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VARIETY OF POSSIBLE SELVES: THE ROLE OF AGENCY AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE REVIEW

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VARIETY OF POSSIBLE SELVES: THE ROLE OF AGENCY AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE REVIEW³

The development of possible self theory led to the introduction of new types of construct. However, the types are inconsistent with the original definition by Markus and Nurius (1986). Authors tend not to consider the phenomenon of agency, playing a crucial role in the motivational function of possible self. Thus, now in the literature, we have non-systemized concepts of various types of possible self.

The article's primary aim is to analyze existing types of possible selves through the lens of agentic energy, and to unify the construct's understanding. We consider most frequent types of possible self, such as hoped-for possible self, feared possible self, best possible self, self-regulatory and self-enhancing possible self, lost possible self, shared possible self, and impossible self. Creating the systematic view is essential for the future of the theory as there are already some misconceptions that come from the liberal interpretation of the originally strong construct.

We propose a solution in the form of traditional literature review with the result of definitions reconsidered depending on the role of agentic energy in the process of possible self producing. The expected outcome of the framework is to set a unified direction for further discoveries.

JEL Classification: Z00

Keywords: possible self, self-concept, agency, impossible self, personality, self-image, self-identity, self-schema, feared self, personality development

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Highlights:

- While the concept of possible self is gaining more empirical data, understanding the construct seems to vary among authors, and misconceptions appear.
- Whereas the researchers usually address the motivational aspect of possible selves, the primary motivational feature of the construct — the phenomenon of agency — is generally ignored.
- The current article revises and unifies frequently met types of possible selves through the lens of the agency's role within the concept.

Background

Possible Self is a substantial construct that has received misunderstanding from most of the researchers. As introduced in the article by Markus and Nurius (1986), the construct constitutes a link between self-evaluation and personal motivation. The phenomenon of agency, which takes a unique role in formulating possible selves, is emphasized. However, in the subsequent development of the theory by other researchers, the role of the agency is noticeably ignored. As Erikson points out in the framework article (2007), many misconceptions led to the consequences where the construct is used as a replacement for other constructs and phenomena, and its direct functions are omitted. Some researchers tend to see it as a universal implement that can be used as an element of existing models to enhance its efficacy. Ignoring the agentic part seem to separate a person (or an agent) and one's possibilities. The agentic energy endows the construct with explanatory power as it states the significant impact on a person's behavior and facilitates the meaning-making function of the construct.

There is no single theoretical frame for the various types of possible selves. It can be concluded that the possible self frequently is referred to as the descriptive phenomenon. With its high potential, the construct usually remains underestimated due to relative deviation from the original concept (Erikson, 2007). The current article aims to consider the main issues, which contribute to the divergence of conceptions problem and to provide a specified theoretical frame based on the essential attributes of the possible self concept. Traditional literature review is used as the main method since it solves the key tasks we set. Our aim is to analyze the core findings considering the possible self construct and to propose new insights about the way it is formulated and how it is functioning. The gap between original concept by Markus & Nurius (1986) and the current ideas of various authors is the primary interest. The results of our work are concluded in the revision of some parts of the theory which is presented in the table (Table 1).

Possible selves, as affirmed in the original theory by Markus and Nurius, “*can be viewed as a cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats ... They provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation.*” (Markus & Nurius, p. 954)

Explanatory potential of possible selves approximately proposes that the content of possibilities determines a person's behavior. Motivational function of possible selves is one of the primary features studied by the researchers (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Hoyle & Sowards, 1993; Cross & Markus, 1994; Higgins, 1996; Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006;

Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Hoyle & vanDellen, 2008; Vignoles et al., 2008; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010; Bak, 2015; Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2015; Nurra & Oyserman, 2018). Processes underlying possible selves' formulating take considerably more significant roles as they connect various aspects of personality.

One of the main conditions confirming possible self's explanatory quality is that by producing it, a person appears to imagine oneself as the agent in the current situation in which it can be released (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Bruner (1995) studied possible selves as consisting of narrative structure since during formulating it includes the representations of behavior, causes, reactions, and finally the event. Therefore, it creates the story where the person is the main character. Markus states one of the possible selves functions' as creating new context due to actions the person is currently doing: "*possible selves function to provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the now self*" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 962). For instance, if there is a salient possibility of getting the highest marks in the year, then getting 'C' on one of the assignments would have significantly different meaning. Therefore, the impact possible self can make on the behavior has to be consistent with the background of what is currently trending in one's priorities.

The construction of personal meaning as the essential feature of the possible self confirms the connection between the construct and the self. One of the main features of the link is the experience of agency. As Markus stated in the original article, agency is the ability to maintain and develop possible selves. In the following works, authors evolve the understanding of agency's role, so it appears to be one of possible self's main features.

The original theory of possible self regards agency as the ability to act like an independent autonomic agent being the central element of situation and event, whose main quality focuses on the ability to make a decision, to be creative about how to behave in order to reach the wanted aim (Bandura, 1982; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Markus and Kitayama (2003) consider two agency models, theoretically explained with two different tendencies, i.e., eastern and western traditions. Thus, the western tradition disjoint theory is represented in disjoint agency. It considers that the main aim of people is to express themselves throughout reaching autonomy and independence. The conjoint agency is connected with interpersonal connections and mainly took place in the context of human interaction. Despite various motives, the goal of expressing agency stays the same as it is directed ability to impact the development of actions in different situations by making decisions.

The theory of agency by Harre supposes that the primary condition for becoming an agent is maintaining the specific level of autonomy in actions and the ability to act in the current situation despite the previous experience and the possible circumstances (Harre, 1979). Thus, the agency is the capability to act based on reflection, to state various aims, and to influence the world not only in a passive way but by interacting with the external world within different circumstances.

The newest addition to the idea of the motivational function of possible selves is the MAPS model proposed by Frazier, Schwartz, & Metcalfe (2021). The authors state a crucial role in the interchange between possible selves, agency, and metacognition in the successful self-regulatory process. The model works in the following way: the possible self represents the goal reached with the use of metacognitive control strategies that increases the sense of self-efficacy, leading to higher levels of agency. The idea corresponds with the theses concerning the motivational function

of the possible self. However, the conceptualization regards the possible selves and the agency phenomenon as the distinct elements in the model, which can serve independently. Nevertheless, the concept represents the closest understanding of the agentic energy within the possible self function (Frazier, Schwartz, & Metcalfe, 2021).

Following the original theory, the possible self is considered to have more potential to impact human behavior than only representing what a person fears or wants. As the authors proposed it, possible selves are the representations of goals, fears, and hopes; the construct is linked with the self and depends on the context in which a person is. Therefore, it seems that the possibility appears to be “experienced from inside” (Erikson, 2007, P. 349) as the one makes the intentional and deliberate decisions about one’s attitude toward the possible self or what actions should be taken into account for reaching, avoiding, or excluding it from the self.

Types of possible selves

Definition and functions of any possible self. The issue became more complicated when the mini-theories of various types of possible selves appear in the literature. Here we aim to study the most frequent ones, i.e., *hoped-for possible self* (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Carver, Reynolds, & Scheier, 1994; Cross & Markus, 1994; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010), *feared possible self* (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Paternoster, & Bushway, 2009; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010; Pierce, Schmidt, & Stoddard 2014; Aardema & Wong, 2020), *best possible self* (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Harrist et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2010; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Renner et al., 2014; Liau et al., 2016; Loveday, Lovell, & Jones, 2018; Altıntaş et al., 2020), *lost possible self* (King & Raspin, 2004; King & Hicks, 2007; King & Mitchell, 2015; Vasilevskaya & Molchanova, 2016), *self-regulatory and self-enhancing possible self* (Oyserman et al., 2004; Strachan et al., 2016), *shared possible self* (Schindler et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2014), and *impossible self* (Kostenko & Grishutina, 2018; Grishutina & Kostenko, 2019). Later in this section we will attempt to appraise the degree of agency involved in each mentioned type of possible self—as it follows from the theoretical baseline.

Considering various paths researchers tend to view the possible self, there is a chance of great confusion. Erikson (2007) was the first to pay close attention to the necessity of being more considerate of the original theory, as there is already a number of articles where the possible self is presented with misconceptions. Thus, Erikson claims that there is a risk of two types of misconceptions—too broad or too narrow understanding of the construct. First of all, possible selves are not goals, hopes, or fears, as it sometimes stated in the papers. Hopes and fears can be the basis of the possible self or be its product, although still they are not equals. Secondly, the too narrow approach is to present the construct as the expectations one can possess (Erikson, 2007). Possible selves are not just the points in the scheduled plan. One can control their actions in regard to avoid something they do not want, although the feared possible self nevertheless may be present.

The possible self definition given by Markus and Nurius is crucial for understanding the construct as it considers all the essential aspects of it. Since there are so few studies regarding agency as “*a distinct quality of possible selves*” (Erikson, 2007, p. 352), it seems understandable why there are so many misconceptions. We will later clarify these essential features and review the prospects of taking agency into account.

As it has been already mentioned, the possible self is the component of self-concept that appears to have valuable motivational potential as the construct itself firstly was considered as the representation of human's motives. Accordingly, in the original study only two main types of possible self were distinguished—hoped-for and unwanted (or as it is often stated in the further works—feared). These types represent two variants of emotional attitude toward the possible selves—either one is fascinated by one's own possibilities and so tries hard to attain them, or one does not really want to achieve a specific future state (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The functioning of possible self is provided by two components of self-concept, such as *self-schemas* and *working self-concept*. The role of possible self in behavioral regulation is important since minor inconsistencies in self-concept derived from the external world make the negative possible selves appear. The presence can affect a person's self-evaluation and, thus, their decisions on how to act. The content of self-concept is the primary source of information that forms the possible self. The *self-schemas* are considered to be the construction of one's past experiences, including the representations of the abilities and skills useful for the current activity. Hence, the availability of specific self-schemas can be the prerequisite of the possible self realization. As for the *working self-concept*, Markus & Nurius operationalize: "*it can be viewed as a continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge*" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 957). There could be various self-conceptions switching due to the current situation.

So, the content of the working self-concept and the possible selves enrich each other. The possible self is a dynamic construct that constantly changes due to the information from the other components of self-concept (Kostenko, 2016). Therefore, as firstly stated by Markus and Nurius, and then extended by Erikson (2007), *the possible self contains the ability to bring the context or the experienced meaning*. There are changes in the person's knowledge about oneself. Thus, the activation of different self-concept characteristics can form the expectations and hence motives for future behavior. The case brings up the phenomenon of agency which plays a significant role in directing one's behavior.

As we stated before, the agency is the subject's activity, the feeling of being an agent of the possible situation. While formulating possible selves, a person could imagine how to achieve the aim and experience oneself as capable of changing the results for the chosen possibility. There is various research confirming the hypothesis that agency is the primary phenomenon of possible selves that makes a substantial impact on persons' actions. Although, in line with the earlier ideas, few researchers link the motivational role of possible selves with the agency itself.

The original article by Markus and Ruvolo (1992) emphasizes a valid thesis considering the connection between self-concept and motivation through possible self. Thus, the idea of what is possible for the self gives strength and actualizes the feeling of one's efficiency, competence, and optimism and provides conditions to ensure that behavior is affected by it. As representations of what a person would like to attain or avoid, possible selves organize actions due to the mentioned phenomenon—agency. By presenting the realization of their potential, a person feels a significant surge of feeling oneself competent and shows better performance. These are the conclusions made by the authors after three conducted studies: people who imagine success in activities due to the efforts applied, showed better results, as opposed to those who imagine being unsuccessful or successful but owing to luck, not efforts. Markus and Ruvolo consider the obtained data via the construct of the working self-concept, which is associated with possible self and contains various representations of a person's self (good Self, bad Self, ideal Self, past Self,

etc.). They are dynamically replaced and actualized by external situations and circumstances and can organize behavior to achieve the necessary goal. Thus, when a person imagines oneself to have successfully completed the task, due to making efforts, the positive possible selves become available. Moreover, thinking about the negative results make the feared possible selves available, which affects the process of performance. The result of this study is the thesis that certain ideas about what and how a person wants to achieve can act as a mediator between positive expectations, optimism, self-efficacy, and a person's performance in tasks. (Markus & Ruvolo, 1992).

Hoped-for possible self. The potential subject's activity is energy contained in the possible self narrative. The central thesis of the current framework is that producing various kinds of possible selves (one from the list above) could be accompanied by different processes. For instance, taking the examples from the original text by Markus and Nurius, *hoped-for or positive possible self* is the one that appears to function in the following way.

Imagining a student who has hoped-for possible self—"finished course-work." Following the ideas mentioned before, firstly, there is a necessity to detect if there are positive self-schemas, which can be connected with the possible self, e.g., "good at academic writing." The parallel process is the activation of the "being a responsible student" in the working self-concept. According to this, the person manages to imagine oneself capable of influencing the realization of the possible self. By being agentic, the mentioned energy of an active subject can be released, affecting behavior.

To sum up, if there are valuable skills for the possible self and the concept of oneself experiencing the successful academic performance. A number of researchers state that the imaging process of achieving a possible self is connected with the most efficacy. Hence, the most active, agentic state a person experiences when formulating the hoped-for possible self.

Feared or unwanted possible self. Considering the opposite type of possible selves—the *feared one*—it is essential to mention that it demonstrates considerable discrepancies with the *impossible self* and, therefore, should be distinguished correctly. As for the mechanisms of realizing potential agency, it is assumed that the process is consistent with the one regarding the hoped-for possible self, although the aims are different. In the first case, all the motivational power is directed to reach the hoped-for condition. As for the second one, the main direction of agentic actions is placed to stop the potential realization of the feared possible self.

Consequently, the primary role of agency in formulating the feared possible selves is to feel oneself as a person who can prevent certain circumstances. Pierce, Schmidt, & Stoddard (2015) assumed that as there is an understanding of how the hoped-for possible selves can impact the behavior, the processes underlying the consequences of feared possible selves on it as well. The authors studied the connection between possible selves and delinquency among youth. They state the thesis that the presence of the feared possible self concerning the delinquent behavior might be the indicator that one "...may lack the agentic qualities that would aid in the attainment of opposing, positive possible selves" (Pierce, Schmidt, & Stoddard, 2015, p. 19). Therefore, they proposed that feared possible selves might occur when one can not feel oneself as the agent in the future situation, and so the lack of agency is what feared possible selves states.

The study results claimed that only the ones who had delinquent feared possible selves and lacked the hoped-for possible self, which was the opposite of the feared one, engaged in the

delinquent activity under peer pressure. Thus, the data confirmed that feared possible selves usually consist of what a person is afraid to become or attain.

The above corresponds with the definition by Oyserman and Markus (1990):

The sense of one's self in a feared or undesired state—me in prison or me unemployed—is also motivationally significant. It can provide a vivid image or conception of an end-state that must be rejected or avoided. An image of one's self in such a feared or undesired state can produce inaction or a stopping in one's tracks. (p.113)

The authors consider the balance between the expected or hoped-for possible selves and feared possible selves to be the boost in motivation. For instance, the study showed that the presence of a hoped-for possible self that is the opposite of a particular feared possible self might be the reason to prevent the realization of the latter.

Few studies regard feared possible self type in work with the obsessive-compulsive disorder within the context of cognitive-behavioral therapy (Aardema et al., 2013; Aardema & Wong, 2020). It illustrates the proposed idea as the patients with such disorder suffering from obsessive thoughts usually tend to fear themselves but mostly what they cannot prevent from doing. That is the case of experiencing the lack of agency to stop specific behavioral patterns that may impact a person's life.

Best possible self. The type of possible self connected with the hoped-for possible self is the *best possible self*, most applicable to practice. The best possible self is viewed as the “*high-level life goal*”; therefore, the main idea is that imagining it might energize one’s motivation toward realization (King, 2001). The concept of best possible self was firstly constrained in addition to the methods of releasing trauma. Writing down life goals — best possible selves — was associated with feeling happier and better physically. However, there was no idea about what processes underlie these mechanisms. The researchers tend to state the connection between possible self and self-regulation: imagining best possible self seems like gaining control over one’s personal goals and clarifying motives and priorities. Based on the diagnostic manipulation by King (2001), to imagine the best possible self, people need to think of the future where everything is successfully ended, every want is released, and all the things are worked out for them. Moreover, the findings of longitudinal studies state that imagining the best possible self increases positive affect, well-being, and optimism (King, 2001; Harrist et al., 2007; King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Peters et al., 2010).

There is an indirect link between best possible self and self-regulation as the research mainly considers how the type could influence a person's affects and expectations about the future. Most therapeutically, the studies considering the best possible self focus on the way a person's thinking can modify in regard to imagining the best future outcomes. However, there is almost no research assuming the impact on behavior from such interventions.

Analyzing the possible self concept through the lens of agentic energy power, we could consider the best possible self in the following way. As it was stated before, the phenomenon of agency appears the moment a person formulates one’s possible self. Agentic energy in the best possible self acts in a straightforward manner—a person does not need to imagine possible ways to reach their possible selves as the condition itself states that everything works well for the one.

Therefore, agentic energy has no need to be manifested. As there is no direct evidence proving that there is a link between behavior and the best possible self interventions, it is safe to say that agency is relatively passive considering the type.

Nevertheless, the best possible self findings confirm the significance of elaborating one's possible selves, living through the idea of it. According to the processes discussed earlier, the thought about oneself being successful enough for all the goals to be reached can enhance the overall evaluation of oneself. For instance, the study by Markus and Ruvolo (1992) reveals that thinking about success can result in winning in the end. Also, the research shows that neurotic participants experience significant reduction in negative thinking, so it can be proposed that the best possible self intervention may be a proper way to prepare a person to act (Peters et al., 2010).

Moreover, the mechanisms of possible selves' functioning discussed earlier reveal that the presence of certain self-schemas enables the reflective experience of being able to achieve a hoped-for possible self. By imagining the best possible self, one could become more confident about one's goals and therefore think of oneself as the agent in the future. In this case, presumably after considering the best possible self, for some time, a person could feel more agentic about one's hoped-for possible selves.

Self-regulatory and self-enhancing possible self. *Self-regulatory and self-enhancing possible selves* are the types introduced by Daphna Oyserman and colleagues. “*Self-enhancing possible selves promote positive feelings and maintain a sense of optimism and hope for the future without evoking behavioral strategies*” (Oyserman et al., 2004, p. 132). As the authors suggested, the type serves to make the person feel good about oneself, which can be useful. A person can have the “I’m doing good in school” possible self to increase positive affect and optimistic thoughts toward the future. The self-regulatory possible self is connected with proposing specific behavioral strategies to attain goals while formulating it (e.g., “I’m doing my homework right after coming home from school”). Detailed and concrete self-regulatory possible selves have shown a connection with better academic outcomes (Oyserman et al., 2004) than the self-enhancing ones.

In regard to possible self concept, the findings fit well according to the mechanisms of agency: the more precisely a person can imagine oneself in the future situation as an agent, a.k.a someone who has the specific behavioral strategy, the probability of attaining such goal becomes higher. Imagining the actions includes activating proper self-schemas and working self-concept. Therefore, it appears to be the manifestation of personality agency. Moreover, a clear idea about what one should do to release one's possible self leaves out all the potential obstacles as the planning stage allows one to focus on what actions could be more useful.

The self-enhancing possible selves have some effects on a person too. If self-regulatory ones serve as the motives, the self-enhancing ones facilitate optimism and increase positive affect. As in earlier, this is the significant basis for increased self-evaluation and the first stage of stating behavioral goals (Strachan et al., 2016).

These two types could be seen as the subtype for the hoped-for possible self as the self-regulatory possible selves represent what motivational function possible selves execute through the agency.

Lost possible self. *Lost possible selves* are what a person once “used to wish to be”. King and Raspin (2004, p. 607) defined lost possible selves as “*representations of the self in the future,*

which might have once held the promise of positive affect, but which are no longer a part of a person's life." The main characteristics of possible self playing a significant role in understanding the property of lost possible selves are salience and elaboration. How often a person thinks of one possible self and how detailed it can be imagined is vital for explaining how the lost possible self works.

Firstly, King, & Raspin (2004) presented lost possible selves as the best possible selves which women experienced before the divorce. It states what one can imagine in the future, although it has already stayed in the past. The stated idea is that as motivation is one of the most critical drivers of a human's life, the motives which were important in the past could reveal significant aspects of life. In the study of lost possible selves, a sample of women in divorce reported data that showed a higher level of salience of lost possible self (i.e., how easy it is for one to imagine it or how often it occurs in mind) for those who had a lower level of subjective well-being (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

King & Mitchell (2015) consider lost possible selves as a potential base for meaning changing and ego development. The findings suggest that the more salient the lost possible self, the more regret a person will experience. The authors assume that lost possible selves could be linked to personality growth as long as there is just an image of lost possible self and no energy still in the presence.

We yet consider that as all the possible selves—the lost one's type as well—manifested agency the time it was present in one's life. In the longitudinal study, women who could not elaborate on their lost possible selves were less considerate about everything. Therefore, it may be that only after the agentic energy was turned to the passive side, that is when a person can let go of its past future self. So if the lost possible self still takes place in one's mind and is not very elaborated but fairly salient, this may be the indicator that such lost possible self is becoming a regret. It takes energy to live through your lost possible self over and over again; therefore, to let oneself move on, there is a necessity to think the lost possible self through and let it finally go.

King & Hicks (2007) states that the narrative of our life can be written "backward," not only considering what has already happened but what could have happened as well. Hence, lost possible selves contain the agentic energy, although not how one can see oneself being the agent in future situations. As it comes from the definition, lost possible selves represent the potential future that could have taken place in the past. Thus, it can be assumed that the most agency one can get through thinking about one's lost possible self is the understanding and formulating a new possible self, which will contribute to attaining one's goals.

Lost possible self may be one of the uncertain types of possible selves as it does not concentrate in the future, but in the future that might have occurred. Therefore, the closest thing one can get in imagining releasing this possible self is letting it go.

Shared possible self. As the definition stated, a possible self is something one can have about oneself and one's future. "Shared" in the notion indicates engaging others in the future, united inner experiences. Schindler et al. (2010) state that shared possible selves are "*from both spouses hoping to bring about or seeking to prevent similar future events or outcomes.*" (p.416). The shared possible selves are the distinct possible selves, which are interdependent (i.e., one partner can have the possible self "to get well soon" and the second partner's one is "to have a healthy partner"). The idea itself came from the study of couples where one partner was diagnosed

with cancer. The findings showed that the more shared goals a couple has, the higher levels of well-being, self-esteem, and positive affect were manifested by participants.

Wilson et al. (2014) invested in studying shared possible selves, with the results stating that the more shared possible selves the partners have at the moment a man was diagnosed with prostate cancer, the better psychological well-being was. Moreover, the authors added another condition where they divided possible selves into *other-focused selves* and *self-focused selves*. The other-focused possible selves mainly considered the partner and could co-occur to be the shared possible self (i.e., if a wife has other-focused possible self “my partner is happy” but there is no “to be happy” possible self in the partner’s list, then the possible self does not count as shared). Thus, the results stated that if the partner fears the diagnosis, the presence of other-focused possible selves in their partner’s list makes it easier for them to cope. Moreover, if the other-focused possible selves of one partner do not match the other-focused possible selves of the other one, it can cause poorer wellness.

Considering shared possible selves, it is compelling to apply the idea of agency. As it is stated in theory, the person imagining a possible self can experience the situation in the future. However, speaking about the shared possible selves, it takes two to imagine. Staying within the framework, the formula can be seen as this: the agentic energy of shared possible self can be released only on one condition, if both partners have each “side of the puzzle” in their list. Otherwise, it is the other type of possible self presented. It is essential to point out that the possible self in the definition is a component of self-concept; therefore, it mainly involves the possibilities a person sees for oneself. So, in the case of the shared possible selves, the connection is vital as one could not formulate a possible self for another person.

We propose that agentic energy in the shared possible selves manifests when both partners have matching possible selves. For instance, if one partner has possible self “being a lawyer”, and the other one has the “my partner has finished law school,” then both statements could invigorate each other. Moreover, it can be viewed as an enhancement and self-regulatory possible self where one creates positive affect and the other based on the energy of previous activate agentic energy.

Although there is little research on the type, it seems necessary to investigate not only the sample of patients with prostate cancer. Considering previous ideas, the connection between possible selves of both partners can be a meaningful indicator of relationship quality. Furthermore, expanding the concept of possible selves in the couples, the consistency of partner’s possible selves could be taken into account to study one’s relationship more individually and precisely.

Impossible self. The *impossible self* is the type of possible selves which was found in our previous empirical studies. “The impossible self is a manifestation of the significant possible self, which is influenced by rumination and neuroticism, and is correlated with higher levels of negative affect and self-accusation” (Kostenko & Grishutina, 2018, p.16). A study was conducted to investigate different aspects of the impossible self.

The principal aim of the research was to determine the correlation between constructive and non-constructive forms of reflection and possible selves. We assumed that there could be any obstacles to the attainment of hoped-for possible selves. Thus, it was considered that the quality of reflective processes, self-attitude features, and other characteristics of a person's well-being could be prerequisites for the possible selves of different kinds. The main hypotheses of the study were (1) Constructive and non-constructive forms of reflection have correlations with

characteristics of hoped-for and feared possible selves; (2) The severity of non-constructive forms of reflection (such as rumination, fantasizing, self-accusing, etc.) would negatively correlate with the parameters of possible selves such as perceived ability to influence their realization and the estimated likelihood of their implementation (Hooker, 1992; Kostenko & Grishutina, 2018).

However, the obtained results revealed that regardless of the content of possible selves, some respondents chose the hoped-for possible self of a special type. Due to evaluation of the parameters of the possible self, firstly, participants do not consider themselves able to realize their most desirable possible self. Secondly, they estimated low the objective probability of its achievement. These findings were accompanied by the severity of negative indicators, i.e., increased rumination, a high level of neuroticism and negative affect, as well as a strong tendency to self-blame.

In the theoretical context we are considering, we assume that the listed negative qualities, being salient in the personality, can affect the abilities that serve as the basis for the manifestation of the phenomenon of agency. It was found that these characteristics have an impact on the number of possible future events, which a person can imagine, as well as on the self-awareness of a person's ability to influence the situation. As already mentioned, confidence in one's own ability to attain possible self increases the likelihood and focus on its final achievement (Norman & Aron, 2003). The negative attitude towards the chosen possible self, on the contrary, restricts consciousness and will, placing them in a cage where one can experience inability and uncertainty. Research results report a positive association of rumination with depression, pessimism, neuroticism, and other negative characteristics, as well as a negative connection of rumination with the ability to solve problems successfully (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). According to Leontiev and Osin (2014), quasi-reflection and introspection (as non-constructive types of reflection) do not form the basis for positive problem solving and situations. These conclusions can be confirmed by the fact that one type (quasi-reflection) is focused on avoiding the situation, and the second (introspection / rumination) represents what was designated by J. Kuhl as "state orientation," but not "action orientation" (Kuhl, 1987). Findings like these clarify the problem of inhibited motivational energy of possible self in association with a vivid expression of negative personality indicators and the prevalent non-constructive reflexivity. Apparently, the discussed set of personal characteristics does not allow a person to enter active interaction or even actively influence the world.

This set of qualities restrains the individual's internal motivational energy, limiting one's ability to be an active subject in a situation of decision-making or behaving. Intuitively, one can comprehend that manifestations of self-blame and neuroticism can affect the self-attitude of a person, thereby indirectly influencing the experienced attitude to their ability to express their desired capabilities into life (Grishutina & Kostenko, 2019).

The proposed idea was replicated in the second study, and the attempt to create the method for examining the "impossible" tendencies toward the most hoped-for possible self was made. The impossible self clearly incarnates the ideas of the original theory as it shows the contrast between it and the hoped-for and best possible selves. As mentioned above, the formal types of possible self mostly connect with well-being, positive affect, and goal achievement. In contrast, the impossible self demonstrates correlations with rumination, neuroticism, negative affect, and self-blame.

Summary

The construct of the possible self is currently one of the leading conceptions concerning the self-concept theory. It appears to be resourceful in various ways, and the researchers tend to investigate its different aspects. However, there are several misconceptions with the original theory, which affect the divergence of views. Erikson (2007) reflected and proposed a consistent direction for future research regarding the possible self. As the possible self was defined as the link between cognitive self-evaluation and motivation, its impact on the person's behavior was laid on the basis of the conception. Therefore, the processes and mechanisms of how the cognitive representations of the fears, hopes, expectations, goals could change one's behavioral patterns are vital issues. Markus and Nurius, the authors of the original concept, as well as Erikson, emphasized on the major role of the agency phenomenon. It considers the level of how a person can decide for oneself, take responsibility, and be the active agent changing the internal and external worlds depending on the choices they make.

Following the authors' steps, we stated agency as one of the main qualities of the possible self due to its connection with the motivational potential. Considering the construct, it corresponds with one's ability to experience the possible self from within or to be able to imagine what could happen, what should be done, and what decision should be taken—how to be the agent in the future or possible situations. Through the components of self-concept (i.e., working self-concept and self-schemas), the agentic energy is created to achieve the possible self.

Several kinds of possible self were found in the literature, and that originally motivates the aim of the current article. There are few misconceptions that should be mentioned for future research. First of all, regarding the ideas of Erikson, almost every article concerning the possible self construct starts with the definition of it as a goal. Although Markus indeed defined the possible self as the “cognitive representation of the goals,” it contains different meaning. One can imagine a possible self that is not necessarily planned or has potential for the realization soon. A person can formulate possibilities of what one wants or tends to be / to experience, and there is sometimes no solid support for it. As was mentioned earlier in the article, there could be no underlying reasons for the feared possible self to be present (regarding one's ability to prevent any adverse outcomes). However, it could still be there when one is formulating their possible selves.

The main issue is that the authors address the motivational aspect of possible self, but they seem to ignore the idea of agency. As the core feature of the construct, the agency should be considered more precisely. Now it seems that the aims of existing research regarding the motivational aspect of possible self, although the explanation to the occurring outcomes avoids the proposed phenomenon.

We assume that, unifying the findings, authors should consider the main aspects of the construct stated in the original theory by Markus and Nurius. The attempt to look at what has been discovered since the first mentioning of the possible selves has been made into framework, and the agentic baseline for the diversity of conceptions was introduced (Table 1).

Table 1

Defining the types of possible selves through the lens of agentic energy

Type of possible self	The role of agency	The original view	How it can be interpreted in the terms of possible self theory
<i>Hoped-for possible self</i>	To achieve the wanted possible self as the one experience oneself as the agent in the future situation.	“Can be viewed as a cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives one can possess.” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.954)	Wanted, or hoped-for possible self contains the aspects of the future situations where a person could experience agency.
<i>Feared possible self</i>	To feel oneself as a person who can prevent certain circumstances.	“The sense of one's self in a feared or undesired state—me in prison or me unemployed—is also motivationally significant. It can provide a vivid image or conception of an end-state that must be rejected or avoided. An image of one's self in such a feared or undesired state can produce inaction or a stopping in one's tracks.” (Oyserman & Markus, 1990, p.113)	Unwanted, or feared possible self is the type, which characterizes by the lack of agentic energy to avoid the attainment of the opposite wanted possibilities.
<i>Best possible self</i>	A person does not need to imagine possible ways to reach their possible selves as the condition itself states that everything works well. Therefore, agentic energy does not need to be manifested.	“The best possible self is viewed as the “high-level life goal”; therefore, the main idea is that imagining it might energize one’s motivation toward the realization.” (King, 2001, p.800)	If the best possible self becomes more detailed through the interventions, and more self-schemas are involved in the process, the best possible self turns into a regular hoped-for possible self, thus rousing the agency

<i>Self-regulatory possible self</i>	Self-regulatory possible self is the motives driving a person to attain wanted possibility.	“To regulate behavior, the self-concept must contain not only goals or desired end states, but also strategies about how to behave in order to reach the desired end state.” (Oyserman et al., 2004, p.131)	Self-regulatory possible self is viewed as the motives which could direct the agentic energy to attain the wanted possibility.
<i>Self-enhancing possible self</i>	The self-enhancing ones facilitate optimism and increase positive affect. As in earlier, this is the significant basis for increased self-evaluation and the first stage of stating behavioral goals.	“Self-enhancing possible selves promote positive feelings and maintain a sense of optimism and hope for the future without evoking behavioral strategies.” (Oyserman et al., 2004, p.132)	Self-enhancing possible self appears as the type to increase the positive affect and optimistic approach towards oneself.
<i>Lost possible self</i>	Lost possible self represents a person’s motives in the past. If one hangs on the past possible self, a lot of energy is directed to experiencing it, so the agentic energy wastes on the lost possibilities.	“Representations of the self in the future, which might have once held the promise of positive affect, but which are no longer a part of a person’s life.” (King & Raspin, 2004, p.607)	Representations of oneself in the future that no longer appeal to one’s life and, depending on the state of salience, could take over the agency from the current possible selves a person has.
<i>Shared possible self</i>	The agency is activated if the partners have matching possible selves.	“Shared selves” were those where both spouses named a similar possible self that needed to be accomplished interdependently, that is, if one spouse’s goal was accomplished, then the other spouse’s goal was accomplished.” (Schindler et al., 2010, p.418)	The shared possible selves are the distinct possible selves, which are interdependent and manifest the agentic energy.

Impossible self

The agentic energy of the wanted possible self is suppressed due to the influence of various negative phenomena.

“The impossible self is a manifestation of the significant possible self, which is influenced by rumination and neuroticism, and is correlated with higher levels of negative affect and self-accusation.” (Kostenko & Grishutina, 2018, p.16)

The impossible self manifests as a significant possible self where the agency is suppressed by nonconstructive conscious phenomena.

The proposed connection between the possible self and self is another reason why the more precise attitude towards the construct is necessarily (Erikson, 2007). While simplifying and omitting the significant parts of the possible self, authors make the link incomprehensible, thus, excluding the meaning-making function.

Hence the main conclusion is that there are particular features of the possible selves that emphasize its valid functions, and frequently researchers tend to ignore some of them, thereby not revealing the inherent potential of the construct. The agency phenomenon plays a crucial role in connecting the possible self and the self as namely the ability to feel oneself as the agent in the situation allowing a person to experience authentic feelings that can guide their behavior. Moreover, taking into account the agentic potential reveals the processes behind the various types of possible selves.

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