Possible Selves Mapping: Life-Career Exploration With Young Adolescents

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Abstract

Possible selves are cognitive manifestations of goals, aspirations, values, and fears. Although relevant to adolescents' exploration of future personal and career roles, most research and practical application involving possible selves has been with adults. An interview called the Possible Selves Mapping Interview (PSMI) was developed and employed with 42 young adolescents aged 11 to 13. All participants generated at least two hoped-for and two feared selves. Occupational hoped-for and safety feared selves were the most prevalent themes. Only a few gender differences were noted. Implications for counsellors are discussed, including the use of possible selves mapping in personal and career counselling.

Résumé

Les soi possibles se définissent comme des manifestations cognitives de buts, d'aspirations, de valeurs et d'appréhensions. Malgré qu'ils soient utiles pour les adolescents explorant leurs rôles futurs personnels et professionnels, la plupart des recherches et des applications pratiques existantes au sujet des soi possibles ont été faites sur des adultes. Une entrevue d'identification des soi possibles a été conçue et expérimentée sur 42 jeunes adolescents, âgés de 11 à 13 ans. Tous les participants ont manifesté au moins deux soi souhaités et deux soi redoutés. Des soi professionnels souhaités et des soi redoutés relatifs à la préservation physique constituaient les thèmes les plus courants. Les différences attribuées au genre étaient minimes. Cet article présente les conséquences en découlant pour les conseillers, notamment l'identification des soi possibles dans le counselling personnel et professionnel.

INTRODUCTION

Counsellors today are continually challenged to help clients respond to shifting economic and social structures. The rapidly changing world of work requires that counsellors assist individuals to re-assess their talents and opportunities in the labour market and in the education/training system. With the increased complexity of a global market economy and the many transitions demanded of workers, it is vital to encourage ongoing self-management of life-career roles. New programs have emerged to help young people address these demands, for example the new curricula in British Columbia schools, *Personal Planning K to 7* (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1995) and *Career and Personal Planning Grades 8 to 12* (B.C. Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training, 1997). The purpose of the new curricula is to provide opportunities for students to develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge required to make successful choices in their work and personal lives. Despite this evidence of increasing emphasis on young people's life-career development, little research has

actually been conducted on "develop[ing] personal hopes and expectations for career-life roles" (School Programs Branch, 1992, p. 11).

Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of "possible selves" can be used in life-career counselling to help clients explore and generate options, increase self-awareness, and formulate plans to achieve goals. Possible selves are the future-oriented components of the self-system involved in goal setting and motivation. The construction of possible selves entails the recruitment of imaginative capacity and self-reflection on the part of the individual to create a set of hoped-for, expected, and feared future selves. For example, one might faithfully practice the saxophone every afternoon with the hope of becoming a world famous jazz musician and the expectation of graduating from Julliard Music School—even while struggling with the co-existing fear of being unsuccessful. A hoped-for self is an aspired self that one desires to become, but which may or may not be realistic. An expected possible self, however, is a self that one believes one can realistically become. When a hoped-for self is viewed as reachable, specific scripts, plans and action strategies become attached to that self and the hoped-for self evolves into an expected self (Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). On the other hand, when a hoped-for self is seen as unachievable, the plans and motivational controls needed to attain it do not develop. A feared self is a possible self that one does not want to become, yet fears becoming. The feared self plays an important role in the self-concept by acting as a motivator so that concrete actions are taken to avoid that future possible self.

The concept of possible selves is closely associated with hope. Hope has been defined as "a sense of the possible" (Lynch, 1974). It has an action-orientation, and this implies that hope is related to motivation or agency. Building upon the work of Pervin (1989) and Bandura (1989), Snyder et al. (1991) found that high-hope people saw themselves as able to sustain goal-directed agency, and able to perceive pathways which would lead to a goal. Low-hope people, on the other hand, showed decreased agency and identified fewer pathways for their goals. Markus and Nurius' (1986) description of possible selves includes these two processes of agency and goal planning.

Possible selves can have a very concrete impact on how people initiate and structure their actions, both in realizing positive possible selves and in preventing realization of negative possible selves (Inglehart, Markus, Brown, & Moore, 1987; Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990). Since envisioning an action entails previewing a sequence of events that would likely accompany that action, the creation of elaborated possible selves achieving the sought-after goal has a direct impact on the translation of end-states into intentions and instrumental actions (Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990; Markus & Kunda, 1986; Nuttin, 1984). Thus, possible selves can be described as cognitive structures within the self-concept that contain a

person's aspirations, motives, and goals (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Since motivation implies potential change from present to future, possible selves represent motivation in the self-concept. Possible selves provide the energy and the means to reach goals, and thus allow a person to plan, carry out, and supervise progress while self-evaluating competencies (Wurf & Markus, 1991). In other words, achieving possible selves is also determined by self-efficacy expectations for attaining a particular goal (Bandura, 1986). Because of the emphasis on future goals and motivation, the concept of possible selves has potential for application to life-career development and planning.

Cross and Markus (1991) conducted a cross-sectional study of possible selves across the adult lifespan. Respondents were asked to list all their hoped-for and feared possible selves, rank how *capable* they thought they were of obtaining or preventing these selves, and how *likely* they thought these selves were to being realized. Each of four age groups (18-24, 25-39, 40-59, 60-86) revealed different quantities and response patterns of hoped-for and feared selves. The youngest group had high hopes, more fears, and unfettered expectations for the future. In comparison, the 40-59 age group had a moderate number of hopes and fears in fewer categories, felt a little less capable of accomplishing (or preventing) possible selves, and made more of an effort to bring about (or prevent) future selves. The oldest respondents had the fewest number of hopes and fears in the least number of domains, felt the least capable of influencing the outcomes of hoped-for and feared selves, but engaged in the most activities to bring about their possible selves. A number of other studies exploring the concept of possible selves in a variety of domains relevant to older adolescents and adults have been conducted (cf. Garcia et al., 1995; Hooker, Fiese, Jenkins, Morfei, & Schwagler, 1996; Hooker & Kaus, 1992; Inglehart, Markus, Brown, & Moore, 1987; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992; Ryff, 1991). The results of these studies have demonstrated the utility of the concept of possible selves in research and practice with adults.

Although a few studies have investigated the concept of possible selves with populations other than adults (Anderman, Hicks, & Maehr, 1994; Carson, Madison, & Santrock, 1987; Day, Borkowski, Punzo, & Howsepian, 1994; Garcia & Pintrich, 1995), there has been no systematic approach developed for young adolescents. Such an approach could offer a promising avenue for research exploring developmental trends in self-concept formation in adolescents. In terms of counselling practice, a measure of possible selves could also provide a means for youth to explore their life role aspirations and for understanding the impact of gender on these aspirations. Sex role expectations related to young adolescents' occupational choices has been a common theme in the career counselling literature. Lavine (1982) and Phipps (1995) both

found that male and female elementary-aged children envisioned themselves in a fairly narrow range of sex-stereotyped occupations, although the range was narrower for males than for females. Although these career interests may be related to children's emerging sex-role identities and mirror age-appropriate interests (e.g., sports, babies, animals), according to Phipps, they also reflect a limited range of exposure rather than a foreclosure on options. Meara, Day, Chalk, & Phelps (1995) encourage counsellors to develop strategies for career counselling using the concept of possible selves. They point out that generating possible selves gives students opportunities to learn about those occupations and to make plans to achieve their goals. The self-concept of young adolescents evolves as they "make meaning in the context of their own understanding" (Hayes, 1994, p. 7) by synthesizing childhood identities with what they know of their skills, abilities, values, and interests (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994).

In order to make use of the concept of possible selves in research and practice with adolescents, an age-appropriate measure is needed. The purpose of the present study was to develop a suitable measure, and to determine how meaningful the concept of possible selves is for young adolescents. The specific research questions under investigation in this study were: (1) What are the hoped-for and feared possible selves generated by young adolescents?; (2) What categories and themes of possible selves are most prevalent within this age group?; (3) How do young adolescents rate their ability to achieve (or prevent) these possible selves?; (4) How do young adolescents rate the likelihood of occurrence of these possible selves?; (5) What are the number of behaviours that young adolescents engage in to obtain or prevent future selves?; and, (6) What gender differences exist in young adolescents' descriptions of possible selves?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were 22 female and 20 male students from a town and surrounding rural area in the interior of British Columbia. The sample ranged in age from 11 to 13 years and represented a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Young adolescents from grades 5 to 7 were chosen for the study because, at this age they are shifting from concrete to formal operational thinking (Vernon, 1995). As the ability to think in increasingly abstract terms develops, adolescents develop the capability to think about future changes and visualize possibilities (Newman & Newman, 1988). The self becomes conceptualized by adolescents as a contemplative being (can self-reflect), a self-determining being (can make plans and decisions), a relational being (can compare self to

others) and a continuous being (has a past, present, and future) (Damon & Hart, 1982; Rosenberg, 1986).

Potential respondents were chosen on the basis of their availability and interest in participating, thus forming a purposive sample (Babbie, 1990). Several parents of children in the target age group were contacted through school and community programs. Chain sampling (snowball sampling) was used to obtain the rest of the sample. In particular, young adolescents who were willing to discuss their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future were selected. Since the aim of the study was to determine the degree this age group could generate lists of possible selves, it was essential that participants be willing to verbalize their hopes and fears.

Possible Selves Mapping Interview (PSMI)

The Possible Selves Mapping Interview (PSMI), was developed for this study by the first author (see Shepard & Marshall, 1997). The PSMI is an adaptation of Cross and Markus' 1991 paper and pencil adult measure of possible selves. The questions used by Cross and Markus were put into an interview format, which was considered more appropriate to engage and interest the young adolescent age group. Vocabulary and illustrative examples were also revised. After pilot testing with a target age group of students, minor wording changes were made to improve clarity and readability.

The PSMI is divided into three sections: Introduction, Exercise, and Debriefing. The Introduction serves two purposes. Firstly, the concept of possible selves is explained, and participants are given examples relevant to this age group. Secondly, participants are encouraged to relax and let "their thoughts flow into the future."

In the Exercise section, participants are asked to respond to the prompts, "think about what you hope to become" and "think about what you fear, dread, or don't want for yourself." Hoped-for selves are written on green cards by the interviewer and feared selves on yellow cards. These cards are then used in a series of four activities, carried out for both hoped-for and feared selves. Following each activity, the information is recorded on the Possible Selves Map. A description of the four activities follows. (1) To ascertain the relative importance of hoped-for and feared selves, participants rank their hoped-for (and feared) selves and elaborate on these possible selves by answering a series of questions. The questions are designed to access the meaning of these selves to the participants, who are asked to group the cards in a way that makes sense to them and then to discuss the significance of the grouping with the interviewer. (2) To assess perceived self-efficacy, participants are asked, "How able do you think you are of achieving (or preventing) this possible

self?" Respondents are then asked to select the possible self they feel most able to achieve, star the card and rate their capability on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all capable; 7 = completely capable). (3) Outcome expectancy is appraised by the question, "How likely do you think it is that this possible self will happen?" Respondents are asked to put a check mark on the card and again rate the likelihood on a Likert-type scale. (4). To secure information about short- and long-term goal setting and likelihood of achievement, participants are asked to reflect on the steps that they had taken this past month to bring about (or prevent) these possible selves.

In the Debriefing section participants are asked to summarize their Possible Selves Map "as if they were talking to someone who knew nothing about them." In return, the interviewer then re-summarizes the participant's PSMI and checks for accuracy. The entire Interview takes between 20 and 30 minutes, depending on how many possible selves the adolescent generates.

Interviewing

In the present study, the PSMI was administered in a quiet place to ensure both privacy and audibility of the tape. The majority of the interviews lasted about 30 minutes. All interviews were transcribed.

Analysis

The data analysis examined young adolescents' hoped-for and feared possible selves, prevalent categories of possible selves, judgments about their competencies and effectiveness in achieving or preventing possible selves, and the number and types of actions engaged in to bring about or prevent possible selves. Results were examined by group and by gender as dictated by the nature of the research question. Independent sample t tests were performed to determine any significant relationships with levels of significance set at .05, two-tailed.

Participants' hoped-for and feared possible selves data was grouped into categories using a content analysis procedure developed by Woolsey (1986), in which each new response is compared to previous responses. As a check, an independent research colleague performed a "blind sort" of the data which confirmed the already-established data categories.

The relative frequency of each category was computed by dividing the number of selves in a category (e.g., the number of leisure selves for a respondent) by the total number of hoped-for selves or feared selves listed by that same respondent. Thus, we were able to rank the categories of hoped-for (and feared) selves by frequency of mention and to control for differences in number of selves mentioned. Actions to achieve possi-

ble selves were scored by unitizing responses into individual elements that expressed one specific action (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results will be presented and discussed for each research question, with the exception of question number seven. Because there were so few significant gender differences, these will be discussed where relevant.

1. *What are the hoped-for and feared possible selves generated by young adolescents?*

Figure 1 shows hoped-for selves. The average number of hoped-for selves generated was 5.36 ($SD = 1.81$). Figure 2 shows feared selves. The young adolescents generated fewer feared selves ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.29$). The difference between the number of hoped-for and feared selves was significant, $t\ (41) = 5.16$, $p < .001$. There were no significant gender differences. Participants enjoyed the process of constructing their own possible selves map, finding it "kind of a neat way to think about the future." The young adolescents in this study had no difficulty picturing themselves in the future, and were able to generate a multiple possible selves. In previous research, Day, Borkowski, Punzo, and Howsepian (1994) found the concept of possible selves to be a meaningful construct for young Mexican American children.

Participants in this sample produced more hopeful long-term visions of themselves than feared visions, which is consistent with previous findings (Cross & Markus, 1991). Several respondents commented that they felt uncomfortable thinking about "the bad things." Perhaps, as Elkind (1981) notes, these young adolescents like to believe that negative things only happen to other people and, are therefore, less willing to entertain negative future pictures of themselves. Another possibility could be that this group is less concerned or aware of negative views at this time in their lives.

2. *What categories and themes of possible selves are most prevalent within this age group?*

The eleven categories that emerged from the content analysis were: education/training, health, ideals, leisure, lifestyle, meaningful work, mortality, occupation, possessions, relationships, and safety (see Table 1). These categories were similar to those found by Cross & Markus in their 1991 study.

Occupational hoped-for selves were most frequently mentioned (43%). For young adolescents, occupation is a developmentally meaningful representation of self in the world. An occupation describes what

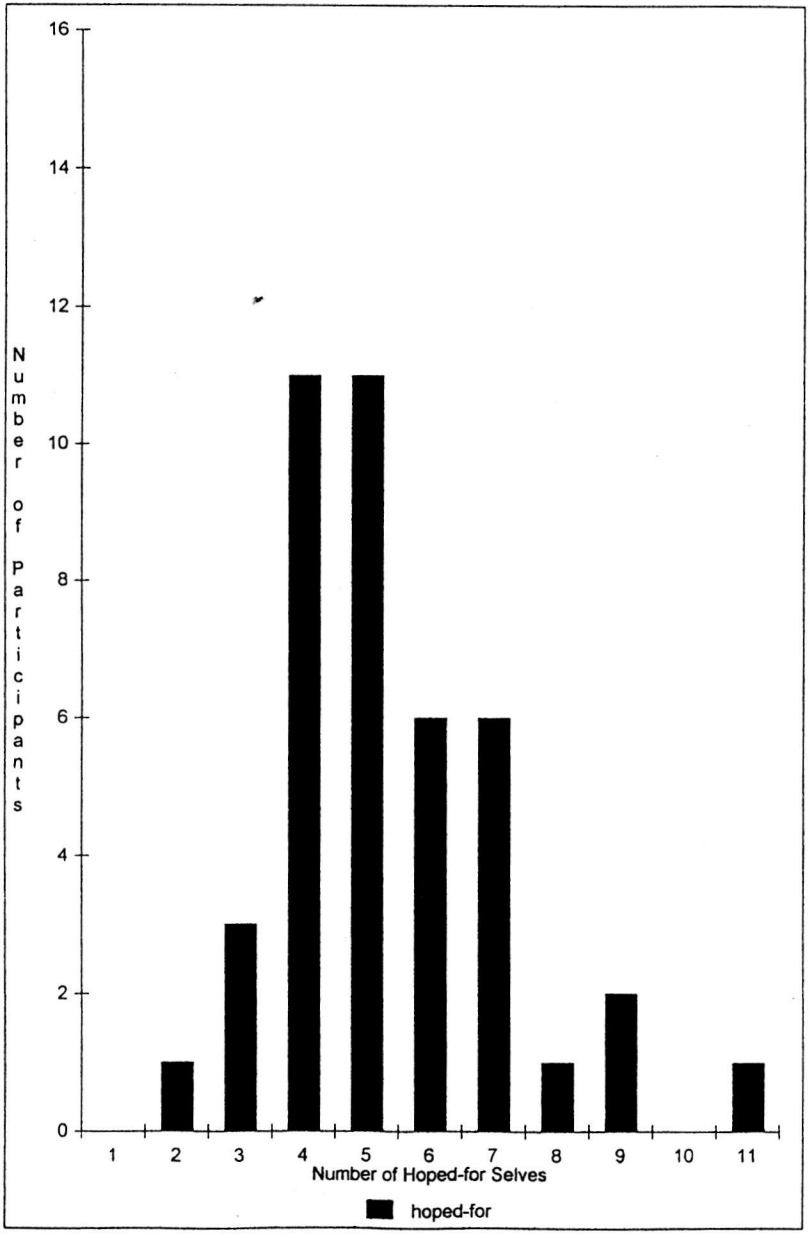

Figure 1:
Number of hoped-for selves

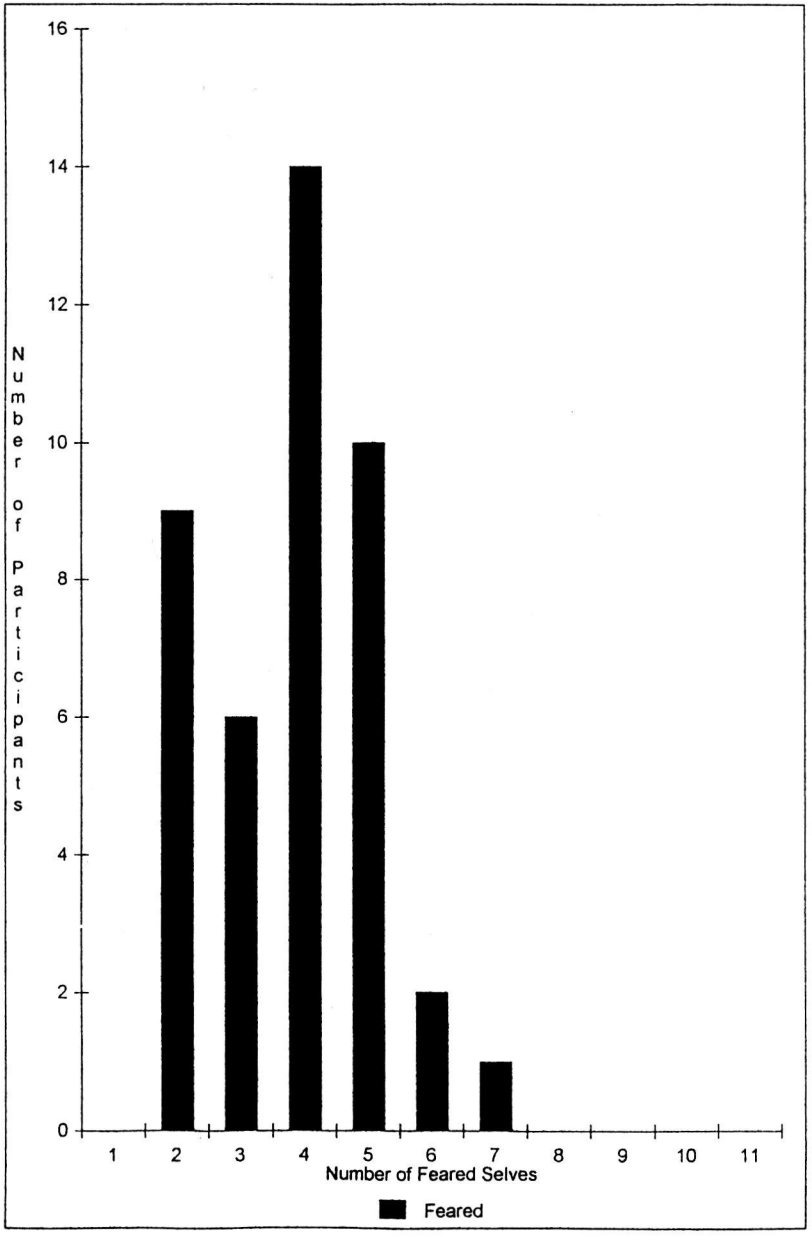

Figure 2:
Number of feared selves

you do, how much money you make, and where you live; it can be a tangible and material vision of oneself in the future. As one participant stated, " A lawyer is my first choice. I've always wanted to be one. You get big cases and lots of money, you can get a house, you know, like a big house. . . ." Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1981) found that young adolescents mentioned occupations more frequently than older adolescents. Hobbies and interests were closely connected to the occupational daydreams of the present sample (actress, athlete, artist, singer, performer, writer, and photographer) which is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Ginzberg, Ginsberg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951; Seligman, Weinstock, & Heflin, 1991).

For girls, the most frequently mentioned occupational self was teacher. Other occupational selves wished for by girls included vet, actress, horse riding teacher, and singer. One fourth of occupations chosen by this group of girls involved some sort of teaching or nursing. However, science and technology occupations, such as oceanographer, archaeologist, meteorologist, naturalist, and chemist were also mentioned by these girls as occupational dreams, as were more traditionally masculine occupations, such as construction worker, RCMP officer, farmer, blacksmith, lawyer, and vet. This shift to girls considering traditionally masculine occupations has also been found by Leung and Harmon (1990).

The boys in this sample listed professional athlete and pilot as their most frequent occupational hoped-for selves. Boys in the present study demonstrated typically masculine preferences, similar to Phipp's research (1995). Physiotherapist was the only occupation mentioned that could be classified as traditionally female. The occupations of missionary and third world helper listed by boys in this study reflected an interest in serving humanity.

The occupational selves mentioned by this sample are indicative of the community in which they live. The occupations listed are highly visible and relevant in their current lives (for instance, farmer and vet).

For feared selves, safety was mentioned most frequently (23%—see Table 1). Safety fears included sustaining injuries while participating in leisure activities (for example, falling off while dirt biking, being bucked off a horse, or being electrocuted while flying a kite.) Other safety fears included kidnapping, sexual abuse, and being attacked by wild animals. The safety fears of this particular group seemed to be related to participating in and seeing activities that carry the potential for physical injury. Horseback riding, using chain saws, operating farm machinery, dirt bike riding, and hiking in wilderness areas were activities mentioned by several members of the sample.

Loss of relationships was the second most frequent category of feared selves. While hoped-for relationship selves were family-oriented, for example, "be a mother," "have a family," and "be married," feared selves

TABLE 1

Categories of Hoped-for and Feared Selves with Relative Frequencies and Examples of Responses

Hoped-for selves		*Feared selves*	
Category	*Examples*	*Category*	*Examples*
Occupational (0.43)	farmer, paramedic, blacksmith, meteorologist	Safety (0.23)	have a serious accident, be near spiders, be kidnapped
Possessions (0.13)	owning a computer, having pets, having a house	Relationships (0.15)	somebody in the family dying, never getting married
Leisure (0.11)	visiting Australia, drawing, showing horses	Ideals (0.14)	being into drugs, teen pregnanacy, being greedy
Lifestyle (0.09)	make lots of money, live on a farm, live away from people	Lifestyle (0.12)	being homeless, being in debt, still living at home when older
Ideals (0.08)	being kind-hearted, having meaning in life, saving nature	Health (0.12)	having a disease, gettting fat, having a knee replacement
Education (0.07)	go to college, learn to fly a helicopter	Meaningful Work (0.09)	having a job I hate, being in a dead-end job like McDonalds
Relationships (0.06)	having a family, being a mother	Education (0.05)	to be uneducated, fail at school
Meaningful Work (0.04)	getting a rewarding and enjoyable job	Mortality (0.04)	dying while young, have a painful death
Safety (0.00)	no hoped-for selves mentioned	Possessions (0.04)	my house burning down, not having a car
Health (0.00)	no hoped-for selves mentioned	Occupations (0.03)	a sewage maintenance man, being a model, being a doctor
Mortality (0.00)	no hoped-for selves mentioned	Leisure (0.00)	no feared selves mentioned

included losses in a variety of relationships, such as with brothers and sisters, parents, friends, children, husbands and wives, and humankind. Since family is a major influence for these young adolescents, it is understandable that they fear losing family members and important others through events like death and divorce.

Gender Differences. There were a few significant gender differences among the possible selves categories. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to indicate hoped-for selves in the possession category, $t(40) = 3.66$, $p < .001$. Common possession selves were being car and truck owners, house owners, pet owners, and recreational vehicle owners. Damon and Hart (1982) cited a study by Montemayor and Eisen, who found that with age, adolescents use the category of possessions less frequently as self-descriptors (50% at age 9, but only 8% at age 18). The emphasis on possessions by the males in this study could simply mean that these young adolescent males are defining themselves in terms of objects (Damon & Hart, 1982; Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, 1986). More research will clarify whether this is true for young adolescent males in general.

Males had significantly more fears in the lifestyle category than females, $t\ (40) = 2.58$, $p < .05$. Their feared selves included being homeless and being poor. As discussed previously, boys in this study seem to define themselves in terms of tangible objects and, consequently, they fear losing those objects that self-define them. On the other hand, girls in the study had significantly more feared selves in the relationship category than males, $t\ (40) = 3.79$, $p < .001$. A number of studies have pointed to the value girls put on relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Harter, 1985, 1990; McGuire & McGuire, 1988; Rosenberg, 1986). Just as boys may define themselves in terms of the concrete (as in the number of hoped-for possessions), girls may define themselves in terms of their connections with others. Therefore, loss of these connections would be their greatest fear.

3. How do young adolescents rate their ability to achieve (or prevent) these possible selves?

Participants' average rating of how capable they felt of accomplishing their most important hoped-for self was 5.63 on a scale of 7 ($SD = 1.01$). They rated their ability to prevent an important feared self slightly lower, $M = 5.15$, ($SD = 1.61$) on a scale of 7, but this difference was not significant. Thus, both boys and girls felt themselves very capable of achieving an important hoped-for self and preventing a feared self from occurring. As one participant remarked, "The rating really helped me to think about what might happen. I see myself as pretty much able to do things." It should be noted that the PSMI did not ask participants to

describe what was needed in order to achieve these long-term goals. Their responses could reflect their enthusiasm and optimism for the future more than a realistic view of their ability to achieve all the necessary steps related to a particular future self. This point would need to be addressed in a more focused way in life-career planning and counselling.

This similarity in self-declared capability among girls and boys in grades 5 to 7 is somewhat different to the findings of Phillips and Zimmerman (1990). In their study, boys and girls in grades 3 and 5 did not differ in perceived competency, but by junior high girls' perceived competence was significantly lower than the same age boys. According to several researchers, girls in junior high have regularly been found to underrate their abilities; while boys at the same grade level tend to overrate themselves (Crandall; Deaux; Eccles; Parsons; et al; as cited in Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990). Perhaps these gender differences do not appear until after grade 8, or perhaps young adolescent girls are maintaining their sense of competency. A 1996 study by Maxwell, Maxwell, & Krugly-Smolska found that high school girls did not consider the "forces of constraint" in the labour market, as previous adolescent females did.

It would be of value to explore the connection between competency and relationship selves as well as with competency and nontraditional occupational selves. In the present study, girls selected and rated important hoped-for selves in areas where they felt most efficacious. For instance, one rated "being a mother" at 6 because "I like kids, and I know how to take care of them. I guess there's always the chance I won't get married, but I think I probably will."

4. How do young adolescents rate the likelihood of occurrence of these possible selves?

When participants rated the likelihood of achieving their most important hoped-for self, the mean rating was 5.5 on a scale of 7 (SD = .94). Their average feared self likelihood rating was 3.9 (SD = 1.8), significantly lower than their hoped-for likelihood rating, t (41) = 4.69, $p <$ .0001. These young adolescents believed their important hoped-for possible selves were more likely to happen or to come about than their important feared possible selves. When asked to explain their ratings, several participants said that they had "positive" thoughts about the future and didn't think bad things would happen. One respondent said, " I don't like thinking about the yellow cards [feared selves] as much as the green cards [hoped-for selves]," while another said that, "It paints the picture black." This group appears to think introspectively about some aspects of their life (for example, stating reasons for their capability ratings), but prefer not to think about themselves in unpleasant situations.

5. *What are the number of behaviours that young adolescents engage in to obtain or prevent future selves?*

The average number of actions to obtain hoped-for selves was 3.76, (*SD* = 2.26) and the average number of actions to prevent feared selves was 3.12, (*SD* = 1.52). There were no gender differences in the number of actions taken. Participants were able to describe a number of behaviours that they engaged in to obtain their most important hoped-for selves. For example:

> I plan on being a mechanic. Yesterday I was fixing the riding lawn mower, the carburetor, I cleaned it. I know where the spark plugs go and I can take the starter apart and put it together. (Male, Grade 7, 3 actions)

Participants were also able to list actions taken to avoid feared selves:

> I don't want to be someone that people fear. Like most people don't like me and I can be a jerk—like I was a real jerk a few years ago. Now I am sharing a lot and actually I am trying to make friends and I am trying to be nice to people and do things. Like today I lent my baseball mitt to someone at school so he could play. I do things like that but then sometimes I keep things to myself.
> (Male, Grade 5, 3 actions)

These statements illustrate the assertion made by Markus and Ruvolo (1989) that possible selves direct the acquisition of appropriate self-knowledge, the development of plans, and the pursuit of suitable behavioural schemes. Elaborated positive possible selves should organize and energize the individual for goal-oriented behaviour, and detailed negative possible selves should have the power to stop action. Another participant said, "When I think about what I do now in school, and if I have an idea for when I am older . . . like going to Yale, then I think that will help me to get there." Further research needs to be done to compare the elaboration and detail of possible selves to later actions and behaviours demonstrated to realize or prevent those future selves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings show that young adolescents are able to understand the concept of possible selves, and to describe them in an interview format. The PSMI is a specific procedure for exploring the link between self-concept and incentives for future behaviour. It is not simply another way of ascertaining youths' hopes, aspirations, and fears—it is a unique structure providing extensive data about many facets of personal life-career development and planning. The interview format encourages adolescents to consider their futures in terms of their hopes, fears, capabilities, expectations, priorities, and action-plans. Counsellors could include the procedure as part of their counselling interviews. In this way, adolescents could explore their possible selves, and elaborate on the cognitive and affective components of those selves. Counsellors could then help them consider hoped-for careers and lifestyles, self-efficacy

and competency, family life relationships, as well as fears such as unemployment, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, and injuries. Information gained through expressing possible selves could be helpful in exploring gender-role socialization and relationship concerns such as separation, divorce, and death.

The PSMI is particularly relevant to career exploration programs in schools. For example, the new Personal Planning and Career and Personal Planning curricula in BC schools have been designed to "help students become thoughtful, caring individuals who plan and review, make informed choices, and take responsibility for their personal and career development" (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 2). School counsellors and teachers could utilize the PSMI to assist students in collecting information about interests and values, in developing short- and long-term plans, and in evaluating, monitoring, and refining plans. Information contained on the Map, such as specific vocational roles, could be developed into full descriptions that includes settings, activities performed, the nature of interpersonal relationships in that role, the required education, etc. The Map and cards used in the PSMI are a concrete representation of students' hopes, expectations, and fears for the future which can be stored in student portfolios or student learning plans, to be reviewed throughout the year and revisited throughout high school. Additionally, the PSMI could be discussed in student-led conferences with parents. An on-going record of the students' capability and likelihood scores could show development and/or change over a period of months or years.

Possible selves could also be explored in a group setting. The first author has used the PSMI with a group of 10 students during a grade 6/7 career education class. The group administration yielded somewhat less information than the individual administration, and the students did not spend as much time self-reflecting, perhaps because they felt inhibited in front of their peers. However, at the end of the class students wanted to share and discuss their Possible Selves Maps with each other.

The limitations of the present study should be borne in mind. The sample size of 42 was large enough to yield statistically significant findings, but was a relatively small group from a small town /rural area. More research is needed with larger and diverse samples, such as at-risk youths, students with learning difficulties, and adolescents from a variety of cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.

One recommended extension of the present research would be a longitudinal study of possible selves across childhood and into adolescence. For example, collecting data from students through elementary school and high school would allow researchers to see whether specific possible selves motivate participants to engage in related achievement behaviour. Future research should investigate the developmental and

societal factors that influence the full range of possible selves in elementary school children and high school students.

Rapid and continuous technological, economic and social changes have an impact on the life-career planning of adolescents. They must be able to adjust to new circumstances, plan without rigidity, and think about their futures in terms of multiple possibilities. The Possible Selves Mapping Interview offers students a unique opportunity to imagine possible futures, and to engage in an open, personally meaningful inquiry. The PSMI provides an opportunity for youth to self-reflect, appraise levels of competency, and to gather information about hopes and fears for the future, all components of successful life-career programs. For teachers and counsellors, the PSMI is a format that is sensitive to students' value systems and can promote discussions about what students' cultural and/or gender identity mean to them. It has potential to be particularly helpful in widening students' occupational horizons, and can be used with individuals or groups. Perhaps most importantly, the PSMI offers an opportunity to construct and reconstruct the self in multiple contexts or domains, which is a major goal of holistic life-career counselling.

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