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Possible Selves Mapping Intervention: Rural Women and Beyond

Blythe Shepard and Seanna Quressette

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Shepard, Blythe, Ph.D., is a counselor educator at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. Her research interests include the life-career development of rural residents using narrative and mapping techniques.

Quressette, Seanna, M.Ed., has over 20 years experience in the career development field, in both urban and rural settings, including a decade of experience training career development practitioners in British Columbia and Alberta.

As economic, environmental, technological, and social changes continue to transform rural areas, women face particular challenges in managing their work lives (McAtee & Benshoff, 2006; O'Toole & MacGarvey, 2003). Entrenched ideas about women's roles, insecurity of seasonal employment, the distance to work and training sites, and the characteristics of jobs in the new economy provide particular challenges for women in the rural labour market. Women in rural areas often experience triple disadvantage because of their gender, their location, and the interactions between the two.

Rural communities as sites where life-career planning and decision-making are taking place, remain an area of study overlooked in the career literature. In Canada, one in five women live in rural areas; that is, in towns or municipalities beyond the commuting zone of large urban centres with 10,000 or more population or in areas with a population density of fewer than 150 people per square kilometer (Ministry of Rural Affairs, 2000). Many rural and remote communities experience "boom or bust" cycles of employment because their economies are dependent upon primary production, such as agriculture or resource development and unstable manufacturing industries, such as food processing (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Canadian rural areas, 14 percent of women are engaged in non-farm self-employment as compared to 11% of women in urban areas in 2001. Recent growth in self-employment in rural areas has tended to be in the less financially secure own-account category (du Plessis, 2004).

Rural Canadian women, in comparison to their urban counterparts, have unique circumstances to contend with when considering their life-career paths. Reduced access to continuing education, to a range of occupations, and to role models has also been identified (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2007; Phimister, Vera-Toscano, & Weersink, 2001). The lack of child care services in rural communities and the distances that must be travelled to access care are further deterrents for working women in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2006). Across all age groups, rural female employment rates are

significantly below the rates found in urban centres and the work available tends to be menial, part-time, and low-paying with little opportunity for economic advancement (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2007). While the trend toward urbanization remains strong globally, women continue to live and work in rural communities and there continues to be a need to understand how, with limited options, they can continue to develop their career and life paths (Shepard, 2005). Rural women are often left alone to grapple with a complex reality encompassing social and labour market changes which generate uncertainty relating to their income security. This population needs counsellors who can work with them to address the multiple barriers that they face and to assist them in thinking about their futures.

In this paper, we present an intervention that counsellors can use to explore the hopes and fears of rural women as they consider their future. The Possible Selves Mapping Intervention (PSMI) is designed to assist individuals in developing new views of self within the context of their world. That is, possible selves as future-oriented constructions created by one's knowledge, values, and motives are "representational constructs" (Kelly, 1955) or personally held interpretations of the world.

Possible Selves

Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves that we could become and are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas, the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self. (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954)

Hoped-for selves include the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the individual and contain images and visions of the individual in desired end states. These hoped-for selves are domain specific and are critically important to behavior because they integrate and summarize thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the self in a specific behavioral domain. They store not just abstract goals or declarative knowledge, but also the specific scripts, strategies, plans, and associated affect for achieving a desired end-state (i.e., procedural knowledge). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), this connection between declarative and procedural knowledge encourages the transition from a hoped-for self into organized behavior.

Feared selves, on the other hand, are the possible selves that an individual wants to avoid, yet fears becoming. Instead of influencing an individual's movement toward a goal, the feared self plays an important role in the self-concept by acting as a motivator so that concrete actions are taken to avoid that future possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves, then, provide a theoretical framework for understanding the means by which future orientation influences behavior. Firstly, the hopes and fears that an individual holds for the future become the standards by which that individual gauges current behaviors or information. Secondly, possible selves can act as motivators by providing the energy to persevere in attempts to attain goals and to avoid fears. Thirdly,

the procedural knowledge of possible selves guides behavior by facilitating meaning-making, by providing incentives for behavior, and by regulating behavior.

To further explicate the concept, two individuals may share the same possible self (e.g., owner of a home-based business). However, the degree to which this possible self is salient in their everyday lives may vary. One individual may have a very clear picture of carrying out this self with the expectation that owning a business will occur. This individual can list several specific behaviors that he or she engages in to make this hoped-for self come true. As well, this individual believes that he or she is capable of accomplishing this hoped-for self (personal efficacy) and expects that this possible self will be achieved (outcome expectancy). On the other hand, an individual who has an unclear picture of owning a business may list only a few specific behaviors undertaken to meet this goal and may not feel very capable or optimistic of accomplishing this possible self.

Possible selves, then, can have a concrete impact on how people initiate and structure their actions, both in realizing positive possible selves and in preventing realization of negative possible selves. Since envisioning an action entails previewing a sequence of events that would likely accompany that action, the creation of elaborated possible selves achieving the sought-after goal has a direct impact on the translation of end-states into intentions and actions. In the domain of career behavior, having a hoped-for self of working steadily or a feared self of being unemployed should provide one with incentive to actively search for work. It seems plausible that possible selves would be involved in regulating behavior, including career-related behaviors.

The concept of possible selves has been applied to a variety of issues and groups including the transition to motherhood (Nurius, Casey, Lindhorst, & Macy, 2006), school involvement (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002), negative health behaviors in early adolescence (Aloise-Young, Hennigan, & Leong, 2001), Latino boys and girls (Yowell, 2000, 2002), and young adolescents' career ideas (Shepard & Marshall, 1999).

Context

The workshop took place in a town of 1100 in which the viability of the historically important industries of forestry and mining now seemed uncertain. Less than 30% of the working population was employed year round full time, compared to the provincial average of 48% (Statistics Canada, 2007). In this community there was significant financial disparity between the income of men and women; men were employed in full-time, full-year work more than twice as often as women; the average total income for men was 20 percent higher than the average total income for women (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Key informants already identified in the community through a previous research project assisted in recruiting participants for the workshop. Nine women who were between the ages of 25 and 55 and who had lived in the area for at least 10 years took part in the PSMI workshop. All participants were of Euro-Canadian origin with the exception of one participant who was Métis.

Possible Selves Mapping Intervention

Possible selves mapping is based on constructivist views of counselling in which clients are assisted in understanding the relationships among events in their lives, in seeing how they impose order on their challenges, and in recognizing how they make meaning of their experiences (Peavy, 2004). The PSMI is a hands-on, visual strategy that can be used with both individual clients and small groups.

Participants were asked to respond to the following script: “At times we think about what we hope we will be like. One way of thinking about this is to talk about possible selves—selves we want to become. Some of these possible selves seem quite likely, for example, being a home owner or being a parent. Others seem quite unlikely, but still possible, for instance, having all of your family remain in this community. We might have pictures of ourselves in the future that we are afraid of or don’t want to have realized, for instance, being unemployed. Others seem less likely, for instance, being all alone in the world. I would like you to take a few minutes and think about what you hope for yourself in the future. Please list on the green file cards as many hoped-for selves as come to mind putting only one response on each card (pause). Now I would like you to think about what you fear, dread, or don’t want for yourself and list as many feared selves as come to mind using the yellow file cards (pause).”

Participants were then asked to elaborate on each card as the facilitator probed for details. The cards were then used in a series of four activities, carried out for both hoped-for and feared selves.

- (a) Participants ranked their hoped-for (and feared) selves. Once ordered from most important to least important, participants were asked to elaborate on their four most important hoped-for and feared selves.
- (b) They were then asked to select from their top four most important hoped-for and feared possible selves, the ones they felt capable of achieving (or preventing). They rated their capability on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= not at all capable; 7= completely capable). Examples of questions asked included: Think about your most important hoped-for selves and describe the way you imagine your life would be. If you could achieve your most important hoped-for selves, what sort of individual would you be? How would you describe your ability to achieve your dreams and to prevent your fears?
- (c) As a third step, participants were asked to select the hoped for and feared possible self they felt had the most likelihood of occurring (e.g., what they expected to happen) and to rate the likelihood on a 7 point Likert-type scale.
- (d) The last activity involved asking participants to reflect on the steps that they had taken during the past 6 months to bring about (or to prevent) their most important possible selves. Examples of questions asked included: Given what you have said about your ability to create your hoped-for self, what action can you take today to move in the direction of that hoped-for self? Given what you have said about your ability to prevent your feared self, what action can you take today to move away

from that feared self? What other activities could you engage in to help bring about (or deter) your most important possible selves? What resources and supports do you imagine that you might need in order to achieve (or deter) your most important possible selves?

- (e) Participants then recorded the information gained on a Possible Selves Map to take with them for ongoing reference (Figure 1).

Participants reactions to the PSMI are provided in the next section along with a summary of their hopes and fears and actions proposed to achieve (or prevent) their possible selves.

Responses to the PSMI

Workshop participants had positive responses to the intervention. “I have never paused and thought about what I want and desire. I guess I am too busy just surviving. I liked having the cards in front of me – sort of like having your life laid out.” Another participant noted that the process “got me thinking about down the road... especially the fears. I realized that I need to do things now in order to be prepared for 5 years from now when I am supposed to retire.” A third participant became aware that her action plans were too vague. “I need to have help with the specific steps needed to achieve my hopes and to not have my fears come real... It kind of motivates me to do something, but I just don’t know exactly what it is I need to do.” All participants stated that they enjoyed having the cards and map as a starting point from which to reflect on their current situations and what they wanted to achieve in the next two to five years.

Important Hoped-for Selves

Examples of important hoped-for selves for this group of women included: to have an increased personal income from business; become a strong communicator (English is a second language); to be supported emotionally, financially, spiritually, and physically; to find food; to maintain a healthy relationship with son; to be a self-sufficient woman; to be happy and fulfilled in life; to be happily married; to be a spiritual student and guide; and to be a mother.

Overall, participants rated themselves as quite capable of achieving their hoped-for selves (range of 3 to 7 with a median of 5.5). They expected or thought likely that their hoped-for selves would occur (range of 3 to 7, with a median of 6.5). The younger participants (less than age 30) looked forward to achieving relationships with family and partners. Erikson (1959) explained this stage also in terms of sexual mutuality - the giving and receiving of physical and emotional connection, support, love, comfort, trust, and all the other elements that we would typically associate with healthy adult relationships conducive to mating and child-rearing. Some of the women older than 30 described hoped-for selves that indicated they had not achieved financial or emotional security.

Important Feared Selves

Examples of important feared selves for this group of women included: not having a home; having a business that does not work or support me; to not find a home; to die in poverty; to be in ill health; to be unable to provide for myself; to be lonely; to have a broken heart; to be alone; to die unhappily; to be abandoned by my partner; to be a single mother; to be estranged from family; to be a single mother; to have to move away from here; and to remain in an unfulfilling relationship.

There was more variation among participants in rating their ability to prevent an important feared self from occurring; the ratings ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 7 with a median of 5. Of interest is the lack of control that some of the older participants had in having a home or being able to provide for themselves. In terms of likelihood, participants' ratings ranged from 1 to 7 with a median of 3 indicating that feared selves were seen as less likely to materialize in the future. This group of participants appeared to prefer not to think about themselves in unpleasant situations.

It was clear that relational contexts were important to these rural women in both their hopes and fears. Five of nine participants indicated at least one, and in one case two, *Hoped for Experiences* that were based on relationships; whereas, seven of nine participants indicated their *Feared Experiences* were relationally based. It is extremely likely that these women will take into account the presence or absence of relational contexts when making future career decisions. The importance of community influence in career identity is an essential part of the relational contexts of career within a person's life (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005). Within small communities, the connections, and the influences those connections have on the individual, can seem magnified, when compared to the diffuseness of influence the community has within a larger urban context (Kim & Kaplan, 2004). Blustein (2004) identified the need to take into account the potential influence of relationships both within family and community on the career development process. Crozier (1999) also stressed the importance of examining women's experience of work in a relational context.

Actions Taken

Constructivist counseling is based on the client's subjective narrative or life story. The counselor is a collaborative partner with the client in increasing the client's personal awareness of past and present chapters and in eliciting action steps in building a preferred way of being in future chapters (Peavy, 2004). A participant in her late 20s identified "being happy" as a number one priority that needed to be addressed before she could move towards her career goal of being a teacher. In the following narrative she describes action steps taken to ensure that she obtains this goal.

I've been battling depression [since] maybe around fifteen-seventeen and I've more recently learned that I just need to have maintenance on myself and if I'm happy I think that means that I'm sort of keeping up with that. I've been going to yoga and acupuncture and I see a women's counselor here and it seems to me that those three things maybe themselves aren't the solution but their [sic] indicating that I'm paying attention to myself and when I get too caught up in life I don't take care of myself. The happiness, I think, especially going to see the counselor, I'm realizing that

what I'm dealing with isn't as complicated to tackle as far as the happiness goes - the solutions are sometimes really simple. I also met a new friend, a new male friend and using all of these things that I've learned in the past few years especially that I can communicate my needs so that I can get what I want from a relationship.

An older participant in her mid-50s indicated that her most important feared self was "to not have a home." Although in a relationship, her partner was unable to work full-time due to health problems. A home, to this participant, meant a place to put down roots, a sanctuary. She describes how faith, determination, and rituals have helped to build a drive within her to move from the area that she loves to find work that will allow her to come back and build her home. In her narrative, she describes her fear of being too old to find suitable work and wonders about work and life outside the community.

Discussion

The PSMI appears to provide a framework for constructing new perspectives of the self in the future, for setting personal goals for growth, and for developing self-management skills, like decision-making. By enhancing and promoting certain selves over others, it is possible for the individual to make the best use of certain knowledge and skills in the achievement of their selected selves. Possible selves can serve to motivate and direct change both by initiating activities to reach positively valued future states (such as becoming self-sufficient) and by encouraging action to avoid feared futures (such as being a single mother).

For rural women, the discussion of career decision making, career options, and the contextualization of career within a broader reality is qualitatively different than for their urban counterparts. These women felt a strong need to stay connected to family, they indicated a lack of access to higher education without relocation, and described a social structure which defined their options. Based on the current statistical data, a woman is very likely to find herself the sole earner of a single parent family (in this community over 75% are in a single parent home), likely creating her income from a variety of part-time, part-year jobs or is likely to be a business owner/operator working long hours for little remuneration and no benefits (Statistics Canada, 2007). In small communities it is often the case that women tether together some combination of multiple opportunities to ensure they are earning a livable wage for themselves and their families. One participant described this as the "Shuffle, which is you have, usually, minimum, two or three jobs on the go...[You are] constantly shuffling and like my schedule every week changes and it becomes odd jobs. It's very...half the time is spent organizing jobs."

Like many resource based communities, the career options for women in this small community are often defined by what remains available after the men have gone to work. Listening to rural women describe their career roles and opportunities, time seems to have stood still: "...here in a small town like ours, you can be a teacher, you can be a nurse, you can be a waitress, you can run your flower business. It's same old, same old, pink ghetto." The participants even make the distinction between those who are "from" the community having less access to opportunity when compared to women entering the community. "And then there's a whole newer segment of women...who come with their

computers and their degrees from bigger places...and they establish themselves.”

Certainly, in this community women find employment and satisfaction in their work; however, the process of career planning and life planning is largely based on available opportunities and chance encounters with meaningful contribution. That planfulness is not often the process women choose within this rural context. Finding employment appears to be a process of “picking up little bits and pieces...there’s always people phoning me saying – oh look there’s a weekend job here, or, did you want to apply for this job...it’s always word of mouth.” Career counsellors could provide a much needed service for rural women in order to help them elaborate on their possible selves, identify barriers to their hoped-for futures, set goals for obtaining their positive possible selves, and develop action plans that make sense within their particular community.

Transferability of PSMI to Other Populations and Issues

The PSMI is a strategy that could be useful with a wide variety of clients and counseling situations. Career counselors can use the PSMI to assist clients to collect information about interests and values, to develop short-and long-term plans, and to evaluate, monitor, and refine their plans (Shepard, 2000). The PSMI has been used successfully in group settings with youth to access their dreams for the future, their sense of competence in achieving those dreams, and the behaviors they can direct towards achieving those goals (Shepard, 2005). Counselors can use the PSMI to develop resiliency in clients. The ability to self-appraise, to realistically evaluate both one’s capacity for actions and expected outcomes, to actively problem solve, to change perspectives, and to have self-knowledge are resources that individuals can enlist to deal effectively with a stressful world. School counselors can use the PSMI to assist students in developing skills in self-assessment, self-reflection, and goal setting. The maps and cards used in the PSMI are a concrete representation of students’ hopes, expectations, and fears for the future which can be stored in student portfolios to be reviewed throughout the year (Shepard & Marshall, 1999). A number of possible selves in specific domains can also be examined, for example, possible selves in the area of health or education.

Conclusion

Across the lifespan, people change and grow by building new skills, interests, attitudes, and other assets. The PSMI provides a framework for constructing new perspectives of the self in the future, for setting personal goals for growth, and for developing self-management skills, like decision-making. Possible selves mapping is a self-assessment and exploration activity that is contextual in focus, flexible for use with a wide variety of clients and counselling situations, and practical in application. The PSMI fosters the development of present and future narratives and encourages client responsibility through action.

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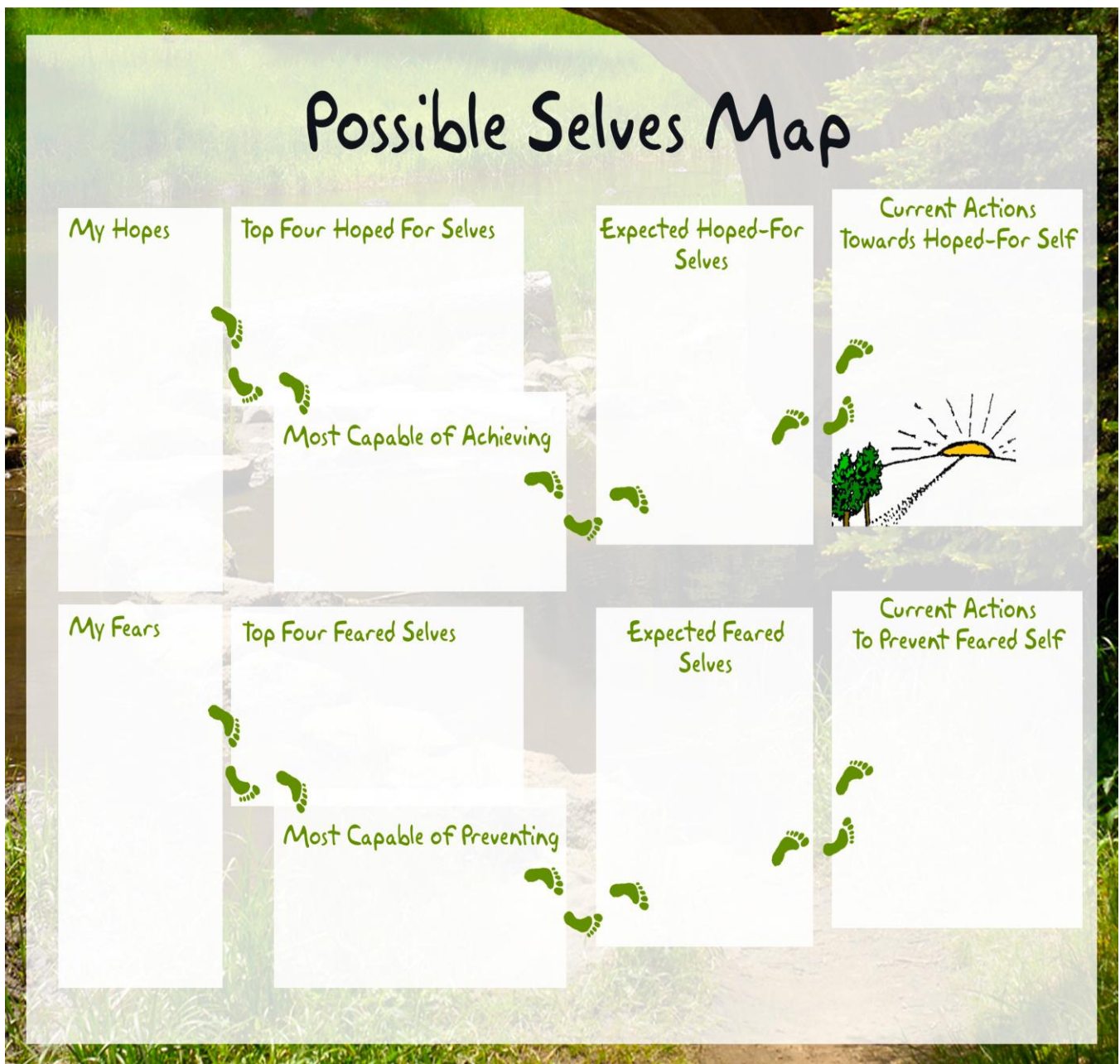


Figure 1. Possible Selves Map