

Possible Selves

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Self-concept is an individual's idea of who the individual was in the past, who the individual is at present, and who that individual has the potential to become in the future. When considering self-concept, group memberships and other social roles typically shape how an individual thinks about him- or herself. A strong self-concept helps an individual to make sense of his or her present situation, maintains positive feelings through difficult situations, make sensible predictions about the future, as well as helps to sustain motivation.

Possible selves is the term that has been used to refer to the aspect of self-concept that refers to an individual's predictions about his or her future. Possible selves are the various forms of him- or herself that an individual believes he or she may become in either the near or more distant future. Possible selves are considered a critical component of motivation and goal-setting. An individual's possible selves typically include both positive and negative selves, with positive selves representing positive images that an individual aims to become, and negative selves representing negative images that an individual aims to avoid becoming.

With the positive and negative images of the future provided through the use of possible selves, they are considered an essential aspect of an adaptive self-concept. Through the use of possible selves, individuals are able to focus on optimistic hopes for the future. Despite current life situations, possible selves give individuals goals they can work towards as well as negative outcomes they wish to avoid. With regards to the implementation of self-regulation geared toward future goals, the use of possible selves are most effective when they are clear, combined

with effective strategies, compatible with other components of self-concept, and when difficulty serves as motivation to continue rather than motivation to give up.

When developing possible selves, both individual and contextual factors play critical roles. The individual factor that has the most influence on the development of an individual's possible selves is past experience. Past experiences of positive or negative outcomes in an area will have a strong influence on an individual's belief about his or her ability to become their possible selves as well as ability to create and implement strategies to work towards the possible self. Past failures commonly make it more difficult for individuals to envision success as well as create and implement strategies that will lead to future success.

Conversely, past successes frequently make it easier for individuals to envision successful create and implement effective strategies. Contextual factors important to the development of possible selves include both developmental and social context. The developmental level of an individual will have a strong influence on the content of possible selves in that a young child's tasks will focus on developing a sense of self and being academically competent, whereas more mature tasks will focus on occupational and interpersonal function. Social context influences the formation of possible selves through role models and the expectations of others. Social contexts often have considerable influence on possible selves in that some social contexts provide easy access to appropriate role models whereas other social contexts do not provide appropriate role models. For example, low socioeconomic youth may be less inclined to develop positive possible selves without access to models of how to overcome obstacles in their environment.

Although positive individual and social contextual factors may increase the extent to which positive possible selves come to fruition, they will not result in positive outcomes on their

own. Possible selves are successful and maintained over long periods of time when they have been linked to strong behavioral strategies, they correspond with social identities, and a level of difficulty in attainment that will neither exhaust nor inhibit interest. Strategies are a necessary means to obtaining possible selves once they have been created. Successful strategies are concrete and detailed, work to enhance focus, and plan for setbacks by developing backup plans. Once these strategies are in place, individuals are more likely to sustain their efforts if their social identities are compatible with the possible self they are aiming to become. If an individual feels that the possible self is in conflict with current social identities, it is less likely that they will engage in strategies to attain their ideal possible self. The most effective way to reach ideal possible selves is to create both positive and negative possible selves for the same domain. For example, a positive possible self (i.e., getting your dream job) and a negative possible self (i.e., working in a job you hate) would both serve to motivate an individual to implement strategies and challenge social identities in order to become his or her ideal possible self.

Further Reading

Kerpelman, J., & Dunkel, C. (2006). *Possible Selves: Theory, Research and Applications*. Nova Science Publishers Incorporated.

Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., Terry, K., & Hart-Johnson, T. (2004). Possible selves as roadmaps.

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