



# Dreams of a Better Life

## Aspirations and expectations: exploring young people's 'possible selves'.

Joanna Ridley - Doctoral candidate, School of Education - [jridley@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:jridley@brookes.ac.uk)

### The concept of Possible Selves

Possible selves equate to the future identities we imagine for ourselves, both those that are hoped for and those that are feared. These identities are influenced by factors within and beyond our control.

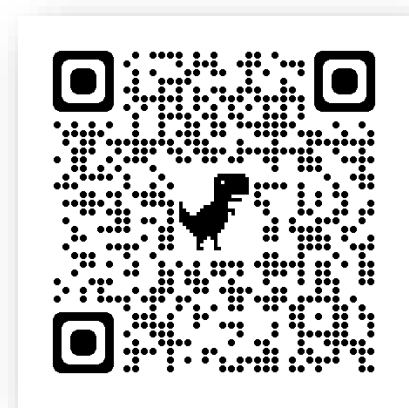
In their study of young people's academic-related possible selves, Oyserman & colleagues found that those from higher socio-economic groups, surrounded by positive role models and with access to greater cultural and social capital, had possible selves that were focused and 'aspirational', whereas young people from relatively disadvantaged groups, had lower expectations of their possible selves and those that were aspirational were vague and the routes to achieve them unclear.

### Research Aims

To investigate the relationship between young people's imagined 'possible selves' and perceptions of class identity.

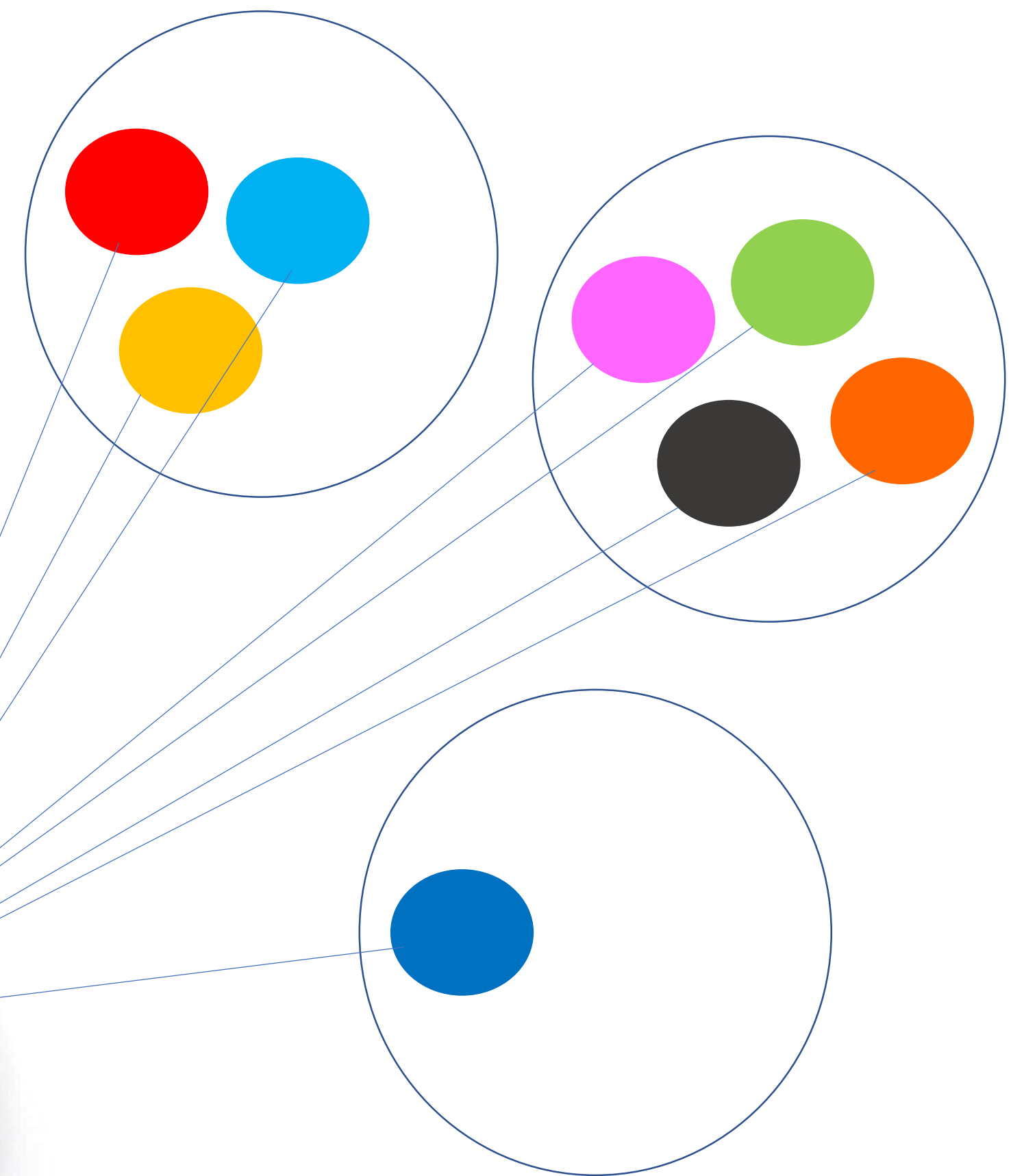
To build a complex understanding of the mechanisms and processes influencing the development of educational/career aspirations and expectations for young people.

To offer new critical insights in the field of higher education widening participation



### Supporting information

Use the QR code to find background articles and further references relating to this study.



### Q Methodology

Q methodology sets out to systematically study subjectivity, our individual and shared viewpoints. While the opinions we hold are subjective, they have structure and form. Q methodology aims to make this form manifest for the purposes of observation and study.

It does so using statistical factor analysis and factor rotation techniques.

1. Participants sort a set of items (usually statements) collected from the wider concourse of opinion on the subject in question. They are asked to sort according to how closely they agree or relate to each item.
2. Their complete sorts are entered into Q software which factor analyses and rotates the data, producing one or more factors, equating to distinct viewpoints.
3. The researcher analyses the factors qualitatively, using abduction to consider why these distinct factors exist and what could be influencing them.

### Factor 1: 'High Expectations'

This group expressing this viewpoint, saw university attendance in their future; were aware of high expectations on them of others and did not seem to be worried about the cost or other possible barriers to HE participation. Current parental involvement seemed relatively high and there was a particular focus on professional careers.

### Factor 2: 'Weight of the World'

The group expressing this viewpoint conveyed some pessimism about being able to cope with future costs, whether that related to HE participation or general living. They were less positive about the expectations of others and there seemed to be less active involvement of parents. Creative roles featured more prominently.

### Factor 3: 'Show me the money!'

This viewpoint focussed significantly on the financial benefits of having a high status job, although aspirations for specific career roles were more vague. HE was not necessarily seen as the route to these high status jobs and there seemed to be less immediate role models around them who had participated in HE.

### Q-set, P-set and data collection

Q -set: The set of statements for sorting by participants was adapted from the tool developed by Kerpelman & colleagues for US college students. It was further developed for the UK context and for year 9 students.

P-set: A total of 60 year 9 students were involved in the q-sort activity, most of whom were based in one school in the south of England, due to covid restrictions.

Data collection: Participants sorted the statements onto a grid (see image) and also provided subjective socio-economic status data using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective SES (youth edition).

The data were factor analysed and rotated by specialist Q Method software and three distinct factors or viewpoints, were identified.

A total of 7 participants who's sorts scored particularly highly on each factor took part in a semi-structured interview with the aim of exploring the issues raised within each factor.



### References

Kerpelman, J (2006) 'Using Q Methodology to study Possible Selves' in Dunkel, C. & Kerpelman, J (eds) *Possible Selves: Theory, Research and Application*, Nova Science Publishers.

Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986) 'Possible Selves', *American Psychologist*, 41 (9) pp. 954-969.

Watts, S. and Stenner, P. (2012) *Doing Q Methodological Research: theory, methods and interpretation*. London: SAGE Publications

### Critical realist analysis

Detailed analysis of the results is still taking place and will be informed by a critical realist, social constructionist theoretical framework, with the aim of identifying the underlying causal mechanisms and processes that may be leading to these distinct viewpoints. The aim will be to consider what the result might mean for widening participation policy and practice going forward.