

Adolescent Possible Selves Predict Planning and Educational Attainment Seven Years Later

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Introduction

Adolescence is a time of exploration and future planning, when young people envision their futures and set goals based on those expectations. The theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) suggests that these selves (hopes and expectations for the future) act as motivators and regulators of planning and behavior, thus influencing future outcomes. Research indicates that adolescents' possible selves influence achievement in early adulthood. Adolescent behavior partially mediates this relationship, suggesting other factors, such as planning, may also be involved.

While we know conceptually that having a goal or possible self and planning to achieve that goal are distinct, many researchers talk about these concepts interchangeably (e.g., Little, 2006), implying that while they are distinct, they happen together. However, one empirical study of planning and possible selves (Gonzales, Burgess, & Mobilio, 2001) found that was not the case. Many individuals have goals, even elaborate ones, and never take the time to plan, resulting in a lack of goal accomplishment. It would therefore make sense that planning would mediate the relations between expectation and achievement. While many literatures have indicated the importance of expectations for future accomplishments, few studies have explored the relations between adolescent possible selves and planning, and to our knowledge no studies of these relations have been conducted over multiple years. This study examined the influence of adolescents' possible selves on their planning and educational attainment in early adulthood.

Hypotheses:

- 1) Adolescent possible selves (hoped for and expected future occupation; expected educational attainment) will be positively associated with adolescent planning.
- 2) Adolescent possible selves will be positively associated with educational attainment as a young adult.
- 3) Adolescent planning will mediate the relationship between adolescent possible selves and educational attainment as a young adult.

Method

Participants: Data came from a longitudinal study of adolescent development conducted in rural Pennsylvania. The population was primarily white and lower to middle class. This study included 317 participants (175 females, 142 males) assessed at two time points: in grades 9-11 (T1; M age = 14.98, SD = .85) and seven years later, when participants were in their early to mid twenties (T2; M age= 23.11, SD = .94).

Measures:

Hoped for future occupation (T1): "What career do you most *hope* to have when you are finished with school?" (NORC coding for occupational prestige, range = 0 to 100)

Expected future occupation (T1): "What career do you most *expect* to have when you are finished with school?" (NORC coding for occupational prestige, range = 0 to 100)

Expected educational attainment (T1): "How much education do you expect to complete?" (range = 1 "some high school" to 7 "professional degree")

Planning (T2): 11 items (i.e., "I like to plan things in advance"; $\alpha = .80$; range = 1 "never" to 7 "always")

ADULT educational attainment (T2): "How much education have you completed?" (range = 1 "some high school" to 7 "professional degree")

Control Variables: Mother's education (range = 1 "some high school" to 7 "professional degree"); grades in school (GPA); age; sex (female=1, male=2)

Data Analysis: Using multiple regression analyses, relations among possible selves, planning, and educational attainment were tested. In the first set of analyses, each possible self (hoped for occupation, expected occupation, or expected educational attainment) at T1 was entered separately along with controls (age, sex, GPA, mother's education) to predict planning at T2.

Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. At the bivariate level, young adult educational attainment was positively correlated with planning, hoped for occupation, expected occupation, and expected educational attainment, as well as mother's education and grades in school. Planning was positively correlated with hoped for occupation, expected educational attainment, and GPA, but not expected occupation. There were no gender differences in any of the study variables.

The first set of regression analyses predicted planning in young adulthood. Occupational selves and expected educational attainment were significant positive predictors of planning in separate models, with age, sex, mother's education, and GPA controlled (hoped for occupation $R^2 = .07$, $p < .01$; expected occupation $R^2 = .06$, $p < .01$; expected education $R^2 = .05$, $p < .01$).

The second set of regression analyses predicted young adult educational attainment (Table 2). Adolescents' hoped for occupational and expected educational selves positively contributed to separate models after controls and planning were included ($R^2 = .41$, $p < .001$). Planning also made a positive significant contribution, but contrary to the hypothesis, did not appear to mediate the relation between adolescent possible selves and educational attainment in young adulthood (Figure 1). For completeness, a regression was also conducted in which expected occupation and planning predicted educational attainment. Results were similar to those for hoped for occupation and expected education.

Because there was no evidence of mediation, a Sobel test was not conducted.

Table 1. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

Variables	Mother's Education	Age	GPA	Hoped For Occupation	Expected Occupation	Expected Education	Planning	Educational Attainment
Age	-.01	-						
Grades	.11*	-.04	-					
Hoped For Occupation	.00	-.06	.17*	-				
Expected Occupation	.04	-.10*	.18*	.56*	-			
Expected Education	.21*	-.10*	.32*	.41*	.32*	-		
Planning (T2)	.01	-.09	.20*	.15*	.09	.12*	-	
Young Adult Educational Attainment (T2)	.22*	-.09	.38*	.23*	.22*	.58*	.24*	-
Mean (SD)	2.60 (1.55)	15.02 (.91)	7.62 (1.70)	53.35 (16.77)	54.29 (18.00)	4.02 (1.45)	4.28 (.77)	4.36 (1.50)

* $p < .001$

Discussion

- Results suggest that adolescents' possible selves and planning have an impact on adult outcomes.
- Possible selves are related to but distinct from planning. This is expected based on both the planning and future cognition literatures, which suggest that while individuals usually have future goals and then plan to achieve those goals, it is possible to have goals without taking necessary steps, such as planning, to achieve them.
- Planning does not mediate the relations between possible selves and attainment. This suggests that while planning is important, it does not explain the relations between possible selves and attainment. Possible selves appear to have effects that are independent of individual propensities for planning.
- There is a need for more research that explores the link between planning and future cognitions. Studies that assess specific possible selves and adolescents' planning related to those particular selves would seem especially beneficial.
- It could be the case that adolescents who have elaborate possible selves also are more likely to plan, leading to an associated relation between the two without mediation. Future studies should explore the co-morbidity of these factors.

Table 2. Regressions Predicting Young Adult Educational Attainment from Possible Selves in Adolescence

Step	Hoped for Occupation		Expected Occupation		Expected Education	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Mother's education	.16**	.16**	.16**	.16**	.09*	.10*
Age	-.08	-.07	-.08	-.07	-.05	-.04
Gender	.05	.05	.06	.07	.03	.03
GPA	.35**	.32**	.36**	.33**	.19**	.17**
Adolescent Possible Self	.18**	.16*	.17**	.16**	.48*	.47**
Planning (T2)		.16**		.16**		.14**
R ²	.22**	.24**	.24**	.26**	.37**	.39**
Δ R ²		.02**		.02**		.02**
Δ F		9.74**		10.38**		9.93**

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 1. Possible Selves and Planning Predict Educational Attainment

