

# Using the lens of ‘possible selves’ to explore access to higher education - a new framework for policy, practice and research

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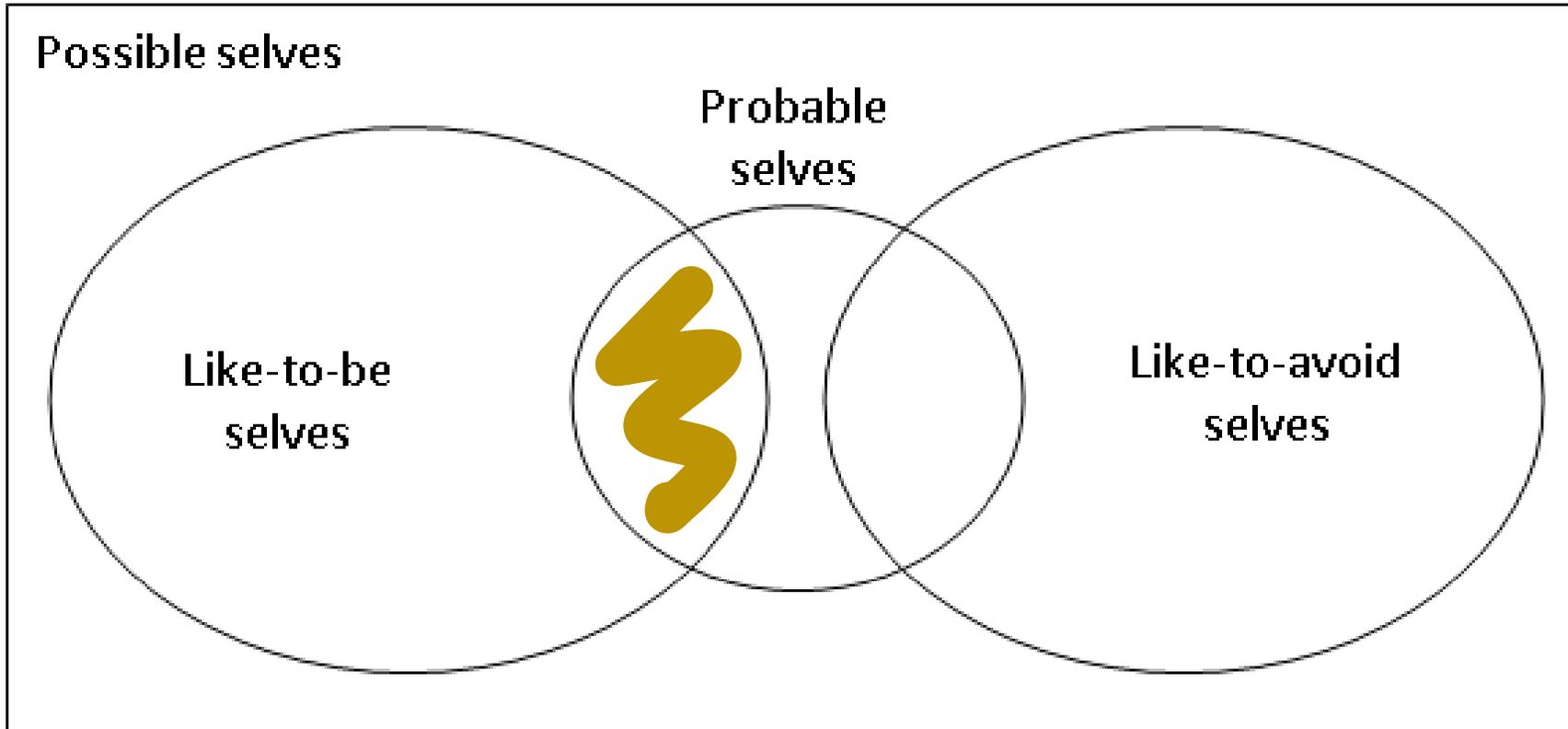
# Introducing the theory of possible selves

- ▶ Markus and Nurius (1986)
  - ▶ Focus on images of ‘what [people] might become, would they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming’ (p.954)
  - ▶ ‘Possible selves [...] can be viewed as cognitive bridges between the present and the future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become’ (p.961)
  - ▶ ‘An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context’ (p.954)

# Categorising possible selves (1)

- ▶ ‘Individuals have considerable freedom to define and redefine their significant possible selves’ (Cross and Markus, 1991, p.233).
- ▶ Three types of categorisation:
  - ▶ **Possibility** - which selves can be conceived within the individual’s personal experience and sociocultural context
  - ▶ **Likelihood** - which selves are assessed by the individual to be probable, given prevailing structural constraints
  - ▶ **Desirability** - which selves are subjectively attractive and thus like-to-be or like-to-avoid selves

# Categorising possible selves (2)



# Elaboration

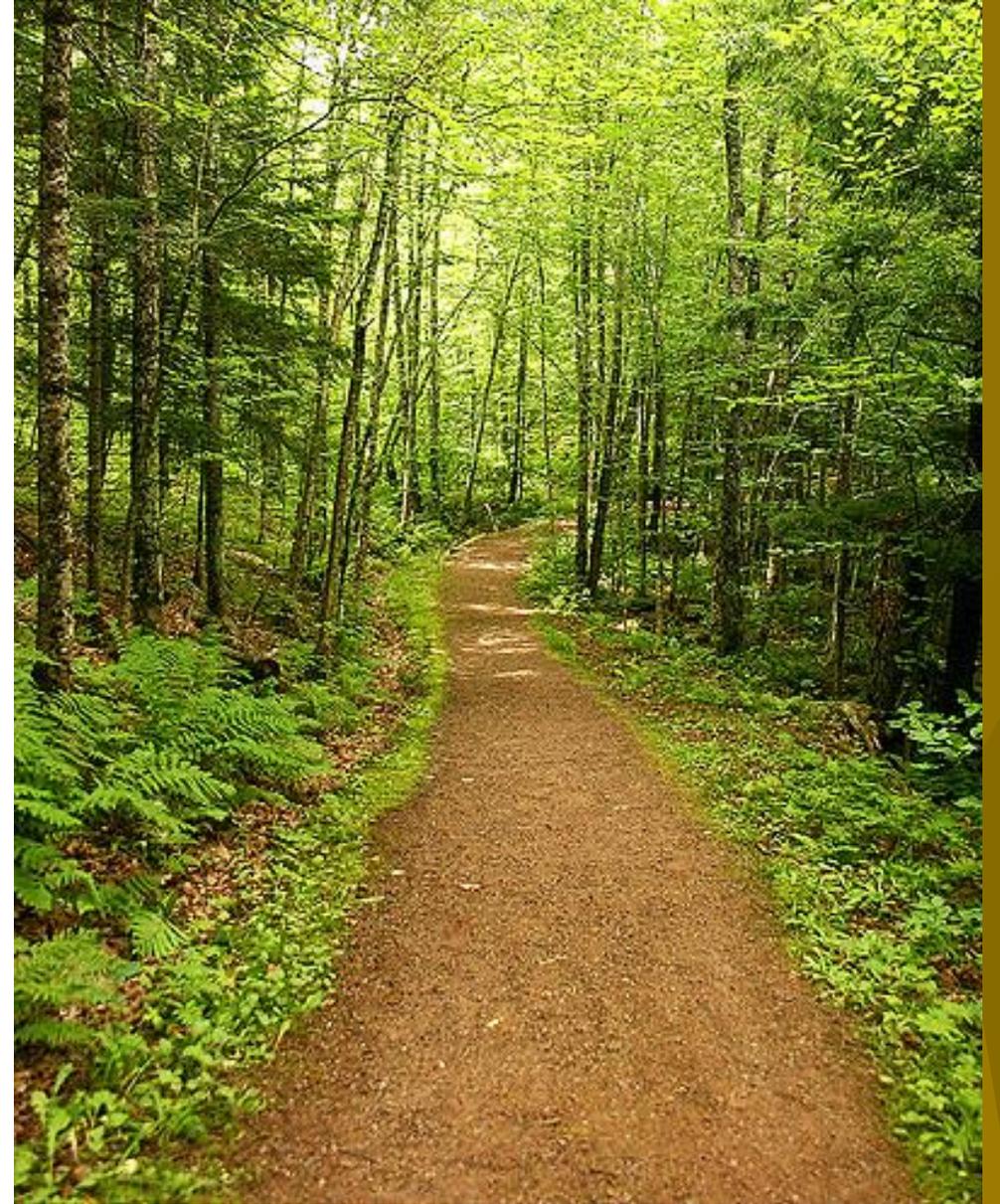
- ▶ The extent to which possible selves are fully-formed and detailed, with a vivid vision of what that self would be like and the intermediate steps needed to get there.
  - ▶ ‘Clearly elaborated possible selves and the strategies of realizing them decrease the psychological distances between one’s current state and the desired end-state’ (Ruvolo and Markus, 1992, p.119)
  - ▶ ‘The more compelling the possible self, the more vividly it can be elaborated in the present, and the more it will command attention and structure one’s current activity’ (Markus and Ruvolo, 1989, p.229)

# Possible selves in practice

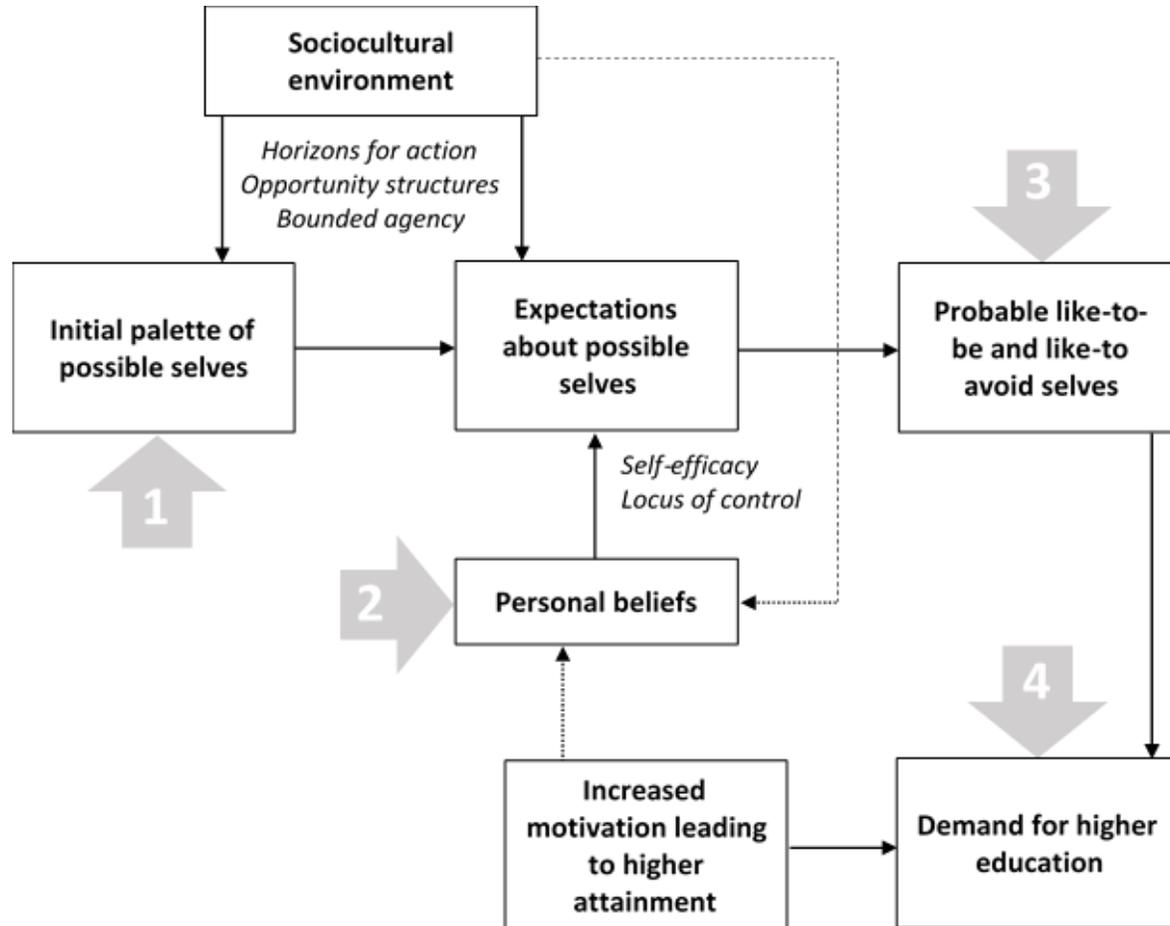
- ▶ Relatively little use of theory in education to date
- ▶ Series of robust studies by Daphna Oyserman and colleagues in disadvantaged area of Detroit
  - ▶ Stronger outcomes for participants with well-elaborated possible selves and strategies for achieving them
  - ▶ ‘Giving youth the opportunity to see the connections between present and future at their own pace, through activities shared with a group rather than “insight” based discussion’ (Oyserman, Terry and Bybee, 2002, p.323)
  - ▶ Different socioeconomic groups have a similar propensity to construct possible selves, but those from disadvantaged groups are less likely to have articulated strategies for achieving them (Oyserman, Johnson and James, 2011)

# Quick summary

- ▶ Possible selves form a bridge between present and future
- ▶ Motivate and legitimise current actions
- ▶ A like-to-be self that is also assessed to be probable is particularly effective
- ▶ But only if the young person can devise a clear path to achieving it
- ▶ A possible selves approach can improve educational outcomes, but paths less clear for disadvantaged young people



# Possible selves and outreach



- ▶ Focus on three elements:
  - ▶ Widening the palette of possible selves
  - ▶ Shifting assessment of desirability and likelihood
  - ▶ Helping with elaboration

# Palette of possible selves

- ▶ Disadvantaged young people have fewer (or no) possible selves predicated on higher education
- ▶ Broadening palette to include selves that are culturally-relevant, but which are related to educational success - some career-based, but also more general
- ▶ De-emphasise 'me as a student' or 'me as a graduate', focusing on the wider selves to which these states give access - e.g. 'me travelling abroad'
- ▶ Not about raising aspirations, but diversifying them (Archer, DeWitt and Wong, 2014)

# Shifting subjective assessments

- ▶ Focus on the criteria by which young people assess the probability and desirability of possible selves:
  - ▶ Self-efficacy - beliefs about whether they will be able to achieve specific goals (e.g. high attainment)
  - ▶ Locus-of-control - beliefs about whether events are under their control and efforts will be rewarded
- ▶ Expectations of key influencers (e.g. parents and teachers) - link between educational and life chances
- ▶ Longitudinal approach rooted in short-term successes, reflection and learning orientation (Watkins, 2010)

# Supporting elaboration

- ▶ Working to align like-to-be (or like-to-avoid!) selves with probable selves
- ▶ Supporting the ‘detailing’ of the selves and the plan-building to achieve (or avoid) them
- ▶ Centred on process of guided discovery that is centred on the young person - led by their possible selves and not value judgements about ‘appropriateness’
- ▶ Role for mentoring and work experience as means of ‘trying on’ possible selves (St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013)

# Contrasts with 'traditional' outreach

- ▶ No foundational basis in 'aspiration raising' - focus instead on exposing young people to novel possible selves
- ▶ Little or no direct focus on higher education - ancillary to building like-to-be selves that become probable
- ▶ Neither passive (information provision) or didactic (persuasive), but supportive individualised guidance
- ▶ Targeted at pre-16 age group - making higher education possible through motivation and attainment raising
- ▶ Vital engagement with parents and teachers to challenge (realistic) sociocultural expectations

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# The full paper...



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