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Gender Differences in Possession Aspirations

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The "American Dream," in whatever form is alive and well on college campuses, and its achievement often motivates college performance. Possession aspirations tend to be specific, concrete, and characterized by high expectations (i.e., a significant difference exists between the amount and level of current possessions and those desired). This age group is also very susceptible to the social influence and cultural norms, where many of the stereotypical components of the "American Dream" originate. Gender stereotyping of the "American Dream" is pervasive in our culture, particularly as portrayed through the mass media (e.g., women aspire to a husband and family; men aspire to financial success). Thus one might expect male and female students to exhibit significant differences in their possession aspirations, both in type of possessions/experiences desired and the relative priorities attached to different items.

Our study explores the possibility of such gender differences using two different approaches and samples. The first approach is designed to elicit gender role stereotypes with regard to possession aspirations: "What do you think most college women (men) would like to have/do/be three years after graduation?" Both same sex and opposite sex stereotypes will be obtained. The second approach probes for individuals' actual aspirations: "Three years after graduation, how do you want your life to be in terms of ..." Specific categories of possessions examined (in both approaches) include: (1) the things you own; (2) the place you live (including the things inside); (3) the way you get around; (4) how you spend your free time; (5) what you do for a living; (6) your relationships with people; and (7) your physical appearance. Priority rankings of these seven categories provide information regarding the relative importance of each class of possessions.

Content analysis examines differences between perceptual stereotypes and between male and female aspirations. Differences in aspirations and in priorities as perceived by the opposite sex are compared to those each gender holds for itself.