Future Orientation in the Self-System: Possible Selves, Self-Regulation, and Behavior

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**ABSTRACT** Possible selves are representations of the self in the future. Early theoretical accounts of the construct suggested that possible selves directly influence motivation and behavior. We propose an alternative view of possible selves as a component in self-regulatory processes through which motivation and behavior are influenced. We demonstrate the advantages of this conceptualization in two studies that test predictions generated from theoretical models of self-regulation in which the possible selves construct could be embedded. In one study, we show how viewing possible selves as a source of behavioral standards in a control-process model of self-regulation yields support for a set of predictions about the influence of possible selves on current behavior. In the other study, we examine possible selves in the context of an interpersonal model of self-regulation, showing strong evidence of concern for relational value in freely generated hoped-for and feared selves. These findings suggest that the role of possible selves in motivation and behavior can be profitably studied in models that fully specify the process of self-regulation and that those models can be enriched by a consideration of future-oriented self-representations. We offer additional recommendations for strengthening research on possible selves and self-regulation.

Self-regulation is a fundamental activity of the self-system, the organized, dynamic, and causal constellation of thoughts, feelings, and motives that constitutes people’s experience of themselves (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Although...
moment-to-moment experience might be dominated by people’s experience of themselves from the past and imagine themselves in the future. Moreover, these past selves, and the imagined future selves to which they often give rise, are consequential components of the self-system that likely play a key role in the ongoing activity of self-regulation.

In this article, we consider the role of *possible selves*, representations of the self in the future, in self-regulation. We begin by outlining conceptual models of the construct, starting with the original model, then proceeding to elaborations on that model and alternative conceptual models. Next, we highlight the manner in which possible selves generally have been studied, noting that relatively few studies have examined the putative causal effects of the construct. We suggest that such studies are relatively rare, in part, because the effects of possible selves are rarely considered in the context of theoretical models that specify a process by which their influence on motivation and behavior is realized. We then describe two studies in which possible selves are considered in this way. We conclude the article with recommendations for improving operational definitions of the construct so that it can be more readily incorporated into research on self-regulation.

**CONCEPTUAL MODELS**

*Original Conceptualization*

In their seminal presentation of the construct, Markus and Nurius (1986) defined possible selves as “self-knowledge [that] pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future”; that is, “selves that we would very much like to become,” “selves we could become,” and “selves we are afraid of becoming” (p. 954). These aspects of future-oriented self-knowledge are assumed to derive from representations of the self in the past, reflecting specific experiences such as prior performances and social comparisons as well as the more general experiences and expectations conferred by cultural and historical context. Unlike past and current selves, possible selves have not been realized and, therefore, are not constrained by concerns over what is realistic or plausible. As such, possible
selves are more malleable and, therefore, less stable than representations of the self anchored in the past or present.

Future-oriented self-knowledge is both descriptive and motivational. Current and past selves are evaluated and interpreted with reference to possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Thus, for instance, a current representation of the self as “average student” would be viewed differently by an individual with a salient “surgeon” or “physicist” possible self compared to an individual for whom the possible self “musician” or “athlete” is most salient. More relevant for self-regulation are the motivational properties of possible selves. Because possible selves represent hopes and fears, they motivate the pursuit or avoidance of specific behaviors (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For instance, a salient representation of self in the future as “divorcée” might motivate career choices that do not take time and attention away from one’s spouse and the avoidance of conversation topics that would highlight significant differences of opinion.

Possible selves are constituents of a differentiated, dynamic self-system (Hoyle et al., 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987). They become relevant for current self-representation and behavior when they are recruited into the working self-concept, the subset of self-knowledge that is active in working memory (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986). A given possible self might rarely be activated and, therefore, have little impact on current self-representation and behavior. Alternatively, that possible self might be chronically activated and highly consequential for current representations of the self and approach toward or avoidance of specific behaviors (Norman & Aron, 2003). For instance, individuals actively pursuing weight loss might find that they frequently contemplate the “slender self” or the “fit self,” and their current self-representations as well as their eating and exercise behaviors are interpreted and evaluated with reference to these possible selves.

A fundamental distinction between possible selves concerns whether they are representations of the self to be pursued or avoided. Those to be pursued are representations of the self that are, in the eyes of the individual, desirable. These hoped-for selves are positive and often based on assumptions or observations of other people rather than personal experience relevant to a particular self-representation. Possible selves to be avoided are those that are undesirable. These feared selves are negative and often based on personal
experience. Because feared selves are more grounded in personal experience, they are more effective at predicting current-self states than hoped-for selves (Ogilvie, 1987; cf. Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999), although they are less readily activated than hoped-for selves (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992).

To summarize, possible selves, as originally conceptualized, are future-oriented representations of the self that provide context for interpreting and evaluating current and past selves and motivate behavior. In both capacities—self-descriptive and motivational—possible selves are relevant for self-regulation. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, possible selves typically have not been studied in that context.

Extensions of the Original Conceptualization

Although possible selves initially were characterized as constituents of a dynamic self-system with implications for behavior, the specific characteristics of possible selves that give rise to behavior were not specified. In subsequent characterizations of the construct, Markus and colleagues extended their original conceptualization to make more explicit the basis for the hypothesized link between future-oriented self-representations and current behavior (e.g., Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Possible selves, described as “action-oriented representations” (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 213) and “cognitive/affective elements that incite and direct one’s self-relevant actions” (p. 217), were characterized with reference to more general models of information processing. From this perspective, possible selves were hypothesized to produce behavior because they provide individuals with an image of themselves engaged in behaviors relevant to those self-representations and, in so doing, render accessible more cues relevant to these behaviors (cf., Gollwitzer, 1999). The accessibility of these cues is attributable to the fact that information processing is biased by the content of the currently activated representation of self (i.e., the working self-concept). As such, the emergent goals, unlike goals that are widely shared or imposed by others, are specific and self-defining.

Although all possible selves have the potential to influence current behavior, some are more likely to do so than others. Possible selves most likely to influence behavior have been termed self-regulatory...
possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Self-regulatory possible selves are those that represent a self-defining goal and include specific behavioral strategies for pursuing the goal. Self-regulatory possible selves can be distinguished from self-enhancing possible selves, which contribute to positive feelings about the self but do not have direct relevance for current behavior. For instance, academic possible selves that envision the self studying and avoiding distractions are likely to motivate current behavior, whereas those that envision the self simply as a high school graduate might engender positive feeling about the self but are not likely to motivate current behavior (Oyserman et al., 2004).

An extension of this model adds a consideration of the potential conflict among possible selves relevant to a specific domain of behavior. Specific representations of the self in the future, like all self-representations, are associated with other representations of the self—past, current, and future (Markus & Wurf, 1987). As such, when a specific possible self is active in memory, it is possible that other, associated self-representations are activated as well. When those self-representations motivate behaviors that are inconsistent with behaviors motivated by the possible self in question, the likelihood of behavior consistent with the possible self is reduced (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, in press). Similarly, possible selves are associated with other cognitions relevant to the behaviors implied by the possible selves. To the extent that these cognitions undermine confidence that the behaviors can be sustained over time, or performed at all, the likelihood that the possible self will motivate behavior is reduced (Oyserman et al., in press). Possible selves most likely to produce behavior are those that suggest behaviors people feel confident they can perform and sustain that are not inconsistent with associated self-representations.

Another extension of the original conceptualization considers the motivational consequences of off-setting, or balanced, hoped-for and feared selves (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For instance, an individual might simultaneously harbor the self-representations “high school graduate” and “dropout.” One basis for the proposition that balanced possible selves provide stronger motivation than hoped-for or feared selves alone is straightforward—the motivation conferred by balanced possible selves is additive and therefore greater than the motivation conferred by the hoped-for or feared self alone. Additionally, balanced possible selves tap both approach and avoidance
motives, thereby broadening the repertoire of behaviors relevant for the desired outcome.¹

Elaborations of the original description of the possible selves construct have resulted in a conceptual model that specifies characteristics of those possible selves most likely to influence current behavior. Such possible selves suggest behaviors that are self-defining but do not conflict with associated self-representations. They comprise behavioral strategies that can, with confidence, be translated into immediate and sustainable action. And they are coupled with other possible selves that suggest complementary actions that contribute to attainment of the same outcome. Importantly, these elaborations do not extend the basic definition of possible selves as future-oriented representations of the self.

*Prototype Model*

A promising approach to defining possible selves likely to motivate behavior draws on an extensive literature on prototypes, mental models of self (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984), others (Cantor & Mischel, 1979), and situations (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982). Of specific interest and relevance are prototypes of self and others engaged in or not engaged in specific behaviors (e.g., Barton, Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1982). Comparisons of the influence of prototypes and possible selves focused on enacting or not enacting the behavior indicate that both influence current behavior regardless of whether the focus is action or inaction (Ouellette, Hessling, Gibbons, Reis-Bergan, & Gerrard, 2005). The influence of both types of images is qualified by individual differences. Specifically, prototypes influence behavior only for individuals high in the tendency to compare socially (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), whereas possible selves influence behavior only for individuals high in the tendency to consider future consequences of their actions (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). These findings indicate

¹. Quinlan, Jaccard, and Blanton (2006) suggest that the balance hypothesis has not yet been tested in a manner that is free of statistical confound because the effect of balanced selves, an interaction effect, is not evaluated controlling for the main effects of hoped-for and feared selves. They conducted a statistically appropriate test and found no evidence of a balance effect; however, their prototype operational definitions differ significantly from the operational definitions of hoped-for and feared selves in prior research.
that, for some individuals, possible selves patterned after prototypes motivates current behavior beyond any influence of prototypes of others behaving in the present.

A related strategy more closely aligns prototypes and possible selves, using prototypes as a basis for defining possible selves and the logic of expectancy-value models (e.g., Feather, 1982) for capturing variation on these possible selves (Quinlan, Jaccard, & Blanton, 2006). Using this strategy, possible selves are based on social prototypes that correspond to individuals who engage in or do not engage in the target behavior (e.g., Barton et al., 1982). Positive and negative features of the prototypes are distinguished, yielding positive and negative prototypes of individuals who do or do not engage in the behavior. These present-oriented prototypes become future-oriented possible selves when individuals indicate the likelihood that each feature will describe them in the future (expectancy) and rate the valence of each feature (value). The summed products of these ratings constitute participants’ standing on four prototype-based possible selves tied to the behavior of interest: positive (hoped-for)-action, positive-inaction, negative (feared)-action, and negative-inaction. The initial study using this conceptualization and measurement strategy indicated that the possible self corresponding to the negative-inaction prototype predicted binge drinking, an effect that persisted after controlling for current-self standing on the prototype features as well as attitude toward, subjective norms about, and perceived control over the behavior (Quinlan et al., 2006).

Prototype-inspired efforts to align more closely possible selves with behavior define possible selves using features that correspond to others either engaged in or not engaged in the behavior. Defined in this way, possible selves evince one of the key features of self-regulatory possible selves—by representing the self engaged in or avoiding a specific behavior, they suggest strategies for enacting the behavior in the present (Oyserman et al., 2004). Prototype-based possible selves differ from self-regulatory possible selves in that they are not necessarily self-defining; however, the expectancy-value operational definition provides a means of determining the extent to which the prototype is self-defining (Quinlan et al., 2006). By separately generating prototypes of the future self engaged in and not engaged in the behavior, this approach offers an equivalent but alternative approach to operationally defining balance. These strengths are offset by a move away from the rich content of freely
generated representations of self to normative representations provided by the researcher.

**Related Constructs**

The rich store of self-knowledge offers the potential for many different representations of the self, of which possible selves are a subset. When considering the role of possible selves in self-regulation, it is useful to distinguish possible selves from related but distinct self-representations prominent in theoretical models of self-regulation. Chief among these is the ideal self, which has a long history in psychological science and is central in prominent models of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Higgins, 1987). Because the ideal self typically has not been realized, it is not a representation of the current self. Yet, most approaches to defining ideal self operationally do not explicitly place it in the future. As such, although a reminder of an ideal self might give rise to a possible self, it might instead suggest a simple alternative to the current self. Similarly, the ought self (Higgins, 1987) is a representation of self that contrasts with current self but it might or might not inspire a possible self. To be avoided are undesired selves, which are more likely to be grounded in the past or in the observed experiences of others than in future representations of the self (Ogilvie, 1987). Like ideal and ought selves, undesired selves might translate into possible selves; however, they are not always future-oriented representations of the self. Thus, although possible selves are related to other representations of the self, their strict representation of the self in the future sets them apart from other self-representations.

**STATUS OF THE CONSTRUCT IN PUBLISHED RESEARCH**

Because of their potential to motivate behavior and the ease with which they can be mapped onto hopes, dreams, goals, and aspirations, possible selves have been studied in a wide range of populations and contexts. Indeed, a PsycINFO® search on the term “possible self” revealed more than 270 publications inspired by Markus and Nurius’s (1986) seminal paper in the 20 years since it first appeared in print. Many of these publications describe empirical studies in applied settings. The range of populations and behaviors encompassed by these publications is impressive,
including, academic achievement (e.g., Clements & Seidman, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2004), delinquency (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990), career counseling (e.g., Chalk, Meara, & Day, 1994), health behavior (e.g., Ouellette et al., 2005), and aging (e.g., Hooker, 1992). A survey of the ways in which possible selves have been conceptualized with reference to other variables in these publications is informative regarding the potential relevance of the possible selves construct for models of self-regulation.

There are four principal roles a construct such as possible selves might play in a research study—独立 variable, intervening variable, dependent variable, and moderator variable (Hoyle & Robinson, 2003). In light of our earlier review of theoretical work on the construct, one might expect the typical investigation to consider possible selves as an independent or intervening variable, that is, as a putative cause or as an explanation for the causal effect of another variable on behavior. When possible selves are studied as dependent variables, the research could focus either on the first link in a cause-mediator-effect chain or on describing variation in the content of possible selves as a function of personal characteristics such as age, gender, mental health, or race/ethnicity. The latter focus does not provide information on the causal or explanatory implications of possible selves. Although possible selves also could be considered as a moderator variable, qualifying the effect of some other variable on behavior, self-representations are rarely studied in this way.

We evaluated the status of the possible selves construct in empirical studies described in 73 published articles according to whether they treated possible selves as an independent, intervening, dependent, or moderator variable. In those studies that treated the construct as a dependent variable, we distinguished between those that viewed the construct as mediating a causal chain from those that viewed the construct in descriptive terms. Of the 76 studies we coded, 34% positioned possible selves as a causal or intervening variable, allowing for tests of the putative causal and explanatory role of the construct. In the majority of studies, 66%, possible selves were positioned as a dependent variable, with all but a few focused on the content of possible selves as a function of some person characteristic. Although these studies are a rich source of information about the myriad ways in which people project themselves into the future, they offer little in the way of elaborating the processes by which future-oriented
representations of the self influence current behavior. In other words, on the basis of the existing literature, we know a great deal about what possible selves are but relatively little about what they do.

**ADVANTAGES OF EMBEDDING THE CONSTRUCT**

Although the conceptual and empirical work linking possible selves and behavior has produced promising results (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2004, in press; Quinlan et al., 2006), further attempts to strengthen the possible-selves-behavior link through embellishment of the conceptual or operational definition of the possible selves construct seem unlikely to prove successful. We believe this is true because, in all the research to date linking possible selves to behavior, the possible-selves construct has stood alone; it has not been embedded in a model that specifies a process through which possible selves motivate behavior. We suggest that control-process models of self-regulation specify such a process (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Hoyle & Sowards, 1993) and that the link between possible selves and behavior is well described and explained by those models (cf. Kerpelman & Lamke, 1997). Thus, we question the assumption implicit in extant theory and research that possible selves “mediate personal functioning” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954) and instead suggest that possible selves are involved in processes that mediate personal functioning. In our view, possible selves are not themselves a “significant regulator of the person’s behavior” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Rather, they are a key component in processes by which behavior is regulated. As such, a fruitful new direction for research on possible selves and behavior would be the exploration of the construct as it contributes to the process of self-regulation.

*Possible Selves as Behavioral Standards*

In the parlance of control-process models of self-regulation, possible selves are behavioral standards. Behavioral standards, in these models, are “points of comparison” between current experience and thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are desirable at that moment (Carver & Scheier, 1981). The sources of these standards include goals (Boldero & Francis, 2002), personal projects (Little, 1983), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), and self-guides (Higgins, 1987).
Possible selves, especially those having the qualities of self-regulatory possible selves (Oyserman et al., 2004), also are a rich source of behavioral standards. Indeed, possible selves, because their content and expression have been so carefully studied, are a particularly well-understood source of behavioral standards.

Possible selves map particularly well into hierarchically organized control-process models of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Hoyle & Sowards, 1993). According to these models, behavioral standards can be referenced at different levels of abstraction depending on the nature of current experience. For instance, if current experience is interpreted with reference to overarching goals, then self-regulation will involve abstract behavioral standards such as ideals. If, on the other hand, current experience is interpreted only with reference to the demands of the current situation, then self-regulation will involve more concrete behavioral standards that prescribe specific behaviors. Behavioral standards are organized hierarchically from abstract and general to concrete and specific such that, with the exception of the highest-order standard, a particular behavioral standard derives from the level above it. Borrowing from control theory (Powers, 1973) the highest level of standards are global ideals. These give rise to programs, which are the basis for plans of action, the level of standards most likely at play in typical situations.

As behavioral standards, possible selves could be identified at each of these levels of abstraction, although, consistent with the description of self-regulatory possible selves (Oyserman et al., 2004), we would expect possible selves that prescribe plans of action to most directly influence behavior. Importantly, however, these possible selves influence current behavior only to the extent that they are discrepant from current experience. For instance, a future-oriented representation of the self as active and healthy is not likely to influence current behavior for the individual who is active and healthy now, no matter how detailed the plans of action prescribed by this possible self. A future-oriented representation of the self as inactive and unhealthy might motivate current behavior even for the individual who is active and healthy now, if the discrepancy between that feared possible self and current experience is not comfortably large.

We evaluate these claims and illustrate the study of possible selves in self-regulatory context in a study of health-promoting behavior by college students.
Self-Regulation of Health Behavior

We investigated the behavioral influence of health-related possible selves in a sample of healthy college students. Our strategy was to activate either a hoped-for or a feared possible self in the health domain and evaluate the influence of this activation on a set of ostensibly unrelated health-promoting behaviors. Because our participants were in good health, we reasoned that the activation of a healthy representation of self in the future would not make salient a discrepancy between future and current self-representations and therefore would not produce behavioral evidence of self-regulation. We expected the activation of a representation of self in the future as unhealthy to make salient a discrepancy between future and current self-representation. Such a discrepancy would, of course, be desirable; thus, the motive for health-promoting behavior would not be discrepancy reduction. Rather, from a control-theory perspective the goal of such behavior in this instance would be discrepancy enlargement—a widening of the discrepancy between future and current self-representation (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The motivation to move away from an undesirable self-representation is given direction by an accompanying motivation to move toward a desirable self-representation that is incompatible with it (Carver et al., 1999; Carver & Scheier, 1998). If our reasoning is correct, the activation of a representation of self as unhealthy in the future will motivate current health-promoting behavior aimed at maximizing the discrepancy between current self and this undesired future self while narrowing any discrepancy between current self and a future-oriented representation of self as healthy.

To further explore the degree to which activating possible selves produces behavioral self-regulation, we compromised the capacity to self-regulate for half our participants. We accomplished this by having them suppress emotion while watching an emotionally charged film clip. If our possible-selves activation manipulation in fact produced self-regulation, we expected these individuals to evince less health-promoting behavior and heightened state negative affect indicative of a failure to reconcile the future and current representations of self (Carver & Scheier, 1990).

Participants in the study were undergraduate women and men, who were assigned to a condition in a 2 (ego depletion vs. no ego depletion) × 3 (health-related-self prime: hope-for, feared, no prime)
Participants began the session by completing a timed writing exercise designed to prime health-related possible selves. Participants in the hoped-for and feared selves conditions were provided a list of words to be included in a description of “a person you could become.” The list provided participants in the hoped-for condition included words such as healthy, independent, and well, which were to be used to describe the person they hoped or wished to be like. Participants in the feared condition were to use words such as unhealthy, dependent, and ill to describe the person they were afraid of becoming. The remaining participants wrote directions to a variety of nearby locations (e.g., local cinemas, a nearby office building).

After completing their essays, participants were shown a 9-minute video clip from an emotionally charged film. About half the participants were told to react naturally while viewing the clip. The remaining participants were instructed to avoid expressing and feeling emotions while watching the clip. Such emotional suppression requires cognitive and affective resources that might otherwise be devoted to self-regulation (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). Thus, the capacity to self-regulate was compromised for about half the participants. When the video clip ended, participants were given a brief set of items focused on characteristics of the clip.

At the outset, participants had been informed that, in order to fill out the hour, two experiments had been coupled. After they responded to items about the video clip, participants were greeted by a second experimenter, ostensibly from the College of Health Sciences, who asked that they respond to a survey. The survey included items asking participants to indicate their interest in participating in a series of free workshops to be offered next semester. The workshops concerned weight loss, exercise, and nutrition. The survey concluded by asking participants to indicate their willingness to work with a personal trainer for 1 hour per week for 8 weeks. Before the second experimenter departed, participants were allowed to examine and take with them informational materials regarding health-related issues (e.g., nutrition, alcohol use, sexual behavior). After the second experimenter left, the first experimenter returned and administered a brief measure of state affect. We reasoned that participants’ interest in the workshops, willingness to work with a personal trainer, and interest in the informational materials (as evidenced by how many they selected to keep) were evidence of self-regulation.
The pattern of means for a composite measure of self-regulation, shown in Figure 1, yielded a significant two-way interaction. When participants were instructed to act naturally while watching the video clip, there was significantly more evidence of self-regulation when a feared health-related self had been primed than when a hoped-for health-related self or no possible self had been primed. When participants were instructed to suppress their emotions while watching the video clip, there was no significant difference in the extent of self-regulation across conditions, and the means were lower than the mean for participants who watched the movie acting naturally following the prime of a feared health-related self. This pattern indicates that the priming of a feared self produced evidence of domain-relevant self-regulation. As expected, the priming of a hoped-for self had no effect on self-regulation as we operationally defined it.

If we are correctly interpreting our outcome measure as an indicator of self-regulation, we should see higher state negative affect among participants who scored lower on our self-regulation composite. This was indeed the case: The more health-promoting behavior participants engaged in, the lower their state negative affect.

These findings indicate that possible selves have a causal influence on behavior and suggest that this influence unfolds in the context of a fully articulated model of self-regulation. The simple activation of

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1**
Extent of self-regulation as a function of prime and instructions regarding how to watch an emotionally charged film clip.
a relevant possible self did not produce behavior; healthy college students who wrote about a healthy self in the future were no more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors than students for whom no possible self was activated. Moreover, students who wrote about an unhealthy self in the future were more likely to engage in health-promoting behavior than control participants only when their ability to self-regulate had not been compromised. As a whole, this pattern is fully consistent with a model in which possible selves are a source of behavioral standards that influence behavior in a manner consistent with a control-process model of self-regulation.

Possible Selves and Other Models

Because possible selves are a rich source of behavioral standards, they are readily incorporated into models of self-regulation that implicate such standards. One benefit of that incorporation is that the mechanism by which possible selves influence behavior is well specified. In the context of such models, possible selves do not, as typically assumed, directly influence motivation (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1994). Rather, they give rise to behavioral standards against which current self-representation is compared and with which it is reconciled through behavior. A distinctive feature of possible selves, compared to other sources of standards such as ideal and ought selves, is that they explicitly refer to a future point in time. The possible selves construct also is broader than other similar sources of behavioral standards in its allowance for both positive and negative self-knowledge. As such, the self-regulatory process by which possible selves influence behavior varies according to whether the prevailing behavioral standards reflect a hoped-for or feared representation of self in the future. Because of their explicit focus on future self-representations and allowance for both positive and negative future-oriented self-knowledge, possible selves are relevant for other process models of self-regulation within which they have not yet been considered. One such model specifies a mechanism by which interpersonal behavior is regulated.

Future Orientation in the Sociometer

According to the belongingness hypothesis, humans have an innate desire to form and maintain relationships (Baumeister & Leary,
1995). So strong and evident is this desire that it “raises the possibility that much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 498). One explanation for this fundamental desire, and the motives and behaviors to which it gives rise, is that at least a minimal level of social acceptance is necessary for survival. Thus, the natural tendency to cultivate positive social relations likely arose through natural selection—early humans who successfully fostered social bonds were more likely to survive.

The sociometer hypothesis suggests that, in conjunction with the evolution of a need to belong, humans evolved a mechanism to monitor the degree to which their belongingness needs are met—the sociometer (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The sociometer is a psychological module that monitors social acceptance and rejection (Leary, 2004). The focus of this monitoring is the subjective sense of relational value—the extent to which other people value their relationship with the individual (Leary, 2002). An individual’s current sense of relational value should be reflected in their current representation of self.

Because of the fundamental nature of the need to belong, it seems likely that relational value is reflected in future representations of the self as well—even when those self-representations do not explicitly concern interpersonal relations. For example, a hoped-for self regarding academic performance might represent self in the future as approved by parents, admired by peers, and belonging to an academic honor society. A feared self in this domain might represent the self in the future as disappointing to parents, excluded from a circle of high-achieving friends, and shunned by formal groups that value academic achievement. For this reason, we would expect possible selves not only to be a source of explicit behavioral standards related to a specific domain (e.g., academics, athletics, career), we also would expect them to be a source of more implicit behavioral standards that concern relational value. For this reason, the behavioral standards conferred by possible selves are doubly motivational because they suggest representations of self behaving or experiencing outcomes that are self-defining but that also have implications for relational value in the future.

In an initial study of our conjecture that the sociometer is both present and future oriented, we asked college students to pen narratives describing themselves in the future. They were randomly
assigned to describe either a hoped-for or feared self. We did not specify a time horizon or a domain. Importantly, nothing about the instructions invited specific reference to social inclusion or exclusion, ensuring that any mention of inclusionary status would be spontaneous.

Naïve judges rated the extent to which each narrative made explicit reference to inclusion and exclusion. The average of their ratings, which were highly consistent, yielded a score for inclusion and a score for exclusion, each ranging from 1 (no references to inclusion/exclusion) to 5 (references to inclusion/exclusion throughout). We expected to find evidence of references to inclusionary status in the narratives and for these references to follow a specific pattern: References to inclusionary status in hoped-for-self narratives should concern inclusion but not exclusion. Conversely, references to inclusionary status in feared-self narratives should concern exclusion but not inclusion.

The observed pattern is displayed in Figure 2. The balance between references to inclusion and exclusion varied in the predicted manner for hoped-for- and feared-self narratives. In the hoped-for-self narratives, frequent reference was made to inclusion, but exclusion was rarely mentioned. Mirroring this pattern, in the feared-self narratives inclusion was rarely mentioned, but frequent reference was made to exclusion.

This is the first empirical evidence that future-oriented self-representations, regardless of the behavioral or outcome domain to which
they refer, include a representation of the degree to which the self might be relationally valued. Thus, the sociometer, which, to date, has been considered only with reference to its monitoring of current relational value, appears to monitor anticipated future relational value as well. For this reason, we would expect possible selves to motivate behavior for two reasons: (1) They provide an image of the self engaged in specific behaviors or receiving specific outcomes. (2) They provide an image of the self as accepted or rejected by other people. Our study found evidence of explicit allusions to the latter image, but we suspect that, because a concern for relational value is implicit in specific behaviors and outcomes, the role of the sociometer in possible selves is even stronger than our findings would suggest.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

We have demonstrated that an account of the role of possible selves in self-regulation can be substantially improved by embedding the construct in models that fully specify the process by which self-regulation produces motivation and behavior. Our efforts in this regard were aided by increasingly clear and explicit accounts of the content of possible selves most likely to be associated with motivation and behavior. For the most part, these improved accounts were produced without reference to fully articulated models of self-regulation. In this section, we suggest further refinements to the construct assuming that the role of possible selves in self-regulation is indirect, primarily a function of their provision of behavioral standards against which current experience is compared.

*Status as a Construct*

Implicit and fundamental in our treatment of possible selves in self-regulation is an assumption that possible selves are a construct, not a theory. Although possible selves have been described as directly influencing motivation and behavior (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2004), there has been little progress in 20 years of research on possible selves in specifying the processes by which possible selves would exert such an influence. Research motivated by this aim has focused almost exclusively on the *content* of possible selves as opposed to potential *mechanisms* by which they influence motivation and behavior. As we have noted, research in this
tradition has resulted in a well-articulated conceptual definition of the possible selves construct. It has not, however, provided a compelling account of how possible selves influence motivation and behavior.

Although the possible selves construct does not specify a process through which future-oriented self-knowledge affects behavior, because the content of possible selves has been so well specified, they are readily incorporated into models of self-regulation. Possible selves is an unusually rich construct that captures a broad array of content with an uncharacteristic accounting for the element of time. For this reason, possible selves are more readily studied in self-regulatory context than related constructs such as ideal, ought, and undesired selves (see, however, Bybee, Luthar, Zigler, & Merisca, 1997).

Unfortunately, operational definitions of the possible selves construct have not kept stride with the conceptual definition. There is neither a standard measure of possible selves, nor a standard index that is extracted from possible-selves measures. Research participants might be asked to list possible selves (e.g., Aloise-Young, Hennigan, & Leong, 2001; Frazier & Hooker, 2006), rate or rank-order a list of possible selves they are provided (e.g., Chalk et al., 1994; Nurius, Casey, Lindhorst, & Macy, 2006), or describe a specific possible self (e.g., Freeman, Hennessy, & Marzullo, 2001; King & Smith, 2004; Quinlan et al., 2006). From these measures, researchers might index the number of possible selves (e.g., Anthis, 2006), the most salient or important possible self (e.g., Hooker, 1992), the presence or absence of a specific possible self (e.g., Black, Stein, & Loveland-Cherry, 2001), or the perceived likelihood of achieving one or more possible selves (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1991). At this point in time, there is no consensus regarding which of these measures or indices is implied by the label “possible selves,” which is used generically to refer to an array of operational definitions. An unfortunate byproduct of this idiosyncratic approach to defining possible selves operationally is that knowledge about the construct generated by empirical research is not easily synthesized, and therefore estimates of the strength of its influence across individuals, domains, and settings cannot be determined.

2. Although the empirical possible-selves literature might be compartmentalized in such a way that a series of meta-analyses could be done, it would not be possible to conduct a meta-analysis that took into account all, or even most, of the many findings published to date.
All but a few published studies operationally define possible selves using a self-report measure. As illustrated in our study of health-related possible selves and health-promoting behavior, possible selves are amenable to manipulation in controlled experiments, enabling tests of causal influence. Our manipulation focused only on whether a hoped-for or feared possible self had been activated (see also, Ruvolo & Markus, 1992); however, it would not be difficult to design manipulations that vary specific characteristics of activated possible selves such as temporal distance (e.g., next year vs. 10 years from now), domain (e.g., health vs. career), or extent of focus on specific behaviors.

**Temporal Distance**

Typically, studies of possible selves either do not offer research participants a time horizon, or they offer a time horizon that is arbitrary. In the latter case, the variability across studies is substantial. For instance, Ouellette et al. (2005) asked research participants to describe themselves as they will be “10 to 20 years from now,” whereas Quinlan et al. (2006) asked college students to describe themselves “2 years after college.” Were the operational definitions of possible selves compatible in studies that provide a time horizon, it would be possible in a meta-analysis to evaluate the role of temporal distance in possible-selves effects. Because the literature is not amenable to such an analysis and because variability in time horizon is rarely considered in individual studies (for examples, see Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Strahan & Wilson, 2006), relatively little is known about how temporal distance affects the influence of possible selves on motivation and behavior.

Temporal construal theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) offers a compelling basis for predicting that effect. According to the theory, people’s mental representation of an event varies as a function of temporal distance. The construal of events that are temporally distant typically is abstract, general, and goal oriented. Conversely, events that are temporally close are construed in concrete and specific terms, with relatively little focus on goals. We would expect that, in the same way that people construe future events differently as a function of the anticipated time to their occurrence, people construe themselves differently as a function of the time horizon they are referencing. Specifically, possible selves in the near future should
be richer in detail but less centered on goals than possible selves in the distant future. Following on our work with possible selves in control-process models, as a source of behavioral standards the optimal time horizon for a possible self would be one at which information about specific behaviors (i.e., means) is accompanied by information about important goals (i.e., ends). This theoretical analysis suggests that time horizon should not be ignored or specified arbitrarily but, rather, systematically varied as a potentially important moderator of the effect of possible selves on self-regulation.

CONCLUSION

The possible selves construct offers a rich and detailed description of future-oriented self-representations. From its inception, the construct has been linked to motivation and behavior, presumably through the process of self-regulation. Attempts to explicate the process by which the construct influences motivation and behavior have fallen short. We argue that such attempts have fallen short because possible selves is a construct, not a theory, and the explanatory power of any hypothetical construct outside a well-specified theoretical model is limited. We further argue that, because the conceptual definition of possible selves is well specified, it can readily be embedded in theoretical models of self-regulation in which self-representations play a central role. We describe two studies in which we demonstrate the value of embedding the possible selves construct in this way. We conclude by recommending greater attention to operational definitions of the possible selves construct. Specifically, we recommend a common set of measures and indices, which would allow for meta-analytic syntheses of possible selves findings and measures that reflect the fullness of the conceptual definition of the construct. We also argue for the importance of considering temporal distance in operational definitions of possible selves, especially in research on possible selves and self-regulation. We hope these recommendations stimulate research on the role of possible selves in motivation and the self-regulation of behavior.

REFERENCES


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