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Editors

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*Editors*

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### Abstract

Possible identities are the positive and negative identities one might hold in the future. This chapter reviews what is known about the content and consequences of possible identities. Of particular interest are the implications of possible identities for identity-based motivation, current action in pursuit of identity-based goals. From a theoretical perspective, possible identities are important; they provide a goal post for current action and an interpretive lens for making sense of experience and so should influence both well-being and motivation. Surprisingly little is known about how and under which circumstances these consequences occur. This chapter addresses this gap. Key findings are threefold. First, possible identities differ with life phase, life transition, and life circumstance and intersect with other aspects of identity. Second, possible identities, and particularly negative possible identities, sometimes affect well-being. Similarly, possible identities are sometimes, but not always, implicated in current action. Research is beginning to address when and how possible identities matter. As outlined in the identity-based motivation model, connection, congruence, and interpretation of difficulty matter. If a possible identity feels connected to the current self and the actions needed to attain the future identity feel congruent with the current self, then people are more likely to interpret difficulties they encounter as meaning that the future identity is important rather than impossible to attain, and consequently to persist in their pursuit of this future identity.

In each kind of self, material, social, and spiritual, men distinguish between the immediate and actual, and the remote and potential. (William James, 1890, p. 300)

The self is a mental concept, a working theory about oneself, stored in memory, and amended with use. It is a working theory about who one is, was, and will become, rather than a store of autobiographical memories. Autobiographical memories and mental images become part of the self only if they take on self-defining meaning (see Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Epstein, 1973; Greenwald & Banaji, 1989; Oyserman, 2001,

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2007). As the opening quote by William James makes clear, within one's self-theory, the future part of the self (who one may become) is distinct from the current part of self (who one is now). The future self provides a sense of potential and an interpretive lens to make sense of experience, guide self feelings, and energize goal pursuit. People are motivated to act in ways that feel identity congruent. They are motivated to work toward the futures they believe people like themselves can attain. At the same time, they are also motivated to work to avoid other futures, especially futures they believe out-group members (people not like themselves) attain (for an overview of the identity-based motivation model: Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Oyserman & Destin, 2010b; for a different perspective, see Soenens and Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume).

However, for a number of reasons, identity-based motivation processes do not always cue current action to attain a future self. First, the future self may not feel connected to the present self. Second, the actions necessary to attain a future self may feel incongruent with other salient aspects of the current self. Third, experience of ease or difficulty in thinking about a future self may be misinterpreted as implying that no action is needed at the moment (or that action does not matter). For example, bringing to mind a future self may feel difficult and experienced difficulty may be interpreted as meaning that the future self is impossible to attain.

Thus, while the future self can influence the current self, it does not always do so. To understand why the self matters sometimes but not always, we begin this chapter with an operationalization of what we mean by self and identity as well as examples of the early psychological theory and research on which current theorizing and research are based. In the third section we describe the content of the possible identities that make up the future self, emphasizing what is known about the influence of life-phase and socio-cultural factors on self-content. In the final section, we describe what is known about the consequences of possible identities, their impact on well-being and behavior, ending

with implications for identity-based motivation. Though it may seem that knowing the content of future self-goals is sufficient to predict behavioral outcomes, as discussed in the final section of this chapter, this is not necessarily the case.

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## Conceptualizations of Possible Identities

### Early Roots

The idea that the future self matters seems to have developed from multiple theoretical well-springs. Perhaps the best-known early psychological conceptualization comes from William James (1890). James (1890) provided a useful working definition of the self, describing it as both a cognitive structure (e.g., differentiating that which is me vs. not me, that which is the current me vs. future potential me) and the content (all the qualities that a person can define as his or her own), feelings, and actions that accompany this content.

According to James, if they could, people would attempt to define themselves as potentially all things and as potentially successful at everything. However, James specifies that aspiring to become all things and failing to do so can undermine self-esteem; people do not feel good about themselves when they aspire to become more than they attain. Thus, in James' view, people weigh (though not necessarily deliberately and consciously) the advantages of broad aspirations (many possible identities) against the disadvantage of feeling badly about oneself when progress toward an aspiration (a possible identity) is insufficient. Consequentially, he proposed, people let go of previous possible identities to improve current self-esteem, but are always tempted to expand the future self by adding new possible identities (see Section Content Across Life Phases and Transitions for other early research).

### Current Conceptualizations

Current conceptualizations of the self also focus on cognitive structure, describing it as a theory

about the self rather than as simply content (for reviews that include some focus on the future self, see Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Baumeister, 1998; Karniol & Ross, 1996; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Generally, the *future self* is that part of self-concept focused on the self one might become. As components of the future self, possible identities are working theories of who one may become, based in current assessments of one's own strengths, weaknesses, talents, and characteristics, as well as assessments of what is possible for people like oneself (e.g., for an early formulation, see Erikson, 1968). This future-oriented perspective provides an evaluative context for making sense of the present and motivates and incentivizes future-oriented action.

Philosophers and psychologists alike have asked about the effects of the future self for current behavior and emotional experience. In particular, they have asked *why* and *when* (under what circumstances) conflict between the needs and desires of the future self and the needs and desires of the present self are resolved in favor of the future self. In other words, what predicts the likelihood that the present self will take current action in service of the future self? When and how might the existence of a future self spur future-focused action in the present? As will be discussed in Section Temporal Distance, the answers to these questions depend in part on whether the future self is perceived as connected to the present self, representing the "true" self unencumbered by current constraints, or as disconnected from the present self, such that the concerns of the future self matter no more than the concerns of a stranger.

Possible-identities researchers are interested in both content and consequences of these identities. They ask which future identities people choose for themselves, what are the consequences of having particular future identities for self-regard (well-being) and self-change (behavior), and when these consequences are likely to unfold. A variety of terms are used in the literature to describe aspects of the future or to-be-attained self. Thus, relevant research describes possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b), ideal

and ought selves (Havinghurst, Robinson, & Dorr, 1946; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985), desired and undesired selves (Ogilvie, 1987), fantasy selves (Bybee, Luthar, Zigler, & Merisca, 1997; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001), goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), and personal projects (Little, 1987; Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2007). In the current review of the literature, we attempt to be as inclusive as possible without losing sight of the goal of outlining content and consequences of possible identities for well-being and action. Of necessity, we synthesize across a very disparate literature obtained through Psych-info and Google Scholar searches using as key words the above future self terms. Throughout, we take the simplifying step of referring generally to *possible identities*.

### **Identity-Based Motivation: Situated, Dynamic, Constructed in Context**

In this chapter, we use the term *possible identities* rather than *possible selves*, or another term, for both empirical and theoretical reasons. First, empirically, the literature typically examines content of specific social (e.g., "I'll be a college student," "I'll be a better daughter") and personal (e.g., "I'll be successful," "I'll be smart") possible future *identities*, rather than the future *self* as a whole (for reviews, see Kerpelman & Dunkel, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009). Self-concept is a large, multifaceted structure that includes past, current, and future identities (Howard, 2000; Neisser, 1988, 1997; Oyserman, 2001). As outlined next, using the term *identity* also has advantages for linking to theoretical frameworks.

*Possible identities as social products.* Erikson (1968) described adolescent identity development as a process of defining oneself in a particular historical, cultural, and sociological time period. Re-connecting with this term both (a) facilitates connection to Erikson's earlier perspective and (b) highlights that we are conceptualizing future identities broadly, beyond a Western culture-bound focus on the self as an individual product. Indeed, we focus on a broader cultural perspective of the self as a social

process consisting of connections and relationships to important others (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1993, see also Cheñ, Boucher & Kraus, Chapter 7, this volume).

*Possible identities as social cognition.* Thinking of the self as set of multiple, not necessarily well-integrated current and possible identities is critical to dynamic conceptualizations of the self that take into account recent advances in social cognition research (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Greenwald & Banaji, 1989; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Possible identities are not fixed. Rather they are amended, revised, and even dropped depending on contextual affordances and constraints, and these changes are not necessarily conscious and deliberate. A social cognition perspective highlights three core points. First, feelings and actions are influenced by those aspects of self-concept that are in working memory; second, situations influence which aspects of self-concept are in working memory; third, self-concept is revised and amended by experiences. The identity-based motivation perspective model takes a further step and predicts that the meaning of a particular identity and the actions that feel congruent with it are not simply cued but actively constructed by features of immediate contexts (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Oyserman & Destin, 2010a). As will be detailed in the final section of this chapter, contexts not only make a particular identity salient, they also shape the content and behavioral consequences of identities.

*Possible identities as psycho-social and cultural forces.* Moreover, using the term *identity* facilitates bridging psychological and sociological literatures and integration of the possible identity literature with modern goal theories. Psychologists often refer to the self and to possible selves without considering the social aspects of the self or the social contexts within which the self is enacted, essentially treating possible identities as decontextualized *personal* identities. In contrast sociological and social psychological theories expand their frame beyond the decontextualized self-focus to social identities and social contexts (e.g., see Cinnirella, 1998; for reviews,

see Hogg & Smith, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

By moving beyond first person singular identities (the identities *I* aspire to attain and wish to avoid), other perspectives on the future self come to light. Consider, for example, first person plural identities, *us* identities, *social possible identities*, or *possible identities embedded* in social identities. These are the identities *we* aspire to and wish to avoid and include the identities people in my social group (*we*) can strive for (e.g., Cameron, 1999; see Oyserman, 2007; Spears, Chapter 9, this volume). A possible identity can be personal and also social, thus a person assessing whether a college graduate possible identity is plausible for him/herself is asking not only a personal identity question, but also a social identity question (“can people like me get to and graduate from college?”). Another less studied perspective is the third-person perspective on the future self. This involves considering how others might see the future self. As will be outlined later (see Section Intersectionalities of Possible Identity Content Across Gender, Racial–Ethnic, and Socio-Cultural and Socio-Economic Contexts), there are average gender and cultural differences in sensitivity to contextual information, with women and those from collectivist cultures are more likely than men and those from individualist cultures to incorporate the desires and perspectives of others into their possible identities (e.g., Knox, 2006; Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1998; Waid & Frazier, 2003). Moreover, there is some evidence taking a third-person perspective can motivate action to attain a future self (Vasquez & Buehler, Studies 1 and 2, 2007).

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### **Early Research on Possible Identities: Role Models as Ideal Self**

While James (1890) provided a theoretical conceptualization, Darrah (1898) and others undertook empirical research. These early studies content-coded the responses of school-aged children to open-ended questions about their ideal self. Researchers were explicitly concerned with

generalizability and context effects. Therefore, they tabulated results from large samples of children from the United States (e.g., Chambers, 1903; Darrah, 1898; Havinghurst et al., 1946), Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland (e.g., Havinghurst & Macdonald, 1955), and Norway (Teigen, Normann, Bjorkheim, & Helland, 2000). The focus was on describing *who* children wanted to become (e.g., parents, historical figures, movie stars). Though this is not how possible identities are currently conceptualized, early research provides anecdotal evidence supporting James' ideas about the content and structure of the future self and foreshadows more recent research on future content and consequences of possible identities.

The earliest study of the future self we were able to locate operationalized the ideal self as who one wants to be like. Data were collected in 1896 from a large sample of 7–16-year-olds in San Mateo County, California and in St Paul, Minnesota (Darrah, 1898, extensively summarized in Chambers, 1903; Greenstein, 1964). Darrah found that young children's ideal self focused on other children they knew, in essence describing an ideal self they could become now. However, by mid-childhood, children's ideal self focused on future possibilities. They described future selves in terms of adults, both historical and contemporary public figures, with particular focus on George Washington. Thus, whereas about a third of 7-year-olds described a child of their age as their ideal self, less than 10% of 16-year-olds did so. By age 15, a third of boys and a quarter of girls said that they would most like to be George Washington. Though children's reasons for their choices are not fully described in the publication, from the examples the author provided, it seems that responses focused on children's understanding of the *character* of the desired ideal self. For example, children wanted to be honest like George Washington.

Chambers (1903) followed up with an examination of the reasons children gave for choosing a particular person as an ideal future self. Chambers surveyed all the children in the New Castle, Pennsylvania, public schools using the same core question, "What person of whom you have ever heard or read would you most

wish to be like? Why?" Like Darrah, Chambers also found that George Washington was a future ideal self, particularly among children in early to middle childhood (though less among later adolescents, who focused on individuals they were acquainted with as ideal future selves). Chambers also reported his analyses of the reasons children gave for their choice, finding a developmental trajectory. The youngest children gave no reason or simply described the person chosen; by age ten, children gave general positive reasons (because he is "good") and only in early adolescence were reasons substantively focused on the kinds of civic qualities, personal morals or character children desired to attain. For example: "Queen Victoria, because she was a good Christian woman and very kind and knew how to raise her children and knew how to mind her own business and knew how to bring up her children in the proper way" (p. 123). However, this category was not fully operationalized in the published paper.

The third early milestone study provided children an opportunity to describe characteristics of future identities and re-shifted focus to particularly examine *adult* possible identities. Havinghurst et al. (1946) collected data from a varied sample of over 1,100 children in Baltimore, Chicago, and small Midwestern communities in the United States. Samples differed in age (6–16), gender, socio-economic status, rural–urban location, and ethnicity. Their goal was to ask children to describe their ideal future selves and, through content coding and comparing responses across groups, to come up with a general coding scheme to describe the development of the ideal self. Children were asked to write a brief essay entitled "The Person I Would Like to be Like" (p. 242). Specifically, children were asked to "Describe in a page or less the person you would most like to be like when you grow up. This may be a real person, or an imaginary person. He or she may be a combination of several people. Tell something about this person's age, character, appearance, and recreations..." (p. 242). As before, question format focused attention on potential models for ideal selves; however, in contrast to earlier studies, the prompt also provided the opportunity

for students to write about “what” they hoped to be like—their future character, appearance, and activities. Further, by focusing on “when you grow up,” they focused on adult ideal selves explicitly.

These authors also noted differences by age. Shifts occurred both in who was the focus of the future self and in whether a particular other was used as a model at all. At 6 or 7 years of age, ideal selves were commonly rooted in examples of parents. In middle childhood, ideal selves shifted toward images of athletes, movie stars, entertainers. In adolescence, ideal selves shifted back to closer-to-hand examples of young adults in one’s immediate context, especially neighbors, older siblings, aunts, and uncles. These people’s successes and failures were deemed likely models for one’s own future self. Moreover, while adolescents tended to shift to closer adults, they did not necessarily choose a single ideal. About half of 16-year olds developed composite ideal selves abstracted from a number of people.

Thus, early researchers found some continuity in developmental trajectories across time and place. Although early researchers focused on identifying *who* role models were rather than on the content and consequence of future identities, the narrative content that survives from this early research clearly demonstrates that children were describing the content of their future self and its implications for well-being and action. As an example, here is an excerpt from the ideal-self response from a 16-year-old boy studied by Havinghurst and colleagues (1946):

I want to be energetic. Someone once told me, genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, I want to be philosophical and plump . . . someone who is always astride the situation . . . but . . . also be efficient and have a good sense of humor. I may be asking too much, but I would not like any broken limbs or crippled faculties. I don’t care what I look like, just so I’m not too repulsive. I can’t think of any particular occupation I will be suited for, but since I like to write, I may devote my time to that. . . . I should like to be able to play tennis, or at least play at tennis.

This teenage boy’s description highlights three current interests of possible identity researchers—the link between content and

action, the link between positive and negative possible identities, and the meaning of differences in perceived likelihood of various possible identities. Thus, in his free description, this boy includes both possible identities (e.g., “energetic” and “astride the situation”) and strategies to attain them (e.g., hard work and “perspiration” rather than “inspiration”). In doing so, he implies that his effort, not his current state, is important for attaining his possible identities. Moreover, some of his positive future identities seem to cue disavowal of some of his negative future identities. For example, describing self-defined positive future identities (e.g., I want to be plump) seems to cue to-be-avoided self-defined negative future identities (e.g., I don’t want to be crippled), even though the instruction was simply to describe one’s ideal self. Third, some future identities seem more likely than others (e.g., his conceptualization of a future career is “I can’t think of any particular occupation I will be suited for, but since I like to write, I may devote my time to that”). As far as the domains described, William James’ “material self” which includes the body (e.g., “I don’t care what I look like, just so I am not too repulsive”) is clearly important, but elements of the “spiritual self” which includes self-reflections and traits (e.g., “philosophical”) are also represented. Less clearly articulated are aspects of the “social self” which includes how others see the self, though it may be that these descriptions imply that others agree that one is efficient or has a good sense of humor in order for these traits to have the desired positive effects.

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### Possible Identity Content

Now we turn to current conceptualizations of possible identity content. In this section, we briefly summarize heterogeneity in assessment (differences in measurement and focus) then move on to content domains, reviewing the content literature within four organizing frames. These are: (1) life phases and transitions; (2) intersectionalities across gender, racial-ethnic, and socio-cultural and economic context; (3)



identity valence and balance; and (4) identity distance. Of course, the studies described here could fit in more than one section; our goal is simply to provide the reader with a sense of the multiple ways possible identity content can be considered.

### Assessment Issues

*Heterogeneity in measurement.* Measures of possible identities are diverse both because of differences in theoretical conceptualization and because it is not yet clear how best to assess them. One general division is between open- and closed-ended measures. Open-ended measures have two distinct strengths and two related weaknesses. First consider their strengths. Open-ended measures allow participants to freely describe salient possible identity domains, content, and concerns. Moreover, because the researcher does not provide a list, open-ended measures reduce social desirability responding and self-presentation concerns. Next consider their weaknesses. First, open-ended responses provide a sense of salient possible identities but not a full listing of all identities one might be willing to consider. Second, open-ended responses must be content coded prior to interpretation, which can be labor intensive and can result in loss of much of the detailed information obtained. In contrast, closed-ended measures ensure uniformity of response domains, content, and concerns. These are clear strengths of the method but at the same time a pre-selected list reduces chances of learning what is salient to the respondent and increases the chance of social desirability influences (endorsing possible identities that feel normative whether or not one would have generated them in an open-ended task).

Another domain of measurement heterogeneity is how far in the future the future self is and whether the question provides a temporal anchor (e.g., next year, in 10 years, as an adult) or not (e.g., in the future). Temporal anchors increase specificity but only make sense if anchors are grounded in a theoretical conceptualization of the future self. Some theories refer to the future more

generally (e.g., ideal self, future self, personal projects). If the theory does not distinguish near and far future, researchers may prefer not to include specific anchors.

Similarly, probes that elicit both positive and negative aspects of the future self (e.g., desired, undesired, expected, feared) ensure that both positive and negative aspects are covered. This coverage makes sense if it is theoretically relevant. But since some future self theories do not specify differences in the function of, or even the necessity of, considering valence in the future self, it is hard to argue that all measures should make valence explicit.

In sum, the current state of the field is that a variety of open- and closed-ended measures are used, some specifying temporal distance and valence, others not, some specifying content domains and others leaving domain open. Although differences reduce our ability to generalize about the likely content of possible identities, they also reflect real divergence across theories as to what should be the focus of attention. As a result, it would be premature to force standardization of measurement (for a contrary position, see Erickson, 2007).

*Heterogeneity in focus.* In addition to differences in measurement, focus of attention also differs across authors. It is plausible that possible identity content is linked to life phase or specific to gender, racial-ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic contexts and that content varies by perspective, valence, and temporal distance as will be outlined in the following sections.

### Content Across Life Phases and Transitions

A number of reviews address possible identity content (e.g., Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Though many populations have yet to be studied, our sense is that, as predicted by Erikson's (1968) developmental model, content centers on salient life tasks, phases, and transitions. Here we consider two broad age and life phase groupings: (a) Schooling and preparing for adult relationships and occupations, and

(b) engaging in parenting and career, aging, and the life phase of retirement and health concerns.

*Childhood and adolescence.* Atance (2008) reviews research findings demonstrating that children form mental images of their future wants and desires by the age of four or five. Havighurst and colleagues (1946, 1955) also found early focus on the future self, with children from age 6 years of age (and through the teenage years) describing their ideal self in terms of character, physical appearance (especially girls), material goods (especially boys), and sociability. More recently, Oyserman and Markus (1990a) found that the positive and negative possible identities of 13–16-year olds focused largely on school and extracurricular activities (e.g., do well in school, play basketball, do poorly in school, not get to play sports). Other common possible identities were intrapersonal identities (e.g., happy, attractive, depressed, fat), interpersonal identities (e.g., have friends, spend time with mother, alone, no boy/girlfriend), jobs versus poverty (e.g., have a job, make money, be poor, can't have nice things), material goods (have a car, have nice clothes), and crime (e.g., steal, sell drugs, be in jail). School was a more salient possible identity for youth who were in school, accounting for a third of their responses. On the other hand, children adjudicated to treatment facilities for delinquent activities were significantly less likely to report school-focused possible identities.

In addition to obtaining content information, researchers have also asked about the effect of parents and other adults on their children's future identities, asking whether children nominate parents as influencing what is possible for them (Oyserman, 1993), whether children see becoming like their parents or other adults as a positive future self, and whether parents' own ideal selves directly shape the ideal selves of their children. Oyserman (1993) found that more delinquent teens were more likely to view peers, lifestyles, or no one at all as influencing their possible identities and less likely to perceive parents and other adults as influential than were teens not involved in delinquent activity. Havighurst and colleagues (1946) found that children nominated their parents as their ideal self but that mid-adolescents

shifted focus to famous role models, and that older adolescents again returned to family or other local models. The influence of parents and other adults on adult possible identities has been described qualitatively (e.g., Freer, 2009; Shepard & Marshall, 1999). Zentner and Renaud (2007) focused specifically on the impact of parents' ideal selves on children's ideal selves. Teens' ideal selves were correlated both with their parent's beliefs about what the teen's ideal selves should be and with parent's own ideal selves. The association between parent and child ideals was stronger among teens reporting a positive and nurturing parent-child relationship. Mother's ideals mattered more than father's.

*Adulthood and aging.* A number of studies with middle class young adults suggest that their possible identities are focused on occupational and interpersonal issues such as getting married; that family and parenting possible identities become more important in the middle adult years; and that the centrality of job-focused possible identities recedes as adults enter later adulthood (Cross & Markus, 1991; Hooker, Fiese, Jenkins, Morfei, & Schwagler, 1996; Strauss & Goldberg, 1999). As adults age, they continue to imagine future identities (e.g., Cotter & Gonzalez, 2009; Hoppmann & Smith, 2007; Hoppmann, Gerstorf, Smith, & Klumb, 2007). However, older adults become less positive in general about their future self (Ryff, 1991). Moreover, physical health-related possible identities become more prominent in older adulthood (Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Kaus, 2000; Hooker & Kaus, 1994).

The Berlin aging study provides unique insight into possible identities among aging adults. In this sample, over half of all possible identities are health-related (Hoppmann & Smith, 2007). Additional common possible identities focus on everyday competence (both cognitive and physical), family, and political and religious attitudes (Freund & Smith, 1999; Hoppmann & Smith, 2007; Smith & Freund, 2002). In these adults, as in others, prior life-phase choices influence current possible identities. A surprising finding is that the possible identities of childless elderly women were more likely to focus on family ties, whereas the possible identities of

elderly women with children focused on social relationships outside the family (Hoppmann & Smith, 2007).

*Transitions and changes.* In addition to studying specific life phases, a number of authors have examined life transitions and changes. Life transitions typically refer to normative shifts from one phase to the next. Transitions are often accompanied by changes in the accessibility of, commitment to, and beliefs about the likelihood of attaining a particular possible identity. These changes may occur slowly as new challenges unfold developmentally, or they can occur relatively quickly as new challenges present themselves due to unforeseen circumstances. We found a number of studies examining transitions. Some transitions involve adding possible identities, while others are better described in terms of the loss of possible identities. As detailed below, examples of adding possible identities include transitions to adulthood, school transition, and transitions into parenthood. Examples of losing possible identities include divorce, job loss, and other setbacks.

Dunkel (2002) studied the transition to early adulthood. To understand the relationship between identity development and possible identities in young adulthood, he assessed both constructs in a sample of mostly white college students (averaging 20 years of age).<sup>1</sup> He found that students reported more possible identities, and especially more negative or feared possible identities when they were in the *identity moratorium* phase than when they were in other phases. The identity moratorium phase can be considered a mid-range phase of identity development. The goal of the moratorium phase is to commit to working toward certain identities (see Kroger and Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume).

Manzi, Vignoles, and Regalia (2010) examined stability of possible identities across the transition to university and the transition to being a parent or parenthood. Prior to these transitions, these authors asked participants to describe their desires, fears, and expectations about the centrality of different parts of their identity in the future. After the transition, participants were

shown their prior rating and asked to consider it again. Identities participants expected or desired to be central were in fact rated as more central after the transition.

Changes in life circumstances have also been associated with loss of possible identities. For example, Price, Friedland, and Vinokur (1998) note that one of the effects of job loss is loss of identity as a current and future breadwinner, contributing member of society, and valued part of the family unit. King and Raspin (2004) studied associations between possible identities and the well-being of recently divorced women, distinguishing possible identities that were currently possible and those which had been lost due to divorce. Those with clear, easy to imagine, and detailed currently possible identities had higher well-being both concurrently and 2 years later than those with clear, easy to imagine, and detailed possible identities that were lost and no longer attainable due to the divorce.

To study what it takes for people to give up on a possible identity, Carroll, Shepperd, and Arkin (2009) set up a field experiment. Participants were psychology students in their final year of undergraduate coursework who were seeking career advice. In the first stage, students met with a career advisor who created a positive possible identity (“business psychologist”) by providing attractive information about this field and the possibility of an intensive 1-year master’s degree program to become certified. At the next phase, students were divided into two conditions. All were provided feedback. Some were simply told that this positive possible identity was unlikely. Others were told both that the possible identity was unlikely and, if pursued, was likely to result in attaining a negative possible identity (“clerical worker”). Only when the negative possible identity was referenced, did participants relinquish the positive possible identity. Carroll and colleagues (2009) replicated these findings in a follow-up experiment using the same method. The implication is that, as predicted by James (1890), once a possible identity has been formed, it is revised downward or let go of only with great reluctance.

### **Intersectionalities of Possible Identity Content Across Gender, Racial–Ethnic, and Socio-Cultural and Socio-Economic Contexts**

Similarities and differences in possible identity content by socio-economic status, gender, socio-cultural, or racial–ethnic group have also been studied. Antecedents of between-group differences found are difficult to specify. Such differences may be due to differences in opportunity structures, differences in socialization, or other differences—particularly differences in how intersections among identities are handled.

*Gender.* If one's future is structured within gendered norms and expectations, then possible identities should differ by gender (Knox, 2006). If women are more socialized to focus on connections and relationships while men are socialized to focus on autonomy and independence, then their sense of self generally and their possible identities in particular, should differ in that *one focuses on relating and connecting and the other focuses on autonomy and independence* (see Knox, 2006; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Indeed, Darrah (1898) found gender differences in the ideal selves generated by boys and girls. On average, boys picked fewer people as ideal-self models than girls and picked mostly men, whereas girls picked men and women equally. Darrah proposed that this might be due to the relative dearth of high-achieving female figures in school textbooks and public discourse. Chambers (1903) also found that by the end of high school, girls returned to more local individuals as ideal-self models, interpreting this as due to their realization their goals should be set lower.

Moving beyond coding of specific individuals that children and teens wanted to become, Havighurst and colleagues (1946) coded for content of ideal selves and found this also varied somewhat by gender. *Character* was the most common content of ideal selves for both genders, while *Physical appearance* was as salient as character for girls, but less so for boys. Conversely, *Material goods* were salient in the ideal selves of boys, but not girls. *Sociability* was the third most common ideal-self content for boys.

Gender and social context effects may intersect. For example, in their analyses of the possible identities of boys and girls in a four-state sample, Oyserman, Johnson, and James (2010) found that doing well and not getting in trouble at school are more salient possible identities for children living in more disadvantaged neighborhoods compared to children living in less disadvantaged neighborhoods. Boys and girls did not differ in the salience of school-focused possible identities overall. However, controlling for salience of school-focused possible identities, boys living in more economically disadvantaged neighborhoods were less likely to have strategies to attain their school-focused possible identities than girls.

Results also highlight gender differences in sensitivity to relational and social factors. In the Zentner and Renaud (2007) field study previously described, parents had more impact on the ideal selves of girls than of boys. Not only are girls more sensitive to their parents' perspective, they are also more likely to assume that their possible identities need to fit social contexts in the future. For example, Curry and colleagues (1994) found that academically successful girls were more likely to consider both work and family in their possible identities, while boys focused only on work.

Kemmelmeier and Oyserman (2001a; Study 2) demonstrated gender differences in sensitivity to contextual cues with an experimental paradigm. They asked male and female college undergraduates to think of someone they knew who was doing poorly in school and who may fail. Then they randomly assigned participants to consider either (a) how they were similar to this person or (b) how they were different from this person. As predicted by the hypothesis of higher average female contextual sensitivity, women's academic possible identities were more negative in the condition cuing similarity to a failing target and more positive in condition cuing difference from this target. No such effect emerged for men.

Other studies suggest that negative or feared possible identities are either more salient or more consequential for girls. Feared physical appearance possible identities were negatively

correlated with self-esteem for girls, but not for boys (Knox, Funk, Elliott, & Bush, 1998). Adolescent girls rate feared possible identities as more likely to become realities than adolescent boys (Knox, Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 2000; see also Anthis, Dunkel, & Anderson, 2004). Mothers are more likely to have feared possible identities focused on parenting than fathers (though men focused more on occupation-focused feared possible identities), so this may reflect gender-role stereotypes regarding parent responsibility for child outcomes (Hooker et al., 1996).

*Culture and race-ethnicity.* Content of the future self may differ by cultural context for a number of reasons. First, cultures may vary in valued content. Second, cultures may vary in the extent to which people are sensitive to contextual information. Third, cultures may vary in the extent to which positivity about the self is normative. Finally, culture may interact with structural affordances and constraints to influence content of possible identities (for reviews, see Oyserman & Lee, 2008a; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002).

Though little research has used culture as an axis with which to study the future self, existing research has tended to focus on the distinction between individualism and collectivism (for reviews of how culture influences goal focus and motivational processes, see Oyserman & Lee, 2008b; Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009; see also Oyserman et al., 2002 and Smith, Chapter 11, this volume, for more information on the individualism–collectivism distinction).

Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) collected data from college students in Detroit, Michigan, finding that the association of cultural factors (individualism, collectivism) with possible identities differed between White and African-American students. Higher individualism was associated with reporting more strategies to attain school-focused possible identities among White students; among African-American students, individualism did not matter, but students higher in collectivism reported more strategies to attain school-focused possible identities.

In another study, Kimmelmeier and Oyserman (2001b) assessed individualism and collectivism

and asked college students to think of someone they knew who was doing well in school and was likely to succeed, randomly assigning participants to either (a) consider how they were similar to or (b) how they were different from this successful person, and then rate how likely they were to attain a number of academic possible identities. Students who were higher in individualism believed they were more likely to attain academic possible identities no matter whether they thought of similarities to or differences from a successful other. However, participants who were higher in collectivism were more sensitive to the context manipulation. They rated their chances of attaining a positive academic possible identity as higher after thinking of how they were similar to, rather than different from, a successful other.

In a third study, Waid and Frazier (2003) found differences in content of possible identities that were congruent with cultural differences. They compared possible identities of Hispanic and White American adults aged 60 and older. Compared to Hispanic Americans, White Americans' possible identities focused more on the personal (e.g., hoping for education and personal abilities, fearing physical decline) whereas, compared to White Americans, Hispanic Americans' possible identities focused more on the social (e.g., family-focused hopes).

Research comparing content of possible identities across racial–ethnic groups suggests that school-focused possible identities are common among youth across racial–ethnic groups. For example, Fryberg and Markus (2003) found that school-focused possible identities were the most common category of expected self for both American-Indian and European-American junior high-school and college students. However, these results are context sensitive. Thus, Oyserman and Markus (1990a) found that school-focused possible identities were more common among African-American than among White youths in their Detroit, Michigan sample. However, in their primarily white context, Anderman, Anderman, and Griesinger (1999) found the reverse, with African-American youth less likely to report school-focused possible selves than white youth. Moreover, living in segregated neighborhoods

can undermine positive racial-ethnic identity elements associated with school-focused possible identities (Oyserman & Yoon, 2009).

These findings imply that salient stereotypes about racial-ethnic groups can influence the content of possible identities. Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone (2008, Study 4) recently tested this proposition empirically among American-Indian students. Specifically, they randomly assigned American-Indian students to one of three conditions: A stereotype-cuing condition, in which they viewed American-Indian sports mascots, a non-stereotype-cuing condition, in which they viewed an American-Indian College Fund advertisement, or a no image control condition. As expected, school-focused possible identities were more likely to come to mind in the control and neutral image conditions than in the stereotype image condition.

Kao's (2000) qualitative analysis of high-school focus group and personal interview data support the interpretation that possible identities are influenced by salient stereotypes. In this study, Black students described feared possible identities of being a school failure (a negative stereotype of Black students). Hispanic students described feared possible identities of being an unskilled manual laborer (a negative stereotype of Hispanics). Asian students described hoped-for possible identities of high academic success (a positive stereotype of Asians).

*Socio-economic status (SES).* A handful of studies specifically examine the content of possible identities of participants who are either low income or vary in their income status. We found three studies focusing explicitly on low-income mothers. In each study, possible identity content focused on employment and family roles (pregnant teens, Klaw, 2008; mothers receiving welfare or transitioning to work, Lee & Oyserman, 2009; single, rural, low-income mothers, Ward, 2009). Less is known about low-income fathers. Although a study with imprisoned fathers suggests a common feared possible identity for these men is becoming like their own fathers (Meek, 2007).

Two studies compared content across socio-economic status and found subtle differences.

Among college students varying in socio-economic status, lower socio-economic status was associated with expecting to attain less-prestigious work and career goals and these lower expectations were associated with lower well-being; however, the groups did not differ in their hoped-for identities (Pisarik & Shoffner, 2009). Among middle-school children, the most common next-year possible identity focused on school, with no effect of parental SES. Controlling for parental SES, neighborhood-level economic disadvantage mattered. Children from more disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to have school-focused possible identities but were less likely to have strategies to attain these identities than children from more advantaged neighborhoods (Oyserman et al., 2010). One possible way to interpret this result is that all children are exposed to images of school success through the media but differ in their access to chances to learn how to go about achieving their desired identities.

Moreover, models of possible identities may also be less delineated among children in high-poverty contexts. White and Black children from more impoverished circumstances were more likely to desire becoming "glamorous adults" (p. 248), public figures, or fictional characters than individuals from their own lives. They were also more likely to maintain their wish to become a glamorous adult (an athlete, a movie star, or an entertainer) over time (though it became less salient over time for children from higher socio-economic circumstances) (Havinghurst et al., 1946).

## **Valence**

*Positive and negative possible identities.* As outlined next, positive and negative possible identities are likely to focus on salient life domains but negative possible identities are often more diverse than positive possible identities. With regard to life domains, Hooker and colleagues (1996) found that the most common hoped-for and feared possible identities of parents of infants and preschoolers focused on parenting (e.g., "have

a closer relationship with my kids when they're grown" or "kids being hurt or stolen") or on occupation. Both mothers and fathers of preschoolers had more feared possible identities than parents of infants, suggesting that concerns become more salient as infants transition to childhood.

Studies with children and adolescents often find larger variety in negative than positive possible identities. Thus, in a comparative study of the possible identities of adolescents in four subgroups (public school, community placement following delinquent activity, schools of attention following delinquent activity, and maximum security lockup), Oyserman and Markus (1990a, 1990b) noted that hoped-for and expected identities converged on a few categories but that feared possible identities were more heterogeneous. Yowell (2000) and Knox and colleagues (2000) replicated this effect of more heterogeneity in negative possible identities in school-based samples.

*Balance.* Rather than compare positive and negative identities, it is also possible to consider whether they are in the same domain. This has been termed "balance" of possible identities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b). In the initial examination of this construct, Oyserman and Markus (1990a, 1990b) found that teens differing in their self-reported level of delinquent involvement differed in the likelihood that they had balanced (positive and negative) future identities. Teens who reported more balanced possible identities subsequently reported fewer delinquent behaviors, even when controlling for other factors such as race-ethnicity, gender, and positivity of expected and negativity of feared possible identities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b).

This effect was replicated when teens differing in their official level of delinquent involvement were compared; those with higher official involvement with the justice system (e.g., adjudicated, community placement) had fewer balanced-possible identities than those with lower-official involvement (e.g., public school). In a follow-up study comparing male adolescents in public high school and the county detention facility, Oyserman and Saltz (1993) replicated

this difference in balance across official delinquency level and also demonstrated that balance was associated with higher social competence. The positive effects of balance have also been documented in the domain of academic attainment, specifically, using more strategies to work on school-focused goals, more engagement with school, and better grades (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 1995).

### Temporal Distance

Although all possible identities are future-oriented, the future may be proximal (e.g., "I'll pass the eighth grade") or distal (e.g., "I'll have a good job when I grow up"). Time units can be marked vaguely (e.g., "when I am an adult and on my own") or clearly (e.g., "next September" or "next semester"). Time can be marked by meaning unit ("by the time I have to buy another swimsuit," "by the time I retire") or by date ("by Valentine's Day").

How time is marked is likely to influence how vividly a possible identity is imagined, how much attaining it feels linked to present action, and therefore the likelihood that it will cue identity-based motivational striving. For example, soldiers, prisoners, and high-school students may mark time until the future begins (after discharge, once parole begins, after graduation) such that the present is experienced as separate from the future and the future feels distal, vague, and open. When the future begins later, there is not much that can be done now—except wait for the future to arrive. Conversely, the present can be seen as connecting fluidly to the future, and as such, as a time for setting the groundwork for what will become possible in the future. When the future begins now, current action is immediately necessary. With this mindset, a soldier may focus on getting the kind of training that can be used after military service, a student may focus on taking advanced-placement classes to increase the likelihood of college acceptance, and a prisoner may focus on attaining peace of mind,

re-connecting with family, or obtaining training, to make the transition to life outside the prison smoother.

Temporal distance is also likely to matter for possible identity content. In their construal-level theory, Trope and Liberman (2003) show that thinking about a distal future event activates a more global, abstract construal style in which the focus is on the general "essence" of the event, whereas thinking about a proximal future activates a more local, concrete, and context-focused construal style. Analogously, there is some evidence that thinking about a distal future self results in more abstract, trait-like descriptions (Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008) than thinking about a proximal (e.g., myself tomorrow) future self or the current self (Pronin & Ross, 2006). For example, Pronin and Ross (2006) randomly assigned participants to rate either their current or their future self on a series of descriptors, with the option of stating whether the trait that describes them depends on the situation. Participants tended to describe the distal future self in terms of traits and to describe the proximal future self and current self as constrained by context, with actions being predicted by situation as opposed to fixed traits.

This tendency is especially pronounced when participants are asked to imagine the actions the future self will take rather than the feelings the future self will have (Pronin & Ross, 2006). When considering the far future, participants make choices and commitments based on what they value, rather than on what is merely easily feasible (Liberman & Trope, 1998). This is a potentially critical difference in perspective and may be at the root of at least some of the motivating effects of possible identities. In sum, this research implies that when imagining a (far) future self, people are motivated to attain important, valued self-attributes and are not immobilized by the situational limitations of the present.

In line with this thinking, Kivetz and Tyler (2007) demonstrate that distal future thoughts activate the desire to become like one's *true self*<sup>2</sup>, whereas proximal future thoughts activate

a vision of the future self focused on more pragmatic and instrumental concerns, especially how best to act toward a goal. They randomly assigned participants to proximal (in a week) and distal (in 10 years) conditions then had participants select characteristics that would best describe them. In the far future, the self was described with abstract characteristics (e.g., "fulfilling my inner potential") more so than in the near future.

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### Consequences of Possible Identities

Research describing possible identity content typically does so with the aim of understanding the consequences of these aspects of the future self for well-being and goal attainment (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998; Karniol & Ross, 1996; Markus & Nurius, 1986), often with particular focus on specific goals and their link to strategies (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Bayer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). In this section, we consider what is known about the consequences of possible future identities for two core functions of self-concept: well-being and goal attainment. The well-being function is to protect and maintain a reasonable level of positive self-regard (*self-protection* or *self-enhancement*). The goal attainment function is to sustain and facilitate personal growth, development, and change (*self-improvement*) (for reviews of self-motives, see Brown, 1998; Fiske, 2008; Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume).

Possible identity content has been associated with current well-being as well as with later outcomes including academic success and life satisfaction (for recent reviews, see Kerpelman & Dunkel, 2006; Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008). These associations suggest that the content of the future self matters. Typically, studies provide either cross-sectional or longitudinal associations of identity content with an outcome of interest. However, some studies first manipulate content of possible identities and then show consequences for outcomes, providing a clearer causal pathway. We review both kinds of research designs here.



Although studies do not typically assess a process model for how possible identities matter, Carver and Scheier (1982, 1998) provide a clear description of a potential mechanism: a self-regulatory negative feedback loop (for a review, see Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). Carver and Scheier (1998) propose that, once an individual sets possible identity goals, he or she uses these goals as comparison standards, compares progress against possible identity goals, and then modifies his or her thoughts and behaviors to increase fit between the current and future self. Although this perspective provides a useful rubric, it has rarely been empirically tested. Moreover, recent work suggests that possible identities are not necessarily influential only when consciously brought to mind as implied in the Carver and Scheier model. Modern motivational theories assume that self-regulatory processes can be unconscious and automatic (for a review see Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007). That is, while people sometimes explicitly and consciously focus on their future identities, much of the impact of the future self is likely to occur through implicit and automatic cuing of various potentially competing possible identities. Furthermore, situations do not simply cue possible identities from memory; possible identities are likely to be actively shaped by situational affordances in the moment (e.g., Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b; Oyserman & Destin, 2010a).

This section consists of two parts. First, we review evidence that possible future identities are consequential for well-being, optimism about the future, anxiety, and mood (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1994; Freund & Smith, 1999; King, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1987; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Second, we turn to evidence that this same act of generating mental images of possible identities can change behavior, heighten self-regulation and motivation, and ultimately facilitate attainment of various goals. We describe research suggesting when these positive consequences are likely to occur (e.g., Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Ramanathan & Williams, 2007; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Where possible, we connect this literature to the related literature on

intrinsic motivation and the experience of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993; Keller & Bless, 2008; see also Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume; Waterman, Chapter 16, this volume).

### Consequences for Well-Being

Research on the interface between possible identities and well-being focuses on the motivational and emotional consequences of considering possible identities. Negative possible identities can be particularly motivating when they are salient such that being different from an undesired self feels better and being similar to one feels worse than being similar or different from a desired self feels (Ogilvie, 1987). The notion that positive possible identities should enhance motivation is congruent with a self-efficacy perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

Simply considering a future identity may improve how one feels about one's self and one's future (Oyserman et al., 2004). Adolescents who believe that *positive* possible selves *are likely* to be attained have higher self-esteem compared to those who do not (Knox et al., 1998). An improved sense of well-being may be inherent in considering alternatives to the current self because alternative futures serve as a reminder of the malleability of the self (e.g., "I may not be doing well in school this year, but I will next year").

This positive consequence of considering a future self does not require that particular detailed future identities be instantiated or that a particular action plan to attain a future identity be articulated (Gonzales, Burgess, & Mobilio, 2001). A number of studies provide supporting evidence for positive effect of imagining a positive future self. In one study, participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental condition in which they articulated a future self-goal or a control condition in which they did not (Gonzales et al., 2001). All participants were asked to report their current mood and well-being. Both mood and well-being were higher in the experimental

group. Just considering a future self-goal resulted in elevated mood and improved well-being of experimental compared to control participants.

Content of possible identities is also sometimes, but not always, correlated with well-being, as can be seen in studies of individuals with physical and mental health problems. In one study, Kindermans and colleagues (2010) content-coded the ideal, ought, and feared possible identities of patients with chronic lower back pain. They did not find a relationship between possible identity content and depressive symptoms but Janis, Veague, and Driver-Linn (2006) did find effects in their comparison of the possible identity responses of women diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and non-diagnosed controls (using a closed-ended measure). Women diagnosed with borderline personality disorder rated their positive possible identities as farther from their current identities and negative possible identities as both closer to their current identities and more likely to be true of themselves in the future than did non-diagnosed control women.

Although optimism about the future are correlated with motivation, success, and well-being (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Seligman, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988), recent work suggests that effects of future identities may differ depending on how future identities are represented. For instance, a number of other studies suggest that the consequences of possible identities for well-being depend on their fit with contextual demands and affordances. In one study, Meade and Inglehart (2010) assessed the possible identities of teens in orthodontic treatment. They found that teens whose possible identities focused on physical appearance were happier and more satisfied with their choice to complete orthodontic work than were teens whose future identities were not related to the outcomes of the orthodontic work. In another study, Manzi et al. (2010) focused on two transitions: Students who transitioned to college and adults who transitioned to parenthood. Pre-transition participants were asked to describe their future identities, and then were shown their prior responses following the transition. Participants whose subjective identity structures were consistent with their expected and

desired identity structures prior to the transition reported more current positive emotions. Finally, using a beeper methodology, Hoppmann et al. (2007) examined the associations among possible identities, everyday behaviors, and well-being in a sample of elderly adults (average age 81). Participants first filled out a questionnaire including open-ended hoped-for and feared possible identities. For the next 6 days, they were asked to note what they were doing and how they were feeling when their beeper sounded. They received five daily beeps at random intervals, thus allowing researchers to sample their ongoing experiences rather than obtain a retrospective report. The core finding was that participants who engaged in more activities relevant to their hoped-for identities reported greater well-being than those who engaged in few or no relevant activities.

Positive possible identities are more likely to enhance well-being when they feel close rather than far (e.g., Janis et al., 2006), clear and vivid, rather than vague or pallid (e.g., McElwee & Haugh, 2010). Thus, college students who endorsed scale items suggesting that they see their future self with clarity (e.g., *When I picture myself in the future, I see clear and vivid images*) were more likely to report positive emotions, as well as less depression, less alcohol use, and greater life satisfaction. Ruminating about one's future self (e.g., *My thoughts tend to wander toward imagining possible futures for myself*) was not helpful and was associated with negative affect and more negative automatic thoughts and anxiety. Such rumination was typically focused on feared possible identities that were perceived as unavoidable (McElwee & Haugh, 2010).

Valence of possible identities also matters for well-being. However, highly positive future images do not enhance well-being in the long or short term. In a 5-year longitudinal study of young adults, Busseri, Choma, and Sadava (2009) found that participants with steep upward "subjective temporal perspective" trajectories, who see their present as more satisfying than their past and their future as much more satisfying than their present, reported lower levels of life satisfaction both when first asked

and 5 years later. The authors suggest that individuals low in current life satisfaction engage in “complacent” fantasy and wishful thinking and tend not to engage in future-focused action. Therefore, they do not make progress toward their goals and are distressed by the large gap between their present and desired states (see also Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

The discrepancies between one’s current and possible future identities have also been implicated in predicting well-being. Higgins’ self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1996; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986) examines two discrepancies, the actual-ideal discrepancy between one’s current or actual self and the self one would ideally like to become; and the actual-ought discrepancy between one’s current self and the self one feels obligated to become. A separate line of work has examined the effect of two somewhat different discrepancies, the actual self-future desired self-discrepancy and the actual self-future undesired self-discrepancy (Ogilvie, 1987). Studies related to each discrepancy model are presented next.

Higgins proposed and found that an actual-ideal discrepancy is associated with symptoms of depression and dejection (Higgins, 1987, 1996; Higgins et al., 1986). This finding has been replicated across a number of studies and samples (Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003; Ozgul, Heubeck, Ward, & Wilkinson, 2003). Higgins (1987, Higgins et al., 1986) also proposed and found that an actual-ought discrepancy should be associated with guilt and anxiety. However, recent studies have found that actual-ideal and actual-ought discrepancies are highly correlated and that controlling for actual-ideal discrepancy reduces the effect of actual-ought discrepancy on emotional well-being, implying that more research is needed to understand the unique effects of this third-person perspective on the self (Gramzow et al., 2000; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003; Ozgul et al., 2003).

With regard to discrepancies between one’s current and future desired and undesired self, Ogilvie (1987) found that the discrepancy between one’s current and undesired future self

mattered more for well-being than did the discrepancy between one’s current and desired future self. This result has been replicated (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Phillips, Silvia, & Paradise, 2007). Carver and colleagues (1999) asked participants to complete an open-ended self-measure, including ought, ideal, and feared-future selves and then rate how similar each was to their current self. Perceiving a small, rather than a large, discrepancy between current and feared selves was associated with more symptoms of depression, less happiness, more anxiety, more guilt, and less contentment. The stronger-negative effect of similarity to undesired possible identities compared to the weaker-positive effect of similarity to desired possible identities was confirmed by Phillips and colleagues (2007). Why this might be so is not yet clear though Ogilvie argues that it implies that undesired selves are more concrete and experience-based than ideal selves.

That said, congruence between present and ideal selves has long been used as a measure of psychological growth in therapeutic settings. For instance, Carl Rogers (1954) described use of a Q-sort technique to assess a patient’s present and ideal selves before, during, and after therapy. He found that, as therapy progressed, the correlations between these Q-sorts increased, suggesting that movement toward one’s ideal self can be used as a measure of therapeutic progress. More recent work has provided further evidence that the proximity between actual and undesired selves can predict the presence of psychopathology. Allen and colleagues (1996) used a free-response measure (Rosenberg, 1977) to assess conceptions of actual (current) self, ideal self, undesired self, ought self, and distal future self (“my long term prospects for the future”) among individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder and a control group. They did not find an association between valence (positivity, negativity) of future self and diagnosis or symptoms of depression, but they did find that smaller actual self-undesired future self-discrepancy was associated with a diagnosis of major depression.

Taken together, research suggests that both positive and negative possible identities can

influence well-being when they are salient. While simply contemplating positive possible identities can provide a sense of optimism for the future, the effect of the negative aspect of the future self on well-being may be even larger than the effect of imagining a positive future. In particular, contemplating a large gap between undesired future identities and one's current situation is associated with higher well-being.

### Consequences for Behavior

Now we turn to the effects of possible identities on behavior. Although the idea that possible identities should influence motivation and behavior is central to theorizing on all aspects of the future self (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986), research documenting direct effects of possible identities on performance is just beginning to emerge (for a similar point, see Norman & Aron, 2003). Initial studies focused on demonstrating effects of balanced-possible identities (having positive and negative possible identities in the same domain) on subsequent likelihood of engaging in delinquent activities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b). These studies were important because they demonstrated that possible selves are associated with real and important behavioral consequences. Follow-up research suggested that one of the mechanisms linking balance to behavior was the impact of balance on teens' ability to imagine consequences of their behavior, as assessed in their responses to social problem scenarios and communication tasks (Oyserman & Saltz, 1993).

Another series of studies demonstrated that possible identities are also associated with academic outcomes during the college years (Oyserman et al., 1995) and in middle school (Oyserman et al., 2004). Some of these studies showed effects over time, such that balance (Oyserman et al., 2004) or having school-focused possible identities (Anderman et al., 1999) at one point in time predicted grades at a later point in time. For example, sixth grade students with positive academic possible identities improved their grade point average by seventh

grade, especially when their sixth grade academic possible identities were more positive than their current academic self-concept (Anderman et al., 1999). Positive academic possible identities in middle school predicted higher endorsement of performance goals—wanting to do schoolwork in order to prove one's competence (Anderman et al., 1999).

A few studies explicate how the near and far future are linked within the future self. In one study, controlling for current grades, occupation-focused possible identities predicted subsequent grades but only if future occupation was perceived as education-dependent, not otherwise (Destin & Oyserman, 2010, Study 1). Another study showed effects of educational and occupational future identities over a 7-year follow-up. In this longitudinal study of low-income rural teens, those 15-year-olds who aspired to go further in school and get more prestigious jobs reported having attained more education 7 years later (e.g., Beal & Crockett, 2010).

Future identities can influence current health-related behaviors as well. For example, salient health-possible identities can influence exercise time. In this study, students either wrote about a future identity as regular exerciser or as non-exerciser or about someone else who did or did not exercise. Among participants high in future orientation, writing about either exerciser or non-exerciser possible identities increased subsequent exercise time, whereas writing about someone else did not (Ouellette, Hessling, Gibbons, Reisbergan, & Gerrard, 2005). Research linking possible identities to healthy choices has also been conducted with elderly adults. In the previously described beeper study with adults aged 80 and older, Hoppmann and colleagues (2007) found that adults with desired possible identities focused on social and cognitive capacity were more likely to report engaging in social and skill-preserving activities (e.g., going out, paying bills) when they were beeped the following week. Moreover, 10 years later, survival was predicted by the extent that hoped for self and behavior were in sync.

These studies represent important advances for two reasons: they indicated effects across

content domains (academics and health) and they showed effects over time. However, these studies were limited because they could not establish a causal process. They showed associations over time but could not conclusively argue that possible identities produced the change (rather than that possible identities were associated with the change due to a common third variable).

To address this problem of causal uncertainty, a number of researchers have tried to directly manipulate the salience and content of a possible identity and demonstrate behavioral consequences, with regard either to an immediate behavior (typically in the laboratory), or to an effect on behavior over time. For example, Ruvolo and Markus (1992) measured students' persistence on academic tasks after they had been randomly assigned to either a positive or a negative future self condition. In the positive future self condition, students imagined that things had gone as well as possible for them. In the negative future self condition, students imagined that things had gone as poorly as imaginable. Students in the positive future self condition persisted more than students in the negative future self condition. Another study assessed partner preferences when different possible identities were salient (Eagly, Eastwick, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2009). Students were randomly assigned to either a homemaker future-identity salient or a provider future-identity salient condition. Imagining oneself as a future homemaker increased interest in a mate with more of a provider focus. Imagining oneself as future provider increased interest in mates who would share homemaking. Though this study did not assess behavior over time, the authors interpret results to suggest that gender differences in choices may be based in salient possible identities.

To demonstrate a causal effect of possible identities over time, Oyserman and colleagues (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002) randomly assigned children to control or intervention groups. Control was school as usual; intervention was a series of small group activities designed to change children's school-focused possible identities. As predicted, possible

identities were influenced by the intervention. Children in the intervention groups reported significantly more balanced school-focused possible identities that were linked to behavioral strategies (e.g., do homework, listen in class). Their school grades and school behavior improved significantly over 1 and 2-year follow-ups. These effects were mediated by change in balance (Oyserman et al., 2006).

### Consequences for Identity-Based Motivation

We opened this chapter by proposing that possible identities are likely to affect behavior over time if certain conditions hold. We term these conditions *connection*, *congruence*, and *interpretation of difficulty*. Connection refers to the perception that the future self is connected to the present self. Congruence refers to the perception that actions necessary to attain a future self are congruent with other salient aspects of the current self. Interpretation of difficulty refers to the perception that ease or difficulty in thinking about a future self implies that the future self is important, not impossible to attain (so action is needed at the moment). In the following sections, we examine each of these premises (for more extensive reviews and evidence, see Oyserman, 2007; 2009a; Oyserman et al., 2006).

*Felt connection to the current self.* As outlined next, evidence from a number of experiments supports the proposition that people are more likely to take action in support of their future self if the future self feels connected to rather than disconnected from the current self. Anything that makes it easier to imagine a future self should increase felt connection to that future self. Indeed, people are more likely to take action when a proximal possible identity is linked to a distal one (Destin & Oyserman, 2010, Study 1), when the future feels close (Peetz, Wilson, & Strahan, 2009, Study 1), when the future self feels near (Nurra & Oyserman, 2010, Studies 1 and 2), and when it is easy to imagine the future self in context (Oyserman & Destin, 2010, Studies 1–3).

Since felt connection may be an implicit judgment rather than an explicit or conscious one, rather than simply tell participants that the future self is connected to the present self, each experiment utilizes a different subtle manipulation. Studies have manipulated the perceived link between proximal and distal possible identities (Destin & Oyserman, 2010, Study 2), whether the future feels close (Petz et al., 2009, Study 2), whether future identities feel close (Nurra & Oyserman, 2010), or whether the path to future identities feels open (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Effects have been shown with college students (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Petz et al., 2009) as well as with children in middle (Destin & Oyserman, 2009, 2010) and elementary school (Nurra & Oyserman, 2010).

For example, Nurra and Oyserman (2010) asked children to imagine their future selves as adults. Children mostly described jobs they would have. The predicted effect of future self on later-school performance was found when the future self felt connected to the current self. To manipulate how the future self was imagined, children were randomly assigned to either a future-connected condition (and asked to describe their "near future as an adult"), a future-disconnected condition ("far future as an adult"), or a control condition ("future as an adult"). Children in the connected future condition outperformed children in the other conditions. Similarly, Oyserman and Destin (2010b) randomly assigned first-year college students to imagine either their desired or their undesired future selves during their college years. Participants described at least one school or career-focused possible identity. The predicted effect of the future self on planned school effort was found when the future self felt connected to the current self. In these studies, felt connection was manipulated by manipulating match between future self and social identity as a student. Specifically participants were randomly assigned to imagine students at their university (succeeding or at risk of failing) and to imagine their own (positive or negative) future identities. Participants planned to more schoolwork in

more settings and starting sooner in the matched conditions (in which they imagined students like themselves as at risk of failing and their own negative future identities or imagined students like themselves as likely to succeed and their own positive future identities) compared to the unmatched conditions.

The idea that students should be more motivated when the future feels nearer was tested by Petz and colleagues in a series of field studies. In the first study, students were contacted 2 weeks before their midterm exam, asked how well they expected to do on the exam and how far in the future the exam felt. Compared to those who said the midterm felt close, those who said it felt farther away expected to perform worse on the exam and actually did perform worse, even when controlling for their expectations (Petz et al., 2009, Study 1).

In a second experiment, students were asked to generate their (positive and negative) possible identities (and strategies to attain them) once they were college graduates. They then filled out a current academic motivation scale. Whether being a college graduate was a near or far future identity was manipulated by providing students with a long (from now until 25 years from now) or short (from now until 5 years from now) timeline. These contexts shifted perspective on whether graduating in 3.5 years was a subjectively near future (when considered in the context of a 25-year future) or a subjectively far future (when considered in the context of a 5-year future). The manipulation influenced the likelihood that specific strategies were generated to attain possible identities. Participants provided more specific strategies when the future felt near, but provided more outcome-focused thoughts when the future felt far. Students felt more motivated when they considered specific strategies, and less motivated when focused only on outcomes (Petz et al., 2009, Study 2).

Rather than directly manipulate how far the future feels, other studies have shown effects with children by manipulating whether the far future (adult economic success) and the near future (educational attainment) feel connected (Destin & Oyserman, 2010, Study 2) and whether the

path to the near future (educational attainment) feels open or closed (Destin & Oyserman, 2009, Studies 1 and 2). For example, to show effects of the distal future when linked to the proximal future, Destin and Oyserman (2010, Study 2) randomized children into two groups. Half were presented with information suggesting that their future was education-dependent (e.g., more education would result in more income), and half were presented information suggesting that their future was education-independent (e.g., income would come from skills such as athletic competence or other non-school-dependent abilities). Students in the education-dependent condition were eight times more likely to work on extra-credit homework than were those in the education-independent condition. These results were interpreted to mean that distal possible identities can influence action when linked to more proximal possible identities.

In each of these studies, effects were found when researchers manipulated how participants considered their future. The advance in these studies is that effects are not assumed to be based in conscious and deliberate processing, but rather to be based in the kind of non-conscious or automatic and peripheral processing likely to happen in every day life. This contrasts with earlier models demonstrating that ratings of the importance of a possible identity were correlated with the detail with which the identity was described and how fast people were in responding to a trait as fitting or not fitting their possible identity (Norman & Aron, 2003). Rather than focus on which identities people *say* are important to them, newer research focuses on the conditions under which possible identities *are* important for behavior.

*Congruence and connection to other important identities.* Even if a possible identity feels connected to the current self, it can fail to influence behavior in the desired direction if the actions necessary to work on the possible identity do not feel congruent with other important aspects of the self, including social identities. That content of possible identities may be influenced by gender, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and that this effect is due in part

to salient stereotypes about what is possible for one's group has already been noted (see Section Possible Identity Content). Here, we propose that a particular possible identity (e.g., becoming a successful student) is more likely to influence behavior when it feels congruent with an important social identity (e.g., being African-American). To test this possibility, Oyserman and colleagues (2006) developed an intervention to bolster school-focused possible identities in part by reframing difficulty in working on school as meaning that this possible identity was important and creating congruence between school-focused personal possible identities and important social identities such as racial-ethnic identity. A more direct test was conducted by Elmore and Oyserman (in press) who randomly assigned middle-school boys and girls to either a "we do it" or a "we do not do it" condition in which they either learned about successes of their gender group or successes of the other gender group. Compared to children in the control or "we do not do it" conditions, children in the "we do it" condition worked harder on a math task, reported more school-focused possible identities (open-ended measure), and were more optimistic about their earning and educational attainments.

*Interpretation of difficulty and certainty.* Working on important self-goals is typically difficult and success is typically uncertain. In this section we consider the possibility that how this difficulty and uncertainty is interpreted is consequential in predicting when future self-focused action will occur. Current action is influenced by how experiences of difficulty (or ease), of uncertainty (or certainty) are interpreted. If experienced difficulty is interpreted as meaning that attaining the possible identity is impossible to attain or experienced ease is interpreted as meaning that attaining the possible identity is a sure thing, current action is less likely. The same holds for interpretation of uncertainty or certainty. If experienced uncertainty is interpreted as meaning that the possible identity is impossible to attain, or experienced certainty is interpreted as meaning that the possible identity is a sure thing, current action is less likely.

The notion that expectations matter is common to self-efficacy (Bandura, 2007; Skinner, 1996), expectancy, and value X expectancy (for early formulations, see Atkinson, 1964; Miller, Galanter, & Pribam, 1960) theories (see also Locke & Latham, 1990). These models assume that people are more likely to work on self-goals when they believe that they have the skills to attain the goal and when they believe that they will be able to attain the goal if they try. Thus, following these perspectives, self-regulatory effort is more likely when one feels relative certainty and when this feeling of certainty is assumed to derive from either one's own prior experience or the experiences of relevant others.

An identity-based motivation model differs from these perspectives by highlighting the positive motivational consequences of experienced *difficulty* and *uncertainty* in attaining a possible identity. Difficult tasks should not undermine effort if the task feels identity congruent. For example, Smith and Oyserman (2010, Study 2) randomly assigned students to hear that a difficult task was something that people in their major did well at or a no information control and demonstrated if a task was perceived as identity-relevant, students persisted longer at the task than otherwise. Parallel effects are found when considering certainty. If attaining a possible identity feels completely certain, there may be no need to think of it or work on it at all right now; it can always be worked on later. Much like the sad end of the hare in the fable of *The Tortoise and the Hare*, in which the hare never got around to trying, a possible identity that is experienced as fully certain to be attained may not feel worthy of effort or may simply not come to mind. In this sense, some uncertainty about the outcome is useful.

Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated the undermining effect of too much certainty. Some studies directly manipulate certainty of success, whereas others manipulate the feeling that one can always start working later. For example, Amir and Ariely (2006) tested the impact of certainty on game performance. They randomly assigned participants to differing levels of feedback on their progress. Although some

feedback was better than none, at very high levels, feedback reduced effort. Specifically, either seeing progress or learning about proximity to the finish was helpful, but adding both reduced effort, as if the participants became overconfident "Hares." In another set of studies, Khan and Dhar (2007) randomly assigned participants to two conditions. In one condition, they were offered choices among snacks (or magazines or movies). In the other condition, they were offered the same choices but with the following twist: they could choose now and would be called back later to make the same choices again. Those with only a single choice tended to make healthy and useful choices; however, those who knew they could choose again later chose the unhealthy snacks, and kept doing so on each subsequent choice, as if they assumed they could always catch up later. Field studies also imply the negative consequences of high certainty; a number of field studies show that compared to lower or more moderate family SES, higher-family socioeconomic status increases risk of early initiation of alcohol and substance use (e.g., Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

That some uncertainty is helpful when considering one's possible identities was demonstrated by James and Oyserman in a series of studies with college students. In one study (James & Oyserman, 2009a), students were randomly assigned to a control condition (in which they read some facts about their university) or to one of two experimental conditions that either presented the future as certain or uncertain for graduates of their university. Students were then asked to describe what they expected and feared becoming like over the college years and how much time they planned to spend that week on a number of activities. Those primed with uncertainty generated more possible identities focused on occupation and more strategies to attain these identities. As expected, effects for the control group were midway between the certainty- and the uncertainty-primed groups. In a second study (James & Oyserman, 2009b) students were again randomly assigned to control or experimental conditions. In each condition, students were asked to think about a possible future identity and



the path to work toward it. What varied is whether they first read text implying that the path was certain and predictable, entirely uncertain and unpredictable, or certain in some ways and uncertain in others (this “both” condition was labeled “optimal uncertainty”). Students were then asked to describe their possible identities, to describe what they would be doing the coming week, and to rate their likely use of alcohol and recreational drugs that week. As predicted, students in the optimal uncertainty condition were most likely to focus on academic possible identities, allocated more time to studying, and were less tempted to drink and use drugs.

The implication is that some uncertainty is motivating and that too much certainty is not. Potentially, the relationship is U-shaped, such that neither very high certainty nor very high uncertainty are helpful (Oyserman & James, 2009). Whereas studies outlined earlier show de-motivating effects of too much certainty, other work suggest that excessive uncertainty can also reduce effort. For instance, less uncertain “expected” possible identities are typically more strongly associated with behavioral consequences than more uncertain “hoped for” or even “fantasy” possible identities (Klinger, 1987; Oettingen, 1996, 1999; Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996; Singer, 1966).

Other support for the idea that too much uncertainty undermines effort comes from survey data with school children in which high uncertainty about attaining positive future identities predicts subsequent behavior problems. In one large survey, Griffin Botvin, Nichols, and Scheier (2005) asked urban minority seventh grade students about their chances of attaining a number of positive-possible futures, including graduating from high school, attending college, getting a job that is enjoyable and pays well, and having a happy family life. The next year, these same students filled out questionnaires about their risky behaviors. Students who believed that their chances of attaining positive futures were low engaged in more binge drinking in eighth grade.

In another large survey, Honora and Rolle (2002) asked eighth grade students about their

academic possible identities and how prepared they believed they were to attain these goals. Their findings indicated that high uncertainty was undermining. Specifically, students who believed they could not attain their desired academic possible identities were more likely to engage in fighting and maladaptive behavior in school. Certainty about negative futures produces parallel results. For example, in a nationally representative survey, students with negative future expectations (e.g., low life expectancy, low belief in college attendance) reported more risky behavior (e.g., delinquency, shoplifting) (Caldwell, Wiebe, & Cleveland, 2006). We interpret these results to mean that uncertainty about positive future selves and certainty about negative future selves signaled that effort was useless.

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### Conclusion

In the current chapter, we reviewed the literature on the content of possible identities and the consequences of possible identities for well-being and current action. Early research focused on understanding who children see as models for their adult self. While these researchers assumed that identifying these models would predict behavior and development, we found no evidence that early researchers tested their hypothesis by measuring behavioral outcomes. After a hiatus, interest in the future self returned. As before, researchers assumed that the future self mattered because it provides a goal post for current action, but as before, much of the literature is descriptive rather than predictive. Moreover, although there is increasing interest in studying intersectionalities of identities and in understanding potential cultural effects, possible identities are typically studied as personal identities and many groups and contexts have not been studied. Thus, content-focused future research is still needed to address these gaps, by including more groups and contexts, by considering *social possible identities* (the socially rooted aspects of possible identities), and more generally by connecting possible identity research to culture-sensitive models.

Researchers typically focus on a first person perspective, but cross-cultural and counseling literatures suggest that imagining one's future self from a third person's perspective (how others see one's self) can be quite motivating. This too is an area for future research.

Future research can be guided by research to date, which does provide some important outlines of the likely content of possible identities. Specifically, the literature reviewed here suggests that possible identities are typically concentrated on life tasks and transitions. Relatively little research has examined the role of possible identities in overcoming or dealing with life problems and setbacks. There is some evidence that giving up a possible identity is difficult. Future research focused on coping with lost possible identities is likely to be useful in understanding how individuals cope with temporary or more chronic setbacks, including not only job loss and divorce, but also physical and mental illness, debilitating accidents and other events that change individual's life course. Research has only just begun to examine the consequences of race-ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and cultural factors on possible identity content and consequences.

With regard to implications for well-being, negative possible identities matter. Feeling too close to an undesired possible identity is worse for well-being than feeling far from a desired possible identity. More research is needed to explain when and how desired and undesired possible identities matter for well-being over time. Lastly, with regard to implications for action, people are more likely to take action to attain a possible identity when three conditions are met. First, the possible identity feels connected to the current self. Second, actions needed to work on the future self feel connected to the current self. And third, the experience of thinking about and working on the possible identity is interpreted to mean importance, not impossibility or futility. Each of these conditions for taking action has been studied but not has been extensively researched, leaving much room for future enquiry.

## Notes

1. While younger children and teens have possible identities, a central life task of adolescence has been described as identity development, with the notion that during adolescence and early adulthood, the form of one's future occupational and relationship-focused identity begins to solidify (Erikson, 1968).
2. See Waterman, Chapter 16, this volume and Soenens and Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume, for alternative conceptualizations of "true self."

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