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Possible Selves

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ABSTRACT: The concept of possible selves is introduced to complement current conceptions of self-knowledge. Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. Possible selves are important, first, because they function as incentives for future behavior (i.e., they are selves to be approached or avoided) and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self. A discussion of the nature and function of possible selves is followed by an exploration of their role in addressing several persistent problems, including the stability and malleability of the self, the unity of the self, self-distortion, and the relationship between the self-concept and behavior.

Self-concept research has revealed the great diversity and complexity of self-knowledge and its importance in regulating behavior (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1982; Gergen, 1972; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Higgins, 1983; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; McGuire & McGuire, 1982). But there is one critical domain of self-knowledge that remains unexplored. It is the domain of *possible selves.* This type of self-knowledge pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future. Possible selves 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. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self.

An individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation.

The assistant professor who fears he or she will not become an associate professor carries with him or her much more than a shadowy, undifferentiated fear of not getting tenure. Instead the fear is personalized, and the professor is likely to have a well-elaborated possible self that represents this fear—the self as having failed, as looking for another job, as bitter, as a writer who can't get a novel published. Similarly, the person who hopes to lose 20 pounds does not harbor this hope in vague abstraction, but rather holds a vivid possible self—the self as thinner, more attractive, happier, with an altogether more pleasant life.

In this article we examine the theoretical features of possible selves and illustrate some of the important ways in which they mediate personal functioning. In particular, possible selves are linked to the dynamic properties of the self-concept—to motivation, to distortion, and to change, both momentary and enduring. A discussion of the nature and function of possible selves is followed by an exploration of the role of possible selves in a comprehensive theory of the self-concept.

Possible Selves: A Definition

Antecedents of Possible Selves

Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. They are different and separable from the current or now selves, yet are intimately connected to them. Possible future selves, for example, are not just *any* set of imagined roles or states of being. Instead they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies. I am *now* a psychologist, but I *could* be a restaurant owner, a marathon runner, a journalist, or the parent of a handicapped child. These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social. Many of these possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become.

An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained (cf. Elder, 1980; Meyer, 1985; Stryker, 1984). The 1984 Olympic games probably created powerful possible selves for some young runners. Many no doubt absorbed the performance of Carl Lewis within the realm of their own

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possible selves, just as Carl Lewis claimed to have used the early track victories of Jesse Owens to create a possible self and to give a specific cognitive form to his desire to become the world's fastest runner. Similarly Geraldine Ferraro fostered the creation of a new possible self, that of a political self, a leader self, for many American women. And James Fixx, the expert on running who died of a heart attack while jogging, was the source of a compelling negative possible self for many runners.

Past selves, to the extent that they may define an individual again in the future, can also be possible selves. An adult, for example, will never be an eight-year-old child again. Some critical aspects of the child self, however, may remain within the self-concept as a possible self (see Block, 1981; Brim & Kagan, 1980). And under some circumstances, this self-view may be activated and become influential in directing behavior, such as in a visit home over the holidays. The selves of the past that remain and that are carried within the self-concept as possible selves are representative of the individual's enduring concerns and the actions that gave rise to these concerns. Thus, the successful possible self may include the fact that "I once got the best grades in my class." The socially anxious possible self is linked with the memory that "I used to be afraid of people." And the unwanted possible self is tied to the painful image of always being "the last one chosen for the softball team." Development can be seen as a process of acquiring and then achieving or resisting certain possible selves. Through the selection and construction of possible selves individuals can be viewed as active producers of their own development (e.g., Kendall, Lerner, & Craighead, 1984; Lerner, 1982).

Consequences of Possible Selves: A Cognitive Approach

A focus on the self-knowledge that accompanies an individual's goals, fears, and threats is a natural extension of a cognitive approach to the study of the self-concept. In this approach the self-concept is viewed as a system of affective–cognitive structures (also called theories or schemas) about the self that lends structure and coherence to the individual's self-relevant experiences. (For a full discussion of these and related ideas, see Epstein, 1973; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Sentis, 1982; Markus & Wurf, in press; Rogers, 1981.)

Self-schemas are constructed creatively and selectively from an individual's past experiences in a particular domain. They reflect personal concerns of enduring salience and investment, and they have been shown to have a systematic and pervasive influence on how information about the self is processed. In particular domains, these well-elaborated structures of the self shape the perceiver's expectations. Moreover, they determine which stimuli are selected for attention, which stimuli are remembered, and what type of inferences are drawn (e.g., Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus, 1983; Markus & Sentis, 1982). In this way, the self-concept becomes a significant regulator of the individual's behavior. The recent empirical work from this cognitive perspective lends strong support to many ideas of the early self theorists (e.g., Allport, 1943; Kelly, 1955; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; Snygg & Combs, 1949) who argued that the self-structure is the most important in the psychological field and is the one that organizes the individual's interpretations of the world.

Studies on the functions of self-knowledge have focused nearly exclusively on how well-substantiated or factual self-conceptions constrain information processing. But individuals also have ideas about themselves that are not as well anchored in social reality. They have ideas, beliefs, and images about their potential and about their goals, hopes, fears. This is particularly so in those domains that are important for self-definition. To be sure, this self-knowledge is of a different type than the self-knowledge of one's gender, or race, or the self-knowledge of one's preferences or habits. Most obviously, as representations of the self in future states, possible selves are views of the self that often have not been verified or confirmed by social experience (cf. Epstein, 1973; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977; Swann, 1983). Yet self-knowledge of this type should not be dismissed, for it is entirely possible that this variety of self-knowledge also exerts a significant influence on individual functioning, and it is the purpose of this article to explore the nature of this influence. We suggest first that possible selves are important because they function as incentives for future behavior (i.e., they are selves to be approached or avoided), and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self.

With respect to the first function, self-knowledge not only provides a set of interpretive frameworks for making sense of past behavior, it also provides the means–ends patterns for new behavior. Individuals' self-knowledge of what is possible for them to achieve is motivation as it is particularized and individualized; it serves to frame behavior, and to guide its course. In this role possible selves function as the personalized carriers (representations) of general aspirations, motives, and threats and of the associated affective states. They serve to select among future behaviors (i.e., they are selves to be approached or to be avoided).

The second important function of possible selves derives from their role in providing a context of additional meaning for the individual's current behavior. Attributes, abilities, and actions of the self are not evaluated in isolation. Their interpretation depends on the surrounding context of possibility. Thus, the student with a physician possible self will attach a different interpretation to a grade of A in organic chemistry than will someone without this possible self. Similarly, the person with the alone or lonely possible self is likely to imbue a broken lunch date with

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much greater negative significance than someone without this negative possible self. Possible selves furnish criteria against which outcomes are evaluated.

Further, because possible selves are not well-anchored in social experience, they comprise the self-knowledge that is the most vulnerable and responsive to changes in the environment. They are the first elements of the self-concept to absorb and reveal such change. As representations of potential, possible selves will thus be particularly sensitive to those situations that communicate new or inconsistent information about the self. A poor grade on an exam will not permanently challenge an individual's enduring sense of self as "intelligent" or "hard-working," but it will give temporary substance to a possible self as "drop-out" or "academic failure." And the activation of these possible selves will influence the individual's current self-evaluation of intelligence.

Related Approaches

The notion of the self-concept extending both backward and forward through time appears in the literature in diverse forms. James (1910) used the term "potential social Me" and distinguished it from the "immediate present Me" and the "Me of the past." Freud (1925) wrote about the "ego ideal," which referred to the child's conception of what the parents consider morally good. For Horney (1950), neurosis occurred when the idealized self became the focus of the individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. The concept of the "ideal self," the individual's view of "how I should be," was important in the work of Rogers (1951) and he claimed that the individual's self-regard depended on the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self. The notion of potential selves also intrigued Gergen (1972), and he has argued that their range and complexity have been ignored in the focus on the "central tendencies" of the self (p. 64). Similarly, Gordon (1968) analyzed the retrospective, current, and prospective elements of the self, and Schutz (1964) has discussed tenses of self, noting the difference between the Present Tense (acts in progress) and the Future Present Tense, which includes anticipated or imagined acts.

More recently, Levinson (1978) has described "the Dream" and has been concerned with the imagined possibilities of the self as motivating forces. The Dream is a personal construction that contains the "imagined self" associated with a variety of goals, aspirations, and values, both conscious and unconscious. With maturation, the Dream becomes cognitively refined and more motivationally powerful. Levinson, however, has focused on dreams; he has not analyzed nightmares or negative possibilities. Similarly, Cummings (1979) wrote of a personally salient "lost dream or hope" that when reinstated can serve as a powerful therapeutic procedure to overcome problems such as addiction, negativism, and lack of caring.

Recent reviews of the empirical literature on the self-concept from both the psychological and sociological perspective (e.g., Epstein, 1984; Gecas, 1982; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Suls, 1982; Zurcher, 1977), reveal that except for some limited attention to the "ideal self," the content of conceptions of the self, other than those of the current self, have not been emphasized. There have been a variety of efforts to empirically explore individuals' understanding of the future (e.g., Davids & Sidman, 1962; De Volder & Lens, 1982; Goldrich, 1967; Lessing, 1968; Teahan, 1958; Wallace, 1956), but this work has rarely been concerned with how the future is represented in the self-concept.

The link between the future and the self-concept is implicit in the writings of the symbolic interactionists who argue that the self as an organizer of behavior is always anticipating, always oriented to the future. (Lindesmith & Strauss, 1956; Stryker, 1980). To Mead (1934), having a self implies the ability to rehearse possible courses of action depending on a reading of the other person's reactions and then being able to calibrate one's subsequent actions accordingly. Whenever individuals engage in this type of role taking, they are in the process of creating potential selves, and there can be as many of these selves as there are times when the self is the object of definition, expectation, or evaluation. Other sociological theorists extended Mead's idea and tackled directly the relation between the self (or identity) and motivation. Foote (1951), for example, believed that all motivation was a consequence of the individual's set of identities. The individual acts so as to express his or her identity: "Its products are ever-evolving self-conceptions" (p. 17), and "When doubt of identity creeps in, action is paralyzed" (p. 18). When action does manage to proceed with an uncertain identity, it is completely robbed of its meaning. More recently Stryker (1968, 1984) contended that identities continually seek validation and that the most important behavior is in the service of confirming particular identities. And the more important the identity, the more it is in need of validation.

Similarly, psychologists Gollwitzer and Wicklund (1985) have linked the self-concept to motivation through the concept of self-definitions. Self-definitions are construed primarily as goals or ideals and are described as conceptions of the self as having a readiness to engage in certain classes of behavior. And there are a number of recent theories of motivation that also can be interpreted as efforts to relate the self or the ego to specific actions. These theories conceptualize goals as a vital part of the self-concept, just as Erikson (1946, 1950) viewed the psychosocial crises as critical tasks of identity formation (see also Adler, 1929). Thus Greenwald (1982) referred to ego tasks, Little (1983) to personal projects, Cantor to life tasks (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986), and Markus (1983) to self-schemas. Instead of focusing on how individuals expect to perform on a certain task (e.g., Atkinson, 1958; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944), on the type of proximal goals they set (e.g., Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Manderlink & Harackiewicz, 1984), or on the cognitive representation of the goal object (e.g., Mischel & Baker, 1975), these theorists have focused more globally on what individuals hope to accomplish with their

lives and what kind of people they would like to become as the significant elements of motivation.

The few empirical findings on what people believe is possible for them suggest that individuals do have access to this type of self-knowledge and are willing to report it, although these studies have focused almost exclusively on positive possibility. In a study of 12-year-old children, McGuire and Padawer-Singer (1976) asked the question "Tell us about yourself" and found that 12% of the sample mentioned "hopes and desires" and 18% mentioned career aspirations. Singer (1975) found that daydreams are often completely dominated by self-relevant images of the future. Rosenberg (1979) has investigated the "desired adult self" and asked questions such as "What personality would you like to have when you grow up?" Older children put great emphasis on interpersonal traits in describing their hoped for personality, whereas the younger children rely on social identities (groups, roles, statuses, or social categories). There have been only a few attempts to relate people's performance to what they believe is possible for them. Turner (1978; see also Willerman, Turner, & Peterson, 1976) noted that having respondents report what they are maximally capable of doing in a relevant situation rather than what they typically do or what they expect to do increases the size of the correlations between self-reports and subsequent behavior. And Gregory, Cialdini, and Carpenter (1982) found that many more people who imagined themselves with cable television subscribed to it than did those who simply listened to a pesuasive message about its virtues.

The Working Self-Concept

In most theoretical statements, the self-concept is characterized as a complex dynamic phenomenon (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1983, Epstein, 1973; Gergen, 1967; Greenwald, 1980; Kelly, 1955; McGuire, 1984; Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser & Campbell, 1984). Turner (1968), for example, discussed "the passing images of self arising and changing in every relationship the individual enters" (p. 94). Yet the empirical work, with a notable recent exception (see Higgins, 1983) lags far behind these very rich conceptualizations. The traditional view features the self-concept as a fairly uniform, monolithic structure, consistent over time, comprising some number of physical features or psychological structures that abstract the essential traits from the individual's past behavior.

Most self-concept inventories ask, in effect, who you are *now,* but they do not inquire who you want to be, or who you are afraid of becoming. The self-concept is a more expansive phenomenon than is reflected by the typical descriptions of it. It extends its reach deeper in time. The self-concept reflects the potential for growth and change, and all the values that are attached to these possible future states.

The value of considering the nature and function of possible selves is most apparent if we examine not *the* self-concept, which is typically regarded as a single, generalized view of the self, but rather the current or *working* self-concept. Not all self-knowledge is available for thinking about the self at any one time. The working self-concept derives from the set of self-conceptions that are presently active in thought and memory. It can be viewed as a continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge. The array changes as individuals experience variation in internal states and social circumstances. The content of the working self-concept depends on what self-conceptions have been active just before, on what has been elicited or made dominant by the particular social environment, and on what has been more purposefully invoked by the individual in response to a given experience, event, or situation.

In a similar formulation, Burke (1980) found that like the self-concept, the sociologist's concept of identity cannot be used as a basis for competent performance because it is much too stable and removed from the demands and constraints of the moment-to-moment situation. Instead he proposed that it is self-images which can be viewed as current working copies of the basic identities that guide performance.

The individual's collection of self-conceptions and self-images can include the good selves (the ones we remember fondly), the bad selves (the ones we would just as soon forget), the hoped-for selves, the feared selves, the not-me selves, the ideal selves, the ought selves. They can vary dramatically in their degree of affective, cognitive, and behavioral elaboration. They also vary in valence. Some self-conceptions are regarded as positive and others as negative. A third dimension of variation, already implicit in the examples given here, is what Schutz (1964) called the "tense" of self, and more recently, what Nuttin and Lens (1984) referred to as "temporal sign" of the self. That is, where in time is the particular self-conception located? Many of an individual's self-conceptions are images of the *now* or current selves; they describe the self as it presently is perceived by the individual. Other self-conceptions, however, are possible selves. These may be past selves that no longer characterize the self, but under some circumstances could be relevant again, or they may be future selves, images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared.

Some conceptions of the self, because of their importance in identifying or defining the self, are likely to be chronically accessible, and these views can be considered as "core" self. These may include what Gordon (1968) referred to as factual self-conceptions; those of maximum perceived "actuality" (e.g., ascribed characteristics, major roles and memberships), as well as self-conceptions that are especially significant, conceptions that have been called self-schemas (e.g., Markus, 1977) or salient identities (Stryker, 1984). Other self-conceptions vary in their accessibility depending on the individual's affective or motivational state or on prevailing social conditions.

Under some circumstances, perhaps following a defeat, a loss, or a lapse in willpower, the working self-concept will be dominated by conceptions of negative possibility. The working self-concept of the dieting individual who succumbs to a third slice of pizza will include

not only some actual representations of self, but also a variety of self-conceptions of negative possibility. Some of these are quite likely to be realized (e.g., tomorrow's self in too-tight pants), whereas others may be quite improbable and relatively impoverished in their specific cognitive elaboration (e.g., the obese self, the out-of-control self).

In other instances, the working self-concept may contain largely positive possibilities. Thus, when a sophomore is rewarded for giving the right answer to the professor's question, the student's working self-concept is likely to contain core conceptions of the self as competent and a good student, as well as a number of self-conceptions representing positive possibility, both those that are quite probable (getting a good grade on the next exam) and those that are much more remote (the *summa cum laude* self). This description of the working self-concept draws on recent descriptions of memory priming (cf. Higgins & King, 1981; Wyer & Srull, 1984) in which activating a particular self-conception is assumed to activate other closely related conceptions and also to increase the likelihood that it will be activated again.

A focus on possible selves is broadly construed as an effort to tie self-cognition to motivation, but as a consequence it also relates self-cognitions to self-feelings or affect. Affect is generated in one of several ways. First, each identity or self-conception has a particular affect attached to it. Thus, when a negative possible self is activated, for example, it brings with it the associated negative affect, which, in turn, can have a marked impact on the form and content of subsequent behavior (cf. Bower, 1981; Clark & Isen, 1982; Salovey & Rodin, 1985). From this perspective, self-esteem is not a stable overall estimation of one's worth as an individual, but rather a variable value that is a function of the valences of the self-conceptions comprising the working self-concept at a given time. Heise (1977), in what he termed affect control theory, argued that identities are accompanied by particular feelings that serve as guidelines for interpreting and creating events. An individual's behavior is determined by efforts to confirm these fundamental self-feelings. Thus, the identity of mother carries with it a large number of positive sentiments, and the individual behaves so as to maintain these positive feelings. If these self-feelings cannot be maintained, a new identity must be selected.

Second, affect derives from conflicts or discrepancies within the self-concept. To the extent that individuals can or cannot achieve particular self-conceptions or identities they will feel either positively or negatively about themselves. This view is consistent with the early self theorists who suggested that affective and motivational states can be systematically related to shifts or conflicts within the self-concept (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Freud, 1925; James, 1890; Sullivan, 1953), as well as with a variety of recent theoretical approaches that relate goals and outcomes to emotions (e.g., Abelson, 1981; de Rivera, 1982; Higgins, 1983; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Janis & Mann, 1977; Lynch, 1981; Roseman, 1982; Toda, 1982). Thus, in Higgins's (1983) self-concept discrepancy theory, he relates disappointment, for example, to a discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self, and anxiety to a discrepancy between the actual self and the ought self (an image of self held by another).

Exploring the Possible Self

We assume that all individuals have possible selves and that they can easily reflect upon them. The nature of these possible selves, their importance to the individual, their degree of cognitive and affective elaboration, and their link to specific plans and behavioral strategies will, of course, vary depending on the individual's position in the life span. In an initial study, we asked 210 male and female college students about the role of possibility within the self-concept. Based on the responses to an earlier study in which we asked another group of students to "tell us about what is possible for you," we developed a questionnaire that listed 150 possibilities for the self. These items derived from six categories: (a) general descriptors or adjectives typically found in self-concept inventories, for example, creative, selfish, intelligent; (b) physical descriptors, for example, good-looking, blind, wrinkled, or athletic; (c) life-style possibilities, such as having an active social life, being health conscious, a cancer victim, or alcohol dependent; (d) general abilities, for example, able to fix things, able to cook well, able to influence people, or knowledgeable about art or music; (e) possibilities reflecting various occupational alternatives, such as business executive, supreme court justice, artist, taxi driver, or police officer; and finally (f) possibilities directly tied to the opinions of others, such as being appreciated, loved, feared, or unpopular.

In each of the six domains, a third of the possibilities had been judged as positive, a third as negative, and a third as neutral. For each item, we asked respondents whether it described them now. We then assessed possible selves by asking (a) whether the item had described them in the past, (b) whether the item was ever considered as a possible self, (c) how probable the possible self was for them, and (d) how much they would like the item to be true for them.

In general, the frequency of endorsements indicated that most of the items were meaningful to a majority of the respondents. Table 1 shows a representative subset of endorsements for positive and negative items in each domain. Virtually all respondents thought it was possible for them to be rich, admired, successful, secure, important, a good parent, in good shape, and to travel the world. In contrast, almost none of our respondents thought it was possible that they could be a welfare recipient, a spouse or child abuser, a janitor, or a prison guard. On the average, 80 (with a range from 32 to 147) of the total 150 items were endorsed as selves that had been considered possible. For now selves, the average number endorsed was 51 (range from 28 to 93), and for past selves, the average was also 51 (range from 28 to 93). A third of the subjects indicated that they thought about how they were in the past a great deal of the time, or all the time,

Table 1
Percentages of Respondents Endorsing Selected Self Items

Item	Question: Does this describe you now?	Question: Have you ever considered this a possible self?
Personality		
Happy	88.0	100.0
Confident	83.8	100.0
Depressed	40.2	49.6
Lazy	36.2	48.3
Life style		
Travel widely	43.6	94.0
Have lots of friends	74.6	91.2
Be destitute	4.5	19.6
Have nervous breakdown	11.1	42.7
Physical		
Sexy	51.7	73.5
In good shape	66.7	96.5
Wrinkled	12.0	41.0
Paralyzed	2.6	44.8
General abilities		
Speak well publicly	59.0	80.3
Make own decisions	93.2	99.1
Manipulate people	53.5	56.6
Cheat on taxes	9.4	17.9
Others' feelings toward you		
Powerful	33.3	75.2
Trusted	95.7	99.1
Unimportant	12.8	24.8
Offensive	24.8	32.5
Occupation		
Media personality	2.2	56.1
Owner of a business	1.4	80.3
Janitor	2.6	6.8
Prison guard	0.0	4.3

whereas 65% reported that they thought about themselves in the future a great deal of the time, or all the time.

A consistent positive bias was also noted in the endorsements. The overall ratio of positive to negative selves ever considered was almost four to one (although this ratio varied considerably by domain), with 44% of the subjects reporting having considered *all* of the positive items as possible. In contrast, only 3% of the respondents had considered *all* the negative items, and half of our respondents report never having considered more than 25% of the negative items as possible selves. In addition, the positive selves were also *thought* about more than the negative and were predicted as being much more probable.

These data suggest that individuals can reflect on their possible selves and that these selves are not identical with descriptions of their current or now selves. These students imagine an extremely heterogeneous set of possibilities for themselves, and these possibilities do not appear to be particularly constrained by their current or now selves, even in domains such as personality, others' feelings toward them, and physical characteristics. On the contrary, they seem to believe that they are quite likely to change, often quite dramatically. Thus, although we found a strong positive correlation between the items endorsed in the past and the items endorsed as currently descriptive ($r = .68$), the relationship between the items ever considered and the items currently descriptive was significantly lower ($r = .21$). In fact, it is only the negative past selves that had a substantial relation with the selves imagined as possible ($r = .55$). Thus, to the extent that individuals admit to something negative as a past self, they seem to believe that such a characteristic might also describe them in the future.

A central assumption of this expanded view of the self-concept is that dimensions of self other than the now self should make meaningful contributions to the explanation of variance in an individual's current affective and motivational states. We attempted to gain some general idea about these states by requiring respondents to complete the Affect Balance Scale (Derogatis, 1975), the Rotter Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and a Hopelessness Scale (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974) designed to assess general expectations and feelings about the future. These scales were completed before the possible selves questionnaire. We regressed criterion variables such as positive and negative affect, hopelessness, esteem, and locus of control on the various self components (past selves, now selves, ever-considered selves, and probable selves) in separate models and found that each of the components significantly contributed to several of the dependent measures. Each of the self components was a significant predictor for esteem, and for global predictions about the future; and probable selves contributed significantly to the explanation of positive affect, and personal control (Table 2).

In a separate study ($N = 136$), to evaluate the relative contribution of possible selves to these measures of the individual's current affective and motivational state, a more stringent method of analysis was used. Using stepwise regressions, *now* selves were first entered, followed by *ever considered* selves in one model, *probable* selves in a second model, and *like-to-be* selves in a third model. We sought to evaluate whether in explaining current affective or motivational states, possible selves would provide additional explanatory power beyond that which the now self conceptions could offer. This method tests for the significance of that portion of the individual's affective state, motivational state, self-esteem, and perceived control that is separately and independently attributable to the possible self components (e.g., ever-considered, probable, and like-to-be selves).

Figure 1 shows these results. It illustrates the relationship between positive now selves and negative affect, hopelessness, and esteem, as well as these relationships when positive ever-considered selves are added to now selves, when positive probable selves are added to now

Table 2
Multiple Correlation Coefficients Between Measures of Affect, Control, Esteem, and Self-Concept Components

Criterion variable	Does this describe you in the past?	Does this describe you now?	Have you ever considered this as a possible self?	How probable is this possible self?
Positive Affect[a]	.31***	.26*	.21	.32***
Negative Affect[a]	.30***	.39****	.13	.21
Locus of Control[b]	.14	.24*	.31***	.27**
Esteem[c]	.43****	.59****	.44****	.42****
How positive is future?	.31***	.41****	.41****	.51****

[a] Based on Derogatis's (1975) Affect Balance Scale. Positive affect reflects responses to Joy, Contentment, Affection, and Vigor subscales. Negative affect reflects responses to Depression, Anxiety, Guilt, and Hostility.
[b] Based on Rotter's (1966) Locus of Control Measure; high scores reflect greater internal locus of control.
[c] Based on Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$.

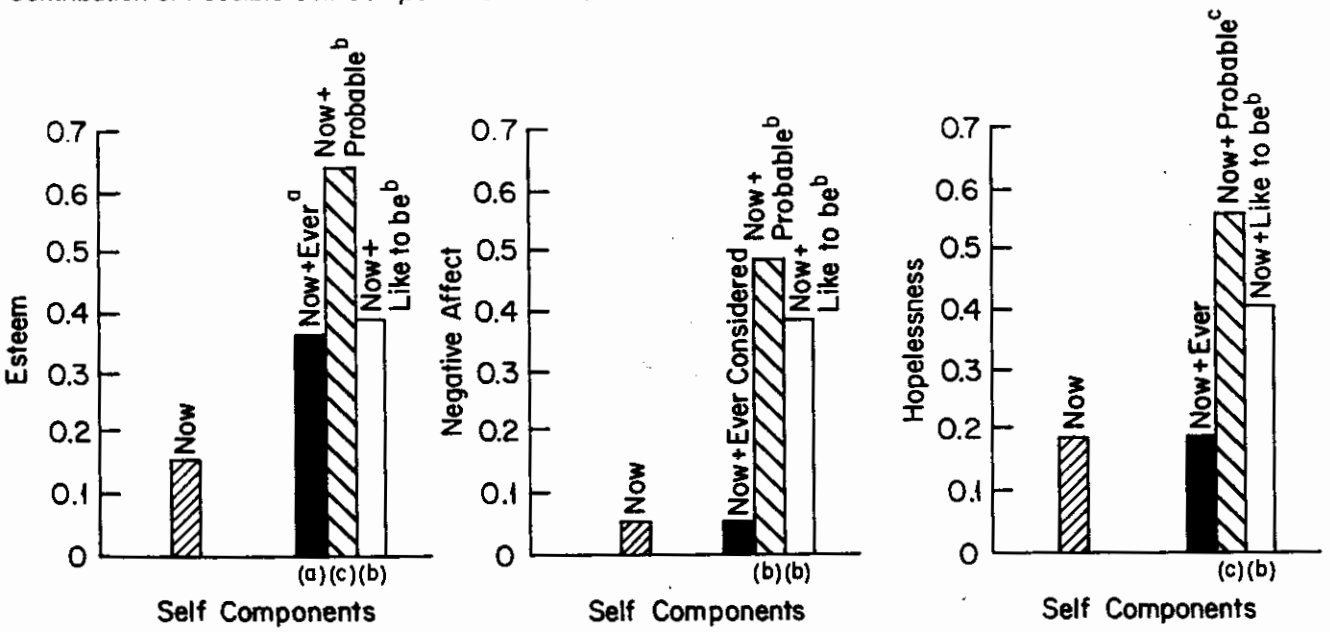
selves, and when positive like-to-be selves are added to now selves. Also indicated is the significance of the unique contribution of these components when the contribution of the now self is accounted for. Thus, for example, knowing an individual's estimates of the probability of certain possible selves considerably augments our ability to explain current negative affect.

All of these possible self components were found to contribute significant additional variance to the explanation of all the dependent measures. The probable and like-to-be self components reflected very strong and consistent unique contributions. These findings indicate that there are indeed independent dimensions within the self-concept that may be importantly related to the individual's current affective state (cf. Higgins, 1983). It is reasonable therefore to assume that the nature of an individual's working self-concept states could vary systematically with that individual's affective and motivational state, and vice versa.

Possible Selves as Incentives

The inclusion of a sense of what is possible within the self-concept allows it to become dynamic. Some possible selves stand as symbols of hope, whereas others are reminders of bleak, sad, or tragic futures that are to be avoided. Yet all of these ideas about what is possible for us to be, to think, to feel, or to experience provide a direction and impetus for action, change, and development. Possible selves give specific cognitive form to our desires for mastery, power, or affiliation, and to our diffuse fears of failure and incompetence. Some motives, such as hunger or thirst, appear to work directly to energize or activate behavior. Other motives (the need for achievement, for example) do not appear to instigate behavior directly. Instead, they are mediated by what the individual

Figure 1
Contribution of Possible Self Components Relative to Now Selves



Note. Letters in parentheses denote significance of the unique, *additional* variance explained in the dependent variable by ever-considered, probable, or like-to-be selves after now selves have been accounted for.
[a]$p = .05$. [b]$p = .01$. [c]$p = .001$.

believes to be possible and by the importance assigned to these possibilities.

Recent theories of motivation (e.g., Atkinson & Birch, 1978; de Rivera, 1982; Raynor, 1974; Weiner, 1974) view motives as "dispositions" within an individual to strive to approach a particular class of positive incentives (*goals*) or to avoid a particular class of negative incentives (*threats*). Possible selves represent these motives by giving specific *cognitive* form to the end states (goals and threats), to the associated plans or pathways for achieving them, and to the values and affect associated with them. Thus, two individuals may feel an equally strong need for achievement, yet the dynamics of action that follow as a result of these needs depend on the particular possible selves that currently encode these strivings.

The importance of motives, goals, and values as major components of personality has been obvious to many theorists (James, 1910; Lewin, 1935; McClelland, 1951; Tolman, 1932). Some have focused on the mental representations of motives (Kagan, 1972; Kuhl, 1984; Nuttin, 1972, 1982; Schank & Abelson, 1977), whereas others have pursued the relationship between the self and motivation (Lewin et al., 1944). Most recently Nuttin (1984) has criticized psychology's preoccupation with the impersonal, the instinctual, or the unconscious nature of human motivation. He argued for the need to personalize motivation and for the value of studying how motivation is transformed into the activity of goal setting and into the concrete intentions and plans of which we are more or less aware.

Theories of motivation have not been specific about the elements of self-knowledge that give shape to the relations between the self and motivation. Several critical questions remain unanswered. How are motives, goals, and values cognitively represented and communicated within the self-system? What structures carry them? In what ways do they function? The contribution of the notion of possible selves to these traditional frameworks is to suggest that some of the dynamic elements of personality may be carried in specific cognitive representations of the self in future states. For example, goals can rarely be cognized in total abstraction. It is not the abstract "getting a BA" that is represented in the mind of a sophomore. Instead, this goal is represented as the particular individual himself or herself achieving that goal, that is "my getting a BA" or "my having a BA." In Lewin's (1935) language, there is a piece of self in that goal space.

Possible selves are represented in the same way as the here-and-now self (imaginal, semantic) and can be viewed as cognitive bridges between the present and future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become. When certain current self-conceptions are challenged or supported, it is often the nature of the activated possible selves that determines how the individual feels and what course the subsequent action will take.

The concept of possible selves allows us to make a more direct connection between motives and specific actions. For example, in the early studies of need for affiliation by Shipley and Veroff (1958), individuals were asked to stand while others in the group rated their acceptability as a potential friend. On a subsequent Thematic Appercept Test (TAT) measure, the individuals who came under scrutiny by their peers produced more imagery indicating a desire for affiliation than those who were not led to question their social acceptance. This relationship between the concern over social acceptance and affiliation imagery, documented in numerous studies of affiliation motivation, may well have been mediated and guided by the possible selves that were currently active in the working self-concept because of the recent peer evaluation experience. Specifically, the experimental manipulation may have primed a variety of specific negative possible selves (e.g., the unwanted self, the alone self, the unpopular self), or perhaps, for some, positive possible selves (e.g., good friend, popular, and admired). The subsequent focus on affiliation displayed in the TAT stories may then have derived from imaging how to avoid the negative possible selves being realized or how to approach the positive possible selves. In contrast, these types of affiliation-related possible selves were probably not salient in the working self-concepts of those who did not experience the scrutiny of their peers.

More recently, Taylor (1983) has described the need for people to gain a sense of mastery as they adjust to life-threatening events like cancer. Gaining a feeling of control over the event appears vital to successful coping. But how is the need for mastery represented within the self-system? We suggest here that this need will only be effective in motivating behavior to the extent that it has been elaborated into a specific possible self. The desire to gain control or to display competence is probably not sufficient. To be effective this desire must be translated into a vision of the self as healthy, active, and strong and must be accompanied by specific plans and strategies for becoming these possible selves. These possible selves are cognitive representations of the incentives for mastery, and without them there should be little instrumental behavior in the direction of mastery.

Similarly, in discussing the role of self-knowledge in motivating behavior, Bandura (1982) demonstrated the importance of individuals' beliefs about their efficacy. An efficacy expectation is the individual's belief that he or she is competent to perform a required behavior. Here we would speculate that general beliefs about efficacy can be particularly influential to the extent they are linked to specific, clearly envisioned possible selves. For example, Bandura described a study by Dowrick (1977) in which children with severe deficiencies in their social and psychomotor skills were helped to perform a task that far surpassed their skill level. Later these children are shown videotapes of themselves performing the task with all of their mistakes and the external aids cropped out of the tape. After viewing their successful performance on the tape, the performance of the handicapped children was enhanced relative to baseline levels on other filmed but not observed activities. The videotape created and for-

tified specific positive possible selves for the children that functioned as powerful incentives and standards for future successful task performance.

In general, the phenomenon of agency, whether it is characterized as effectance motivation (Harter, 1978; White, 1959), personal causation (deCharms, 1968), intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975), self-control (Mischel & Mischel, 1977), or will could be interpreted in terms of the individual's ability to develop and maintain distinct possible selves. Similarly, the lack of these agentic qualities may be related to the existence of well-elaborated negative possible selves that give vivid cognitive form to an individual's fears and insecurities, but that do not contain strategies or self-scripts for how to escape them.

In an effort to explore how possible selves might function as incentives, Porter, Markus, and Nurius (1984) examined the possible selves of individuals who had recently experienced a life crisis. The responses of 30 victims of a life crisis (loss of a long-standing relationship, death of a loved one) were compared with the response of 30 individuals who had not experienced a crisis.

Prior to completing the possible selves questionnaire and affect measures described earlier, these participants were asked to describe their life crisis and then to evaluate the degree to which they felt they had recovered from the crisis. The crisis subjects were divided into those who indicated that they had recovered from a crisis and those who indicated they had not. Subjects who claimed they had not yet recovered in comparison to the noncrisis controls were significantly more likely to endorse the following as now selves: not in control, weak, likely to die young, not able to fit in, poor, fearful, resentful, underachiever, depressed, and stupid. Respondents who felt they had recovered from the crisis did not appear to be any better off, at least with respect to descriptions of the now self. Thus, good recovery subjects in comparison to noncrisis controls were significantly more likely to endorse lonely, underachiever, unemployed, poor, weak, and resentful as now selves, and they did not differ from the poor recovery subjects on these items. In comparison to the crisis subjects, the noncrisis subjects were significantly more likely to describe themselves as optimistic, secure, respected, successful, adjusted, interesting, loved, happy, and confident.

Had we only inquired about the now or current self (i.e., how do you describe yourself?), it would have appeared that the poor and good recovery individuals were not different from each other; individuals in both groups would have appeared to be in grave distress. Yet when we compared the possible selves of these groups, the picture was very different. In comparison to the crisis subjects, noncrisis controls were significantly more likely to endorse the following possible future selves: optimist, long-lived, helpful, lots of friends, happy, satisfied, confident, and secure. The two crisis groups are quite different from each other, however. The poor recovery respondents thought that it was possible for them to be unpopular, nonaggressive, unimportant, weak, unable to fit in, or a failure, to die young, have a heart attack, become depressed, or experience a breakdown. These individuals had negative now selves and even more negative possible selves. In contrast, those who said they were recovered from their crises, even though they were not doing well at the time of the survey, thought it was possible for them to be motivated, independent, rich, creative, trusted, active, powerful, intelligent, and attractive and to win high honors. Most important, they found these possible selves to be significantly *more likely* than did the noncrisis controls.

There are several intriguing interpretations of these findings. It may be that these very positive possible selves of the good recovery group are a result of the positive affect that accompanies a feeling that one is recovered from a life crisis. Or alternatively, it may be that the presence of these possible selves, or the ability to construct them, may have actually facilitated recovery. That is, these possible selves may be the carriers or cognitive representations of feelings of mastery. The fact that the high recovery subjects endorsed many positive possible selves, and evaluated them to be quite likely, suggests that these selves were available in the working self-concepts of these respondents and were functioning as incentives.

It may be, of course, that individuals who claimed to have recovered from their crisis had generally higher feelings of self-efficacy or effectance, yet it would still be useful for therapy situations to know the precise cognitive representation given to these feelings and how these feelings manifest themselves in the working self-concept.

Possible Selves as Context for the Now Self

Beyond their role as incentives, possible selves function to provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the now self. The meaning given to a particular self-relevant event depends on the context of possibility that surrounds it. Thus, an individual's failure to secure a desired job will be much more than a single stroke of bad luck if the event activates an "unsuccessful professional" possible self. The failure may be temporarily devastating if this possible self comes complete with thoughts of not deserving the job because of underlying incompetence, images of being pitied by associates, or fears of never getting a job at all or of working somewhere quietly and bitterly as an insignificant clerk. Given this context of negative possibility, the individual is likely to experience at least momentary feelings of low self-esteem. For a period of time some behavioral outcomes will seem more probable (e.g., not getting another job), whereas other outcomes and the behavioral paths leading to them will seem less likely and perhaps impossible to pursue. For instance, actions that require a self-presentation as competent or confident are difficult to negotiate when behavior is mediated by a working self-concept that features the "unsuccessful professional" possible self as a focal point.

In contrast, achieving a desired goal, perhaps completing an important qualifying exam, is likely to activate positive possibilities such as the "successful professional" possible self. In this context, finishing the exam takes on a very distinctive set of meanings. For some period of

time, the self is not just a self that has passed qualifying exams, but a self that could earn a PhD, administer a research program, and take a trip to the south of France on sabbatical leave. The individual's feelings and immediate actions are likely to be markedly influenced by the nature of this context of possibility.

Kahneman and Tversky (1982) have suggested that in making decisions about the future people run mental simulations by constructing scenarios. The ease with which a particular event can be simulated is used to evaluate the propensity of the system to produce that state. They argued that we are biased in favor of events for which plausible or "easy" scenarios can be found and correspondingly biased against bizarre events or strange coincidences. Many possible selves are achieved through mental simulations, yet this type of self-knowledge does not always exert its influence on the individual in direct proportion to the ease with which it can be formulated or to the likelihood of being realized.

Thus, for many, being rich, famous, enviably productive, completely happy, or thin are not "easy" scenarios because they are fairly remote possibilities and they would involve surprising changes in behavior. Yet should circumstances come to pass that lead to the certain prognosis that we have absolutely no chance of becoming famous, thin, or rich, many of us would become quite distressed. In much the same way, the possible selves of being destitute or terminally ill are not "easy" scenarios, yet they are also not easily removed from the self-concept. The probabilities attached to these events are low, yet they are greater than zero and as such can have a powerful influence on the individual through of the context of meaning they provide for the now self.

The self-conception "I am 10 pounds overweight" is a different self-conception when linked with the possible self of "I could be quite thin" than when linked with the possible self "I will always be fat." Similarly, the meaning of the self-conception "I am poorly paid" derives its meaning from the surrounding context of possibility. It is not the same when considered with the destitute possible self and when considered with the fabulously rich possible self (cf. Crosby, 1982). What matters is not the ease with which these possibilities can be simulated, or their actual potential for being realized. What is important is that they exist as enduring elements that can be activated as part of a working self-concept and that can function as referents or standards by which the now self is evaluated and interpreted.

Possible Selves: Consequences for Self-Concept Theory

Every theory of the self-concept must confront a number of controversial issues. These include whether the self is a distorter, whether the self-concept is stable or malleable, whether there is one true self or many selves, and what the nature of the relationship is between the self-concept and behavior. Current theory and data provide a variety of contradictory answers to these questions. However, if possible selves are included within the boundaries of the self-concept, many of these conflicting results can be reconciled.

The Self as Distorter

The now self is subject to a variety of social reality constraints that are often difficult to ignore (at least for long). It must be a fairly faithful rendering of the individual's experience. But the individual alone is the final arbiter for the possible self. The contents of an individual's possible selves are frequently hidden and protected from scrutiny of others, if not from their influence and they represent the creative, productive efforts of the self-system. A possible self, like the Messiah prophecy, cannot be disproven. Only the individual himself or herself can determine what is possible, and only the individual can decide what is challenging, confirming, or diagnostic of this possibility. For this reason, positive possible selves can be exceedingly liberating because they foster hope that the present self is not immutable. At the same time, negative possible selves can be powerfully imprisoning because their associated affect and expectations may stifle attempts to change or develop. Positive and negative possible selves are alike, however, in that they often make it difficult for an observer to fully understand another person's behavior.

Both recent and classic literature of the self highlight the individual's apparent tendency to distort information or events so as to verify or sustain the prevailing view of self (e.g., Greenwald, 1980). When people seem to be particularly sensitive to their successes and positive outcomes while at the same time forgetting or failing to attend to their failures, they are seen as distorting or as conveniently revising social reality. Similarly, individuals who view themselves as stupid and incompetent in the face of notable intellectual achievements are accused of irrational thinking. Yet charges of distortion and irrationality can only be made to the extent that we know the nature of the self-conceptions that are mediating relevant behavior. When a possible self is active in the working self-concept, we may often appear to be behaving in ways that are inconsistent, crazy, or seriously at odds with what others perceive to be our "true" selves.

Consider the person who experiences a failure and who subsequently appears through self-relevant statements and behavior to be ignoring it or rejecting it. To an observer, this appears quite reasonably as some type of distortion. Yet the impact of the self-conceptions of failure that accompany this experience can be significantly minimized if the individual challenges them by recruiting conceptions of past successes and future positive possibilities into the working self-concept. Although the now self may be challenged by the failure, the elaborated network of positive possibilities remains intact. These possibilities can remain as possibilities (although not indefinitely), and thereby serve as internal resources for the individual allowing him or her to ward off, at least temporarily, threats to self-esteem.

For similar reasons it may be difficult to convince an individual with a negative view of self of the irrationality of his or her thinking (e.g., "You have completed

three years of college with high grades, how can you be stupid?"). Such confrontations may be largely ineffective if this individual's working self-concept is elaborated by a number of vivid negative possible selves (a failure, a drop-out, incompetent, worthless). Beck (1976) claimed that such self-conceptions are particularly likely when an individual has experienced death or loss at an early age and that such conceptions can form the basis of a stable, depressive schema. As conceptions of the "possible," these cognitions are unlikely to be changed in response to arguments about their irrationality. These possibilities are representations of fears and they remain possibilities.

The importance of possible selves in self-definition is thus critical in explaining the frequent lack of agreement between individuals' self-perceptions and how they are viewed by others. After reviewing over 50 studies, Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) concluded that "there is no clear indication that self-evaluations are influenced by the feedback received from others in naturally occurring situations" (p. 549). Most often this disparity is explained in terms of the active distorting nature of the self-concept (cf. Gecas, 1982; Rosenberg, 1981). Yet an alternative explanation is that others' perceptions of an individual are unlikely to reflect or to take into account possible selves. In fact, one of the dramatic differences between self-perception and the perception of others can be found in the simple fact that when we perceive ourselves, we see not only our present capacities and states but also our potential: what we hope to become, what we plan to do, what we are worried will happen, and so on. When we perceive another person, or another perceives us, this aspect of perception, under most conditions, is simply not evident and typically there is little concern with it.

The power of possible selves may also explain other types of bias such as the perseverance of attributions. For example, Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) arranged an experimental situation so that the subjects either succeeded or failed. The task involved judging suicide notes for their authenticity. Later in the experiment these subjects were told that the success or failure feedback was a hoax and had been manipulated by the experimenter. Yet success subjects persevered in the belief that they had high abilities to make accurate judgments. These findings need not imply distortion on the part of these subjects. They may well have recruited the sensitive or the perceptive possible selves into their working self-concepts. The presence of these possible selves would then have facilitated higher judgments of ability relative to those who did not have an opportunity to activate these possible selves.

Self-Concept Change

The question of whether the self-concept is stable or malleable is a continually controversial one (Block, 1981; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Studies over the life course seem to demonstrate an impressive continuity and stability of the self-concept. Similarly, recent empirical work on processes in the service of the self-concept suggests that individuals will go to great lengths to avoid changing the self-concept and to maintain or verify their self-conceptions (Greenwald, 1980; Swann, 1983; Swann & Hill, 1982). Other self-concept researchers claim, however, that the self-concept is highly, perhaps infinitely, malleable (e.g., Gergen, 1972; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976), and in turn they have gathered empirical evidence to support these ideas. Certainly, most research on behavioral and attitudinal consistency would imply that stability is really the exception. Moreover, at an intuitive level, it seems that our self-conceptions can change quite dramatically, depending on the nature of the social situation.

Expanding the scope of the self-concept to include possible selves allows us to account for both its situational and temporal malleability and for its overall stability. The now self, the self that is very much a part of the public domain may indeed remain basically stable. This stability may be a result of invariances in social feedback, in the targets of social comparison provided by the environment, or a result of individuals' needs to present themselves in a consistent fashion. However, because possible selves are less tied to behavioral evidence and less bounded by social reality constraints, they may be quite responsive to change in the environment and may in fact be the elements of the self-concept that reflect such change.

When a self-conception is challenged, there is likely to be a sudden and powerful flood of bad feeling. The negative affect that wells up at such times, whether shame, embarrassment, fear, or anger, may be a direct consequence of the activation of a variety of negative possible selves and their associated fears and anxieties. It is, however, unlikely that such a change in the working self-concept would be revealed by a standard self-concept inventory because these instruments typically ask about generalized or average views of self. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the self-conception has remained the same or has ignored the challenge (for related empirical work, see Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981; Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; Markus & Kunda, in press; Morse & Gergen, 1970). The challenge is likely to be very clearly reflected in the set of possible selves that become available and that provide the interpretive and evaluative context for the now self. Such variation in the content of an individual's working self-concept can have powerful consequences for mood, for temporary self-esteem, for immediately occurring thoughts and actions, and perhaps for more gradual long-term changes in self.

Virtually all empirical studies documenting the resistance of the self-concept to change report only that individuals show resistance to challenging feedback, or do not accept it (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Markus, 1977, 1983; Swann & Hill, 1982; Tesser & Campbell, 1984). These studies have not explored what actually happens to the individual's self-relevant thoughts, feelings, and actions in the course of this resistance. Thus Swann and Hill (1982) found, for example, that when individuals who believed themselves

to be dominant were rated by others as submissive, they sought out people who could affirm their self-conceptions of dominance. Are we to conclude from these efforts toward self-verification that no change occurred in the self-concept? Surely, the working self-concept must vary as a result of a serious challenge to a prevailing self-conception. From the cognitive literature, for example, we know that merely thinking about an event makes it seem more probable (Carroll, 1978). Entertaining possibilities of one's self as submissive is likely to have an impact on one's current state and on future self-relevant thinking even if one's global self-evaluation on a dominance/submissive scale does not change.

Possible selves then may be the instruments of the intense temporary changes in self-evaluation that seem critical in everyday functioning. They may also be the mechanisms of the more long-term enduring changes in self-concept that seem intuitively inevitable, but are not evident in studies of self-conception over the life course. Thus, an individual's view of himself or herself as independent, successful, or competent may be remarkably stable over periods as long as 35 years (e.g., Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt 1980; Block, 1981; Lerner, 1984). Yet the context of possibility that surrounds and embeds these self-views may have undergone substantial changes during this period. As the repertoire of possible selves is elaborated or depleted, the meaning of particular core self-descriptors may change markedly. Thus "competent" for a 17 year-old may be tied to the desire to live on his or her own and a dream of becoming president. At 40, the same label of "competent" may be linked with the hope of being a good parent and the possibility of acquiring stock options. There is some stability to be sure, but there has also been a tremendous growth, change, and development of the self that would not be adequately mirrored by a statement that the self-concept remains stable.

One True Self Versus Many Selves

A third question related to the previous two concerns whether there is a single underlying authentic self that is the essence of the person, or whether the self is a collection of masks each tied to a particular set of social circumstances (cf. Gergen, 1972). If we consider possible selves as systematic components of the self-concept, we can conceive of a self-concept that is diverse and multifaceted without being fake, wishy-washy, or incoherent. Possible selves provide for a complex and variable self-concept but are authentic in the sense that they represent the individual's persistent hopes and fears and indicate what could be realized given appropriate social conditions.

To suggest that there is a single self to which one "can be true" or an authentic self that one can know is to deny the rich network of potential that surrounds individuals and that is important in identifying and descriptive of them. Possible selves contribute to the fluidity or malleability of the self because they are differentially activated by the social situation and determine the nature of the working self-concept. At the same time, the individual's hopes and fears, goals and threats, and the cognitive structures that carry them are defining features of the self-concept; these features provide some of the most compelling evidence of continuity of identity across time.

The Relationship of the Self-Concept to Behavior

The goal of nearly all research on the self-concept is to relate the self-concept to ongoing behavior. The general notion is that if we want to change behavior, for instance, academic performance, we need to change the academic self-concept. Similarly many therapies, particularly cognitive therapies, are based on the premise that an individual's maladaptive behavior is directly related to dysfunctional thoughts about the self. Although most theorists assume that self-knowledge is one of the most important regulators of behavior, only a few, most notably Carver and Scheier (1982), have worked to establish these links. For the most part, the problems of the self-concept and self-regulation have been pursued in two largely non-overlapping literatures.

The difficulty in forging this link is that although an individual's behavior is often extremely variable, the self-concept is typically assumed to be a fairly stable, generalized, or average view of the self. How is this type of structure to mediate a diversity of behavior? In most discussions of self or ego therapy, the mediating role of the self has been accorded considerable importance (e.g., Blankenstein & Polivy, 1982; Karoly & Kanfer, 1982; Kendall, 1983; Wachtel, 1977). What is lacking, however, is an explication of the precise nature of the self-concept and how it may actually work to perform its assumed regulation of behavior.

Recently, various cognitive therapies have begun to invoke specific self-relevant thoughts as significant behavioral mediators (Mahoney & Arnkoff, 1978; Meichenbaum, 1977; see Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1982; Karoly & Kanfer, 1982; Kendall, 1983; McMullin & Giles, 1985 for reviews). There are, however, several problems with therapies that concentrate on specific self-cognitions. Given the view of the working self-concept proposed here, the set of self-cognitions available to an individual for thinking about the self at one point may be quite different from the set available in the next hour. In the proper supportive environment, as during the therapy session, the individual may be able to maintain a particular working set of positive thoughts about herself or himself, but in a different context it may be difficult to hold these same thoughts in working memory.

Furthermore, if possible selves are assumed to function as incentives for behavior, it is necessary to work with individuals so that they generate self-conceptions of possibility to support the positive self-statements developed in therapy. Positive thoughts about the self may be ineffective if they are accompanied by well-elaborated conceptions of negative possibility. For example, in a study of the possible selves of delinquent youths, Oyserman and Markus (1986) studied 100 adolescents aged 14 to 16 years of age who were nondelinquent or delinquent and residing in a group home or confined to a state training school. Using an open-ended format to elicit

possible selves, the respondents were asked for their expected, hoped for, and feared selves. We found that delinquent youths were quite likely to have high self-esteem but that they had a relatively constricted sense of possibility, both hoped for and feared possibility. For those in the state training school, 35% to 40% of their feared possible selves could be categorized as criminal (e.g., criminal, murderer, pusher, junkie, physical abuser of spouse or child). In contrast, the feared possible selves of the nondelinquent youth were a much more diverse and somewhat less negative set. They included what we termed poor selves (e.g., on ADC, no job, poor housing, cannot pay bills) and selves reflecting negative mental states (e.g., depressed, paranoid). For individuals like these delinquent youths, developing a system of positive self-relevant thoughts that can regulate behavior may well depend on helping them create for themselves a broader context of specific positive possibility in the domain of concern. In short, specifying the role of the self-concept in behavioral regulation depends on a thorough analysis of the nature and valence of possible selves.

Conclusions

Conceptions of possibility may be significant in analyzing a broad range of phenomena that implicate the self. Thus, difficulties in an interpersonal relationship may reflect the fact that one person's behavior is being guided by a possible self that the other person has no access to, or is unwilling to acknowledge. Decision making is also an arena where possible selves can have an influence. Many important decisions involve a process of imaging the self under various alternative outcomes. Yet in some decisions, such as the decision to purchase a particular car or a certain cologne, a possible self, rather than the current self will be envisioned and guide the process.

The nature and complexity of an individual's repertoire of possible selves may also be a significant source of individual differences. An optimist is a person who extrapolates possible selves on the basis of positive current experiences, whereas a pessimist extrapolates possible selves on the basis of negative current experiences. Simone de Beauvoir (1952) believed that it was the lot of women in particular to dwell on their possibilities and to agonize over them. She wrote "for women condemned to passivity, the inscrutable future is haunted by phantoms . . . ; being unable to act, she worries . . . in her imagination all possibilities have equal reality" (p. 673). Further, developmental variation in the ability to construct and maintain possible selves is likely to be associated both with the child's ability to engage in self-control and self-regulation and with the adult's approach to aging. Probably everyone over 30 has experienced the anguish of realizing that a cherished possible self is not be realized, even though this possible self remains as vivid and compelling as the day it was constructed.

We have argued here for a more extensive study of self-knowledge, one that takes seriously the individual's conception of possibility. The goal was to underline the interdependence between the self-concept and motivation and to suggest the value of examining motivation not as a generalized disposition or a set of task-specific goals, but as an individualized set of possible selves. In our analysis we have linked possible selves to motivation and to change, both the momentary changes associated with variation in the content of the working self-concept, and more enduring changes. Possible selves can then be seen as personalized cognitive carriers of some of the dynamic aspects of personality. Exactly how these possible selves operate within the self-system remains to be demonstrated in future empirical work. For example, do individuals seek to reduce discrepancy between now selves and their positive possible selves or do they strive to maintain a discrepancy between their now selves and certain negative possible selves? As psychology returns again to an emphasis on motives and goals, the study of possible selves can provide an effective bridge between motivation and cognition.

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