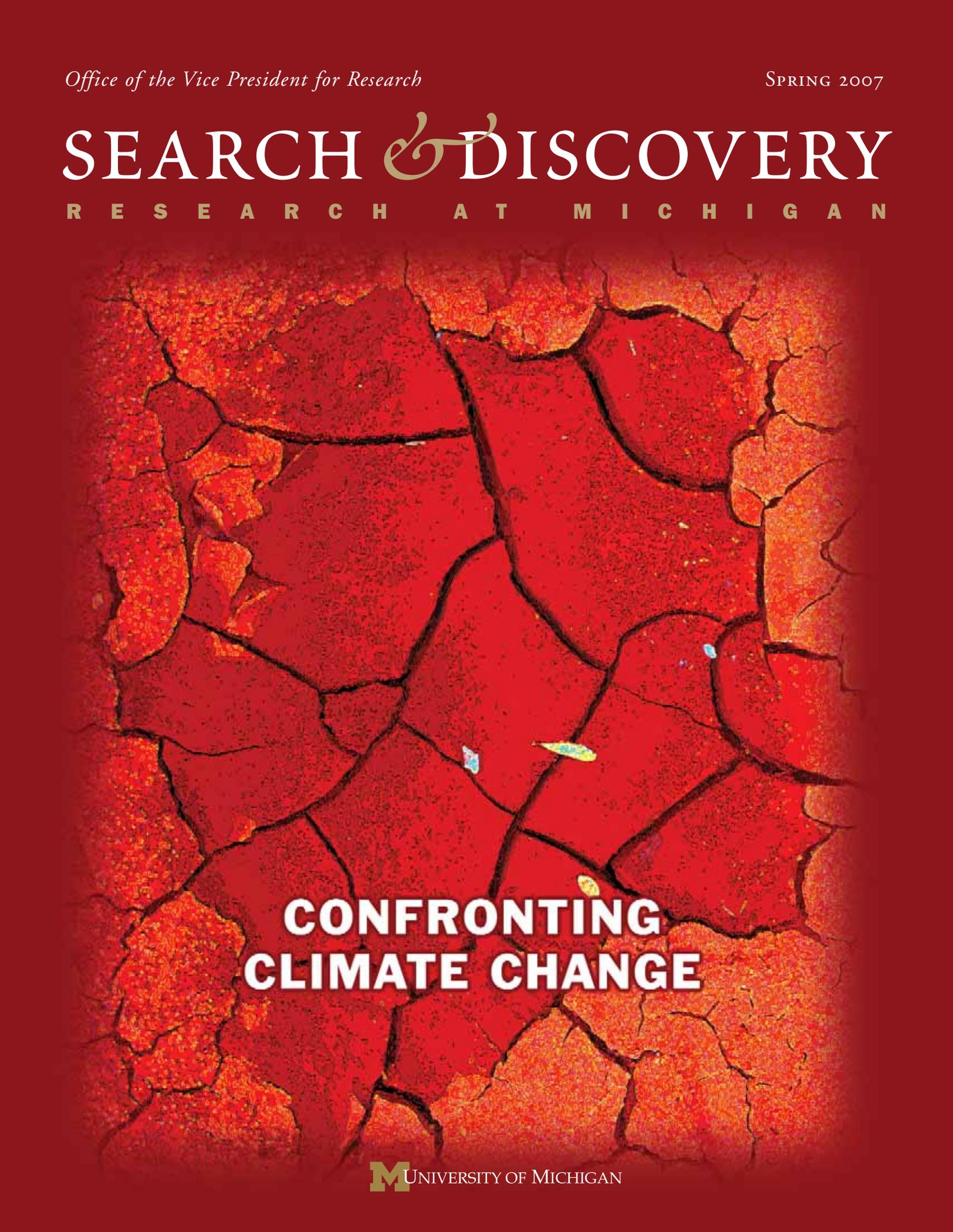


Office of the Vice President for Research

SPRING 2007

SEARCH & DISCOVERY

R E S E A R C H A T M I C H I G A N



**CONFRONTING
CLIMATE CHANGE**

M UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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picture of success

Like their counterparts in the suburbs, teens from the poorest neighborhoods in urban Detroit value school and want to succeed in school. Yet fewer than half of urban teenagers graduate from high school on time.

U-M social scientist Daphna Oyserman was puzzled by this gap between actual academic attainment and high academic aspirations, and believed that low-income and minority teens could be helped to reduce this gap.

“Students clearly state that they want to succeed and their teachers are invested in teaching, yet there remains a gap between students’ attainments and their hopes for the future,” says Oyserman, professor of social work and psychology and research professor at the Institute for Social Research. “One possibility was that part of the gap was due to a discrepancy between students’ wishes for success and their current effort in school.”

Students did not seem to lack positive visions of themselves or hopes for adulthood. What seemed to be missing was the link between these positive future visions and everyday choices young teens make related to school. Success is built on endless repetition of relatively mundane tasks such as completing homework, getting enough sleep, setting and responding to the morning alarm clock, paying attention, and asking questions in class. Students who see future success as linked to these here-and-now activities, or are cued or reminded to engage in these activities, and who don’t feel that these activities would be frowned on by important others, are likely to move toward their goals.

Oyserman wondered if perhaps these were the stumbling blocks that helped create the gap between aspiration and attainment. Perhaps students did not see these strategies as linked to their possible future selves. Perhaps they do not routinely encounter the cues to follow these strategies even if they knew about them.

Still, most teachers remind students to take home their homework and most students know that failing in school does not improve future chances. This suggested to Oyserman a third possibility—that students might know of but not engage in these useful strategies because they were unsure how others would react. Using these insights and her work on identity—plus a body of psychology research on how self-concept influences decisions and behavior—Oyserman proposed a model for why some students will work hard to stay in school while others fail to even show up for class.

According to Oyserman’s theory of identity-based motivation, youths will be more likely to engage in persistent efforts in school if they can envision a goal of doing well and if concrete strategies to do well come to mind and are not seen as incongruent with important social identities.

With funding from the W.T. Grant Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health, she collaborated with a number of Detroit public schools to test her ideas and develop an intervention program for Detroit eighth graders. The program, called School-to-Jobs, aims to bolster the specific psychological processes Oyserman thought could help students stay on track to school success, and help them to see success in school as part of their racial and social identities.

Minority youths get better grades in school when they see links between school achievement, racial identity, and future accomplishment in life, U-M studies show.



Putting Hopes and Dreams into Action

One task teenagers have is to think about the future, to imagine who they will be at a future time. These “possible selves” can be positive or negative images, explains Oyserman: “The ‘clever’ self who passed the algebra test, the ‘fat’ self who failed to lose weight, the ‘fast’ self who fell in with the ‘wrong’ crowd.” Failure to obtain a hoped-for positive possible self may increase the risk for depression, she adds.

Most low-income youth have at least one possible self focused on school. However, few of these teens have in mind strategies for achieving that possible self, such as “set my alarm clock” or “go to class even if my friends skip.” And it’s not enough to stay after class for help once or do homework occasionally. It must be everyday behavior. The teens must avoid getting off-track with pregnancy, drug use, or involvement in crime.

This personal picture of the future must be plausible, too, to motivate the teen to bring to mind and use effective strategies to obtain the positive self and avoid the negative possible self.

Successful strategies for middle-class students may be linked automatically to the academic possible self because, explains Oyserman, “Parents, teachers, and parents of friends all converge to emphasize homework, persistence in the face of difficulty, tutoring, or staying after school if needed.”

In urban low-income communities, youth may have difficulty connecting their possible selves to everyday behavior because they rarely encounter adults who trigger strategies for success. Furthermore, reports Oyserman, low-income youth may interpret their difficulty in self-regulating behavior as a signal to give up on the academically oriented possible self. Doubt creeps in about whether an academic future is genuine or whether people of the same race, economic level, or gender are actually meant to be successful at school.

“Low-income and minority youth are likely to experience at least three sources of difficulty—difficulty bringing to mind school-focused possible selves and linking them to strategies; difficulty maintaining the behaviors necessary to attain these possible selves; and difficulty integrating important school-focused possible selves

with important social identities, such as being a boy or a girl and being African American or Latino,” says Oyserman.

Context is Important

“Caring about school and using effective strategies for doing well in school have to feel like in-group things to do,” Oyserman says. “Boys have to believe other boys want to do well in school and are willing to study in order to succeed; girls have to believe the same about other girls.”

Possible selves do not develop in isolation. Youth need to be able to find connections between their possible selves and their racial and social identities. Social identities are aspects of self-concept based not in individual traits and goals, but on group-based traits and goals. Working class and racial identities are important social identities.

In various studies analyzing racial and cultural identity, Oyserman and colleagues have interviewed students and demonstrated the impact of racial identities on school success.

When a student’s racial identity included a combined focus on both “in-group” and the larger society, this usually led to improved academic performance and higher emotional and behavioral engagement with school over time. Oyserman has found that African American students who felt good about doing well in school because it reflected positively on the Black community excelled, even if they viewed society as somewhat racist and against them. When focus is only on the in-group and not also linked to the broader society, individuals are less likely to reject anti-effort norms, are more at risk of feeling disengaged from school, and more at risk of declining grades, Oyserman says.

In a recent study on Detroit middle school students, feeling connected to one’s racial-ethnic in-group and believing that doing well in school is an in-group characteristic promoted better school outcomes, Oyserman says. In addition, youths who reported high levels of racial-ethnic identity connectedness and awareness of racism in the beginning of eighth grade attained better grades through ninth grade. The positive effect of these components of racial identity on school grades are consistent for African American and Latino youth and for boys and girls.



“Caring about school and using effective strategies for doing well in school have to feel like in-group things to do. Boys have to believe other boys want to do well in school and are willing to study in order to succeed; girls have to believe the same about other girls.”



“This is important because it suggests that interventions, which can bolster a youth’s sense of connection to their racial/ethnic in-group and the belief that doing well in school is an in-group thing to do, can be equally helpful to African American and Latino youths,” Oyserman said. “Girls are doing better in school than boys overall, but racial-ethnic identity can be beneficial for both boys and girls.”

The most recent work in this area is published in the journal *Child Development* by Oyserman, Deborah Bybee (Michigan State University), and current and former students, Inna Altschul, Daniel Brickman, Marjorie Rhodes, Aaron Celious, Elizabeth Inez Johnson, and Kathy Terry.

Possible Selves and Current Behavior

The School-to-Jobs intervention was first tested in Detroit as an after-school program in a middle school. When shown to be successful, it was implemented in three Detroit middle schools. Twice a week for six weeks, in groups of about 12 students, the eighth graders were led through various activities to help them make connections between specific strategies, hard work in school, and racial identity. “The goal is for students to realize that difficulty in school assignments does not mean they can’t complete the work,” Oyserman says.

Students were randomly assigned to the intervention or to a control group that did not participate in the sessions. Parents joined their student for two final sessions focused on communication and interacting with adults in the community.

Following the intervention program, students were tracked for a two-year period, as they moved from three middle schools to more than 80 different high schools. The research team used school records, reports by the students, and teacher reports to measure changes in academic behavior and outcomes.

The effects of intervention emerged by the end of eighth grade and became more marked over time. Youths who participated in the intervention had a better attendance record, grade point average, and standardized test scores. High school teachers rated them as taking more initiative in the classroom and participating more, and as less likely to be disruptive or simply not participate. In addition, the students showed less risk of depression at the two-year follow-up.

The School-to-Jobs program was intentionally brief and inexpensive. To be practical, an intervention program has to be low-cost and manageable for school staff—whether teachers, social workers, or others—to carry out with reliability, Oyserman points out. Interventions that are lengthy and resource intensive are likely to be difficult for schools to maintain and sensitive to turnover in staff and students.

In evaluating the intervention, Oyserman and her colleagues found support for their conceptual model of the program’s influence on improved academic outcomes and mental well being. In concert with social identity and the feeling of thinking about one’s self, called meta-cognitive experience, the intervention worked directly on the student’s “possible selves.”

While Oyserman has been able to replicate the success of the intervention program and validate her conceptual model, she would now like other research groups to see how well it can be generalized to other schools and places. The most recent report on this research is published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by Oyserman, Bybee and Terry. Current

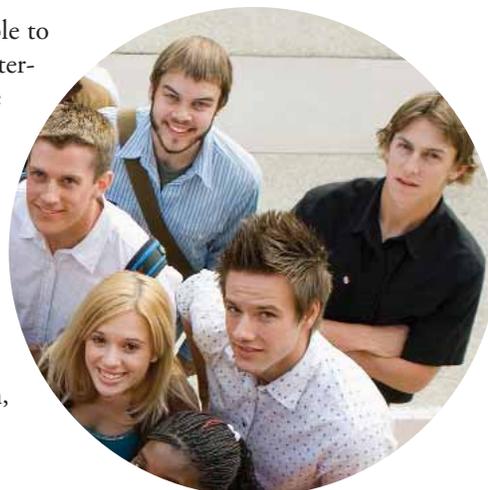
research focused on translating the success of the program to younger students involves collaboration with current U-M doctoral students Leah James and Mesmin Destin.

“The most important finding from the research is that even in areas typically defined as high risk due to poverty and other social indicators, youth want to succeed and can do so more readily if they remain focused on school, undeterred by failure or by concerns that maybe school is not for them,” Oyserman says. “What we need are programs to help children in high-risk contexts hold onto this kind of belief. Research to date suggests that this can happen as part of school-based programs. Future research is needed to better integrate these efforts with the current school reform goals described in the No Child Left Behind legislation. The identity-based motivation model can be effective in thinking about younger children entering the school years.” **S&D**

Further Reading

Daphna Oyserman, Deborah Bybee and Kathy Terry, 2006. “Possible Selves and Academic Outcomes: How and When Possible Selves Impel Action,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91:188-204.

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