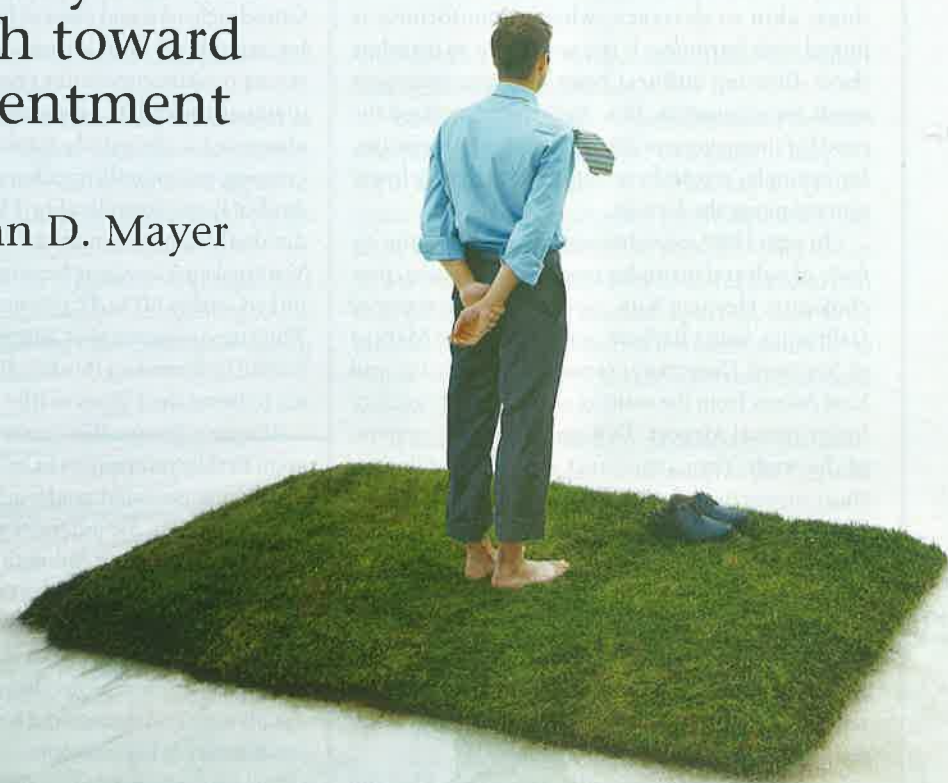


THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW

Getting to know yourself—and your future self—can put you on a path toward contentment

By John D. Mayer



I once asked participants in a study which of several “big questions” about personality they found most interesting. The first-place winner was, “What is my future?” This question is a productive one: people who wonder about their future exhibit an especially healthy form of curiosity, one that augurs greater well-being over time.

In the late 1990s psychologists Philip G. Zimbardo and John N. Boyd, both then at Stanford University, studied the degree to which people focus on their past, present or future. People who live in the present, as opposed to speculating about their future, may enjoy the spontaneity and freedom that such in-the-moment styles allow, and many do quite well living that way. But those who are most present-oriented are also somewhat more likely than others to engage in risky behaviors such as abusing drugs. By comparison, those of us who focus more on what lies ahead often shape our lives in ways that make good sense for our future.

Planning ahead would not be so interesting, I think, except that many of us really identify with our future selves. By “identifying,” I mean that we care for the individual we will become and lay the groundwork to make those later versions of us as comfortable and successful as possible.

To plan about our future selves, we use a mental ability I call “personal intelligence.” Personal intelligence is the capacity to identify, and reason about, information about personality. We use this ability to recognize information about people from their appearance, possessions and behaviors and then use that to

label our impression of a person and to match that impression to our knowledge of similar people. From such clues, we deduce how to behave with the person and how that person will treat us in return. And we look for clues about our own selves to better understand our needs and to map out our future plans. Our ability to reason this way serves as an inner guidance system that helps us navigate the people and situations we encounter and to attain our goals, be it to find a pleasing lunch mate or to choose a more inspiring direction for our life.

People with higher personal intelligence may construct more vivid, detailed future selves than others. These elaborate constructions encourage them to identify more with their future, to take on the stewardship of their present life and guide themselves to attain their goals. Imagining a future self that is realistic, rather than fantastic, is similarly more likely to lead to contentment, as is aiming for outcomes that are consistent with one another and with one’s own values.

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Life's Dream

In 2009 psychologist Hal Ersner-Hershfield, then at Stanford, and his colleagues developed a simple method to record our sense of connection to the later versions of who we are. Participants were shown a continuum of seven pairs of circles. Each pair included one circle labeled “current self” and the other, “future self.” On this seven-point scale, the first pair of current and future circles did not overlap at all, indicating that a person saw little relationship between who he was at present and the person he might become. Each pair overlapped a bit more until the final, seventh pair of selves, which decisively overlapped. Participants selected a pair to indicate how connected they were to their later selves.

Among the people in the study—community members from the San Francisco Bay Area—those who most identified with their future selves planned their life with longer-term payoffs in mind: they saved more money and as a consequence had amassed more wealth than others. Ersner-Hershfield, who is now at New York University, concluded that envisioning our future selves and feeling connected to who we will become guide our behaviors in the here and now in ways that will create longer-term rewards in economic and other realms of our life.

In theory, we can create as many future versions of ourselves as we like, limited only by our imagination. But the more fanciful, whimsical or wishful visions of ourselves, though useful for brainstorming, may be unhelpful if we lack the personal intelligence to identify which selves are plausible. To be reasonable, our imagined selves ought to join together our personality of today with our likely circumstances over time and the person we can realistically hope to grow into.

Psychologist E. Tory Higgins of Columbia University

FAST FACTS

FINESSING YOUR FUTURE

- 1 Personal intelligence is the capacity to draw out, and reason about, information about personality. We use it to deduce how to behave with others, how others will behave toward us, to better understand our own needs and to map out our future plans.
- 2 Two people with different sets of values will use their personal intelligence in different ways and to different ends.
- 3 Some people are better than others at choosing aims that are consistent with one another and thereby avoiding contradictory pursuits.



has explored the relationships among several of our most common self-images: he asks participants to list qualities of their actual selves, of the ideal selves they would like to become, as well as their “ought” selves—the selves other people think they should be. Participants whose actual selves were quite different from their ought selves—signaling that they were failing to meet others’ expectations—experienced more agitation and fear and perceived more threats to themselves. Participants whose actual selves were distant from their ideal were more prone to disappointment and sadness. Although it is not pleasant to be in those negative states, they can serve as a heads-up signal—alerting us to get closer to our goals or to meet others’ expectations.

Our ideal selves are often part of a broader life’s dream, according to psychologist Daniel Levinson and his team, then at Yale University. From the 1960s to the 1980s, they followed 40 men from four occupational groups: blue- and white-collar workers in industry, business executives, academic biologists and novelists. The team conducted multiple interviews with each man and studied the biographies of additional public figures as well. A number of the men pursued a dream that crystallized their motives moving forward. Levinson and his colleagues observed: “This Dream is usually ar-

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Feeling connected to who we will become guides our behavior in ways that will create longer-term rewards.

ticated within an occupational context—for example, becoming a great novelist, winning the Nobel Prize (a common Dream of our biologists), contributing in some way to human welfare, and so on.”

Looking over the men’s development over the decades, Levinson and his colleagues viewed the dream as a directional force that could be ignored only at peril to the person’s development and that would resurface if not attended to. As they put it, “Major shifts in life direction at subsequent ages are often occasioned by a ... sense of betrayal or compromise of the Dream. That is, very often in the crises that occur at age 30, 40, or later a major issue is the reactivation of a guiding Dream ... that goes back to adolescence or the early 20’s, and the concern with its failure.”

Inner Compass

We must weigh multiple values in choosing a direction. Two people with different sets of values will use their personal intelligence in different ways and to different effects. And as observers using our personal intelligence, we familiarize ourselves with the range of values people use to guide their life because knowing a person’s values helps to explain why they make the choices they do. We cannot understand someone who values his family highly if we focus only on his work performance.

Psychologist Shalom H. Schwartz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem worked with an international team of researchers to examine the values that people hold around the world, by administering a survey that

includes dozens of questions along the lines of “How much are you like a man who believes being creative is important to him?” or “How much are you like a woman who wants people to do what she says?” Each question was designed to reflect a specific value. Schwartz and his colleagues believe that respondents for whom “being creative is important” valued self-directed, independent thinking; respondents who chose “wants people to do what she says” more generally sought opportunities for personal power. The team identified 19 internationally recognized values, including self-directed thinking and pursuit of personal power. They arranged the values in a circle with four compass points.

At the north is a universalistic orientation, which includes tolerance (“He works to promote tolerance and peace”) and self-directed thought. To the east are hedonism (“Enjoying life’s pleasures is important to him”) and personal achievement in the eyes of others (“She wants people to admire her accomplishments”). Moving southeast, one can find dominance (“She wants people to do what she says”). To the south is a belief in the importance of

security and safety (“Having order and stability in society is important to her”), and to the west are humility and caring (“He tries always to be responsive to the needs of his family and friends”). Moreover, each of us does better if we know which way our inner compass points. Then, we can apply our personal intelligence to make sure we are proceeding in tune with what we most care about.

The values we emphasize may lead us to excel in one area of life and fall short in another. People with a high level of personal intelligence are likely better at recognizing such compromises—and understanding the trade-offs they prefer for themselves [see box on next page]. Psychologists Ravenna M. Helson of the University of California, Berkeley, and Sanjay Srivastava, now at the University of Oregon, studied women who varied in the values they pursued over their life. They divided the women into four groups: seekers, conservers, achievers and “depleteds.” The seekers wanted personal growth and to think for themselves (they would be toward the north of Schwartz’s compass). The conservers valued tradition, family, security and hard work (the southwest of the compass). The achievers wanted both personal growth and the ability to excel at what they did (covering an area along Schwartz’s compass from the north

THE AUTHOR

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MEASURING PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

People vary in their ability to decode faces, judge motives and understand themselves, including their own values and needs. Though seemingly diverse, these

skills mostly arise from a common ability. I call this ability “personal intelligence,” or intelligence about personality. The Test of Personal Intelligence (TOPI) that I have developed with my colleagues includes a measure of the ability to reason about specific goals. For example, we ask questions such as:

Which goal would be problematic to meet for most people?

1. To become educated in an area that would satisfy one's curiosity.
2. To be adequate and competent in all areas of one's life.
3. To make new friends.
4. To work hard at one's job.

People higher in personal intelligence identify number 2 as the troublesome alternative. They recognize the near impossibility of fulfilling such an aim. Option 2 is, in fact, drawn from a list of irrational beliefs compiled by Albert Ellis, founder of rational-emotive behavior therapy, who studied his clients' illogical lines of thinking, which he believed interfered with their well-being. His clients' undermining ideas, he wrote, frequently included that they “must be perfectly competent, adequate, talented, and intelligent in all possible respects and [that they would be] ... utterly worthless ... unless that criterion is met.” Because people high in personal intelligence recognize the basics of setting reasonable goals for themselves, they are better able to allocate their energies in useful directions rather than becoming unnecessarily tied up in knots over aims they cannot meet.

In the TOPI studies, we also measure if people know how to connect their present selves to the future. As one example, we used a question such as: “If Margaret wants to become better at the French horn, how could she see herself in a way that would help her attain the goal?” Some participants realized that “practicing the instrument each day” was a better answer than “imagine she was performing with the London Philharmonic” because in this instance, practice provided a bridge from her present self to the better player she wished to become, whereas imagining performing with the Philharmonic may be inspiring (or intimidating), but it lacks the steps needed to get there. People who understand how to connect their possible selves score higher on the TOPI, suggesting that those of us high in the ability choose steps that move us toward our life objectives.

—J.D.M.

to the east). The depleted no longer sought either personal growth or achievement, or much of any other direction.

When the groups were compared, the conservers had the highest well-being. The achievers and seekers were about average. Seekers felt most creatively involved on the job, but the achievers were happiest overall with their job security and benefits. The depleted group scored well below any of the other groups in life satisfaction, indicating how important it is to develop our values and maintain pursuit of them.

Of course, we do not always strictly, rationally, choose a value system and then logically deduce the best ways to live our life. Many of us act first in ways that are consistent with our motives, hopes and desires and then learn to describe our actions by selecting a value system that corresponds to what we do. That is, we may reason from our values, but we also pick values that seem to fit our behavior.

Psychologist Shmuel Shulman of Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv and his colleagues interviewed 70 emerging adults (53 employed) with an average age of 24 about their self-knowledge and behavior; they identified three types of maturation among their interviewees. Some seemed unable to reflect on themselves and lacked clarity as to their direction. Others acted so as to please other people rather than having a strong sense of self. Meanwhile those in the third group could discuss themselves clearly, with a sense of who they were and hoped to become. This last group applied personal intelligence to understanding their personal needs and integrated these needs with their social activities. These individuals will most likely fare the best over time. According to Levinson, we will not be happy if we achieve someone else's goals on someone else's terms: “It is not a matter of how many rewards one has obtained; it is a matter of the goodness of fit between the life structure and the self.”

Sensible Strivings

Once we have a sense of direction, we need to take steps to meet our aims. To become the people we wish to be, we learn how to plan by setting short- and intermediate-term goals. Some people are better at such

goal setting than others—they are better able to choose aims that are consistent with one another and to avoid contradictory pursuits as much as possible. Sometimes our strivings are related to one another, as with a young professional who wants to get promoted at work and move to a bigger apartment in a safer area. At other times, they may be more independent but can still be carried out with little conflict, such as a person who wants to meet new people through present friends and to accept others as they are.

But some of us are prone to set goals that conflict with one another, such as the study participant who hoped both “to appear more intelligent than I am” and “to always present myself in an honest light” or another participant who wanted both “to keep my relationships on a 50–50 basis” and “to dominate, control, and manipulate people and situations.” Having the skill to set goals that go together well is a net plus: people with nonconflicting aims experience less inner turmoil and greater overall well-being. Participants also had greater well-being if they perceived that their plans were autonomous rather than being imposed from the outside by parents, teachers or supervisors.

Clayton Christensen, a professor at Harvard Business School, points out that many of his Harvard classmates attend reunions “unhappy, divorced and alienated from their children,” and yet he doubted that any of them had set goals to achieve those outcomes. What happened, as he saw it; was that they lost sight of their life purpose and failed to prioritize their relationships. (Some people may commit a mirror image of this error: they may become so focused on their immediate needs to be with their family and friends that they fail to achieve sufficiently in their careers to support themselves and others, yielding economic insecurities later on). Christensen's implication

Having the skill to set goals that go together well is a plus: people with nonconflicting aims experience greater overall well-being.



is, plainly, to keep the long-term goals and purposes in mind and to be content with devoting some time to those projects, even if the payoff is not immediate, advice that corresponds well to the idea of identifying with one's future selves. **M**

FURTHER READING

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From Our Archives

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