

**Serial number** [0045](#)

**Title** [Why possible selves? The application of the concept of 'possible selves' in researching participation in higher education](#)

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## Why possible selves?

The concept of the possible self was proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986) thirty years ago in the field of cognitive psychology. It has been taken up in educational research to explore the relationship between imagined future achievement (or barriers to achievement) and present motivations to study. The potential of the 'possible selves' approach stems from its understanding of the imagined or feared future self as having an impact on present behaviour. Here, rather than being seen as separated in a linear temporal relationship, present and future are understood as intertwined and inseparable. However, the origins of the concept in psychology create a challenge for research that is based in a sociological tradition. Psychology's emphasis on the individual can, we argue, potentially unroot experience from the material conditions and structures in which selves are produced and reproduced.

Our sociological interest in possible selves can be seen as part of a turn towards the psychosocial as an organizing concept in social sciences, which connects with notions of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and debates about the ways in which we should understand the construction of biographies and learning careers under present conditions (see for example du Bois Reymond 2000, Furlong et al 2006). Diane Reay's (2015) discussion of habitus and the psychosocial, Amy Stich's (2012) focus on reputational 'affects' as well as *effect* in a study of social class and higher education in the USA, and discussion of the place of emotions in higher education (Gilmore and Anderson 2016; Leathwood and Hey 2009) all provide examples of how interest in the psychosocial has been used to expand our thinking and understanding of the ways in which subjectivities and material worlds interact and may be mutually constitutive.

In this session we will use this work to interrogate and challenge our own engagement with the construct of 'possible selves' as a means to understand individual experience in a way that is located within the context of the structural opportunities and constraints that make possible or impossible the realization of an imagined 'possible self' at the present juncture.

This session, therefore, first offers two papers that discuss the concept of possible selves and its application in educational research (Martin Erikson, Holly Henderson), and then we will move on to discuss:

- Why possible selves? Can the use of 'possible selves' do justice to structure as well as agency?
- Does the concept of 'possible selves' lead to individualized notions of possibility and opportunity?

- Where do understandings of the increasingly competitive and marketised stratification of HE fit into an analysis of the ways in which individuals imagine and construct their futures?

## References

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