

Possible Selves: A Contextual Approach to Adolescent and Emerging Adulthood Identity and Transitions



Centre for
Youth & Society

Contact: amarshal@uvic.ca

Anne Marshall (PhD), Breanna Lawrence (MA), Kate Creedon (MA), Tanya Ward (MA)
University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

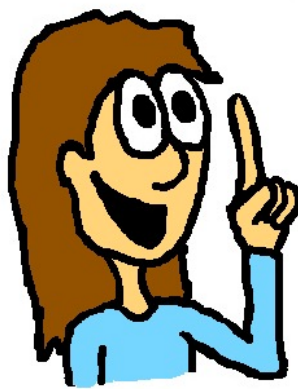
Marshall & Guenette, 2011

Theoretical Framework

- Possible Selves is a cognitive psychology construct identified by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986)
- Possible selves (PS) constitute a personalized form of self-concept that represent the hopes, dreams, and fears that individuals hold and have held in the past, present, and future
- A hoped for self is a self that someone aspires to become, that may or may not be realistic
- An expected self is a self that someone believes can be realistically achieved
- A feared self is a self that someone does not want to become but fears they may become
- Possible Selves represent people’s unique socio-cultural and historical contexts
- Our research focused on youth identity and developmental transition
- Informed by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2003) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000)

PSMP Steps

- The Possible Selves Mapping Process (PSMP) has been developed by our team for research, career development, and counselling interventions
- It can be done individually or in small and large groups.
- The 7 steps in the PSMP are as follows:
 1. Brainstorming hoped for and feared possible selves
 2. Grouping and naming these possible selves on a Brainstorm Map
 3. Debriefing the Brainstorm Map
 4. Identifying most likely and most wanted hoped for and feared selves
 5. Transferring brainstorm information to the Possible Selves Map
 6. Identifying “Things to do right now” -- exploring how to achieve hoped for selves and avoid feared selves
 7. Reviewing the process and next steps



Applications

- PS and PSMP can be used in research, education, and counselling
- Develops understanding of personal values
- Connects current activities with future actions and goals
- Identifies factors affecting sense of self and personal potential
- Acts as a permanent record that allows a creator to return for review and revision
- Increases motivation to achieve hopes
- Useful for career development and counselling, health literacy, resiliency, and motivation
- Collect data about interests, abilities, and values
- Develop short and long-term plans for personal & work goals
- Evaluate, monitor, and refine plans
- Individual and hands-on PSMP workshop formats, DVD, & Manual
- Teachers or facilitators can learn and apply the process in a two to three-hour workshop

Implications

- Possible Selves play important roles in developing self-concept
- Relate to multiple events and characteristics in a person’s life
- Become important motivators to select future behaviours
- Can empower people by fostering hope
- Can increase a person’s energy to reach goals and to evaluate their abilities and competencies to carry out these goals
- Exploration of possible selves incorporates models, images, and symbols from social experiences to impart meaning, give direction, and clarify links between identity and motivation.
- Visual representations engage youth and enable us to understand the complex and interrelated experiences of life and career aspects
- As Packard and Conway (2006) observed, “One major advantage of visual methods is that they are sensitive to non-textual, spatial forms of representation and participants are likely to find them a novel and creative form of expression” (p. 261)

STUDY 1:

Adolescents’ Science Career Aspirations Explored through Identity and Possible Selves

How do secondary students describe their science identity and career aspirations?
How do these students’ self-views and aspirations change over time?

Participants:

- 13 students (Time 1; 16-17 years old) participated in a 12-hour internship at a university laboratory
- Enrolled in a Grade 11 biology career preparation program at an urban secondary school

Methods:

- Longitudinal study, conducted as part of the Pacific CRYSTAL Project at the UVic
- Video-taped Possible Selves Mapping Process

Analysis:

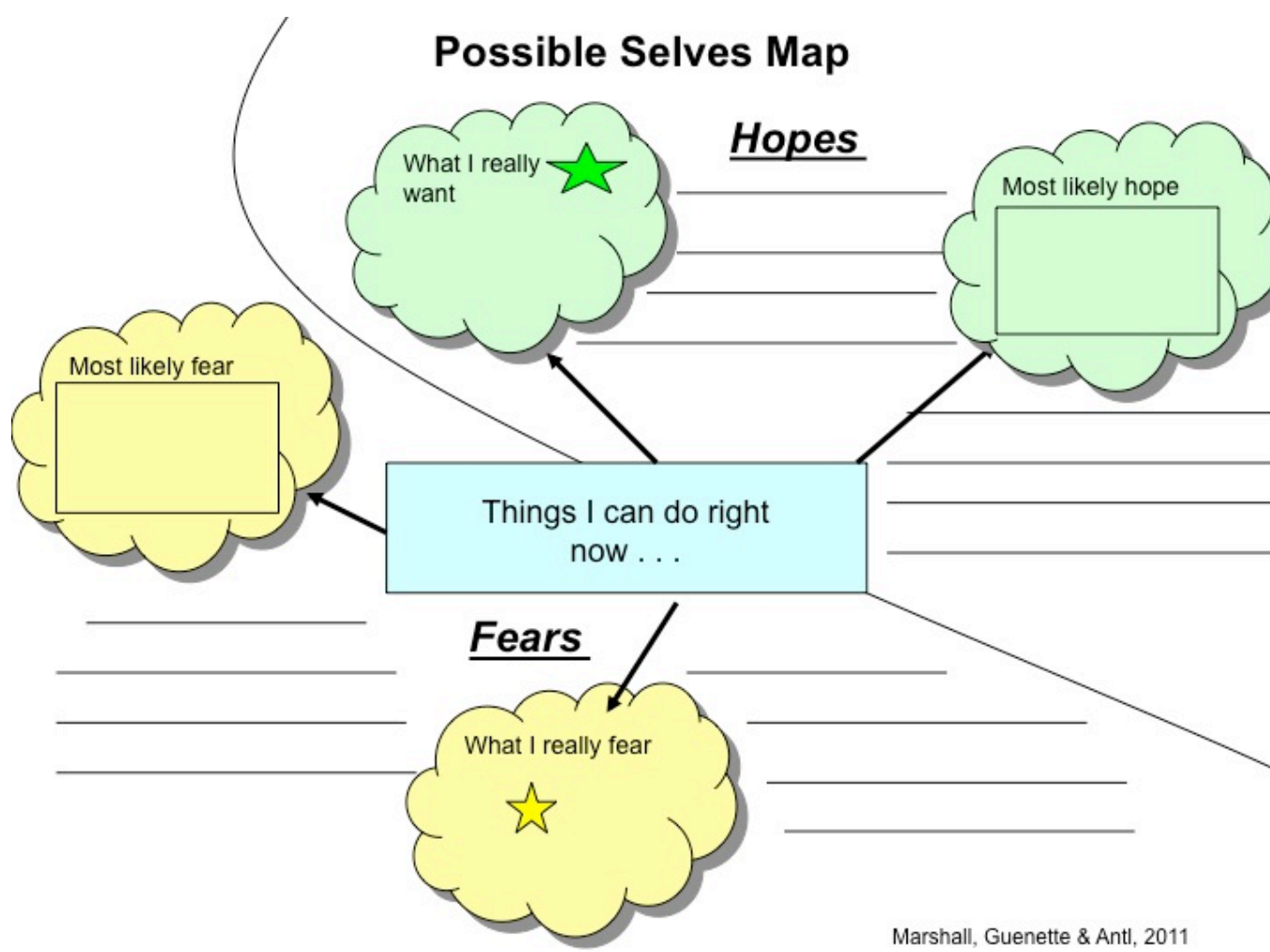
- Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Longitudinal Themes:

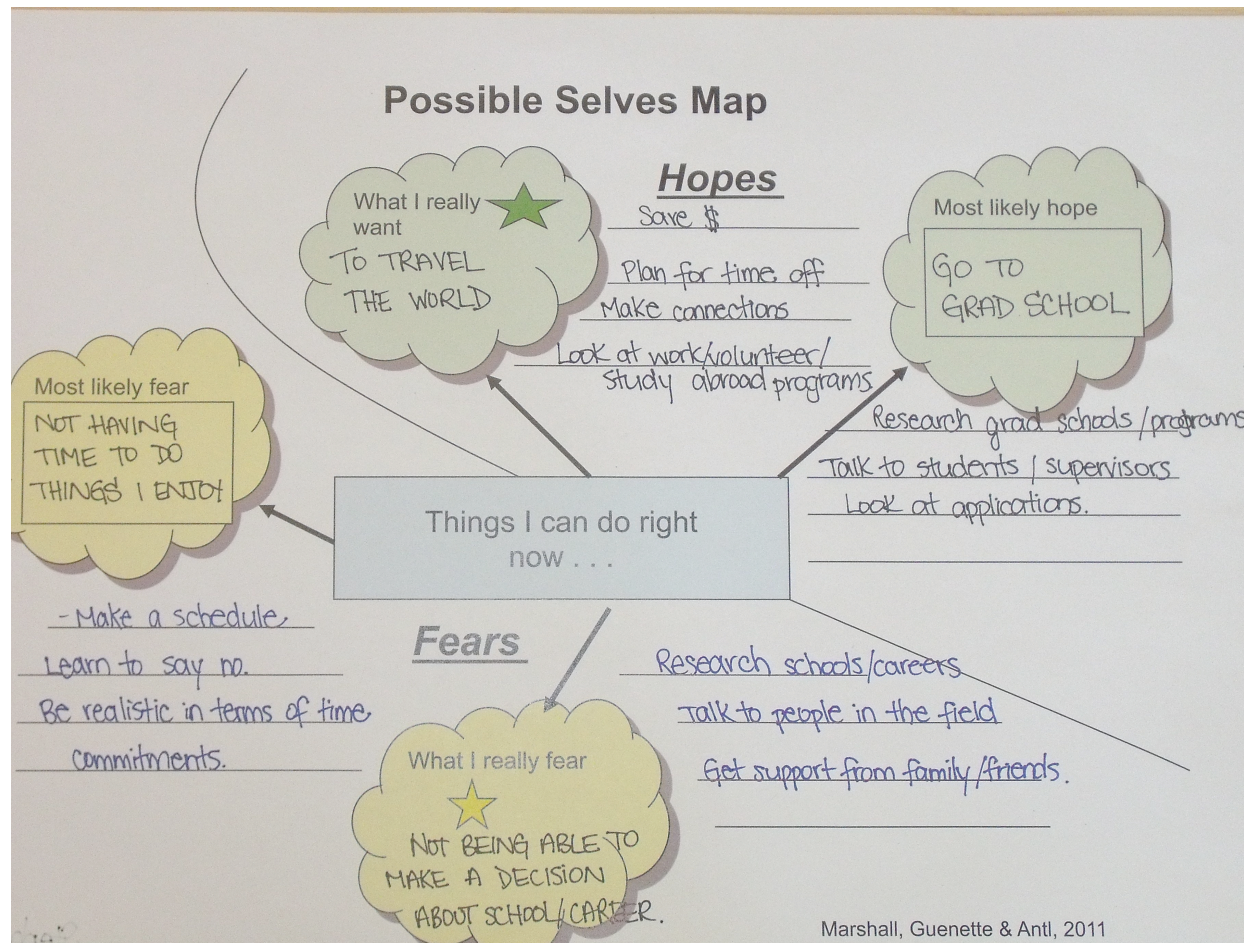
- Changes in goals over time (career choices refined, greater importance on relationships vs. careers, desire for overall happiness, balance)
 - Looking back, they also recognized a wish for balance in their lives: A young woman commented “I want to have time for both work and a family – not just working all the time.”
- Influences on goals over time (early career planning, experiential learning, life circumstances)
 - Some became aware that a particular science career or work setting was not something they wanted to pursue: A young man said “I’d figured from that [lab experience] that I probably didn’t want to be in a lab.”
- Consistency over time (career goals, life goals, hoped-for and feared selves)

Implications:

- Most of the young people in this study maintained their *science identity* to some degree and their interest in science-related educational and career goals over the course of the study although their horizons had broadened over the three years
- Enhanced self-efficacy and increased science knowledge were significant outcomes of the university laboratory internship - experiential learning activities were clearly influential for these young people
- Mentorship, experiential learning opportunities, and regular decision-oriented activities are critical elements in the career transition process
- The findings provide support for continued emphasis on the central constructs of self-efficacy, expectations, and personal goals (Bandura, 1986) in career exploration
- Our findings also underscore the importance of goal flexibility and having more than one option
- Imperative that early career exploration in secondary school be revisited in order to help students integrate new ideas and experiences and extend their understanding of the potential implications for life and work choices and pathways
- Similar to Arnett’s (2004) research on emerging adults, young people in this study expressed optimism with regard to their futures



Marshall, Guenette & Anil, 2011



Marshall, Guenette & Anil, 2011

STUDY 2:

The Work and Educational Aspirations of Young, Rural, Single Mothers: Narrative Interviews with Possible Selves Mapping

What stories do young single mothers in rural communities tell with respect to work and educational aspirations?

Participants:

- 6 single mothers (18-23 years old), from a small coastal community in British Columbia

Method:

- Narrative interviews (Reissman, 1993) and Possible Selves Mapping Process (steps 1-5)

Analysis:

- Analysis of the narrative (McCormack, 2004) and thematic text reduction (Creswell, 2008)

Main Themes:

- Education (motivation, supportive teachers, flexibility, challenges, “getting there”)
- Work (small town feasibility, fears of failure, temporal goals, economic uncertainty, self-efficacy)
- Supports Systems (mom’s group, health unit, outreach workers, daycare, family, transportation)
- Money (Housing, stress, subsidies, having to work, hopes to own a home)
- Becoming a mother (supportive family, hopes and fears for child, motivation, personal injuries)
- Living in a small town (wanting to leave, fears of leaving, benefits, accessibility)
- Concerns about violence (past abuse, substance use, self-protection, lack of support ,relationships)

Implication:

- Important that young single mothers in rural communities, who might be marginalized or discriminated against, be supported in their efforts to obtain education and employment

STUDY 3:

From the Inside to the Outs: Possible Selves and Transition Planning for Youth in Custody

What are the hopes and fears described by youth in custody as they near release?

Participants:

- 6 young men and 1 young woman (15 to 18 years old) In Victoria, British Columbia
- 2 serving their first sentences, 5 have been in jail more than 5 times

Method:

- Narrative influenced question asking what supports and barriers the youth perceive as they near release
- Asked youth what their concept of a “successful release” was, and used the Possible Selves Mapping Process to identify their hoped-for and feared-for selves

Analysis:

- Ghostwriting (Rhodes, 2000) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Main Themes:

- Jail (returning to jail, breaching/probation, adult jail)
 - A participant who has spent a considerable amount of time in custody explained “Like no one’s a perfect criminal right, so you just can’t always be a criminal for the rest of your life right? So...like it’s not about not getting caught it’s about not doing crime because you can get caught right?”
- Relationships (family, peers, professionals)
- Giving Back/Reconnecting with the Community
 - When talking about how he feels when he has tried to reconnect with the community in the past a young man said “I feel like everybody doesn’t want me out there right, it feels like, ‘okay this kid should be back in jail.’ That’s how I feel when I’m out there.” Another young man hoped to “change kids on the streets to legit ways of thinking, help out kids who live in poverty, be successful in helping kids in community, get forgiven, help people who helped me and forgive people.”
- Drugs and Alcohol
- School/Education
 - A young man hoped he would “have enough patience for school.” While another participant stated that he hoped to “finish my schooling and go to university or college, I want to have a career in building houses.”
- Work/Career
- Success, Independence,
- Life of Crime (term used by youth in Victoria who are associated with the criminal lifestyle)
- Physical Health/Wellness

Implications:

- Many release plans are missing how to maximize success and minimize failure
- It is important to address how we can help youth face their fears and real challenges to support them in creating realistic plans to support their release
- The youth are well able to articulate what they need to do and have (i.e., internal and external resources and supports), but they struggled to plan things they can do *right now* to ensure future success

