



Possible Selves Theory

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Self-concept is one's theory about oneself, the person one was in the past, is now, and can become in the future, including social roles and group memberships. A well-functioning self-concept helps make sense of one's present, preserves positive self-feelings, makes predictions about the future, and guides motivation. The contents of the future-oriented component of self-concept have been termed *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are the selves one believes one might become in the near and the more distal future and are therefore important in goal setting and motivation (for a review, see Oyserman & James, in press). Possible selves are valenced; that is, each individual has both positive images of the selves he or she desires and expects to become and negative images of the selves he or she wishes to avoid becoming.

While current self-concept focuses on who one is now, by focusing on the future, possible selves allow for self-improvement, malleability, and personal growth. They provide a chance to experiment with and try on various potential futures ("Maybe I'll be a teacher or maybe I'll be a nurse. What would it be like to become a teacher or a nurse? How would I get there? What are the stages and obstacles along the way?"). The future is the target of much of our efforts as individuals. Homework is done and broccoli is eaten all in pursuit of some future state. As noted by Oyserman & James (in press), doing or not doing homework one night really does not make that much difference, but if each night's homework is viewed in this way, homework will rarely get done—and that does matter. Whether one eats or does not eat the potato chips with lunch today does not make or break one's likelihood of being overweight, but, over time, each of these small choices adds up. In this sense, current actions are taken due to individuals' beliefs about their consequences in the future. Generally speaking, individuals are motivated to reduce the gap between their present and future positive possible selves while increasing the gap between their present and future negative possible selves.

Because possible selves provide both positive images of one's self attaining future goals and negative images of one's self failing to attain these goals (and of the feared selves one might become instead),

possible selves are an integral part of a well-functioning self-concept. By focusing on the future, possible selves can improve well-being and optimism about the future. Things may not be going well now, but a possible self suggests the promise of change. Possible selves can improve one's ability to self-control and self-regulate because possible selves help one to focus on goals and lessen the influence of distractions in one's social world. Possible selves are most likely to improve self-regulatory ability when they are salient, linked with strategies, feel congruent with other aspects of self-concept, and when difficulty attaining them feels like proof one really cares rather than evidence for withdrawing effort (Oyserman & James, in press).

In terms of content, school-focused selves are common in childhood and adolescence regardless of socioeconomic status (for a review, see Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). School-focused possible selves describe positive expectations regarding one's school success and academic attainment, including specific, immediate goals such as passing eighth grade or not failing the math test and more general long-term views such as being smart or getting a GED (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Youth are likely to have multiple, potentially competing possible selves, not all of which will influence behavior at any particular point in time (Oyserman & James, in press).

DEVELOPMENT OF POSSIBLE SELVES: INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Possible selves are influenced by both individual and contextual factors. Others can serve as role models and anti-models for both positive and negative possible selves. These others can be particular individuals with whom one has a relationship or simply a general sense of what others like oneself have been able to do.

Past Experiences. One's own past experiences of success or failure in a domain clearly influences one's beliefs about the relevance or attainability of possible selves in that domain as well as one's ability to articulate strategies to work on the possible self. Past failures may make it harder to articulate both what success would look like in a particular domain and which strategies are likely to be effective. Past successes may make it easier to articulate both what success would look like and which steps are needed to attain a desired possible self. For example, youth with a history of juvenile delinquency and school failure are less likely to articulate education and job focused possible selves, students from low income families are less likely to generate multiple strategies for how to attain school-focused possible selves like doing well and getting good grades (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, in press; Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Developmental Context. Content of possible selves reflects developmentally relevant self-tasks. During the school years, these tasks focus on being competent in school, being connected to others, and developing a sense of self. Not surprisingly, common possible selves are focused on school, relationships and avoiding becoming off-track such as using drugs or becoming pregnant (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). With development, the focus of these tasks evolves. College students and young adults are focused on occupational, educational, and interpersonal possible selves (such as getting married), whereas family and parenting possible selves become more important in young and middle adult years.

As adults age, job-focused possible selves recede and physical health related possible selves become more prominent. However, some possible selves persist even when they are not easy to attain (for a review, see Oyserman & James, in press).

Social Context. Possible selves are also influenced by others' expectations and by historical and sociopolitical contexts. Some social contexts provide easy access to role models and reminders to focus on school while other contexts rarely provide these cues. Minority, low-income, and rural youth may be less able to imagine school-focused possible selves or to sustain these possible selves if their contexts include few models of overcoming barriers to success or are rife with stereotypes that are not congruent with school-focused possible selves. Research has shown that if going to college does not feel like an option as early as middle school, students withdraw academic effort (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).

ASSESSING POSSIBLE SELVES

This section draws heavily from the review of measures and measurement strategies presented in Oyserman and Fryberg (2006). *Oyserman and Fryberg (2006)* provide specific references for both close- and open-ended measures used to assess possible selves and the interested reader is referred to their more detailed discussion.

Close-Ended Measures. Respondents are provided a list of possible selves and either asked to check off which possible selves are relevant or rate their likelihood of attaining each possible self or sort and rank the importance of these possible selves. Close-ended measures are easy to code but require preparation to be sure that the content is relevant to the sample of interest. Moreover, with close-ended measures, one can only learn how much respondents endorse the items provided, not what they would have said given free rein. Though past research results can form a basis, to make sure that content is relevant, pilot work is needed. Given the potential diversity of possible selves, a pre-set checklist may not accurately reflect content of possible selves.

Open-Ended Measures. Open-ended tools typically open with a brief statement of what possible selves are and ask respondents to generate their own possible selves and, where relevant, their strategies for attaining them. The strengths of an open-ended measure are that it allows participants to describe their possible selves without constraint and that the format is easily adapted to different groups and contexts. The limitations of this method are that it requires content-coding of responses and generating one's own responses (rather than simply endorsing a pre-set list as is done in the close-ended method) is likely to be more effortful.

MOTIVATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF POSSIBLE SELVES ON CHOICE, PERSISTENCE, ACHIEVEMENT

The future is an important component of self-concept and doing well in school is a common element of youths' future possible selves (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). In their review, Oyserman and Fryberg report on studies linking possible selves with reduced risk of substance use and sexual activity. Thus,

sixth through ninth graders with fewer positive possible selves were more likely to report cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption and eighth graders whose possible selves focused on being popular rather than academic success were more likely to report smoking and drinking alcohol in the ninth grade. Seventh grade African American boys reported less initiation of sexual activity after participating in an intervention to develop possible selves.

However, possible selves do not always sustain self-regulatory action. Youth do fail algebra and engage in risk-taking behavior. Possible selves succeed in focusing effort when they are linked to behavioral strategies, they feel congruent with important social identities, and they are balanced so that difficulty working on the possible self is not construed to mean that the possible self is unimportant (much as the 'no pain, no gain' metaphor in sports, see Oyserman, et al., 2006). Each of these issues is described below.

Strategies to Attain Possible Selves. Imagining what is possible for one's future can increase optimism, but articulating a possible self is not enough to produce sustained effort and behavior change. For that to occur, possible selves need to be linked with specific strategies (Oyserman et al., 2004). Strategies are concrete behaviors such as studying or setting an alarm clock. Strategies help one to focus on goals while anticipating and planning for setbacks by developing plans of action and fall back plans. In one study, by the end of the school year, students whose school-focused possible selves included detailed strategies reported feeling more efficacious; results were not limited to positive feelings, according to school records, students with strategies attained better grades than those without them (Oyserman et al., 2004). In another study, an intervention increased students' possible selves and strategies to attain them succeed in improving outcomes, including grades and in-class behaviors, even when other conditions suggested risk of school failure (Oyserman, Brickman, Rhodes, 2007).

Social Identity. One is more likely to engage in strategies to attain a possible self when the possible self and the strategies feel congruent with one's important social identities (e.g., racial-ethnic, gender, social class). Otherwise, the possible self itself or working on attaining the possible self will feel like it conflicts with the rest of who one is. For example, if boys believe that only girls raise their hands to participate or do their homework or stay after class for help, they are less likely to engage in these activities, even if they believe that these strategies would help them attain school-focused positive possible selves (for the general model, see Oyserman, et al., 2006).

The Carrot and the Stick: Balance in Possible Selves. It is tempting to focus only on the positive since thinking about how things can go wrong may feel discouraging. However, focusing on both positive and negative possible selves in the same domain improves focus and is associated with better outcomes. Balanced school-focused possible selves occur when one has both a positive possible self (e.g., going to college) and a feared or to-be-avoided possible self (e.g., being an unemployed drop-out) in the same domain (Oyserman, et al., 2006). Having both images serves as a carrot and a stick, simultaneously reminding the student of the goal (the carrot) and of where the student may end up if effort is not sustained (the stick). Students with school-focused balance in possible selves are less likely to be involved in delinquent activities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) and are more likely to attain better grades (Oyserman et al., 2006), and the presence of balance in possible selves may be particularly important in social contexts in which one is likely to encounter obstacles to achieving one's goals.

IMPLICATIONS OF POSSIBLE SELF THEORY FOR TEACHERS

Teachers, parents, and students all have possible selves— images of how things might be in the near and more distal future. These images illustrate that change is possible. Possible selves can undergird self-improvement by showing a path toward the future and by highlighting where one might end up if effort is not maintained. Intervention to help teachers, parents, and students focus on what they want to become and avoid becoming, what they value, and how they expect to engage in becoming like their desired selves and avoiding becoming like their undesired selves can be highly effective. Indeed, the theory of possible selves has been used to understand progress and life transitions for both youth learners and adults in continuing education and other settings.

Perhaps the most important message that educators can take from the research on possible selves is that possible selves are malleable and can be influenced by intervention to enhance the content of possible selves. Changing possible selves through intervention can lead to positive changes in academic behavior, in better academic performance and lower risk of depression (Oyserman et al., 2002; 2006). Of particular note is the School-to-Jobs (STJ) intervention that focused explicitly on improving academic outcomes by changing possible selves. STJ was tested both as an after-school and an in-school intervention, running twice per week for six weeks so that it was completed by Thanksgiving break.

Each STJ session focused on developing an aspect of possible selves. Beginning sessions linked school-focused possible selves to important social identities (e.g., gender or racial-ethnic groups), linked proximal possible selves (e.g., graduating from eighth grade) to desired but distant adult possible selves (e.g., going to college, getting a good job), discussed how possible selves are influenced by role models, and linked present action to possible selves. Later sessions focused on identifying specific strategies to be enacted in the present that would help youth obtain their possible selves. Students articulated how they would cope with difficulty that they might encounter in attaining their desired possible selves. Program activities involved individualized activities such as creating a timeline into one's future, active participation by students, and group exercises. Two final sessions involved parents, with the goal of providing youth and parents structured activities in which to talk about possible selves and strategies to attain them (see Oyserman et al., 2006). Evaluation indicated that STJ successfully improved time spent engaged in strategies (e.g., improved in-class behavior, time spent doing homework) and long-term academic attainment, as measured by standardized test scores and attendance (Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman et al., 2002). Additionally, participation in STJ reduced participants' depressive symptoms (Oyserman et al., 2006) and buffered youth from the negative effects on grades and behavior of low parent involvement in school (Oyserman, et al, 2007). Effects were sustained through two years of follow-up assessment. In sum, possible selves are useful as descriptive and predictive tools and can be modified by in-school activities resulting in significant long-term benefits for children.

See also: [Relevance of Self-Evaluations to Classroom Learning](#)

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