

ACADEMIC GOAL ORIENTATION AND POSSIBLE SELVES OF AFRICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: *There is a large gap in literature about the many Africans increasingly arriving in the United States (US) either by sheer ignorance or because of their racial homogenization with African Americans. Indeed, this conflation ignores the vast socio-cultural and historical differences in literature. This paper examines possible selves and goal orientations of African Undergraduate students in the United States. A study that adopted multiple regression was undertaken. The author sought to understand this relationship by collecting data in the Spring Semester of 2007 from undergraduate students registered in any of the semesters in the Spring semester, 2007 and the year 2006, and whose both parents were born in Africa. A significant relationship was found between students' balanced possible selves and their mastery goal orientations. This suggested that students with more balanced possible selves had higher academic goal orientation. Additional analyses also indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between length of stay in the United States and possible selves which would be indicative of the students' continued enculturation into an individualist society which in effect increases the number of balanced possible selves. Recommendations for further study include studies with students mainly from the different countries and cultures in the African countries.*

KEYWORDS: Goal Orientation, Possible Selves, Undergraduate Students, Enculturation, Immigrants

INTRODUCTION

Possible Selves were defined by Markus and Kitayama (1991) as components of the self-concept of what one can be and would like to be and, what one is afraid of becoming. Breland and Donovan (2005), on the other hand define Goal orientation as the goals that are implicitly pursued by individuals while attempting to attain or achieve a certain level of performance. Goal orientation can also be defined as a stable intrinsic factor that influences one's approach to goal achievement (Button, Mathieu & Zajac, 1996). There has been an increasing growth of the African immigrant population in the United States, the conflation of African-American and African immigrant populations but with very limited educational research on the African immigrants. This was the impetus for this study. To address this gap in educational research, this paper provides a measure for possible selves and academic goal orientation of undergraduate African immigrant students.

The study examines goal orientation and possible selves for several reasons. First, Ogbu's (1991) work demonstrates that perceptions of academic institutions affect people's academic behavior and achievement outcomes. One would also expect that it affects their goals and future views of themselves. Second, adolescents' conceptions of self shapes self-shapes their academic performance (Honora, 2002), and a working conception of self should include a

person's view of oneself as he or she is now, and a view of oneself as he or she could be in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

LITERATURE UNDERPINNING

Although present and future conceptions of self have been studied using different terminologies and with numerous instruments (c.f., Husman & Lens, 1999; Lasane & Jones, 2000; Lens & Mores, 1994; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), the most widely used terminology and instrument is possible selves (Cross & Markus, 1991). Possible selves, according to Markus and Nurius (1986), are what we might become, hope to become and fear becoming. The Possible selves construct will be used for several reasons: (1) it is relevant to young people, who spend a lot of time contemplating what the future might hold for them (Lobenstine, Pereira, Whitley, Robles, Soto, Sergeant, Jimenez, Jimenez, Ortiz, Cirino (2004) (2) it does not limit the individual to rating the self only in the traditional masculine, feminine or other preconceived domains (3) it has been found to be useful for assessing self-concept during adolescence, the developmental stage when self-concept is at its most differentiated stage (4) it allows adolescents to name as many different possible selves as are relevant (Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988) (5) research has demonstrated that it is a strong predictor of school persistence and academic success (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1990) and, (6) it has also been used cross-culturally with success (Oyserman, Harrison & Bybee, 2001).

Possible selves identify students' hopes, aspiration and fears as manifested in the present and in the future. Another way to think about possible selves is as different kinds of goals (realistic, hoped for, and goals to avoid/fear). This conceptualization of possible selves formed the basis for the inclusion of goal orientation. It is not enough to specify the goals that one has, it is equally important to identify how one approaches those goals. Indeed, like possible selves, past research has demonstrated that goal orientation is also a strong predictor of school persistence and academic success (Dweck, 1992). Goals, in general, refer to "potentially accessible, conscious cognitive representations (Pintrich, 2000a, p. 454). Goal orientation, on the other hand, refers to the goals that are implicitly pursued by individuals while attempting to attain or achieve a certain level of performance (Breland & Donovan, 2005). Goal orientation theory distinguishes between mastery (task) goal orientation and performance goal orientation. When students are mastery (task) goal oriented, they engage in academic work in order to improve their competency or for intrinsic motivation (Ames, 1988; Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Students who set mastery goals seek to increase mastery of something new, whereas students who set performance goals do so in an attempt to obtain favorable or to avoid appearance of lacking ability (Dweck, 1990).

Future self-conceptions, goal orientation and motivation

Motivation is seen as one of the most important components of learning in any educational environment (Maehr, 1984). Academic motivation gives academic behavior its energy and direction. It is pivotal and essential for successful learning (Wentzel, 1996). Student motivation in schools has become a major field in educational research due to the impact of motivation on educational outcomes. Certain variables may impact a student's academic motivation. Looking into the future and seeing what one wants to be can act as a positive student motivator.

Other studies have shown a link between academic motivation and looking into the future as opposed to the present. Lasane and Jones (2000) alternately showed that Present Time

Orientation students have a significantly higher level of academic procrastination. They also showed that Future Time Orientation students are unlikely to let the social alternatives distract them from engaging in behaviors that would take them off course in their academic goal-setting. Husman and Lens (1999) posited that students with a long FTP can more easily anticipate the implications of their present class activities for the more distant future instrumentality and thus develop longer behavioral means-end structures. This, they argued, can increase the instrumental motivation for their present learning and achievement tasks in school. According to Bandura (1982), motivation is determined by personal commitment to a specific goal and by one's mental attitude toward possible barriers for this goal. Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that possible selves provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. They function as incentives for future behavior and provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self. Being oriented towards the future has been shown to produce higher levels of achievement motivation (Raynor and Entin, 1982). Latham and Seijts (1999) have specifically found that proximal goals were more effective than distal goals.

Possible selves, FTP and future time orientation have been highly linked with motivation, especially academic motivation (Husman & Lens, 1999; DeVolder & Lens, 1982; Specter & Ferrari, 2000; Lasane & Jones, 2000). Most of these researchers agree that the students' awareness of the self as an agent is a key factor in motivating behavior. Markus and Wurf (1987) theorized that the self regulates behavior, sets goals and expectations, motivates performance to meet these goals, monitors performance on different tasks and evaluates whether performance fulfilled the goals. Waugh (2001) on the other hand, summarized the models of motivation into ten groups as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Motivational Models as summarized by Waugh (2001)

Motivation Category	Associated Research
Arousal and Anxiety Model	Covington & Omelick, 1987; Naveh-Benjamin, 1991; Tobias, 1985
Needs model	Maslow, 1970; Darley, Glucksberg & Kinchla, 1988.
Achievement and Social Goal Model	McClelland, 1985; Wentzel, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Maehr, 1984; Urdan & Maehr, 1995
Behavioral Motivation Model involves rewards: reinforcement and intrinsic motivation	Boggiano & Barrett, 1992; Butler, 1988; Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Heckhausen, 1991
Attribution Theory	Maehr, 1989; Weiner, 1985
Self fulfilling Prophecy	Good & Brophy, 1990; Rosenthal, 1973
Expectancy Value Model	Atkinson, 1964; Eccles et al, 1983
Self-Regulated Learning Model	Corno, 1992; Schunk, 1991; Zimmerman, 1990 Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989
Perceived Self-Efficacy	Bandura, 1982; Schunk, 1989
Personal Investment Model	Maehr, 1984; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986

METHODOLOGY

Though there has been a steady flow of African immigrants into the United States especially since the Hart-Cellar immigration act (also known as the family unification and refugee law), there has been a marked lack of literature on these immigrants. This has been brought about mainly by the conflation of Africans with African Americans. This conflation continues even when there have been demonstrated historical and socio-cultural differences in literature (Ogbu, 1981, 1982; Triandis, 1995). This study thus purposed to close the gap in literature by exploring possible selves and academic goal orientations of African undergraduate students in the United States. Data was collected in the Spring Semester of 2007. Criteria for participant selection called for: (a) undergraduate students registered in any of the semesters in the Spring semester, 2007 and the year 2006, (b) African students i.e. those whose both parents were born in Africa and, (c) Willingness to participate in the study. Data collection was done by use of questionnaire which were completed during a single 30-minute session at a mutually agreed upon location and time.

The study used descriptive and multiple regression methods. Percentages, frequencies, and inferential statistics were used to answer the research question. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) Version 12.0 (SPSS, 2003). Coding for possible selves measures were done according to specifications by Oyserman (2004). They were measured by counting the possible selves with strategies and balance between expected and feared selves as Oyserman and her colleagues (2001) did. Thus total number of balanced possible selves were the number of pairs of expected and feared possible selves that contain opposite sides of the same issue in the same domain. Those students without balance were coded as 0 possible self. Possible selves with balance have been found to have maximal motivational effectiveness (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Furthermore, among goal theorists the concern for quality of motivation is higher than that of absolute amount of motivation (Urduan, 1997).

Possible Selves from the open-ended questionnaire were used as the dependent variable while the independent variable was goal orientation. The influence of the students' length of stay and sustenance in the United States and their majors were used as background variables and controlled for, thus ensuring that any of their contribution in explaining the dependent would be accounted for. Majors were grouped into six main departments: Medical (to include, pre-medicine, nursing etc), Business (to include accounting, business administration, marketing etc), Computer (to include information systems, software engineering etc), Engineering (to include mechanical, electrical, civil etc.), Social sciences (to include sociology, psychology etc. and Education (to include general education, special education etc). The level of significant was established at 0.05 (alpha). Hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine if there was a relationship between the students' possible selves and goal orientation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored the relationship between possible selves and goal orientations of African undergraduate students in the United States. This contributes to the gap in the literature about the many Africans who are increasingly arriving in the United States. This group has not been adequately recognized because Africans are commonly grouped as African-Americans. Indeed, this conflation has continued even when Ogbu (1991) and other researchers (i.e. Rong & Brown, 2002) have demonstrated socio-cultural and historical differences between the two groups.

This study is important because Oyserman *et al.* (1995) suggested that further research was required to examine the role of possible selves in academic achievement with ethnic and social groups other than European and African Americans. The dependent variable was balanced possible selves while the independent variables were the three types of goal orientation: mastery, performance approach and performance avoidance (Ames, 1988; Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

The control variables were age, length of stay in the United States, school the student was attending, financial sponsorship and academic class level (e.g., freshman, sophomore). It was anticipated that a relationship would be found among possible selves and goal orientations while controlling for the background factors.

To identify the relationship between possible selves and goal orientation, several hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. Possible selves balance was regressed on the goal orientation sub-constructs of mastery goal orientation, performance approach goal orientation and performance avoidance goal orientation. This produced a significant main effect with mastery goal orientation as the only significant predictor variable of balanced possible selves. This indicates that an increase in mastery goal orientation is related to increased number of balanced possible selves (see Table 2). This is inconsistent with Anderman and colleagues' (1999) findings that possible selves were related to performance approach goal orientation and not mastery goal orientation. They explained their finding by claiming that during the middle school years, students and teachers in the United States focused on performance goals and less on mastery goals than in other years. These findings indicate that this is not the case for African students enrolled in college.

Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Goal Orientation Variables Predicting Possible Selves

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	ΔR^2
Length of Stay in US	.46	.09	.37**	
Four Year University	.40	.14	.21**	
Connectedness	-.14	.14	-.09	
Embedded Achievement	.04	.16	.02	
Awareness of Racism	.02	.08	.02	
Gender	.08	.14	.04	
Mastery Orientation	.47	.17	.21**	
Perform.Approach Orientation	.06	.09	.06	
Perform. Avoid. Orientation	-.06	.07	-.07	
				.043*

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

$$R^2 = .211, F(9,160) = 4.748, p = .000$$

The conflation of African immigrants with African Americans continues even when there are documented differences. These include cultural differences (Triandis, 1995; Williams, 2003; Beattie, 1980; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and the distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities (Ogbu 1981, 1982). The need to study the African immigrants has continued to increase as they have increased especially in the last two decades. As Rong and Brown (2002) indicated, the lack of research denies the American public and policy maker opportunities to explore the many urgent and intriguing issues concerning

African immigrants and thus contributes to the neglect of their special needs. They also suggested that research was needed that focused on the development of beliefs and attitudes affecting African immigrants' self-perceptions, ethnicity and identity and on strategies to manage the pressure to adapt, and argued the need for educators to learn about diversity.

Implication to Research and Practice

The study explores and documents possible selves and academic goal orientations of African undergraduate students in the United States. An exploration of how African students view themselves in the future and their goal orientation may have important policy implications in education. The socio-cultural effects on these constructs may provide a guide to educators, counselors and other social services professional who work with African youth.

CONCLUSION

This paper is valuable for several reasons. It informs educators and policy makers about this group of immigrants whose minority status may affect their achievement in school (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991) and stereotypically may group them into one of the marked identities that elicit vulnerability to academic under-achievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). School admission administrators and officials need to be cognizant of the motivators and future beliefs of the students they admit. It would help in providing the support and counseling required as the students move along the academic and acculturation trajectory in the United States. Policy makers can thus design appropriate responses to the issues and problems they face and provide the best cross-cultural experiences possible for this group.

The study noted that students with an increase in mastery goal orientation had a higher number of balanced possible selves. Teachers and other professionals who work with these students need to understand how these students' future goals are oriented. Achieving or failure to achieve these goals means stability or lack thereof in the acculturation process for them. Social workers who deal with these students at various levels also need information about the psychological stress and shock caused by the cultural transition from that of a collective society to that of an individualistic one. This would inform their problem-solving process as they deal with these students. It is also hoped that interventions can be encouraged that foster balanced possible selves which would thereby lead to more mastery orientation and academic achievement not only among African undergraduate students but also in the general classroom.

In addition to the growing African immigrant population, Oyserman, *et al.* (1995) suggest that further research is required to examine the role of possible selves in academic achievement with ethnic and social groups other than European and African Americans. Since Western individualism is notably lacking among Africans (Riley, 1992), this study provides a markedly different context in examining the relevance of possible selves and academic goal orientation to identity, with the relationship between possible selves and goal orientation recently becoming prominent in scholarly works.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the results of this research provided useful information regarding possible selves, academic goal orientation, racial ethnic and gender identities of African undergraduate students in the U.S., as with many studies, there are limitations and unanswered questions. The study, however, presents a good first step in understanding African immigrant students in the United States. It would be advisable to study other conceptions of the self about this group which over time acquiesces to being referred to as African American while the differences are so vast.

Lastly, there is need to understand the consequences of immigration on the African continent. On the African continent, there is not a consensus of Africans on the consequences of African immigration. One side decries the brain drain that claims to hinder African developmental efforts. On the other hand, some believe that international migration benefits not only the countries that receive these immigrants but also the countries that send them. They argue that the receiving countries in need of labor get a bargain from these immigrants, while the sending countries get jobs for their unemployed population (Gordon, 1998).

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