

The Role of Possible Selves in Early Adolescence

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Introduction

Adolescence is a time of exploration and future planning, when young people envision their lives and set goals related to education, occupation, and family life. The theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) suggests that possible selves (hopes and expectations for the future) act as a motivator and regulator of behavior. Through this process, adolescents' possible selves influence their future outcomes, with recent research indicating that possible selves in adolescence influence educational attainment in early adulthood. While much is known about the types of possible selves that adults hold for their futures, we know far less about the kinds of possible selves adolescents hold, especially younger adolescents.

Exploring the types of possible selves developing during this time period is important for several reasons. First, adolescence is a period of identity exploration, and research has indicated that one expression of identity during adolescence may be possible selves. Secondly, cognitive developments occurring around the time of puberty provide the opportunity for adolescents to begin planning for their futures, and possible selves are one mechanism for completing this developmental task. Understanding possible self content (e.g., type, number of selves, prestige) is beneficial for providing insight into the development of these selves as well as identifying normative aspects of future cognitions for early adolescents.

Accordingly, this study focused on identifying the number and types of possible selves early adolescents hold as an initial step toward understanding the role of possible selves in self development, identity exploration, and future expectations. Because the content of possible selves has been found to vary by gender, gender differences were also examined.

Method and Descriptive Statistics

Participants:

Data came from a large cross-sectional study of sixth to eighth grade students conducted in rural Tennessee. The population was primarily white and lower to middle class. This study included 472 adolescents (234 females; M age = 12.46) assessed in classrooms at school.

Measures:

Possible selves: Adolescents were asked to imagine themselves 5 years in the future and report three things they most hoped, expected, and feared would be true of themselves, respectively. Possible selves were coded into eight domains: interpersonal, intrapersonal, occupation, education, health and safety, property and wealth, status, and role models. **Each domain contained multiple subcategories (e.g., specific types of occupation).**

Demographics: Adolescents reported their gender, age, mother's education with a range from 1 (*some elementary school*) to 7 (*beyond college*), and GPA (ranging from 1 [*mostly A's*] to 8 [*D's and lower*]).

Data Analysis:

Analyses were conducted to explore the following:

- ❖ The frequency with which young adolescents reported possible selves in each domain
- ❖ Gender differences in these frequencies
- ❖ Gender differences in the frequency of reporting hoped for, expected, and feared selves within particular domains.

Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

- ❖ On average, adolescents reported 2 or 3 hoped for, expected, and feared selves.
- ❖ The number of possible selves reported did not differ significantly by gender.
- ❖ Age was negatively associated with the number of possible selves: younger adolescents reported significantly more possible selves, r 's ranged from $-.12$ to $-.17$, p 's < $.05$
- ❖ In terms of domain, occupational selves were most frequently reported, followed by educational and interpersonal.

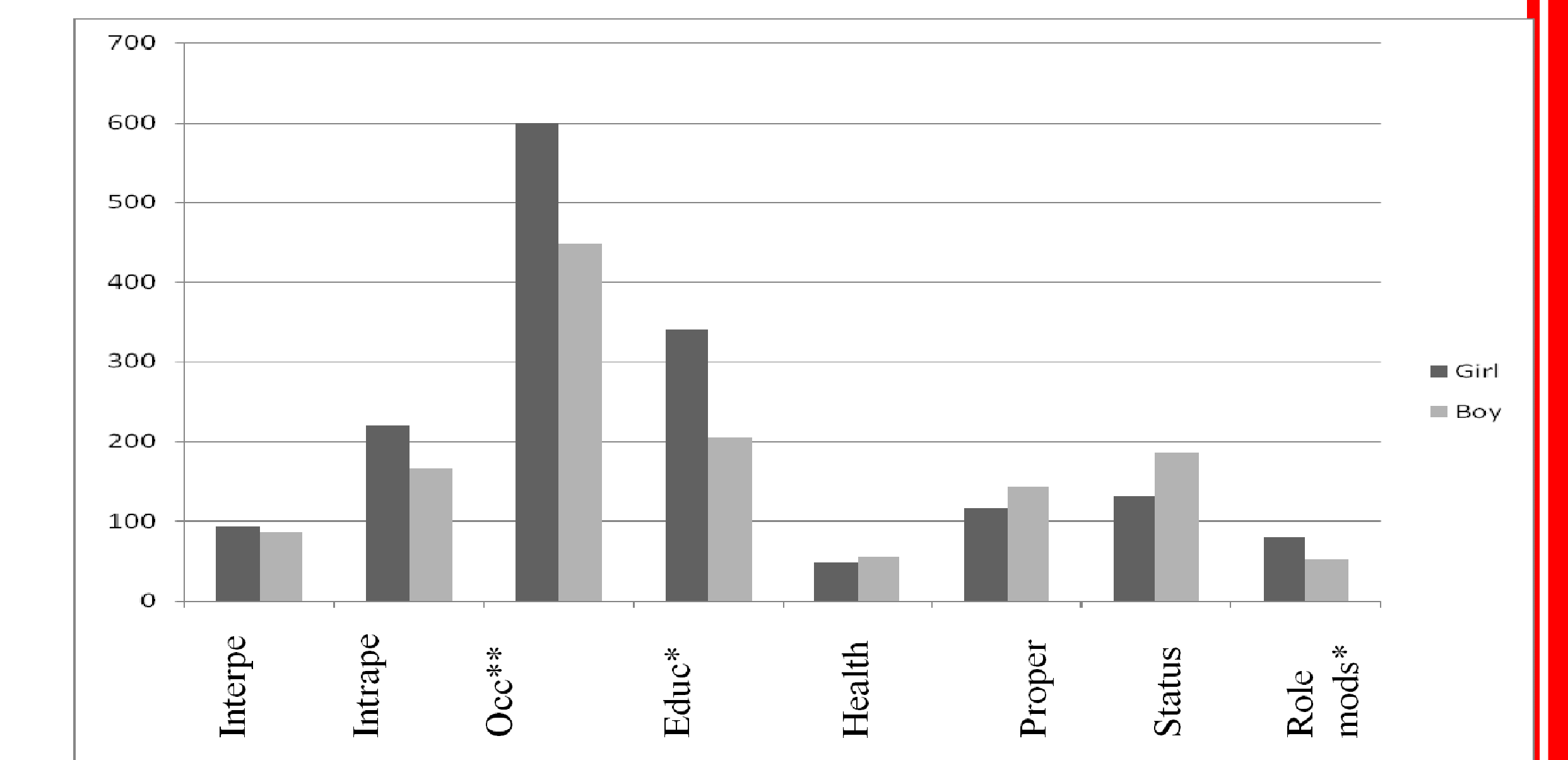
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Gender, Age, GPA, Mother's Education, and Each Domain of Possible Self.

Variable		
Gender	Male	$n = 238$ (50.42%)
	Female	$n = 234$ (49.58%)
Age	$M = 12.46$	$SD = .99$
GPA	$M = 3.26$	$SD = 1.95$
Mother's education	$M = 3.72$	$SD = 1.74$
# Hoped for selves	$M = 2.85$	$SD = .93$
# Expected selves	$M = 2.45$	$SD = 1.29$
# Feared selves	$M = 2.40$	$SD = 1.14$
Possible self domain	Occupation	$n = 1047$ (35.54%)
	Education	$n = 544$ (18.47%)
	Intrapersonal	$n = 376$ (12.76%)
	Status/fame	$n = 308$ (10.45%)
	Property/wealth	$n = 260$ (8.83%)
	Interpersonal	$n = 180$ (6.11%)
	Role models	$n = 131$ (4.45%)
	Health/safety	$n = 100$ (3.39%)

Results

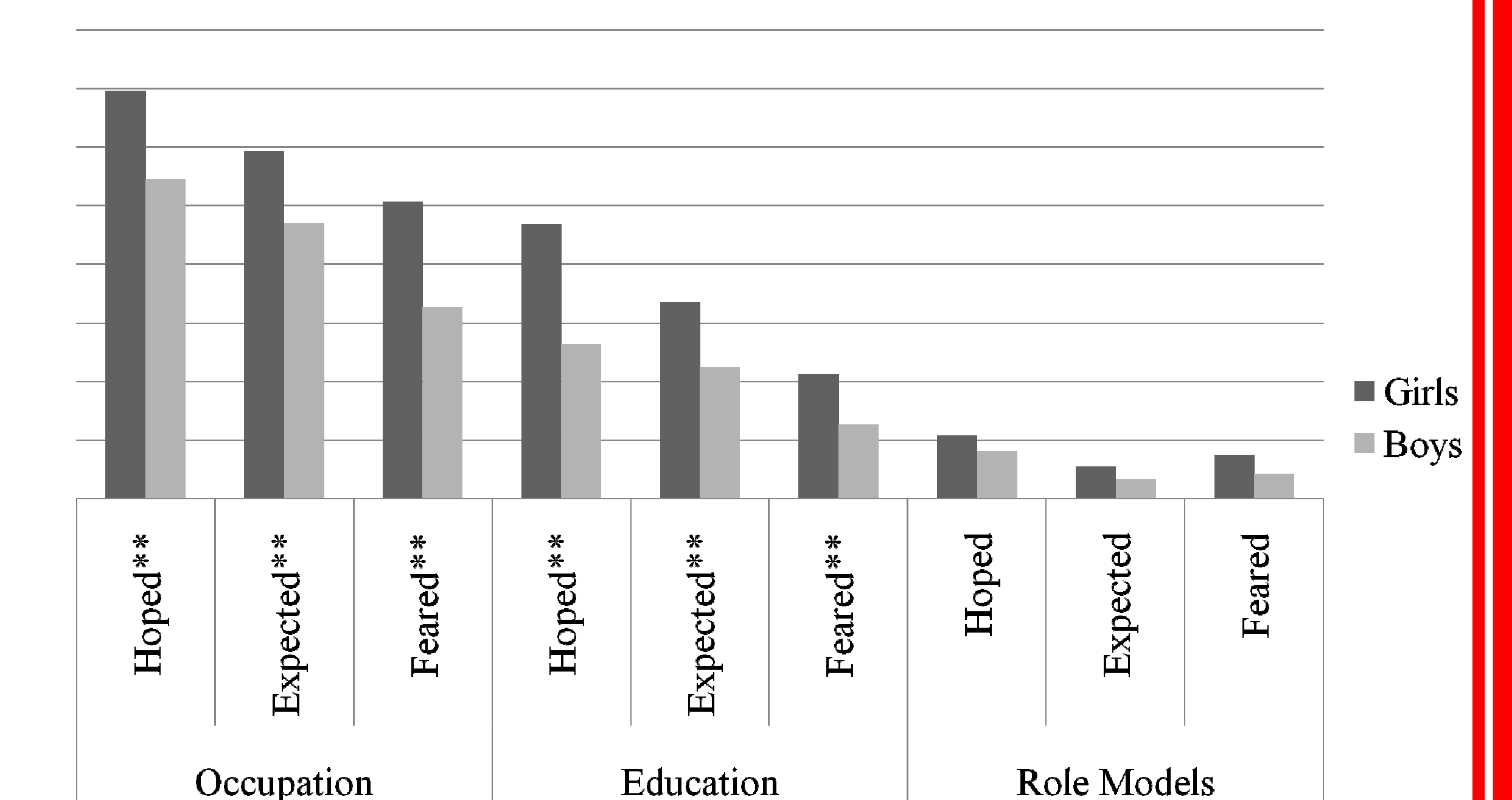
- The first set of analyses used t-tests to explore gender differences in reporting of each domain of possible self (e.g., interpersonal), testing whether boys and girls tended to emphasize different domains (Figure 1)
 - ❖ Girls reported significantly more occupational and educational selves than boys did.
 - ❖ Girls also reported significantly more possible selves related to becoming like role models than boys did.
- The second set of analyses explored whether these significant gender differences were due to the number of reported hoped for, expected, or feared selves in each domain using (Figure 2). ANOVA models indicated that:
 - ❖ Girls reported more hoped for, expected, and feared occupational selves than boys did.
 - ❖ Girls reported more hoped for, expected, and feared educational selves than boys did.
- Finally, for the occupation and education domains, gender differences in the frequency of specific subcategories of hoped for, expected, and feared selves were explored.
 - ❖ Girls reported more hoped for occupational selves that involved either no job or a job requiring an advanced degree. Girls expected more jobs requiring an advanced degree, whereas boys expected more military jobs. Girls reported more fears of having a job that required no training and also jobs that required an advanced degree (Figure 3).
 - ❖ Girls reported more hoped for, expected, and feared educational selves of going to college. Girls reported more often that they hoped to finish high school (not shown).
 - ❖ Notably, most of the selves reported were unattainable within the 5 year time limit adolescents were instructed to use. This is true for many of the domains, including education (e.g., finishing college), and occupation (e.g., becoming a doctor).

Figure 1. Frequencies of each domain of possible selves by gender.



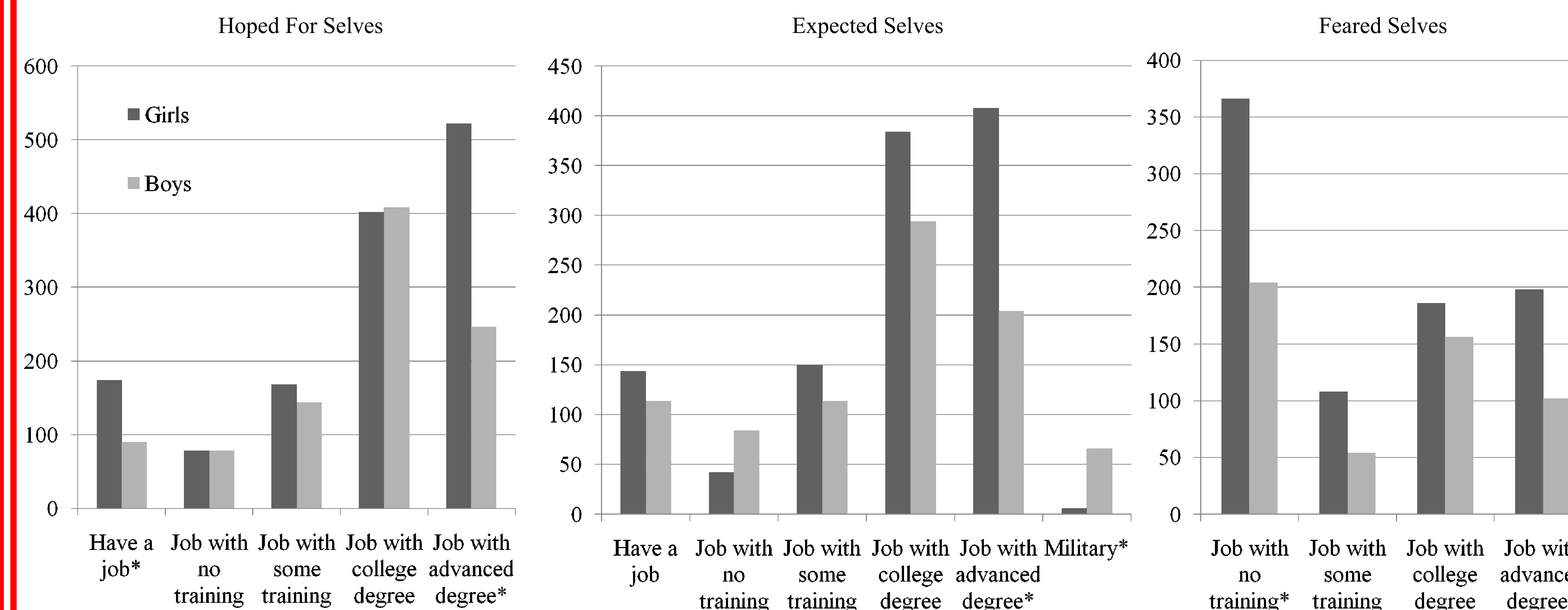
Significant difference between genders; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 2. Frequencies of each type of possible self by gender for select domains.



Significant differences between genders: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 3. Differences in Occupational Selves by Gender and Type



* Significant difference between genders, $p < .05$.

Discussion

- ❖ These results indicate that early adolescents have formed possible selves. However, they often reported possible selves that were not attainable in the specified 5-year period, suggesting that they have difficulty recognizing what is realistic within a particular time frame.
- ❖ Notably, the profile of possible selves across domains was quite different than that reported for young adults (Cross & Markus, 1991) suggesting that possible selves are linked to life stage. These young adolescents most often reported selves related to occupation and education.
- ❖ There were no gender differences in overall number of possible selves; however, the specific content of possible selves varied by gender.
- ❖ The gender differences in possible selves warrant further exploration. It appears that girls were much more focused on occupational and educational possible selves than boys were. Also girls' hopes and fears more often reflected extremes (e.g., fearing jobs with no training and jobs with an advanced degree) suggesting diverse views of their future lives. Future studies should determine whether these gender differences are typical or reflect an Appalachian sample.