

1998

The Importance of College Student Academic Goals: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach

Donald E. Arwood
South Dakota State University

Donna J. Hess
South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist>



Part of the [Regional Sociology Commons](#), and the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arwood, Donald E. and Hess, Donna J. (1998) "The Importance of College Student Academic Goals: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach," *Great Plains Sociologist*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist/vol11/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Sociologist by an authorized editor of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE STUDENT
ACADEMIC GOALS:
A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH**

Donald E. Arwood
Sociology Department
South Dakota State University

Donna J. Hess
Sociology Department
South Dakota State University

ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional study of a sample of first and second year students attending a moderately-sized, Great Plains university is used to demonstrate the correlation between academic self-conceptions and academic goals. Multiple regression analysis shows that academic self-conceptions, academic role-taking, job goals, being a parent, and having a job are excellent predictors of academic goals. The authors recommend that the symbolic interactionist perspective used in the study should be used to study how academic goals link academic self-conceptions with academic behaviors and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Over fifteen years ago, Burke and Reitzes (1981: 83) asked, “what is the connection between *identity* and role *performance*?” Following Stryker’s (1980) approach to symbolic interactionism, they set out to demonstrate “that the self is an active creator of social behavior” (Burke and Reitzes 1981: 83).

What Burke and Reitzes did not include in their explanation was the role academic goals play in bridging identity with role performance. McCall and Simmons (1978) described people as planning animals who define objects with regard to how they relate to their plans. If this is so, goals should be included in any attempt to explain college student role behaviors.¹

College students' goals and plans may be short-term as in specific social situations or long-term, extending over a period of months or even years. For most students, the main long-range goal of being a college or university student is to graduate with at least an undergraduate degree. Some students want, not only to get a degree, but to get good grades; others are happy just to squeeze by. Regardless of the extent of their goals, however, their plan of attack is to act like a student--select a major, sign up for the appropriate courses, attend classes, read text books, write term papers, study for exams, and act in other ways that will ensure that they pass their courses. We can reasonably expect that those who want good grades will put their plan of attack into motion more often than those who merely want to squeeze by. This becomes relevant when we realize that most students also expect that the student status will include nonacademic roles--

1

Goals are things that people strive to achieve. Plans are the methods people use to achieve their goals. The connection between goals and plans is similar to Mead's notion of mind, the "process of first anticipating the consequences of various possible courses of action and then, on the basis of this assessment, choosing or selecting a particular action" (Turner 1994: 63). Hewitt looks at goals in terms of motives; they are aspects of "self-reference in which the person seeks to explain and control his or her own conduct" (1994: 117).

getting a job so they can pay for their education², being a college roommate, joining a fraternity or sorority, going to athletic events, attending house parties, and the like. In sum, students define themselves in terms of goals and plans of action.

The importance of academic goals and how they are tied to student self-concepts is explored in this article. Although it is important to develop an all-encompassing model of academic role behaviors, we must first demonstrate that a relationship exists between self-concepts and academic goals. In a subsequent article, we will focus on how academic goals actually bridge self-concepts and role performances.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The propositions in this paper are based mostly on structural symbolic interactionism, although process symbolic interactionists will see that we have borrowed some of their conceptualizations. As has been well documented (Rosenberg 1981), research on the self has gone down two separate paths, each consistent with a process approach to symbolic interaction or a structural one.³ The *process* approach focuses on situated identities which are defined and adopted in specific social situations. As a person enters into interaction with another, process symbolic interactionists argue, a person “must define the

When talking to students who have jobs, they usually see themselves primarily as college or university students and only secondarily as employees. Having a job is merely a means of staying in school.

The process approach is most identified with *interactionist* symbolic interactionism and the *Chicago School*. The structural approach is most associated with the *Iowa School*.

self, define the other, guide his own actions by taking the role of the other, and constantly adjust and align these actions [and the self as object] with those of the other” (Rosenberg 1981: 594). Process symbolic interactionists argue that the only true social reality is social interaction, which requires empathetic understanding. Empathetic understanding can only be achieved through participant observation, intensive interviewing, and other interpretive-qualitative methods. In contrast, the *structural* approach treats the self as “a stable set of meaning ... that provides structure and relative stability to personality and provides continuity to behavior” (Stryker 1981: 11). Structural symbolic interactionists argue that the self, because it is a stable set of meanings, can be measured and shown to be related to behavior with appropriate quantitative research designs.

Our explanation of student role-making behaviors is similar to the approach of McCall and Simmons (1978), but it also borrows from Burke (1980), Rosenberg (1981), Serpe (1987), Stryker (1980, 1981), Stryker and Serpe (1994) and Erickson (1995). We believe that an adequate explanation of the connection between self-concepts and academic goals must (1) identify the dimensions of academic goals, which we have done above; (2) measure the strength of academic goals; (3) identify dimensions of self-concepts; and (4) show how self-concepts and goals are related.

Measuring the strength of academic goals is an easy enough task. We can ask students to indicate how important it is to: (1) graduate with a college degree; (2) graduate with honors; (3) do well in hard subjects; (4) study for classes; (5) attend classes; and (6) have a high grade point average. Identifying dimensions of self-concepts and how they are related with academic goals is a bit more complicated.

Self-concepts are made up of ideal and situational self-identities, self-images, and self-feelings which develop by means

of role-taking with significant and generalized others (McCall and Simmons 1978; Hewitt 1994; Erickson 1995; Rosenberg et al. 1995). In terms of self-identity, people see themselves through a mirror of social statuses that they occupy, the groups to which they belong, and the ties they have with others in their communities. But conceptions of self go beyond mere social location. Based on taking the role of others, people also have self-images (or self-evaluations) of themselves as adjectives, such as capable, reckless, loving, outgoing, withdrawn, cruel, and the like. As a consequence, people can see themselves not merely as a person, a parent, or a spouse, but also as an *reckless* person, a *nurturing* parent or a *cruel* spouse. Self-efficacy, the belief that one is capable, such as believing one is good at being a student, is a special kind of self-image. Self-efficacy, as with other self-images, may actually be *working copies* of people's social identities (Burke 1980). Also based on role-taking, people see themselves in terms of positive and negative feelings (Rosenberg 1981). This affective component of self is what symbolic interactionists mean by self-esteem or self-worth.

Some self-identities are more important than others, and can steer student role performances in one direction or another. Stryker (1980) notes that people occupy a number of positions in society and define themselves in regard to the roles associated with those positions. These definitions are called social identities, self-identities, or role-identities, and they are organized into an identity hierarchy by means of reflexive role-taking.⁴ McCall and Simmons (1978) propose that there are two identity hierarchies. The first is a hierarchy of identities associated with

Although students' academic role-taking occurs over time, memories of these interactions are objects of symbolic interaction that affect the formation and evolution of academic goals.

ideal self-concepts (hierarchy of prominence), which, we argue, is relevant to long-term educational goals. The second is a hierarchy associated with situational self-concepts (hierarchy of salience). Identities will rank high in the hierarchy of prominence and will elicit concurring role performances more often when people want to maintain ties with those others with whom that identity is aligned in social interaction, when they have strong commitments or investments in the identity, and when they expect intrinsic and extrinsic gratifications from concurring role performances (McCall and Simmons 1978).

With regard to maintaining ties, it is reasonable to expect that students who see “having a group of friends that respect me as a student” as very important will be more likely to set academic goals--to study, attend classes, and to get good grades--than students who indicate that this is not at all important. We could also expect that students who see themselves and want to be seen by others as sociable will put their academic plans into effect less often because they are seeking out situations where they can interact socially with others. Nonacademic roles are not always bad, however. Parenthood could actually increase one’s academic motives and behaviors. It is reasonable to conclude that being a student will mean that parents will have less time for their children. It also appears reasonable, then, to conclude that if parents are going to make this kind of sacrifice, they must expect that in the long run being academically successful will be better for their children. That is, being a good parent means being a good student.

This example points out the importance of students’ characterizations of their identities. Indeed, it would be hard to accept that academic role identities affect students’ role performances directly. According to Burke (1980: 20), role identities “influence role performance only indirectly through the *construction of self-images* and that it is the self-image which

then directly influences performance.” Moreover, some self-images--reckless, nurturing, cruel, etc--are more important than others and, thus, can transcend specific situations and “help to explain the range of commitments we hold to particular role-identities” (Erickson 1995: 133). For instance, students who rank *academic* or *studious* high in describing who they are, will be more devoted to carrying out academic role expectations than students who rank these self-images low in a self-values hierarchy.

As a methodological issue, we can look at the competition of role-identities and self-images in at least three ways. First, we could develop indices to measure identity prominence, identity salience, and salience of self-values. Second, we could develop semantic differential scales with opposing identities and images (parent; spouse; employee; member of student government; student athlete; etc) at each end of the scales. And, finally, we could include various identities in a multiple regression equation and measure the amount of variation in academic goals that is explained by each measure of role-identity. We have chosen to use the first and third of these approaches.

Given the preceding discussion, we hypothesize that the strength of academic goals varies positively with: (H1) academic self-images in a self-values hierarchy; (H2) academic self-efficacy; (H3) academic self-worth; (H4) the importance given to significant others' respect and pride in student's academic abilities; (H5) perceptions of friends' definitions of student as a good student and not as a partier; (H6) importance of getting a good job after graduating; and (H7) parenthood. We further hypothesize that the strength of academic goals will vary inversely with: (H8) the importance of developing life-long friends while at college; (H9) alcohol use; and (H10) having a job.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A random sample of students at a four-year university in the Great Plains region and enrolled in four sections of Introduction to Sociology during the spring semester of 1997 was selected. A questionnaire was administered three weeks before the end of the semester to all students attending class on that day. Only the questionnaires of 1st and 2nd year students who had declared a major were included in the survey population ($n = 149$).⁵ Of these questionnaires, four were not filled out or were far too incomplete to be included, thus reducing the survey population to 145. Of these, ninety percent were randomly selected for analysis ($n = 130$).⁶

Measurement

Six sets of variables are examined. The first set includes the dependent variable, A.GOALS, an index measuring the importance of academic goals. The second set of variables includes dimensions of the self-concept, including: (1)

5

It is assumed that the goals and plans of first and second year students would be different than the goals and plans of third and fourth year students. Third and fourth year students have made the grade by maintaining a grade point average that will keep them in school. They have also invested a lot in their education, which is an impetus in itself for doing whatever it takes to graduate. This is less so the case for first and second year students. Given these differences, it appears wise to treat these two groups as separate populations for this study.

6

The sample was further reduced to 113 during regression analysis, as cases with some missing data were excluded from the analysis.

ACADEMIC--an index measuring the salience of *academic* and *studious* self-images; (2) EFFICACY--an index of the strength of a students' beliefs in how good of a student they are; and (3) WORTH--an index of academic self-esteem. The third set includes two role-taking variables: (1) RT.RESPECT, an index measuring the importance of having friends/parents who *respect/are proud* of the student's academic accomplishments; and (2) RT.GOOD, which measures students' perceptions of friends seeing the student *as a good student* and *not as a partier*. The fourth set includes two alternative goals: (1) J.GOALS--a measure of the importance of getting a high paying job after graduating; and (2) F.GOALS--a measure of the importance of developing life-long friendships while at college. The fifth set includes identities and behaviors that could compete for salience with the academic identity and, thus, could affect academic goals. These are: (1) parenthood (PARENT); (2) being an employee (JOB)⁷; and (3) ALCOHOL--the number of drinks per week, which is an indirect measure of the importance of friendship goals. The last set includes just one extraneous variable, DIFFICULTY, which measures students' opinions of how hard their major is when compared to others.⁸

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Four sets of analyses were done on the data. The first is an univariate analysis. The second is an application of Pearson's

PARENT and JOB are treated as dummy variables in the regression analyses (yes =1; no =0).

This variable is also a dummy variable (more difficult than average = 1; average difficulty or less = 0).

product moment correlation; the third is a multiple regression analysis; and the fourth is a step-wise regression analysis. For the sake of space, the first three analyses are presented within the same figure.

The relationships between **A.GOALS**, the index of the intensity of academic goals, and the independent variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. **A.GOALS** is strongly and significantly associated with **RT.RESPECT** (.550). It is moderately and significantly associated with **ACADEMIC** (.412), **SELF-WORTH** (.370), and **RT.GOOD** (.470). There are weak, significant correlations between academic goals and **J.GOALS** (.276), **ALCOHOL** (-.185), **F.GOALS** (.157), and **DIFFICULTY** (.177). Based on correlation analysis, all of the research hypotheses, except H2, H7, H8, and H10, are accepted. H8 looks at the association between academic goals and friendship goals. It was hypothesized that this relationship would be negative; it is positive.

TABLE 1. ANALYSES OF ACADEMIC GOALS AND SELECTED VARIABLES
(n = 113; mean = 6.487; s = 3.309).

VARIABLES	UNIVARIATE STATISTICS			CORRELATION			REGRESSION		
	Mean	sdt	r	r	P	Beta	P	P	
ACADEMIC (H1)	6.487	3.309	.412	.0001		.225273	.0035		
EFFICACY (H2)	12.681	3.285	.076	.2120		-.153394	.0604		
WORTH (H3)	9.327	2.068	.370	.0001		.160363	.0379		
RT.RESPECT (H4)	8.310	1.518	.550	.0001		.385783	.0001		
RT.GOOD (H5)	7.102	1.989	.470	.0001		.220385	.0071		
J.GOALS (H6)	4.018	.991	.276	.0020		.231842	.0021		
F.GOALS (H8)	4.044	.967	.157	.0480		-.084371	.2655		
ALCOHOL (H9)	1.900	1.953	-.185	.0250		.141417	.0668		
PARENT* (H7)	---	---	.151	.0877		-.015615	.8490		
JOB* (H10)	---	---	.078	.3828		.141417	.0668		
DIFFICULTY*	---	---	.177	.0466		.043721	.5236		

*correlation coefficient is eta for a sample of 130; otherwise, n = 113.

MULTIPLE R .76993
R SQUARE .59279
ADJ. R SQU .54844

TABLE 2. STEP-WISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS:
DESCRIBING THE VARIATION IN
ACADEMIC GOALS

VARIABLES P	MULTIPLE R (Total)	R ² (Total)	Beta
RT.RESPECT	.55026	.30278	.426013 .0001
ACADEMIC	.66923	.44787	.286615 .0001
PARENT	.70405	.49569	.167172 .0130
RT.GOOD	.72504	.52569	.280995 .0004
J.GOALS	.74795	.55943	.211377 .0026
JOB	.75851	.57533	-.129787 .0489

The regression analysis shows that ACADEMIC, RT.RESPECT, RT.GOOD, J.GOALS, and PARENT are significant in explaining the variation in academic goals. The R² is actually quite impressive; 59.279 percent of the variation in A.GOALS is explained by the model. The R² (.57533) in the step-wise regression analysis is also quite impressive. RT.RESPECT explains the most variation in academic goals (30.278%). The amount of variation in academic goals increases with the addition of ACADEMIC (44.787%), PARENT

(49.569%), RT.GOOD (52.569%), J.GOALS (55.943%), and JOB (57.533%). The impact is positive for each of these variables except for having a job, which is negative.

CONCLUSIONS

Hewitt (1994: 1), in his text on symbolic interactionism, writes that “[w]e human beings live in a world of names for ourselves, for others, and for our activities. These names announce who we are, what we are doing, and why are we doing it.” These names are not created in a vacuum. The names that students construct for themselves, what they are doing, and why they are doing it are formed in interaction with family members, friends, teachers, and fellow students. Indeed, students form self-concepts and goals by taking-the-role of these others. Although students’ role-taking occurs over time, memories of these interactions are objects of symbolic interaction that students use to *develop academic goals* and to make an academic role.

The conclusions of this study are consistent with Hewitt’s declaration. Students are reflexive and interactive. They take themselves and others as objects of symbolic interaction and, based on emergent definitions, develop academic goals and plans for achieving those goals. Indeed, our findings support the following:

- ▶ The importance of parents and friends respecting or being proud of student’s academic achievements is important in developing strong academic goals. Having friends who see the student as a good student and not as a partier is also important. Dedicated students do not just happen; their existence is a result of academic role-taking and having positive feelings about these self-objectifications.

- ▶ When academic self-images, self-worth, and job goals are strong, becoming a successful student is a high priority. When they are weak, the importance of getting good grades, graduating with honors, doing well in hard subjects, going to class, and studying are weaker.
- ▶ It also appears that parenthood is a motive for doing well. It is reasonable to assume that being a student will mean that parents will have less time for their children. It also appears reasonable, then, to assume that if parents are going to make this kind of sacrifice, they must expect that in the long run being academically successful will be better for their children.
- ▶ Although having a job does not appear to be correlated with academic goals ($r = .0775$), including it as a significant factor is justified once we control for multicollinearity among all of the independent variables. It appears that the impact of having a job on the development of academic goals is masked in a simple bivariate correlation.

These conclusions are tentative. We have focused only on a narrowly defined population of students. These students may be similar to other first and second year students attending four year universities in the Upper Great Plains, but we suspect they are somewhat different than students in other parts of the United States. Why? Because many of the students attending the university from which the sample was drawn come from rural and nonmetropolitan areas. The Upper Great Plains also has smaller proportions of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and other social categories that, by all accounts, differ from whites in many respects--for instance, different socioeconomic status,

educational aspirations, and occupational expectations. Students attending a four-year university may also differ from students attending junior colleges and private universities.

Self-efficacy and alcohol usage were found to be less important to the process of generating academic goals than was expected. Before moving on to the next step in our analysis of student role performances, we will need to address these concepts. As it was, neither were statistically significant in the regression and step-wise regression analyses. With regards to self-efficacy, the weak relationship between it and academic goals may be explained in at least three ways. First, the difference between it and self-worth may not be as conceptually or empirically distinct as it might first appear. The fact that most researchers combine these variables into a single measure of self-esteem should have tipped us off ahead of time. Second, we may not have measured self-efficacy adequately. Self-efficacy was measured by combining three agreement/disagreement scales: (1) It is easy for me to remember things; (2) I am capable of learning even the most difficult material; and (3) I am able to do as well on exams as most other people. Third, it is possible that some highly self-efficacious students are not living up to their potential; that is, it is easy for them to remember things and they could learn difficult material if they wanted to. The problem is, they might not want to. There also may be methodological problems with the way alcohol usage was measured. We asked students to indicate the average number of days they drank alcohol per week and when they did drink, how many drinks did they have on average. Many students who drink alcoholic beverages, even those who drink more than their share, may be regulating when they party; that is, they might not be partying and drinking when an exam is coming up.

The problematic nature of self-efficacy and alcohol usage points to the need to come up with unique, more adequate measures of them before proceeding to the next phase of our research. Nevertheless, the overall findings of this study are consistent with symbolic interactionist propositions and deserve to be explored in more detail. In particular, researchers should look at how academic goals bridge academic self-conceptions to academic behaviors and outcomes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burke, Peter J. 1980. "The Self: Measurement Requirements from an Interactionist Perspective." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43 (1): 18-29.
- Burke, Peter J. And Donald C. Reitzes. 1981. "The Link Between Identity and Role Performance." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 44 (2): 83-92.
- Charon, Joel M. 1982. *Symbolic Interactionism, Fourth Edition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Erickson, Rebecca J. 1995. "The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society." *Symbolic Interaction* 18 (2): 121-144.
- Hewitt, John P. 1994. *Self and Society, Sixth Edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- McCall, George J. And J.L. Simmons. 1978. *Identities and Interactions*. NY: Free Press.
- Rosenberg, Morris. 1981. "The Self-Concept: Social Product Social Product and Social Force." Pp. 593-624 in *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by Morris Rosenberg and Ralph Turner. NY: Basic Books.

- Rosenberg, Morris, Carmi Schooler, Carrie Schoenbach, and Florence Rosenberg. 1995. "Global Self-Esteem and Specific Self-Esteem." *American Sociological Review* 60 (1): 141-156.
- Serpe, Richard T. 1987. "Stability and Change in Self: A Structural Interactionist Explanation." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 50 (1): 44-55.
- Stryker, Sheldon. 1980. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings.
- Stryker, Sheldon. 1981. "Symbolic Interactionism: Themes and Variations." Pp. 3-29 in *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by Morris Rosenberg and Ralph Turner. NY: Basic Books.
- Stryker, Sheldon and Richard T. Serpe. 1994. "Identity Salience and Psychological Centrality: Equivalent, Overlapping, or Complementary Concepts?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57 (1): 16-35.
- Turner, Jonathan. 1994. *Sociology: Concepts and Uses*. NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Turner, Ralph. 1962. "Role-Taking: Process and Conformity." Pp. 20-40 in *Human Behavior and Human Processes*, edited by A. M. Rose. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.