

Lost and Found Possible Selves, Subjective Well-Being, and Ego Development in Divorced Women

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ABSTRACT Divorced women, who had been married for an average of 22 years, wrote narrative descriptions of their best possible future selves before the divorce (retrospectively) and after the divorce, rated the salience of these narratives, and completed measures of SWB and ED. Independent raters coded the narratives for amount of elaboration (i.e., vivid detail). The salience of the lost possible self was negatively related to SWB while the salience of the current possible self was positively related to SWB. Elaboration of the found possible self was associated with concurrent ED as well as ED two years later. Lost self elaboration interacted with time since divorce to predict ED, controlling for age and Time 1 ED. Results are interpreted as indicating that, while happiness may require us to avoid thinking about what might have been, maturity might require an awareness of the losses and sacrifices of adulthood.

The role of goal investment in positive human functioning is well established. Working toward valued goals is an important aspect of

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psychological (e.g., Brunstein, 1993; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1995; Emmons, 1989; Omodei & Wearing, 1990), and physical (Emmons & King, 1988) well-being. Yet, investing in goals is a risky proposition (cf. Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). The selection of a goal may preclude the pursuit of equally rewarding but competing opportunities (e.g., Kuhl, 1986). Emotionally investing in one's future hopes and dreams may mean experiencing disappointment when things don't go well (cf. Marsh, 1993; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000; see King & Burton, *in press*, for a review). Thus, goal pursuit is imbued not only with potential rewards but also potential regret. Looking longingly upon previously cherished goals may be a source of considerable misery (e.g., Tangney & Salovey, 1999).

In this study, divorced women, who had been married for approximately 20 years, were asked to describe, retrospectively, the best possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) they had imagined for themselves prior to the divorce and the best possible future selves they imagined for themselves now. Participants also concurrently completed measures of subjective well-being (SWB) and ego development (ED) and then again two years later. These data allowed us to examine the ways old and new life goals relate to the experience of well-being and also to personality development.

Marriage is a strong correlate of overall well-being—with married individuals typically reporting themselves as significantly happier than the divorced, unmarried, or widowed (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Mastekaasa, 1994; Marks & Lambert, 1999). Mid-life divorce has been shown to be a particularly difficult life experience, especially for women (Marks & Lambert, 1998, Thabes, 1997). Relative to men, women are likely to experience increased financial hardship after divorce and are less likely than men to remarry (MacLean, 1991; Morgan, 1991). Furthermore, these differences tend to increase with age (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985; Morgan, 1991). At the same time, clearly, such a life change can be a time of renewed assertiveness and autonomy (Apter, 1996). Research has shown that women can and do develop through difficult life circumstances (e.g., Bursik, 2001; Helson, 1992). Thus, the women in this study provide an excellent opportunity to examine the role of the imagined future in SWB and personality development.

Possible Selves

Possible selves are personalized representations of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986, Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992). These selves provide a link between the self-concept and motivation. Possible selves and aspects of possible selves have been found to relate to a variety of outcomes such as memory, self-esteem, and delinquency (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Two aspects of possible selves were the main focus of the present investigation—salience and elaboration. The salience of the possible self refers to the extent to which the individual thinks about the possible self, and how clear and easy it is to imagine. Essentially, salience refers to the extent to which the possible self is an active part of the person's mental life. The elaboration of the possible self, in contrast, refers to the detail, vividness, and emotional depth of the possible self. Past work has focused more on the variety and complexity of possible selves that an individual possesses, rather than on the level of elaboration of a single self. Although clearly related, salience and elaboration are distinct aspects of possible self narratives. Salience refers to the person's subjective sense that they think about the scenario a great deal, that it plays a substantial role in the person's daily mental life. Elaboration refers to the narrative richness of the self, as judged by an observer. A possible self narrative can be highly salient to a person without necessarily being richly described. Conversely, a narrative can be filled with rich detail—a person may construct (or reconstruct) a quite elaborate description of her life in the future—without having thought about it very much for quite some time.

Best Possible Selves and SWB

Possible selves represent the broad range of imaginable possible futures. One's best possible self is one's most cherished future self, one's best possible outcome. This possible self may be viewed as the fruition of our more proximal goals. Research on mental simulation and visualization would indicate that imagining success at one's life goals is associated with enhanced goal progress and a tighter connection between thought and action (Pham & Taylor, 1999; Sherman, Skov, Hertz, & Stock, 1981). King, Richards, and Stemmerich (1998) found that narrative best possible selves related

to SWB. Daily goals that were relevant to actualizing more distal life dreams were valued more highly and progress on these goals was more closely related to SWB (King et al., 1998). Furthermore, the construction of narrative best possible selves has been shown to relate to enhanced positive mood, persistent increases in SWB, and physical health benefits as well (King, 2001a). Visualizing ourselves successfully completing our goal pursuits is related to enhanced goal activity and a sense of purpose in life. These ideas certainly jibe with past research showing that having clear and valued goals is associated with heightened SWB over time (e.g., Emmons, 1989). Thus, we predicted that the salience of the current best possible selves for these women (i.e., how much they say they actively think about their best possible selves) would be associated with enhanced SWB, concurrently and prospectively.

Best Possible Selves and ED

In addition to SWB, we were interested in examining the relations of possible self salience and elaboration to ED. Loevinger (e.g., 1976; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Hy & Loevinger, 1996) described ED as the level of complexity with which the person is able to conceive of and experience him- or herself and the world. The ego is the organizer of experience. From a narrative perspective, the ego may be thought of as the author of the "Me" (McAdams, 1998). McAdams (1998) suggested that ED predicts "human meaning." At the lowest levels of ED, experience is simple and undifferentiated. As we mature psychologically, we come to experience ourselves and the world in more complex and subtle ways. Emerging maturity is evidenced in the recognition of conflict, increasing concern for identity and mutuality, and acknowledgment of the contextual nature of life choices. The relatively mature person experiences understanding and ambivalence that a less mature person would be incapable of experiencing. From a goals perspective, the ego, as the creator of identity, might be viewed as the generator of one's possible selves. Indeed, McAdams, Ruetzel, and Foley (1986) found life goal complexity (measured via interviews) to relate to ED. Thus, we predicted that the elaboration of the best possible self narrative would relate to enhanced ED.

Goals in Retrospect: Lost Possible Selves

The construct of possible selves is particularly suited to this study because possible selves encompass not only the goals we are seeking but all of the imaginable futures we might occupy. In addition to their best possible selves, we asked our participants to write retrospective descriptions of their best possible selves before the divorce. We refer to these constructions as “lost possible selves.” We defined lost possible future selves as representations of the self in the future, which might have once held the promise of positive affect, but which are no longer a part of a person’s life.

Using retrospective accounts of previously cherished goals is a new idea—though drawing links between memory and goals is not (cf. Singer & Salovey 1993). Several types of research have shown that goals have a great deal of impact on daily thought, attention, and memory. Research using daily diaries and experience sampling has shown that goal-related events are more likely to be mentioned and more likely to impact on mood (e.g., Emmons, 1989, Diener & Fujita, 1996). With regard to autobiographical memories, Singer and his colleagues (e.g., Moffitt & Singer, 1994; Singer & Salovey, 1993, 1996) have demonstrated that everyday goals do relate to important autobiographical memory. For instance, our lingering affective reactions to autobiographical memories can be explained via their relations to our long-term life goals (Singer & Salovey, 1996). To the extent autobiographical memory serves as a source of personal meaning and identity, goals, because of their role in attention and memory, may guide the meaning-making process itself.

In a sense, retrospective accounts of the goals one once pursued simply fit into the larger context of autobiographical memory, which has been recognized as important to identity, personal meaning, and the self (cf. King, 2001b; McAdams, 2001; Pasupathi, 2001). Retrospective accounts of previously pursued goals simply focus on a particular facet of previous life experience. As such, memories about goals may be expected to be susceptible to the same biases as other autobiographical memories. Yet, focusing on memories of one’s motivations may also differ in important ways from other types of autobiographical memory.

Motivation has often been portrayed as a source of coherence and meaning in human life (e.g., McClelland, 1985; Murray, 1938). Thus, when individuals talk or write about previously cherished goals, they

are telling us about previous sources of meaning and coherence—what made life make sense “back then.” Such recollections represent (potentially) not only the reality of one’s desires at a given time period, but also current theories and beliefs about the sources of meaning in life (cf. Singer & Salovey, 1996).

Lost Possible Selves and SWB

Theory and research on constructs that tap “unfinished business” indicate that lost possible selves might be thought about a great deal. The Zeigarnick effect (1938) is a classic example of the power of interrupted goals on thought and behavior. Klinger (1975, 1977) has presented an impressive examination of disengagement from unattainable goals. He suggested that failure to disengage from unattainable goals is linked to depressive symptoms. Although this distress is considered a normal part of the process of letting go of valued goals, Klinger (1975) suggested that reduced daily goal functioning and increased psychological distress may result from expending daily thought and emotion toward unfulfilled goals. Kuhl and Helle (1986) experimentally demonstrated that individuals who failed to disengage from unattainable goals tended to show depressive symptoms and limited opportunities for new goals. A hallmark of successful self-regulation may be the ability to flexibly pursue goals—and to disengage from life goals that no longer include the possibility of fulfillment (King, 1998).

The concept of lost future selves is similar to regrets. Individuals might well rue wasting time on goals, especially long-term goals that they have since concluded are not worthwhile. Ryff (1991) found that regrets were a predictor of lowered psychological well-being in midlife. Lecci, Okun, and Karoly (1994) found that regrets accounted for a significant portion of the variance in well-being, controlling for current goal characteristics. Aspects of regrets added to the prediction of (decreased) life satisfaction as well as (increased) depression. Ruminating about loss has certainly been shown to be predictive of poorer adjustment (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). This brief overview of research on interrupted goals and regrets would seem to indicate that lost future selves might be best forgotten—supporting the conventional wisdom of not dwelling on “water under the bridge.” Thus, we predicted the salience of lost possible selves (i.e., the

subjective report of the role of this self in one's mental life) would be associated with lowered SWB, even controlling for aspects of the best possible self.

Lost Possible Selves and ED

Though thinking about one's lost goals might not be a pleasurable experience, it may be unrealistic to expect that adults will weather all the storms of life without experiencing any second thoughts. Part of maturing may be the ability to place one's choices in the context of all the roads not taken. Our ability to frankly reconsider what we once valued may be a hallmark of maturity. Recollections of previously espoused goals may be particularly prone to bias due to defensiveness, denial, or dissonance. Admitting that one really did value a now-forsaken goal may be a threatening activity. That is why we view the capacity to face one's lost possible self in a detailed way as a sign of maturity. Such a capacity reveals a person's willingness to admit to imperfection, to erroneous assumptions, to failed expectations, in short, to humanity. Thus, we predicted that the level of elaboration of the lost possible self narratives would be concurrently associated with ED.

Recall that we measured ED at two time periods in order to examine whether lost and found possible selves might relate to personality development not only concurrently, but over time. A caveat may be in order at this point. Change in ED over time is unusual in adult samples (Cohn, 1998). Research has shown that most change in ED occurs in high school and college (e.g., Loevinger et al., 1985). Therefore, we chose a 2-year time frame as a compromise—to allow enough time to pass to increase the likelihood that at least some participants might show increases in ED, but also to allow us to complete this study in a logistically feasible time frame. Now, we turn to the question of whether changes in ED over the 2-year period might be related to characteristics of lost possible selves.

Confronting lost goals and accommodation. Block (1982) described personality development as occurring through processes analogous to Piaget's assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, the individual avoids any essential change of orientation and manages to assimilate a new experience into his or her existing framework. In accommodation, the person must "construct or invent new schemes that are equilibrating" (Block, 1982, p.291). Most research on ED has assumed that accommodative processes must have occurred if

people increased in ego level over time. In contrast, in a study of parents of children with Down Syndrome, King, Scollon, Ramsey, and Williams (2000) found that accommodation could be tracked in narratives of life change. In that study, aspects of transition stories that indicated an active struggle to make sense of the experience were associated with enhanced ED over two years.

Elaborating on lost possible selves may be thought of as representing part of the accommodative process, as well. The process of deliberately introspecting on one's previously valued life dreams and actively working to invent or reinvent alternative future selves may be viewed as part and parcel of the accommodative process and should, therefore, be reflected in enhanced ED. Thus, it might be that individuals who are able to construct highly elaborate lost possible selves are more likely to experience accommodative change. Therefore, we expected such individuals to show enhanced ED over time.

Finally, we considered the role that time since the divorce might play in the meaning of lost possible self elaboration. It might be that if a transition has occurred more recently, the elaboration of the lost possible self would represent not self-examination but simply memory for recent experience. Conversely, it is also possible that examining a transition too soon afterward may be qualitatively different from the introspective processes that may occur at a later date; the transition is, perhaps, less emotionally charged. Thus, we predicted that time since the divorce had passed might interact with possible self elaboration in predicting ED.

In sum, asking about a person's lost best possible self produces a narrative construction that may be seen as both a manifestation of current ego level (hence, our concurrent predictions) as well as an indication of processes that might be related to future personality development (hence, our prospective predictions). Overall, we conceptualized lost and found possible selves as revealing capacities associated with both SWB and personality development, but also, potentially, processes important to gains on these variables. Having salient and elaborate lost or found possible selves at Time 1 may be viewed as manifestations of SWB and ED, but also as predictive of gains in these outcomes at Time 2, controlling for Time 1 levels. Importantly, we are not predicting that divorce, per se, is related to heightened personality development. Rather, we are interested in identifying, within this group of individuals, the narrative variables associated with SWB and ED, concurrently and over time.

Overview and Predictions

A sample of women who were divorced after lengthy marriages generated narratives about their lost and found best possible selves. After writing the narratives, participants rated the salience of each possible self, indicating how much they currently think about this possible self, how clear the scenario was, and how easy it was to imagine. Participants also completed measures of SWB and ED. Two years later, a subset of these women completed the SWB and ED measures once again. The narrative possible selves were content analyzed for degree of elaboration.

Predictions were made with regard to relations of the salience and elaboration of the possible selves for SWB and ED, concurrently and prospectively. First, for Time 1, it was predicted that the salience of the lost possible self should be negatively related to SWB. The salience of the found best possible self was expected to relate to enhanced SWB. The salience ratings were not expected to relate to ED. With regard to the elaboration of the narratives, it was predicted that, at Time 1, both lost and found self elaboration would relate to ED. It was further predicted that aspects of the two narratives would contribute to both SWB and ED independent of each other, suggesting the unique role of each of these goal constructions in human life.

In terms of prospective predictions, we first predicted that lost and found self salience relations to SWB would hold at Time 2, even controlling for Time 1 levels of this outcome. In addition, we predicted that lost and found possible self elaboration ought to relate to ED at Time 2, controlling for Time 1. If possible self elaboration predicts Time 2 ED, controlling for Time 1 ED, a stronger case can be made that Time 1 goal processes (potentially, a reflection of accommodation) contribute to Time 2 development. In addition, we expected that, if direct relations did not emerge, it might be necessary to test for interactions between possible self-elaboration and time (e.g., Loevinger et al., 1985; White, 1985).

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the Dallas *Morning News* and the Dallas *Observer* offering \$20 to women who had been

divorced after being married for 15 years or more. Prospective participants were given a number to call if interested and were mailed out a packet of questionnaires. Approximately 120 calls were received. During the phone calls, prospective participants were informed that the study involved completing some open-ended and questionnaire measures about their goals and other aspects of their lives. When the time commitment required for the study (approximately 2 hours) and the requirements were explained (the marriage had to have been for 15 years or more), a remaining 100 prospective participants were actually mailed the questionnaires. A total of 73 packets were returned. Participants were sent a check for \$20 upon return of the packet. The average age of the sample was 54.36 ($SD = 9.19$, mode = 48). Ages ranged from 39 to 86 years. The large majority of participants were white (84.6%), with 7.7% being African American, 4.6% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian and 3% other. Length of previous marriage ranged from 15 to 44 years ($M = 23$, $SD = 7.22$, mode = 20 years, median = 21 years). On average, 7.89 years had passed since the divorce ($SD = 6.61$, mode and median = 4 years). With regard to education, 37.5% of the women had completed some college, with 7.8% having an associate's degree and 31.3% having a bachelor or higher degree. Modal income level was \$20,000 to \$40,000; 14.1% reported an income of greater than \$40,000 and 39.1% reported incomes less than \$20,000. Reported incomes prior to the divorce were generally higher than current levels. The modal income prior to divorce was greater than \$75,000 (36%); 84.4% of participants reported a loss of income after the divorce, which echoes the vast majority of findings regarding financial losses that typically occur for women following divorce (cf. Morgan, 1991). The majority of the participants were single. Three had remarried and nine were currently cohabiting.¹ Ex-husbands were more likely to have remarried, compared to participants (47.5%), which is somewhat in keeping with national statistics showing that women are less likely than men to remarry, and that this difference increases with age (e.g., Morgan, 1991). Approximately 41% of participants reported initiating the divorce, with 42.4% reporting that their ex-husbands initiated it, and the remaining participants endorsing the "mutual decision" option. Relative to national statistics, this group is somewhat unusual in that women are typically more likely than men to be the initiators of divorce (cf. MacLean, 1991).

Two years later, the 73 participants were sent a follow-up packet, which they could complete for an additional \$20. Forty-eight participants

1. Analyses were performed excluding the women who had remarried or were cohabiting. In all cases the results were the same or stronger than those reported throughout the paper.

returned the packets (66%). Attrition was due to two factors: 15% of participants could not be located for the follow-up, and 19% did not return the packet (the most frequent reason given was the time involved). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) comparing completers and noncompleters on the possible self, SWB, ED measures as well as age, years since divorce, length of marriage and income revealed no significant multivariate effect (Wilks Multivariate $F(14, 50) = .79, ns$). Indeed, none of the univariate F 's were significant.

Material. Participants completed packets containing open-ended questions as well as a number of questionnaire measures. Instructions for the "lost possible self" narrative read as follows:

[W]e would like you to consider your future as you imagined it *before the divorce*. Try to remember how you imagined your future to be. What sorts of things did you hope for and dream about for your marriage? Think of this as your "best possible life" or your "happily ever after," if you had not divorced. Please write a description of the things you imagined in the space provided below (and on the back of this page if necessary). Be as specific as you can.

Participants were given one page and the back of the page to write their responses. Next, participants were asked to write about their current best possible future self, with the following instructions:

[W]e would like you to consider the life you imagine the for yourself currently, and in the future. What sorts of things do you hope for and dream about? Imagine that your life has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and achieved your goals. Think of this as your "best possible life" or your "happily ever after." In the space below (and on the back of this page, if necessary) write a description of the things you imagined. Be as specific as you can.

Participants then rated three items measuring the salience of the possible future self described in the narrative. These items included, "How easy was it for you to imagine your life in this scenario?" "How clear was the mental picture you imagined?" "How often do you think about this possible future?" Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely much*). Alpha reliability was higher for the salience of the self after the divorce ($\alpha = .79$) than for life before divorce ($\alpha = .50$). In addition, participants reported their current best possible self to be more salient ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.29$) than their "lost" possible self ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.06; t = 2.13, p < .04$).

SWB measures. At both time periods, participants completed questionnaire measures of SWB. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a five-item measure of general life satisfaction. These items are rated on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (M 's = 2.82 and 2.83, SD 's = .99 and .87, for Time 1 and Time 2, respectively). The Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC; Antonovsky, 1988; 1993) measures the degree to which the person feels confident that the world is a predictable, explainable, and structured place, and that challenges that present themselves are within the individual's ability to resolve. Twenty-nine items are rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) (M 's = 2.29, 2.05, SD 's = .36, .25, for Times 1 and 2 respectively). The three components tapped by the SOC are comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness; however, Antonovsky (1993, 1994) recommended using only the total score.

Participants also completed the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982) which measures a range of psychological symptomatology, including depression, hostility, anxiety, paranoia, phobias, and obsessive compulsive tendencies. The overall score, the Global Severity Index, was used as a measure of general distress (M 's = .65 and .53, SD 's = .55 and .42, respectively for each time period).

Within each time period, these SWB measures were highly intercorrelated. For instance, at Time 1, the SWLS and SOC were correlated .40 ($p < .01$) and were each negatively correlated with the Global Severity Index (r 's = $-.36$ and $-.62$, for SWLS and SOC respectively). To simplify analyses, a SWB composite was computed for each time period, averaging over the standard scores for the SWLS, SOC, and the Global Severity Index (negatively weighted). These composites were reliable (α 's = .73 and .74 for Time 1 and Time 2 respectively) and showed high test-retest reliability over 2 years ($r = .66$, $p < .01$).

Ego development. In order to measure ED, participants completed the 18-item version of the Sentence Completion Test measure of ED (SCT; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Hy & Loevinger 1996). In this measure, participants are given 18 stems and space to complete the statements. Sample statements include "Women are lucky because..." and "Raising a family..." Participant responses were scored according to the most recent guidelines (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). When scored according to guidelines, the SCT has shown good test-retest, inter-rater, and internal consistency reliability (e.g., Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). In addition, longitudinal studies support the notion that this test measures sequential stages of personality development (e.g., Redmore & Loevinger, 1979). Additional studies have shown that this measure of personality development can track development in response to life events (Bursik, 1991). Once the responses are coded, each individual is given a total protocol score (TPR).

These scores correspond to the eight ego levels described by Hy & Loevinger (1996): Level 2—Impulsive (egocentric and dependent); Level 3—Self-Protective (opportunistic); Level 4—Conformist (respect for rules); Level 5—Self-Aware (allowing exceptions to the rules); Level 6—Conscientious (self-evaluative, occupied with achievement); Level 7—Individualistic (tolerant of differences); Level 8—Autonomous (coping with conflict); Level 9—Integrated (concerned with identity and mutuality).

The SCT responses for both time periods were transcribed so that all responses to a given item were listed together for the entire sample. Scoring was performed using the guide developed by Hy and Loevinger (1996). The two raters had been trained in the scoring system and had achieved at least a 96% agreement with the expert scoring on practice materials. Raters were blind to the narrative accounts of the participants. The percent agreements for the 18 items ranged from a low of 70% to a high of 98%. Eleven of the 18 items had agreement over 88%. The average number of agreements was 91%. All disagreements were resolved by discussion. The item ratings were then regrouped according to participant and time period, and total protocol ratings (TPR) were assigned to each participant for each time period, using the automatic ogive rules discussed by Hy and Loevinger (1996). The TPR scores at Time 1 ranged from 3 (Impulsive) to 9 (Integrated), with the mode being level 6 (Conscientious). Scores for Time 2 ranged from 3 to 8 (Autonomous). The modal Time 2 ego level was 6. The test-retest correlation for ED over 2 years was $.52$ ($p < .01$). For the subsample who completed both the Time 1 and Time 2 measures, 42% stayed the same, 42% increased at least one level, and 16% dropped one level. Although ED is thought to be stable in adulthood, it is not unusual to see a portion of individuals regress (Adams & Shea, 1979, reported 21%; White, 1985, reported 32% regressing).

ED was unrelated to SWB at both time periods (average $r = \pm .08$, ns), which is in keeping with a long history of past research (cf. King 2001). Notably, ED was significantly correlated with age at Time 1 ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) but not at Time 2 ($r = .08$, ns).

Content analyses of the lost and found possible selves. Two raters independently rated the lost and found selves to measure the degree of elaboration in the narratives. Ratings were made on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scale on the following dimensions: elaboration, vividness, emotionality, and detail. Each of these dimensions was described for the raters, who had considerable experience with this type of coding. Raters completed their ratings independently and were blind to participants' ED, SWB, and salience scores. Interrater correlations ranged from .69 for found self-vividness to .82 for found self-detail. The two ratings were then

averaged over raters for each dimension. These ratings were then standardized and averaged to create two composite scores, lost self elaboration and found self elaboration (both α 's = .88). The two elaboration measures were significantly correlated ($r = .41, p < .01$). The correlation between rated elaboration and participants' ratings of salience was not significant for the lost self ($r = .19, p = .12$) but was significant for the found possible self ($r = .33, p < .004$).² Thus, for forsaken goals, the amount of current thinking about the goal was relatively unrelated to the level of detail and elaboration of the goal, supporting the idea that a person can construct or reconstruct an elaborate life plan without necessarily being preoccupied with that plan. For more current goals, current thought about the goal related to developing a more elaborate goal.

An excerpt from a highly elaborate lost possible self narrative:

I imagined a deliriously happy "empty nest" syndrome. Neither of us likes to travel, but sports are a big priority. I figured we would exercise, go to see the Rangers/Mavericks/Cowboys, etc., together. I envisioned weddings with lots of family pictures. There would be grandchildren to baby-sit. Life would be calm, easy, and sweet.

A lost possible self narrative scoring low in elaboration: I am a realist and never expect anything from life.

Excerpts from a highly elaborate, found possible self include the following:

In my current or real life, I set goals and experience HARD work as I seek to attain them. I feel fortunate in a backhanded way to have experienced misfortune as a young woman. I feel it taught me humility, to be nonjudgmental, compassionate, and gave me the ability to regroup. Life is good but not lavish. It's hard work, and we have to give each other a hand once in awhile. I have changed my goals from material to spiritual. Forgiveness has been key. I have imagined college

2. The measures elaboration were, not surprisingly, correlated with the length of the narratives, as longer narratives would be judged as more elaborate (r^2 's = .70 for lost self and .72 for found self). Essentially, this makes sense in that the length of these narratives, to an extent, indicates a person's capacity to confront a lost possible self. Analyses were run using length as a measure of elaboration itself. Simple length (which is arguably the most reliable of all the content analytic measurements!) however, did not correlate as strongly as rated elaboration. Thus, the elaboration ratings were retained as the preferred measure of elaboration.

degrees, a cozy home, educated, healthy, well-adjusted children, an interesting job, a good marriage....

An excerpt from a found, possible self judged to be low in elaboration:

My life has been ruined by this divorce. I no longer have a trusting partner to share dreams and goals with. Why even bother to have them? What good is anything without someone to share it with? My current goal is only to make enough money to make my monthly bills without withdrawing money from my savings account.

Inductive content analyses were performed to explore the actual content of the selves.³ An exhaustive list of the topics covered in the narratives was assembled, and two raters content-analyzed the two narratives within these categories.

RESULTS

The Content of Lost and Found Possible Selves

Table 1 shows the percentages of participants mentioning the various topics for the lost and found possible selves. Common topics included children and grandchildren, travel, money, and love relationships. Because the categories were created separately for the lost and found best possible selves, not all categories overlapped. Paired *t*-tests compared the frequencies for the overlapping categories, and results are shown in Table 1. Common themes appearing in both narratives included children and grandchildren, money, retirement, spending time with family, having a home outside the city, volunteering for charity, community involvement, and education. Participants were more likely to mention travel and more likely to mention being unhappy in the lost than in the found possible self. The found possible selves were more likely to include mention of love relationships, career success, church involvement, and home improvement.

3. Content analyses were also conducted using the TAT running text method for Achievement, Affiliation, and Power. In addition, Analyses were also conducted, scoring for Agency, Communion, and Generativity. None of these scores related to SWB or ED. In addition, these more abstract coding schemes provided little indication of the actual content of the narratives. Therefore, the inductive categories created from the narratives themselves are reported here.

Table 1
Content Categories for the Lost and Found Best Possible Selves

Category	Lost Self	Found Self	<i>t</i>	<i>r</i>
Kids/Grandkids (.86, .96)	60%	50%	1.15	-.06
Travel (.89, .89)	54%	33%	3.35**	.40**
Money (.89, .97)	44%	50%	.85	.11
Love Relationships (.96, .97)	31%	66%	4.23**	-.03
Retirement (.91, .99)	26%	20%	.85	.37**
Family Time (.96, .91)	20%	14%	1.07	.36*
Unhappy (.90, .86)	19%	4%	2.80**	.08
Career Success (.83, .84)	16%	39%	3.10**	-.02
Home Outside City (.73, .97)	14%	7%	1.07	.02
Volunteering/Charity (.84, .94)	11%	6%	1.27	.11
Church/Spirituality (.99, .97)	10%	24%	2.44*	.14
Community (.96, .91)	9%	6%	.71	.14
Education (.94, .99)	7%	11%	.83	-.10
Intimacy (.73, .94)	7%	1%	1.65 [†]	-.03
Home Improvement (.85, 1.0)	6%	9%	2.60*	.03
Kids' Family Life (.94, .94)	4%	4%	0	-.05
More/Better Friends (.91, .94)	1%	1%	1.00	.00
Growing Old Together (.80,)	24%	—	—	—
Empty Nest (.91)	24%	—	—	—
Homemaking (.90)	14%	—	—	—
Shared Hobbies (.96)	10%	—	—	—
Improved Relationship w/ Ex-husband (.96)	10%	—	—	—
Caretaking (1.00)	6%	—	—	—
Healthy Family (.93)	6%	—	—	—
Health (.93)	—	29%	—	—
Activities With Friends (.93)	—	20%	—	—
Kids' Success (.80)	—	17%	—	—
Living It Now (.83)	—	7%	—	—
Time For Hobbies (.86)	—	9%	—	—
Moving (.99)	—	6%	—	—

Note: For the lost possible self, the unique categories with less than 5% were respect (4%), emotional security (3%), shared decisions (3%), independence (3%), and importance (1%). For the best possible self, unique categories with less than 5% included freedom/spontaneity (3%), being pampered (1%), balance (1%), and political activism (1%).

[†]*p* < .10, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, two tailed. Proportions in parentheses are the inter-rater agreements for lost and found possible selves respectively.

Aspects of the Divorce and Goal Measures

Correlations were computed among the lost and found possible self measures and other aspects of the participants' divorces. Participants who initiated the divorce rated their found possible self as more salient ($r = .24, p < .05$) and their lost possible self as less salient ($r = -.25, p < .05$). In addition, these women were less likely to describe a very elaborate lost possible self ($r = -.27, p < .05$). The number of years elapsed since the divorce was also negatively related to the salience of the lost possible self ($r = -.24, p < .05$). Current financial status was negatively correlated with the salience of the lost possible self ($r = -.32, p < .05$). Thus time and monetary success were related to fewer thoughts about the lost possible self.

Lost and Found Possible Selves, SWB, and ED⁴

Recall that the salience of the lost self was predicted to be negatively related to measures of well-being and the salience of the found possible self was predicted to relate to enhanced SWB. In addition, it was predicted that the elaboration of the lost and found possible selves would be related to ED. As an initial test of these predictions, correlations were computed between aspects of the lost and found possible selves and SWB and ED. At Time 1, as predicted, the salience of the lost possible self was negatively related to SWB ($r = -.24, p < .05$). The salience the found possible self was positively related to SWB ($r = .45, p < .01$), and the elaboration of this narrative was marginally related to SWB ($r = .22, p < .10$).

With regard to ED, as predicted, the elaboration of the found possible self was associated with enhanced ED at Time 1 ($r = .31, p < .01$). However, the elaboration of the lost possible self was only marginally related to concurrently measured ED ($r = .19, p < .10$).

In addition, 2 years after the possible self narratives were written, the salience and elaboration of the found possible self was associated with higher levels of SWB (r 's = $.45, p < .01$, and $.29, p < .05$). Finally, elaboration of the found possible self was correlated with ED at the 2-year follow-up, $r = .30, p < .05$. At Time 2, contrary to predictions, the elaboration of the lost, possible self narrative was unrelated to ED.

4. Although Loewinger's stages represent "types," tests for nonlinear relations were not significant. Throughout the results, ED will be treated as an interval rather than categorical variable.

Next, regression equations were computed predicting SWB and ED, at both measurement times from the 4 possible self variables, in order to examine the independent contributions of these goal measures. Results are shown in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, salience of the lost possible self was marginally negatively associated with SWB, while the salience of the found possible self was significantly positively associated with SWB. Interestingly, the salience of the lost possible self was associated with ED in these multivariate analyses. In addition, as predicted, elaboration of the found possible self was associated with ED.

The bottom portion of Table 2 shows the results of regression equations predicting SWB and ED at Time 2 from the possible self measures at Time 1. The salience of the found possible self (at Time 1) was associated with SWB at Time 2. With regard to ED, only the elaboration of the found possible self was associated with ED.

Because the ED had been shown previously to relate to age in this sample, the regression equations predicting ED from the goal measures were repeated, entering age on the first step and the goal measures on the second step, for both time periods. For Time 1, age contributed to the prediction of ED with marginal significance (standardized $\beta = .20$, $p < .10$), while elaboration of the found possible self maintained its significant relation to ED (standardized

Table 2
Regression Equations Predicting Subjective Well-Being and Ego Development From Lost and Found Possible Selves

Criterion	Standardized Beta Weights				R^2
	Lost Possible Self		Found Possible Self		
	Salience	Elaboration	Salience	Elaboration	
Time 1					
SWB	-.25*	-.14	.42**	.16	.29**
Ego Development	.30**	-.02	.01	.48**	.23**
Time 2					
SWB	-.03	-.20	.39**	.25	.27**
Ego Development	.01	.04	.10	.34**	.10

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$, two-tailed. At Time 1, $N = 73$. At Time 2, $N = 48$.

$\beta = .25, p < .05$). At Time 2, age did not contribute significantly to the prediction of ED (standardized $\beta = .03$), while found self elaboration, once again, contributed significantly (standardized $\beta = .29, p = .05$).

Note that the results in the bottom portion of Table 2 do not control for the levels of the criterion variables at Time 1. Such prospective analyses represent the strongest tests of the prediction of SWB and ED from the goal measures. Unfortunately, because of the strong relations between Time 1 and Time 2 outcome measures, regression equations predicting the Time 2 measures controlling for their Time 1 counterparts produced no notable results. Controlling for Time 1 SWB essentially left little variance to be accounted for in Time 2 SWB by the possible self measures. Similarly, predicting Time 2 ED from the goal measures, controlling for Time 1 ED, produced no significant results over and above the variance accounted for by Time 1 ED.

ED and Lost Possible Self Elaboration

It had been predicted that lost self elaboration would relate to ED. In analyses thus far, however, only the elaboration of the found self was consistently associated with ED. One issue that has not been addressed is the amount of time that had passed since the divorce. In order to examine the interaction of the passage of time with lost self elaboration in predicting ED; a hierarchical regression equation was computed. First, the amount of time that had passed since the divorce was converted to a mean deviation score, and then the product of this variable with the mean deviation score for lost self elaboration was computed as the interaction term. These mean deviation scores for the main effects were entered into a hierarchical regression equation predicting Time 1 ED and the interaction term was entered on the second step. No main effects were found. The interaction of lost self elaboration and the passage of time did, however, contribute a significant change in R^2 (.07, $p < .03$). The standardized β for the interaction term was .27, $p < .05$. Simple regression lines were computed predicting ED at Time 1 from lost self elaboration for individuals for whom the divorce had occurred relatively recently (one standard deviation below the mean, 3.3 years), those for whom it had occurred at the mean (9.8 years), and those for whom it had occurred relatively long ago (one

standard deviation above the mean or 16.3 years). Results are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen in Figure 1, high levels of lost possible self elaboration were associated with increasing ED over time. Low levels of lost possible self elaboration were associated with decreasing levels of ED over time. The same equation was computed predicting Time 1 ED from the main effects of time since divorce, lost self elaboration, and their interaction, first controlling for age. In this equation, though age did contribute significantly to the prediction of ED (standardized $\beta = .26, p < .05$), the interaction step still contributed significantly to the equation (standardized $\beta = .28, p < .02$).

Next, a regression equation was computed to test whether the interaction of lost possible self elaboration and time since divorce predicted gains in ED at Time 2, controlling for Time 1 ED levels. Results showed that this interaction predicted Time 2 ED (standardized $\beta = .30, p < .04$) *even controlling for* Time 1 ED (standardized $\beta = .44, p < .001$) and age (standardized $\beta = .01, ns$). The graph of this interaction was essentially identical to the results in Figure 1. A high level of lost self elaboration was associated with ED over time, while maintaining a low level of elaboration of one's losses was associated with ever-decreasing levels of ED. These same analyses were performed for found possible self elaboration for Time 1 and Time 2 ED, but results indicated that only the main effect of elaboration of the found possible self was associated with ED

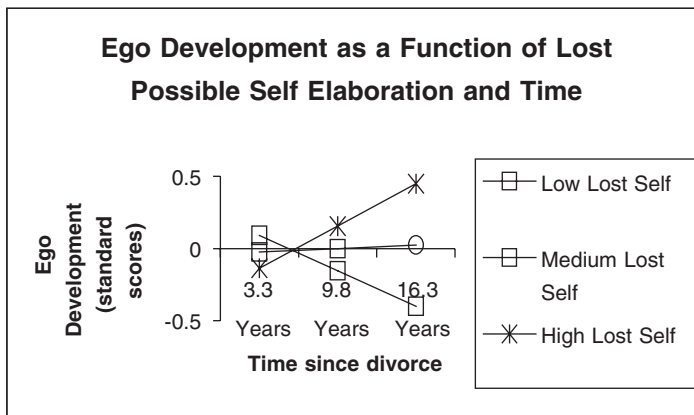


Figure 1

Simple regression lines predicting ED in divorced women, as a function of lost possible self elaboration and time since the divorce.

at both time periods (see Table 2), with no prospective relations emerging.

DISCUSSION

Positive and negative life changes entail a change in our hopes and dreams for the future. The results of these analyses provide some support for the predictions made. First, the salience of the lost and found possible selves tended to relate to SWB while their elaboration related to ED. Specifically, thinking about one's lost possible self was associated with lowered SWB and thinking about one's current best possible self was associated with heightened SWB. The elaboration of the found possible self was positively related to ED, concurrently. These results echo those of McAdams et al. (1986) who found that life goal complexity was associated with ED. Lost possible self elaboration predicted ED (concurrently *and prospectively*), but only in interaction with the time since the divorce.

A few unexpected findings did emerge. For instance, it is notable that lost self salience related positively to ED, concurrently. Although this had not been predicted initially, upon reflection it is not surprising. We have argued that the potentially painful task of considering "what might have been" is an important aspect of maturity. Thus, it makes sense that individuals who are more ego developed are more likely to admit to thinking about their lost possible selves. In a sense this result may indicate that ED development may serve as a resource that allows a person to consider potentially negative experiences without being overwhelmed with regret. This result may also serve as an indication of the relation between ED and the process of self-examination.

Lost and Found Possible Selves and SWB

As mentioned above, the salience of the current best possible self was strongly related to SWB concurrently and 2 years later (though not prospectively). These results, like those of studies cited earlier, may indicate the positive benefits of thinking about and visualizing one's life dreams for self-regulation, well-being, etc. However, it may be noted that these results, taken alone, are susceptible to mood effects or personality trait effects as alternative explanations. The high stability of SWB over time could account for the relations between

best possible self salience and SWB at both time periods, if happy people are simply more likely to report themselves as thinking about their best possible futures. Alternatively, these results may indicate that happy people are better equipped to formulate goals at any given time. Still, a tremendous research literature demonstrates prospective relations between valuing one's goals and SWB over time (e.g., Elliot et al., 1995), though not over the long time period that separated measurements here. Thus, it might be the case that goals may be expected to predict more transient feelings of well-being within a shorter time frame.

The salience of the lost possible self was, in contrast, associated with lowered SWB, but only modestly. Not surprisingly, reporting that one thinks about one's forsaken goals a great deal was associated with lowered life satisfaction, meaning in life, and heightened distress. It is interesting to note, however, that the salience and elaboration of the lost possible self were independent of each other, suggesting it is possible to recognize one's forsaken goals without necessarily ruminating upon them. It is notable that lost possible self salience did not relate to SWB over the 2-year period. Once again, this may be due to the length of time separating the two measurements. Previous goal research has not tended to use such a lengthy period. Furthermore, it may be that by the 2-year assessment, thoughts about the lost possible self had abated, so that regardless of their previous levels, they simply didn't carry the psychological weight that they previously had. If nothing else, this pattern of results indicates that the findings for Time 1 are not easily explained by the broad trait of well-being.

Lost and Found Possible Selves and ED

With regard to ED, it is notable that the most consistent correlate of ED was an elaborate current best possible self. However, this relation only emerged concurrently, not prospectively. Developing highly complex life plans is perhaps best considered an accomplishment of the developed ego, rather than a process related to enhanced development over time.

In contrast, conclusions with regard to lost possible self elaboration and ED present a more complex and provocative picture. No (or only very weak) relations emerged between lost self elaboration and ED. Instead, the results with regard to lost possible self

elaboration suggest the importance of time and, perhaps, timing, in the relation of elaborating on lost or forsaken goals and personality development. The capacity to expound upon the details of one's previously cherished life dream predicted ED for divorced women at midlife, but only in interaction with time since the divorce. Regression results predicting Time 1 ED from lost self elaboration and time may be taken to indicate that individuals who are more mature are more likely to generate highly elaborate possible selves, given a certain amount of temporal distance from a life transition. As was the case with the best possible self elaboration results, this capacity might well be seen as a property of the developed ego.

The results for Time 2, importantly, provide a stronger test for the role of this capacity in predicting future development. Recall that controlling for Time 1 ED, lost possible self elaboration interacted with time to predict, prospectively, ED among divorced women. Thus, the 2-year change in development that was detected was predicted by the interaction of lost self elaboration and time, suggesting that the ability to examine lost goals is not only a byproduct of development but also, possibly, a component of the process of development. Of course, the ideal study to test this proposition would measure ED before the divorce and again afterward. Such a test would allow for a better appreciation of the role of time and timing in the contribution of the reconstruction of life goals in the process of development. One way to interpret the present results is that women who are unable to elaborate on lost goals, or who have refused to do so, may fail to develop. The unexamined life, left unexamined, may stagnate. Our results indicate that the timing of the exploration is important and that this may be a long-term (several-year) process.

Both the concurrent and prospective results point to the wisdom of waiting to explore one's lost selves. Lost possible self elaboration, *per se*, didn't share a strong direct relation to ED. Rather, constructing an elaborate lost possible self was related to ED only after sufficient time had passed. This result indicates that, in terms of personality development, introspecting on potentially regrettable life experiences may only serve to promote personal growth when the individual has sufficient distance from the event. Indeed, it is possible that the very experiences that might lead one to regret might also be a source of nostalgia (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998). Time may not heal all wounds, but it may provide perspective that

allows a person to look back on herself and her goals without harsh judgment.

Limitations

One issue that bears discussion is that of method variance in the relations found. This issue is particularly problematic for the self-report measures of well-being and the salience ratings. It is notable that for the salience ratings, participants were rating a narrative they had written rather than their own life experiences. Still, some other measure of possible self salience, such as reaction time measures, would strengthen the conclusions we might draw from these results.

It is also notable that the SCT and the elaboration measures both relied on content analysis of open ended responses. This problem is perhaps less severe. Respondents wrote two narratives. Therefore, if method variance were responsible for the significant relations between possible self elaboration and ED, we would expect parallel findings for both lost and found narratives. This was not the case. Similarly, if the results were simply a manifestation of verbal ability, we would expect that this ability would express itself in both the lost and found possible selves. Yet lost and found selves related differently to ED. Finally, it is notable that Loevinger (1998) has stated that the concept of ED is intertwined with the SCT measure. Thus, an alternative measure of this construct that did not rely on content analysis of verbal material would be difficult to imagine.

With regard to the generalizability of our results, it may be noted that these women responded to newspaper ads seeking divorced women who had experienced lengthy marriages. Our participants may, therefore, be more likely to identify with their status as divorced women. As a result, the similarity of the women in our sample to divorced women in general is likely to be lower. Clearly, for instance, we were less likely to attract women who had remarried. But for the purposes of this study—to examine the relations of possible self narratives to SWB and ED in more general terms—this sample represents an excellent resource. Whether similar processes characterize SWB and ED in other groups who have experienced important life transitions (or even more mundane changes in life goals) remains a question for future research.

This study also improves on past research in a few ways. First, this study included more than one measure of life goals and could

therefore make stronger conclusions about the type of goal elaboration that is associated with ED. In addition, because ED was measured over two time periods it was possible to predict changes in ED prospectively. Finally, past research has tended to assume that accommodative change has occurred when ED development is found. With the present data we can at least examine how one potential aspect of accommodation, goal revision, relates to ED.

These results point to two independent pathways, one to ED and one to happiness (cf. King et al., 2000). Salience of the possible selves and their elaboration were not consistently related; thus, it would be possible for the happy mature person to have an elaborate lost possible self without necessarily having thought about it much. Possessing an elaborate but not salient lost possible self might indicate that an individual has actively worked through the loss and, though aware of the nuances of the lost future, is not ruminating upon them. It might also mean that the individual constructed the lost possible self narrative in the present moment and that this ability to create the lost self actively is associated with ED. King et al. (2000) have described the mature person as having the capacity to look back (perhaps fondly) on a more naïve, less developed version of the self and to acknowledge the limitations of oneself back then, without defensiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Lost and found possible selves may be viewed as reflections of the interaction of life experiences and more enduring needs and values. A lifetime may be viewed as a process of actively discovering one's "true" wants and needs. The content of a person's life dreams is subject to revision. These changes have implications for well-being and personality development. While investing in the present and not looking back relates to heightened happiness, how *and when* we look back on the selves we've lost or forsaken along the way relates to personality development. These results resonate with Henry Murray's (1938) oft-quoted phrase "The history of the organism is the organism." A history devoid of loss is only part of a history. A larger understanding of our place in the world requires a more expansive view that allows for legitimate loss, an awareness of what might have been, and the capacity to reinvest and risk loss once again.

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