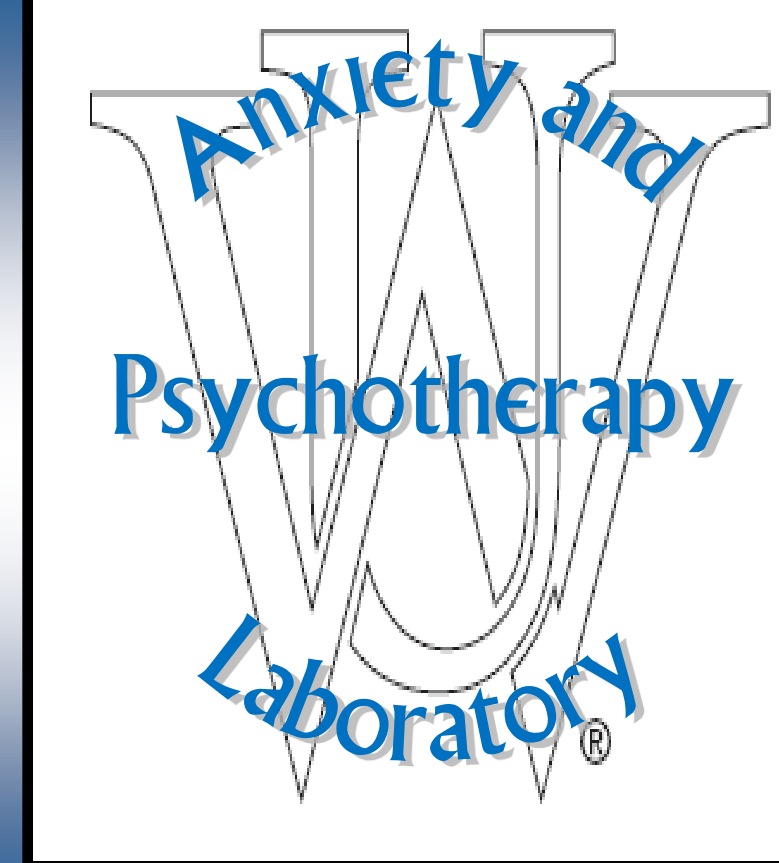# Ought, Ideal, and Undesired Self-Discrepancies: Are there Ethnic Differences?

Cheri A. Levinson & Thomas L. Rodebaugh
Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract

Introduction: Previous research has found that Asians (versus Caucasians) exhibit higher levels of ought and undesired self-discrepancies. We examined if these ethnic differences could be better explained by acculturation.
Methods: Participants (N = 155) completed two sessions. In session 1, participants completed a computer task to measure self-discrepancy. In session 2, participants' ought self-discrepancies and closeness to an undesired self were primed.
Results: The relationship between closeness to an undesired self and ethnicity was mediated by acculturation. Acculturation had significant moderation effects for affect when self-discrepancies were primed.
Discussion: Interventions based on these systems (i.e., Self-System Therapy; Vieth et al., 2003) should consider acculturation when treating diverse individuals.

Introduction

- Self-discrepancy theory predicts that self-guides influence affect (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986)
  - Ideal self = *want* to be
    - Higher levels of discrepancy = depression
  - Ought self = *should* be
    - Higher levels of discrepancy = anxiety
  - Undesired self = *do not want* to be
    - Closeness to an undesired self = negative affect
- Ought self discrepancy and closeness to an undesired self in Asian participants predicted depression better than ideal self-discrepancies (Cheung, 1997)
- Closeness to an undesired self had a direct path to social anxiety in Asian but not Caucasian participants (Hardin & Leong, 2005)
  - However, Japanese participants *less* distressed over discrepancies (Heine & Lehman, 1999)
- Acculturation
  - Changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences
  - May better explain previously found ethnic differences in self-discrepancy research

Participants

- Participants were 155 adult students
  - Mostly women (n = 102; 66%)
  - Caucasian (n = 91, 59.1%), Asian/Asian American (n = 46, 29.9%), African-American (n = 10, 6.5%), Multi-racial (n = 6, 0.6%)
  - Median age was 19.82 (SD = 1.74)
  - Most (n = 132, 85%) were U.S. citizens
  - Ranged in generational status from first to fifth or more generations
    - Mean generational status of 3.19 generations (SD = 1.52).
  - English was language spoken in home (n = 121, 78%)
    - Chinese (n = 15, 9.7%), Korean (n = 14, 9.1%), and other (n = 4, 2.6%) as the primary language
- Main analyses: only Asian/Asian American and Caucasian participants

Measures

Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000)
- Measure of dominant and ethnic acculturation
- Dominant acculturation = Adoption of, or immersion in, the dominant society
- Ethnic acculturation = Retention of, or immersion in, an ethnic society other than dominant society

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)
- Positive (e.g., *excited*; *proud*) and negative activated affect (e.g. *upset*; *scared*).
- State instructions given
- Used to measure affect during priming task

Brief State Anxiety Measure (BSAM; Berg et al., 1998)
- Measure of state anxiety
- Measured anxiety during priming task

Ought, Ideal, and Undesired Self-Discrepancies (Shah et al., 2004)
- Listed Ought, Ideal, and Undesired traits on computer
- Rated each characteristics on a 0 to 9 Likert-type scale from 0 ("not at like me") to 9 ("exactly like me")
- For ought/ideal rating closer to 0 was "more discrepant"
- For undesired rating closer to 9 was "closer to undesired self"

Procedure

Session 1:
- Answered questionnaires
- Completed measure of ought, ideal, undesired selves

Session 2: (approximately a week later)
- Answered questionnaires
- 2 most discrepant ought/undesired traits are primed (as can be seen in below figure): Why is it important to be _____?

Priming Task Procedure:
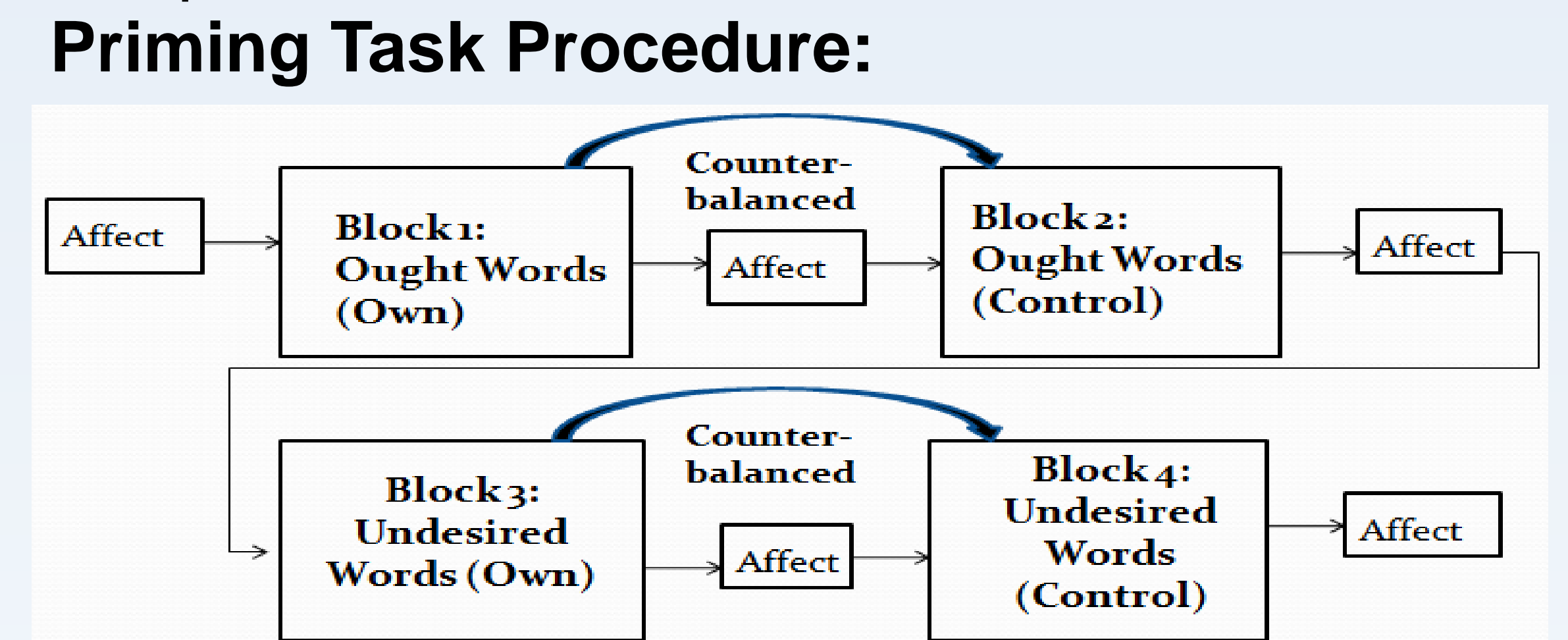
Analyses: Indirect effects (i.e., mediation) were conducted using bootstrapping
- Maximum likelihood estimator was used to report standardized path estimates for the figure*

Results

- No significant differences between Asian and Caucasian participants on ought, ideal self-discrepancy, or closeness to an undesired self
- Dominant acculturation carried the indirect effects of ethnicity on closeness to an undesired self
- The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effects was -1.507 to -.058 (significant at $p < .05$)

Model of the relationship between ethnicity, dominant acculturation, and closeness to an undesired self
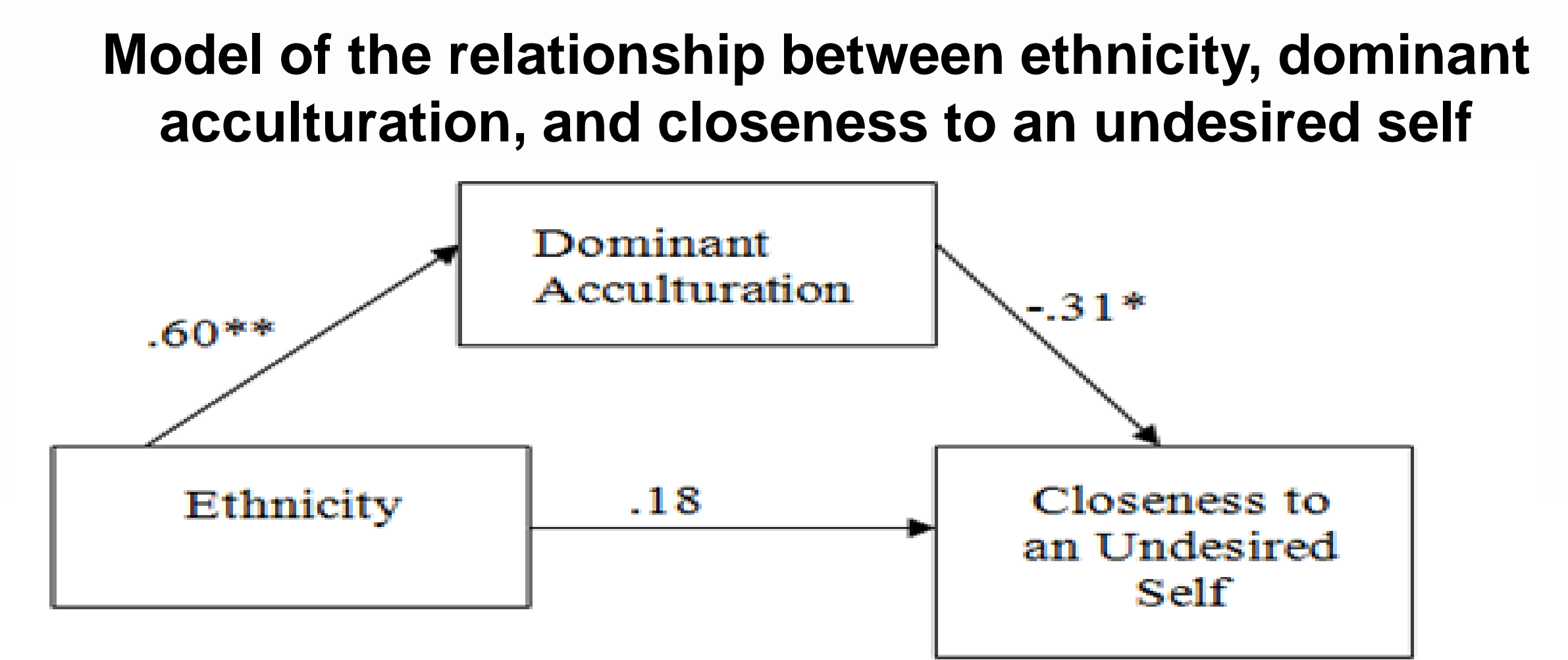
Note. Paths are standardized coefficients. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Results: Priming Task

- Ethnicity did not predict anxiety experienced from own ought words or negative affect over own undesired words
- Significant interaction between ought self-discrepancy and dominant acculturation (part r = .23, p = .030) predicting anxiety experienced from own ought words
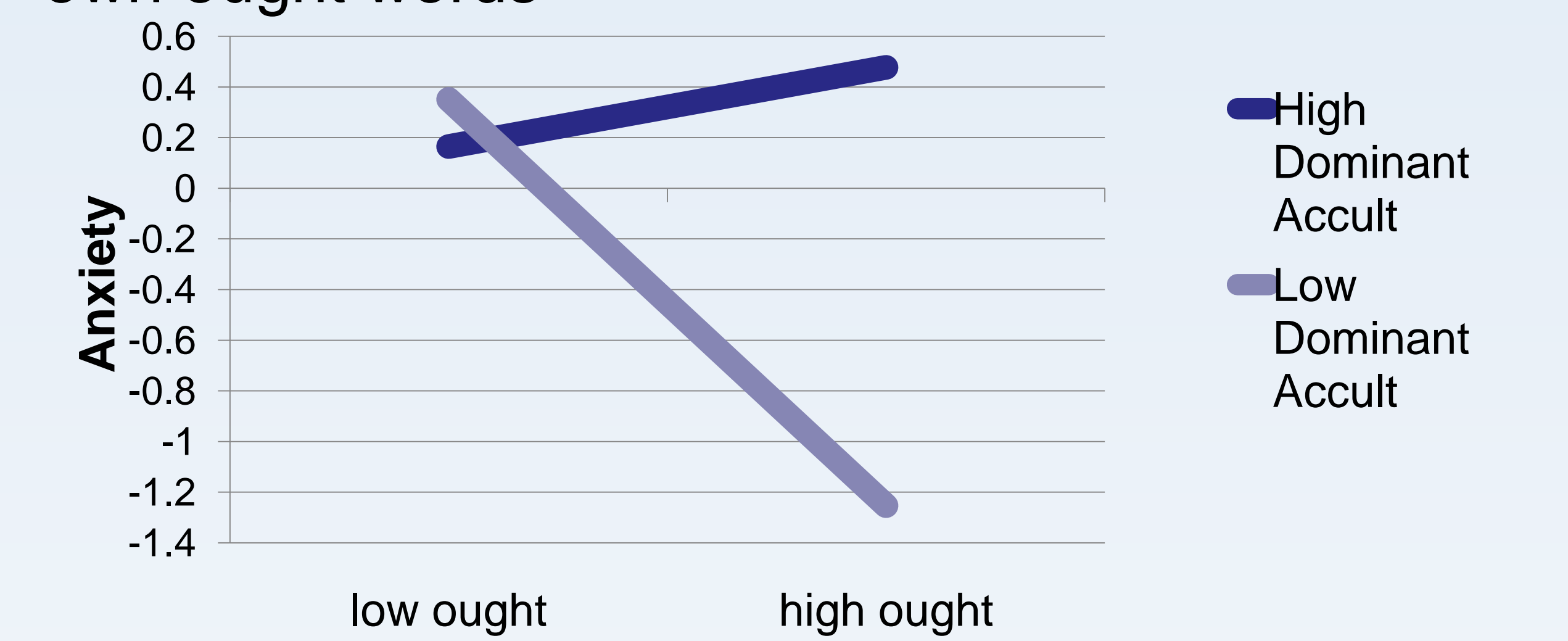
- Significant interaction between ethnic acculturation and closeness to an undesired self (part r = .26, p = .004)
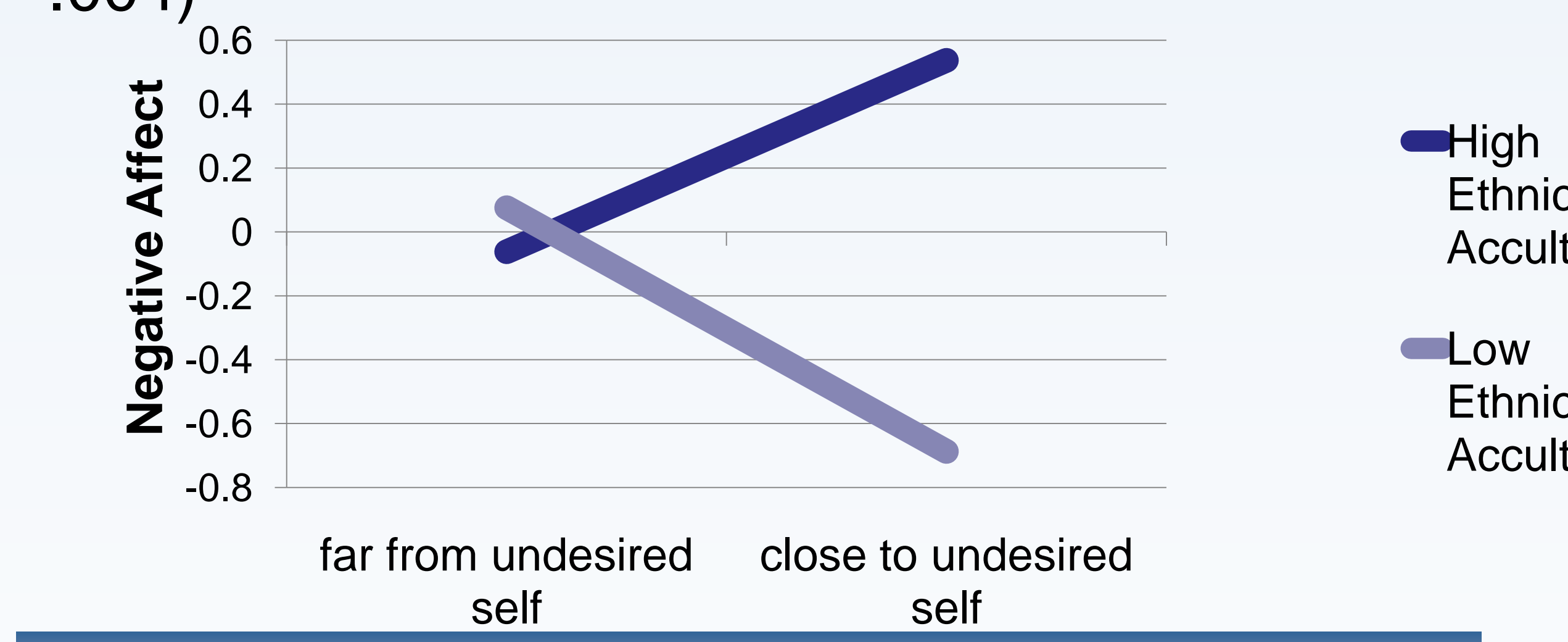
Discussion

- Differences found when utilizing acculturation (rather than *only* ethnicity) as a predictor
- Assimilation to Western culture mediated the relationship between closeness to an undesired self and ethnicity
  - Acculturation may better explain how ethnicity exerts its effect on closeness to an undesired self
- Ought self-discrepancy and closeness to an undesired self operate differently dependent on levels of acculturation
  - Considering levels of acculturation when using therapies based on self-discrepancy theory (i.e., Self-System Therapy; Strauman et al., 2006) may be beneficial