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Журнал Высшей школы экономики

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

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Многообразие возможных Я: роль агентности и эмпирическая валидность

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Abstract

The development of possible selves theory has led to the introduction of new types of the construct. However, the types are inconsistent with the original definition by Markus & Nurius (1986). Researchers 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 primary aim of this paper is to analyze existing types of possible selves through the lens of agentic energy, and to unify the understanding of the construct. We consider the most frequent types of possible self, such as hoped-for possible self, feared possible self, best possible self, self-regulatory and self-enhancing possible selves, 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

Резюме

Развитие концепции возможного Я привело к появлению новых определений конструкта и его разновидностей. Однако эти разновидности возможного Я далеко не всегда соответствуют первоначальному определению Х. Маркус и П. Ньюриус (1986). Авторы не учитывают проявлений агентности, играющей решающую роль в мотивационной функции возможного Я. Тем временем в литературе появляются несистематизированные концепции различных типов возможного Я. Основная цель статьи — проанализировать существующие типы возможных Я сквозь призму феномена агентности и унифицировать данные о конструкте. В статье рассматриваются наиболее изученные типы возможного Я — желаемое возможное Я, избегаемое возможное Я, наилучшее возможное Я, саморегуляционное и самосовершенствующее возможное Я, потерянное возможное Я, совместное возможное Я, а также невозможное Я. Обобщение данных в этой области необходимо для будущего развития

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misconceptions that come from a liberal interpretation of the originally strong construct. We propose a solution in the form of a traditional literature review with the result of definitions reconsidered depending on the role of agentic energy in possible self producing. We conclude that taking into account the agentic potential reveals the processes behind the various types of possible selves. The expected outcome of the framework is to set a unified direction for further discoveries.

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

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теории, поскольку уже сейчас существуют некоторые заблуждения, возникающие по причине свободной интерпретации изначально вполне конкретного конструкта. В ответ на возникающую путаницу определений предлагается решение в виде систематического литературного обзора с пересмотренными определениями типов возможного Я в зависимости от роли агентности, которая проявляет себя в воплощении того или иного возможного Я. Делается вывод о том, что учет потенциала агентности раскрывает процессы, стоящие за различными типами возможных Я.

Ключевые слова: возможное Я, агентность, Я-концепция, невозможное Я, личность, образ Я, идентичность, самоотношение, Я-схема, избегаемое Я, развитие личности.

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Possible Self is a substantial construct that has been misunderstood by most researchers. As introduced in Markus & Nurius (1986), the construct constitutes a link between self-evaluation and personal motivation. The phenomenon of agency, which plays a unique role in formulating possible selves, is emphasized. However, the role of the agency is noticeably ignored in the subsequent development of the theory by other researchers. 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 seems

to separate a person (or an agent) and one's possibilities. Agentic energy endows the construct with explanatory power as it impacts 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 possible self is frequently referred to as a descriptive phenomenon. With its high potential, the construct usually remains underestimated due to a relative deviation from the original concept (Erikson, 2007). This paper aims to consider major issues that contribute to the problem of diverging conceptions and to provide a specified theoretical frame based on the essential attributes of the possible self concept. A traditional literature review is used as the primary method since it solves the key tasks set. We aim to analyze the core findings considering the possible self construct and propose new insights about the way it is formulated and how it functions. The gap between the original concept by Markus & Nurius (1986) and the current ideas of various researchers is the primary interest. The results of our work are concluded in the revision of some parts of the theory and presented in a table (Table 1).

Possible selves, as affirmed in the original theory by Markus & 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, 1986, p. 954).

The explanatory potential of possible selves approximately proposes that the content of possibilities determines a person's behavior. The motivational function of possible selves is one of the primary features studied by researchers (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Hoyle & Sowards, 1993; Cross & Markus, 1994; Higgins, 1996; Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2006; Hoyle & vanDellen, 2008; Vignoles et al., 2008; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010; Bak, 2015; Oyserman et al., 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 the explanatory quality of possible self 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 a narrative structure since during formulating it includes the representations of behavior, causes, reactions, and finally, the event. Therefore, it creates a story where a person is the main character. Markus suggests one of the functions of possible selves to be the creation of a new context through 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 a 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 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 develop the understanding of agency's role, so it appears to be one of the main features of possible self.

The original theory of possible self regards agency as the ability to act as an independent autonomic agent being the central element of a situation and an event, whose main quality focuses on the ability to make decisions and to be creative about how to behave in order to reach the wanted aim (Bandura, 1982; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Markus & 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 linked through interpersonal connections and mainly takes place in the context of human interaction. Despite various motives, the goal of expressing agency stays the same as it is a directed ability to impact the development of actions in different situations by making decisions.

The theory of agency by Harre suggests 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, agency is the capability to act based on reflection, to set 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 suggest 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: 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 possible self. However, the conceptualization regards possible selves and the agency phenomenon as distinct elements in the model that can function independently. Nevertheless, the concept represents the closest understanding of agentic energy within the possible self function (Frazier et al., 2021).

Following the original theory, 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 located. Therefore, the possibility appears to be "experienced from inside" (Erikson, 2007, p. 349) as one makes intentional and deliberate decisions about one's attitude toward 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 appeared in the literature.

Here we aim to study the most frequent ones, i.e., *hoped-for possible self* (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Carver et al., 1994; Cross & Markus, 1994; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010; Strauss et al., 2012), *feared possible self* (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010; Pierce et al., 2014; Aardema & Wong, 2020), *best possible self* (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Harrist et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2010; Layous et al., 2013; Renner et al., 2014; Liao et al., 2016; Loveday et al., 2018; Altintas 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., 2017), *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 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 possible self is presented with misconceptions. Thus, Erikson claims that there is a risk of two types of misconceptions—too broad or too narrow an understanding of the construct. First of all, possible selves are not goals, hopes, or fears, as it can continually be found in papers. Hopes and fears can be the basis of possible self or its product, although still they are not equal. Secondly, the too narrow approach is to present the construct as expectations one can possess (Erikson, 2007). Possible selves are not just the points in a scheduled plan. One can control their actions in regard to avoiding something they do not want, although the feared possible self nevertheless may be present.

The possible self definition given by Markus & 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*” (Ibid., 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 already been mentioned, possible self is the component of self-concept that appears to have a valuable motivational potential as the construct itself was firstly 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 used in further works, feared). These types represent two variants of emotional attitude toward the possible selves—either one is fascinated by one’s 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 possible self.

Self-schemas are considered to be the construction of one's past experiences, including representations of the abilities and skills useful for a current activity. Hence, the availability of specific self-schemas can be a prerequisite of possible self realization. As for *working self-concept*, Markus & Nurius operationalize: "*it can be viewed as a continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge*" (Ibid., p. 957). There could be various self-conceptions switching due to the current situation.

So, the content of the working self-concept and possible selves enrich each other. 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 determined by Markus & Nurius, and then extended by Erikson (2007), *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 expectations and hence motives for future behavior. The case brings up the phenomenon of agency that plays a significant role in directing one's behavior.

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

The original article by Markus & Ruvolo (Ruvolo & Markus, 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 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 & Ruvolo consider the obtained data via the construct of 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, positive possible selves become available. Moreover, thinking about 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 (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992).

Hoped-for possible self. The potential subject's activity is the 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 examples from the original text by Markus & Nurius, *the 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, there are valuable skills for possible self and the concept of oneself experiencing the successful academic performance. A number of researchers believe that the imagined process of achieving a possible self is associated with the most efficacy. Hence, the most active, agentic state a person experiences when formulating the hoped-for possible self.

The mentioned earlier article by Markus & Nurius (1986) reveals aspects of how the hoped-for possible self could represent the motive a person has. Just thinking about a goal seems not enough, as there is a necessity for one to formulate a detailed desired state and strategies for achieving it. Therefore, the agentic state is one where a person has the required self-schemas, i.e., understands the abilities one has to perform possible self and has the accessible knowledge about one's working self-concept essential for its realization. Cross & Markus (1994) support this assumption that by formulating hoped-for possible selves, one reaches the emotional and psychological readiness to perform specific activities considered to be correlated with the most agentic state. Moreover, if one does not have an accessible knowledge about one's abilities and cannot figure the sequence of actions, the negative (see *Unwanted or Feared Possible Self*), possible selves appear to be more available, which can affect the final performance.

Thus, the formulation of hoped-for possible self is connected with the listed mechanisms, and merely through them, a person can experience the phenomenon of agency.

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 at reaching 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 behavior, the processes underlying the consequences of feared possible selves can impact it as well. The authors studied the connection between possible selves and delinquency among youth. They prove that the presence of the feared possible self concerning the delinquent behavior might be an indicator that one “...*may lack the agentic qualities that would aid in the attainment of opposing, positive possible selves*” (Pierce et al., 2015, p. 19). Therefore, they proposed that feared possible selves might occur when one cannot feel oneself as the agent in a future situation, so the lack of agency is what follows with any feared possible self.

The study results claimed that only those 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 & 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 a balance between the expected or hoped-for possible selves and feared possible selves to be a 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 the 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 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 the 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 physically better. However, there was no idea about what processes underlie these mechanisms. The researchers tend to point to a connection between possible self and self-regulation: imagining the 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 underline that imagining the best possible self increases positive affect, well-being, and optimism (Harrist et al., 2007; King, 2001; Meevissen et al., 2011; 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, studies of 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 we mentioned 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 supports that everything works well for them. 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 findings on best possible self 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 Ruvolo & Markus (1992) reveals that thinking about success can result in winning in the end. Also, the research shows that neurotic participants experience a 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 an 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 selves. *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). Both types of possible selves can be viewed as the hoped-for possible selves directed either on self-regulation to perform better or on self-enhancement, for instance, to sustain positive attitudes toward oneself. 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 the 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 a 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 it was mentioned before, this is a significant basis for increased self-evaluation and the first stage of stating behavioral goals (Strachan et al., 2017).

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 agency.

Lost possible self. *Lost possible selves* are what a person once “used to wish to be”. King & 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 experienced by women before the divorce. This type of possible selves describes what one can imagine in the future, although it has already stayed in the past. While motivation is one of the most critical drivers of a human life, 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 comes to 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 agentic energy was turned to the passive form, 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 an 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) argue that the narrative of our lives can be written “backward,” not only considering what has already happened but what could have happened as well. Hence, lost possible selves contain 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 a 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 on the future, but on 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 it was defined, 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) argue 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 that are interdependent (i.e., one partner can have possible self “to get well soon” and the second partner’s one is “to have a healthy partner”). The idea itself came from a study of couples where one partner was diagnosed with cancer. The findings showed that the more shared goals a couple had, the higher levels of well-being, self-esteem, and positive affect were manifested by the 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 their 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 showed that if a 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 theory postulates, 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” on 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’s is “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 discovered 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 some respondents chose the hoped-for possible self of a special type regardless of the content of possible selves. Due to evaluation of the parameters of possible self, firstly, participants did not consider themselves able to realize their most desirable possible selves. Secondly, they estimated low the objective probability of its achievement. These findings were accompanied by the severity of negative indicators, i.e., increased rumination, higher levels 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 a 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 expe-

rience 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 et al., 2008). According to Leontiev & 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 are mostly related to 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 possible self is currently a leading conception concerning the self-concept theory. It appears to be resourceful in various ways, and 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 possible self. As possible self was defined as a link between cognitive self-evaluation and motivation, its impact on the person’s behavior was laid the basis for 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 & Nurius, the authors of the original concept, as well as Erikson, emphasized the major role of the agency phenomenon. It considers the level of how a person can decide for oneself, take responsibility, and be an active agent changing internal and external worlds depending on the choices they make.

Following the authors’ steps, we stated agency as one of the main qualities of possible self due to its connection with the motivational potential. Considering the

construct, it corresponds with one's ability to experience 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 an agent in future or possible situations. Through the components of self-concept (i.e., working self-concept and self-schemas), agentic energy is created to achieve possible self.

Several kinds of possible selves were found in the literature, and that originally substantiated the aim of this paper. There are few misconceptions that should be mentioned for future research. First of all, regarding Erikson's ideas, almost every article concerning the possible self construct starts with a definition of it as a goal. Although Markus indeed defined possible self as the "cognitive representation of the goals," it contains a different meaning. One can imagine a possible self that is not necessarily planned or has potential for a prompt realization. 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, 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.

Various types of possible selves are intertwined. The first types presented by Markus & Nurius (1986) were hoped-for and unwanted or feared possible self. In the future theorizing new kinds were discovered, e.g., best possible self is the type that corresponds with the hoped-for possible self type although they differ in the representation of agentic energy creating in the process of formulating these two kinds of possible self. The connections were observed in the previous paragraphs, notwithstanding the main distinctions about the constructs are considered within the descriptions of each type individually.

The main issue is that researchers address the motivational aspect of possible self, but they seem to ignore the idea of agency. As the core feature of the construct, agency should be considered more precisely. We assume that, unifying the findings, researchers should consider the main aspects of the construct described in the original theory by Markus & Nurius. The attempt to look at what has been discovered since the first mentioning of the possible selves has been made into a framework, and the agentic baseline for the diversity of conceptions was introduced (Table 1).

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

Hence the main conclusion is that there are particular features of possible selves that emphasize its valid functions, and researchers frequently tend to ignore some of them, thereby not revealing the inherent potential of the construct. The agency phenomenon plays a crucial role in connecting possible self and the self as namely the ability to feel oneself as an 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 various types of possible selves.

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 selves theory
<i>Hoped-for possible self</i>	To achieve a wanted possible self as one experiences oneself as an 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 aspects of future situations where a person could experience agency.
<i>Fearred 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 distinguished 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 supports 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 interventions, and more self-schemas are involved in the process, the best possible self turns into a regular hoped-for possible self, thus stimulating the agency.
<i>Self-regulatory possible self</i>	Self-regulatory possible self is motives driving a person to attain a 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 motives which could direct agentic energy to attain a wanted possibility.

Table 1

Type of possible self	The role of agency	The original view	How it can be interpreted in the terms of possible selves theory
<i>Self-enhancing possible self</i>	The self-enhancing ones facilitate optimism and increase positive affect. This is a 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 positive affect and an optimistic approach towards one-self.
<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 agentic energy is wasted on 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 agency from the current possible selves a person has.
<i>Shared possible self</i>	Agency is activated if 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)	Shared possible selves are distinct possible selves, which are interdependent and manifest agentic energy.
<i>Impossible self</i>	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.

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