Possible Selves and Pasteles:

A Truly Socially Contextualized Model of Girlhood

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Research on self-concept using a "possible selves" framework has grown substantially in recent years. Possible selves—"what we might become, hope to become, and fear becoming"— guide motivation and future behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves, which are future-oriented in nature, are especially relevant to youth, who spend a lot of time contemplating what the future might hold for them. From this literature, we know that young people's possible selves are socially constructed, relying heavily on important others in the social environment as role models, resources, and messengers about what is or is not valued in their culture (Oyserman, Grant and Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1993).

Research involving possible selves has looked at a variety of elements of social context, ranging from broad categories such as gender (Curry, et al, 1994) or race (Oyserman, et al, 1995), to specific situations such as level of incarceration (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) or impact of mentoring (Packard, in press). However, in almost all of these studies, the researchers were looking at how social context influenced others, rather than themselves. As a group of mothers and daughters, the goals of our project were different. For our study, we combined the socially contextualized model of the self with an equally socially contextualized model of research. Mothers and daughters were not just participants, but were also actively designing and leading every step of the research project.

We saw mothers as important cultural messengers, and we wanted to examine the mother's role in shaping her daughter's possible selves. By looking at similarities and differences between mothers' and daughters' possible selves, we could also see what messages have remained the same or changed in terms of their identities as girls, daughters and members of a particular (primarily Puerto Rican) culture. Our results address some important aspects of mothers' influence on the possible selves of

their daughters, but also raise some critical questions about the nature of research, who does it, and who has access to it.

Research Questions:

1) What are the similarities and differences between possible selves of teen girls today and those of their mothers when they were young?
2) How would having mothers and daughters doing this research impact the research and the researchers?

METHOD

Participants

From the start, our girl researchers refused to limit the recruitment of other participants based on income, race or ethnicity, or number of parents. They felt this would be "really unfair". Despite the fact that most research on inner-city adolescent girls focuses solely on girls engaged in "high risk" behavior (Way, 1990), this category did not even enter the conversation. In all probability, all of the researchers would be considered high risk by one standard or another, but none of them identified this as a category for themselves or their friends. In the end, our participants were largely Puerto Rican and working class, because this is the population that is most highly represented at the three youth programs doing the outreach. Some came from single parent households, while others included fathers or stepfathers. Two girls counted their aunt or grandmother as their mother figure.

A total of twenty mother-daughter pairs participated in our focus groups. Fifteen pairs completed the possible selves research. (Four pairs were also a part of our research team.) All but one pair completing the research were of Puerto Rican descent, although most were raised in the United States. Daughters ranged from 13-19, with one 10 year old exception. Our data set does not attempt to represent any entire age or ethnic group, but rather is a reflection of the girls and moms with whom we regularly work and live.

Recruitment

Researcher recruitment:

Staff from three youth agencies (Girls Incorporated, Spanish American Union and Teen Resource Project), asked their teen girls if they wanted to help design and carry out research about mothers and daughters. Three mothers of teen girls who were involved in these agencies also became researchers. All researchers had input into who our target group was, what our questions were and what our focus group activities were. All researchers led focus groups, collected data, analyzed it and wrote this paper.

Participant recruitment:

Participants were recruited from two main pools: 1) girls who participated regularly in the three youth agencies (and their mothers), and 2) friends and family of the mothers and daughters on the research team. Members of the research team were also participants in focus groups when they were not leading them. Recruitment was done through word of mouth, flyers and phone calls to mothers of our participants.

Procedure

Design of the study: Our mother and daughter research team created the model used. As mothers and daughters themselves, they knew what kinds of activities would interest others to participate in the study. Mothers and daughters recruited participants by combining activities such as dinners, barbecues, and other outdoor activities into the focus groups. Participants expressed a great sense of comfort and trust because researchers were mothers and daughters. Also, mother and daughter researchers wrote case studies on other mother and daughters pairs including themselves. As one daughter-researcher described planning our first focus group:

> *"For our first focus group we wanted something that would not be boring and would attract not just teens, but also their mothers. So we came up with the Pastele Night. It would be just a group of women and young ladies getting together to cook a traditional Puerto Rican dish, "Pasteles", and just have some girl talk. In the making of "Pasteles", we gave every person a specific job to do, and while everyone was doing their job to complete the dish, we chatted about*

how it is to be a girl in general, and how it is to be a girl in your culture. Most of the mothers and daughters participating were from Latino heritage. The focus group went well and we were able to gather a lot of data."

Quantitative data: The maps. Mothers mapped out possible selves from when they were teens. Daughters did the same for their present hopes and fears. Maps were intentionally open-ended to better reflect true hopes and fears, as opposed to offering set themes that may not apply to these participants. Responses were quantified and tracked into common themes. Personal interviews served to collect additional data in order to complete mother/daughter pairs.

Qualitative information: Group discussions. Group discussions occurred both with mothers and daughters together and separately. Information gathered was important to having a better understanding of the maps. Discussions provided an in depth look at the hopes and fears of the participants and where some of them originate.

Analysis

The entire research team worked together to compile each participant's positive and negative possible selves, first from transcribing our notes and videotapes of the discussions in which they shared what they had written and drawn, and then by adding other components directly from their artwork. We also tracked who or what they said had influenced their possible selves, and any comments they made about the influences of culture and gender.

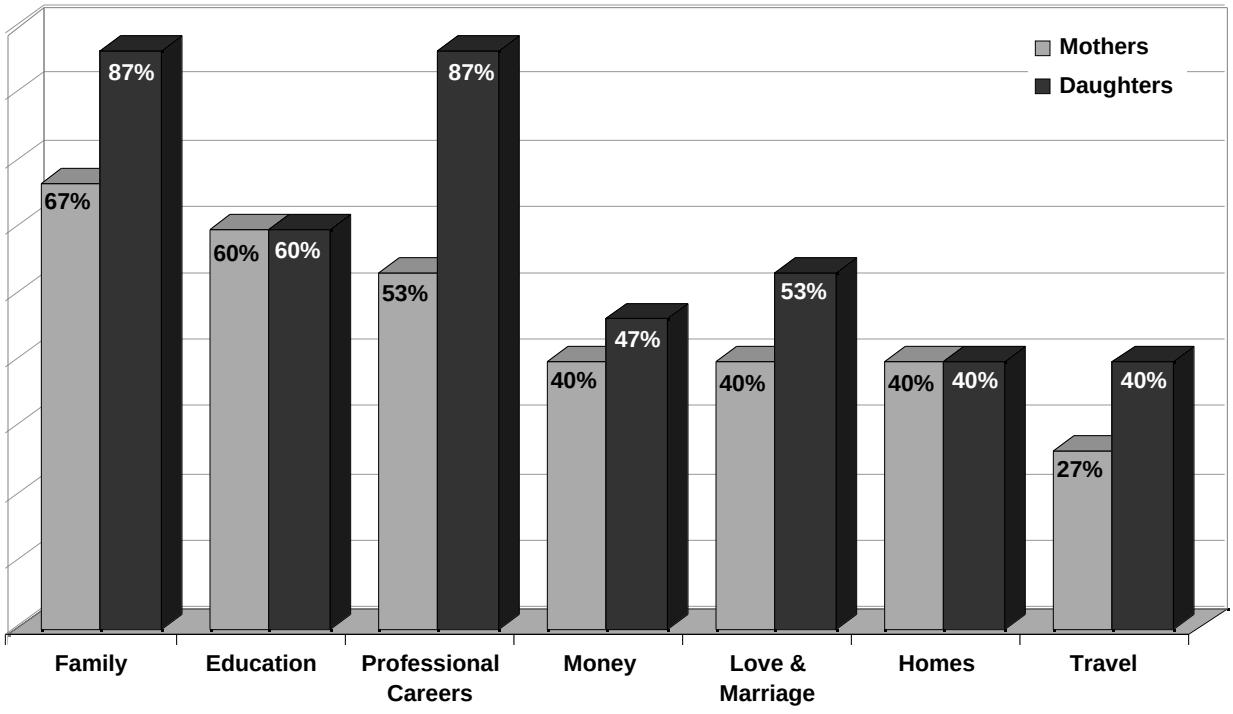
We then coded their answers into common themes. After discarding themes with less than 3% response rate, we ended up with seven themes for positive possible selves and nine for negative ones. We compared frequencies within the themes between mother and daughter groups, and also looked at individual mother/daughter pairs for similarities and differences. Responses were clarified and enriched by the fact that we knew many of the participants, so we could easily do follow up phone or in-person interviews.

RESULTS

Common values between mothers and daughters

We found a great deal of similarities between mothers and daughters in terms of their positive possible selves: families, education and careers came up most frequently for both groups, and similar frequencies of response were found across all seven positive themes *(see Chart 1).* We also found the top negative possible self—drug or alcohol abuse—to be shared by both groups. Additionally, no possible selves came up as positive for a daughter and negative for a mother, or vice versa. These results demonstrate a high level of shared values and goals between mothers and daughters.

Chart 1. Comparison of Positive Possible Selves



The case of Jenny and Jessica demonstrates some of these shared values and the outcome of their discussion.

CASE STUDY: Jessica and Jenny, written by Jenny (the mother)

I was born in Puerto Rico, moved to the U.S. at the age of five. I grew up with a very traditional, strict macho father. Talking about sex, drugs and alcohol was very simple, "never do it." Things were hidden well in the home front: 1) No arguments in front of children, 2) no drinking in front of children, and 3) No talk of sex in front of children. So I grew up very ignorant in these topics. My dad was a machista, he would say, "Women should stay home take care of the children, clean the house and have food ready for him." I knew I didn't want this in a marriage or in my life. Even though my dad was strict and harsh, he was very loving and caring. My dad was my inspiration; I learned a lot from him.

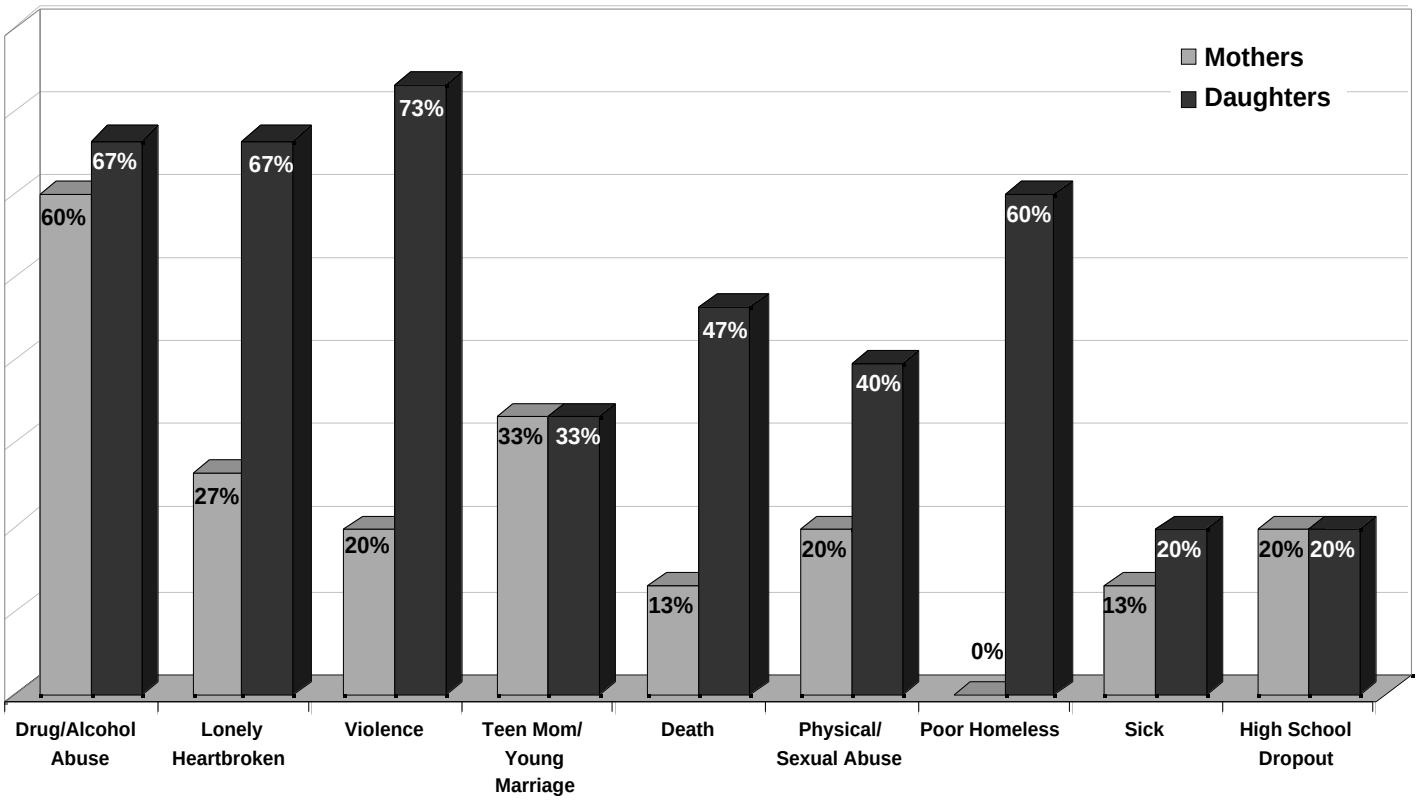
Jessica grew up differently; she has space, privacy and can talk to the family or me about any issue in her life. She has a lot of knowledge on peer pressure, self-esteem, drugs, alcohol and violence. I want Jessica to learn about her culture, but she can also change a lot of it, if she wants too. I don't want her to feel that she has to stay home and take care of the children, only if she chooses it.

As a mother I thought it would be interesting to know more about my daughter (even though we have an open communication). I figure because of our age difference and our upbringing, we would pick different likes/dislikes. To my surprise we had a lot in common. Actually we were the team with the most in common. We both put down college, family, love, money, travel and a home. We put down drugs, alcohol and gang violence as things we didn't want for our futures. I was surprised when Jessica picked me as her inspiration, because she has a lot of family that helped her through a lot. Here are two women who grew up in different environments (culture) but yet want so much of the same things.

Greater Prevalence of Negative Possible Selves for Daughters

We found many more differences between mothers and daughters when it came to negative possible selves. First of all, the daughters had over twice as many negative possible selves than their mothers. (Up from approximately 50% more on the positive possible selves.) In four of the dominant themes (violence, death, poor/homeless, and lonely/heartbroken), daughters reported many more responses than mothers. Daughters mentioned each of these themes at frequencies of 50% to 70%, while mothers' responses ranged from 0% to 30% *(see Chart 2).*

Chart 2. Comparison of Negative Possible Selves



The story of Lisa and Sasha demonstrates these differences:

CASE STUDY: Lisa and Sasha

Here is a case about a mother, Lisa who is 39 years old and a daughter, Sasha who is 13 years old. Both have grown up in totally different lifestyles.

Lisa had grown up with a lot of abuse in her family. She has never had any one to inspire her. She lived with a mother that could not communicate with her and does not want the same for her daughter. In fact she does not want her daughter to go through any of the negative things she has gone through herself. Before fearing these things for her daughter, Lisa feared a young and unsuccessful marriage for herself. She also feared abuse in all forms, and being like her mother.

Today, Lisa and Sasha have a good relationship, they get along and communicate well with each other. However, Sasha has demonstrated she has more negative selves than her mother. Sasha fears homelessness, death, violence, spousal abuse, being ugly, and a teen mom. She emphasizes more her fear of any form of abuse in her life. Unlike her own mother, Sasha's inspiration comes from Lisa and her older sister. She says, "I'm lucky to have such a great family and feel comfortable to talk to any one of them."

Mothers' Experiences Reflected in Daughters' Fears

We found that negative possible selves from the daughters, (i.e. things they feared happening to them), were very closely tied to what their mothers actually went through. For example, daughters that had a negative possible self of dealing with physical/sexual abuse often had mothers who actually dealt with physical/sexual abuse. Therefore, our research suggests that the negative experiences of the mothers heavily influenced negative possible selves of the daughters. Our case study of Rath (mother) and Elaine (daughter) illustrates this more in depth. Rath and Elaine are different than our other participants in terms of their cultural background (Rath is Cambodian and Elaine is Cambodian/Chinese/American) and the fact that Rath was a refugee, but they are similar in their pattern of having the daughter reflect her mother's negative life experiences.

CASE STUDY: Rath and Elaine

Rath had to grow up at a very young age. At the age of fifteen, most girls we talked to are currently dealing with high school, finishing homework and getting more freedom from their parents. When Rath was fifteen, she was a Cambodian refugee living in Thailand and about to go into an arranged marriage. She tried to protest by telling her mother, "I don't need a man, I cook and clean, wash my own clothes..." The protests did not work and her teenage years are filled with memories of not being able to go to school, working to support her family, looking for food, taking care of kids, etc. Rath knew so little about the adult world she felt like she was being raped on her wedding night because she did not know about sex. She feels that had she been a boy her life would have been filled with a lot more opportunity and choices.

Now Rath's daughter, Elaine is 13 years old. She is an honor student in school, excited about college and happy about her steady boyfriend. Elaine's current life reflects her being on the right track for her positive possible selves, which include writing a book, owning a home, and having a happy marriage. However, her negative possible selves seem to closely reflect the experiences of her mother. They are: being uneducated, not having enough food, being divorced, being poor and quitting school. It is very interesting that Elaine listed a negative possible self such as "not having enough food" because none of the other daughters chose that as a fear. That was an experience that Rath went through and Elaine fears happening to her.

Influence of Project on Participants and Researchers

Doing this research project and paper was a great learning experience for us. Since most of us were researchers, facilitators *and* participants, we got to see both sides of the process. As mothers and

daughters, we learned more about each other and our similarities, differences, hopes and fears. We had some conversations we had never had before. As one mother commented, "I couldn't believe it when we looked at our maps. We both wanted to be DJ's and car mechanics!"

Unlike many researchers, we get to see the on-going impact of our work on the participants around us also. They're still talking about things they learned about each other, what they want for their futures and how emotional our focus groups were. They're already sharing with us new ideas for further research. We always invite them to join us next time.

Most of us had never imagined ourselves as researchers. This process challenged us in many ways, even impacting our very own possible selves. Since starting this project, two of the mothers have begun college, and two of our young researchers are planning to try college next semester. The younger girls on the research team are busy trying to explain to friends and teachers that they are presenting at an international conference in London. As one retold us, "Shoot, when my friends ask me if I'm going to the prom, I tell them I have to speak at an *academic* conference, *in London.*" For girls who constantly face stereotypes about dropping out of school and getting pregnant, this possible self as academic researcher is new and powerful.

DISCUSSION

The high similarity between mothers and daughters of positive possible selves such as education, family and careers indicate to us that: a) mothers are powerful figures in the socially constructed selves of teenage daughters and b) daughters' identities can be both culturally affirmed and achievement oriented. Our group of mothers and daughters was primarily Puerto Rican, but we found many similarities to the model suggested by Oyserman, et al (1995) for African American girls, which said that "by conceptualizing achievement as embedded in one's sense of self as a [Puerto Rican], youths—and especially female youths—will not experience contradiction and tension between achievement and being [Puerto Rican]." As one girl said, "Before this experience I felt that if I was a

college graduate, I was an Americanized Puerto Rican. But now, Puerto Ricans can be successful in academics and their careers and associate that as part of their identity."

This was extremely apparent in our follow up discussions when both groups shared their positive and negative possible selves. The conversations were rich with pride and sharing as mothers and daughters realized all that they had in common and celebrated each other's hopes and dreams. Not only were the daughters affirmed by their own mothers, but by the whole group, representing their culture and peer group. Thus the research method served two functions: providing a format for collecting data and actually creating an environment that supported its participants.

When we look at why daughters hold many more fears than their mothers do, we posit several possible reasons. Daughters may be holding multiple messages from their mothers, including what their mom fears for them (like Lisa not wanting her daughter to experience abuse), as well as what they actually see their moms going through. As one mother and researcher commented concerning daughters worrying about being heartbroken: "Maybe girls are seeing all these single moms and worrying that they'll be like that, too."

In addition to this, girls may be facing issues like violence and death more than their mothers did as adolescents. In one focus group, both mothers and daughters felt that the daughters are facing more violence outside of the home than the mothers did when they were young. Exploring these differences could be an interesting direction for future research.

More important, though, are the possible impacts that these differences in negative selves may have within the mother-daughter relationship. "Difficulties in an interpersonal relationship may reflect the fact that one person's behavior is being guided by a possible self that the other person has no access to, or is unwilling to acknowledge" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Daughters may take on actions to find security from these fears that their mothers have never thought of for themselves. Mothers may not understand these actions, causing conflict in their relationship.

As practitioners in the field we can take this information and create more opportunities for mothers and daughters to talk about their hopes and fears. Our community is impacted by the fact that we can now do our own research as we see fit. Prior to this, we were often the research subjects of local college professors and students. As well meaning and useful as their research may have been, the results never found their way back to us. Now, as researchers ourselves, we can share our methods and results within and outside of our community.

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