

CHAPTER 11

POSSIBLE SELVES

Identity-Based Motivation and School Success

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The idea that the self is temporal and that the future-oriented components of the self are critical to understanding well-being can be traced to William James (1890/1950), who proposed that the selves we strive to become focus motivational attention, guide behavior, and are an important source of positive self-regard. James proposed that the future, as represented by one's self-relevant goals for the future, is likely to exert a major influence on current behavior. In a review of the literature, Karniol & Ross (1996) note the ubiquity of this assumption as well as the idea that these future self-relevant goals matter because they shape the strategies one chooses to achieve one's goals. Following from these models, it seems reasonable to suppose that possible self-goals play a motivational and self-regulatory role in shaping future behavior.

Indeed, the term *possible self* has been coined to describe incorporation of future goals into self-concept; *possible selves* are positive and negative images of the self already in a future state—the “clever” self who passed the algebra test, the “fat” self who failed to lose weight, the “fast” self who fell in with the “wrong” crowd (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Failure to attain possible selves may increase risk of depression (Oyser-

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man & Fryberg, 2006; Strauman, 2002; Strauman & Higgins, 1988) and there is some evidence that well-being (King, 2001) and performance (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992) improve when positive possible selves are brought to mind. But clearly we do not always function in an “imagine it and you will be it” kind of world; possible selves do not always sustain self-regulatory action. In spite of possible selves, youth sometimes fail algebra, gain undesired weight, and engage in behaviors they themselves would prefer to avoid.

Why might it be that possible selves might fail to sustain self-regulatory action and what would a predictive model need to take into account? In the current chapter I argue that sustained self-regulation is less likely when relevant possible selves do not feel congruent with important social identities, when these possible selves are insufficiently cued in context, when possible selves are not linked with strategies, and when effort is undermined by misinterpretation of difficulty in working toward one’s possible selves. A predictive model therefore must outline both which possible selves are likely to be contextually cued (or “on-line”) and, of these possible selves, which are likely to be invested in over time. I outline and provide supporting evidence for such a predictive model, with particular attention to school-focused possible selves, drawing heavily on my research with urban, low income and minority youths and especially my preventive intervention work (see Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2006).

While school (both doing well and avoiding failure) is a common focus of youth’s possible selves (Oyserman, Johnson, & Bybee, 2007), school underperformance is a national problem. I propose that youth have difficulty creating and sustaining school-focused possible selves when they perceive these possible selves to be incongruent with other important aspects of their self-concept (e.g., racial-ethnic identities), live in social contexts that fail to cue strategies for attaining their school-focused possible selves, and misinterpret difficulties in working on these possible selves as evidence that school success may be an unrealistic goal. Conversely, I propose that youth will commit sustained self-regulatory effort to a possible self when the possible self feels congruent with important social identities, is contextually cued, contains behavioral strategies, and when difficulty working on the possible self is construed as normative.

SCHOOL-FOCUSED POSSIBLE SELVES AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Self-concepts include both personal and social identities, that is, ways of defining the self in terms of personal attributes, traits and goals as well as ways of defining the self based on group memberships and the traits and goals assumed to define one’s in-groups (Oyserman, 2007). These group-based

identities are likely to include community expectations about the occupations and academic attainment of in-group members. For some youth these community expectations are negative images of the in-group as low achieving (Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003). These negative stereotypes may set the stage for assuming that the selves possible for oneself and other in-group members ~~are not congruent with school focused possible selves.~~

Indeed, ethnographic research suggests that high school students perceive Latinos as more likely to become manual laborers, Asians to do well in school, and African Americans to do poorly in school (Kao, 2000). The same results emerge from scenario-based experimental research, whether focused on the link between minority status and low academic attainment or on the link between low social class and low academic attainment. Thus, when a failing student is described, Latino and African American students are more likely to predict that the target is Latino or African American than white (Graham, 2001). When asked to predict academic performance of a target student, low income students infer worse performance from low (vs. middle) social class peers (Régner, Huguet, & Monteil, 2002; Weinger, 2000).

When imagining what future is possible for one's self, such negative preformed group images are likely to be highly accessible, making social group membership feel like it conflicts with school-focused possible selves. Working toward one's school-focused possible selves is likely to feel harder in the presence of accessible images of in-group members engaging in behaviors that undermine chances of attaining school-focused possible selves and failing to engage in behaviors that would help attain school-focused possible selves. While there is debate as to the degree of evidence that school success is viewed as a white middle class goal (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Ferguson, 1998), there is consistent evidence of the stereotyped link between minority status and low achievement (e.g. Steele, 1997).

The stereotype threat literature documents that simply bringing to mind category membership as minority or working class dampens academic performance (e.g., Croizet & Claire, 1998; Steele, 1997). Individuation or separation of self from in-group alleviates this effect (Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, & Mitchell, 2004), but the idea of intervening to disconnect youth from their racial-ethnic in-group (e.g., creating "racelessness" see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) is unappealing and likely to have other negative consequences (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

SCHOOL-FOCUSED POSSIBLE SELVES AND INOCULATION FROM OVER-INTERPRETATION OF DIFFICULTY

Rather than attempting to dampen the centrality of important social identities, a more reasonable strategy to improve success in attaining school-focused

possible selves may be to increase the felt congruence between school-focused possible selves and social identity. This is not easy to do. School-focused possible selves are likely to be difficult to attain and experienced difficulty implies questions (“Why is engaging in this school-focused activity so hard for me; is this really the true me? Do we have school-focused possible selves?”), the answers to which that often result in misinterpreting difficulty as meaning that school-focused possible selves are not “true” possible selves. Likewise, youth must judge whether particular behavioral patterns (e.g., asking for help) are likely to work and if they contradict in-group identity (e.g., “Will asking the teacher for help actually help me succeed in school or is it just a ‘white’ thing to do?”).

To better understand how the feelings of difficulty that are experienced as adolescents imagine and pursue their possible selves influence commitment to those possible selves, it is fruitful to reconsider James’ (1890) original formulation of the self. James viewed the self as composed both of content—what one thinks about when one thinks about one’s self, and the accompanying metacognitive process—the feeling of thinking about one’s self. This implies that self-judgments about who one is or may become are based on both content (what comes to mind) and process. Considering the content of thoughts about the self separately from the feelings associated with these thoughts parallels work in social cognition (Schwarz, 1998, 2002). This work proposes that human reasoning is accompanied by metacognitive experiences of relative ease (difficulty) and fluency (dis-fluency) (Schwarz, 1998, 2002).

Following from this research in social cognition, when imagining a possible self is accompanied by a metacognitive experience of difficulty, the feeling of difficulty is interpreted with a naïve theory—things that are hard to think of are less likely to be true (Higgins, 1998; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). The experience of ease or difficulty when bringing to mind a possible self can provide the basis for inferring whether a possible self is a “true” self that is worth pursuing and investing effort in or a “false” self, conflicting with social identities. Metacognitive experience of ease also provides feedback as to whether the gap between the current and possible self is manageable or unmanageable and therefore whether effort should be expanded or the possible self should be abandoned.

Though the experience of metacognitive difficulty is generally interpreted as meaning “not true for me,” a number of studies have documented that other interpretations are possible (Rothman & Schwarz, 1998). Sports stories abound with reinterpretation of the meaning of experienced difficulty (e.g., “no pain, no gain”) and the need to keep trying (e.g., “you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take”). In the case of attempting to attain school-focused possible selves, while the metacognitive experience of dif-

difficulty is generally interpreted as “not the true me,” the experience of difficulty could be reinterpreted to mean other things. Difficulty can be viewed as a normative part of the process (e.g., “success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”). Difficulty can also provide evidence of progress (e.g., “the important things in life are the ones you really have to work for”); if difficulty and failures along the way are viewed as critical to eventual success, then difficulty is evidence of striving.

Attaining school success and avoiding school failure requires ongoing behavior; it is not enough to complete one homework assignment or stay after class one day. If one’s metacognitive experience is that working on a possible self is difficult and if this difficulty is interpreted with a naïve theory that ease is associated with truth, then difficulties associated with working toward the possible selves will undermine it. As is detailed in the previous section, low income and minority youth are likely to have difficulty integrating school-focused possible selves and social identities. As detailed in the following sections, they are likely to live in social contexts that do not cue strategies to help attain possible self goals and may not fully appreciate the need to have possible selves that fit with the high risk context in which they are growing up.

CONTEXTUAL CUING OF POSSIBLE SELVES

Youth growing up in low socioeconomic status (SES) contexts have multiple models of adults who failed to attain their possible selves. These models make it unlikely that youth growing up in low SES contexts will recognize the normativeness of difficulties, and instead likely that they will misinterpret feelings of difficulty as a sign inevitable failure. This misinterpretation is crucial because it is likely to undermine behavioral persistence in pursuit of possible self goals. Thus rather than assuming that youth are able to make sense of difficulty as normative, low SES youth are likely to need specific inoculation from over-interpreting current difficulty and failure as predictive of future possibilities. Taken together, their metacognitive experience of difficulty is likely to provide feedback that school-focused possible selves are false rather than true selves, cuing disengagement from these possible selves and the goal pursuit they imply.

Self-concept includes an enormous amount of information about the self, but not everything one knows about oneself is likely to be accessible at any point in time and only accessible self-knowledge is likely to influence judgment, decision making and behavior (Higgins, 1996b). Therefore, it is important to consider which possible selves are likely to be contextually cued in differing social contexts. Of particular interest is the effect of resource-rich versus under-resourced contexts.

Resource-rich contexts (e.g., a middle class neighborhood school) provide models of success and a developed structure to guide the process of attaining school-focused possible selves. In these contexts, strategies may be automatically cued when possible selves are cued because parents, teachers, parents of friends, and other adults all converge to emphasize homework, persistence in the face of difficulty, tutoring or staying after school if needed. Parent involvement in school also sends a number of effort-congruent messages. By spending time at school, parent involvement implies that investment in school is worthwhile, that attaining school success is possible, is congruent with other important identities, and that the way to do it is to work hard and engage with others in school (see Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, *in press*).

Conversely, in under-resourced contexts, school-focused possible selves and strategies to attain them are unlikely to be automatically cued; these contexts are less likely to present easily accessible models to guide success. Youth are more likely to encounter adults who are unemployed, have low academic attainment, and hold non-professional jobs (e.g., Roderick, 2003). Given lack of easily accessible models or automatically cued strategies, youth may maintain an abstract commitment to education without connecting school-focused possible selves to everyday behavior—expressing high aspirations even as their behavior reflects avoidance or even flight from school (for qualitative description, see Roderick, 2003). Evidence for these assumptions comes from three sources: correlational studies, randomized trial intervention research and other field experiments. Parent involvement with school is associated with positive academic outcomes for low income and minority children just like it is for higher income and majority children (for an overview of this literature, see Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, *in press*). The negative effect of low parent involvement in school on youth academic outcomes is moderated by youth participation in a possible selves-focused intervention (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, *in press*). Priming studies (Destin & Oyserman, 2007a) document increased homework focus among low-income African American and Latino students after being reminded that college can be paid for by financial aid (compared with either control condition or when simply reminded of the high cost of college). Priming studies (Destin & Oyserman, 2007b) also document that students are more likely to plan on school-focused action, such as finding ways to get extra help in classes, when contextual risk and possible selves are matched. Students expended more effort to work on school-focused possible selves when reminded of high contextual risk (e.g., on average, GPAs decline) and asked about their feared possible selves and when reminded of low contextual risk (e.g., on average, most students do fine) and asked about their positive expected possible selves. Focusing on positive possible selves alone

is not effective in the kinds of higher risk contexts experienced by youth living in low-income neighborhoods and attending under resourced schools.

EFFECTIVE POSSIBLE SELVES

Correlational research provides initial empirical support for the self-regulatory power of possible selves and their association with better academic outcomes. Adolescents who believe that positive possible selves are likely to be attained have higher self-esteem than those who do not (Knox et al., 1998). Sixth grade students with positive academic possible selves improved their GPA (GPA) by seventh grade, especially when their sixth grade academic possible selves were more positive than their current academic self-concept (Anderman, Anderman & Griesinger, 1999). Among sixth to eighth graders, positive academic possible selves predicted higher endorsement of performance goals—wanting to do schoolwork in order to prove one’s competence (Anderman et al., 1999). Even in samples at high risk of academic problems due to high poverty concentration, youth who had more school-focused possible selves and strategies to attain them had significantly improved grades, even controlling for prior GPA than did youth with fewer of these possible selves and strategies (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

Moreover, a number of studies suggest that possible selves differ in self-regulatory effectiveness. Self-regulatory effort improves when youth have both positive possible selves (goals) and negative possible selves (fears) in the same domain (“balanced” possible selves) (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) and when youth have incorporated detailed strategies into their possible selves (“plausible” possible selves) (Oyserman et al., 2004). When possible selves are balanced, individuals select strategies that both increase the likelihood of becoming like the positive possible selves and decrease the likelihood of becoming like the negative possible selves, thereby focusing self-regulation and broadening effort (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Plausibility provides automatic cuing of predeveloped strategies (e.g., “set my alarm,” “go to class even if my friends skip”).

There is evidence that having school-focused possible selves that include detailed strategies results in improved grades over the course of the school year (Oyserman et al., 2004). Simply having school-focused possible selves alone, without strategies for their attainment, is not associated with improved grades (Oyserman et al.). Despite the fact that most low-income youth have at least one possible self focused on school, few of these possible selves are linked with strategies (Oyserman, Johnson et al., 2007). Many youths fail to attain even the basic school-focused possible self goal of graduating from high school. Thus, the national average for on-time graduation

is 75% overall, 50% for African Americans, and 53% for Hispanics (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). In urban centers like Detroit, graduation estimates are even lower (between 40% and 44% on time graduation) (Detroit News, May 2005).

EVIDENCE FROM EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN STUDIES

A Process Model

Figure 11.1 presents a process model of the connections between possible selves, self-regulatory behaviors, and important outcomes for youth. The process model links social identities, fit between possible selves and social context, and metacognitive experience to possible selves and links possible selves to persistent engagement in self-regulatory behavior. In this section, I summarize results from experimental work carried out in my lab that uses this model. Experimental designs provide stronger support for causal reasoning about possible selves. In these studies, we either cue possible selves (Brickman, Rhodes, & Oyserman, 2007) or both possible selves and social contexts (Destin & Oyserman, 2007b) to provide evidence that changing possible selves leads to change in academic behavior. Based in this model, I also developed a preventive intervention and tested it with my colleagues (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). The intervention manual and broader conceptualization of the theory and evaluation results is available (Oyserman, 2008).

Randomized Field Trial with Two-Year Follow-Up

Goals. The goals of the intervention were to evoke possible selves and strategies to attain them, forge links between possible selves and strategies that are not otherwise automatic, inoculate youth from misinterpreting failure and setbacks in attaining these possible selves, and create a link between social identity and possible selves.

Sample and method. African American, Hispanic, and European American low-income eighth graders attending one of three targeted middle school in Detroit were randomly assigned to their regularly assigned elective or to the eleven session possible-selves based intervention. The intervention was completed by the Thanksgiving break, prior to the conclusion of the first academic quarter. To ensure that the intervention effects would be sustained over time, the intervention occurred in school, with peers, during the school day and targeted the core aspects of the process model outlined in Figure 11.1.

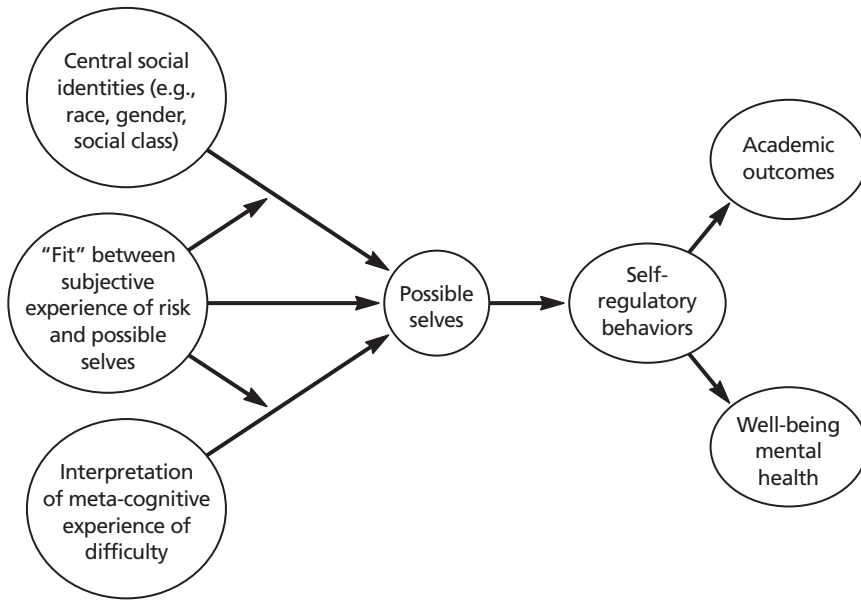


Figure 11.1 Process model: Antecedents of self-regulatory effectiveness of possible selves. *Note:* Adapted with permission from Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: When and how possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 188–204. Copyright 2006 American Psychological Association.

Specifically, structured group activities evoked academically focused possible selves, made clear that academic possible selves were held by peers (and therefore something that “we” aspire to), and highlighted the normativeness of difficulties and failures along the way to attaining possible self goals. Thus, the intervention operationalized the theory of how possible selves might influence self-regulatory behaviors (and through these behaviors, academic outcomes and well-being).

Data were collected with parental consent and included a baseline and three postintervention data points (spring 8th grade, fall 9th and spring 9th grade). All children were enrolled in one of three middle schools in the fall of 8th grade, tracking followed students through that year and the following transition to high school year, when students were enrolled in about 80 schools in various districts. While the income of parents was not obtained, the student body on average could be termed low-income in that 2/3 of students received free or reduced lunch and students lived in census tracts averaging 54% of households below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This rate is well above the Census Bureau’s 40% cutoff for describing a tract as a high poverty area (Bishaw, 2005).

To obtain informed consent, parents were mailed home information, and this was followed up by face-to-face contact at the parent's home or via telephone to ensure that all parents had heard about the goals of the study, what data would be collected from school, teacher, and youth, and for what purpose. Given the chance to hear about the study and get their questions answered, few parents refused participation—94% of the potential sample had parental consent.

Data were collected on behavior in class from core subject teachers in middle school (first two data points) and high school (second two data points). GPA and extent of unexcused absences were obtained from school records. Youth self-reported on their possible selves, the time they spent doing homework, and their possible selves.

Youth self-report responses were based on a brief, in-class survey. In-home interviews were completed in year 1 for the 56 students suspended ($n = 11$), expelled ($n = 9$), transferred ($n = 10$), or otherwise not in school ($n = 26$). By year 2, students were enrolled in 80 schools; the at-home interview procedure was followed when in-school survey completion was not feasible. Teachers were reimbursed \$5 for each assessment (\$10 in year 2); students were reimbursed \$5 (year 2 only).

While control condition youth attended their regularly scheduled elective, intervention condition youth received the intervention (for manual and fuller description of the model and evaluation see Oyserman, 2008). Fidelity to protocol was maintained via in vivo ratings by trained observers and weekly staff meetings (see Oyserman et al., 2006). Across the three schools, average attendance for the 11 school sessions ranged from 80% to 90% by school, with only 36 youths assigned to the intervention group failing to attend at least half the inschool sessions. In these, 13.6% of intervention group cases, the youths were not attending school (often due to suspension or move to another school).

Despite the challenges of maintaining contact with the highly mobile sample, Oyserman et al. (2006) were able to keep missing data and attrition to a minimum. Only four youth were completely lost to follow-up by the spring of 9th grade; information from at least one source (youth, teacher, or school records) was obtained at this final point for 98.5% of the intention-to-treat sample. Also, missing data rates were low. Across four measurement points, Oyserman et al. (2006) report missing 9% of youth questionnaires, 11% of teacher ratings, and 12% of the by-term school records. School records and teacher ratings are of particular importance for the current study. At any point in time, almost all records (92% to 96%) and teacher ratings (83% to 97%) were obtained. Expectation maximization methods were used to estimate the approximately 7.9% of data that were missing due to skipped items or unavailable information (across youth, school, and

teacher data elements) incorporating the full set of preintervention variables. All results reported use estimated data.

While attaining and sustaining an intervention effect is notoriously difficult, Oyserman et al., (2006) documented effects that were stable and even increasing over time. This sustained effect over 2 years is particularly impressive, given the high poverty neighborhoods the youth were embedded in and the difficulty of improving academic outcomes when prior academic attainment accounts for much of the variance to be explained. They documented effects using two very different analytic strategies (structural equation modeling and longitudinal multilevel modeling) with different strengths and assumptions.

Results. Testing both direct effect and mediation effects, the authors report both moderate-sized direct effects (e.g., $d \geq .3$) on changing possible selves and linking them with strategies and, at 2-year follow-up, effects on academic outcomes ranging from large (e.g., $d \geq .7$) for time spent doing homework, change in in-class disruptiveness and change in time spent doing homework, to moderate (e.g., $d \geq .3$) for grades, change in grades, and unexcused absences taken from school records and in-class initiative taking, change in initiative taking and disruptiveness by teacher report. The intervention also reduced 2-year follow-up risk of depression (youth reported) ($d = -.26$). Importantly, Oyserman and colleagues (2006) also demonstrated that the 2-year follow-up effects are mediated by change in possible selves and in the possible self-to-strategy linkage. Table 11.1, reprinted from Oyserman et al., (2006) provides a summary of some of the main outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Although possible selves focused on school success are common, so is failure in school, suggesting a puzzling gap between possible selves and the sustained self-regulatory behavior needed to attain one's goals. In the current chapter, I suggest a process model in which self-regulation is likely when context-relevant possible selves and relevant strategies are cued, feel congruent with important social identities, and when difficulty in pursuing possible selves is understood to be normative. An intervention based on this model is described as well as 1 and 2 year follow-up data. Confidence in the generalizability of results is high because a randomized design was used and participation in both the intervention and each of the four waves of data collection was over 90%. The intervention was documented to change possible selves, increasing both feared off-track and school-focused possible selves and strategies to attain them. As hypothesized, intervention youth both had more of these possible selves and were better able to use them to improve behavioral

TABLE 11.1 Multilevel Models: Estimated Means in Experimental and Control Conditions — Spring 8th and 9th Grade

Dependent variables ^a	Estimated condition means/percents			
	Spring of 8th grade		Spring of 9th grade	
	STL (n = 116)	Control (n = 112)	STL (n = 116)	Control (n = 112)
Change in APS balance	0.07	-0.12	—	—
Change in feared off-track PS	0.31	0.00	—	—
APS plausibility	2.36	1.96	—	—
Absences (student report)	3.49	3.95	—	—
Unexcused absences (school records) ^b	12.28	14.53	22.52	24.77
Homework time (hours/week; open ended) ^b	3.49	3.28	2.51	1.57
Homework time (hours/week; closed ended)	4.15	3.74	—	—
Disruptive behavior (student report)	2.37	2.63	—	—
Disruptive behavior (teacher report)	1.74	1.83	1.55	1.73
In-class initiative (teacher report)	2.51	2.44	2.48	2.25
Core academic GPA (school records)	1.98	1.83	1.64	1.36
Standardized tests (school records; proportion passed)	0.83	0.77	—	—
Referral to remedial summer school	36.2%	48.2%	—	—
Retention in 8th grade	4.3%	10.7%	—	—
Depression (CESD—spring of 9th grade)	—	—	10.35	12.29

Note: N = 228 youth in the participating sample.

^a For variables with estimated means for both 8th and 9th grades, estimates were from the intercept term of a 3-level longitudinal multilevel model (time, students, homerooms); for variables with estimated means for only one grade, estimates were from cross-sectional 2-level multilevel models (students in homerooms).

^b These positively skewed variables were log transformed for analysis; however, to facilitate interpretation, means are presented here in the original metric (i.e., in exponentiated form).

^c Depression was measured only in the spring of 9th grade; means were estimated by a 2-level cross-sectional multilevel model.

Source: Adapted with permission from Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: When and how possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 188–204. Copyright 2006 American Psychological Association.

self-regulation. The intervention produced measurable change in possible selves, and change in possible selves predicted change in behavioral self-regulation—going to school rather than skipping, behaving and participating in class, and spending time on homework; self-regulation not only improved academic outcomes but, equally importantly, reduced risk of depression.

The possible self framework assumes that motivation is influenced by both positive (expected, wanted, or hoped for) possible selves and negative (feared

or unwanted) possible selves. Indeed, the intervention research shows that the impact of school-focused possible selves on self-regulatory behaviors was distinct from the impact of feared off-track possible selves on self-regulatory behaviors. Youth with balanced and plausible academically focused possible selves spent more time doing homework, were less disruptive and more behaviorally engaged in classroom activities. Youth with feared off-track possible selves attended school more (had fewer school absences).

The distinct role of feared off-track possible selves is also congruent with a number of other self-regulatory models. For example, Carver (2004) describes self-regulation to avoid feared possible selves or anti-goals as discrepancy-enlarging self-regulation. Larsen (2004) describes the self-regulatory system as vigilant to environmental dangers; when danger is cued, individuals are more cautious about engaging in behaviors that may increase risk. Higgins (Higgins & Spiegel, 2004) describes prevention-focused self-regulation as risk averse.

Following these perspectives, youth with feared off-track possible selves can be expected to be cautious about risk increasing behaviors; they are likely to engage in action (e.g., attending school) they perceive as antithetical to their off-track selves (becoming pregnant, involved in drugs or crime). Indeed, increased feared off-track possible selves reduced risk of school absences. While vigilant focus on anti-goals or prevention is likely to reduce risk of harm, active engagement in goal attainment (discrepancy-reducing self-regulation) is likely to increase chances of success.

In my laboratory, we followed up on the possibility that feared possible selves are more effective in risky contexts where vigilance is necessary and found this to be the case. Specifically, we examined the “fit” between perceived risk and possible selves. In a between-subjects priming design, we demonstrated that the efficacy of expected and feared possible selves in cuing school-focused motivation differed depending on how the context of school was framed. When school was described to students as a low risk context (e.g., most students do fine), then priming students to think about their expected possible selves increased their school-focused motivation. The reverse was true when school was described to students as a high risk context (e.g., most students experience declining GPAs). In this case, it was priming students to think about their feared possible selves that increased their school-focused motivation (Destin & Oyserman, 2007b).

Although self-regulatory systems theories posit roles for both discrepancy reducing (promotion) and discrepancy increasing (prevention) systems, prevention focus, engaging in self-regulatory behavior to avoid feared possible selves, is not particularly prominent in the academic goal literature. Perhaps this is because in middle class contexts, pursuit of academic goals may more commonly involve the discrepancy reducing feedback system—

engaging in self-regulatory behavior to attain positive expected possible selves. There is evidence that college students are more likely to use promotion- than prevention-focused self-regulation (e.g., Lockwood, Sadler, Fyman, & Tuck, 2004).

Prevention-focused self-regulation may become more salient in a number of circumstances. First, prevention-focused self-regulation may be more likely when social contextual risk is high, such as in circumstances of poverty. For example, first generation college students are more likely to engage in strategies to avoid feared possible selves than strategies to attain positive possible selves (Oyserman, Gant, Ager, 1995, Study 1). Ethnographic evidence from low-income high school students also highlights the salience of feared off-track possible selves—becoming unemployed, homeless and destitute (Steinitz & Solomon, 1986; see also Kaiser Foundation, 2002). Second, it is possible that culture influences choice of self-regulatory system, while Euro-Canadian college students find promotion-focused strategies compelling; Asian Canadian college students find prevention-focused strategies compelling (Lockwood, Marshall, & Sadler, 2005). Similarly, Hong Kong Chinese college students found prevention-focused reasons for action more convincing than did American college students (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000, Study 4). Prevention focus alone may not be helpful, without a framework guiding action (e.g., Uskul, Keller, & Oyserman, in press).

Whether focused on positive expected or feared possible selves, self-regulation fails when individuals do not realize that a particular action is antithetical to goal achievement, when possible selves do not provide clear standards of what to attain or avoid or when possible selves are not linked with self-regulatory behaviors (e.g., Carver, 2004; Higgins, 1987). For low income teens, lapses in self-regulation may be difficult to repair—when risk of failure is high, any misstep can spell disaster. This contrasts with the situation of middle-class teens whose self-regulatory lapses can be compensated for by contextual regulation set in place by neighborhood, school, and parents. Middle class students are more likely to be provided mentoring, tutoring, monitoring, and enrichment activities whether they seek them out or not (e.g., Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999).

Low-income students are more likely to live in contexts lacking such collective efficacy resources (Sampson et al., 1999). Thus, for low-income youths, self-initiated engagement in self-regulation that focuses on attaining positive possible selves and avoiding negative possible selves is likely necessary. A number of studies have documented that when stereotype threat is activated, prevention (discrepancy enhancing) focus increases (Oyserman, Uskul, Yoder, Nesse, & Williams, 2007; Seibt & Förster, 2004), as do negative thoughts about one's math capacity (Cadinu, Maass, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005).

These results can be construed to suggest that stereotype threat undermines academic attainment by making academic possible selves less salient

and school-focused strategies less accessible as ways of avoiding off-track possible selves. While much research has focused on academic outcomes, the identity-based motivation model has also been documented in the domain of health promotion (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, *in press*). Taken together, these results suggest that when possible selves feel congruent with social identity, relevant strategies are cued in context, and experienced difficulty is interpreted as part of the process, possible selves can improve goal attainment.

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