

**Serial number** 0098  
**Title** Possible selves and possible others – explicating theoretical and methodological potentials  
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## **Possible selves and possible others – explicating theoretical and methodological potentials**

The concept of possible selves, originally defined by Markus & Nurius (1986), has been successfully employed in studies of student well-being and motivation in higher education (e.g. Gartzia, & Fetterolf, 2016; Hamman et al., 2013; Milner, 2002, Murphey et al., 2014; Pizzolato, 2006; Yowell, 2002). Elaborating the original definition of possible selves by Markus and Nurius (1986), Erikson (2007, p. 356) defined possible selves as

... conceptions of our selves in the future, including, at least to some degree, an experience of being an agent in a future situation. Possible selves get vital parts of their meaning in interplay with the self-concept, which they in turn moderate, as well as from their social and cultural context.

Possible selves are characterized by positive and negative emotional valence, a perceived probability and a perceived controllability. Possible selves give meaning to future situations such as being admitted to university, attending lectures, or graduating, serving as goals in a process adjusted by cultural norms and social interactions (Cameron, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Marshall, Young & Domene, 2006; Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009; Vignoles et al, 2008). Possible selves provide a future social context for the individual, including imagined future social interactions with others (e.g. Markus & Nurius, 1986, see also Brown, 1998). The purpose of this paper is to show how the understanding of such social interaction in possible selves can be explicated through the concept of *possible others*, and to discuss how such a conceptual development can be used in research on student motivation and well-being. Using insights from existing empirical and

theoretical work on possible selves, the paper is intended to prompt discussions about the potential of the concept of possible others.

The concept of possible others refers to the others imagined in a possible self, and to their behaviours and their attitudes. The possible other can, for example, be a fellow student, a professor or a supportive or dismissing parent or peer. The concept has previously been used in relation to possible selves, but only sparingly.<sup>1</sup> Murphey et al. (2014) discussed that the imagined actions of possible others could influence motivation and Miller and Read (1991) argued that our imaginations of possible include our presumptions about their personality and other traits, which will influence how we think about interacting with them.

Whereas the presence of possible others is implicit in most of the literature on possible selves, an explicit approach opens the door for a wider set of empirical and theoretical advances. A few examples with a potential to expand our understanding of possible selves can illustrate this:

- Which possible others are present the possible selves, and which are missing (possible others that could have been expected)?
- Which possible others are known today, such as old friends, parents or relatives, and which are assumed new acquaintances, such as students of professors?
- Are there possible selves about making new acquaintances or about losing old acquaintances?

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<sup>1</sup> There have also been different definitions: Howard and Hollander (1993) used the notion of possible others for all conceptions of the futures of others, regardless of they being part of the own possible self or not.

- What attitudes are possible others assumed to have and what actions are they taking in the possible selves (supportive, inviting, disapproving, etc)?
- Does the possible others influence emotional valence and perceived controllability, and thus motivational functions of possible selves? If so, in which directions?

Methodologically, at least two major approaches can be distinguished. The first is to add possible others as a further dimension in possible selves inventories or in interview questions about already identified possible selves (such inventories are used by for example Erikson et al., 2012, 2014 and Markus & Wurf, 1987). The second is to use possible others as a focal point for detecting possible selves, for example by giving participants instructions such as “imagine a situation when you interact with others as a student at university”. While this delimits the kinds of possible selves prompted, it has the advantage of singling out the kinds of concrete future situation that Erikson (2007) described in his definition of possible selves. Regardless of approach, the concept offers potentials for a systematic research on assumed interactions with others in the future. Here, the concept of possible others can help expand the studies of possible selves into neighbouring areas of social cognition, for example in terms of independent and interdependent self-concepts in students with different cultural backgrounds (e.g. Downie, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The concept of possible others might also be adopted as a tool for facilitating widening participation. For example, black youths from low-income backgrounds have been found to see commitment to educational success as a 'sell-out' of their background. In such a case, the creation of positive possible selves about studies and career might perhaps be paired with positive possible selves about still being a part of an original background and getting support from it, as well as strategies for realizing such possible selves (e.g. Milner, 2002, see also

Pizzolato, 2006; Yowell, 2000, 2002). However, possible others can also create supportive behaviour: Murphey et al. (2014) showed that simple interference based on students' own descriptions of classmates could facilitate possible selves of how they supported other students.

Summing up these arguments, the concept of possible others in relation to possible selves calls for new and interesting research into student motivation and well-being, not the least serving as a tool for investigations of the mechanisms supporting widening participation. However, the details of such a venture need to be deliberated, where this paper hopefully could serve as inspiration.

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