

CAREER-RELATED POSSIBLE SELVES OF RURAL ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The first independent career related decisions are made during the ninth grade of the elementary school when the further educational institution is selected. The concept of possible selves can be used in career education to help students increase self-awareness, explore and generate options, and formulate plans to achieve future goals. The aim of the article is to examine rural adolescents' ability to generate career-related possible selves and plausible strategies to attain these possible selves. On the basis of the Possible Selves Theory, the open-ended measure was developed by the author. The pilot research was carried out in Latvia in January 2013. Forty six nine-graders from two rural elementary schools and two rural secondary schools participated in the research. Next year and adult possible selves generated by rural adolescents include such domains as education, employment, leisure activities, physical and personal development, as well as interpersonal relationships and lifestyle. The most important ones are domains of education and employment. Statistically significant differences of the results among the gender subgroups are not found in the research, statistically significant differences exist between the possible selves and their attaining strategies generated by rural secondary school students and rural elementary school students.

Key words: expected possible selves, feared possible selves, adolescence, career, career management.

Introduction

Employment and business in knowledge society is featured by relatively often changes in an individual's career and by a possibility to receive life-long career guidance, by a simplified access to career guidance support services by all people, and by promotion of career management skills throughout a life time (Sultana, 2012). During a certain individual's development stage, promotion of career management skills is a task to be carried out by the school which is an institution of formal education. According to the liberally rational educational paradigm, education is a tool to ensure community development and its sustainability, as well as a guarantee of competitiveness and welfare for society as a whole and for each individual separately. Support for labour market liberalization is one of the fundamental tasks of education; therefore, much attention is being paid to vocational and career education (Katane, 2007). According to the ecological approach (which is a post-modern constructionist approach in its core), the main task of education is to promote development of the skills which help to live in a changeable environment, to further responsible and independent individuals who are able to assess situations and make proper decisions, study independently and improve themselves, their development (Briede and Pēks, 2011).

Current understanding of career education (Karjeras izglītība ..., 2009) has limitations and does not sufficiently provide an active, constructive student's cooperation in improvement of his/her career management skills.

In the author's opinion the Possible Selves Theory is one of the possible theoretical concepts

based on which it would be possible to develop a career education model according to the principles of constructivism, where active student's cooperation is included in developing his/her career management competences.

Possible selves (PS) are the future-oriented hypothetical images of oneself one would like to attain or of oneself one would like to avoid, which are generated within individual's life context (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2002). It is believed that in rural community adolescents develop in restricted, poorer environment which does not offer possibility to try and master several role models related to education and employment; therefore, construction and maintenance of future selves in those domains are more complex and harder for rural adolescents (Shepard, 2003).

Unfortunately, there is no research carried out in any population group in cultural environment of Latvia. To find out the most characteristic peculiarities how the rural nine-graders generate PS, a pilot research described in this article was carried out in two rural elementary schools and two rural secondary schools in January 2013.

The aim of the article is to examine rural adolescents' ability to generate career-related possible selves and plausible strategies to attain these possible selves.

Materials and Methods

The research of career-related PS of rural adolescents is based on the principles of liberally rational educational paradigm. The theoretical part of the research consists of the study and theoretical analysis of the scientific and methodological literature

on career development, career management and concept of possible selves. The empirical part deals with the answers to the following questions: 1. What are the most important domains in which rural adolescents generate next year and adult possible selves (PS)? 2. What is the proportion of rural adolescents' career-related PS among other PS? 3. What is the balance of rural adolescents' PS within various domains? 4. What strategies do rural adolescents consider as the most important ones to attain their expected PS and avoid their feared PS? 5. Are there any statistically significant differences in generating PS between different genders and among adolescents studying in different types of educational institutions?

To carry out the empirical part of the research, a questionnaire was designed based on the Possible Selves Questionnaire developed by D. Oyserman (Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman, 2004), the open-ended measure, which is 'more preferable if possible selves of participants must be found out' (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006; Lee and Oyserman, 2009).

The empiric part of the research was carried out in 4 rural general education schools: in 2 secondary schools and 2 elementary schools. Fifty five nine-graders were asked to participate in the research. Nine questionnaires (16% of the total number of questionnaires) were excluded from the further processing, as no possible selves were specified written there. Research sample consists of 46 nine-graders, 20 girls (43% of respondents) and 26 boys (57% of respondents). The respondents are between ages 14 and 17 (Mean (M) = 15.39, Standard Deviation (SD) = 0.71). 8 girls and 9 boys are rural elementary school students (37% of respondents), 12 girls and 17 boys are rural secondary school students (63% of respondents). Distribution differences of gender subgroups within the school types are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.14$; $p = 0.71$).

Adolescents were asked to generate 4 expectations and 4 concerns for the coming year, and describe any strategies they had for working toward their expected and away from their feared or to-be-avoided next year PS, as well as to generate 4 expectations and 4 concerns for the year 2018, and describe any strategies they had for working toward their expected and away from their feared or to-be-avoided adult (year 2018th) PS. To clarify adolescents' PS, respondents were encouraged to think about the next year, imagine what they will be like, and what they will be doing next year, as well as to think about ways they would not like to be next year, about things they are concerned about or want to avoid being like and write their expectations or concerns. To establish existing strategies used by adolescents, they were asked to write what they have been doing this year to attain their goals and what they did this year to reduce the chances that this would

describe them next year for each expected goal and each concern. Similar procedures for expectations and concerns, as well as strategies for the year 2018 were provided.

Responses were content-coded, expected and feared PS were categorized into one of nine domains: education (including all activities related to learning and training, their processes and results, including studies to obtain professional education (art, music and sports schools) and independent improvement of skills, as well as status and roles related to studies), employment (all activities, status and roles related to paid employment, self-employment, and business), physical/health related (general body descriptive responses, as well as health description), interpersonal relationships (family, friends, relationships, and social interactions), leisure activities (all activities not included into the education and employment categories, social duties), lifestyle/material (material possessions and living situation, including moving and independency/dependency) (for expected and feared selves) or non-normative/risky behaviour and external harm/victimization (for feared selves only). Any strategies for attaining expected PS or avoiding from feared PS were categorized into one of six domains: learning (purposeful development of one's own knowledge, skills, and abilities, competences within the framework of formal, non-formal and informal education), compliance with the rules, leisure activities, interpersonal relationships, self-management, search for support and information.

The coding system was based on findings obtained by B. Shepard, A. Marshall, D. Oyserman, H. Markus, P. Unemori, H. Omoregie, M. Knox, J. Funk, R. Elliott, and E.G. Bush (Oyserman and Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Shepard and Marshall, 1999; Knox et al., 2000; Shepard, 2003; Oyserman, 2004; Unemori et al., 2004). Data coding was carried out by an independent career counsellor not involved in and not informed about the research.

MS Excel and SPSS 16.0 have been used to process the research data. To find out proportion of career-related PS in each PS group, relative frequencies of each expected and feared PS category were calculated in each PS group, e.g., as for the next year expected PS, the number of possible selves in a given category was divided by the total number of the next year expected PS generated by a participant (Shepard, 2003). The analogous procedures were followed for calculating relative frequencies for the next year feared PS, adult expected PS and adult feared PS. Likewise calculation of relative frequencies of the strategies was carried out in each PS group. The descriptive statistics indicators (Mean, Standard Deviation) were calculated. The non-parametric criterion – Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z was calculated testing for normality of the distribution,

the non-parametric criteria – Mann-Whitney U and Chi-squares were calculated analysing differences of distribution among the subgroups.

Results and Discussion

While carrying out the study and theoretical analysis of the scientific and methodological literature on career development and career management, it was found out that a term ‘career’ in the XXI century is defined as ‘the sequence and variety of paid and unpaid work roles a person undertakes throughout a lifetime’ (Career Education ..., 2009), ‘the evolving sequence of person’s work experiences over time’ (Arthur et al., 1989), ‘the sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person’ (Arnold and Silvester, 2005). It is believed that ‘career embraces life roles in the community and home, leisure activities, learning and work, and that everyone has a career’ (Career Education ..., 2009).

Career development is a lifelong process ‘of managing learning, work, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future’ (Hiebert, 2006), ‘of skills acquisition and building through a continuum of learning, development and mastery’. Career development enables people to be in charge of their own career (Jarvis, 2003). Researchers point out that career development may be both intentional and also unintentional. Intentional career development is ‘about actively creating the life one wants to live, while unintentional career development occurs anyway, because none of individuals can avoid learning, experiencing, living, working and changing’ (Haché et al., 2006).

The main condition of purposeful, intentional career development is developed career management competencies, ‘the understandings, skills and attitudes that people use to develop and manage their career, to understand themselves better, make informed decisions about learning and work options, act on their decisions and participate effectively at work and in society’ (Career Education ..., 2009).

Career management is described as a process by which individuals develop, implement, and monitor career goals and strategies; career management is an individual - not an organizational - activity. It is a process in which ‘an individual creates an accurate picture of his or her talents, interests, values and preferred lifestyle, as well as alternative occupations, jobs and organizations and develops realistic career goals based on this information; develops and implements strategies designed to achieve goals, as well as obtains feedback on the effectiveness of the strategy and the relevance of the goals’ (Greenhaus et al., 2009).

During changeable circumstances people initiate changes in their lives or adjust themselves to rapid environmental changes by setting and designing goals and directions of changes according to their ‘conceptions of self in future’ (Cornford, 1995); career development requires not only regular reflection on the self and the environment and receptivity to feedback, but also the imagination of possible selves, ensuring career (and life as a whole) designing motivation (Savickas et al., 2009).

Possible selves (PS) are the future-oriented component of self-concept, ‘the hypothetical images of the self one would like to attain or of the self one would like to avoid’ (Oyserman et al., 2002) ‘constructed by individual, derived from representations of the self in the past, they include representations of the self in the future’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Individuals construct PS by synthesizing what they know about their traits and abilities and what they know about the skills needed to become various future selves (Oyserman et al., 2002). Possible selves ‘can function as a set of goals that motivate future behaviour and provide means of understanding current experiences’ (Shepard, 2004). PS include images, values, emotions and goals, as well as ‘strategies to attain these possible selves’ (Plimmer, 2012).

The construction of possible selves entails the recruitment of imaginative capacity and self-reflection of the individual to create a set of hoped-for, expected, and feared future selves. A hoped-for self is defined as an aspired self that one desires to become which may or may not be realistic. An expected self is a self that one believes one can realistically become. If a possible self is viewed as reachable, specific action strategies become attached to that self. A feared self is a possible self that one does not want to become, yet fears becoming. The feared self acts as a motivator so that concrete actions (strategies) are taken to avoid that future possible self (Shepard and Marshall, 1999).

PS have maximum motivating efficiency if they are balanced with contrary PS in the same domain. Unbalanced hoped-for and feared PS reduce potentially positive influence of feared PS to the individual’s behaviour expressed in his/her efforts to avoid feared conditions. In this case the individual has a view about the situation which he/she does not want to experience; however, he/she does not have a view about the preferable direction. Existence of several hoped-for or expected PS without feared PS, in its turn, generates threats of superficial approach regarding their implementation; adequately feared PS ensure persistence desired for PS implementation (Oyserman and Markus, 1990a).

Career development evolves according to changes in individual’s identity and self-conception, i.e., according to development (creating, testing, discarding

and revising) of new provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). Provisional selves are generated based on observations of careers and lifestyles of other people, and they are tested to find out their compliance with individual values, competences, demands and style. Individuals identify prototypes of what constitutes desirable performance and harmonize further on their identity with those prototypes, creating the personalized range of possible roles and selves (Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007).

Formation of such provisional selves takes place especially actively during adolescence. An adolescent is any person between ages 10 and 19; adolescence is a period of life during which independence and dependence exist at the same time. The main peculiarities of the period of adolescence are as follows: preparation for life in future, setting of personal goals and selection of educational and employment direction. Active cooperation while transition to the adult life, awareness of and preparation for possible future are expected from adolescents in post-modern society. Orientation towards the future, including a view of possible future, insight on one's own life in it, goals, plans and assessment of possible (anticipated) results are considered as an important development task during adolescence (Laihiala-Kankainen et al., 2010).

According to findings by J. Piaget, at the stage of a certain operation child's thinking is still restricted by the given information, however, during the stage of formal operations (starting from the age of 11-12 years) adolescent's thinking may go beyond previously given information (Gudjons, 2007), adolescents may start grasping abstract and possible issues, recognizing themselves as a 'contemplative, self-determining, relational and continuous being', which is able not only to remember the past and be aware of the presence, but also 'to imagine their future, their possible selves' (Shepard, 2003), a focus on the future is intrinsic to the social role of adolescence (Oyserman et al., 2004). Adolescents' ability to think hypothetically enables them to visualise possible future, to connect present events with possibilities in future (Oyserman et al., 2002). This is a stage when 'individuals attempt to understand themselves and find their place in the job market, as well as through classes, work experience, and hobbies try to identify their interests and capabilities and figure out how they fit in with various occupations' (Šverko, 2006).

An adolescent generates his/her prospective life course within a certain social environment, therefore, success of generating depends on both adolescent's freedom of choice and creativity in making his/her prospective life course and also on support provided by those around them (Laihiala-Kankainen et al.,

2010). Adolescents are ready and they wish to receive feedback from their peers, the media, parents, and other adults, as they actively look for confirmation in responses to their behaviour and actions from those around them during social interaction regarding vital capacity of their prospective life course. They compare their behaviour with role models available in society (Oyserman et al., 2004).

Social environment provides a context in which adolescents receive feedback on the self qualities considered as valuable, significant, and necessary. It is believed that comparing to the city environment, development of adolescents in rural communities takes place in restricted, poorer context, which does not offer several role models related to education and employment for trying and mastering, therefore, construction and maintenance of future selves in those domains are more complex and harder for rural adolescents (Shepard, 2003).

Previous researches (e.g., Shepard, 2003) confirm that during the period of adolescence while generating PS the most important are educational, occupational, and familial domains. During the times of educational transition young people are more likely to be thinking about the educational and occupational challenges.

It was found out in the empirical part of the research that the total PS number generated by each adolescent was within the range of 1 to 16 (maximum possible number of PS) ($M = 12$, $SD = 3.98$), frequency distribution did not significantly differ from the normal distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 1.33$; $p = 0.06$). Ten adolescents (22% of respondents) made 16 PS, the maximum possible number of PS. Distribution differences of the generated PS were not statistically significant among the gender subgroups (Mann-Whitney $U = 236.0$; $p = 0.59$), distribution differences among the elementary school students and secondary school students also were not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney $U = 209.5$; $p = 0.40$).

Distribution of the generated PS number within PS groups (next year expected selves, next year feared selves, adult expected selves, adult feared selves) statistically significantly differed from the normal distribution (all calculated Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z > 1.49$; $p < 0.02$). When comparing distribution by means of the Mann-Whitney criterion, it was found that distribution differences of the generated PS number among the genders in the PS groups (all calculated Mann-Whitney $U > 210.0$, all calculated $p > 0.22$) and among the school subgroups (all calculated Mann-Whitney $U > 195.5$, all calculated $p > 0.21$) were not statistically significant.

When comparing distribution of the number of generated next year expected selves and next year feared selves ($\chi^2 = 3.45$; $p = 0.48$), as well as of the

number of adult expected PS and adult feared PS ($\chi^2 = 1.31$; $p = 0.86$), it was found out that distribution differences were not statistically significant.

The most frequently mentioned PS domains were education and employment. Within the next year expected PS group the most frequently mentioned categories were education, interpersonal and leisure activities, within the next year feared PS group the most frequently mentioned categories were education and non-normative (risky) behaviour. Within the adult expected PS group the most frequently mentioned categories were employment and education, and within the adult feared PS group employment and non-normative (risky) behaviour prevailed (Table 1).

A possible balanced PS number was stated for each respondent and a balanced PS proportion was calculated within the next year PS and adult PS groups. Proportion distribution complied with the normal distribution, next year PS Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 1.09$, $p = 0.19$, adult PS Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 1.00$, $p = 0.27$. Balanced PS proportion was 38% in the next year PS group, it was 43% in the adult PS group, proportion differences among the gender and the school type subgroups were not statistically significant (all calculated Mann-Whitney $U > 134.5$, all calculated $p > 0.09$).

At least one balanced PS pair was generated in the next year PS group by 65% of respondents (in the adult PS group by 70% of respondents). Distribution differences of the balanced PS among the gender and the school type subgroups were not statistically significant. Statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 10.30$; $p = 0.01$) were found when comparing next year PS generated by the secondary school students and those generated by the elementary school students. 24% of elementary school students and

41% of secondary school students had not generated any balanced next year PS pairs, 76% of elementary school students and 31% of secondary school students had generated one balanced next year PS pair, 8 (28%) secondary school students generated two balanced next year PS pairs.

The nine tenth (89%) of balanced next year PS were generated within the education domain, 3% were related to employment, 3% were related to personality traits, and 5% were related to interpersonal relationships; in the adult PS group, in its turn, 30% were related to education, 50% were related to employment, 12% were related to interpersonal relationships, and 8% were related to lifestyle.

Distribution of the number of strategies necessary to achieve PS within the selection did not statistically significantly differ from the normal distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 0.68$; $p = 0.74$), each adolescent had generated from 1 to 16 strategies ($M = 7.28$, $SD = 3.62$). Proportion of the generated strategies in each PS group varied, proper strategies in the next year expected PS group were generated for 89% of PS, in the next year feared PS group - for 66% of PS, in the adult expected PS group - for 52% of PS, in the adult feared PS group - for 43% of PS.

Differences in the number of strategies generated in each PS group were not statistically significant among the subgroups of respondents' gender (all calculated Mann-Whitney $U > 171.5$; all calculated $p > 0.20$).

It was found out that there were statistically significant differences among the school subgroups in terms of the number of generated strategies both in the adult feared PS group (Mann-Whitney $U = 126.0$; $p = 0.03$) and in the total number of strategies (Mann-Whitney $U = 150.0$; $p = 0.03$). Elementary school

Table 1

Relative Frequencies of Possible selves

Category	PS groups			
	Next year		Adult	
	expected possible selves	feared possible selves	expected possible selves	feared possible selves
Education	0.56	0.33	0.29	0.12
Employment	0.07	0.08	0.42	0.30
Interpersonal Relationships	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.12
Physical/Health-Related	0.02	0.10	0.05	0.06
Leisure Activities	0.18	0.00	0.04	0.01
Personality Traits	0.03	0.10	0.02	0.05
Lifestyle/ Material	0.02	0.09	0.08	0.15
Non-normative/ Risky Behaviour	-	0.11	-	0.16
External Harm / Victimization	-	0.10	-	0.03

Table 2

Relative Frequencies of Strategies in PS groups

Category	PS groups			
	Next year		Adult	
	expected possible selves	feared possible selves	expected possible selves	feared possible selves
Learning	0.60	0.41	0.73	0.40
Compliance with the rules	0.02	0.16	0.02	0.15
Leisure activities	0.20	0.00	0.03	0.02
Interpersonal relationships	0.09	0.11	0.06	0.05
Self-management	0.05	0.27	0.11	0.24
Search for support and information	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.13

students generated strategies only for 27% of PS in the adult feared PS group (students of the secondary schools – for 54% of PS). Comparing the number of all generated strategies, it was found out that secondary school students had generated strategies for 69% of PS, but elementary school students – for 54% of PS.

The most frequently mentioned strategies were learning and self-management. The most frequently mentioned strategies in the next year expected PS group were learning and involving in leisure activities, the most frequently mentioned strategies in the next year feared PS group were learning, compliance with the rules and self-management. The most frequently mentioned strategies in the adult expected PS group were learning and self-management. Strategies dominating in the adult feared PS group were as follows: learning, self-management, compliance with rules, and searching for support and information (Table 2).

Assessing correlation between the generated strategies and PS, it was found out that according to respondents, the most important strategy in the education PS domain was learning (a strategy of this category was mentioned in 86% of responses to achieve the expected PS, or to avoid feared PS regarding education). Less important were the following strategies: compliance with the rules (5%), self-management (5%), and search for support and information (4%). Learning was the most important strategy also in employment domain (67%), while less important were such categories as self-management (13%) and searching for support and information (15%).

Career-related adult expected PS included a desire to have a good job, also including satisfaction with the chosen profession, proper choice of profession (20% of respondents, 16% of the total number of all adult expected PS). Thirty five adult expected PS of the rural nine-graders included a job in a particular

profession. The profession mentioned most often was a motor mechanic (it was mentioned 5 times, i.e., almost 20% of male respondents had referred to such a possibility in their adult expected PS), adult expected PS of the girls included jobs in such professions as hospitality specialists (it was mentioned 4 times, it was also approximately 20% of the total number of female respondents) and cooks (it was mentioned 3 times, 15% of the total number of female respondents). A soldier was mentioned three times in the questionnaires, a forester, a worker and a police officer, as well as entrepreneurship were mentioned twice. Such professions as a driver, a frontier guard, an architect, a programmer, an electrician, a mechanic, a manager of a farm, and a supervising engineer (for boys), as well as a shop-assistant, lawyer, and a hairdresser (for girls) were mentioned once in the questionnaires.

Adult feared PS included wrong profession choice, having undesired job due to force majeure (3 responses), janitor’s job (2 responses), as well as a status of an unemployed person (23 responses, 50% of respondents, 67% of adult PS).

Conclusions

1. Rural adolescents’ next year and adult (after five years) PS include such domains as education, employment, leisure activities, physical and personal development, as well as interpersonal relationships and lifestyle. The highest balanced proportion of PS is found in the domain of education and employment. Proportion of career-related PS depends on how distant future PS are generated for; expectations and concerns related to education prevail in PS of the nearest future; employment is important for adult PS; high importance of education remains.
2. Rural adolescents view learning as the most important strategy both for achieving expected

- PS and for avoiding feared PS; leisure activities relatively often are used to achieve next year PS. Self-management and compliance with the rules are considered as important strategies that help avoiding feared PS.
3. Statistically significant differences are not found among the subgroups of respondents' gender regarding PS and strategies for their achieving/avoidance. Statistically significant differences were expressed twice less in the number of generated strategies among rural elementary school students the and strategies generated by the nine-graders of rural elementary schools, and those generated by rural secondary school students regarding avoidance of adult feared PS.

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