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Abstract

This paper reflects on the use of 'letters to future selves' in a study examining the career aspirations of women doctoral students. Studies have highlighted the gendered nature of post-doctoral career choices (see Royal Society of Chemistry, 2008). This paper draws on the theory of possible selves developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) in exploring individuals' imagined futures. Drawing on participants' letters, I explore how in addressing their 'future self', participants made reference to a number of possible selves. I discuss the positive and negative possible selves which participants constructed in their letters, and consider how developed, or elaborated these selves were. I outline the challenges which participants expected to encounter during their studies, as well as their hopes and fears for after the doctorate. This paper argues that this method, not commonly used in educational research, enables a unique insight into how women doctoral students imagine their future.

Paper

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Doctoral study is traditionally thought of as the start of an academic career (Park, 2005). Yet studies such as the Wellcome Trust's (2012) found that despite initial aspirations of an academic career, by the end of the doctorate women were less likely than men to want to pursue a career as an academic. This study looks to explore women's career aspirations over the course of the doctorate, examining how their experiences during their studies influence their aspirations. Shortly after beginning their studies, participants wrote letters to their future selves. These letters addressed their selves who had completed the doctorate, and outlined their hopes for the future, the challenges they foresaw, and the advice they would give their future selves. Letters to future selves were used alongside multiple interviews and research diaries, as they enable a different level of insight- capturing both participants' feelings about the doctorate, and how at the start of their studies, they conceptualised their futures. This method is not often used in social research, apart from in psychology (see van Gelder et al., 2013), and thus this study makes a valuable methodological contribution to Higher Education (HE) knowledge.

The concept of possible selves developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) is used to highlight the plurality of potential future selves conceived of by participants. This theoretical concept has been little utilised in HE research in the UK, with the notable exception of Stevenson (2011, 2012). Possible selves are 'conceptions of the self in future states' (Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou, 1998: 154), and may be either positive or negative; 'an individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats' (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954). Some of these possible selves may be well developed, or elaborated (Leondari et al., 1998) while others may be less so. In their empirical study of the fears and aspirations of women undergraduates in the US, Chalk et al. (2005: 189) found that 'the more elaborate and vivid a possible self is, the more it organizes and motivates a person'. This paper considers the range of possible selves outlined in participants' letters to their future selves, and how far these different selves are elaborated. It also discusses the specific hopes and fears participants identified for their future after the doctorate, as well as the challenges they perceived that they would face during their studies.

A range of possible selves were referred to in participants' letters. This plurality of selves reflects the range of possibilities that individuals considered for after the doctorate, both personally and professionally. Half of the participants made reference to academic possible selves, imagining themselves in academic jobs in the future, though some with a degree of ambivalence. Three participants' possible selves were influential researchers, who had been able to make a positive impact on people's lives through their work. Yet the letters highlighted that participants' possible selves related mostly to particular character traits such as being happy and confident, and aspects of their personal lives, such as being family-orientated, rather than necessarily focusing on particular career goals.

Possible selves represent individuals' hopes and fears for the future. They are the 'ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming' (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954). Though a variety of obstacles and challenges were expected during the PhD itself, the possible selves which participants imagined were largely positive, and these were more elaborated than their negative counterparts. In their empirical study with high school students Leondari et al. (1998: 160) found that individuals' negative possible selves were generally less well elaborated- they noted that 'it would seem that the subjects... were much less willing to imagine themselves in an unfavourable future state'. This principle appears to hold true for the participants in this study, too- the possible selves identified in participants' letters were generally positive, including selves that were happier, more confident, and certain of their career goals.

Yet, as Stevenson and Clegg (2011: 233) highlight, possible selves can 'only include those selves that it is possible to perceive'. For a couple of participants who had already experienced significant challenges in their studies before writing the letter, this meant that their possible selves were more negative, and focused on the challenges they expected to encounter during the PhD. Negative possible selves referred to in the letters included selves who would experience financial difficulties, struggle to find employment, and who would consider their PhD not to have been worth the effort.

Using possible selves as a theoretical concept, this paper outlines how letters to future selves offer a unique insight into how women doctoral students imagine their future. It highlights how participants in this study constructed both positive and negative possible selves, but notes that the more positive possible selves were the most elaborated. Letters to future selves are highly personal documents, documenting individuals' various fears, hopes

and dreams for the future from one particular moment in time, making them a unique and invaluable methodological tool in HE research.

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