Perceptions of Present and Future Capability Among a Sample of Rural British Columbia Youth
Perceptions des capacités présentes et futures chez un échantillon de jeunes ruraux en Colombie-Britannique

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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional survey explored 96 rural adolescents' perceptions of their rural context and how their self-concept is related to perceptions of capability regarding hopes and fears for the future. The youth surveyed, from the Kootenay Boundary region of British Columbia, indicated ambivalence about staying in their communities after leaving high school, although many generally liked living there. Findings reveal a positive correlation between a high estimation of capability for obtaining a future hoped-for self and a high self-concept rating. This result has implications for rural youth, including building self-esteem through fostering perceptions of capability and increasing community engagement.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre d'une enquête à coupe transversale menée auprès de 96 adolescents ruraux, on a sondé leurs perceptions à l'égard de leur contexte rural, dans le but de déterminer s'il y a un lien entre leur image de soi et les perceptions qu'ils ont de leur capacité en ce qui concerne leurs espoirs et leurs craintes face à l'avenir. Les jeunes sondés, qui provenaient de la région de Kootenay Boundary en Colombie-Britannique, se sont montrés ambivalents sur la question de savoir s'ils resteraient dans la région après la fin de leurs études secondaires, bien que bon nombre d'entre eux disaient aimer généralement la vie dans leurs communautés. Les résultats révèlent une corrélation positive entre une estimation élevée de la capacité d'obtenir un avenir souhaité pour soi-même et une cote élevée au chapitre de l'image de soi. Ce résultat comporte des implications pour la jeunesse rurale en ce qui concerne l'amélioration de l'estime de soi par le fait de susciter des perceptions de capacité et d'accroître l'engagement communautaire.

The transition from high school is considered one of the most difficult developmental challenges facing secondary school students each year (Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Koscuilek, 2003). The transition process is influenced by the context in which they live (Chen, 1997), their sense of self (Harter & Whitesell, 2003), and what they believe they are capable of achieving (Lapan et al., 2003). In rural communities, geographic isolation, economic uncertainty, and lack of resources often prevail, making the transition out of high school particularly challenging (Lapan

et al., 2003). On the other hand, rural communities are generally characterized by strong community connections (Harrison, 2005; Looker, 2001; Malatest & Associates, 2002; Marshall, 2002; Shepard, 2005).

The self does not exist in a vacuum: rather, it is influenced by numerous contextual factors (Strahan & Wilson, 2006). That is, self-concept and the sense of what is possible develop within a particular rural context. For example, rural areas currently face educational and economic demands that contribute to a climate in which perceptions of possibility regarding present and future goals may appear limited (Shepard, 2003).

In order to find ways for counsellors to better support rural adolescents as they navigate the transition from high school, the relationship between sense of self, hopes and fears for the future, and community was examined. A cross-sectional survey explored rural adolescents' perceptions of their rural context and how their self-concept related to perceptions of capability regarding their possible selves. The intent of this research was to highlight the importance of the rural context in understanding the supports available and the barriers facing adolescents as they transition from high school.

<div align="center">THE RURAL CONTEXT</div>

It can be tempting to romanticize rural life as agricultural, pastoral, neighbourly, and free from crime and pollution. Many rural residents experience strong connections to their place of residence that may have the dual effect of close connections to the people and the land as well as hesitancy to leave to pursue further education or career opportunities (Shepard, 2005). This experience can result in mixed feelings for older adolescents as they consider the life and career choices that accompany the transition from high school (Shepard, 2005). While there is certainly some truth in this romantic vision, it obscures the fact that, historically and in the present, rural life has often been filled with a sense of isolation, hardship, danger, and even despair from inherent instability connected with dependence on natural resources (Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2008).

A recent report (Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2008) noted that "with every new census, rural Canada's place in the national fabric seems to unravel a little more" (p. ix). Rural poverty was connected to recent challenges within agriculture, forestry, and tourism as well as to an aging infrastructure, communication deficits such as poor access to digital technology, and inadequate transportation, education, housing, legal services, and health care. However, against some of these unfavourable odds, rural communities have adapted to these new circumstances and taken steps to survive crisis and become healthy and resilient communities (Centre for Community Enterprise, 2000). Both positive and negative factors have the potential to impact the opportunities available for rural youth in the present and the future as they consider life beyond high school.

<center>SELF–CONCEPT AND POSSIBLE SELVES</center>

Self-Concept

An important demand of adolescence is the development and weaving together of changing multiple selves, the formation of selves toward which to aspire, and the need to resolve the discontinuity that is experienced as identity evolves (Harter, 1990). Emerging cognitive abilities and changing societal expectations combine to modify and shape the self-concept.

As the self-concept is the entire collection of self-relevant experiences, it is more practical to measure self-esteem or the evaluative aspect of a person's positive or negative self-regard (Harter, 1999). Because self-esteem varies as a function of social contexts, a multidimensional model of assessing self-esteem is considered more accurate (Harter, 1999). Domain-specific evaluation reflects the individual's sense of competence across particular domains—for example, social or school competence—and is thought to be impacted more readily by contextual factors (Alves-Martins, Peixoto, Gouveia-Pereira, Amaral, & Pedro, 2002) and memories of the past, in addition to visions of the self in the future (Strahan & Wilson, 2006).

Possible Selves

Within the socioeconomic climate and the educational and occupational opportunities available in a specific rural setting, particular possible selves emerge. Individual conceptualizations of personal future potential, or possible selves, are aspects of the self-concept referring to what individuals could become, would like to become, and are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As personalized future self-conceptions that function as psychological resources, possible selves have at least two main functions (Cross & Markus, 1991).

First, possible selves act as motivators or as incentives for future behaviour. The selves are to be either approached or avoided and function as a blueprint or template for change and growth through adolescent and adult development. The shaping of possible selves thus helps to connect the current self with the imagined future self. Second, possible selves defend the current self by providing an evaluative and interpretive context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves set up expectations for change and provide a framework to interpret and evaluate events and behaviour consistent with these expectations. In this way, possible selves shape self-esteem through developing a context by which the real self is evaluated.

The affective evaluation of an individual's current self and the accompanying satisfaction depends on the "surrounding context of possibility" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). For example, if a rural youth dreamed of becoming an electrician but her school did not offer the prerequisite courses and her family lacked the financial resources to send her elsewhere, this possible self may seem less attainable.

Possible selves, like self-concept and self-esteem, are domain-specific and are therefore context-dependent (Shepard, 2003). In an examination of prevalent

hopes and fears of rural female adolescents, an apparent "bounding process" or restriction in the options available for youth was uncovered (Shepard, 2003). Female participants were presented with few female occupational and educational role models; this may have limited hopes for the future and consequently impacted future goals and planning behaviour. Social contexts can provide feedback to adolescents about whether a particular possible self is valued in a positive or negative way (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). "Peering into the private and personal imaginary revealed the clear imprint of society and history … as with all aspects of self and identity, possible selves are co-owned; they are socially contingent and conditioned" (Markus, 2006, p. xii).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from four communities in the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) in the province of British Columbia using convenience sampling. Four schools within School District #8 (Kootenay Lake) took part in the study; participation was voluntary for teachers and students. Of the approximately 428 adolescent students who were enrolled in grades 10 through 12, 96 students completed the survey (22.4% sample response rate). Of the 96 respondents, 53.1% were male and 46.9% were female. Participants were between 14 and 19 years old with the majority of participants age 16 (59.4%). Most participants (88%) identified as Caucasian with 7.3% of respondents indicating Aboriginal origins.

The Survey

PROCEDURES

The survey instrument was pilot tested with three rural adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18. Three other adolescents also completed the survey once it was posted online to check for any technological difficulties. All pilot participants completed the survey in about 20 minutes. Pretesting was helpful in ensuring the survey items were culturally sensitive, clear, understandable, and age-appropriate (Litwin, 2003).

In order to obtain sufficient numbers for statistical analysis, the online survey was open for one month on two occasions, May 2007 and October 2007. Of the 101 surveys completed, five were considered unusable due to incomplete responses, which left a sample size of 96 for the analysis. Of the five incomplete responses, four had only partially completed the demographic data and the remaining one had completed about half the survey. A small amount of the quantitative data (1.48%) from the completed surveys was also missing. The missing data was handled by inputting random data using a random number generator (Howell, 2004). Qualitative missing data was left blank.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The eight questions generated by the first researcher were designed to be exploratory and expand on common themes found in rural literature such as educational and employment challenges, outmigration, community supports, and community connections. For example, "Do you think your school will prepare you well so you can meet your goals once you finish high school?" and "Do you plan to stay in this community after you are finished high school?" were two questions in the community context section. Participants were asked to choose from three response options: (a) *yes*, (b) *sometimes*, and (c) *no*.

WHAT AM I LIKE?

The *Self Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA; Harter, 1988) is a quantitative measure of self-concept and was developed to assess the multidimensional adolescent self-concept and to assess feelings of self-worth in specific domains in addition to overall sense of worth. Each item on the 45-item questionnaire comprises two contrasting descriptions (one more positively worded than the other). For each description, there are two choices (*sort of true for me* and *really true for me*), and the respondent is asked to choose one.

Positively and negatively worded descriptions are randomly distributed and are scored on a 4-point scale with higher numbers representing positive opinions. Construct validity has been reported for all nine subscales: (a) Scholastic Competence, (b) Athletic Competence, (c) Job Competence, (d) Behavioural Conduct, (e) Social Acceptance, (f) Physical Appearance, (g) Romantic Appeal, (h) Close Friendship, and (i) Global Self-Worth. All subscales report Cronbach's Alpha coefficients or reliability scores that range from .74 to .92 with the exception of Global Self-Worth, which was not included in the factor analysis (Harter, 1988).

Factor analysis has established the presence of eight distinct subscales, with the Global Self-Worth subscale differing from the eight other domains but overlapping with each (Hagborg, 1993). The subscales in this study reported Cronbach's Alpha coefficients or reliability scores that range from .52 to .85. In general, the SPPA attempts to measure an adolescent's sense of a competent self in a number of domains (Worrell, 1997). For a complete list of subscale definitions, please refer to the manual for the SSPA (Harter, 1988).

POSSIBLE SELVES

The *Possible Selves Instrument* (Cross & Markus, 1991) encourages participants to list as many hoped-for and feared selves as come to mind. From this self-generated list, participants then select their two most important hoped-for and two most important feared selves. They then rate how capable they feel of accomplishing their two most important hoped-for selves on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all capable*) to 7 (*completely capable*). Participants also list their two most important feared selves and rate how capable they feel of preventing these important feared selves.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Possible Selves

An average of 3.48 (*SD* = 3.24) hoped-for selves and an average of 2.44 (*SD* = 2.38) feared selves were produced with the number of responses per participant ranging from 1 to 14 for hoped-for selves and from 1 to 15 for feared selves. A paired samples *t*-test indicated that the average number of hoped-for selves reported by participants was significantly larger than the number of feared selves (*t*(95) = 3.914, *p* = 0.000).

The overall mean rating for all the questions regarding capability was 4.97 (*SD* = 1.73). A paired samples *t*-test indicated that participants were significantly more likely to indicate a higher rating of "How capable do you feel of accomplishing this possible self?" for the first most important hoped-for self as compared to "How capable do you feel of preventing this possible self?" for the first most important feared self (*t*(95) = 3.169, *p* < .002). A paired samples *t*-test also indicated that participants were significantly more likely to indicate a higher rating of capability for the second most important hoped-for self as compared to capability of preventing the second most important feared self (*t*(95) = 2.384, *p* < .006).

An independent *t*-test was run to determine any significant differences between the number of hoped-for and feared selves generated according to gender. There was a significant gender difference for hoped-for selves (*t*(94) = -3.05, *p* < .003). As indicated by the means and standard deviations shown in Table 1, females reported more hoped-for selves than males. A significant gender difference was not found for feared selves (*t*(94) = 1.76, *p* > .081). Regarding the question "How capable do you feel of accomplishing this possible self?", an independent *t*-test uncovered no significant gender differences

Table 1
Number of Hoped-for and Feared Selves by Gender

Gender	Hoped-for selves	Feared selves	Total possible selves
Male: Mean	2.57	2.04	4.61
N	51	51	51
SD	2.27	2.58	4.45
Female: Mean	4.51	2.89	7.4
N	45	45	45
SD	3.84	2.07	4.61

Note. N = 96.

Perceptions of Rural Context

A summary of the responses to the rural context questions is provided in Table 2. These results indicated that the majority of participants described their community as rural and that most participants responded *yes* or *sometimes* to the

question "Are there people you can talk to in your community about your future?" It appears that most participants viewed their communities as a place they could find support when contemplating their future.

Table 2
Community Context Questions

Question	Frequency			Percentage		
	Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	Sometimes	No
1	64	29	3	66.7	30.2	3.1
2	29	44	23	30.2	45.8	24
3	31	44	21	32.3	45.8	21.9
4	30	44	22	31.2	45.8	22.9
5	39	46	11	40.6	47.9	11.5
6	37	51	8	38.5	53.1	8.3
7	38	44	14	39.8	45.8	14.6
8	45	40	11	46.9	41.7	11.5

Note. N = 96
Question 1:   Would you describe your community as rural?
Question 2:   Does your school offer the courses or programs you want to take?
Question 3:   Do you think your school will prepare you well so you can meet your goals once you finish high school?
Question 4:   Do you plan to stay in this community after you are finished high school?
Question 5:   Do you like living in this community?
Question 6:   Are there jobs available in this community for people your age?
Question 7:   Are there jobs available in your community for people who have finished high school?
Question 8:   Are there people you can talk to in your community about your future?

For the remaining rural context questions, most participants responded *sometimes*, suggesting that most participants were ambivalent or undecided in terms of whether their school offered the courses or programs they wished to take, whether their school will prepare them well so they can meet their goals once they finish high school, whether they would stay in or leave their community after high school, whether they liked living in this community, and whether there are jobs available for people their age and for people who have finished high school. Thus, much uncertainty regarding educational and economic opportunities in their rural community is apparent for this sample of rural youth.

A chi-square analysis indicated that there were significant gender differences for the question "Does your school offer the courses or programs you want to take?" ($\chi^2(2, N = 96) = 6.523, p > .05$). Specifically, the female participants responded less favourably than boys to this question. No significant gender differences were found for the remaining community context questions.

Self-Concept and Perceptions of Capability for Hoped-for and Feared Possible Selves

Correlation analyses were performed among the nine subscales of self-concept and responses to the question "How capable do you feel of accomplishing (pre-

venting) this possible self?" for the first most important hoped-for and feared selves. Within the self-concept measure there were several correlations: (a) Social Acceptance was correlated with Close Friendship, Athletic Competence, and Romantic Appeal; (b) Romantic Appeal was correlated with Physical Appearance; and (c) Scholastic Competence was correlated with Behavioural Conduct and Job Competence (see Table 3).

Measures of capability with respect to achieving or preventing possible selves were included in the correlation analysis, as a review of the literature indicated connections among perceptions of capability of achieving possible selves with self-concept and community membership (Cameron, 1999). Results showed a significant correlation at $\alpha = 0.01$ between "How capable do you feel of accomplishing this possible self?" for the first most important hoped for self and all nine subscales for self-concept, with Global Self-Concept, Physical Appearance, and Social Acceptance producing the largest correlations. A significant correlation to "How capable do you feel of preventing this possible self?" for the first most important feared self and self-concept was only found for one self-concept subscale, Romantic Appeal. No significant differences were found for any of the nine subscales when analyzed by gender with a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error.

DISCUSSION

Self-representations of future success such as hoped-for selves have been found to be more readily accessible in the working self-concepts of people than self-representations of failure, such as feared selves (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Participants reported more hoped-for selves than feared selves, a result consistent with other studies (see Cross & Markus, 1991; Shepard, 1997). Possible selves are also viewed as representations of personal future potential (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For this sample of rural youth, estimations of positive future potential (hoped-for selves) are represented in greater numbers than estimations of negative future potential (feared selves). Interestingly, participants generated a number of very positive hoped-for selves including "rich," "wealthy," and "successful." Similarly, Cross and Markus (1991) found that young adults aged 18–24 listed a number of extremely positive and global hoped-for selves such as "rich" and "perfectly happy" (p. 239). It would appear that older adolescents and young adults are generally optimistic, although perhaps somewhat unrealistic, regarding their futures.

Most participants felt moderately capable of either accomplishing or preventing a possible self. Participants indicated higher ratings of capability in terms of achieving hoped-for selves than in preventing feared selves. Consistent with the very optimistic examples of hoped-for selves, these ratings of capability also appear positive. This suggests that the rural youth in this study are hopeful about the future with respect to both their perceptions of capability in terms of obtaining hoped-for selves and preventing feared ones, and in terms of the specific examples of hoped-for selves listed. Cross and Markus (1991) also found that

Table 3

Correlation Matrix: Self-Concept in Relation to Perceptions of Capability for Hoped-for and Feared Possible Selves

	Sch Com	Soc Acp	Ath Com	Phy App	Job Com	Rom App	Beh Con	Clo Fri	Global	Fir HfS Cap	Fir FS Cap
SchCom	1	.212*	.245*	.387**	.428**	.088	.517**	.103	.522**	.316**	.002
SocAcp	.212*	1	.476**	.474**	.279**	.379**	-.035	.529**	.545**	.390**	.015
AthCom	.245*	.476**	1	.160	-.005	.135	.011	.257*	.307**	.303**	.036
PhyApp	.387**	.474**	.160	1	.467**	.409**	.156	.318**	.589**	.417**	.194
JobCom	.428**	.279**	-.005	.467**	1	.076	.242*	.329**	.476**	.366**	.172
RomApp	.088	.379**	.135	.409**	.076	1	.099	.215*	.228*	.370**	.206*
BehCon	.517**	-.035	.011	.156	.242*	.099	1	-.022	.419**	.273**	.127
CloFri	.103	.529**	.257*	.318**	.329**	.215*	-.022	1	.432**	.284**	.114
Global	.522**	.545**	.307**	.589**	.476**	.228*	.419**	.432**	1	.437**	.009
FirHfS Cap	.316**	.390**	.303**	.417**	.366**	.370**	.273**	.284**	.437**	1	.164
FirFS Cap	.002	.015	.036	.194	.172	.206*	.127	.114	.009	.164	1

Note: SchCom = scholastic competence; SocAcp = social acceptance; AthCom = athletic competence; PhyApp = physical appearance; JobCom = job competence; RomApp = romantic appeal; BehCon = behavioural conduct; CloFri = close friendship; Global = global self-concept; FirHfSCap = How capable do you feel of achieving your first most important hoped-for self; FirFSCap = How capable do you feel of preventing your first most important feared self.
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

younger adults indicated being much more capable of obtaining hoped-for selves and preventing feared selves than older participants. Indeed, the young adults in their sample believed anything was possible and gave themselves high competency ratings.

Unexpected results were the generation of more hoped-for selves by female participants than by males and no significant gender difference with respect to ratings of capability of achieving hopes and preventing fears between female and male participants. Female participants appeared to be very optimistic about their futures. It would be interesting to see if these female respondents were also strongly supported by friends, family, and teachers.

Hackett and Betz (1981) were the first to use self-efficacy to explain the career development of women and found that societal factors created gender differences in gaining access to primary sources of self-efficacy information. For example, women are thought to gain less exposure to role models, to receive less encouragement for career pursuits, and to experience higher internal physiological responses (e.g., anxiety) that decrease perceptions of self-efficacy (Hackett, Lent, & Greenhaus, 1991). Female participants in the present study who were confident in their ability to accomplish their hopes and prevent their fears may have a clear vision of their goals, strengths, and interests.

Cross and Markus (1991) speak of a "context of possibility" (p. 233) that accompanies the affective evaluation of the current self-concept. It follows that possible selves are most susceptible to influence from this context of possibility as they are an aspect of the self-system that often changes. Possible selves are often kept private and not shared with others and, although influenced by others, are primarily defined and evaluated by the individual (Cross & Markus, 1991). In this way, possible selves contribute to the changeable nature of the current self through differential activation depending on social context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Typically, survey responses reflected the educational and occupational limitations in rural areas, and many responses were linked with leaving the community for jobs, education, and travel. The following are participant examples of possible selves that reflect the challenges of the rural context.

Examples of hoped-for selves included "Moving out," "I want to move to a big city," "I would like to move to a larger community," and "I wanna move out of this town just because there are so many other possibilities and I can expand on myself." Examples of feared selves included "Being stuck with logging or a job that is a low paying job," "Not being able to go to college and get a good job that I can be happy with for a long period of time," "Crappy house, crappy town," and "Staying here and doing nothing with my life."

Most participants indicated that they were able to find support in their communities and generally liked living there. These results echo those of the McCreary Centre Society (2004) and the "British Columbia Atlas of Wellness" (Foster & Keller, 2007). Youth in the Kootenay Region have the second highest rating of sense of belonging to a local community in the province. Both studies also found that family and school connectedness was above the provincial average.

Harrison (2005) also named community connections as important supports for youth with almost two thirds of youth feeling that they have good parental and teacher connections and that their contributions to the community were valued. For rural counsellors, this perception of social support may moderate the limiting effects of occupational and educational challenges and the perceived "bounding process" described in rural areas. On the other hand, close connections may also constrain rural youth from pursuing opportunities beyond the safety of close family, friendships, and community (Shepard, 2003).

A preponderance of youth surveyed felt their school only sometimes offered courses or programs they wanted to take, and only sometimes prepared them once they finished high school. The responses were consistent with reports on rural education that indicate that rural schools typically offer fewer courses that are prerequisites for specific college and university programs (Looker, 2001; Shepard, 2005). In terms of educational limitations, most respondents only sometimes perceived their community as being able to offer them the resources they need in order to succeed as they transition from high school and toward adulthood. This may be problematic for rural youth as they prepare for their future. The lack of availability of postsecondary institutions in rural areas makes upgrading coursework difficult and expensive, and the cost of pursuing postsecondary education is higher for rural students than for urban students (Frenette, 2002).

A minority of participants in this study planned to leave after finishing high school, although potential outmigration of rural youth is common elsewhere in rural Canada. Deep connections to their place of residence can contribute to hesitance for rural youth to pursue higher education or careers when they first graduate from high school (Shepard, 2005). Another reason for indecision regarding staying or leaving and planning for the future is a fear of what lies ahead; it can be safer to wait and see (Shepard, 2003). These findings suggest a potential tension for rural youth between the educational and occupational limitations of their area and strong community attachments. As Alasia (2010) cautions, researchers need to focus on "communities in their regional milieus" (p. 3) such as rural communities in coastal British Columbia versus rural communities in the Prairies. With this in mind, research targeting the self-system of rural participants should be generalized with caution.

A high estimation of capability in terms of obtaining a hoped-for self was paired with a high rating of self-concept globally and on nine subscales. Hoped-for selves that are viewed as attainable by the current self can elicit feelings of self-efficacy and competence (Knox, 2006). Since possible selves are thought to arise from self-competence beliefs at the individual level (Vernon, 2004), achieving possible selves is determined by self-efficacy expectations for attaining a particular goal (Bandura, 1986). Consistent with this research, higher self-esteem is associated with greater confidence that positive possible selves will be attained, and "developing a sense of competence and high self-esteem is important during the transition from adolescence to adulthood" (McCreary Centre Society, 2004, p. 35).

Results were less conclusive for feared selves, with only the Romantic Appeal subscale correlating with perceptions of how capable a person feels of preventing a possible self. However, when feared possible selves were clustered into categories, it became evident that many respondents feared "being rejected by others," "being disliked," and "being overlooked." At this developmental stage, concerns about being attractive to those in whom they are interested, dating the people they would like to be dating, and feeling that they are fun and interesting on a date contribute to how participants feel about themselves.

The transition from high school represents both opportunities and challenges for youth. This research considered how a rural context might be intertwined with a young person's hopes and fears for the future in addition to current self-perceptions. Of particular note was the positive correlation between current self-perceptions, or self-concept, and perceived capability regarding achieving a hoped-for self in the future. For counsellors working with rural youth, this finding suggests that through supporting client perceptions of capability regarding achieving a future goal, the possibility of that goal being reached is improved, and current self-esteem may be improved as well.

Implications for Theory

Little research is available about the self-system of rural adolescents. The particular qualities of a rural community were salient considerations for this research. A tension emerges for rural youth between the educational and occupational limitations of their area and strong community attachments. This research reflected that tension, with participants indicating an ambiguity regarding whether they should stay or leave their community after high school graduation and perceptions of their school not always offering the courses they would like, countered by the perception that there are people in their community that they can talk to and indications that they generally like living in their community.

These findings suggest that context is an important consideration when conducting research that investigates self and identity. The nature and development of the self-system is intimately connected to contextual factors. Separating context from the results may present an incomplete understanding. Quantitative measures of self-concept, like the SPPS, assess levels of how positive a person's self-perception is in a number of different domains. Although this is an important assessment, a quantitative measure is not able to capture the contextual factors that have contributed to a person's self-concept or the level of self-esteem of that same person. Thus, while quantitative measures of the self are useful, they capture only part of the picture; perhaps a qualitative approach is better suited to uncovering the layers of context that are interwoven with both present and future selves.

The connection found between self-concept and possible selves in the present research highlights the value of studying both present and future components of the self together. For instance, possible selves are typically conceptualized as resources that facilitate identity development and that motivate and sustain self-change. In addition, possible selves are relevant self-knowledge with which

to plan for the future. Thus, when possible selves are accessed, we can really get a sense of how the current self-concept is gained in addition to how individuals conceptualize their future.

Implications for Counselling Practice

If students perceive barriers to hoped-for selves as insurmountable, there will be little motivation for them to engage in further exploration (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). A counsellor who is aware of a student's perceptions could begin to help the student assess the accuracy of those perceptions and to identify goals the student perceives as realistic. Thus, counsellors should strive to help students manage their perceptions of barriers while simultaneously becoming aware of actual barriers as they enact their transition plans. Counsellors might incorporate strategies designed to help rural students gain a sense of mastery and increase self-confidence in specific career-related tasks as they endeavour to guide students in exploring their interests and obtaining more information about the world of work.

Research suggests that structured activities occurring in everyday settings can have great impact on who we think we are and what is possible for us to achieve (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). A number of studies indicate that possible selves can easily be addressed through structured interventions that can consequently impact performance (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002). A school-based intervention, such as a previous graduate sharing a story of university success, may enhance youth's ability to imagine attending university and what the self can achieve. Subtle contextual shifts may change the sense made of the daily experience of attending school, which can, in turn, fuel motivation (Oyserman et al., 2002).

Rural counsellors can use the generation of possible selves to assist students in collecting information about their interests and values, to develop short- and long-term plans, and to evaluate, monitor, and refine their plans. Eliciting possible selves may increase students' ability to self-appraise, to realistically evaluate both capacity for actions and expected outcomes, to actively problem solve, to change perspectives, and to obtain self-knowledge—all resources that youth can enlist to deal effectively with an ever-changing world. By examining possible selves in specific domains, interest areas can be identified (e.g., possible selves in the area of health or creative ability).

Despite the educational challenges facing young people in rural communities, teachers and counsellors are often considered important social supports and motivators that can help connect rural youth with their community and encourage access to resources such as career planning, rural-based training programs, mentoring relationships, volunteer opportunities, and employment (Looker, 2001). A key component of developing and strengthening resilience in communities is to strengthen community connections through establishing on-the-ground support and a network of co-operating organizations (Canadian Rural Partnership Rural Dialogue, 2006; Centre for Community Enterprise, 2000).

When the authors travelled to one of the communities to present research results, the community demonstrated a number of ways of connecting youth with adult mentors and involving youth in decision making: (a) community members were actively engaged in the school and provided resources such as healthy food for school events; (b) community members attended various meetings and volunteered time directly with students; (c) the community celebrated youth success with announcements on the school monitor; (d) youth voices were heard and incorporated in the design and building of new resources, such as the playground. Thus, this school provided many examples of initiatives to strengthen community connections and support positive self-esteem of youth.

Future Considerations

Several areas of this study have room for improvement. Changes to the recruitment process could have encouraged a larger number of participants from each community. Recruitment was carried out through communication with school principals over the telephone. While the principals were receptive and supportive of this research, it is likely that a presentation in person would have encouraged more participation.

The number of respondents in this survey was relatively small; therefore, the results cannot easily be generalized to other rural populations. However, if context is an integral component of this research, then it follows that the results should not be generalized without considering the particular context of other communities. For example, Alasia (2010) found that human capital as measured by the number of individuals with some postsecondary education had a strong and positive association with community growth and prosperity in one community.

Future research in this area would benefit from a narrower focus in order to explore in more depth the responses by participants and to clarify the connections among self-concept, possible selves, and community. As possible selves are typically kept private, a survey may not adequately access possible selves in terms of number and detail. A face-to-face interview is suggested as an approach that will generate more responses and more details about the responses (Shepard, 1997).

The role played by community in adolescent self-concept development is another area that requires more exploration and clarification, as it is likely that the influence of community was not adequately captured. The extent to which rural youth are actually accessing services and the types of services being accessed may be a more important assessment of community connection.

CONCLUSION

The self-concept has long been considered an integral component of healthy psychological functioning: a component of the self-system that develops from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood and is evaluated by self-esteem. The more recent possible selves research that connects this concept with

motivation, behaviour, and future goals has helped cement the importance of this area of study, especially for older adolescents contemplating their transition from high school. Possible selves and self-concept represent an accumulation of self-knowledge embedded in multiple contextual factors. This research examined the relationship between the self-concept, possible selves, and community for a sample of rural youth as they approached the transition from high school.

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