

They've got high hopes: Links between tenth grade possible selves and future college attendance

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Abstract

Markus and colleagues (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990) examined the connection between adolescents' thinking about adulthood and the idea of possible selves, which include both "hoped for" (e.g., having a secure job) and "feared" (e.g., being unemployed) selves. The present study examined the relationship between matched possible selves in three domains (instrumental, financial, and family) during 10th grade and college attendance four years later. The sample for the present study was drawn from the 10th grade (Wave 5) and 21-year old (Wave 7) data from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT). Chi-squared analyses revealed that those who indicated matched or hoped for instrumental possible selves at 10th grade appeared to be more likely to be full-time college students four years later than one would expect based on college attendance rates for the whole sample. Possible financial and family selves, however, did not appear to be related to future college attendance. The results from the present study provide support for a link between adolescents' identity and young adults' educational choices.

Introduction

Adolescence is a time when individuals think about and prepare for adulthood (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Markus and colleagues (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986) have examined the connection between adolescents' thinking about adulthood and the idea of possible selves, which include both "*hoped for*" (e.g., have a secure job) and "*feared*" (e.g., be unemployed) selves. These researchers have documented the relationship between adolescent possible selves and the formation of identity at young adulthood. They have also noted that possible selves act as incentives for behavior, such that hoped for selves are approached and feared selves are avoided. Specifically, Oyserman & Markus (1990) found that having matched/balanced hoped for and feared possible selves in adolescence (e.g., hope to stay clean and off the street; fear being tried as an adult) is linked to lower recidivism in delinquent activities.

In the present study, we examined the connection of possible selves to a different behavioral domain—college enrollment. As suggested above, having matched hoped for and feared selves in a given domain may be more closely linked to future college attendance behavior than having no possible selves or having only a hoped for or feared possible self in that domain. The current study examined the relationship between matched possible selves in three domains (*instrumental*, *financial*, and *family*) during 10th grade and college attendance four years later.

Hypotheses

1. Adolescents who indicated matched instrumental possible selves at 10th grade will be more likely to be full-time college students than one would expect given rates of college attendance in the sample as a whole.
2. Adolescents who did not indicate any instrumental possible selves at 10th grade will be less likely to be full-time college students than one would expect given rates of college attendance in the sample as a whole.
3. Adolescents who indicated any combination of financial or family selves at 10th grade will not be more or less likely to be full-time college students than one would expect given rates of college attendance in the whole sample.

Because instrumental selves (e.g., successful, hard-working, respected, independent, intelligent) are more closely related to college attendance behavior than financial or family selves, we hypothesized that only instrumental possible selves would be linked to later college attendance.

Method

Sample. The sample for the present study was drawn from the 10th grade (Wave 5) and young adulthood (21 years old; Wave 7) data from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT). The sample included 574 adolescents, of which 63% were females and 54% were in college full-time at Wave 7.

Procedure and Measures. Questionnaires were administered in high schools at Wave 5, and were mailed to young adult participants at Wave 7. The following measures were included for the present study: 1) Possible Selves at Wave 5; 2) College Attendance at Wave 7. *Possible selves* were assessed with two open-ended questions at Wave 5: "Many people have in mind some things they want to be like in the future regardless of how likely it is they will actually be that way. These are the kinds of selves that you most want to be like. Think about four possible selves that you most hope to be by the time you are 28. Please list them below:" "Think of four possible selves that you fear or worry about becoming by the time you are 28. These are the things you most want not to be true of you or that you most want to avoid being when you are 28. Please list them below:" *College attendance* at Wave 7 was assessed by one question. Participants could respond "yes" or "no." "Are you a full-time college student during the academic year?"

Coding Scheme. Participants could generate four hoped for selves and four feared selves. Possible selves were coded into several domains, including, but not limited to, instrumental, financial, and family. Possible selves responses were considered matched if the participant listed one or more hoped for and feared self in the same domain (response examples are listed below in Table 1).

Table 1: Possible Selves Across Domains

POSSIBLE SELVES	MATCHED	SELVES
	HOPED FOR SELVES	FEARED SELVES
Instrumental:	*being a hard worker/ambitious	*being a couch potato
	*being well-educated	*being illiterate
Financial:	*having a nice car	*driving a VW
	*being rich	*living in the gutter
Family:	*having a positive marriage	*having an abusive spouse
	*being a parent	*having no family/kids

Results

In order to examine the patterns of possible selves in 10th grade, analyses were conducted for each domain of possible selves: instrumental, financial, and family (see Tables 1-3). Because the variables were categorical, the relationship between 10th grade possible selves and Wave 7 college attendance was assessed via chi-squared analyses. This analysis assesses the number of members who fall into various categories of the variable of interest. The chi-squared statistic (X^2) reveals whether the differences between the cell frequencies and the frequencies that would be expected can be attributed to chance or non-chance factors.

Our analyses revealed that those adolescents who indicated either matched or only hoped for instrumental possible selves at 10th grade appeared to be more likely to be full-time college students four years later than one would expect given rates of college attendance in the sample as a whole. The greatest advantage appeared to be associated with having matched instrumental possible selves. Additionally, adolescents who indicated no instrumental selves at 10th grade appeared to be slightly less likely to be full-time college students than one would expect based on rates of college attendance for the entire sample. Financial selves and family selves, however, did not appear to be related to future college attendance. The same patterns were found when the sample was divided according to gender.

Discussion

Identity formation is a key task of adolescence (Erickson, 1980). One of the key aspects of identity is one's occupation, which for many adolescents, begins with a commitment to educational goals and pathways (Erickson, 1968). Markus and colleagues (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990) have documented the connections between adolescent possible selves and the formation of identity at young adulthood. These researchers have noted that possible selves act as incentives for behavior, such that hoped for selves are approached and feared selves are avoided.

The results from the current study provide support for the link between adolescents' future self-concepts and the educational choices they make as young adults. As expected, instrumental possible selves were related to future college attendance. It was predicted that instrumental possible selves would relate to college attendance for two reasons. First, instrumental qualities are necessary to apply for and be successful in college. Second, many of the instrumental responses appeared to be related either directly (e.g., being a college graduate) or indirectly (e.g., being prestigious) to having a college degree. As predicted, financial and family selves were not related to college attendance. We anticipated this non-relationship because it is likely that high school students who want to be parents expect, for financial reasons, to combine career and family. Thus, students who plan to have children as well as those who do not, should be equally likely to attend college.

Participants may not have associated attending college with higher financial status for a variety of reasons. Participants may have associated college with the financial strain of high tuition and student loans or they might have had the knowledge that a college degree does not necessarily guarantee a high paying job. Additionally, even though they would like to be financially well off in the future, other barriers such as ability or lack of high school preparation, may have prevented them from attending college. Finally, some of the financial selves (e.g., being a millionaire) seem less related to a college degree and more related to a chance event, such as winning the lottery. Future researchers may take into account other factors, such as support or ability, as well as examine the differences in the predictive power of matched possible selves versus that of unmatched possible selves (e.g., a hoped for possible self without a matching feared self or vice versa).

Table 1: Chi Squared Analyses for Instrumental Selves

Possible Selves	n	Full-time college	Not Full-time College
None	303	48.5%	51.5%
Hoped For Only	129	65.1%	34.9%
Feared Only	44	59.1%	40.9%
Matched	98	70.4%	29.6%

$X^2 = 19.60, df = 3, p < .001^*$

Table 2: Chi Squared Analyses for Financial Selves

Possible Selves	n	Full-time college	Not Full-time College
None	253	53%	47%
Hoped For Only	34	55.9%	44.1%
Feared Only	133	57.1%	42.9%
Matched	154	63%	37%

$X^2 = 3.94, df = 3, p = .268$

Table 3: Chi-Squared Analyses for Family Selves

Possible Selves	n	Full-time college	Not Full-time College
None	324	58.3%	41.7%
Hoped For Only	74	56.8%	43.2%
Feared Only	48	50%	50%
Matched	138	55.4%	44.6%

$X^2 = 1.28, df = 3, p = .733$