

Middle-Class African American Adolescents'  
Construction of Personal Identity

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Author Notes

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## Introduction

Interest in adolescent self-representations has focused on the integration of diverse cognitive self-conceptions in the construction of a coherent self-identity. The cognitive developmental framework proposes that by late adolescence, the development of higher order abstraction allows for the coordination of inconsistent self characteristics (Case, 1985; Flavell, 1985). How the content and structure of these different self-characteristics develop during early and middle adolescence is central to understanding the integration of self-systems.

Several lines of research have investigated how the self becomes more differentiated with age. For instance, Harter (1986) focused on differentiations across domains of the self, including scholastic performance, athletic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. In contrast, Higgins (1991) investigated relationships between actual and desired selves, or ought selves, defined as attributes that one believes that one should, or ought to possess.

Most of the research in this area focuses on white middle-class adolescents, but there is a need to look at these processes in minority youth. The present study focuses on middle-class African-American adolescents assessed longitudinally over two years in an effort to understand specific variations in normative development without confounding race with SES.

There are three main goals of the study. The first goal is to provide more descriptive information on the development of middle-class African-American adolescent's perceived competence in multiple domains. To this end, we examined adolescents' ratings on Harter's measures of perceived self-competence longitudinally over two years. Second, we examined how desired personality characteristics were structured and whether they became more differentiated with over the two-year period. This question was addressed using both variable- and person-centered approaches. The variable-centered analyses focused on determining relations among variables within our sample, whereas the person-centered analyses focused on uncovering similar groups of adolescents across variables (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). In the present study, factor analyses of adolescents' desired personality characteristics were conducted to represent the variable-oriented approach, and cluster analyses of these variables were conducted to represent the person-based approach. The third objective of the study was to examine the relationships between Time 1 desired personality characteristics (both variable- and person-centered) and their ratings on Time 2 adolescent adaptation and parental relationship measures.

## Participants

N= 85

	<u>Time 1</u>	<u>Time 2</u>
<u>Mean Age</u> (SD)	13.09 (1.28)	15.05 (1.28)
<u>Gender</u>		
Males	41	41
Females	44	44
<u>Family Income</u>		
\$25,000 - \$39,999	13%	16%
\$40,000 - \$69,999	49%	39%
\$70,000 and over	38%	45%

# Self Measures

## Perceived Competence

- 4-point Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982)
- Subscales: Academic, Social, Athletic, Appearance, Conduct, and General

## Desired Personality Characteristics

- 5-point Personal Qualities Questionnaire (A. M. Cauce, personal communication, 1995)
- “How important it is to be” each of 25 qualities that “teenagers possess”

# Correlates

## Ethnic Identity

- 5-point Ethnic Identity Questionnaire (Phinney, 1992)

## Parental Monitoring

- 5-point Parental Monitoring Questionnaire (Dornbusch et al., 1985)

## School Grades

- Parent report of average grades in school over past year
- Scores ranged from 1 (mostly F's) through 5 (mostly A's)

## Problem Behavior

- 7-point Problem Behavior Scale (Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996)

## Closeness with Parents

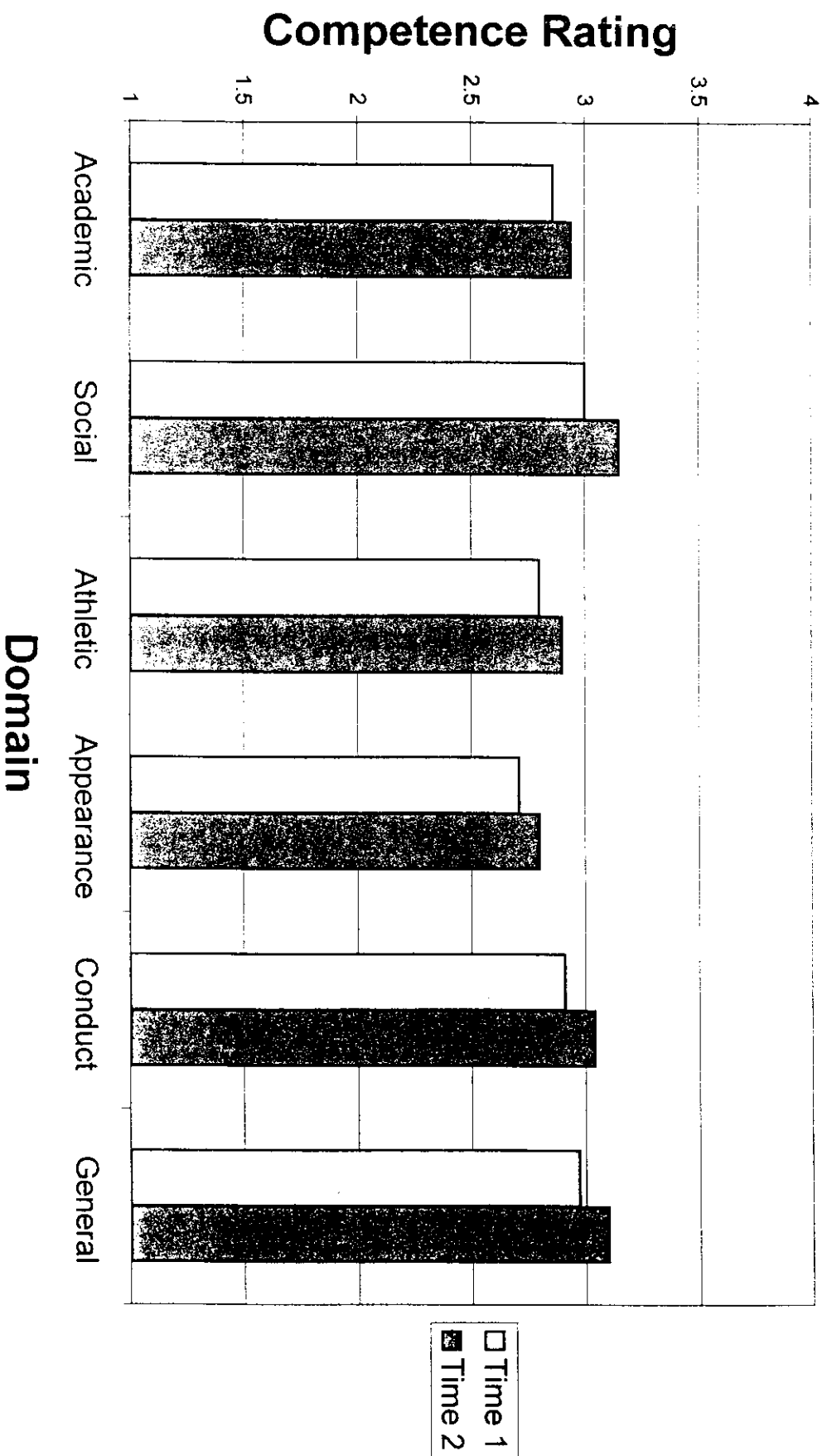
- Subscales of Trust and communication of the 8-point Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)

# ***Aim 1***

## **Describe Development of Perceived Competence in Multiple Domains**

- Time X Domain X Gender Repeated Measures ANOVAS on Harter subscales of Perceived Competence

# Perceived Competence by Time



# Perceived Competence

(Time X Domain X Gender)

## MAIN EFFECTS

Time  $F(1, 81) = 3.51, p < .06$

**Time 2 > Time 1**

Domain  $F(5, 81) = 8.69, p < .001$

Academic < Social, General  
Athletic < Social, Conduct, General  
Appearance < Academic, Social, Conduct, General

## INTERACTION EFFECTS

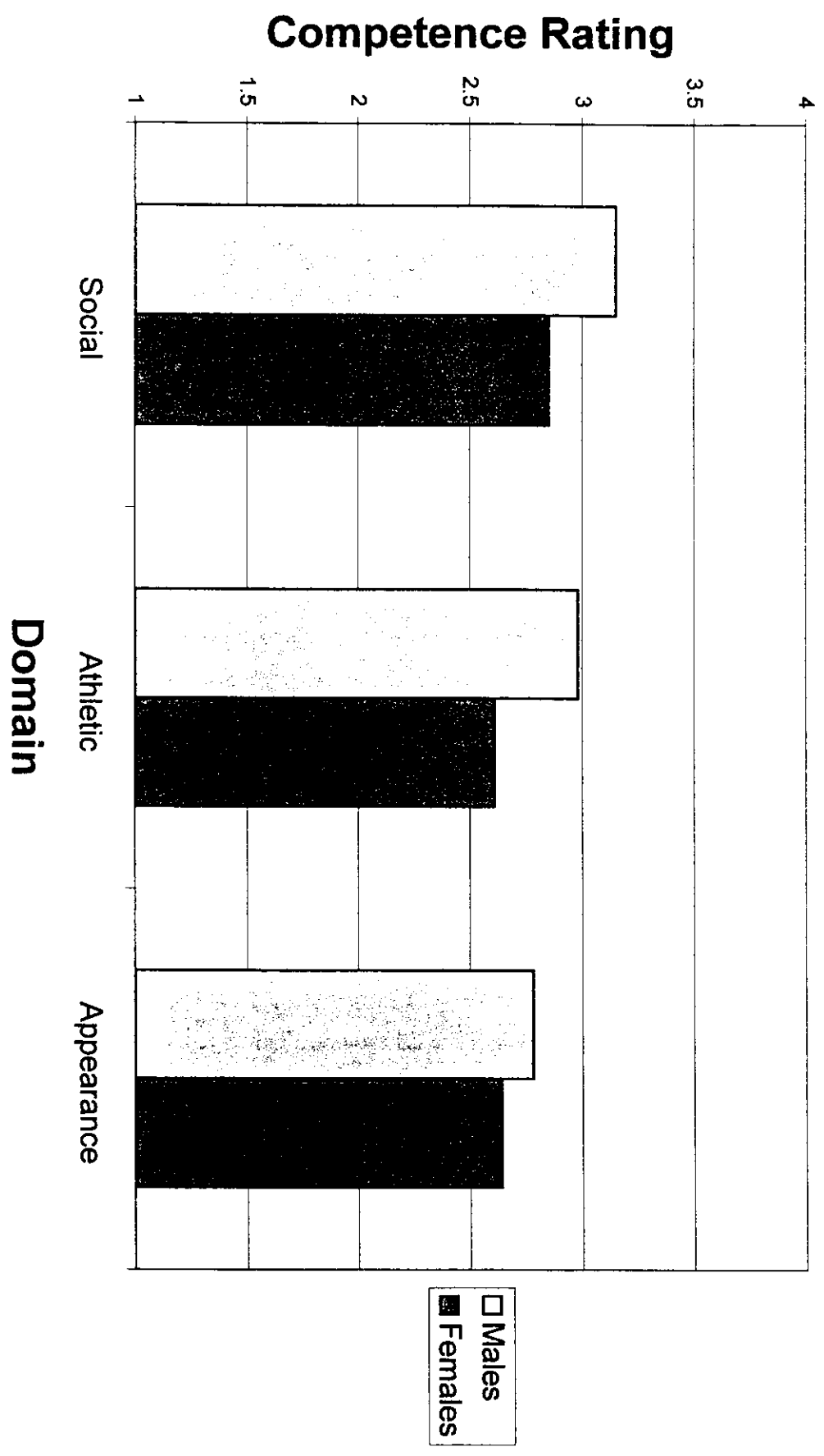
Domain X Gender  $F(5, 81) = 4.43, p < .01$

**Athletic: Males > Females**

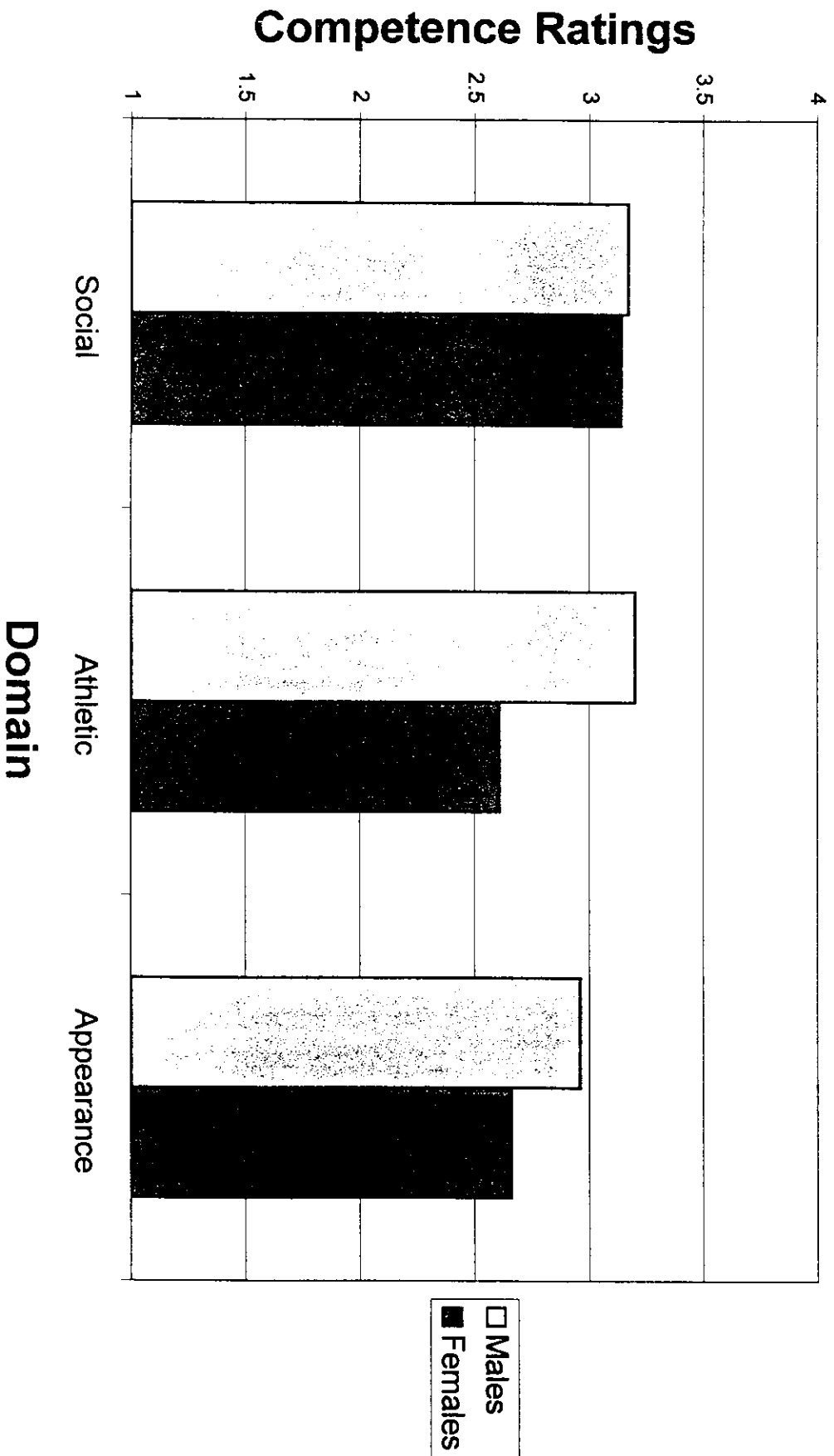
Time X Domain X Gender  $F(5, 81) = 2.84, p < .05$

Time 1 Social: Males > Females  
Time 2 Appearance: Males > Females

# Time 1 Perceived Competence by Gender



# Time 2 Perceived Competence by Gender



# **Aim 2**

## **Describe how Desired Personality Characteristics are Structured**

- Variable Centered: Principal Components Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation conducted on Time 1 and Time 2 Desired Personality Characteristic items
- Person-Centered: Cluster Analysis performed on the derived Desired Personality Characteristic Variables at both Time 1 and Time 2

# Variable-Centered Approach

## Factor Analyses of Desired Personality Characteristics

### Time 1

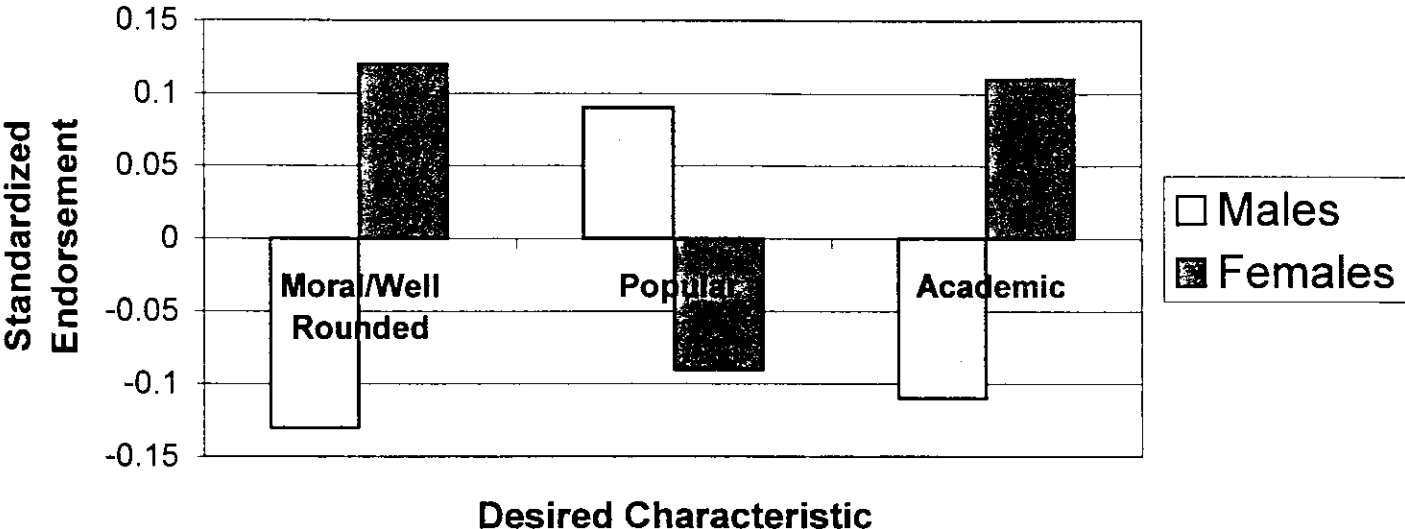
<u>Moral/Well</u> <u>Rounded</u>	<u>Popular</u>	<u>Scholastic</u>
Sensitive	Cool	Top Student
Honest	Popular	Smart
Well Rounded	Athletic	Hard Working
Happy	Good Looking	Confident
Independent	Well-Dressed	
Outgoing		
Get Along with Sibs.		
Caring		
Respectful		
Physically Healthy		
Cooperative		
Self-Reliant		

### Time 2

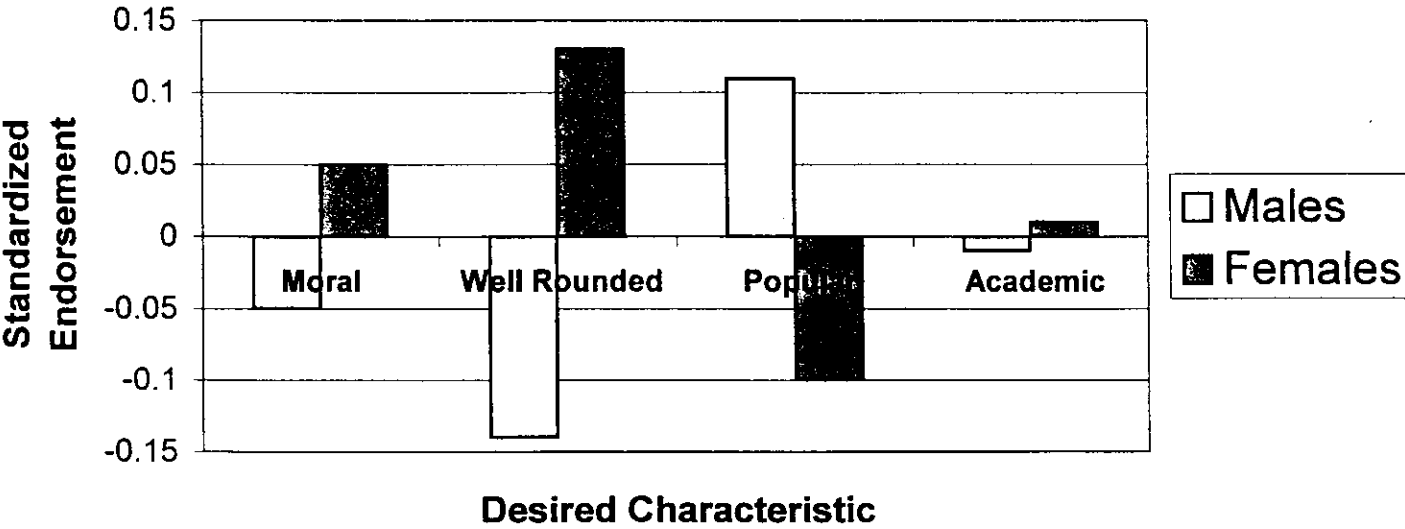
<u>Moral</u>	<u>Well</u> <u>Rounded</u>	<u>Popular</u>	<u>Scholastic</u>
Sensitive	Creative	Cool	Top Student
Honest	Well Rounded	Popular	Smart
Get Along Sibs.	Happy	Athletic	Hard Working
Caring	Independent	Good Looking	Confident
Respectful	Outgoing	Well-Dressed	
Cooperative			

# Desired Personality Factors by Gender & Time

## Time 1



## Time 2



# Desired Personality Characteristics

(Personality Characteristic X Time X Gender)

## Time 1

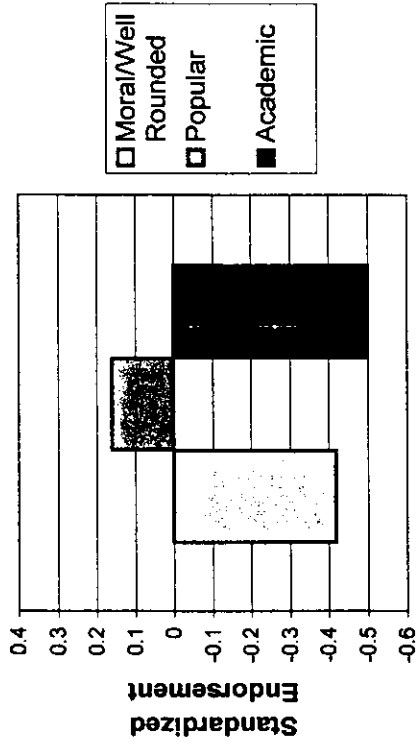
<b>Moral/Well Rounded:</b>	<b>Males &lt; Females**</b>
<b>Popular:</b>	<b>Males &gt; Females+</b>
<b>Academic:</b>	<b>Males &lt; Females*</b>

## Time 2

<b>Moral:</b>	<b>Males = Females</b>
<b>Well Rounded:</b>	<b>Males &lt; Females**</b>
<b>Popular:</b>	<b>Males &gt; Females+</b>
<b>Academic:</b>	<b>Males = Females</b>

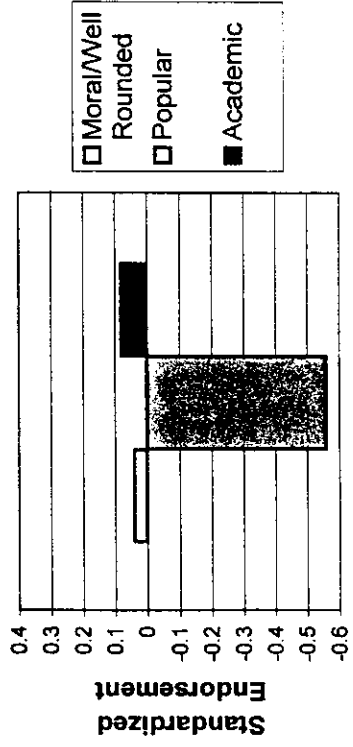
Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$

## "At Risk" (N=20)

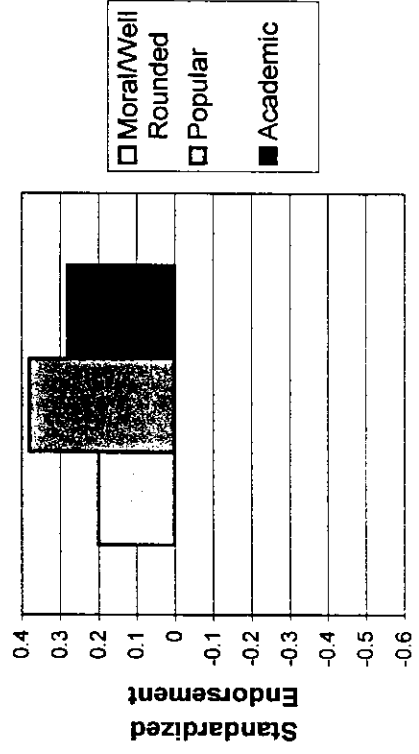


# Time 1 Cluster Analysis of Desired Personality Characteristics

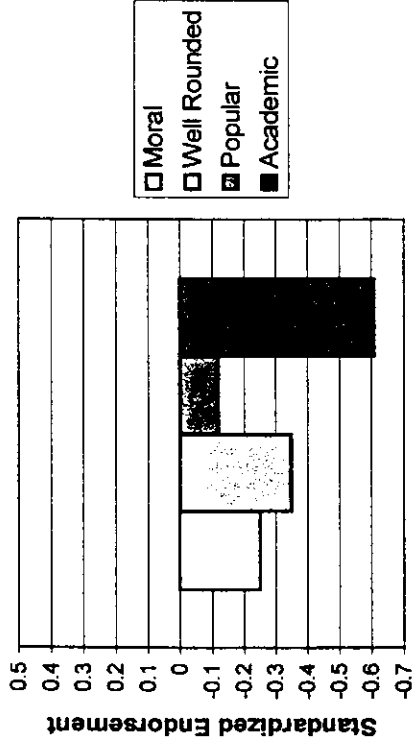
## "Popularity Shunners" (N=21)



## "Strivers" (N=35)

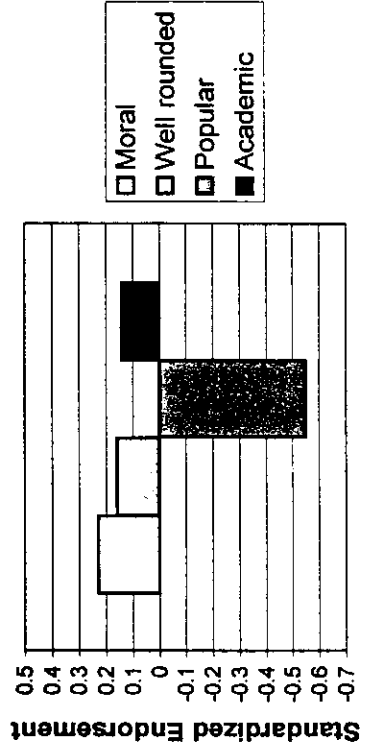


## "At Risk" (N=29)

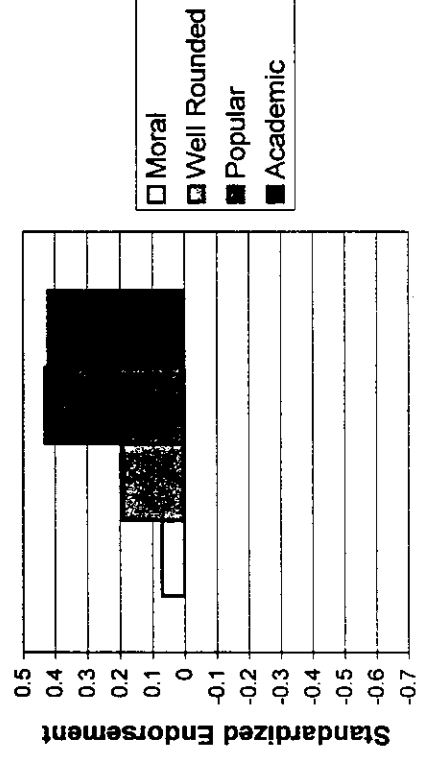


## Time 2 Cluster Analysis of Desired Personality Characteristics

## "Popularity Shunners" (N=21)

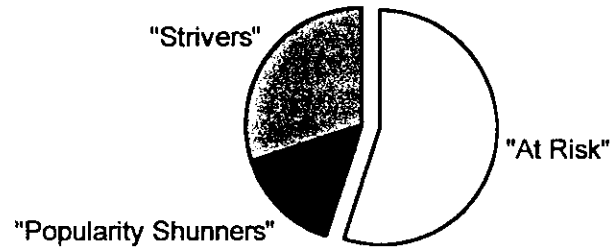


## "Strivers" (N=35)

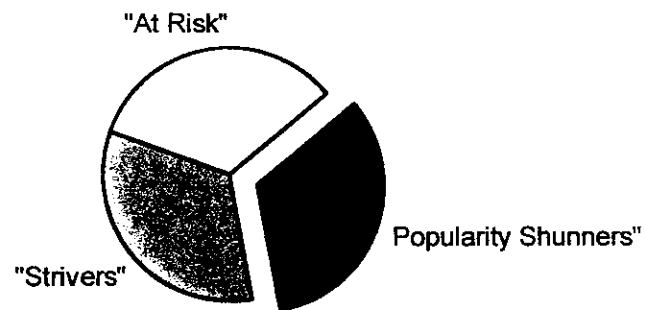


# Stability of Cluster Membership

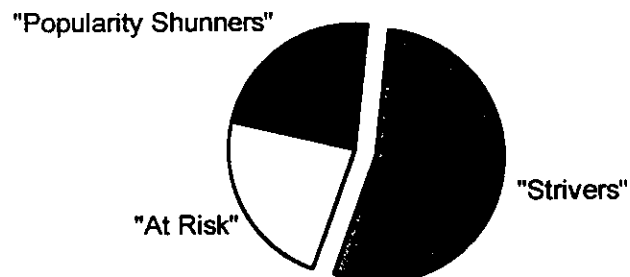
## "At Risk" Members at Time 2



## "Popularity Shunners" Members at Time 2



## "Strivers" Members at Time 2



# **Aim 3**

## **Examine the relationships between Time 1 Desired Personality Characteristics and Time 2 Adaptation and Parental Variables**

- Correlations between Time 1 Factors and Time 2 Adaptation and Parental Variables  
ANOVA on Time 2 Adaptation and Parental Variables with Time 1 cluster membership as between factor

**Correlations between T1 Desired Personality Factors  
and T2 Adaptation and Parental Relationship  
Variables**

<b><u>Time 2 Variable</u></b>	<b><u>Time 1 Moral/Well Rounded</u></b>	<b><u>Time 1 Popular</u></b>	<b><u>Time 1 Academic</u></b>
Age	-.09	-.17	-.32**
Ethnic Identity	.29**	.10	.34***
Parental Monitoring	.27*	-.12	.26*
Trust with Parents	.34***	-.07	.26*
Parent Communication	.31**	-.03	.23*
Problem Behavior	-.58***	-.09	-.37***
GPA	.06	.12	.16
<b><u>Perceived Competence</u></b>			
Academic	.09	.02	.23*
Social	.04	.16	-.06
Athletic	-.08	.09	-.03
Appearance	-.01	-.03	.05
Conduct	.33**	-.03	.09
General	.14	-.03	.08

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$  (two-tailed)

# **Time 1 Desired Personality Characteristic Clusters and Time 2 Adaptation and Parental Relationship Variables**

## **Gender\*\***

**Males:** “At Risk” > “Popularity Shunners”  
“At Risk” > “Strivers”

## **Perceived Competence**

**Conduct:** “At Risk” < “Popularity Shunners”\*  
**General:** “At Risk” < “Popularity Shunners”+

## **Problem Behavior\*\***

“At Risk” > “Popularity Shunners”  
“At Risk” > “Strivers”

## **Ethnic Identity\***

“At Risk” < “Strivers”

## **Trust with Parents+**

“At Risk” < “Popularity Shunners”  
“At Risk” < “Strivers”

## **Parental Monitoring\***

“At Risk” < “Popularity Shunners”

Note: \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, \*p < .05, + p < .10

## Discussion

Middle-class African American adolescents' ratings of perceived competence were differentiated by time, domain, and gender. Overall, early adolescents' feelings of competence increased over time. This differs from White samples, where competence beliefs have been found to decline during early adolescence (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Analyses by domain revealed that adolescents in our sample rated themselves higher in social and overall competence than in athletics, appearance, and academics and that these findings varied by gender.

As predicted, the results of the factor analyses supported the cognitive-developmental view that the self becomes more differentiated over time. Three desired personality factors emerged at Time 1 (moral/well-rounded, popular, and academic), but at Time 2, adolescents distinguished between the moral and well-rounded qualities. Interestingly, identified desired self-characteristics were similar to Brown's (1990) descriptions of peer groups (popular, academic, and normal).

Analyses of the factors of desired characteristic revealed that males desired popularity more than females. At Time 1, boys were higher on the academic qualities factor than were girls, but this difference was not significant at Time 2. At Time 2, girls rated the moral/well-rounded factor as more important than the boys while at Time 2, they continued to endorse the well-rounded factor more than did boys.

Time 1 desired self factors and Time 2 adaptation and parent relationship variables were meaningfully related. Scores on moral/well-rounded and academic factors were consistently related to later positive outcomes. Both of these factors also were positively related to parental monitoring. Additionally, the *desired* factors, moral/well-rounded and academic, were related to Time 2 *actual* self-characteristics, behavioral conduct and academic competence, respectively. The popular factor was not related to outcome variables, perhaps because popularity consists of both prosocial and antisocial groups (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000).

The person-centered analyses identified three distinct groups of adolescents. "At-Risk" adolescents were low in moral, well-rounded and academic qualities, while "Popularity Shunners" did not desire popularity. "Strivers" rated all of the qualities high at both times. Membership in these groups was relatively stable over time. "At-Risk" adolescents scored lower than adolescents in the other two groups in ethnic identity, perceived competence, trust with parents, and higher in problem behavior. Furthermore, parents monitored these youths less.

In conclusion, these results suggest that middle-class African American adolescents' self-representations become more differentiated with age and are related to a variety of outcomes. They appear to reflect cognitive development and growing social environments as adolescents attempt to construct coherent self-identities.

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