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Understanding Urban Adolescent Mothers' Visions of the Future in Terms of Possible Selves

Elena Klaw

ABSTRACT. As part of a larger study of factors influencing the educational and occupational achievement of adolescent mothers, this study explored the phenomenology of pregnant and parenting teens' aspirations and expectations using the construct, "possible selves." Focus group discussions, autobiographical projects, and self-report surveys revealed that African American pregnant and parenting youth develop self-representations related to future achievement in the context of interactions with neighborhoods, health care systems, and adult support figures. Results related to teens' "ideal selves," "feared selves," and "who they might become" are presented.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges posed by adolescent childbearing are well documented (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Debolt, Pasley, & Kreutzer, 1990; Hayes, 1987; Hellenga, Aber & Rhodes, 2002; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy [NCPTP], 2004). For example, adolescents who bear children must cope with adjusting to pregnancy and parenthood along with managing the normative developmental challenges associated with becoming adults (Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Panzarine, 1986; Schinke, Barth, Gilchrist, & Maxwell, 1986). For many minority adolescents, stressors associated with early childbearing are compounded by hazardous circumstances related to racism and poverty (AGI, 1999; McLoyd, 1990). In light of these stressors, pregnant and parenting adolescent women are at heightened risk for a host of negative life outcomes, including reduced educational attainment, unemployment, economic hardship, loss of hope, and depression (Blechman, & Culhane, 1993; Child Trends, 1995, 1996, 1997; Prater, 1995; NCPTP, 2004; Upchurch, 1993; Zabin & Hayward, 1993). Not surprisingly, the first several years following childbirth appear to be particularly perilous.

Early research regarding the future goals of poor youth suggested that in response to blocked opportunities, youth generally lowered their expectations for future educational and occupational attainment (MacLeod, 1987). For example, ethnographic research suggested that urban black youth believe that systemic racial discrimination precludes socioeconomic mobility for African Americans regardless of the amount of education achieved (Ogbu, 1991). Thus, according to this body of literature, black youth lower their aspirations for educational and occupational attainment as a direct response to the perception that education will not bring about opportunity (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Mickelson, 1991). Indeed, a resistance to education was believed to become instantiated in an "oppositional culture" to schooling for black youth (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu).

More recent examinations, however, have challenged the assumption that experiences and observations of discrimination automatically lower the aspirations and subsequent motivation of disenfranchised youth (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Studies of African American adolescent

mothers have consistently revealed that most youth do not lower their expectations for attaining their future goals, nor do they disidentify with traditional avenues of achieving occupational success. Indeed, African American pregnant and parenting young women consistently express both high hopes for educational and occupational attainment and high expectations for achieving their goals. (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Hellenga et al., 2002). At the same time, however, their actual chances of obtaining a college diploma and realizing a professional career remain significantly compromised (AGI, 1999; NCPTP, 2004). In a similar vein, Mickelson (1990) termed the contradiction between positive attitudes toward schooling, and low educational attainment in poor black youth as “the attitude achievement paradox.” Mickelson’s (1990) work suggests that African American youths’ experiences related to discrimination in the opportunity structure do not, in fact, dilute their future aspirations but instead limit academic striving and performance.

In terms of understanding the high aspirations and expectations of youth facing so many obstacles to attainment, literature related to possible selves provides a theoretical framework for examining the ways in which youths’ ideas about their adult lives are constructed transactionally within such socializing contexts as the family, school, peers, the media, and mentoring relationships (Furstenberg, 2001; Kao, 2000; Kao & Tienda, 1998). The concept of possible selves suggests that the self-representations that serve to motivate action include ideas about what one might become in the future as well as images of what one hopes to become and of what one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Such an approach recognizes that youth are active agents in their own socialization, depicting the development of self as an ongoing reciprocal process that occurs through youths’ engagement in activities and relationships (Kao, 2000). Thus, exploring teens’ possible selves provides a window into the relationships between adolescents’ thoughts about the future, their motivation, and the internal and external resources that enable them to take concrete behavioral steps toward educational continuation (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Kao, 2000; Knox Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 2000).

In contrast to the persistent emphasis on negative outcomes that predominates literature about ethnic minority pregnant and parenting youth (Hellenga et al., 2002), such an approach allows us to recognize that not all pregnant and parenting adolescents of color experience hopelessness and reduced occupational and educational achievement. Little is known about the self-representations of the many adolescent mothers of color who manage to complete their education and remain

optimistic about the future (Forste & Tiende, 1992; Leadbeater & Way, 1996, 2001; Scott-Jones & Turner, 1990; Stevens, 1997). For example, further attention is needed to better understand both the internal and external processes that enable more than half of adolescents who become pregnant during high school to eventually graduate (Child Trends, 1996; AGI, 1999).

Indeed, distinct protective factors seem to affect the attitude and life chances of youth who "beat the odds" by rising out of poverty. (Colletta, Hadler, & Gregg, 1981; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Scott-Jones, Roland, & White, 1989; Scott-Jones & Turner, 1990; Stevens, 1997). For example, young people who achieve positive life outcomes despite ongoing obstacles often possess a natural mentor, an involved non-parental adult support figure (Anderson, 1991; Lefkowitz, 1986; Werner & Smith, 1982, Williams & Kornblum, 1985). In a preliminary study by Klaw and Rhodes (1995), for example, the involvement of a natural mentor was associated with increased life optimism in pregnant and parenting teens and an increase in teenagers' belief in education as a bridge to occupational opportunity. Concretely, teens with involved mentors were found to be more likely to be participating in activities that related to their future goals. A subsequent longitudinal investigation revealed that consistent natural mentor involvement is indeed associated with increased high school persistence and graduation for urban pregnant and parenting youth (Klaw, Rhodes, & Fitzgerald, 2003). Building on this body of research, the current qualitative study aims to use the construct of possible selves to illuminate African American adolescent mothers' perspectives about their future prospects and to examine the ways in which hopes and fears about future selves motivate teen mothers toward educational persistence.

CURRENT STUDY

Despite the large body of literature documenting negative outcomes associated with adolescent pregnancy, few studies have investigated the development of teen mothers' future plans in the context of the formation of possible selves. Thus, current insight into the attitude achievement paradox, exemplified by the high aspirations and low achievement of many disenfranchised youth, remains limited. Further, existing studies and policy statements regarding the life outcomes of pregnant and parenting teens often entirely omit the phenomenological perspectives of adolescent mothers themselves. (Leadbeater & Way, 1996, 2001). The current study seeks to address these gaps by using

qualitative methods to explore the ways in pregnant and parenting youth actively construct their future goals in the context of the myriad of obstacles they face toward educational and occupational success. Further, building on quantitative investigations regarding the potent effects of non-parental adult support in adolescent mothers educational and occupational outcomes, the current study explores the process in which such relationships influence teen mothers' self-representations.

Drawing on the emic tradition of focus group research, semistructured discussion groups involving 30 adolescents were conducted to provide young women with the opportunity to use their own words to explore factors that influence their aspirations, plans, and concerns regarding the future. Focus group methodology is a group interview technique designed to facilitate self-disclosure by allowing participants to build off one another in discussing their unique perspectives (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003). As part of the current discussion groups, participants constructed collages and stories that illustrated the relationships between their aspirations and the role models and barriers in their lives. Teens also created "lifeline" drawings as schematic representations of their visions of the future, depicting the high points, low points and difficulties they anticipate as they complete their education and strive to achieve a career.

METHOD

Procedure

All students attending an alternative school for pregnant and parenting adolescents, located in a large Midwestern city, were invited to participate in a large-scale university-based research project pertaining to risk and protective factors in the lives of pregnant and parenting adolescents. A research associate met with the students and their parent(s) and explained that all enrolled students would be eligible to participate in an annual standardized interview and that participation in this project was voluntary and confidential. Informed consent of the students and parents was obtained, and interview participants received \$10 vouchers to the school-based baby boutique.

In addition, students and their parents were informed that the university would also be providing some supportive programming to benefit pregnant and parenting youth at the school. Thus, as part of ongoing involvement as a support group facilitator, the first author met with the school principal to discuss conducting focus groups related

to career planning. Through discussions with the school principal and classroom teachers, three classes were selected to participate in career planning focus groups: Career Planning, Life Skills, and Parenting. These particular classes were selected because the school principal determined that career planning focus groups would serve as a natural and beneficial addition to ongoing class curriculum.

A letter was sent home to all parents/guardians of teens enrolled in classes targeted for focus group participation. Parents/guardians and students were made aware that participation in career planning focus groups was voluntary, that focus groups were to be tape-recorded, and that all identifying information would remain confidential. Parents/guardians and youth participants provided informed consent for participation in the focus group study. Before beginning the research project, approval was obtained for all aspects of the study from the University Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Thirty students, ranging in age from 14 to 19, with a mean of age of 16.4, participated in career-planning focus groups. The majority of the teens were receiving public assistance. Ninety percent of the participants were African American, and the remainder were Mexican American. One of the participants, a Mexican American student, was married.

Procedures

Two semi-structured focus group sessions were conducted by the author for each of the three classes during regularly scheduled class time. The moderator used a "rolling interview guide" designed to elicit adolescents' experiences, thoughts and observations in their own words (Morgan, 1997). During these sessions, students completed brief surveys, drew a lifeline depicting the future, and discussed a guided fantasy about their dream job. Students were also asked about the influence of role models on their future outlook. In addition, some students completed collages regarding their expectations or plans for the future. Common concerns raised by students, such as the need for child-care, transportation, and health services, were discussed as they emerged during the group sessions. By asking adolescents to interview one another about their aspirations, the moderator developed rapport and trust among focus group members at the beginning of the

focus group process (Kreuger, 1988). Open-ended questions were used throughout the sessions to enable adolescents to share their unique phenomenological perspectives on envisioning and achieving their future goals (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Measures

Obstacle Survey

Surveys pertaining to perceived obstacles to goal attainment were administered at the completion of the first focus group session. The instrument was based on previous research as well as group discussions with pregnant and parenting teens and consisted of 26 items rated on a scale ranging from 1 to 3 (not at all a concern, somewhat of a concern, a large concern). A copy of the Obstacle Survey is included in Appendix A.

Autobiographical Project: Me Collage

The following instructions were distributed and read aloud at the end of session two of the career planning focus groups: "Using poster paper, scissors and glue, create a collage that shows who you are: include things you've written or drawn, as well as cut out sayings and images from magazines. Be creative and try to show where you're from, what's important in your life, as well as what you see yourself doing in your future."

Qualitative Analyses

All focus group sessions were audio-recorded. The verbatim transcripts of the three two-session focus groups were used as the primary qualitative data. The creative projects completed by focus group members, including lifelines, and collages, were examined to provide complementary perspectives into young women's visions of the future. Ideas that guided initial coding attempts were generated from the initial research questions, previous research related to the development of future goals, and the investigator's experience working with groups of pregnant and parenting students at the school site. The focus of coding was understanding the processes involved in the construction of teen

mothers' possible selves. Building on the tradition of using emic approaches to understand the world view of members underrepresented groups, researchers sought out youths' own descriptions of experiences that were "phenomenologically salient" (Dworkin et al., 2003). Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the primary investigator and a research assistant first read the transcripts several times and independently searched for response patterns within the transcripts. Each researcher then developed a classification system for coding the overarching thematic categories that emerged (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) and developed subcategories that emerged within the overall themes. Hypotheses were continuously developed, verified, elaborated, and redefined as the researchers discussed their coding schemes and tested the data against the codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers sought out conflicting evidence, and rival explanations in formulating theoretical interpretations of the data (Miles & Huberman; Strauss & Corbin). Response categories were refined through an iterative process of discussion and negotiation. Each researcher then sorted transcript material into relevant response categories. A word-processing program facilitated this process by enabling the researchers to mark transcript excerpts with their designated thematic codes, cut them from the transcript text, and paste them into their assigned categories on coding sheets (Miles & Huberman; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

A third researcher then independently sorted transcript material into response categories, and response categories were further refined through discussion and negotiation at this step. Once reliability in coding between the raters reached 90%, the thematic codes that were assigned to each unit of transcript material were considered final. Thematic results were interpreted in the context of the concurrent longitudinal study and existing literature. As part of the analytic process, thematic findings and their interpretations were summarized. Examples of each major theme will be reported in the current paper.

A similar process was used to analyze the content of the lifelines and collages that students created to illustrate their visions of the future. Themes from students' future lifelines were examined to explore the relationships between the aspirations or hopes that the young women report and the obstacles or concerns that they express. Using the grounded theory process described earlier, thematic analysis of students' collages was employed to further identify the conceptual domains of teenagers' aspirations, expectations, and beliefs about the opportunity structure. The relationships between the findings of the stories, lifelines, and collages were explored in the context of literature

on possible selves to enrich our understanding of the network of constructs embodied in the teens' representations of the future.

RESULTS

High Hopes and the Idealized Middle-Class Self

When asked to represent themselves and their plans for the future in the form of a collage, the young women used magazine cutouts to create strikingly similar representations. In analyzing the collages, several themes emerged. (1) The teenagers envisioned themselves as married women, and almost all of the collages featured pictures of brides, wedding rings, and families with babies. (2) The teenagers emphasized the importance of financial success; the majority of collages included pictures of luxury cars and expensive homes. (3) The young women envisioned themselves in professional careers; many collages included images of college graduation and employment. (4) The young women highlighted the support of their family members; many collages showcased images of the young mother's parents and grandparents. In sum, the collages all reflected the achievement of traditional avenues of occupational and educational accomplishment and the attainment of an outwardly happy nuclear family. In presenting positive images of married professional women, all of the adolescent young women chose to represent themselves through an iconography of success widely accepted by dominant middle-class culture. Based on the statistical realities of the participants' lives, the themes of the collages were initially interpreted by the researchers as components of teens' "hoped for selves," aspirations somewhat removed from directly lived experiences. However, in discussing their collages, the teens described these images as depictions of their actual life trajectories.

Constructing the Ideal Self in the Context of Limited Opportunity

While the future selves depicted in the collages seemed to bear little relationship to young women's current life circumstances, their discussions revealed that imagined adult selves were indeed constructed in transaction with neighborhood and social support networks. For example, teens' ideas about "who I might become," often reflected

an ideal self who exhibited heroism in the midst of high levels of neighborhood violence.

[I want to be] a doctor . . . so I can save people. Like . . . when they real sick, when they in trouble, and get shot or somethin' like that, I can help 'em out. . . . Be able to save a life or something.

At the same time, teens recognized that "who I might become" was affected by the contingencies of the labor force and, indeed, negotiated their aspirations so that their work force choices reflected perceived opportunities for job stability. Modeling themselves after the nurses, obstetricians, and other health care practitioners in their lives, many students aspired toward careers in health services. Such career choices seemed to enable youth to envision themselves as engaged in heroic endeavors while at the same time affording them the sense that such a career was achievable.

The only reason I wanna be a nurse is because I always have a job 'cause . . . they always need your help. You make good money and . . . you don't have stay in school . . . for that for a long time, just three years.

Incorporating Mentors as the Basis of Who I Might Become

In the context of coping with demands of parenthood and emerging adulthood, adolescent young women looked toward significant adults in their lives for encouragement and guidance. Many teens felt inspired by an older female kin member who managed to achieve a professional career despite bearing a child as an adolescent. Consistent with current research on the role of mentors in young women's lives (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002), natural mentors seemed to serve not just as role models but as images of an ideal self that youth could realistically internalize as "who I might become." Potent images of the accomplishments of inspirational adult support figures seemed to directly motivate educational persistence.

I listen to my godmother. . . . 'cause she finished school and she the one with four children. She finished school and she had a baby before that. . . . She said it's hard but you can still do it.

In keeping with the literature on mentoring (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Klaw et al., 2003; Darling, Hamilton, Toyokawa, & Matsuda, 2002), some mentors appeared to affect career-related identity by providing career-related information and offering guidance on attaining job related skills.

[My boyfriend's mother] she's the head of her department at the hospital. . . . We was just sittin' down talkin' about it one day . . . and . . . she had told me how much she make . . . and she showed me her book . . . she showed . . . how to draw blood . . .

Further, as demonstrated by a growing body of research, the emotional support and encouragement provided by natural mentors appeared to serve a key role in engendering a sense of self efficacy and optimism about achieving future goals (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Indeed, in describing what might be possible in the future, the young mothers in this study expressed their internalization of mentors' unwavering positive regard.

My teacher helps me believe in myself and helps me think I can do it. . . . He says don't be stupid. . . . He . . . talks to us about pregnancy and . . . stuff. And he'd tell you don't be a fool for no boy.

My brother just tells me that I can do it. . . . Just 'cause I got a baby, [I] ain't stoppin' none. I could still be what I wanna be. I got help from my parents and other people in my family.

Incorporating the Feared Self:

You need a job. . . . I'm lookin' for one but it's hard to find a job. . . . It's hard. You got a lot of bills to pay.

Despite their high aspirations, participants in the present study were extremely aware that barriers to needed services could impede their future goals. Thus, the results of surveys regarding obstacles to educational completion reflected who they feared becoming.

Lack of Services and the Feared Self

Approximately 94% of the students were concerned about insufficient child care impeding their ability to continue their education; 60% considered it a large concern. Indeed, existing research suggests that many teenage mothers cite lack of child care as a major contributor to early school leaving, unemployment, and dependence on public assistance (Musick, 1993). Approximately 71% of the students were concerned with transportation, with 17% citing it as a large concern. As expected, many participants discussed transportation needs as a significant obstacle to regular school attendance and to receiving needed services such as health and child care. These findings suggest that despite their high aspirations, adolescent mothers recognize that the cost, hassle, and fatigue they experience related to inadequate structural supports extracts a large toll from their school performance and reduces the likelihood of continuation.

Poor Health and the Feared Self

Approximately 80% of the students reported that they were concerned with health care as an obstacle to achieving their future goals, with 43% of the sample citing health care as a large concern. In particular, approximately 85% of the teens in this sample reported that contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) concerned them. For 68% of the students, STDs were a large concern. These findings are not surprising in light of the high rates of sexual activity and low rates of sexual knowledge among adolescents. Clearly, teens are at special risk for STDs and HIV infection due to their immaturity, high rates of experimentation with drugs and sexual activity, and sense of invulnerability. For 88% of the adolescents in this study, contracting AIDS was a concern, with 78% citing it as a large concern. It is important to note that although teens possess relevant knowledge about HIV transmission, their rate of condom use is fairly low (Bowler, Sheon, D'Angelo, & Vermund, 1992; Briggs, 2000). Teens of color, who are at higher risk for HIV infection than are white teens, often possess more misinformation than do their non-minority counterparts and are less likely to use condoms (Bowler et al.). Indeed, only half of African American teens and 50% of Hispanic teens report using condoms during their first experience of intercourse (Terry & Manlove, 2000). The high rate of heterosexual HIV transmission within African American urban communities places African American

teenage mothers, and their offspring, at heightened risk (Briggs, 2000). These findings suggest that despite their optimism about the future, inner-city African American adolescent mothers are indeed aware of the serious risks involved in their sexual activity. In fact, AIDS and STDs play an integral role in teens' feared selves.

Under-Preparedness for College and the Feared Self

Although most of the teens in the focus group stated they saw themselves attending college in the future, students in this study were concerned with many school-related obstacles to achieving this possible self. Approximately 88% of the students were concerned that they needed higher grades. Approximately 81% of the students were concerned that they needed more money to pay for continued education. Approximately 90% of the students felt that they need more job training, and 81% felt that they needed more preparation to continue their education. In discussing concerns related to educational under preparedness, teens acknowledged that although they planned to eventually attend college, at the same time they also feared dropping out of high school.

Negotiating the Ideal Self with the Feared Self: Managing Contradictions

In juxtaposition to the entirely hopeful ideal self-images represented in the autobiographical me collages, and the pessimistic reflections of the "feared self" represented in responses to the obstacle survey, the discussion group results focused on balancing the competing demands of educational and occupational development with the daily exigencies of teenage parenthood. Although no teens reported that they expected to be unable to achieve the goals they had set out for themselves, in the context of the discussion, they revealed concerns about being unable to surmount the stressors in their lives. Thus, in the supportive milieu of the focus groups, teens discussed their career goals both in terms of who they hoped to be and who they feared becoming. Moreover, teens' responses reflect their lack of information about the steps required to achieve their educational and occupational goals. Through seemingly contradictory statements, teens revealed both their "ideal selves" and their "feared selves" in discussing both the high points and low points they anticipated in their future.

Well, my goal is to finish high school ... But my low ... Is you know droppin' out ... but I plan on getting a diploma ... the next thing I plan to do is finish college but in the future I might be on public aid instead of finishing college ... and I plan to have a college diploma. I'm planning on my diploma and major in psychology ... but I am talking about what three years from now, I could be raisin my child with low income.

... to finish college for nursing, I plan to begin it's like six years of college for what I wanna do and I'm scared of droppin' out ... well I still gotta graduate high school.

My high points is to become a nurse, to graduate high school in June ... to be a good parent to my child ... to do whatever it takes to be good in life. I wanna go to college for four years. I wanna make sure everything turns out correctly. The [obstacles] is having a baby by myself, people doubtin' me, bein' on my own, bein' able to care for my baby and just bein' pregnant ...

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A Phenomenological Approach to Possible Selves

In sum, within the theoretical context of possible selves, the phenomenological approach employed in the current study provides unique insight into several distinct dimensions of minority pregnant and parenting adolescents' future outlook. Examining aspirations and expectations as possible selves is an approach especially well suited to understanding adolescent development, as it is during this stage that the ability to imagine hypothetical images of the self emerges and different identities are rehearsed (Erikson, 1959; Harter, 1990; Knox et al, 2000). In fact, research suggests that individual self-concept achieves its most differentiated state during adolescence (Knox et al.; Harter, 1985; Marsh, Byrne & Shavelson, 1992). In the current study, the use of a phenomenological approach allowed adolescents to express a multiplicity of disparate self-perceptions, thus shedding light on apparent contradictions in young women's views. Further, the multiple forms of data presented provide converging insight into ways in which youth construct their future ambitions and plans transactionally within the framework of urban poverty.

Aspirations as Hoped for Selves

The current results provide insight into the high aspirations and expectations expressed by many urban pregnant and parenting and youth (Hellenga et al., 2002). For example, although students in the present study were acutely aware of existing barriers, they did not appear to compromise their aspirations or hopes for future attainment. Counter to research suggesting that inner-city youth become alienated from traditional routes to economic mobility (Mickelson, 1990; MacLeod, 1987; Ogbu, 1991), the adolescent mothers in this study expressed an optimistic view of the opportunities available to them. In the context of the collages, for example, the hoped for self presented as “who I will become” incorporated all of the indicators of success accepted in dominant middle-class culture. Indeed, all students depicted professional careers, family stability, and obvious material wealth. In their discussions of these images, teens described envisioning the actualization of their goals. Aspirations, as reflected in the collages, seemed to represent an “ideal self” that is informed, in large part by media images of success far removed from the context of urban mothers’ lives. Although these hopes may indeed contribute to life optimism, it was not clear that such images directly motivated concrete plans for educational attainment. Further discussion revealed that specific professional goals or “hoped for selves” were, in fact, negotiated in the contexts of neighborhood, school, family and adult role models. Thus, students’ specific occupational choices often reflected their observations of inspirational and supportive mentors and the desire to help others facing similar adversities.

Obstacles as Feared Selves

In contrast to the optimistic perspectives presented through collages, survey results revealed teens’ intense concern that their educational achievements would be curtailed by obstacles associated with poverty. These findings supported Mickelson’s (1990) assertion that despite their value of education, African American youth are acutely aware of barriers imposed by the current opportunity structure. Indeed, current literature suggests that inner-city youth do not doubt the value of education, in the abstract, as a route to a professional career but lack the information, capital, and support structures needed to take the concrete steps involved in the attainment of their goals (Rosigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Although all students in the

discussion groups expressed the desire to continue their schooling, few had knowledge of the type of preparation required for higher education. Devoid of necessary information and lacking access to the resources needed to achieve their goals, immediate plans often differed from the aspirations they expressed. While most teens expressed the desire to pursue college education, for example, few teens articulated plans to attend college immediately following high school. Many did not understand the distinctions between different educational options such as the GED (general equivalency diploma), junior college, 4-year college, and graduate schooling. Overwhelmed by the hazards they confronted in daily living, students explained that they needed more money, job training, and child care to enable them to continue their schooling and obtain employment. Discussions revealed that the young women felt consumed by such immediate problems as health needs, gangs, unemployment, and having their children removed by social services. Despite their high aspirations and apparent optimistic outlook, the teens in this study feared that barriers associated with poverty would derail their educational plans.

Negotiating Who I Might Become within the Context of Poverty

In juxtaposition to the images of the “ideal self” presented in the collages and of the “feared self” presented through surveys, the discussion group results centered on the ways in which the young mothers negotiated tensions between hopes for the future and the immediate strains of adolescent parenting. Different self-representations of “who I might become” appeared intensely motivated by observations and interactions within the neighborhood and with significant adult support figures. As opposed to lowering youth’s expectations for the future, such relationships with mentors appeared to bolster optimism through the provision of emotional support, encouragement, and concrete career related guidance. In keeping with previous findings, interactions with supportive adults in the context of sustained relationships seemed to exert the most direct impact on motivating educational persistence (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Klaw et al., 2003).

Limitations

Current results represent an idiographic examination of the process of identity construction in a small sample of pregnant and parenting

urban youth. Since no control group was employed, generalizability of the results beyond the sample of participants cannot be assumed. In a similar vein, a flexible semistructured guide to elicit participant responses was used in place of a forced choice survey format. This method compromised reliability to allow the researcher to gain access to teens' own understandings of the factors involved in developing their future selves, a perspective sorely needed for furthering construct development in the field.

Fortunately, in terms of comparative analysis, current findings and interpretations are consistent with those of broader-scale quantitative investigations. A large body of literature describes the challenges faced by urban pregnant and parenting adolescents, including insufficient access to health care, child care, education, employment, and transportation (AGI, 1999; NCTPT, 2004). Despite the pervasive barriers imposed by poverty, studies suggest African American and Hispanic inner-city youth hold high aspirations for the future and, similar to their white middle-class peers, value education as a route to future success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Hanson, 1994; Hellenga et al., 2002; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Mickelson, 1990). Further, for youth across racial and cultural groups, natural mentors seem to provide valuable guidance and emotional support that becomes internalized in the process of adult identity formation (Beam et al., 2002; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 2002).

Implications

In sum, using the theoretical lens of possible selves, this research provides a window into understanding urban pregnant and parenting adolescents' seemingly contradictory views of the future. Although this study represents the perspectives of only 30 urban pregnant or parenting adolescent women, integrating phenomenological perspectives into existing quantitative findings furthers the development of constructs related to the aspirations and expectations of vulnerable youth. In addition, phenomenological approaches that reveal adolescents as active agents in their own development and document tensions between competing self-views have important implications for policy development and educational reform. As possible selves form the basis for later life choices and accomplishments (Kao, 2000; Knox et al., 2000; Markus & Nurius, 1986), emic understandings of youths' hopes and fears can enable service providers to more effectively intervene

in ways that are relevant to adolescents' experiences (Dwrokin et al., 2003).

In light of current findings, efforts to improve the life chances of urban minority pregnant and parenting adolescents must focus on expanding health and childcare, schooling, job training, and occupational opportunities available in inner-city communities. Social workers play a particularly key role in expanding life options, both by helping individual adolescents to gain access to key resources and by developing policies and interventions that address the multifaceted nature of intergenerational cycles of poverty, school dropout, unemployment, and teen parenthood.

In addition, current research suggests that the potentially protective role of significant adult support figures should be considered. Although it is not clear as to whether assigned mentors can duplicate the effects of natural mentoring relationships, assigned mentor programs that offer sustained consistent contact with adult role models seem to have positive effects on scholastic competence and daily school attendance. (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2003). Efforts to increase intergenerational contact between adult professionals and disenfranchised youth are fundamental steps toward providing youth with access to the information and resources needed to achieve educational and occupational goals. Although social support interventions cannot serve as a panacea against poverty, the development of career mentors may ultimately increase youths' access to higher education and to the labor force. As inner-city youth undertake the transition from school to work, mentors or supportive adult role models may play a crucial role in translating their dreams to reality.

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APPENDIX A: OBSTACLE SURVEY

- 1-Child care
- 2-Transportation
- 3-Health Care
- 4-This pregnancy
- 5-Future pregnancies
- 6-AIDS
- 7-STDs
- 8-Other health needs
- 9-Not many jobs available in my community
- 10-Facing discrimination because of my race
- 11-Facing discrimination because I'm a woman
- 12-Facing discrimination because of where I live
- 13-Difficult High School work
- 14-School is boring
- 15-Need higher grades
- 16-Hard to return to home school
- 17-Being suspended or expelled
- 18-Parents want me to work full time
- 19-Being in jail
- 20-Need money to pay for continuing my education
- 21-Need more job training
- 22-Need more preparation for continuing my education
- 23-My boyfriend doesn't want me to continue my education.
- 24-Being part of a gang
- 25-Facing Shooting
- 26-Other Concerns _____