

# The Communicated Self

## Exploring the Interaction Between Self and Social Context

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*This study explored the influence of social identity and social context on achievement in a counterstereotypical domain. A group of 114 inner-city African American and Mexican American 12-year-old students completed Kuhn and McPartland's (1954) 20-statement "Who Am I" questionnaire and Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale. Analysis of self-descriptions revealed that success in a counterstereotypical domain (e.g., academic achievement) at age 18 was predicted by a more elaborated self-concept, a more elaborated self-schema within the counterstereotypical domain, and more positive self-descriptions. A more individuated self-description was marginally related to success. Results suggest that opportunities to communicate within a variety of contexts may permit the development of a more complex and adaptable self-concept and thereby facilitate achievement in a counterstereotypical domain. Notably, self-esteem did not predict success.*

**T**he essence of communication is the formation and expression of an identity. The formation of the self is not an independent event generated by an autonomous actor. Rather, the self emerges through social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) and social categorization (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Markus, 1977; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Identities are formulated and maintained over time through interactions both mediated and unmediated, direct and indirect, interpersonal and intercultural. Communication, then, is integral to the ongoing negotiation of self, a process during which individuals are defined by others as they, in turn, define and redefine themselves. Consequently, research on the self-

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concept and its role in communication must necessarily consider both the existing identities that comprise the overall self as well as the social contexts where individuals are situated.

The present study examines the relationship between self-identity and academic persistence for a sample of African American and Mexican American adolescents. This relationship has important practical and theoretical implications for communication research. African American and Mexican American students across socioeconomic strata achieve lower levels of academic success compared with their European American and Asian American counterparts (Ogbu, 1991). One consequence of lower levels of achievement for African American and Mexican American students is that they are placed at greater risk of failing to complete high school. Chesebro et al. (1992) found that for junior high school students who were in "at-risk environments" (e.g., schools in relatively poor, urban settings where the rates of academic performance are below state and national standards), there were significant differences between African American, Hispanic American, and European American students' self-reports of communication apprehension and communication competence. Specifically, Hispanic and African American students in at-risk environments indicated that they were significantly more apprehensive about communicating with strangers in small groups or in dyads compared with European American students in at-risk settings.

African American and Hispanic students also rated themselves as less-competent communicators than did their European American counterparts. Chesebro et al. (1992) observe that "effective oral communication is likely to play a critical role in reversing the outcome predicted for at-risk students" (p. 345). Because communication is the enactment of one's self-identity, understanding the relationship between self-concepts and academic achievement should shed light on specific interventions related to communication that might facilitate academic persistence among African American and Mexican American students who are at risk of school failure.

#### AFRICAN AMERICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

Literature on race and ethnicity in America suggests that identity adaptation for non-European American ethnic group members can be seen as part of an effort to manage and negotiate a self-identity that is "marked" or stigmatized on the dimension of ethnicity (e.g., Essed, 1991; Goffman, 1963). It is important to note, however, that ethnic identity is constructed by individuals within specific contexts. Ethnic iden-

tity is a richly layered dimension of the self, created through an interweaving of past history, social values, language, cultural context, political conflict, geographic region, and current life circumstances (Christian, Gadfield, Giles, & Taylor, 1976; Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Phinney, 1990).

Frequently, social contexts are closely tied to cultural identities and cultural stereotypes. Ogbu (1978, 1991) observes that the academic setting is particularly problematic for members of stigmatized minority groups. Across cultures, members of minority groups that were involuntarily incorporated into a society dominated by another ethnic or religious group often fail to strive academically (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978, 1991). Explanations for the relative failure to achieve academically for some minority groups (e.g., African American and Mexican American students) but not others (e.g., Asian American, particularly Japanese American students) point toward the relationship between ethnic identity and cultural context. For example, Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) note that the internalization of cultural stereotypes about race may inhibit the development of identities oriented toward academic achievement for inner-city African American youths.

This process of stereotype internalization reflects a broader set of psychological responses to the social, economic, and political realities of racialized urban areas (Cross, 1995; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Massey & Denton, 1993; Ogbu, 1978, 1991). These authors note that it is not ethnic or racial identity alone, nor economic and social barriers to success in and of themselves that limit efforts to achieve academically. Rather, the interaction of these factors can lead to the development of a subculture within which ethnic identity is defined in terms of rejecting the "dominant" society and its culture (Cross, 1995). In describing this subculture with respect to inner-city African Americans, Cross (1995) notes its extreme reactionary basis: "If Whites are perceived to act one way, Black identity is its reverse. If to study and achieve is White, then to be Black is to resist being successful (that is, to fail)" (p. 191). Cross contends that the elaboration of a more sophisticated and functional identity is inhibited by this "sledgehammer analysis" used to define ethnic identities in racialized terms. More important, the resulting identity is paradoxically both a *de facto* internalization of the negative stereotype and a source of positive self-esteem (Cross, 1995). Conversely, for members of marginalized minority groups who are high achievers academically, feelings of detachment from their ethnic group or "racelessness" are associated with introjective depression (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

For many inner-city African American and Mexican American youths, the combined influences of limited future opportunities in the surrounding community, lack of support from one's peers, and a diminished faith in one's own ability to achieve may impede the devel-

opment of a future identity as an academic success (Cross, 1995; Ogbu, 1991; Oyserman et al., 1995; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). The experiences of ethnic identity for both African Americans and Mexican Americans are uniquely described by the histories of these two groups. Nonetheless, a broader process of economic, social, and political marginalization layered over a history of colonization or slavery leaves members of both groups vulnerable to particularly negative cultural stereotypes (Ogbu, 1991; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985). Therefore, developing a counterstereotypical identity (in this case a self as "scholar" identity) for members of negatively stereotyped groups involves the dual task of both constructing the desired self while simultaneously dismantling the cultural stereotypes (Oyserman et al., 1995).

Stereotype vulnerability means that minority adolescents may face a particularly challenging task with respect to identity negotiation. To succeed, they must actively strive to achieve counterstereotypical identities within a context where many of their peers are not only rejecting such identities but rejecting them on the basis of their membership within the stereotyped group (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Cross, 1995, Steinberg et al., 1992) (see Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996, for a discussion of counterstereotypes). Chesebro et al.'s (1992) finding that African American and Hispanic American students who were at risk reported significantly lower levels of communicative competence than their Anglo American counterparts is consistent with this assertion. It may not be that their communicative competence is lower but, rather, that the nature of the communication tasks they face is more complex.

The present study looks at inner-city African American and Mexican American adolescents for whom identity negotiation occurred within a context that both constrained and facilitated the achievement of a counterstereotypical identity in an academic domain. Specifically, we examined how self-descriptions collected at age 12 differentiated Mexican American and African American adolescents who successfully completed an academic enrichment program 6 years later from their counterparts who did not. The participants in this program were enrolled at one of two different public junior high schools at the time data were initially collected.

Program participants' high school years were spent at a single high school in south central Los Angeles where the graduation rate for the senior class in May 1996 (the year before the successful program participants graduated) was 34% (Education Planning & Information Center [EPIC], California Department of Education, 1997). In 1996, 70% of the students attending the high school qualified for free or reduced-price meals (EPIC, 1997). These indicators of academic performance and income for the school population as a whole suggest that the high school would be characterized as an "at-risk" environment by the stan-

dards set out in Chesebro et al. (1992). The following section draws from theories of the self to identify factors that would interact with the social contexts of the school (and at-risk environment) and the academic enrichment program to explain relative differences in academic persistence.

### ADOLESCENCE, SOCIAL IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The self is communicated through the engagement of one's identity along many dimensions. This multifaceted self facilitates adaptation to different communication settings. A key dimension along which self-identities are arrayed is the individual-collective dimension (Brewer, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1994, Markus & Kunda, 1986). Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theory of social identity proposes that the self is experienced at both the personal and the group level. Personal identities are based on idiosyncratic life experiences that make each individual distinctly different from all others. Social identities refer to identities that categorize the individual as a group member. These two kinds of identity afford individuals a combined sense of belonging and uniqueness, or optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), and may facilitate the maintenance of a positive social identity (Gudykunst & Gumbs, 1989).

Recently, Turner et al. (1994) have extended social identity theory by linking it more directly to the concept of self: "Social identity . . . refers to the shared social categorical self ('us vs. them,' in-group vs. out-group, us women, them men, Whites, Blacks, etc.);" (p. 454). In an attempt to maintain positive social identity, individuals tend to feel attachment to, and demonstrate preferences for, similar in-group members but feel alienated and dissimilar from out-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Memberships that are defined by readily observable dimensions are perhaps the most accessible and therefore more likely to influence social interactions compared with group memberships for which the defining dimension is relatively unobservable (Allport, 1954; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Goffman, 1963). Thus, it is not surprising that some of the most pervasive prejudice involves race and gender.

Whether motivated to maintain optimal distinctiveness or to achieve a positive social identity, the multifaceted self adapts to the cultural norms and situational constraints of any social interaction. This study considered three aspects of the overall self-schema—individuation versus collectivism, self-complexity, and valence or self-relevant feelings—that would influence the ability of African American and Mexican American adolescents who sought to achieve success in a counterstereotypical domain.

## Individuation

How might the personal versus collective aspects of self mediate the efforts of stigmatized groups who strive to succeed in a counterstereotypical domain? Cox and Gallois (1996) note that social enhancement strategies are likely to be influenced by the degree to which an individual depends on certain, distinct social identities relative to others in the overall self-schema. For example, ascribed group memberships (e.g., ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation) are more likely to become core identities relative to other group identities, even though they may not provide higher social status (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Particularly for members of groups that are culturally defined as deviating from norms that reflect the relative power and/or numerosity of one group over others (e.g., women compared with men, gays and lesbians compared with straights, people of color compared with Whites), the issue is not so much whether individuals identify with their particular group as how this particular group membership "fits" with other identities (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Cross, 1995; Ethier & Deaux, 1994).

One strategy that might thwart the negative cultural stereotype associated with inner-city African American and Mexican American adolescents as "academically challenged" is the cultivation of an identity that facilitates the engagement of personal as opposed to social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, personal orientation in the self-concept would permit the engagement of identities along dimensions that do not lead to direct comparisons on the dimension of ethnic or racial group membership. The prevalence of personal identities in the overall self-concept may reflect a deliberate avoidance of the stigmatizing social identity (e.g., racial identity) or it may reflect the relative dependence of an individual on a select few social identities, including, perhaps, the culturally stigmatized social identity (Cox & Gallois, 1996). The first scenario is consistent with the strategy implied by Tajfel and Turner (1986), in which members of stigmatized social groups avoid engagement of stigmatized group identities in situations that threaten positive social identity. The second scenario is more consistent with that described by theories of oppositional identity development in which a stigmatized identity becomes fully integrated into the self-concept, redefined in positive and, potentially, personal terms, thereby resolving seeming conflicts with other identities (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Cross, 1995; Goffman, 1963).

For the Mexican American and African American youths in the present study, success in the academic domain should be related to the elaboration of more personally oriented as opposed to collectively oriented self-identities. Such an individualistic orientation would be indicated by a self-description that emphasizes one's uniqueness (e.g., "I

am smart" or "My name is Michael") as opposed to self-descriptions that emphasize one's group-affiliated identities (e.g., "I am a girl" or "I am Mexican American"). On the basis of these analyses, the following hypothesis is asserted:

H1: Members of a stereotyped group who are more individuating as opposed to collective in their self-orientation will demonstrate greater success in a counterstereotypical domain.

### Complexity

Self-representations can differ not only in terms of content, such as individualist versus collectivist self-descriptors, but in terms of structure as well. One such structural dimension involves the complexity of one's self-representations. Some theorists indicate that the greater the repertoire of distinct selves one can bring to a given social situation or relationship, the more complex and differentiated the self-schema (Goffman, 1959; Markus & Wurf, 1987). This suggests a second strategy that might facilitate stereotyped group members' success in a counterstereotypical domain—namely, the ability to draw from a greater range of self-identities. Individuals who have more complex self-concepts are both able to think of themselves in different ways and are oriented toward a greater number of situations in their self-representations.

A complex self-schema may be beneficial from both a psychological and a physiological standpoint. Linville (1987), for example, demonstrated that individuals whose self-concept was differentiated into a greater number of specific domains tended to survive stressful life events better than those who had a more limited range of identities. Linville concluded that keeping various self-domains relatively isolated from one another may provide a buffering effect. Specifically, she argued that if different identities or domains are fairly independent of each other, then failure in any single domain should remain relatively contained and not spill over into other domains or generalize to an overall feeling of failure. This suggests that a more complex self-identity composed of multiple separate domains might also facilitate success among members of stereotyped groups in counterstereotypical domains. Consequently, we predict the following:

H2: Success in a counterstereotypical domain for members of a stereotyped group should be related to a greater diversity of domains within one's self-representation.

In addition to the range of domains of self, complexity of the self-concept is also indicated by the degree of elaboration within particular

domains. As Markus and her colleagues note, not all self-identities or "self-schemata" are created equal (Markus, 1977; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Some self-identities are more central to our view of self. These central or "core" identities tend to be those that are more chronically accessible, more salient, more important to us, and consequently, more likely to be engaged in our everyday social interactions. For example, individuals who are chronically concerned about their weight (weight schematics) pay far more attention to weight-relevant cues and possess far more weight-related knowledge (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In other words, their self-schemata reveal much more cognitive elaboration in the domain of "weight."

Cognitive elaboration of identities that contradict aspects of other identities may be of particular importance. The social alienation experienced by many members of stigmatized minority groups is due, in part, to the simplicity with which racial and achievement-oriented identities have been defined by these groups (Cross, 1995). Social identities need to be elaborated to be well integrated into the overall self-concept (Cross, 1995; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). If greater cognitive elaboration is indeed an indicator of the importance and centrality of an identity within the overall self-schema, then we predict the following:

H3: Success in a counterstereotypical domain for members of a stereotyped group will be positively related to the degree of cognitive elaboration within that specific domain.

## Valence

Taken as a whole, the above hypotheses describe aspects of the self that are likely to facilitate achievement within a counterstereotypical domain for members of a stereotyped group. They emphasize the more cognitive components of the self-concept. But evaluative aspects of the self-concept may also play a role in academic success. Self-identities may be positively, negatively, or neutrally valued. Nonetheless, the conceptualization of a multifaceted self in which multiple domains of self-identities are differentiated in terms of importance and centrality renders the global measure of self-esteem questionable. Although low self-esteem may be related to deviant behavior and lower academic achievement (e.g., Chen & Dornbusch, 1998), high self-esteem does not consistently correlate with academic success (Major & Schmader, 1998).

The inconsistency of the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is partially explained by a self-handicapping defense mechanism many minority students adopt as a way of protecting themselves from racism (Major & Schmader, 1998; Zuckerman,



Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). In particular, students who associate their ethnic group membership with academic failure are more likely to disengage their self-esteem from their self-identity within an academic domain. After all, a student's self-esteem could be influenced by many factors—appearance, popularity, athletic ability—that may or may not be related to academic success. An identity as “failure” within a particular domain only influences self-esteem to the degree that success within that domain is valued (Hattie, 1992; James, 1890) and perhaps to the extent that the domain dominates other self-identities (Linville, 1987). Consequently, it is unclear whether positive self-esteem or a more positive self-concept will necessarily be associated with academic achievement.

RQ1: To what extent does the valence of one's self-description, specifically the predominance of positively valued self-identities within the overall self-concept, contribute to the likelihood of achieving success in a counterstereotypical domain for members of a stereotyped group?

RQ2: To what extent does global self-esteem contribute to the likelihood of achieving success in a counterstereotypical domain for members of a stereotyped group?

The above hypotheses and questions address the issue of how achievement in a counterstereotypical domain might be obtained through the engagement of a fluid, multifaceted self. In particular, the study examines the differences in self-descriptions of inner-city Mexican American and African American adolescents at age 12. These differences are evaluated in light of the same youths' academic success 6 years later. The focus of the study, then, is on how the “self as scholar” in the counterstereotypical domain might be negotiated with respect to other social identities.

## METHOD

The context of the current study included the pervasive cultural stereotype of inner-city African American and Mexican American students, each participant's own more idiosyncratic history, as well as the opportunity to attend an academic enrichment program. Participation in the academic enrichment program involved attending supplemental classes at a local university 5 days a week for 2 hours a day in addition to regular school classes. A primary goal of the program was to encourage participants to view themselves as “scholars” or potential students at a university. Students were recruited into the program at age 12 with the understanding that successful completion of the program (i.e., staying in the program until graduating from high school) would

result in a full 4-year college scholarship to the institution of their choice including tuition, room, and board.

Participants in the program were randomly selected from more than 300 seventh-grade students who attended one of two junior high schools in inner-city Los Angeles and showed a minimal level of interest (signing a card for more information after a required assembly about the program). An important premise of the program was that *average* students living in South-Central Los Angeles be given a chance to excel academically. The program focused on average students because academically gifted students could gain entry to magnet schools on the basis of their test scores. Although 300 students expressed interest, the program could only support a cohort of approximately 50 per year. To maintain a sense of fairness, selection was not based on academic performance but a roughly equal number of male and female students were randomly drawn from the overall pool of 300. In short, students who were not selected to participate in the program attended the same schools as the "scholars" and, at least at the onset, performed at the same level academically as those students who followed the same curriculum and attended the same schools but were not participants in the program.

### Participants

After parental consent was obtained, 114 students from two inner-city junior high schools in Los Angeles County participated in the present research. All students were either Mexican American (77%) or African American (23%) and were almost equally split in terms of gender (54% females and 46% males). This sample contained three groups: "successful scholars" who had been admitted to and were about to complete a 4-year academic enrichment program ( $n = 26$ ), "discontinuing scholars" who had been admitted to the program but left ( $n = 21$ ), and a "baseline control group" of students who attended the same schools as those in the program but who were not in the program ( $n = 59$ ). Eight cases were excluded from the analysis due to inconsistent or incomplete information about the participants' status in the program or in the control group. The groups of particular interest for the present research are those who had been selected for inclusion in the academic enrichment program and had either completed the program or left it.

### Procedure

During a regularly scheduled class period at their respective junior high schools, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire containing Kuhn and McPartland's (1954) Twenty Statements Test (TST), in

which individuals are asked to provide up to 20 words or phrases that describe them on a piece of paper with the words "Who am I?" printed at the top. Participants then completed Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. Care was taken to emphasize that the questionnaire was not a test or assignment and would not be graded.

## Measures

Three coders were trained to independently evaluate participants' responses to the "Who Am I?" portion of the questionnaire. The coders were adults (two women, one man), and all three were Anglo-American. Each self-descriptor from each respondent's questionnaire was presented to coders one at a time via a computer screen. Because coders were only presented with the self-descriptors, they did not have information from the questionnaires that would identify the program status of the questionnaire's respondent. Consequently, coders were blind as to whether a given self-descriptor was made by a student participating in the academic enrichment program or by one of the nonparticipants, except in those cases where the respondent's self-descriptor referred to participation in the program.

Using alpha as a coefficient of agreement (Krippendorff, 1980), the intercoder reliability was .84 overall (.84 for judgments of personal as opposed to social identity references, .87 for assignment of content categories, and .82 for judgments of the valence of the references). Disagreements between the three coders were resolved by assigning the value agreed upon by two coders. There were no instances where all three coders disagreed.

Each response was coded on the following dimensions:

*Individuating versus collectivist or group orientation.* Statements were coded as to whether they referred to individual or idiosyncratic aspects of the self (e.g., "I am tall for my age") or more collectivist or group identities (e.g., "I am Mexican American"). The individual statements were summed to reflect an absolute number of individuating self-descriptors.

*Complexity of self.* The total number of self-descriptors completed out of a possible 20 was recorded to assess the relative degree of cognitive complexity of the self. The extent to which one has cognitively elaborated any one domain of the self has been typically considered an indicator of the availability and centrality of that domain to an individual's self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consequently, each self-descriptor was coded for its basic content (e.g., "I have brown eyes")

was coded as reference to physical appearance). A total of 30 different content categories was created to reflect the diversity of domains revealed by participants' responses. The number of different domains an individual used in the self-description as well as the number of self-descriptors that fell into each of these domains were used to reflect the participants' complexity and elaboration of self-identities. In addition, as an indicator of the degree of elaboration of the specific domain of interest, namely, academic success, the number of school or academic-related items was also tallied for each participant.

*Valence of self-descriptors.* Each statement was coded for whether it referred to a positive, a negative, or a neutral aspect of self. For example, "I am smart" is a positive self-description, "I am ugly" is a negative self-description, and "I have three brothers" is neutral.

*Achievement in an academic domain.* Six years after the initial data collection when participants were 12 years old, the authors learned which students had successfully completed the academic enrichment program and graduated from high school. Participants who exited the program prior to completing it may have done so by choice or may have been asked to leave because of behavioral problems. Consequently, the indicator of achievement reflected the theoretical premise that participants' self-identities were *socially* constructed. Persistence in the program reflected the participants' maintenance of their identities as scholars.

## RESULTS

### Data Transformations

The coded information about each self-description was used to create measures reflecting the individuating versus group orientation in the self-representation, the valence of the self-representation, and the complexity of the self-representation. A measure of individuated identity was constructed by tallying all references to personal identities and dividing by the total number of self-descriptors made by each respondent. A measure of self-complexity was constructed in three ways. First, the total number of self-descriptions offered was computed for each participant. Next, the number of different domains of identity was computed by tallying the number of different content categories associated with each respondent's self-description. Finally, the number of references made to academic achievement (e.g., "scholar," "smart," "good student") were tallied for each respondent. Valence of the self-description was measured by tallying the number of positive self-

references and dividing by the total number of references. Finally, responses to Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale were averaged to reflect participants' mean responses on the 10 items of the scale with 1 indicating *low self-esteem* and 4 indicating *high self-esteem*. The coefficient of reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale was .69.

## Analysis

Two analyses are presented below. First, a discrimination function analysis was performed using the measures created from the self-descriptions and scores on Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to predict which students remained in the program after 6 years compared with those who left the program. To provide a context for interpreting what sets these two groups apart from each other, responses from the control group composed of the seventh-grade classmates of the program participants are included in the analysis. So, membership in three groups is predicted from the specified variables: scholars who stayed, scholars who left, and the "control" group of nonparticipants. The predictor variables were percentage of personal references, total number of descriptors, number of different domains mentioned, number of descriptors related to academic achievement, percentage of positive self-descriptors, and self-esteem. The second analysis is a multivariate analysis of variance, conducted to ascertain whether there are any significant interactions between race, gender, and participation in the academic enrichment program on any of the predictor variables.

Preliminary examination of the data show that all but two of the variables (percentage of personal references and total number of self-descriptors) distributed normally and had homogeneous variance across conditions. The two nonnormally distributed variables were negatively skewed due to a ceiling effect on these two measures. Because discriminant function analysis and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) are robust to violations of the assumption of normality—provided the violation is not due to outliers in the data—the analyses reported were performed on the untransformed variables to facilitate the interpretation of results.<sup>1</sup>

Examination of the covariance matrices across conditions specified in the hypotheses revealed some variation in the covariances across conditions (Box's  $M = 151, p = .03$ ) but was not so severe (e.g.,  $p < .001$ ) as to compromise the robustness of the analyses to this violation. A third assumption of the proposed analyses is that the predictor variables in discriminant function analysis (or the dependent variables in MANOVA) are not highly correlated with each other. The correlation matrix of the variables used in the analyses has a determinant of .38 and provides evidence that this assumption was met (see Table 1).

TABLE 1  
Correlations Between Variables for Multivariate Analyses (N = 106)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Personal	—					
2. Total	-.05	—				
3. Different	-.06	.63	—			
4. Academic	-.11	.36	.41	—		
5. Positive	.17	-.07	-.04	.21	—	
6. Esteem	.17	-.07	-.16	-.02	.30	—

NOTE: Personal = percentage of individuating references; total = total number of self-descriptors; different = number of different domains mentioned; academic = number of academic-related descriptors; positive = percentage of positive self-descriptors; and esteem = score on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale.

### Discriminant Function Analysis

Two discriminant functions were calculated,  $\chi^2(12) = 24.96, p < .02$ , for both functions combined. After removal of the first function, there was marginal discriminating power,  $\chi^2(5) = 8.88, p = .11$ , for the second function. The first discriminant function differentiated the successful scholars from the other two groups. The second function differentiated the discontinuing scholars from the other two groups. The control group, then, was not very well identified by the predictor variables. This is expected. All that is known about students in the control group is that in the seventh grade, they were not participating in an academic enrichment program either by choice or by chance.

The correlations between the predictor variables and the discriminant functions indicate a combination of complexity, individuation, and positive self-representation or self-esteem differentiated between the three groups. As is indicated by the matrix of correlations between the predictor variables and the discriminant functions in Table 2, the first function was composed of the percentage of positive self-descriptors, the number of academic related self-descriptors, and the percentage of individuating self-descriptors. The second function consisted of the remaining three predictor variables, namely, the total number of self-descriptors, the number of different domains in the self-description, and self-esteem.

### Predicting Success in a Counterstereotypical Domain

The relative differences between the groups on the variables that correlate most with the first discriminant function indicate that this function differentiated between the successful scholars and the other

TABLE 2  
Correlation Coefficients Between Each Predictor Variable and Discriminant Functions

	Function 1	Function 2
Predicts successful scholars		
Percentage of positive self-descriptors	.73 <sup>a</sup>	-.10
Number of academic-related descriptors	.53 <sup>a</sup>	.29
Percentage of individuating self-descriptors	.49 <sup>a</sup>	-.27
Predicts discontinuing scholars		
Total number of self-descriptors	.18	.82 <sup>a</sup>
Number of different domains	.10	.66 <sup>a</sup>
Score on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale	.35	-.55 <sup>a</sup>

a. Variables that comprise each function are grouped together.

two groups. Table 3 shows the pattern of means of the predictor variables for each of the groups. Hypothesis 1 received slight support. The students who persisted in the program tended to describe themselves in more individuated terms,  $F(2, 103) = 2.54, p = .04, \eta^2 = .05$ .<sup>2</sup> As differentiated by the first function, the successful scholars ( $M = 88\%$ ,  $SD = .09$ ) had more personally oriented self-descriptions compared with the other two groups ( $M = 81\%$ ,  $SD = .18$ ),  $t(104) = 1.93, p < .03$ . However, this difference was primarily a function of the significantly lower percentage of individuating self-descriptors in the control group ( $M = 80\%$ ,  $SD = .20$ ) and the successful scholars,  $t(83) = 2.06, p = .02$ . The differences between groups on the measure of individuation suggest that, at least at the outset, pursuit of a counterstereotypical identity is predi-

TABLE 3  
Mean Differences in Self-Identity Measures for Students Who Stayed or Left the Program and the Control Group<sup>a</sup>

	Successful Scholars	Left Program	Control Group
<i>Individuation</i>			
Percentage of individuating self-descriptors	88 <sub>b</sub> (0.09)	85 <sub>ab</sub> (0.12)	80 <sub>a</sub> (0.20)
<i>Complexity</i>			
Total number of self-descriptors	16.92 <sub>b</sub> (3.26)	13.67 <sub>a</sub> (5.77)	16.47 <sub>b</sub> (4.68)
Number of different domains	10.08 <sub>b</sub> (2.45)	8.62 <sub>a</sub> (2.89)	10.00 <sub>b</sub> (2.79)
Number of academic-related descriptors	3.04 <sub>b</sub> (1.80)	1.90 <sub>a</sub> (1.87)	2.15 <sub>a</sub> (1.76)
<i>Valence</i>			
Percentage of positive self-descriptors	51 <sub>b</sub> (0.21)	39 <sub>a</sub> (0.23)	34 <sub>a</sub> (0.23)
Score on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale	3.13 <sub>b</sub> (0.43)	3.17 <sub>b</sub> (0.44)	2.97 <sub>a</sub> (0.39)

a. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Means with different subscripts in the same row differ significantly from each other with  $p < .05$  (one-tailed).

cated on a more individualistic orientation in the overall self-concept.

The successful scholars differed significantly from the other two groups with respect to how elaborated their identities were in the counterstereotypical domain,  $F(2, 103) = 2.91, p = .03, \eta^2 = .05$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 3, students who persisted in the academic enrichment program used more school-related self-descriptors ( $M = 3.04, SD = 1.80$ ) compared with the discontinuing scholars and the control group combined ( $M = 2.09, SD = 1.78$ ),  $t(104) = 2.36, p = .01$ . Finally, the successful scholars were significantly more positive in their self-representations,  $F(2, 103) = 4.83, p = .01, \eta^2 = .09$ . Successful scholars were more likely to describe themselves in positive terms ( $M = 51\%, SD = .21$ ) compared with the discontinuing scholars and the control group respondents ( $M = 35\%, SD = .23$ ),  $t(104) = 3.01, p = .003$ .

Taken together, these results suggest that those who have a more positive and individuated self-concept and have a more elaborated self-identity within a counterstereotypical domain are more likely to succeed in pursuing a counterstereotypical identity. However, when all variables are adjusted for and Type I error is set overall to  $p < .05$ , the percentage of positive self-descriptors in the overall self-concept is the only predictor variable that significantly separates the successful scholars from the other two groups. This suggests that of all the variables that distinguished between the successful scholars and the other two groups, the tendency to describe themselves in positive terms at age 12 was the strongest predictor of their future.

### Predicting Discontinuation in the Pursuit of a Counterstereotypical Identity

Differences between groups on the variables that correlate most with the second discriminant function indicate that this function primarily differentiated between the participants who left the academic initiative program and the other two groups. As is shown in Table 2, this function was composed of the total number of self-descriptors, the number of different domains mentioned in the self-description, and self-esteem. The pattern of means in Table 3 shows that participants who left the academic program had less elaborated self-concepts. Discontinuing students had significantly fewer self-descriptors,  $F(2, 103) = 3.50, p < .02, \eta^2 = .06$ , and tended to describe themselves in terms of fewer domains,  $F(2, 103) = 2.17, p = .06, \eta^2 = .04$ .

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, discontinuing scholars had fewer self-descriptors overall ( $M = 13.67, SD = 5.77$ ) compared with the other two groups ( $M = 16.61, SD = 4.28$ ),  $t(104) = 2.62, p < .01$ . These respondents also had fewer different identities overall in their self-descriptions ( $M = 8.62, SD = 2.89$ ) compared with the other two groups ( $M = 10.00, SD =$



2.68),  $t(104) = 2.08, p = .02$ . Differences in global self-esteem only distinguished the control group from the participants in the academic initiative program,  $F(2, 103) = 2.52, p = .09, \eta = .05$ . Program participants, whether they stayed in the program or left, had higher self-esteem scores ( $M = 3.15, SD = .43$ ) than the respondents in the control group ( $M = 2.97, SD = .38$ ),  $t(104) = 2.24, p < .03$ .

The pattern of differences on the variables that comprise this second function indicates that discontinuation of the pursuit of a counterstereotypical identity is related to the relatively limited complexity of the overall self-concept. When all variables are adjusted for and Type I error is set at  $p < .05$ , only the total number of self-descriptors significantly differentiated the discontinuing scholars from the other two groups. This suggests that of all the predictor variables, the absence of a more elaborated self-representation most strongly predicts whether a person is able to persist in pursuing a counterstereotypical identity.

### The Role of Gender and Ethnicity

A multivariate analysis of variance evaluated whether there were any significant differences on the predictor variables between members of different ethnic or gender groups. Of particular concern was whether these factors interacted with program status. Consequently, although program status is considered a dependent variable in the hypotheses, it was entered as a factor in a 2 (ethnicity: African American, Mexican American)  $\times$  2 (gender: male, female)  $\times$  3 (program status: successful scholars, discontinuing scholars, control group) MANOVA. Percentage of personal as opposed to group references in the overall self-concept, total number of self-descriptors, number of different domains, number of academic-related identities, percentage of positive self-descriptors, and self-esteem were the dependent variables.

There were marginally significant interactions between ethnicity and program status on three of the dependent variables. The first interaction concerned the number of different domains mentioned in the self-descriptions,  $F(2, 94) = 2.4, p = .08$ . African American students who successfully completed the academic enrichment program tended to describe themselves in terms of a wider range of identities ( $M = 11.4, SD = 2.41$ ) compared with African American students who left the program or in the control group ( $M = 8.1, SD = 2.52$ ),  $t(21) = 2.6, p = .02$ . There were no significant differences between the three different groups of Mexican American students in the range of different identities provided in the self-descriptions,  $F(2, 82) < 1.0, ns$ .

The second Race  $\times$  Program Status interaction occurred on the measure of elaboration within the counterstereotypical domain, namely, the number of references to academic-related identities,  $F(2, 94) = 2.9, p =$

.06. African American students who left the academic initiative program had significantly fewer academic-related self-descriptors ( $M = .78$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) compared with the persistent scholars and the control group ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $t(21) = 2.99$ ,  $p = .007$ . Conversely, for the Mexican American students, there was a significant difference between the number of academic-related self-descriptors provided by the successful scholars ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) compared with the Mexican American students in the control group ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ,  $t(69) = 2.1$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

Finally, there was a significant interaction between race and program status on the percentage of positive self-descriptors respondents made,  $F(2, 94) = 3.1$ ,  $p = .05$ . There was no difference between the percentage of positive self-descriptors provided by African American students who persisted in the program ( $M = 55\%$ ,  $SD = .15$ ) and the African American students in the control group ( $M = 51\%$ ,  $SD = .28$ ),  $t(12) < 1.0$ , *ns*. However, the African American students who left the academic initiative program tended to have significantly fewer positive self-descriptors in their overall self-representations ( $M = 33\%$ ,  $SD = .22$ ) compared with the other two groups of African American students,  $t(21) = 2.0$ ,  $p = .06$ . With respect to the Mexican American students, the most positive self-descriptions were provided by the successful scholars ( $M = 50\%$ ,  $SD = .22$ ) compared with the discontinuing Mexican American scholars ( $M = 43\%$ ,  $SD = .25$ ) and the Mexican American students in the control group ( $M = 31\%$ ,  $SD = .21$ ),  $t(81) = 2.9$ ,  $p = .004$ .

Given the relatively small sample size for the African American students as a whole ( $N = 23$ ), the interactions found for that group should be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, it appears that for the African American students within the sample, persistence in an academic domain was especially contingent on a positive, well-elaborated self-identity, whereas for the Mexican American students, persistence was contingent on a more positive self-concept. There were no other significant interactions.

## Summary

Of the three specified hypotheses, the one receiving the strongest support was Hypothesis 2. This hypothesis specified that success in a counterstereotypical domain would be contingent on having a relatively elaborated self-concept, and this variable was most predictive of not persisting in an academic domain. The first hypothesis specified that those who succeeded in a counterstereotypical domain would have more individuated self-orientations. This hypothesis was somewhat supported to the extent that those who were participating in the academic enrichment program had more individuated self-descriptions than the control group, but this difference was not especially robust

with respect to predicting success or failure in a counterstereotypical domain. The third hypothesis also received partial support. Hypothesis 3 specified that those who were successful in pursuing a counterstereotypical identity would have more elaborated identities in the counterstereotypical domain than would others. There was a significant difference between the successful scholars and the other two groups with respect to the elaboration of their academic-related identities; however, this difference did not successfully differentiate between the groups above and beyond the other variables in the analysis. The valence of self-descriptions overall was the single greatest predictor of success in a counterstereotypical domain.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to explore the connection between a social identity, self-concept, and pursuit of an identity that contradicts the negative stereotype of the particular social identity. Specifically, we examined how members of marginalized minority groups successfully negotiated an identity that fostered achievement in a counterstereotypical domain. Those who succeeded in the counterstereotypical domain of academic achievement tended to have a greater diversity in the number of domains used to describe themselves, had more complex self-identities with respect to the total number of self-descriptions they spontaneously could provide about themselves, and had more elaborated self-identities as scholars compared with students who left the program. Although those who succeeded in the program described themselves in more positive terms, there were no significant differences in self-esteem scores as measured by Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale between those who successfully completed the program and those who left. Overall, the results suggest that the development of a complex, well-articulated range of positively represented identities is conducive to achieving a counterstereotypical identity.

One alternative explanation for the differences between those who persisted in the program and those who left is that the successful scholars were more academically gifted. With respect to this particular study, those who had more complex verbal skills may have been able to describe themselves in more complex ways. However, such an explanation of the results from this study should be undertaken cautiously. The control group had identities that were just as complex and diverse as the group of successful scholars. Yet, the respondents in the control group were significantly less positive and more group oriented in their self-descriptions compared with the successful program participants. Most of the literature on academic ability and ethnicity or race recog-

nizes that for those groups that consistently perform less well (e.g., African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans), access to resources, internalized self-expectations, and perceived limitations for one's future explain much of the variance in performances of groups defined on the basis of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (Miller, 1995; Ogbu, 1978, 1991).

The nature of the linkages between domains of identity and the valence attached to different self-schemata is not directly tested in this study. However, research on self-identity and self-affect or self-esteem offers different explanations for why those who had more diverse self-concepts did succeed. Linville (1987) shows that individuals who have a broad range of identities report feeling emotionally positive and experience less stress physiologically than individuals who have fewer domains of identity. It may be that the youths who achieved academic success were able to do so because they had a range of distinct identities from which they could draw, and these identities were kept separate from each other. Consequently, failure in any one domain, if or when it occurred, would have been buffered by the presence of other positively valued identities in other domains.

An alternative explanation for the link between academic persistence and more positive self-representations is provided by studies that investigate the role of minority identity in academic achievement. It is possible that rather than keep their core identities as scholars separate and distinct from other core, social identities, the students who achieved success in a counterstereotypical domain linked their identity as scholar to their ethnic and gender identities. Strong ethnic identification for minority adolescents is predictive of academic success (Rotheram-Borus, 1990), helps minority youths "make sense" of their group membership (Oyserman et al., 1995), and can operate as a functional defense against racism (Cross, 1995). Nonetheless, the experience of ethnic identity and its relationship to achieving counterstereotypical identities is contingent on a number of factors, including whether one has an awareness of racism (Oyserman et al., 1995) and whether one's academic environment recreates racial or gender hierarchies (Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Oliver et al., 1985).

Further explorations of the role of social and personal selves within cultural contexts should take into account the extent to which social selves are core identities, whether the context within which communication is taking place requires the enactment of an identity that is consistent with core social identities or inconsistent (e.g., counterstereotypical), and the extent to which communicators' other identities are linked to and/or consistent with other core identities. More important, the relationship between these aspects of self-identity and specific communicative competencies require direct examination. The results

of this study imply that success in a counterstereotypical domain was less dependent on the formation of a singularly focused identity. Rather, success was contingent on individuals' elaboration of an identity within the counterstereotypical domain and the possession of a range of positively valued, somewhat individuating identities. Adaptation may have involved the development and elaboration of identities that allowed for greater individuation.

In the sense that self-identities are generated through interactions, communication plays a key role in the development and elaboration of identities that can contribute to success in a counterstereotypical domain. This study demonstrates the importance of cultivating identities that are elaborated and adaptable to a domain as a precursor to achieving success within that domain. One obvious mechanism for cultivating such identities is through repeated interactions with individuals who already possess the counterstereotypical identity. To the extent that African American and Hispanic American students who are at risk are less likely to engage in those interactions, the possibility for academic success is twice jeopardized, first by the lack of willingness to seek clarification of course material due to the student's negative judgment of his or her communicative abilities and second by the absence of opportunities for developing and elaborating an identity as a successful scholar. For those students who do not yet possess positively valued, complex, and elaborated self-identities, communication educators may lend a needed boost by fostering classroom environments that explicitly accommodate ethnic identities that are stigmatized with respect to academic success.

## NOTES

1. A discriminant function analysis was conducted using transformed versions of the skewed variables and showed no substantial change in the pattern of results. However, one of the variables, the arcsine transformed percentage of individuating self-descriptors, dropped in significance from  $p = .04$  to  $p = .11$ .

2. Because the specified hypotheses were directional, all reported significance levels for statistical tests of these hypotheses reflect one-tailed tests. The significance levels reported for the research questions and for the interactions between gender, race, and program status are two-tailed.

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