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Ideal selves as identity management strategies

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses the relationship between ideal selves and social context from a social identity perspective. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and related research, it is argued that ideal selves stand in a functional relationship with identity management strategies and that, consequently, shared beliefs about relevant intergroup relations influence the preferences for ideal selves. Three studies conducted with black and white adolescent and adult South Africans tested the assumption. The overall results of the studies confirmed that whether ideal selves corresponding to social change, social mobility or social creativity were preferred depended on whether the intergroup relations between black and white South Africans were perceived as secure or insecure.

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1. Introduction

The idea that individuals can discriminate between who they are and who they would like to be has a long history. In 1898, Estelle M. Darrah asked 1440 school children “What person of whom you have ever heard or read would you most wish to be like?” in her pioneering study on ideals (Darrah, 1898). This study was followed by many others during the 20th century using either the same or very similar questions (an overview is provided by Teigen, Normann, Bjorkheim, & Helland, 2000). The nature of studying ideals changed with the introduction of the theory of possible selves by Markus and Nurius (1986), in that, ideals as part of possible selves were conceptually linked to the self-concept and therefore theoretically embedded.

The theory of possible selves as a cognitive-motivational theory conceptualises possible selves as cognitive representations (e.g., self-schemata) that derive from representations of the self in the past and the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves appear to have two psychological functions: they motivate behaviour (demonstrated for academic achievement, see Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; career goals, see Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012; Schnare, MacIntyre, & Doucette, 2012; and health, see Hooker & Kaus, 1994) and they provide an evaluative and interpretative frame (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Hannover, Birkner, & Poehlmann, 2006; Higgins, 1989). As the traditional approach on ideals (see Teigen et al., 2000), the theory of possible selves assumes that people hold ideal selves, which are conceptualised as assumptions and aspirations about what “we would very much like to become” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954).

Both the traditional studies on ideals as well as studies based on the theory of possible selves emphasise the interplay between ideal selves and the social context. In a qualitative review of the traditional studies on ideals from 1889 to 1996, Teigen et al. (2000) identified two general trends for the 20th century: first, the shift from national-historical (e.g., George Washington) towards contemporary ideals (e.g., public media figures such as athletes) and secondly, the shift from

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externalised ideals towards the rejection of external ideals (e.g., increased number of myself answers). Based on the notion that ideals reflect the social and historical context, Teigen et al. (2000) concluded that these shifts mirror changes in societies at large. Likewise, Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that ideal selves as part of possible selves have the potential to reveal not only the “inventive and constructive nature of the self” but also mirror “the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained” (p. 954). Although both research traditions acknowledge the importance of the social context, it is, however, surprising that they have not paid much attention to the relationship between social change processes and the individual, yet socially shared construction of the ideal selves. Thus, despite the undeniable link between individual ideal selves and large societal trends, a systematic understanding of the function of ideal selves in the way how people respond and contribute to social change in intergroup relations is still missing. This research aims to contribute to such a systematic understanding.

Given that ideal selves have to our knowledge never been analysed in light of this question, our approach is to a large extent exploratory. However, in order to advance theory development, we propose initial assumptions and hypotheses were they are appropriate. We base our analysis on social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and propose that peoples’ ideal selves stand in a functional relationship to their strategies to maintain and develop positive social identities. Moreover, we hypothesise that individuals’ preferences for ideal selves are determined by their shared beliefs in socio-structural characteristics of the intergroup relations relevant to them. Three studies that tested this hypothesis within a real intergroup context characterised by radical social changes will be presented.

1.1. *Ideal selves from a SIT perspective*

Ideal selves are part of the self-concept that defines the personal self. The self-concept of individuals, however, does not only consist of their personal selves but also of their social selves (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). People belong to different groups (e.g., occupational group) and social categories (e.g., gender, race, etc.); and this belonging as well as the associated importance of these groups and social categories determines their social selves and identities. This leads to the question of whether ideal selves as cognitive representations are limited to ideal personal selves or whether they extend also to social selves. In a first approach, Cinnirella (1998) elaborated this question theoretically from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and introduced the notion of *possible social identities*. He defined possible social identities as individual and shared cognitions about “possible past group memberships, possible future memberships, and perceptions of the possible past and future for current group memberships” (Cinnirella, 1998, p. 227). Furthermore, he proposed that cognitive alternatives of intergroup relations as conceptualised within social identity theory should be expanded to incorporate possible social identities. Likewise, the present research focuses on social aspects of ideal selves. However, it diverges from Cinnirella’s (1998) idea. Rather than proposing to extend social identity theory by considering possible social identities, we propose to extend our understanding of ideal personal selves and their interrelatedness to the social context from the perspective of social identity theory. Thus our focus is less on possible/ideal group memberships as such, but rather on the function of ideal personal selves in intergroup relations involved in social change.

Social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) states that social identity consists of that part of the self-concept that is based on the knowledge of being a member of one or more social groups, together with the evaluation and emotional significance of that group membership. One of the basic assumptions of SIT is that people strive for positive social identity which can be achieved by positive distinctiveness as a result of comparison of the ingroup with a relevant comparison group on a relevant comparison dimension. Given the condition that positive distinctiveness cannot be reached or that it is perceived as threatened, social identity theory predicts that people engage in identity management strategies to gain or maintain positive social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) distinguished three identity management strategies: *individual mobility* (i.e., the individual’s position is changed whilst the status relations between the comparison groups remain unchanged); *creativity strategies* (i.e., comparison references are changed in one or the other way so that negative comparison results become less important) and *social competition* (i.e., to seek social change). Based on self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) an additional strategy was introduced by Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, and Klink (1998) which is called *individualisation*. The notion of individualisation essentially describes the shift from social to personal self-categorisation, i.e., people attribute more importance to their personal than to their social identity. Similar to social mobility, this strategy allows people to escape from their negative social identity while the status relation between ingroup and outgroup and its evaluation remains unchanged.

We argue that identity management strategies correspond with ideal selves. The reason is that the various types of ideal selves differ in their instrumentality for approaching positive social identity depending on the nature of the identity management strategy that is at stake. For instance, in social competition it might not be very useful to identify with outgroup prototypes or ideals promoting individualisation because those might be seen as undermining ingroup cohesion and solidarity. Instead, it might be much more appropriate to identify with real/imagined persons that are perceived to be motivated and able to challenge current status relations between ingroup and outgroup. Such ideal selves representing social change are usually revolutionaries, politicians, or religious leaders. In contrast, such revolutionary ideals might not be instrumental for pursuing social mobility. The latter requires ideals that are prototypical for the outgroup thereby allowing approaching this group and eventually becoming one of them. The strategy of individualisation conforms with a real/imagined person that allows the individual to shift from social to personal self-categorisation. Ideal selves are instrumental for such a shift if they symbolise a uniqueness (e.g., an ideal personifying “oneself” or family members) that is rather unlikely to be affected

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