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Exploring the relationship between resilience and possible selves from the literature on the possible selves of young people: A scoping literature review

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ABSTRACT

Young people face many challenges as they journey through adolescence and into emerging adulthood, for example, unemployment, mental health issues, substance misuse and family disintegration. Possible selves is a theory of self-concept and behaviour motivation which argues that self-concept includes a future component comprised of hoped for, feared and expected possible selves. Hoped for and feared selves motivate behaviour either towards or away from a self in a specific future domain. Resilience enablers are those things that facilitate the development of resilience. There is considerable literature on possible selves as well as on resilience, but negligible research on how the two theories might work together. A scoping literature review was conducted to answer the question: “Can the relationship between possible selves and resilience be identified from the literature on the possible selves of young people?” Twenty-seven articles were reviewed, and eight resilience enablers were identified: family (role models, peers), health behaviours (general and sexual) education and career, culture, making (learning by doing promotes self-efficacy), balancing possible selves, enabling environments and hoping for the best. Young people’s possible selves are often global and require detailed planning to become achievable. Achieving possible selves requires persistence despite adverse circumstances which is an aspect of resilience. Thus, integrating resilience and possible selves theories might facilitate the realisation of goals in the lives of young people.

Keywords: possible selves; resilience; scoping literature review; young people

INTRODUCTION

Young people face many challenges as they journey through adolescence and into early adulthood (Mampone et al. (2021). Challenges that impact on young people include social anxieties, substance misuse, physical and mental health issues, poverty, homelessness, family disintegration and unemployment (DeLuca, 2019; Léopore & Simpson Lapp, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Girls and young women face additional challenges including gender-based violence, lower levels of education, maternal health issues and pay disparities for those who are employed, all of which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Hadaway, 2022). A high level of resilience is required in order to meet and overcome these challenges and achieve “better than expected outcomes” (van Breda, 2018, p. 4).

Resilience as a field of study emerged in the 1950s as a result of dissatisfaction with the deficit models of theory and intervention that predominated at the time (McElwee, 2007). From the 1970s to the 1990s resilience studies shifted focus and were characterised by defining resilience, operationalising concepts and measurement. Norman Garmezy (1971) is regarded as the pioneer of this wave of resilience research, which saw a shift away from problem-focused functioning to positive adaptation (Masten et al., 1999; Rutter, 2012). Resilience enablers are those factors that support the development of resilience (Theron, 2020). These may be tangible (for example, a good school within reasonable travelling distance) or intangible (for example, relationships or culture).

At approximately the same time that resilience theory was undergoing an evolution, Markus and Nurius (1986) suggested the theory of possible selves. Possible selves is a theory of self-concept and behaviour motivation. It challenged the then current view of self-concept as fixed and based on past events, suggesting instead that self-concept is flexible and dynamic, and included a future component that served to motivate behaviour. Possible selves theory maintains that the future component of self-concept is made up of three constructs: a hoped for self, feared self and expected self. These serve to motivate behaviour towards a hoped for self, away from a feared self, or to achieve a more balanced expected self (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The two theories have continued to develop in the ensuing years; possible selves with regard to application (Johnson et al., 2020; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016; Tse et al., 2014), and resilience in respect of developing working definitions, deepening understanding of resilience enablers and the way that resilience is facilitated across all levels of human functioning (Ungar, 2012; van Breda, 2018). However, the connection between possible selves and resilience has been overlooked until recently. It has been suggested that identifying and developing the possible selves of young people can serve to pinpoint resilience enablers that may otherwise go unnoticed. For example, exploring the origin of a possible self and finding that it originates from a role model provides a connection between the two theories. The list of known resilience enablers is substantial, but using possible selves theory to purposefully identify these is unexplored territory. As young people are future capital, it seems imperative that we look for new ways to maximise their life chances in the face of the challenges and stressors they face. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to review the literature on possible selves and young people to identify resilience enablers to strengthen the argument for the interaction

between possible selves and resilience. The premise of this article is that if resilience enablers can be identified incidentally from possible selves literature, this suggests that intentionally using possible selves to identify resilience enablers may yield more achievable possible selves. The article opens with a background section presenting the context of young people, the theories of possible selves and resilience, and explains why these are important for young people. The methodology for conducting the scoping review is presented. The review identified the following resilience enablers: people, health, education and career, culture, ‘making’ (from the Maker Movement [Papavlasopoulou et al., 2017] which promotes learning through making artifacts that may develop competence and contribute to self-efficacy), balancing hoped and feared possible selves, enabling environments, and hoping for the best. These are presented and a discussion of these in relation to literature follows. This will be followed by conclusions and recommendations for further research and practice.

BACKGROUND

Legislation

Internationally, children and young people are recognised as a vulnerable population requiring particular care and attention (Lambert & McVeigh, 2024). Various international legislations are in place to protect children and their rights (United Nations, 1986, 1989). The principles in this legislation trickle down into national acts and policies, the aim of which is to ensure that children and young people are protected (Kotanen, 2018; RSA, 2005; UK, 1989). However, young people face numerous challenges across multiple domains as they journey towards adulthood, and the protection against these to ensure “better than expected outcomes” (van Breda, 2018, p. 4) may not necessarily be found in the enactment of legislation and policy. For example, De Wet and Ewemade (2019) point out that although the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (RSA, 2007) prohibits children under the age of 15 years from work, and limits the types of employment for young people between the ages of 15 to 18 years, this is not strictly observed and many children and young people are engaged in labour market activities. Likewise Scolaro et al. (2015) note that although legislation and policy in respect of child marriage in the Asia-Pacific region have received attention in recent years, the implementation has been inconsistent, and the practice of child marriage continues.

Poverty and young people

Poverty is an ongoing challenge for young people worldwide (Silwal et al., 2020). The global North and the global South continue to address issues of poverty and its associated problems such as poor health, inadequate education, housing, food insecurity, unequal access to resources and social isolation (Lépure & Simpson Lapp, 2017; Ngumbela, 2020). In many countries these problems are deeply entrenched in structural issues of discrimination and historical issues of colonisation (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2018; Manana & Rule, 2021; Romer, 2022). The ripple effects of poverty impact on the life chances of young people, constraining their opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Girl children and young women are particularly affected (Hadaway, 2022). The education of boys is frequently prioritised in families and girls are often the first to be taken out of school when finances are

constrained. In addition, girls and young women are at risk of early pregnancy, forced marriage and early school drop-out (Sandoy et al., 2016).

Mental health and young people

Poverty is a known contributor to the development of mental health challenges. Mental health issues are increasing among youth populations globally (World Health Organization, 2021). Social anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation are at the forefront of mental health issues affecting young people (Chiu et al., 2021; DeLuca, 2019). These may be caused or exacerbated by other social problems such as stigma, substance misuse, bullying, family disintegration or identity formation (Chhabira et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2018; Maudu et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2020). These problems, or a combination of such problems, can in turn lead to, for example, homelessness among young people (Wang et al., 2019). The challenges that young people encounter can lead to visions of a truncated future and blunted possible selves.

Resilience theory

In the face of the multiple stressors that affect young people, it makes sense to look for ways of assisting them to manage challenges and thrive despite them. Resilience theory offers a framework that can be useful in helping young people to overcome adversity and achieve “better than expected” outcomes (van Breda, 2018, p. 4).

Resilience theory emerged in the 1970s with the pioneering work of Norman Garmezy (Garmezy, 1971). In the four waves of resilience work that have emerged since then, resilience theory has evolved significantly (Wright et al., 2013). Definitions of resilience have been refined and the importance of operationalising the concept of resilience has been explored (Naydonova & Schevchenko, 2023; Rutter, 2006). The measurement of resilience has received scholarly attention, and various tools have been developed (Windle et al., 2011). Longitudinal studies have been conducted which have established that resilience is a fluid aspect of a person; it may be present in some circumstances but not in others (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Resilience as a process or outcome has received attention (Kolar, 2011; Olsson et al., 2003). Finally, the connection between genes, environment and resilience have been examined (Olsson et al., 2003; Rutter, 2012) More recent work by Ungar (2012) examines the social ecologies of resilience, arguing that resilience is not an individual characteristic, but stems from a child’s or young person’s social and physical environments. Specifically, Ungar (2012, p. 4) states that the understanding of resilience is moving away from a focus on positive development in the vulnerable child to a “broader focus on processes in complex environments that interact to foster good developmental outcomes (i.e., biological, psychological, and social) of relevance to culturally diverse communities”. Still more recently, van Breda (2018, p. 4) defines resilience as “the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity”. He goes on to break down the definition, explaining that “multi-level” refers to resilience processes that take place over the different domains of the social ecology. The term “systems” is used to include systems of differing sizes and scope (individuals, families, communities, organisations, the climate or economy). “In the face of” means the adversity is

ongoing, whereas “in the wake of” means the adversity has passed. “Better than expected outcomes” are individual outcomes based on the person’s life circumstances. To illustrate the model van Breda (2018) uses the example of a young person who is managing to remain drug-free in a context of a community where substance misuse is rife as demonstrating a better-than-expected outcome.

The number of resilience enablers identified in the literature is substantial. The list includes people, for example, family, educators, neighbours, mentors, role models and care-givers (Alessi et al., 2018; Parent & Oliver, 2015; Theron, 2020; van Breda, 2022), education (Theron & Theron, 2014), hope and meaning making (Walsh, 2003), and culture (Theron, 2015). Involvement in sporting activities also contributes to resilience in different ways (Lau et al., 2013). Gilligan writes extensively on the value of exposure to the world of work, hobbies and voluntary activities as enablers of resilience (Gilligan, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2008; Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017). Identifying and developing resilience enablers is critical, given the challenges young people face such as social inequality, poverty and mental health challenges. Recently, future orientation as a contributor to resilience has emerged in a small body of literature, but although Sulimani-Aidan (2016) and Dumont et al. (2022), mention future selves, only one article has intentionally brought the theories of resilience and possible selves together (Bond & van Breda, 2018).

Possible selves theory

The possible selves theory was proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986). In their seminal article these authors suggested that self-concept was not a static construct, influenced only by past and current events. Rather, self-concept has a future aspect as well, making it more dynamic and opening up the possibility for individual change. The future aspect of self-concept is referred to as one’s possible selves and is made up of three separate components; a hoped for self, a feared self and an expected self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These aspects of future self-concept function as motivators of behaviour; toward a hoped for self, away from a feared self and balancing the hoped for and feared selves to achieve an expected self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As such, they are personalised representations of individual goals and may serve as powerful agents of change (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989).

Sulimani-Aidan (2016) notes that having a positive future focus is insufficient to motivate behaviour and develop resilience. She argues that unless the specific content of a future focus is unpacked, simply having a positive view of the future will not adequately contribute toward resilience. The Possible Me Tree model offers a way of exploring possible selves. The model is a three-step process. Step one involves the use of a life-map activity to facilitate future-focused thinking. Step two makes use of a detailed drawing of a Possible Me Tree identifying aspects of future self-concept and the hoped and feared possible selves about that aspect of self. Step three is the planning phase (Bond, 2025). One South African study implemented the possible me tree model with a group of young people in care (Bond, 2017). In the process of unpacking the content of their possible selves using questions specifically designed to bring resilience enablers to the fore, the authors were able to identify resilience enablers specific to each young person interviewed (Bond & van Breda, 2018). For example, the role of relationships is a well-known resilience enabler, but using the Possible Me Tree

model can direct the practitioner/researcher to relationships that *young people* define as important. These include friends and biological family, but also role models such as a community member who has done well for himself, a sports coach, famous people and non-biological ‘family’ (Bond, 2023). This suggests that resilience enablers can be identified when exploring possible selves. Similarly, having well developed possible selves can themselves serve as resilience enablers. For example, one participant acknowledged that she was tempted, but resisted the invitation to sell drugs in her neighbourhood, because the proffered opportunity did not fit in with her hoped for possible self as a successful businesswoman (Bond, 2019). However, the literature that purposefully brings the two theories together is scarce and appears to be confined to the articles referenced in this paragraph. The scoping literature review was conducted to strengthen the argument that resilience enablers can be identified from possible selves.

METHODOLOGY

There are two major types of literature reviews: systematic and scoping reviews. Systematic literature reviews as a method of research gained momentum in the 1970s to 1980’s. Initially found in healthcare research, systematic reviews have gained in popularity and are now used across a range of disciplines to answer a variety of research questions (Munn et al., 2018). Systematic reviews are used to identify evidence from international sources to answer a specific question (Munn et al., 2018) and the results of systematic reviews are commonly used to inform policy and practice (Peters et al., 2020).

In contrast, scoping reviews have a broader aim. Their purpose is to establish the coverage of available literature on a specific topic, and they are useful in bringing together literature from different disciplines. Scoping reviews do not set out to synthesise the literature; the results from scoping reviews are commonly presented in table or schematic form (Munn et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020). As scoping reviews have gained in popularity, recommendations have emerged for conducting this kind of review (Peters et al., 2020). The purpose of the review reported on in this article was to establish the extent of the literature in different disciplines on possible selves and to identify resilience enablers from that literature. Thus, a scoping review approach was selected for this study using the guidelines suggested by Peters et al. (2020): identification, screening, eligibility and studies included. The question posed was “Can resilience enablers be identified from the possible selves literature focusing on young people?”

RESULTS

In the identification phase, a database search was conducted using the EBSCO database “Academic Search Ultimate”. The parameters of the search were full text, peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2024 selected from the following databases: Africa Wide Information, APA Psychology Articles, APA Psychology Info, Family and Society Studies World Wide, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition, Humanities Source, Social Work Abstracts, Social Work Reference Centre, Sociology Source Ultimate and Women’s Studies International. The keywords used in the search were “Possible selves” and “Young People”, and “Possible selves” and “Adolescents”. This search yielded 41 (n41) articles. A

further three (n3) articles were sourced from the reference lists of articles identified in the initial search. Thus, the search yielded 44 (n44) articles in total. No duplicates were found during the initial step in the screening phase. One article was excluded from the results because it had been withdrawn by the publishing journal for plagiarism (n1). The remaining 43 articles were then screened by the author for eligibility. Exclusion criteria were articles that addressed the possible selves of adults or younger children, and those focusing on discussion, systematic reviews, theory papers and articles that addressed concepts of 'self'. For example, self-esteem, self-compassion, self-reflection, self-healing and self-efficacy would meet the criteria, but not possible selves. Thirteen (n13) articles were excluded on the above grounds. A further three (n3) articles were excluded as they used the theory of Best Possible Selves, which is a different theory to the one proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986) as the Possible Selves theory. This means that sixteen (n16) articles were therefore excluded following the eligibility screening leaving total number of 27 (n27) articles to be included in this review.

The inclusion criteria were articles, written in English, that specifically focused on the possible selves of young people between the ages of 11 and 29, and from which resilience enablers could be identified. These ages were decided on as they encompass varying definitions of 'youth'. For example, in the United Kingdom 'youth' is defined as between the ages of 13-19 (World Bank Group, 2014b). The United States defines 'youth' as any young person under the age of 25 (World Bank Group, 2014c); 'youth' in Brazil refers to young people from 15 to 25 (Youth Policy, 2013), whereas Nigeria and South Africa define 'youth' as between the ages of 18 and 35 (National Youth Development Agency, 2015; World Bank Group, 2014a). Furthermore, youths between these ages are in the early, middle and late developmental stages of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Dunkel & Harbke, 2016), both of which are life phases in which young people are experimenting with future identity.

Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was addressed by adopting recognised research methods (Peters et al., 2020) and providing thick descriptions of the research process and findings. Peer scrutiny was also employed to enhance trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). The methodology, selection process and findings were reviewed by a senior colleague who has published several systematic reviews.

The search process followed is summarised in Figure 1.

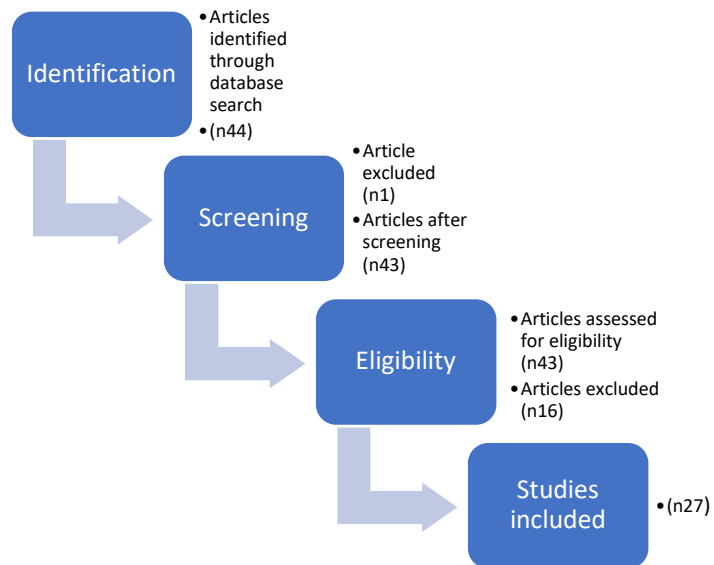


Figure 1: Search process and results

The results are presented in Table 1 and in narrative form.

Table 1: Summary of sample size, participants and research methods

Author(s)	Year	Sample size	Participants	Research method
Anders, K. M., & Olmstead, S. B.	2019	800	400 college attending and 400 non-college attending. College-attending sample 67.1% female. Non-college attending sample majority female 58.9%. Age range 18-25 for both samples	Adaptation of standard Possible Selves and Strategy Measure (Anders et al., 2017).
Anders, K. M., & Olmstead, S. B.	2019	35	First semester college students. Average 18.0 years. 82.9% female.	Semi-structured interviews.
Anders, K. M., Olmstead, S. B., & Johnson, E. I.	2017	282	First semester college students. Average 18.2 years. 65% female.	Restricted use online survey using demographic items, scales and measures and open-ended questions.
Bennet, D., & Male, S. A.	2016	49	Undergraduate engineering students	Two 2-hour workshops
Carey, R. L.	2021	5	Adolescent males. 5 boys aged 17 years	Four in-depth semi-structured interviews.
Corte, C., Lee, C. K., Stein, K. F., & Raszewski, R.	2020		Not applicable	Systematic literature review.
Dumont, A., Lanctôt, N. & Paquette, G.	2022	15	Adolescent females. 15 girls aged between 16 -18	Semi-directed interviews based on the Possible Selves mapping interview (Shepard & Marshall, 1999)
Early, J. S.	2017	15	Adolescent females. 15 girls in grades 9-11	Intervention research. Weekly writing workshops over a period of six weeks. Participants interviewed a female scientist of their choice.
Freer, P. K.	2015	85	Adolescent male choral singers ages between 12 and 18 years.	Multi-national study. In-depth interviews with participants using the active interview approach
Halfond, R., Corona, R., & Moon, A	2012	18	29 Latino parents and 18 adolescents (14 female, 11 male, mean age 12.2).	Individual interviews using semi-structured interview schedules.
Hards, E., Hsu, T. C., Joshi,	2024	1168	Adolescents between the ages 13 and 18	“I will be” possible selves questionnaire

J. E., & Reynolds, S.				
Huerta, A. H.	2022	26	Latino boys ages 11-19	Two in-depth semi-structured interviews.
Johnson, A., Corte, C., Culbert, G., Finnegan, L., Tarlov, E., Maskaly, J., & Lusk, B.	2020	52	Recently incarcerated males between the ages of 18-29	Mixed methods: 42-item Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being, LEVEL 2-Substance Use-Adult (adapted from NIDA-Modified-Assist), & AUDIT- C questionnaire. Open ended possible selves measure.
Jones, S., Hordsy, R., Mittelmier, J., Quyoum, A., & McCaldin, T.	2021	14	Students age 16-18	In-depth interviews with students using Harrison and Waller's (2018) model.
Koul, R., Sosik, J. J., & Lerdpornkulrat, T	2017	1132	Adolescents between the ages of 13-20. Mean age 16.81.	Survey questionnaire (achievement goal orientation). Cross and Markus (1991) process used for Possible Selves.
Lee, J.	2021	113	Adolescents; average age 14.58	Persistent Academic Possible Selves Scale (PAPSS).
Lee, C. K., Corte, C., Stein, K. F., Finnegan, L., McCreary, L. L., & Park, C. G.	2014	137	Adolescents: Grades 8 & 9. Mean age 13.5. 50% female.	Secondary data analysis from a longitudinal study. Yes/No questions re alcohol use. Alcohol Misuse Scale. Closed-ended Possible Selves questionnaire. Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale. Children of Alcoholics Screening Test. Perceived influence of friends measured using 1 item question Likert scale.
Lee, C. K., Corte, C., Stein, K. F., Park, C. G., Finnegan, L., & McCreary, L. L.	2015	137	Adolescents: Grades 8 & 9. Mean age 13.5. 50% female	Open-ended possible selves questionnaire.
Mulvey, B., & Wright, E.	2022	100	Undergraduate students	In-depth interviews
Murphy, A., & Stevenson, J.	2018	9	8 female, 1 male, ages between 18 and 43. Average age 27	Narrative Inquiry. Three semi-structured interviews with each participant.

Matais,-Garcia, J. A., Santamaria, A., Cubero, M., & Cubero-Perez, R.	2023	132	Adolescents ages 16-18	Twenty Statement Test (TST).
Schlegel, R. J., Chu, S. L., Chen, K., Deurmeyer, E., Christy, A. G., & Quek, F.	2019	190	91 females, 99 males ages 8-11	Intervention consisting of 'making' artifacts followed by discussion.
Wainwright, L., Nee, C., & Vrij, A.	2018	126	Males, ages 11-13. Average age 12 years	Cross sectional design. Self-report questionnaire (delinquency). Possible selves open-ended questionnaire.
Yang, R. P-J., & Noels, K. A.	2013	93	Males and females. Ages 18-47. Average 25.6	Open-ended Possible Selves instrument.
Zhu, S., & Tse, S.	2015	3078	Mean age 14.8. 46% male, 53% male, 1% did not report gender	Adapted Possible Selves questionnaire; open-ended questions
Zhu, S., Tse, S., Scheung, S. H., & Oyserman, D.	2014	3160	Mean age 14.8. 46% male, 53% male, 1% did not report gender	Instruments adapted from (Oyserman et al., 2004), Oyserman & Saltz, 1993. Support received from parents (Wills et al., 1992) (Mak, 1993)-item social desirability scale(Oyserman & Saltz, 1993)

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGIES USED IN THE ARTICLES REVIEWED

The articles reviewed for this paper employed a variety of methodologies. The Possible Selves questionnaire, or an adaptation thereof, was used, either on its own (Anders & Olmstead, 2019b; Lee et al., 2018; Yang & Noels, 2013; Zhu & Tse, 2016) or in conjunction with a Rapid Assessment Instrument (RAI) (Johnson et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2014; Perry & Vance, 2010; Wainwright et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2014). The RAIs used are detailed in Table 1. One study used an online survey (Anders et al., 2017), and another article is a systematic literature review of possible selves and health behaviour among young people (Corte et al., 2020). Anders and Olmstead (2019a), Carey (2021), Halfond et al. (2012), (Huerta, 2022) and Murphy and Stevenson (2018) conducted individual interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Mulvey and Wright (2022) conducted in-depth interviews. Freer (2014) and Jones et al. (2021) conducted in-depth interviews using specific models, namely the active interview approach suggested by Holstein and Gubrim (1995) and the model of possible selves suggested by Harrison and Waller (2018), respectively. Similarly, Dumont et al. (2022) conducted semi-directed interviews based on the Possible Selves Mapping Interview suggested by (Shepard & Marshall, 1999). Hards et al. (2024) used a variant of the “I will be” task proposed by (Rathbone et al., 2016). Two articles used measurement scales. Lee (2021) used the Persistent Academic Possible Selves Scale (PAPSS) and Matías-García et al. (2023) implemented the Twenty Statement Test (TST). Two articles were based on intervention studies. Early (2017) implemented a six-week Girls Writing Science Project with 15 girls, between Grades 9 to 11. The programme and workshops were highly participatory, using an experiential learning approach. The girls were encouraged to explore their ideas on how they envisioned a scientist, were exposed to TED talks and a gallery of women scientists, prepare a letter of introduction, compose an interview schedule, and conduct an interview with a woman scientist of their choice. Schlegel et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study over two years with 91 female and 99 male students using making activities in a science class. The classes were run for one week at a time over a 36-week academic year making a total of six six-week periods. Students were tasked with building a model by using electronics, arts and crafts materials, switches and basic circuit boards to indicate weather and weather conditions. In the second year, students build on this foundational activity by designing an example of an organism that had adapted to its environment (a bird’s beak) using electronics and 3D technology.

RESILIENCE ENABLERS IDENTIFIED FROM THE POSSIBLE SELVES LITERATURE

The following section of the article discusses the resilience enablers that were identified from the possible selves literature. In keeping with the work of eminent resilience scholars, education and career, enabling environments, culture, self-efficacy and balancing possible selves emerged as resilience enablers from this review (Theron, 2020; van Breda, 2022). Two new resilience enablers were identified, specifically general and sexual health behaviours and ‘making’ as a contributor to new possible selves.

People: Family, role models and peers

Influential people emerged in the possible selves articles reviewed for this paper, specifically family, role models and peers.

Family

(Koul et al., 2017) noted that young people in an academic school (rather than a vocational school) placed high value of their possible selves in the domain of family. (Koul et al., 2017, p. 424) refer to this as a “higher-order relatedness need”. Parental support is noted as critical to the development and achievement of hoped for possible selves, as it increases the likelihood of developing strong hoped for academic and career possible selves, and reduces the likelihood of risk-taking behaviours (Zhu et al., 2014) Parents also assist their children when the school environment is unhelpful (Murphy & Stevenson, 2018). The role of parents in communicating with their children emerges in Halfond et al. (2012), Halfond et al. (2012) discuss the importance of assisting fathers to talk to their children about their hopes and fears for them. Also, understanding and honest father communication about sex with daughters has been shown to decrease sexual risk behaviour.

The work of Jones et al. (2021) reinforces the importance of family and family networks to young people. Their findings show that young people were choosing to remain at home with their families while completing college. In part this decision was driven by a feared self as losing connection with family, but also young people recognised and appreciated the support they received from family while they were completing their education. A particular form of family support is noted by Matías-García et al. (2023) , who note that the content of parental narratives in respect of education and career are important in forming enduring possible selves. Similarly, Carey (2021) and Huerta (2022) note the significance of future selves messaging from family and significant adults in the lives of young people.

Role models

The importance of role models as contributors to the development of possible selves emerged strongly in the literature reviewed for this article. Freer (2014) comments on the importance of family members as role models, particularly fathers and older brothers who were involved in the world of music. These male role models positively influenced boys’ aspirations as singers. Making friends with other boys who were involved with singing and who provided role models, positive peer influence and support are noted in Freer (2014). These relationships also contributed to young boys resisting negative peer influence (Freer, 2014). Similarly, Matías-García et al. (2023) found that parents with higher education served as role models for their children’s educational and career possible selves. By engaging with women in scientific fields of interest to adolescent girls, the participants in the study by Early (2017) found role models – women who had worked hard to achieve their goals, who were balancing work and family commitments, and with whom the girls shared personal characteristics.

Carey (2021) and Dumont et al. (2022) also discuss the importance of role models. Carey (2021) describes an example of positive gender role modelling from a father who gave up his own career aspirations in the face of changed life circumstances, choosing to find

employment and provide for his family. Dumont et al. (2022) note the significance of a counsellor as a role model for one of their participants.

Peers

Positive peers are reported in the literature as resilience enablers (Theron, 2020). Peers were identified in the possible selves work of Freer (2014) and Perry and Vance (2010). Positive peers were found to influence commitment to group singing among adolescent males and were noted as a support network when a boy's voice started to change (Freer, 2014). The work of Perry and Vance (2010) shows a mixed relationship between peers and possible selves. On the one hand, the data indicated that peer beliefs about school did not have a significant effect on school-related possible selves. On the other hand, peer beliefs about career expectations and planning did have a significant effect. The authors suggest that this ambiguity may be due to mixed terminology, for example, friends, students and classmates, which may have confused participants (Perry & Vance, 2010). Even with this mixed message, the value of peer beliefs in the domains of career expectations and planning can be regarded as a resilience enabler.

The findings above point clearly to the roles of family, role models and peers in the development of possible selves. However, they are also serving as resilience enablers. Being able to rely on family support as you journey towards your hoped for possible self, having a role model who offers a tangible example of what you hope to become and having a supportive peer group are well noted in the literature as resilience enablers (Abrinkova et al., 2021; Flores-Buils & Andres-Roqueta, 2023; Wright et al., 2024). Thus, in their most obvious sense, positive support from families, role models and peers contribute to resilience. However, resilience can also be developed in the presence of negative family environments, role models and peers. When negative influences contribute to the development of feared possible selves that then motivate behaviour away from the feared self, this may be regarded as an act of resilience and therefore a resilience enabler. These findings point to the circular relationship between possible selves and resilience. The engagement and influence of family, role models and peers contribute (positively or negatively) to the creation and achievement of possible selves at the same time acting as resilience enablers, providing support, guidance and affirmation. This in turn assists with the achievement or avoidance of a possible self.

General and sexual health behaviours

In their systematic literature review of possible selves and health behaviour in young people Corte et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between the two concepts. Where young people had a high perceived likelihood of achieving their hoped for possible self, they demonstrated lower levels of health-risk behaviours and high levels of health-promotion behaviours. Also, domain specific hoped for selves, for example, high school graduate, was associated with health-promotion behaviours.

In exploring the sexual possible selves of college students several aspects of sexual health and wellbeing emerged (Anders & Olmstead, 2019a, 2019b; Anders et al., 2017). Delaying engaging in a sexual relationship, remaining faithful to one partner, avoiding pregnancy and

taking care of one's sexual health and wellbeing are resilience enablers that can be identified from the body of work produced by Anders and her colleagues.

Here we see the relationship between the resilience enablers of health (sexual and general) and wellbeing and possible selves. An expectation of achieving a hoped for self contributes to taking steps to promote good health (and avoid poor health choices) which are resilience enablers. Maintaining good health and wellbeing also contribute to the achievement of the expected self, as one is not delayed in the journey towards a possible self by recovering from illness or taking maternity leave. Additionally, maintaining good health indicates a high level of self-regulation, which is itself a resilience enabler (Adibsereshki et al., 2021).

Education and career

Lee et al. (2015), Zhu et al. (2014) and Zhu and Tse (2016) noted that academic achiever was most often cited by participants as a hoped for possible self. Lee et al. (2015) suggest that having significant possible selves in relation to academic performance and having many hopes for future selves served as a protective factor and resulted in decreased alcohol consumption among young people.

Lee (2021) argues that persistent academic possible selves develop an enduring academic self-concept which leads to self-regulation. This is also noted by Matías-García et al. (2023), who argue that positive academic content in self or other narrations leads to positive self-descriptions. This in turn contributes to the continuity of self – the connection between present and future possible selves which becomes a predictor of academic performance.

Hoped for possible selves in respect of high school completion, tertiary education and having a definite career outcome in mind (for example, lawyer, engineer, social worker or police officer) emerged among young people in Halfond et al.'s study (2012). Having individual education and career plans and opportunities to achieve career-related goals were noted by Yang and Noels (2013) as contributors to the cross-cultural adjustment of international students in Canada. Hoped for possible selves in the domain of career contributed to university students "navigating and negotiating" (Ungar, 2012, p. 27) their way to resources and opportunities that would facilitate the achievement of their possible selves (Mulvey & Wright, 2022).

Education is noted in resilience literature as a significant resilience enabler (Theron, 2020; Wood et al., 2020). It is also noted in the possible selves literature as a significant contributor to the creation and achievement of hoped for possible selves (Oyserman et al., 2004). The findings from this scoping review connect these two concepts, demonstrating how developing strong academic and career possible selves leads to resilience-enhancing behaviours, and suggesting that resilience enablers, such as role models and self-regulation, contribute to the commitment to achieving a possible self.

Culture

Although this was not a prominent theme to emerge from the scoping review, it is a significant finding. Maintaining connection with one's culture is noted in the South African literature as a resilience enabler (Theron, 2013). Three young people referenced the importance of culture and cultural roots in Halfond et al. (2012) study of Latino youth. The youth participants expressed a wish to speak their home language fluently and return to their home country to connect with their cultural roots.

Culture is noted as a significant resilience enabler. Culture contributes to ethnic and racial identity and establishes and transmits cultural values. Culture is found in family history, values, principles and social systems, which are all noted as resilience enablers in South African and international literature (Mampone et al., 2021; Panter-Brick, 2015). It may be argued that as culture has a strong influence on identity formation, it may also shape possible selves. The resilience enablers above may serve as strong motivations to achieve hoped for selves and avoid feared selves (Panter-Brick, 2015). So far, the mutual relationship between possible selves and resilience in relation to culture seems sound. However, culture can also serve to limit possible selves. Traditional views of gender roles and appropriate aspirations may conflict with a young person's own hoped for selves. Zhu and Tse (2016) note a gender difference in boys' and girls' perceived mathematical abilities and interconnectedness (Au et al., 2023). Parents socialise male children to be 'good' at math in preparation for math-based careers (e.g. accounting, medicine) (Wang et al., 2023), whereas girls are steered to 'softer' career goals such as teaching or nursing (Stoet & Geary, 2022). In addition, the clash between Western individualistic values and traditional cultural values of community before self may cause stress and anxiety in young people. How young people resolve this dissonance in a way that satisfies their individual ambitions while maintaining cultural values is a point of concern (Panter-Brick, 2015).

'Making' as a contributor to self-efficacy

One article (Schlegel et al., 2019) discussed 'making' as a contributor to self-efficacy which is a resilience enabler (Schwarzer & Warner, 2012). Papavlasopoulou et al. (2017, p. 57) defines the Maker Movement as a "philosophy in which individuals or groups of individuals create artifacts that are recreated and assembled using software and/or physical objects". Schlegel et al. (2019) comment that the 'making' activities were important to a group of children who are underrepresented in science fields and therefore lack role models and who may not have access to affordable STEM programmes. The findings from implementing making activities in science classes suggest that making contributes to the development of science-related possible selves and increased self-efficacy (Schlegel et al., 2019). Self-efficacy is a significant resilience enabler (Supervía et al., 2022) as, when encouraged, it moves in an upward spiral; the more a young person does (in this case 'makes') the more confident they feel, so they are willing to attempt more. The upward spiral of self-efficacy can be a strong influencer on achieving a hoped for possible self, demonstrating the relationship between possible selves and resilience as proposed by Bond and van Breda (2018).

Balancing possible selves

Families are recognised as providers of care and support while young people are developing their future selves in respect of their occupation (Murphy & Stevenson, 2018). It is noted in the literature that the possible selves of young people, particularly young people in disadvantaged circumstances, are frequently grandiose and exaggeratedly idealistic (van Breda, 2010; Yowell, 2000). The circular relationship between possible selves and resilience can be found in Murphey and Stevenson's (2018) work. Their research showed that families play a role in bringing to the fore hidden capabilities that may serve to balance extreme hoped for or feared selves, and lead to more realistic, achievable balanced future selves. This can be linked to the literature on early possible selves that developed the original work of Markus and Nurius (1986) further, suggesting that balanced selves have more impact on decision making and behaviour modification, and thus are more likely to be achieved (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

Enabling environments

Environments that facilitate the development of strong hoped for possible selves with a high level of perceived achievability may be referred to as enabling environments which are contributors to resilience. It is possible to identify several components of enabling environments from the work of Bennett and Male (2016) and Early (2017). Bennett and Male (2016, p. 607) discuss "career previews", where students are given an overview of a chosen career. The value of this activity is that it creates opportunities to challenge students' preconceived ideas about a particular career. "Establishing relevance" (Bennett & Male, 2016, p. 612) facilitates the development of connections between the 'self', learning and the intended career. Enabling environments also provide opportunities for young people to imagine and explore possibilities in their intended career. This activity allows the young person an opportunity to evaluate their hoped for self, and how it lines up with their abilities and values (Bennett & Male, 2016). An enabling environment also makes use of practical exposure to the chosen career by facilitating holiday employment in the intended field. Bennett and Male (2016) suggest that opportunities for professional experience should be offered early in the degree. Their work focuses on the engineering profession, but the same argument can be applied to work experience in any chosen career.

Early (2017) also notes the value of creating an environment which allows picturing future selves. In her work with adolescent girls, the envisioning process took the form of preparing an interview schedule and interviewing a woman working in the field of science. This series of writing workshops and interviews created an enabling environment where the girls made a personal connection to women in the field of science. This facilitated awareness in the girls of a wider world, an understanding of the level of hard work and commitment it takes to achieve a goal, and an awareness of how they want to conduct themselves in the workspace.

However, the timing of interventions is regarded as critical. In their work with at-risk early adolescents Wainwright et al. (2018) note a shared positive outlook on their futures of the two groups of participants (delinquent and non-delinquent). Having a positive future outlook is noted as a resilience enabler (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016), but this positivity can be dulled by

structural and social barriers resulting in a downward spiral into delinquency (Wainwright et al., 2018). The timing of interventions that contribute towards creating enabling environments by addressing the social contexts of young people's aspirations and promoting possible selves that are congruent and achievable would appear to be critical to promote resilience and avoid the decline into delinquency.

Hoping for the best

Hope and being hopeful were noted in Dumont et al. (2022) and (Hards et al., 2024) as significant resilience enablers (Hidayat & Nurhayati, 2019; Theron, 2020). By their nature, hoped for possible selves suggest hope as they represent one's hopes for the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The young women in the study by Dumont et al. (2022, p. 5) expressed the notion of hoped for selves as "doing better and having more" These young women hoped for stability, power over their lives, healthy relationships, to be a better person and to be there for others (Dumont et al., 2022). Likewise, Hards et al. (2024) noted that having positive possible selves, such as being happy, having employment, getting married and having a family, served to ameliorate depression in young people. Hope in the domain of interpersonal relationships was found by Johnson et al. (2020) to contribute to personal growth in incarcerated young men.

Hope as a resilience enabler is known to alleviate stress and is a positive resource for the present and future (Hidayat & Nurhayati, 2019; Senger, 2023) Hope acts as a catalyst for change and powerful motivator of behaviour (Laranjeira & Querido, 2022). As such, the connection between possible selves and resilience may be seen in the young peoples' hopes for their future selves.

DISCUSSION

Following the seminal article on possible selves by Markus and Nurius (1986), a body of literature has emerged in a series of waves. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of literature on possible selves as personalised goals (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989), possible selves and delinquency (Oyserman & Markus, 1990), across the lifespan (Cross & Markus, 1991), and possible selves and performance (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). During the early 2000s the focus was on the application of possible selves theory in different domains. Oyserman and colleagues wrote about possible selves and education (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002, 2004). Continuing this theme, Yowel explored the possible selves in respect of education and career choices among Latino youth (Yowell, 2000, 2002). Although the initial emphasis was on possible selves and young people, there were studies that explored the possible selves of older persons (Rossiter, 2007; Smith & Freund, 2002). The mid-2000s saw a continuation of the application of possible selves theory to include substance misuse (Lee et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2014) and education in different contexts (Luigia, 2009; Mainwaring & Hallam, 2010).

This waxing and waning of interest in possible selves theory may point to an inherent weakness in the theory itself. As early as 2006, Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) commented that possible selves theory lent itself to being embedded in other theories, suggesting that this would serve to increase the utility of the theory and contribute to a deeper knowledge of the

processes that inform the generation of possible selves. So far, this suggestion has had limited uptake. Possible selves theory was integrated into Prochaska and DiClemente's (1984) cycle of change (Dunkel et al., 2006) and action theory (Marshall et al., 2006). It has also been integrated into art therapy (Park, 2016). More recently it has been argued that resilience theory is an appropriate choice to integrate with possible selves theory as the two theories function in a reciprocal relationship, viz exploring resilience enablers may lead to the generation of new possible selves, and exploring possible selves may serve to identify previously unknown resilience enablers (Bond & van Breda, 2018). This article set out to answer the question: "Can resilience enablers be identified from the possible selves literature on young people?" The resilience enablers identified incidentally through the possible selves literature in this scoping review supports the suggestion by Bond and van Breda (2018) that there is a mutual relationship between the two theories. The emergence of two new resilience enablers from this review (general and sexual health and 'making') suggests that there may be other resilience enablers to be identified from exploring possible selves which can add to the resilience literature.

It is challenging for young people to plan for achievable possible selves if resilience enablers are not identified in the process of exploring possible selves. Family, positive peers and role models contribute to the development of possible selves. But these resilience enablers are also critical assets for young people. Not only do they provide emotional support, but also practical support such as assistance with the tasks of working towards a possible self. Enabling environments also contribute to a young person's ability to "navigate and negotiate" their way towards necessary resources to make their possible selves a reality (Ungar, 2012, p. 27).

The literature suggests that possible selves are more achievable when hoped for and feared selves are balanced out into an expected possible self (Tse et al., 2014; Yowell, 2002). However, van Breda (2010) notes that disadvantaged youths tend to have over-idealistic possible selves which are likely to be unachievable. The process of exploring possible selves and identifying resilience enablers may serve to contribute to the balancing of possible selves to achieve a realistic expected self. Bond (2017) illustrates this process with a young care leaver who, at the end of a three-phase interview process, had refined her hoped for possible self from a doctor to an expected self as an early childhood development practitioner. Another care leaver refined her possible selves from "designer" to "business woman" to "business management" (Bond & van Breda, 2018). These expected selves were more in keeping with the participants' educational status and therefore more achievable. When exploring possible selves using targeted questions aimed at purposefully identifying resilience enablers, one can strengthen the possible self and embed it as an achievable aspect of self-concept. An achievable possible self in conjunction with a concrete action plan becomes a resilience enabler as it contributes to self-efficacy.

However, possible selves need clear and detailed planning to make them achievable (van Breda, 2010). Zhu and Tse (2016) observe that the youths in their study had no concrete strategies for achieving their possible selves. This observation is supported by earlier literature (Gonzalez et al., 2012). Oyserman et al. (2011) noted the need for programmes that

link future aspirations to short-term planning. In my own work with young people, possible selves and resilience I have also noted this as a challenge and provide a detailed grid for planning to achieve possible selves (Bond, 2025). Unfortunately, it is not usually the remit of the researcher to follow through with the implementation of planning. This raises questions about the sustainability of possible selves with any group of young people as research participants if they are going to be left with possible selves and a plan of action, but no follow-through support. In reviewing the literature for this article, I was struck by the absence of longitudinal studies that followed up on the achievement of possible selves from original research cohorts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It may be concluded from this review that there is a relationship between resilience and possible selves. Twenty-seven articles on possible selves were reviewed for this paper. The identification of ten resilience enablers from this body of work is a significant number as none of the authors intentionally integrated resilience theory into their work.

It may also be suggested that resilience enablers may contribute to the achievement of possible selves. These conclusions lead to the recommendation for further research that will purposefully bring possible selves and resilience theories together.

In the light of the two new resilience enablers that emerged in this study, further research that brings the two theories together with the intent of seeking out new resilience enablers is recommended.

A further recommendation is for longitudinal studies on the possible selves of young people. Although the body of literature discussed in this review explores the possible selves of young people in various domains, there is no work that follows up on the implementation of possible selves planning. Therefore, little is known about the achievement (or not) of these possible selves. The body of work on possible selves would benefit from longitudinal studies exploring the resilience enablers and strategies used by young people in their journeys towards their hoped for or expected selves.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to this scoping review. The review did not include grey literature, books, book chapters or work written in a language other than English. This may have limited the number of articles available for the review. These limitations could be addressed by compiling a systematic literature review.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to identify resilience enablers from a scoping review of the literature on possible selves and strengthen the argument for an interactive relationship between the two theories. The results from the scoping review of relevant literature indicate that resilience enablers can be identified from the literature on possible selves. The findings presented also demonstrate the interrelatedness of the two theories. This suggests that embedding resilience theory into possible selves methodologies by asking targeted resilience

questions may add depth and increased utility to the possible selves research. Integrating possible selves into resilience-based interventions with youths expands the scope of both theories. Wade (2008, p. 43) argues that youths identify a range of people referred to as “key kin” who are not necessarily biological relations. Asking “Who do you know has achieved this possible self?” or “Who might help you with this possible self?” can point the social worker to resilience-enabling people they might not know about. Similarly, asking “What do you have going for you that will help you achieve this possible self?” or “What resources do you have you can use to achieve this possible self?” can indicate tangible and intangible resilience enablers. In a context where decisions are frequently made about them, not with them, this offers youths at risk a voice and an opportunity to participate in interventions and planning. When interventions and planning are personalised and meaningful, they become more achievable. This may in turn contribute towards making hoped for or expected possible selves a reality and improve the life chances of young people at risk.

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