The Study of the Impact of Possible Selves on the Goal-Setting Skills of Incarcerated Male Students with Learning Disabilities

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THE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF POSSIBLE SELVES ON THE GOAL SETTING SKILLS OF INCARCERATED MALE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

SUSIE M. MARTIN
Fall, 1996

MASTERS THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of Grand Valley State University in fulfillment of the Masters of Education
ABSTRACT

Possible selves is a theory. It involves strategies in helping students view themselves in a more desirable future state. It is focused on the self in three basic domains; Hoped for Selves, Expected Selves and Feared Selves. Possible Selves leads an individual into goal setting skills.

Student inmates with learning disabilities do not have well developed plans for their futures upon release from prison. As a result, such students often return to prison for illegal acts.

A solution to the problem is to implement a goal setting skills program that is based on the students' view of positive possible selves in the future.
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Chapter 1

The Problem

Student inmates with learning disabilities do not have well developed plans for their futures upon release from prison. As a result, such students often return to prison for illegal acts. For example, consider one particular student inmate named J. T. Before his parole, J. T. never said anything positive about plans for his future upon returning to free society. He was out for only six months and returned for a parole violation. I asked him about the nature of his violation. He said, "I was walking down the street at 3 a.m. while intoxicated, and a policeman stopped me and asked for some identification. Checking my identification with police headquarters the policeman found that I was on parole and shouldn't have been intoxicated and on the street at that time. He immediately took me to the county jail. The next thing I remember, I was standing in front of a circuit court judge." Unfortunately, stories like J. T.'s are not rare.

Importance of Study

The importance of this study is to show a link between thought and action. There is a reciprocal relation between criminal behavior and the visions individuals have for themselves (Oyserman & Markus, 1988). Too many young incarcerated men return to prison because they do not set positive, realistic, short and long-term goals for their futures. As a result, many return to prison (Oyserman & Markus, 1988).

Recidivism has a great social and financial cost. Student inmates like J. T. who return to incarceration are setting a bad example in society. When reincarcerated.
a student in essence is saying society has failed and that preventative measures were not available or not effective. Moreover, when a student is reincarcerated human cost soars because a great percentage of tax payers dollars are spent on their care and well being. For the fiscal year 1995-96 it cost $25,000 per year or $64.86 a day to detain a person in prison in the state of Michigan (Michigan Department of Corrections, Public Information and Communications, 1993). This is money that could have been productively spent in other ways.

**History of Problem**

Why do inmates with learning disabilities not have well developed plans for their futures? One reason is these men's goal setting skills are not developed or there is an error in their developed plans. A second reason is most inmates with learning disabilities have very underdeveloped or unrealistic images of who they can become (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For example, some of these students see themselves becoming rich. However, when asked how they are going to become rich, they have an inability to devise a realistic method for attaining their riches. In short, they have no strategies for achieving their vision for the future. A third reason is criminal behavior depends upon balancing a positive vision for the future and a feared vision of the future (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

In many situations the positive vision and the feared vision of future possible selves get dampened by the interaction between the social environment and personal expectations. This is why **goal setting** skills are so important. It is equally important
to set alternative goals so that the feared vision is not distorted by overwhelming negativity.

Individuals with positive expected selves, but without feared selves in the same domains (e.g., those who lack balance in their possible selves) may also drift into delinquent or criminal activities (Oyserman, 1987).

The fourth reason is, offenders often describe their relationships with their fathers as more important than with their mothers (Yates, Bentler & Crego, 1983). A final reason is poor educational success. Often student inmates with learning disabilities have had poor educational opportunities, poor family lives, poor positive role models, and a sense of hopelessness.

In viewing these students background information, collectively, many of their homes are lacking educational materials or access to supplemental educational resources. Either the parent(s) does not have the finances to afford supplemental educational resources or they are lacking education themselves.

Because of their poor family lives (i.e., a single, unemployed parent: two-parent household with alcohol and/or drug abuse) these students do not see positive role models. The only positive role models they see are the ones on television and even that is not encouraged by their family.

Most often these students develop a sense of hopelessness. They acquire a feeling of "It is no use", or "Why should I try." Many begin to form delinquent or criminal behavior patterns.
Chapter 2

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the research on how to help students to develop positive images of who they can become. This information will then be combined to form a program to be studied with incarcerated male inmates with learning disabilities.

Research reiterates the fact that positive goal setting is a motivational tool required for an individual to function successfully and live a crime-free lifestyle. One way to influence positive goal setting is to have students examine who they could be or their possible self.

Possible selves are the future oriented components of the self concept, the components essential for putting the self into action. They are the selves we could become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are conceptualized as the elements of the self-concept that represent the individual's goals, motives, fears, and anxieties. They give precise self-relevant form, meaning, and direction to these dynamics. They are specific and vivid senses, images, or conceptions of one's self in future states and circumstances are viewed as essential elements in the motivational and goal-setting process. Choosing among competing actions and pursuing the chosen action depends on the nature of one's set of possible selves (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Possible selves can thus be viewed as motivational resources that provide individuals with some control over their own
behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Gollwitzer, 1989; Kuhl & Beckman, 1985).

Until quite recently, theory and research on the function of the self-concept focused primarily on those structures of the self that represented one's past and current actions. These self defining structures have been called self schemas (Markus, 1977), salient identities (Stryker, 1980) or core conceptions (Gergen, 1968).

Today, researchers are beginning to focus on those structures of the self that represent one's future. This new focus has great potential because once individuals began see their futures, their entire self-concept takes on new meaning. They develop the attitude, "I can do it" and "I will do it." They seek out goals and strategies. The past or current actions no longer shape these individuals' futures.

When a possible self is created, the cognitive and affective representations of the task confronting the person and the representation of the self become integrated into one representation of the person accomplishing the task. (Markus, Cross, Wurf & Ruvolo, 1985). It is this sense of one's self in a desired end state (e.g., me with a good job) that motivates an individual. The sense of one's self in a feared or undesired state (e.g., me in prison) is also motivationally significant. It can provide an image or a conception of an end state that must be rejected or avoided.

Goal setting training should help the student remain focused and not drift into their social environment. They will not allow themselves to be acted upon by the events, demands, and constraints of the moment but will carry through their own plans or goals. According to Matza (1969) such "drifting" makes an individual
highly susceptible to delinquent or criminal involvement, not because it is planned but simply because as these opportunities arise, the individual can find no compelling reasons to resist them.

Oyserman, Gant, Ager and Joel (1995) conducted a study to determine if undergraduate black and white college students differed in their views of possible selves and strategies to attain them. This study also looked at differences in possible selves according to gender.

This study involved 118 undergraduate psychology students. Of these students, 63 were white, 42 were black, and 16 from other diverse groups. These participants completed an anonymous questionnaire on self and identity as part of their course requirements. Only data from the 105 white and black students were retained for analysis.

Students filled out anonymous questionnaires containing items on possible selves and strategies to attain them. Students generated four or more possible selves. In response to the questions about their expectations for the coming year, (i.e., "Next year I expect to be...", Next year I want to avoid being..."). Students responses were coded into one of five categories: achievement related (school or job), interpersonal relationships, intrapsychic traits or personality characteristics, attainment of material goods, and negative or non-normative self-descriptors.

After generating possible selves, students were asked to check off the selves on which they were currently actively working on and to write down what they were
doing to become like selves they were trying to avoid. The number of strategies or activities thus described were coded by simply counting the number of strategies or activities listed. Again, following the focus of the study, only strategies in the achievement domain were analyzed. Coding was again used as a strategy in analyzing responses.

Although they did not differ in their extent of balance in possible selves, black and white undergraduates did differ in the number of balanced possible selves that were in the achievement domain of school and/or work. Men and women did not differ significantly in regard to balance in possible selves.

Secondly, in two studies by Cross and Markus (1994), college students were classified as either schematic or aschematic. The purpose of study one was to determine if college students with schema (strategies) or aschematic (without strategies), were good problem solvers. Students were classified as either schematic for being good problem solvers (i.e., they believed they were good problem solvers and this ability was very important to their self evaluation) or aschematic for this ability (i.e., they believed they had moderate ability as a problem solver and this ability was of moderate to low importance to their self evaluation). In study one, schematic and aschematic students performed equally well in an initial problem solving test; however, aschematic students did not enjoy the task and had negative possible selves related to logical ability active in working memory. In study two, aschematic students maintained competent performance on a problem solving test.
only when given feedback on an earlier test. The results point to the importance of the
self concept in the development and maintenance of competence.

In another study, Inglehart and Marita (1987) stated that possible selves are
concrete images of what people think they might become, what they would like to
become, and what they are afraid of becoming in the future. The purpose of the study
was to investigate the influence of long-term, self-relevant goals (possible selves) on
subjective well-being after achieving these goals. It was hypothesized that the
satisfaction with achieving the possible self will be higher the more the person has
focused on this possible self and the more emotionally involved the person has been
with the possible self in the past. The first hypothesis was tested in a 10 year panel
study of 99 medical doctors that investigated the influence of long-term, self-relevant
goals (possible selves) on subjective well being after achieving these goals. The
results provided support that the degree to which students had focused on becoming a
physician in their first year of medical school significantly predicted satisfaction with
medicine as a career after achieving this possible self 10 years later.

Oyserman and Markus (1990), conducted a study examining the relationship
between possible selves and the severity of delinquency. Youths who vary in the
severity of their delinquent behavior can be distinguished by the configuration of their
possible selves, with the most delinquent youth displaying the least balance between
their expected and feared possible selves. This study involved 238 youths, ages 13-
16, who varied in degrees of delinquency. They were asked to describe their possible selves.

The non-delinquent youths were more likely to display balance between their expectations and fears, unlike the most delinquent youth. In contrast, a conventional measure of self esteem, which indicates how people feel about themselves currently, did not predict degree of delinquency.

These researchers used interviews and questionnaires in their procedural methods. In the questionnaire students were asked open-ended, self-concept measures. That is, they were to indicate their hoped for selves, expected selves and feared selves. The sets of expected and hoped for selves were each categorized into the following: (a) positive intrapersonal selves; (b) positive interpersonal selves; (c) jobs, school or school related extracurricular activities; (e) material goods; and (f) any negative selves. Feared selves were categorized into the following: (a) negative interpersonal selves; (b) poverty; (c) do poorly in school or extracurricular activities; and (d) crime.

Oyserman and Markus found the nondelinquent youths were more likely to display balance between their expectations and fears.

**Summary of Findings**

Research has illustrated multiple elements of the self-system that influence achievement and performance. For example students who have identified themselves as "logical and analytical" will not only believe they are capable in that domain, but
will also present themselves to others as logical and analytical. They will seek out opportunities that allow them to demonstrate this characteristic and they will construct possible selves around the use of that ability. A growing body of research is demonstrating the importance of the self-system in competent performance. Future research directed toward uncovering the mechanisms and processes involved in the relationship between the self concept and goal achievement. It is necessary to fully comprehend individuals' pursuit of competence.
Chapter 3

Introduction

Student inmates with learning disabilities do not have well developed plans for their futures upon release from prison. As a result, such students often return to prison for illegal acts.

One solution to this problem is to help incarcerated male students with learning disabilities develop goal setting skills by using a possible selves strategy. This solution was modeled in the study done by Oyserman and Markus (1990).

Methods

Subjects and Setting

Fourteen, young, judacated male students, participated in the study. They were learning disabled and had histories of receiving special education services in middle and high school. They also have histories of being in trouble with the law at very young ages. Presently, these students are in a correctional facility in the state of Michigan. They all are serving short sentences. These students are receiving educational services in a secondary departmentalized resource classroom.

Procedures

The Possible Selves Strategy

The students were first asked if they wanted to participate in goal setting training. The teacher explained to the students how this training would help them make educational, career or personal plans for their futures. The teacher further
explained the likelihood of following through on plans is greater once they are written as goals. Along with goals, the student is also shown how to write the steps involved (schema). The teacher next, explains how the use of the Possible Selves Interview Questionnaire is used as stimuli in writing goals.

Students were given the Possible Selves Interview Questionnaire. Three domains were looked at in the questionnnaire. They were as follow: Hoped For Selves, Expected Selves and Feared Selves. A copy of this questionnaire is contained in Appendix A.

During the interview, the teacher and students brainstorm about how they viewed themselves in the future. The teacher directs students' attention to the questionnaire. Students read, discuss and ask questions. The teacher directs and give feedback when necessary.

The Possible Selves Interview Questionnaire was comprised of 15 questions. Questions 1 and 2, the students learn to differentiate between learner and student. On questions 3-10, the concepts of Hope, Expectation, and Feared beliefs are explained. Students are to provide a written example of each. On questions 11-13, students brainstormed information about what they will be in 10 years. Question 14 dealt with things they wish to accomplish throughout life. Question 15 was optional but students were encouraged to discuss it. The question was: What would you want to be said in your eulogy by: (a) a family member, (b) a close friend and (c) a co-worker?
Measures and Procedures

The Student Survey

All 14 participating students were given the Student Survey. Students completed the survey with the aide of the teacher. It was given as a pretest and posttest. Students were told there were no passing or failing scores. Students were told to circle the number which shows how much they agree or disagree with the statement. All statements dealt with the student as a person and as a learner. The number ranged from (1) Highly Agree, to (7) Highly Disagree. A copy of this survey is contained in Appendix B.

Based on their responses, the students were divided into two groups of seven. Group one students received goal setting training. Using the Goal Setting Action Form (see Appendix C). Students in group one set 1 to 5 year goals.

Results

Among the many responses from the Possible Selves Interview were "I view myself as having the GED completed", "I view myself as owning my own business". and "I view myself as a free man."

There were 135 Highly Agree responses out of 280 total group's statements. Group one students and their responses were used as the sample group. They showed 70 Agreed responses out of 140 total questions asked.

Most responses were in the survey were: as a learner, I hope to achieve the GED and as a person I hope to achieve something good out of life. Most students
feared never achieving the GED or not comprehending school learning. As a person, most feared never making it in the real world. As a learner, most expected to become a better student. As a person, most expected to become successful in life. On the back of the questionnaire students circled the **Hoped for Self, Expected Self and Feared Self** that best fit their profile.

Students were amazed at how **goals** could be written with a rationale, action plan (schema), deadlines, projected results, obstacles/constraints and costs (dollars, personnel) or personal time. Students received another **Goal Action Form** to write an alternative goal.

When **Goal Setting Forms** (see Appendix C) were completed, the teacher will readminister the **Student Survey** as a posttest to all 14 students. One might predict there will be a 100 percent positive response from students that participated in the **Goal Setting Training** when compared to their **pretests** responses. Students who did not participate in the **Goal Setting Training** will not respond any differently than on the pretest. Students who participated in the training will work harder at achieving their **goals** and are less likely to return to the **Michigan Department of Corrections** as prisoners.

**Conclusion**

Students felt more accountable for setting and achieving **goals** they never thought possible. They viewed **Possible Selves** as unique. It gave them a new way of
seeing themselves. Upon completion of the 5.5 hours of Goal Setting Training, students will receive a certificate of achievement which will count as part of their prerelease fulfillments to be acknowledged by the parole board.
REFERENCES


OTHER REFERENCES


Heatherton, Todd F. anc Joel, L. (1994). Can personality change?

Washington, D. C.


APPENDIX A
POSSIBLE SELVES INTERVIEW

Directions: Read and carefully discuss each statement with the student completing the questionnaire. Define and clarify the terms learner and person as necessary. Make notes on the interview form which capture, as close as possible, the student's word for word response to each question. Number each response to each question, e.g., Question 1 written next to Response #1.

1. What statements best Describe you as a learner?
2. What statements best Describe you as a person?

Explain to the student the concepts of Hope, Expectation, & Feared beliefs. Provide a personal example of a Hope, Expectation, and Feared possible self.

3. What do you Hope to achieve as a learner?
4. What do you Hope to achieve as a person?
5. What do you Expect to achieve as a learner?
6. What do you Expect to achieve as a person?
7. What do you Fear as a learner?
8. What do you Fear as a person?
9. What statements will best Describe you as a learner 10 years from now?
10. What statements will best Describe you as a person 10 years from now?

Let's talk about your longer range future beyond the 10-year time frame.

11. What do you Hope to be in the long-term future?
12. What do you Expect to be in the long-term future?
13. What do you Fear being in the long-term future?
14. What are some of the things you wish to accomplish during your life?
15. (OPTIONAL QUESTION) What would you want to be said in your eulogy by:
   a) a family member
   b) a close friend
   c) a co-worker?
Hoped-for Selves

- "me as a famous business person"
- "me as a professional athlete"
- "me as a loving parent"

Expected Selves

- "me as a high school graduate"
- "me as a scholarship athlete"
- "me as a successful student"

Feared Selves

- "me as a poor person"
- "me as a lonely person"
- "me as an unhealthy person"
APPENDIX B
**STUDENT SURVEY**

Name ______________________ Date __________

Directions: Circle the number which shows how much you agree or disagree with the statement. There is no passing or failure score so don't be worried about high or low point totals.

1. As an person, I work as hard as I can.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

2. I can grow and improve as a learner.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

3. Others control the level of academic success I experience.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

4. As an person, I have a high level of confidence in my ability.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

5. I am a motivated learner.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

6. If I apply myself, I can achieve almost anything academically.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

7. I can grow and improve as a person.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

8. I can reach my academic goals through my own efforts.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree

9. As a learner, I have a high level of confidence in my ability.
   - Highly Agree
   - Highly Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - Highly Disagree
10. I am a motivated person.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

11. There is much I can learn about how to be a better learner.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

12. If I apply myself, I can achieve almost anything outside of school.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

13. As a learner, I work as hard as I can.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

14. I can reach my personal goals in life through my own efforts.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

15. I determine how I perform academically.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

16. Others usually determine how much time I spend on academics.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

17. I control the level of academic success I experience.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

18. My academic performance is mainly based upon me wanting to please others.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

19. I am mainly driven by myself rather than others to achieve academic success.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree

20. Without outside influence and structure, my academic performance would decrease.
Highly Agree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Highly Agree
What Is A Goal?
Who Sets Goals and How Do They Agree?
WHY SET GOALS?

Goals are an essential part of successfully conducting business.

Well-defined goals enable choice, design and implementation of important business activities (objectives) necessary to achieve overall desired results (missions).

Goals:
• Establish DIRECTION for on-going activities.
• Identify EXPECTED results.
• Improve TEAMWORK through a common sense of PURPOSE.
• Heighten performance levels by setting TARGETS to be achieved.

Goals provide the motivation and direction necessary for growth and success in important areas of almost every business. For example:

• If you or your company never sets goals for direction, how will your organization know where it is headed?

• If no goals exist for progress, how does the organization know where it is?

AND

• If there are no goals for achievement, how will the organization know when it has arrived?
Once a review is finished and there is reasonable assurance that all (or most) of the necessary goal-oriented details exist, then the Goal Action Form can be completed. It is useful because it documents the action plan for goal achievement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL:</th>
<th>RATIONALE FOR THIS GOAL:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACTION PLAN: (Steps/Procedures/Assignments)</td>
<td>DEADLINES:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>PROJECTED RESULTS (Success Indicators):</td>
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<td>□ Immediate:</td>
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<td>□ Long Term:</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBSTACLES/CONSTRAINTS:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>COST (Dollars, Personnel Time):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSON RESPONSIBLE:</td>
<td>COMPLETION DATE:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ED 695 DATA FORM

ME: Susie M. Martin

JOR: (Choose only 1)

___ Ed Tech ___ Ed Leadership ___ Sec/Adult
___ Elem Ed ___ G/T Ed ___ Early Child
___ Elem LD ___ Sec LD ___ SpEd PPI
___ Read/Lang Arts

JE: A Study of the IMPACT OF POSSIBLE SELVES ON the GOAL SETTING SKILLS INCARCERATED male students with LEARNING DISABILITIES

ER TYPE: (Choose only 1) SEM/yr COMPLETED: ____________

___ Project
___ Thesis

ADVISOR'S SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL

Descriptors from the Psychlit Data Base (1995) computer system to describe content of Thesis.

1. Self-Schemas, Possible Selves, and Competent Performance.
2. Possible Selves on Academic Achievement
3. The Self-Concept: A Social-Cognitive Update
4. Possible Selves in balance
5. Possible Selves and delinquency
6. Possible Selves and Satisfaction with Career
7. 
8. 
9. 
10. 

TRACT: Two to three sentences that describe the contents of your paper.

My Thesis describes the concept of possible selves (a cognitive approach and its impact on an individual's ability to set positive goals. Implications for education provides a strategy for educators in their teaching the youth adult with learning disabilities.

Note: This page must be included as the last page in your master's paper.

rev 5/94

04/94