

Possible Selves and temporal orientations: implications for access, retention and success

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Possible Selves

- Through personalized beliefs about the future-self individuals able to project '*what they might become, what they would like to become, what they are afraid of becoming*' (Markus & Nurius 1986: 954).
- Multiply or singly/relate to one/multiple views of a future career, education, health, lifestyle etc. (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003)
- Generalised states (sad, happy) and/or specific roles (parent, lawyer)

Possible Selves: development

- May be highly developed or elaborated, or undeveloped; some aspects may have more salience (Garcia and Pintrich, 1995; Vick, 2011).
- Drawn from '*the pool of possible selves...categories made salient by the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context[s] and... individual's immediate social experiences*' (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954).

Possible Selves: development 2

- Are dependent on social, cultural, economic and historical backgrounds (Oyserman et al., 1995; Vick, 2011)
- Informed by:
 - gender (Chalk et al., 2005; Lips, 2002)
 - class (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011; Oyserman, et al, 2004; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006)
 - race (Oyserman, et al, 1995; Kao, 2000; Yowell, 2002; Frazier, 2009; Vick, 201, Stevenson and Clegg, 2012, Stevenson, 2012)

The ability to think into future scenarios and to construct imaginary ‘project selves’ that involve ‘realistic’ or what Bourdieu called ‘coherent and convenient’ mobility trajectories is differentially distributed along social class lines. (Corbett 2007, p. 785)

Possible Selves: validation

- Contingent on whether they are validated/affirmed, or threatened/ignored
 - Family
 - Advisors/Educators
 - Wider societal discourses
- Actual or ‘true’ possible selves may contradict other important social identities (Osyerman et al, 2006) e.g. ‘fitting in’; ‘hoped for’ future may not therefore be the ‘true’ self.

Possible selves and institutional policy work

- Participation in undergraduate education indivisible from the expected outcome of that education
- The implied graduate future is ever-present, and all the more powerful where there are rising costs of tuition, such as in the UK.
- This graduate future is drawn upon by:
 - school career services (Duggan, 2016)
 - university marketing materials (Symes and Drew, 2017)
 - undergraduate curricular and extra-curricular focus on career futures and employability (Baker and Henson, 2010).
 - discourse of possible futures endemic to programmes of outreach and widening participation

Imagining a future

- multiple ways in which structures within and outside of Higher Education constrain the ways that futures can be imagined
- social class, race, disabilities and immigration status are markers of inequality that enable and limit particular kinds of Higher Education futures
- interplay between structure and agency
- interaction of cultural, structural and social processes

Project 1: Possible Selves and ECA

- Students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity
- Highly linked to family, class and gender
 - Time future: highly developed possible selves
 - Time present: developed student selves, under-developed and blocked future possible selves
 - The past and future in the present: enduring values-based possible selves

Project 2: Possible selves and attainment

- An exploration of the link between ‘possible selves’ and the attainment of BAME students on social science courses
- Students with an underdeveloped view of themselves as the future employed
- Students whose views of the future are constantly changing
- Students with an unrealistic view of their future possible self
- Students who are planning for an unknown future
- Students whose past relates to future possibilities
- Students whose imagined futures are both focussed and highly realisable
- Informs strategies being put in place (academic and ECA)

Project 3: Possible selves

BAME students

- Research on degree attainment gap
 - Black students: 'hoped for' selves (to achieve high academic results) competing with their 'ought to' selves (not over-perform/not stand out academically).
 - Asian and Chinese: disconnect between hoped for future selves (high achievers), 'true' selves (lacking know-how/neglected and so likely to under-perform) and 'ought to' selves (seen as high achievers).
 - White students: much greater congruence between their hoped for, true and 'ought to' selves
- Informs academic help seeking and help demanding activities

Project 4: Possible Selves and Refugees

- Fractured selves
- Ought to
 - Take any job
 - Earn money
 - Not take money from the state
- True
 - Professional role
 - Higher earner
 - Familial role model

Possible Selves and Refugees 2

- Im/possible Selves
- Absent
 - Time future: highly developed possible selves
 - Time present: developed student selves
 - Those whose imagined futures are both focussed and highly realisable

Present

- Those planning for an unknown future
- Those whose past relates to future possibilities
- Blocked future possible selves
- The past and future in the present

Implications

- Uncertainty about directions; unsure how to plan
- Goals abstract or largely unattainable
- Possible selves and motivation
- Need to support development of new possible selves
- Need access to mentors and education advisors, who operate both as sources of possible selves and as a context for their elaboration (Fletcher, 2007).
- Higher education and HE advisors can play a role
- Need to develop road maps and help set concrete plans and attain goals

Possible Selves: road maps

- More elaborated the future self, more likely to engender action but requires focused direction of strategies (Oyserman et al. 2006)
- Road maps (Oyserman, 2006): connecting actions in the present with desired/feared futures

Limitations

- possible selves concept allows an acknowledgement of the powerful role played by personalised imagined, hoped for and feared futures, but runs the risk of situating educational problems with the individual, thereby ignoring social and structural issues.
- need to foreground discussions of the struggle between endemic discourses of individualisation and structural constraints on educational possibility.

Possible selves and our practice

- How might you embed the concept of the possible self in your work?