their social mobility," or "become more upwardly mobile."

College student possible selves thus began as mechanisms for a more global hoped-for possible self—to be more upwardly mobile, to have a career that would allow for a lifestyle different from that found in their community. This desire for upward mobility meant different things for different students. For some students it meant doing better than their parents, for other students it meant escaping from their parents. Whether the college student possible self came from parental encouragement or from a desire to find a way to escape their parents' lifestyle affected students' expectancy levels for their hoped-for college student possible self.

Parental encouragement and the college student possible self. Some students ($n = 16$) had at least one parent who encouraged them to go to college. These parents emphasized the importance of education in a variety of ways. Cosette's mother took advantage of her area's schools-of-choice program and made sure Cosette attended the best public schools in the area. April's mother pushed her to take only college preparatory level courses in high school. Chaz's mother enrolled him in programs at the local community college, and whenever he was feeling disinterested in school, his step father encouraged him; "My step dad was always going around saying, 'Do not quit nothin' you start, and always finish school'." Regardless of the actions their parents took, students in this subgroup grew up in homes where education was talked about, valued, and considered the key to future success—both in terms of career opportunities and as a safeguard from adolescent experiences more common in their communities. As April said,

That [education] was something that was always instilled in me. . . and as I got older my mom was like do not take a break, do not ever

take a break, go straight through college, because when she took a break from high school she ended up with little me, so she was like do not take breaks, and that is like something that is always in the back of my head, it was like expected; there was no other option.

Cosette's description of how she came to construct a college student possible self, illustrates another common approach parents used when encouraging their children.

When I was little my mom always asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I always was like, I want to be a doctor, I want be this or that, you know I changed my mind every week, but ultimately all the careers I picked, I had to have a college education, and that was the point of my mom asking.

Cosette's mother took encouragement beyond repeatedly telling Cosette college was important. Cosette's mother helped her see that college was important for her to get what she wanted—to achieve her career aspirations.

Regardless of their method, parents in this subgroup actively encouraged these students' collegiate aspirations. This encouragement helped their children create college student possible selves at a young age and see value in holding onto their college student possible selves. More important, through their practices these parents enabled their children to do three things to affect their own possible self-development: (a) identify feared possible selves (e.g., being a teenage mother), (b) construct hoped-for possible selves (e.g., being a doctor), and (c) see how their hoped-for college student possible selves were linked to successful avoidance of their feared possible selves (e.g., Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). This balance between hoped-for and feared possible selves is key. Having a hoped-for possible self-gave students a goal (becoming a college student) and a specific way of avoiding undesirable futures. These students had a balance that could enable them to more effectively interact with both types of possible selves.

In addition to helping students construct balanced possible selves, the parents of students in this subgroup also helped their children see their college student possible selves as expected, as opposed to hoped-for. When April said, "it was like expected; there was no other option," and when Ana said, "She [mom] taught me I could be a college student," they implied that they expected to actually become college students. This level of expectancy was also evident in Cosette's description of her mother's influence on her.

My mom was always like no matter what comes up, what happens, I'll make a way for you, you'll succeed, or money will not stop you from getting ahead in your education. . . We had to sacrifice a lot of things, but you know ultimately it did not matter, because as long as I had my education I had my future.

Through their parents' encouragement of and commitment to their educational aspirations, students in this subgroup were not only able to construct balanced possible selves, but also to see their college student possible selves as expected rather than merely hoped for.

Low parental encouragement and the college student possible self. Those students whose parents did not explicitly encourage college aspirations ($n = 12$) tended to develop their college student possible selves later than students with explicitly supportive parents. Furthermore, the construction of college student possible selves was preceded by identification of feared possible selves and a desire to avoid becoming them. For instance, Dion recognized negative experiences in which others were enmeshed and he wanted to avoid before he created a college student possible self.

Seeing people on the streets, stuff like that, family members out there, and that was just something I do not want to do. I mean of lot of them do drugs or smoke weed. I sit back and I watch. I watch them, and watch their results. And their results, I learn from that. I do not want to be like that.

Taz and Jordan described more traumatic experiences leading to feared possible selves. After his brother was killed by a rival gang member, Taz became more aware of his own mortality and his desire to escape gang life, "It made me realize the streets were not for me." And Jordan said, "I was molested as a child from the ages of 6–12. . . and I was like, 'Okay I really want to get away from this. I do not want to be around anybody like this'." A feared possible self of victim emerged for these participants, as did a desire to escape toward something else, but they lacked an explicit goal. They lacked a hoped-for possible self that was not merely a negation of their feared possible self.

Acknowledgment of a feared possible self pushed students in this subgroup to consider ways of avoiding these possible selves. Through their searches for viable ways of avoiding their feared possible selves, these students discovered college. Growing up in a community where college attendance was uncommon, however, meant that when these students first heard about college, they did not know what it meant to be a college student. As Jordan said,

One time someone said to me, "Oh you are a good listener; you really help people out, you should go to college and be a psychologist." And I was like, "Okay," even though I did not know what those words even meant!

And Tye added to this when he said, "Well I'm from the projects, so people do not really go to college. Maybe they go to like community college, but it is not like common, so I did not really know what it meant to go to college."

The shift from thinking of college as a possibility they knew little about to actively considering college student possible selves seemed to take place as these students experienced both increased encouragement from nonfamily members, and an increase in the likelihood of becoming their feared possible selves. As Chris said,

For me it took a lot of teachers telling me about college and encouraging me, and see-

ing what was happening to my friends before I actually thought about trying to go to college. So it was probably like when I was 14 or 15 that I decided to go for college.

Chris's college student possible self was motivated by two different factors: encouragement from teachers, and acknowledging feared possible selves.

As participants in this subgroup began to construct college student possible selves, however, they tended to construct their college student possible selves as hoped-for, but not particularly expected possible selves. Jordan described her concerns this way.

When I thought about college, I thought about hard work. My whole thing was am I going to be able to face it? Am I going to be able to deal with it? Because I did not have the same experiences and preparation that other kids at [name of university] would have coming in. . . . And I was wondering, "Am I going to be able to take on that challenge?"

These students knew they were different from other students with whom they would be attending college, and so concerns like Jordan's were not uncommon. And as the time to apply to college approached, these concerns manifested themselves in students' doubts as to whether they should apply at all. For example, Anthony said, "I was really worried and I thought that I should not even bother to try to apply; I should not waste my money on the application fees." These students expressed a desire to come to college, but their expectancy level for achieving this possible self was collectively lower than that held by students with parental support for their college aspirations. This lower expectancy level kept the possible-selves balance skewed toward feared possible selves. This imbalance led students to question the viability of their hoped-for possible selves.

Schema Construction and Overcoming Obstacles

As these students struggled with doubts as to the viability of their possible selves, students with parental encouragement also con-

fronted obstacles to their possible selves. To cope with these obstacles, all students were thrust into schema construction. Regardless of expectancy level, they needed to know more about their possible selves in order to move toward achievement of their college student possible selves and to assess the benefits of the work entailed. They needed to better understand how to become a college student and what it meant to be a college student. They needed procedural and conceptual schemas for becoming college students.

Procedural schemas. On the most basic level, students worked to construct procedural schemas, schemas about how to get into college, about the processes and experiences involved, such as taking the appropriate standardized tests and filling out admissions and financial aid applications. The participants in this study recognized that without procedural schemas for becoming a college student they could not make specific plans, and thus the achievement of this particular hoped-for possible self was jeopardized. Tye knew he wanted to become a college student, but at first he “did not even know how to get applications sent to me!” Chaz spoke about how he knew grades were important but he almost missed the last deadline to take the ACTs, because he “did not even know there were tests to take.” And April said:

We [my mom and I] looked at my GPA, and we figured out where I could probably get in and where I probably would not get in. And we talked about what I would need to do the rest of my time in high school to get in a good school, but there came a point when my mom just did not have the answers, and I’m like, “How do I get in this school?” And [she said], “I do not know. You’ll have to find out.”

These realizations forced students to learn more about admission procedures and expectations. For example, April described how realizing that her mother could not advise her in the application process, prompted her to seek out procedural schemas.

Just not being able to run to my mom for everything when I was struggling or confused, because there was nothing she could do. . . .I had to just find my own way. . . .And I was really really close with my counselor, and that was something that I set up, like it is available; the help is available, but you have to go get it, so I would always go in his office and be like help me with this, help me with that. . . .what else do I have to do, how can I get financial aid; and he helped me fill out the FAFSA forms and whatever. . . .and I told him, “I cannot afford to pay for all these college aps, can you help me get ‘em waived?” You know, I kinda used my resources.

Seeking help from her counselor, April built and worked within her procedural schema in three ways. First she learned about the processes and procedures by asking questions like, “What else do I have to do?” and “How can I get financial aid?” She also received help as she worked through all the forms involved in the application process. Finally she found ways to work around obstacles to her achievement of her college student possible self in getting application fees waived. This example points out the importance of procedural schemas in possible-self achievement. Without such schemas, students did not know how to work toward their goals and through obstacles associated with the procedures.

The support April described was a key part of the majority of the students’ stories. Supportive teachers and counselors helped these students learn about college and how to become a college student, as well as helped students when they encountered obstacles to their achievement. For example Joe’s high school coach helped him attract national recognition from colleges, which then helped him through the application process. An on-site admissions counselor helped Sarah organize the steps in her application process and set goals for herself. One of Maija’s English teachers helped her gather information and navigate the admissions process. And Jordan spoke about the importance of teachers helping her gain ac-

cess to opportunities to increase her competitiveness as an applicant.

I knew the requirements [for college]. And I was like I cannot get that from my high school. . . . But people referred me to enrichment programs. They saw how well I was doing and my counselor and my teachers knew my interests, and they knew I wanted to go to college no matter what it took, so with my good grades and their input, it helped me get into programs. . . . I was in the Chrysler program, and I took various classes there, that enabled me to learn more and better my math skills that I could not learn from my school, that I knew I would need to come here. And I also went to Lake Superior State to stay and to do some work there and learn about engineering things that I knew would benefit me.

By demonstrating their commitment to their possible selves, these students gained the attention of others who were able to help them work through the processes involved and obstacles they encountered so they could position themselves as competitive applicants.

Conceptual schemas. The construction of procedural schemas, while important, did not guarantee either that the student would be admitted to college or that the student was fully comfortable with her or his college student possible self. Although going to college seemed like a good idea, as students moved closer to applying to and then attending college, they often began to question their choices. They wondered about how their choices were affecting and would affect their relationships they valued. Jordan wondered about how her choice to go to college would affect her family, since she was the nurturer and began working and paying the bills at age 13. Karina worried about her choice to go to college straining her relationship with her older sister because, "My sister always thought I got stuff she did not, and this would be one more thing, one more way for her to say I was becoming too good to hang out with her." Makayla spoke about how her dad was "kinda cautious about it [my college student

possible self]." And Hollis described how being recruited and considering college affected his friendships.

This [getting recruited] was a real positive thing. But at first I started feeling like I was being cut out. . . . So one day I told 'em, "Hey I feel like I'm being cut out of certain things. What the hell, I'm still me." See that is why I did not want to be this big superstar, because I did not want my friends thinking, "Hey we cannot hang out with him no more." So I wanted to go to college, but I did not.

This conflict between working toward one's own goals and staying in relationship with important others was common and important to the possible-self achievement process, because this conflict temporarily slowed the process. Until students were able to figure out ways to maintain relationships while moving along their possible-self trajectory, they tended to inhibit their achievement process.

As these students worked through their temporary confusion as to whether to proceed, they typically did two things: (a) They stepped back from the situation to think about what they wanted and why they wanted it, and (b) they considered how to meet their own goals as well as maintain relationships and meet reasonable expectations of others. For example, as Jordan considered how to continue to help her family and work toward her college goal she said she spent a lot of time thinking and balancing.

Thinking about how I could get a degree and help other people, including my family, but other people like my family too. I cannot sit or stand by and just do nothing. Thinking about how I could get a degree and really help my family, I decided I had to go to college. If I was to stay at home and knowing what it is like. . . . I have a lot of family problems, people do not get along the way we should; I knew that would distract me from doing my schoolwork all the time. . . . So I chose to come to college and try to help my family from here. I talk to my brother all the time about what he needs to do so he can come here too. I bring him up here and show

him around the library. I'm trying to help him make it here too.

Maintaining her self-described role of mother to her younger brother, getting a college degree, and being able to help her family and families like hers were all goals of Jordan's. She wanted all of them, and it took serious amounts of reflection for her to see that while she would have to decrease her financial contribution to her family, ultimately choosing to go to college would best help her be able to support her family in the future and work with families like hers. Through her reflections on how to balance her goals for herself with her desire to remain in relationship with others and meet their needs, Jordan constructed a conceptual schema for her college student possible self. She articulated for herself what it meant to be in college, how it would affect her relationships, and how she could work to maintain her relationships.

Achieving college student possible selves required more than procedural schemas for these students, because even for students with parental support, becoming a college student was novel. Because of its novelty, students had no role models to look to and learn from about how it felt to be a college student, or what it meant to be a college student in their community, or how to cope with doubt and/or disdain from family or community members. Through the construction of a conceptual schema for being a college student, these students were able to construct a coherent sense of who they wanted to be and why they wanted to be that, as well as ways to cope and interact with others who did not understand or support their possible-self goals. Ultimately it was the emergence of this conceptual schema for being a college student that allowed these students to continue to work through their procedural schemas and become college students. As Makayla said,

At first I was just angry at my dad that he was not supporting me the way I wanted him to, but his caution made me think more about what it would be like for me to go away to

college, how it would feel for him, and I started to think more about how I was going to deal with all that and if I wanted to. I thought I did, but I needed to know more about *why*. Once I knew why I could talk to my dad better, and he was like, "Okay. That sounds good to me, but you are not putting too much on yourself too soon are you?" And by that time I was able to be like, "No dad, this is a good thing for me to do and I can tell you why."

So while procedural schemas helped students clarify the procedures involved in becoming college students, conceptual schemas allowed students to proceed confidently through their procedural schema work, because they had a stronger understanding of what it meant for them to become college students. The conceptual schema gave students a clearly articulated purpose for becoming college students.

Summary of Findings

By bringing together the possible-self literature and the literature on the motivation and academic achievement of low-income students of color, the findings of this study push for consideration of a new perspective on the aspirations-achievement gap among students of color from low-income communities. Analysis of student stories suggests that successful pursuance of academic aspirations requires not just the possession of a hoped-for college student possible self, or even an expected college student possible coupled with parental encouragement. Rather, the findings point toward the importance of procedural and conceptual schemas for becoming college students. Said otherwise, students needed access to resources about how the application and admission process worked (procedural schemas), but in order to persevere in implementing their procedural schemas, they needed to understand the relational implications of their commitment to their aspirations (conceptual schemas).

The latter is especially important to note, because it suggests these students' retention and achievement of aspirations came not through seeing themselves as raceless, or as choosing to act White and thus not maintain connection to their community (e.g., Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Instead achievement of their aspirations seemed to come through renegotiation of familial, peer, and community relationships such that students were able to maintain and balance these important relationships with their personal aspirations. In short, goal achievement seemed strongly related to student development of procedurally and conceptually schematic possible selves.

struct and achieve college student possible selves.

Finally, as a point of caution, the underlying narrative suggests a movement from a place of challenge to one of triumph over obstacles. Although these students' achievement of admission to college is commendable and indicative of their persistence and goal commitment in the face of obstacles, admission to college does not imply movement away from obstacles. Further investigation of these students' stories during their collegiate experience suggests the college environment provided new challenges and forms of marginalization with which these students had to cope and which threatened their maintenance of their college student possible self (Pizzolato, 2004).

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

There are a number of important limitations to note. First the sample size was relatively small, only 28 students. Although this is a relatively large sample size for grounded theory, it makes generalizability nearly impossible. Additionally, the sample was drawn from a single, public, 4-year, Midwestern university, and the majority of the students came from monoracial home communities. Similar studies with a larger, more heterogeneous sample of students would help investigate whether similar possible-self construction and achievement processes occur in other student groups.

The method of the study is also potentially problematic. Asking students to recall events during a single interview may not be the most reliable way of collecting data, but because I wanted to learn about possible-self construction and achievement from students who actually achieved their college student possible self, this method was selected. Real-time study of high-risk students working through the possible-self construction and achievement process would provide helpful insight into how students of color from low-income communities con-

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings are important to deepening collective understanding regarding possible-self achievement generally, and college student possible-self achievement for these students of color from low-income communities specifically. The findings gesture toward a need to focus further on how students develop conceptual schemas in addition to procedural schemas, how conceptual schema development may affect students' abilities to work through processes outlined in their procedural schemas for the hoped-for possible selves, and work studying differences within the population. Future work should also investigate potential gender differences in achievement patterns that seemed to emerge but were not focused on here. Such work should help clarify theoretical understanding of possible-self achievement and specify ways to design programs and interventions to support and facilitate possible-self achievement in students from traditionally marginalized groups.

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