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Using the lens of 'possible selves' to explore access to higher education – a new framework for policy, practice and research (0424)

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Abstract

The theory of 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius, 1986) asserts that we all have multiple visions of ourselves in the future that motivate and legitimise our current actions. Each future self can be considered more or less probable or desirable, as well as being in constant flux through the individual's experiences and changing sociocultural context. The theory has enjoyed substantial exposure with respect to many facets of young people's decision-making (e.g. around careers education), but it has not yet been applied extensively to access to higher education.

This paper will present a new framework for bringing the thinking tools provided by 'possible lives' to bear on decisions made by young people about higher education. It will suggest theory-led interventions to influence decisions among disadvantaged young people, as well as outlining an agenda for future empirical research to challenge the dominant policy discourse around 'aspiration-raising'.

Paper

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that all individuals possess a concept of a pool of putative 'possible selves' that they could become in the future. Within this pool, individuals construct one or more 'like-to-be selves' that mark out desirable futures – and, in contrast, undesirable possible selves to be avoided. The extent of the pool and preferences within it are strongly influenced by both the individual's sociocultural context and their day-to-day experiences, rendering them open to changes over time – either unplanned or planned.

Vitaly, Markus and Nurius (1986) also posit that individuals undertake instinctive judgements about the relative likelihood of each possible self coming to pass. This subjective assessment of expectation is again shaped by the sociocultural context in which they are situated and causes them to identify 'probable selves' that may or may not be aligned with their like-to-be selves. Markus and Nurius (1987) further argue that each possible self may be vague or elaborated, in the sense that the individual has a clear vision of what that self would be like and the steps that they need to get there. This 'roadmap' (Oyserman *et al.*, 2004) or 'narrative' (Erikson, 2007) helps to make meaning of their current life and provides a specific motivation for, and legitimisation of, current actions (e.g. with respect to schoolwork: Leondari *et al.*, 1998; Leondari, 2007).

While the theory of possible selves has enjoyed recognition within the discipline of social psychology for its usefulness in understanding how young people make decisions about their future, it has not yet been used widely in higher education research. Where it has been used, it has generally been employed within a sociological discourse, with key elements of the original psychological theory being neglected. This paper will therefore return to the original source material and provide an overview of the theory of possible selves before moving to discuss its relevance to decisions relating to access to higher education. It will argue, *inter alia*, that current policy and practice in England, with its pervasive discourse of raising aspirations (e.g. Department for Business, Innovative and Skills, 2014), tends to over-focus on persuading young people that an (often ill-defined) concept of 'life as a graduate' should form the core of their like-to-be self without understanding the wider decision-making processes at work.

The paper will go on to present a new framework demonstrating how a sensitivity to the wider implications of Markus and Nurius' work can be used to generate new thinking and new approaches to widening the participation of under-represented groups in higher education. For example, it will stress the value of work to (a) diversify the pool of possible selves (e.g. through an expansive and generative approach to careers guidance), (b) challenge sociocultural expectations about probable selves (e.g. through direct engagement with adult influencers such as parents and teachers), and (c) help young people to elaborate possible selves that are predicated on higher education (e.g. through life-course planning that strengthens confidence in the relationship between educational success and life chances).

It will also remain cognisant of the role of structural constraints in disadvantaged communities, including the nature of the youth labour market, and the role that this has in shaping both experiences and expectations. In particular, the paper will seek to integrate possible lives with the theory of 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) as a means of unifying the influence of the sociocultural context with individual motivation and decision-making.

In particular, the paper will argue for the importance of aligning a well-elaborated like-to-be self that involves higher education with the perception that this is also a probable future self. Markus and Nurius (1987) predict that this will lead to legitimised current actions in pursuit of the like-to-be self, which in this context should include increased motivation to attain highly in school – the overwhelmingly dominant predictor for participation in higher education (Crawford, 2014). The paper will conclude by asserting that this approach, if implemented in policy and practice, is more likely to instil improved equity than a dogged and misguided reliance on raising aspirations, as well as outlining an agenda for future empirical research to support the presented framework.

References

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