Possible Selves:

How Self-Perception of the Future Applies to Older Adults

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Possible selves research suggests that goals and perceptions of the future shape human development and behavior (Cross & Markus, 1991). Although previous research demonstrates age-related differences in possible selves across time, older adults are not often included in possible selves discourse (Ryff, 1991). To better understand the diversity of possible selves across age, we conducted an interview with 13 older adults at the Mayflower retirement community in Grinnell, Iowa. Through our retrospective study, participants were asked to report the number and type of goals across their lifetime, satisfaction at different points in life, and concerns about health and social life domains over time. Results indicate that older adults recalled more specific and less global goals at old age as compared to young age. Further, participants recalled more global and less specific goals in young adulthood. Our findings support the theory that older adults use goal accommodation to achieve a closer fit between their ideal and actual selves (Ryff, 1991).

Keywords: possible selves, aging, adult development, feared selves, ideal selves

Possible selves, the aspirational ideals that individuals develop for their future, are influenced by the self-schemas particular to an individual's past (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves can serve not only as an internal motivator for individuals to attain their ideal selves, but also as a guide for self-direction and evaluation of outcomes as they pertain to or stray from the individual's ideal self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Thus, the process of acquiring and resisting possible selves shapes self-development and growth (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Since possible selves are aspirational and futuristic personal goals, older adults are often overlooked in possible selves research (Ryff, 1991). However, whereas old age is a chapter of physical decline, later adulthood allows individuals the ability to reflect on the experiences of their past selves and strengthen their goals in striving to achieve their ideal selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In this study, we seek to better understand the complexities of possible selves in older adults as they pertain to realistic goal orientation, convergence of expectations, and overall comprehensiveness of ideal selves.

Although possible selves are important across all ages, previous research has shown some differences in the way goals and expectations manifest for different age groups. To better understand the link between possible selves and aging, Ryff (1991) conducted a study that compared the past, present, and ideal self-assessments of young, middle-aged, and elderly adults. The results demonstrated that across all dimensions of wellbeing, elderly adults indicated a closer fit between their ideal and actual selves as compared to younger and middle-aged adults. Cross and Markus (1991) also consistently found that younger adults (aged 18-24) reported more extreme goals for their futures than middle-aged (aged 25-39) and older adults (60+). Younger adults reported goals such as "marrying a Playboy centerfold," "becoming rich," and "acquiring fame" whereas middle and older adults reported more moderate aspirations such as "being a more caring person" and "maintaining a healthy lifestyle." A possible explanation for Ryff's (1991) and Cross and Markus's (1991) findings is that with age, comes an accommodation process that includes lowering expectations and adjusting goals.

Additional research indicates that a consequence of generating less extreme goals in older adulthood is an increase in emotional wellbeing (Manzi, Vignoles, & Regalia, 2010). Manzi, Vignoles, and Regalia (2010) asked young adults about to enter university (aged 17-20) and expecting parents (aged 21-53) to record desirable possible selves pre and post major life transitions. Those whose pre-transition expectations more closely aligned with their post-transition identity structures reported higher wellbeing. In a similar study, Staudinger, Bluck,

and Herzberg (2003) found that younger adults anticipated unfeasibly high expectations for their futures, but reported lower emotional wellbeing in comparison to older adults whose expectations more closely matched their present self-perceptions. The findings presented in Manzi et al. (2010) and Staudinger et al. (2003)'s studies suggest that identity accommodation and goal adjustment may positively influence emotional wellbeing.

The notion that younger adults have more extreme expectations than older adults suggests that some possible selves and goals may be abandoned over time (Markus & Herzog, 1991). In this view, accommodation of expectations, reinforced by the salience of dwindling time left to live, may predict that younger adults' goals are more comprehensive than older adults'. Smith and Freund (2002) echoed this hypothesis, expecting to find that older adults report less diverse possible selves as they age. Participants were asked to report possible selves in six domains: health, personal characteristics, interests/activities, social relationships, life events, and cognition. Contrary to their expectations, Smith and Freund found that young-older adults (aged 70-79) reported ideal selves that are no less diverse than old-older adults (aged 80+). The findings may have demonstrated equally diverse possible selves across age groups because the experimenters limited their subjects to young-older adults and old-older adults rather than comparing young and old adults. However, it is also possible that goal-type may differ across age, as demonstrated by Ryff (1991) and Cross and Markus (1991), but that overall goal comprehensiveness is not significantly different across age groups. Thus, further research is needed to fully explore and understand the comprehensiveness of possible selves across age.

The discussion of the complexity of possible selves also merits discussion of feared possible selves, which are the identities that an individual is afraid of becoming (Cross & Markus, 1991). Like ideal selves, feared selves are complex and personal to the individual (Cross & Markus, 1991). In examining the possible selves of people aged 19-86, Cross and Markus (1991) asked respondents to list their ideal and feared selves and rate the likelihood of achieving said selves. When compared across age groups, adults aged 60+ generated more feared selves regarding physical and social lifestyle changes than their younger counterparts (Cross & Markus, 1991). Similarly, Hooker (1992) conducted a study to assess the health-related possible selves of both young and old adults, and found that health-related issues were of greater value to older adults than they were for younger adults. Thus, age-related declines may contribute to the increased prevalence of feared selves related to health and social domains.

In order to address limitations of current possible selves research as it pertains to older adults, we seek to expand on ideal and feared selves as well as satisfaction and goal comprehensiveness across the lifespan. Based on the research presented, we expect that older adults in the Mayflower Community will report increasingly moderate expected ideal selves across time. Thus, when recounting their experiences as young adults, we predict that the older adults in our study will recall having more extreme goals and expectations at earlier points in life as compared to now. Additionally, since accommodation of expectations can lead to higher emotional wellbeing, we hypothesize that older adults will report higher states of wellbeing now than when they were young due to acquired accommodation strategies over time (Staudinger, Bluck, & Herzberg, 2003). Further, we expect that older adults will pose more concerns and fears related to health and social domains now than as younger adults due to increased physical decline (Cross & Markus, 1991). Finally, we want to investigate the level of detail our interviewees report about their possible selves in five domains: health, activities, social, family, and personal characteristics. By incorporating participants' views on goals and expectations from young adulthood onward, we hope to expand on previous research which has only observed goal comprehensiveness across young-old and old-old age groups. In support of research suggesting abandonment of possible selves over time, we hypothesize that older adults' ideal selves are less comprehensive now than in the past (Markus & Herzog, 1991).

Method
Participants and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we administered the Adult Development Interview (ADI) to 13 Caucasian older adults living in a rural Midwestern retirement home. There were 10 females and three males, whose ages ranged from 78 to 89. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis by their community home and agreed to be interviewed for two, one-hour sessions over the course of two weeks. Grinnell College students taking the Adult Development course acted as interviewers and were individually paired with an older adult. Participants consented to the interview prior to the start of the first session. All

dyad interviews were conducted in one large auditorium and the same student-participant dyads were retained when returning for the second round of interviews. All interview sessions were audio-recorded with portable electronic recording devices. Interviewers later transcribed their interviews and uploaded the transcriptions to a shared storage drive.

The ADI is a free-response questionnaire consisting of 5 sub-sections pertaining to participant background, occupation and health, family and friends, religion and spirituality, and life lessons. Two versions of the ADI consisting of differently ordered questions were split evenly amongst interviewer-interviewee pairs (6 pairs had Version 1, and 7 pairs had Version 2) in order to ensure thoroughness of responses.

Measures

Ideal selves. To better understand the concept of ideal selves, we examined individuals' adherence to two different types of goals over the course of their lifetime: global and specific goals. More specifically, we counted the number of global goals and specific goals that our participants vocalized throughout the interview session. Global goals were coded as aspirations that spanned more than the course of a day to complete, and specific goals as desires that spanned less than a day to complete. Responses such as "I want to be a perfect mother" or "I would like to finish college" were marked as global goals, whereas "I would like to dress myself without help" or "I want to eat healthy" would be deemed specific goals. Counting the number of global and specific goals in young adulthood and older adulthood would provide a more in-depth look at the changes within individual ideals across the lifespan.

Self-satisfaction. In examining level of fulfillment in older adult's lives, we coded responses to the question "Do you think you are more or less satisfied today than you were during your young adulthood?" as "Yes," "No," and "No Difference."

Health and social concerns. We coded concerns related to health and social domains by assessing whether or not participants reported fears in the social and health-related areas of their lives at younger adulthood and older adulthood. The presence of health or social concerns within the participants' responses were then recorded as "Yes" or "No" in the young-social, young-health, older-social, older-health subgroups. We specifically looked into the answers from the "Occupation and Leisures" and "Family and Relationships" sections of the ADI where participants answered questions such as "Do

you have any significant health challenges today?" and "Has the importance of friendship changed for you over your lifetime? And, if so, how?" The differing health and social concerns were measured as follows:

- C1: Young Health Concern (e.g., "I feared contracting polio.")
- C2: Old Health Concern (e.g., "I fear falling and breaking a hip.")
- C3: Young Social Concern (e.g., "I feared losing popularity in high school.")
- C4: Old Social Concern (e.g., "I fear outliving my friends.")

Comprehensiveness of goals. To understand the diversity of goals that exist among younger and older adults, we also studied the comprehensiveness of our participants' ideal selves. We divided participants' goals into five domains: health, activities, social, family, and personal characteristics and evaluated the number of domains for which each individual reported goals in young adulthood and in old adulthood. We then tallied the number of domains fulfilled for each individual at their respective age groups and presented the findings as a ratio of Total Goals-Young: Total Goals-Old. The comprehensiveness of goals was measured as follows:

- G1: Health Goal (e.g., "Running a marathon")
- G2: Activities Goal (e.g., "Reading a book every month")
- G3: Social Goal (e.g., "Making new friends")
- G4: Family Goal (e.g., "Taking my family on vacation")
- G5: Personal Characteristics Goal (e.g., "Being more organized")

Results

Relationship between Age and Goal-Type

We hypothesized that participants would report more specific goals and less global goals in older adulthood as compared to less global and more specific goals in young adulthood. Thus we expected the relationship between age and number of global goals to be inversely related to age and number of specific goals. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a repeated measures analysis of variance with two levels of goal-type (global and specific) and two levels of age (young and old). When isolating age, findings indicated that the number of goals did not differ significantly between age groups $F_{(1,12)} = 4.03$, $p > .05$. However, a repeated measures ANOVA found a significant interaction between type of goals reported and age, $F_{(1,12)} = 20.62$, $p < .05$. As observed in Figure

1, participants had fewer global goals ($M = 1.08$, $SD = .954$) and more specific goals ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.121$) at old age than when compared to young age, whereas in young adulthood, participants had more global ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.144$) and less specific ($M = .38$, $SD = .650$) goals. These findings support the idea that possible selves are more extreme at younger ages and become more closely aligned with reality as people age. Regardless of age, the types of goals reported still significantly differed $F (1, 12) = 19.260$, $p < .05$. On average, participants recalled more global goals than specific goals ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.50$, and $M = 1$, $SD = 1.12$, respectively).
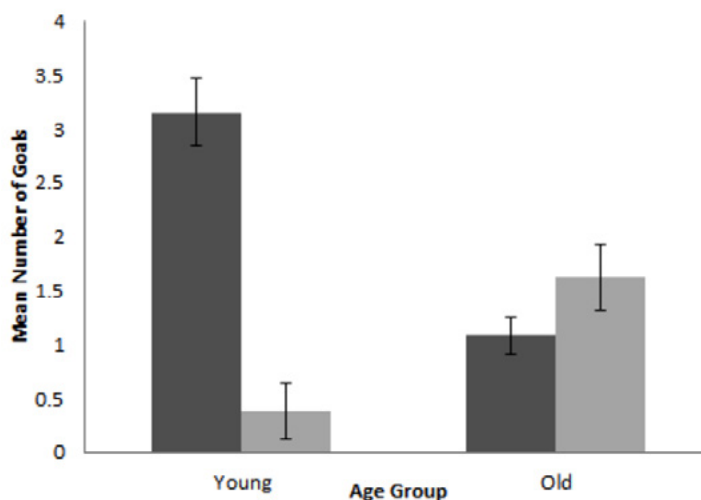

Figure 1. Mean number of global and specific goals at young and old age. On average, participants recalled more global goals than specific goals in younger adulthood whereas they reported more specific goals than global goals in older adulthood (p < .05).

Aging and Satisfaction

With regard to the relationship between life satisfaction and aging, we expected that the older adults in our study would be more satisfied now than they were when they were young adults due to the convergence of ideal and actual selves. A chi-square goodness of fit test was performed to determine whether satisfaction levels were equally distributed across three categories: more satisfied in old age, more satisfied in young age, and no difference. As observed in Figure 2, findings demonstrated that there was not a significant difference in the satisfaction levels at old and young ages, $X^2 (2, N = 13) = 2.00$, p > .05. Although our test did not reach significance, the results were in the direction of our hypothesis. Only 15% of participants reported that they were more satisfied when they were younger, whereas 46% of participants felt more satisfied now and 39% feel there is no difference in their satisfaction levels.
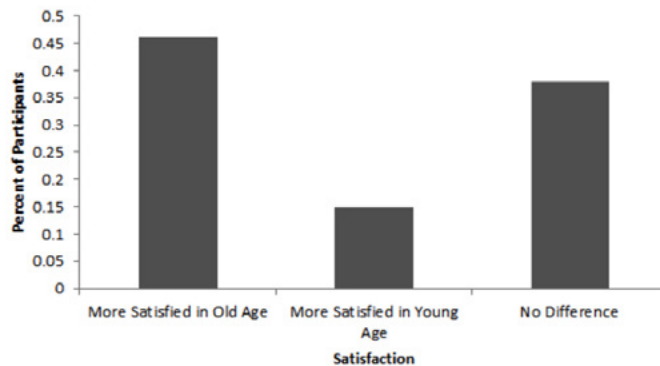

Figure 2. Percentage of participants who felt more, less, or no difference in life satisfaction in older adulthood as compared to younger adulthood. There is no significant difference between age and satisfaction scores, although the results support slightly greater satisfaction in older adulthood (p > .05)

Aging and Feared Selves

Our third hypothesis stated that participants would report more health and social concerns than young adults due to increased feared possible selves in health and social life domains. Two chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between health concerns and age, and social concerns and age, respectively. Neither test was significant. As displayed in Figure 3, participants did not, on average, report more health concerns at old age than at young age, $X^2 (1, N = 13) = .014$, p > .05, and participants were not more likely to report social concerns at old age than at younger ages, $X^2 (1, N = 13) = .627$, p > .05. However, as observed in Figure 4, a more in-depth analysis of our data displayed trends supporting our social concerns hypothesis. Of our participant sample, 15% of individuals reported social concerns in both young and old adulthood, 23% of individuals reported an absence of social concerns throughout young and old age, and 23% of individuals reported social concerns in young adulthood that no longer appeared in older adulthood. The largest percentage of the group, 38%, reported no social concerns in younger adulthood but acquired social concerns in older age, thus leveraging some support for the theory that increased feared selves in social domains develop with age.

Aging and Goal Comprehensiveness

Lastly, we expected that participants' total number of goals in five life domains (health, activities, social, family, and personal) would be less comprehensive at old age than in young adulthood. A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the comprehensiveness of reported goals in old and young age. Our findings, as displayed in Figure 5, were not significant, suggesting that older

adults' goals are no less comprehensive than younger adults' goals, $t(12) = .714$, $p = .489$.
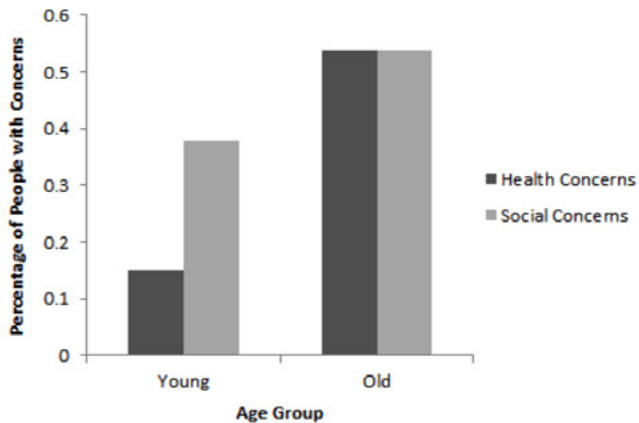

Figure 3. Percentage of participants who reported health and social concerns in younger and older adulthood. There is no significant difference found between likelihood of health and social concerns across lifespan (p > .05).
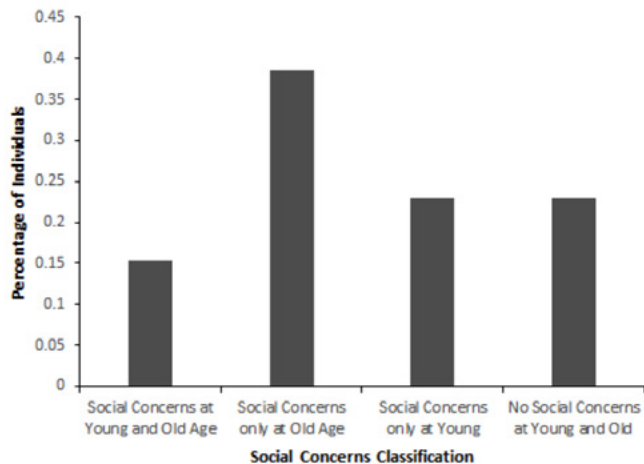

Figure 4. Percentage of individuals who indicated social concerns at various age groups. The percentage of individuals with social concerns only at old age provides some support for feared selves in older adults, although results are not significant (p > .05).

Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand the complexities of possible selves across age. We found that participants indicated significantly more specific goals than global goals in old adulthood and less specific and more global goals in young adulthood. Our results provide evidence that individuals experience a shift from extreme expectations to goal accommodation when developing personal goals across the lifespan. The findings support previous research which suggests that older adults achieve a closer fit between their ideal selves and their actual selves (Ryff, 1991).

We expected that older adults would be more satisfied in old age because their goals are more closely aligned with reality and thus, more attainable. However, our results demonstrate that participants did not report significantly higher levels of satisfaction in old adulthood as compared to young adulthood. Although our findings are not significant, the results are in the direction of our hypothesis. With only 13 participants, it is unclear whether the results are not significant due to systematic inconsistencies or an insufficient sample size. Another explanation for our findings is that participants may have been subject to recall bias, or bias in accuracy of recollections of the past (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Because we asked participants to recall feelings of satisfaction from several decades prior, it is possible that they were not as precise in recalling their past memories. Similarly, positivity effect suggests that older adults are likely to recall more positive than negative information due to age-related differences in emotional attention and memory (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Thus, our participants may have been less likely to report being more satisfied in older adulthood because their memories of young adulthood are distorted in a positive direction (Mather & Carstensen, 2005).

We explored the concept of feared selves, hypothesizing that older adults would report more concerns related to health and social life domains in older adulthood due to increased salience of physical decline and social vulnerability with age. Although the findings lean towards the direction of our hypothesis, they are not significant. The lack of evidence supporting our health and social hypotheses may be due to poor inter-rater reliability and construct definition. Because the responses for health and social concerns were coded by researchers on a subjective basis without a strong test of inter-rater reliability, researcher bias could contribute to our findings. Additionally, the questions posed in the ADI were not specifically worded to address health and social feared possible selves, indicating potential inconsistencies in the researchers' construct definitions. An alternative explanation for the findings is that older adults may not be as vulnerable to health and social fears as we had hypothesized. Previous research reports that older adults use goal optimization strategies such as socioemotional selectivity in order to increase their socioemotional functioning. The socioemotional selectivity theory demonstrates that older adults achieve emotional gains in later life, thus providing an explanation for greater emotional stability and perhaps reduced health and social fears in later adulthood.

Finally, we predicted that older adults would report less diverse goals in old age due to some possible selves being abandoned over time. The results did not produce a significant effect for goal comprehensiveness and age. On the contrary, our data indicated that young adults' goals were slightly more comprehensive than older adults' goals. Our findings may be explained by Smith and Freund (2002), who found that young-old adults (aged 70-79) expressed equally diverse hopes and fears as compared to old-old adults (80+) despite their hypothesis that old-older adults would produce less dynamic possible selves. Although their study only focused on the older adult population, the dynamism of possible selves demonstrated in Smith and Freund's (2002) research may persist throughout the lifespan, thus explaining the lack of support for our goal comprehensiveness hypothesis. An additional explanation for the results of our goal comprehensiveness hypothesis is poor operationalization of goal diversity. Our operationalization resulted in some construct overlap which may have affected the variability in interpretation of participant responses. It is possible that the five domains measured were defined too similarly for us to distinguish distinct differences between goal-type. For example, instances of social and activities goal overlap could have been reduced with stronger definitions in the coding process.

In the future, research on possible selves across the lifespan could be furthered in a few directions. For instance, implementing a longitudinal study ensures the accuracy of ratings at various points in participants' lives, rather than having them rely on memory which may be prone to recall biases (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Positivity effects in recall may contribute to a more positive and thus less accurate recollection of the past events, therefore skewing participant responses (Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Although a between-subjects design may be more appropriate to combat the high attrition rates of longitudinal studies, there may be challenges with cohort effects skewing the data.

In regard to furthering the depth of research on age's effects on goal-type, examining the goals exhibited in middle adulthood would help us better understand the relationship between life experiences and aspirations. It would be interesting to discover whether middle adulthood goal-types exhibit trends that corroborate our findings about differences between older adults and young adults. For example, finding a balanced number of global and specific goals in middle adulthood would strengthen the hypothesized shift from more global to more specific goals over time. Thus, research incorporating middle-aged adults would strengthen possible selves discourse and expand on understanding of adult development.

Although the theory of possible selves in older adulthood is an important topic to explore, older adults are rarely prioritized in possible selves research (Ryff, 1991). The findings in this study expand our knowledge about age-related differences in ideal selves and goal accommodation, suggesting that older adults' goals are more specific than global in nature whereas young adults seek more global and less specific aspirations. Despite our findings, limitations of our study demonstrate the need for future research in order to better understand changes in possible selves with aging as well as the relationship between possible selves, life satisfaction, and feared selves across time.

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