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## **Abstract**

The temporal orientation of UK policy on access to and success in higher education is towards the future. It assumes a reflective student, usually young, able to imagine both an undergraduate and then a postgraduate 'possible self', and who can plan and implement requisite strategies to attain it. Underlying such policies, however, is the assumption that all students are oriented towards the future, that they can imagine what this future might look like and that their progression in to the future is linear. This paper problematizes such assumptions by presenting narrative interviews with adult learners, including refugees, ex-offenders, and care leavers, all of who have complex pasts and protracted trajectories into and through HE, to describe their different temporalities, how they think about their futures, the strategies they are adopting, or not, in order to attain their imagined futures, as well as the reflexive work involved in working to simply 'stay put'.

## **Paper**

Possible selves are representations of the self in the future, including those that are desired and those that are not (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Evidence suggests that those with more highly developed possible selves are more goal-oriented (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011, 12) and more likely, when confronted with a threat to the viability of their possible self, to either persist, or to construct new imaginings of the self in the future (Stevenson, 2012; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011, 12). The focus of most UK higher education (HE) widening participation access and outreach work is on supporting young people from under-represented groups to think forward in to the future and to develop the skills and strategies which will enable them to achieve a desired undergraduate self. Once there HE pedagogical strategies, notably personal development planning (PDP), underpinned by institutional employability policies, aim to equip these same students with the capacity to reflect on and plan for attaining a future post-graduate possible self (Stevenson and Clegg, 2010; Clegg, 2009; Clegg and Bufton, 2008). Much of the possible selves literature assumes a linear trajectory into HE, the traditional trajectory of young learners (Furlong, Cartmel, and Biggart 2006). In contrast, the trajectory of adult or 'mature' learners is significantly less linear and more unpredictable, often involving multiple breaks and transitions. For refugees this can include sudden and extreme dislocation and the need to establish new lives, whilst the extreme temporality experienced as a consequence of the asylum process is likely to shape the way in which refugees think about their futures. Other adult learners, including those who have experienced significant illness or bereavement, long-term unemployment or prison, may have highly complex pasts which can, at times, threaten to disrupt both their present and their future trajectories (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012); whilst for care leavers the fractured nature of the care process, involving multiple home and school transitions, can also mean that routes into HE are protracted, complex and non-linear. Moreover, for such learners developing and sustaining a possible self is extremely difficult when previous hoped-for selves have been rendered impossible or problematic through the processes of social, emotional, familial, or economic dislocation.

This paper draws on detailed narrative interviews with thirty adult learners (ten refugees, ten adult learners who have spent time in care, and ten other adult learners with highly complex pasts) all hoping to access higher education in order to attain hoped-for possible selves, as well as to avoid feared possible selves. In the first part of the paper I briefly describe the learners, the complexity of their lives, and the ways in which, for all of them, time-past was shaping thinking about both time-present and conceptualisations of time-future. Across their narratives six further broad temporal positions could be identified: those with an underdeveloped view of themselves in the future; those who were accessing higher education in order to plan for an unknown future; those whose views of the future, and what higher education might offer, were constantly changing; those who found it difficult to conceive a realistic view of their future possible self and were unsure about the possibilities higher education might offer; and those whose imagined futures were both focussed and (potentially) realisable through the pursuit of higher education qualifications. In offering these accounts I also describe the high levels of agency, determination, hard work and resilience which the learners were, in different ways, drawing on in seeking to establish or re-establish hoped-for futures. In doing so I offer a critique of much of the possible selves literature which overly focuses on internal motivation and self-concept, rather than on structural barriers (including poverty) and institutional barriers (such as the lack of recognition of prior qualifications), as well as the lack of access for adult learners to mentors and education advisors, who operate both as sources of possible selves and as a context for their elaboration (Fletcher, 2007). Moreover, a further weakness of the possible selves literature is that it privileges future orientation to the extent that the present becomes simply an under-theorised negative category (Stevenson and Clegg, 2010). I therefore end by presenting narratives from a further group of learners, those for whom the being in the present, rather than thinking in to the future, was a desired temporality orientation and who were therefore involved in considerable reflexive work in seeking to 'stay put' (Archer, 2007).

## References

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