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Abstract
This paper is theoretical rather than empirical, and acts as an introduction to the Group Discussion session on the possible selves concept. As such, the paper sets out the origins of the concept, and outlines some of its previous uses in Higher Education research. I then show how the concept has proved relevant and useful in my own research project on geographies of inequality in English Higher Education. The paper closes by highlighting some of the challenges of using a psychological concept in sociological research, and asks some key questions about the concept's potential to address issues of structural inequality. Importantly, the paper builds on two previous SRHE events on the subject of possible selves, and takes forward the questions and conversations from those events.

Paper
Any discussion of temporality in relation to Higher Education requires careful and clear theorisation (Bennett and Burke, 2017). In this paper, I discuss the possible selves concept as one potential theorisation of temporality, showing how the concept can, and should, work alongside concerns with place, space, (im)mobility, and inequalities. The concept of 'possible selves', first introduced in 1986 by Markus and Nurius (1986), has three key definitional features. The first of these is the multiplicity of imagined futures; the possible selves concept draws attention to the ways in which several possible futures can be imagined, feared, or hoped for simultaneously, and without being mutually exclusive of one another. The second important feature of the possible selves concept is that it sees the imagined future as personalised, rather than abstract. Markus and Nurius argue that, more than imagining possible futures, we imagine our selves into these futures. The possible selves concept, with its focus on the 'selves', privileges this process of personalisation. The final key feature of the concept is that it seeks to explore behaviour in the temporal present, through drawing attention to how current behaviour is shaped by and lived according to these multiple, personalised, possible futures. It is this final feature of the concept that has attracted the most research attention since the concept was introduced. While the possible selves concept has been used in research contexts as diverse as psychotherapy (Bak, 2015) and juvenile detention centres (Abrams and Aguilar, 2005), it is most commonly associated with educational research. In studies set in schools, the concept has been used in the US to explore connections between imagined academic futures and present motivation to study (Marshall, Young and Domene, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee and Terry, 2006).

The possible selves concept has also been used in Higher Education research, in a variety of contexts. In both health care education (Eaton and Donaldson, 2016) and teacher education (Hamman *et al.*, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009), the concept has been used to explore how student practitioners imagine their future professional selves. These studies draw out the multiplicity of imagined future selves, showing how trainee professionals' present behaviour is shaped by the practitioners they are afraid of becoming, and the practitioners they hope to become. While these studies have focused particularly on students' imagined transition from study to work, other research has used the possible selves concept to highlight patterns and experiences of inequality in Higher Education. Stevenson and Clegg's (2013) study of mature students in UK Further and Higher Education particularly draws out the role of the past in shaping imagined futures. This analysis shows how intersections of inequality such as social

class, gender and race, which affected the past educational experiences of the participants in this study, also play a role in determining which educational futures are seen as possible. Stevenson's (2012) study of minority ethnic students' experience of undergraduate study also argues that, if experiences of education differ according to race and ethnicity, so too do the futures that are possible for students to imagine. The transitional nature of Higher Education, which, at its most linear, sees students as building on a past of school education, and preparing for a career future, means that it is a rich context for exploring constellations of past, present and future temporalities. As these studies show, the possible selves concept has already proved useful in drawing out the relationship between individual experience and structural inequalities affecting access to and progression through Higher Education.

It is this relationship, between individual and structural inequalities, than informs my own use of the possible selves concept. My ESRC-funded doctoral research project focuses on geographical inequalities in English Higher Education. The project takes college-based Higher Education (CBHE), or undergraduate degrees taught in Further Education Colleges, as an example of the stratified English Higher Education context. I argue that CBHE is a particularly exaggerated example of the impact of both national distribution of Higher Education provision, and the role of rapidly changing policy at a local level. Within this context, my research argues, students' classed, raced, gendered and aged experiences of Higher Education must be seen as refracted through the places, (im)mobilities and institutional spaces that form the past and present of their educational trajectories. While common understandings of Higher Education are as a transitional point along an educational and career trajectory, the imagined future is a crucial element of educational experience. My research project therefore explores CBHE students' imagined futures as shaped by the places and spaces they have experiences, and their mobility or immobility within and without these places and spaces.

My use of the possible selves concept in this research context has, however, involved some conceptual struggle. The concept is focused firmly on the individual, and originates from the discipline of cognitive psychology. As Erikson (2007) highlights, the disciplinary basis for the terminology of 'self' in 'possible self' is the language of self efficacy. In order to use the concept for my own sociological research, it has been necessary to adapt this language of selfhood to include theorisations of subjectivity and subjectification. This linguistic adaptation is representative of a larger conceptual translation process, through which a concept developed in the discipline of cognitive psychology has been stretched and shaped to apply to sociological research. The process has involved using a Butlerian theorisation of subjectivity (Butler, 1997) which sees imagined futures as operating in the 'domain of the sayable'. Seen in this way, the futures that are possible for students to imagine are products of the structural limitations that shape their past and present experience. Following Prince's (2014) call for possible selves research to take issues of place and space into account, my theorisation of subjectivity is also spatial, and highlights how the 'domain of the sayable' is structured by narratives of place, space and (im)mobility. This use of the possible selves concept is deliberately elastic and complex, and throws up important questions about how we account theoretically for the interplay of individual experience and structural inequality in Higher Education research.

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