Vision boards: A creative tool for self-exploration and identity development

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Abstract:

Researchers recently described vision boards as a creative tool that counselors and clients can use to promote communication and identification of future goals in a strengths-based and solution-focused way. Using the framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) the authors describe a method for using vision boards in educational settings to promote identity exploration, enhanced self-efficacy beliefs, and the development of career and educational aspirations for under-represented adolescents. The authors present a case example of middle school students from rural, low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who created vision boards as part of a summer camp. Implications for the use of vision boards are discussed for counselors, counselor educators, and researchers.

Article:

Youth and adolescence are often exciting developmental periods that encompass socio-emotional changes, increases in cognitive and educational capacity, and limitless possibilities for the future (Turner & Lapan, 2005). For some youth, the journey toward a future career pathway is illuminated by supportive school personnel, caring families, and community networks. However, for other youth who do not possess these forms of social capital, the future may feel mysterious or frightening (Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, & Beck, 2006) and full of barriers to career possibilities. The counseling profession has long believed that we must serve all clients and families and thus consider culturally responsive outreach for youth who are not receiving support for their career aspirations (Lee, 2001). SCCT provides an appropriate foundation for conceptualizing and implementing career development initiatives that attend to both individuals (e.g., interests, goals, self-efficacy beliefs, and outcome expectations) and their context (e.g., supports and barriers in the environment, types of learning experiences) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Because SCCT

emphasizes contextual factors often overlooked by other career development theories, it is a good match for addressing the barriers (e.g. discrimination, bias, lack of opportunities, stereotypes) under-served youth face

In addition, scholars have suggested key tasks in adolescent career development that are consistent with SCCT (Lent et al., 1994; Turner & Lapan, 2005). Those tasks include developing positive career self-efficacy beliefs, engaging in career exploration, developing self-understanding and exposure to educational/career options, identifying values and interests, and feeling empowered to move forward. Therefore, the purpose of this conceptual article is to present a case illustration of how we used a creative SCCT-based future exploration tool (i.e., vision boards) to promote college aspirations and career development tasks with middle school students from rural, low SES backgrounds who participated in a summer camp. An SCCT-based framework is appropriate for understanding low-income students who experience disparities in college attendance patterns (e.g., delayed college entrance) relative to non-rural, high SES students (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015).

Vision boards are a flexible, multipurpose, creative tool. The tool exists within the expressive arts and creative counseling tradition (Gladding, 2008) and provides students with an avenue to symbolically process various topics (Cochran, 1996). For instance, individuals may use vision boards to reflect on broad or complex questions involving uncertainty or incongruence (e.g., "What are my values?" or "What do I want to do after I graduate?") and to use visual media to identify or clarify the responses (Mosely, 2010). Vision boards can include images from magazines, drawings, inspirational words, photographs, or decorations. In general, vision boards tap into imagination and creative, non-linear thinking, and may free individuals to include subconscious wishes or dreams in their formation of consciously-stated goals or aspirations. The process of "visioning" is similar to guided imagery, or the creation of mental images that recreates the sensory perceptions of a place or experience, in that it provides open-ended structure, allows for creative expression, and facilitates processing of discovering personal meaning (Skovholt, Morgan, & Negron-Cunningham, 1989). The imagery selected for a vision board can help bridge the gap between a developing sense of identity and conscious thoughts about a young person's future educational/career path (Mosely, 2010).

Rationale

Counselors can use vision boards to promote communication and future goal setting (Burton & Lent, 2016), to identify and discuss educational and career aspirations (Wiggins & Tingley, 2015), and to explore identity and interests (Skovholt et al., 1989). Exploration is an appropriate career development task for youth who are still in the process of identity formation, but not yet ready to commit to one career goal exclusively (Turner & Lapan, 2005). From the perspective of SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), exploration is part of the learning experiences construct; school counselors can intentionally structure these learning experiences to build self-efficacy beliefs and positive outcome expectations for their students' interests and goals.

As youth and adolescents work toward self-understanding and orienting themselves toward the future, career and academic exploration is often a meaningful part of that developmental work. Using vision boards, counselors can help adolescents explore their career and identity

development and strengthen their self-efficacy in a way that is both intentional and flexible. School counselors can use vision boards as a creative component of their school counseling programs to help all students achieve career and college readiness (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2012, 2014). As young people face questions about their identity and life goals, school counselors can use vision boards to support developmental progress (Wallace-Broscious, Serafica, & Osipow, 1994). Vision board prompts may allow students to identify their strengths and successes, enhancing their self-efficacy beliefs. The boards can also broaden a students' perception of future possibilities as students identify and articulate their interests, ponder the consequences of their choices, and envision careers that fit with their identity. Congruent with the case study below, students can test and clarify their identities and form stronger supportive relationships by explaining the meaning behind their vision boards to important people in their lives.

Vision boards can also promote self-reflection without relying heavily on verbal expression and allows for exploration and processing rather than focusing on determining the "correct" answer (Burton & Lent, 2016). In a scheduled and task-oriented school setting, students may enjoy the opportunity for creative expression. Vision boards are open-ended and strengths-based and allow youth to explore and construct a positive self-image.

In addition to vision boards' developmental appropriateness for youth, school counselors may find vision boards especially useful in under-resourced educational settings (Wiggins & Tingley, 2015). Researchers have used the SCCT model to demonstrate that positive ethnic identity development can impact culturally diverse youths' career-decision making self-efficacy (Gushue, 2006; Gushue & Whitson, 2006). For students who may experience discrimination, barriers, or discouragement of future aspirations in their social context, vision boards can promote a positive self-perception. In facilitating a discussion of vision boards with groups of students, counselors can use a SCCT framework to identify themes and differences among the boards in ways that help students identify the value in undervalued aspects of their identities. Additionally, while maintaining an awareness of contextual barriers, counselors can challenge students' low or inaccurate self-efficacy or outcome expectations. Consistent with SCCT, vision boards can empower students and allow them the agency to state their interests, goals, and aspirations in a creative format while also identifying supports for reaching those goals. The counselors or educators leading the activity can also use the vision boards to advocate for students or amplify the voices that are not always included in the school's dominant discourse. For example, students who are perceived as lacking "potential" for post-secondary education (e.g., students from low SES backgrounds, from immigrant families, or with disabilities) can articulate their aspirations through the vision boards in a way that encourages school faculty to respond proactively and supportively.

The process of creating vision boards

The following is a description of the process of preparing for and facilitating the creation of vision boards. Although this process is presented for a group counseling setting, counselors can easily adapt it as an individual intervention or a classroom guidance lesson.

1. Prepare a variety of materials for students to use in constructing their vision boards (e.g., poster board or poster paper, magazines, construction paper, markers, colored pencils, glue, scissors, tape, stamps, ribbon, stickers). Select a wide array of magazines that honor various cultural identities to maximize students' self-expression and provide options for a variety of role models.

2. Create specific prompts for students to answer for the initial reflection, as part of their vision boards, and for the final reflection. For the initial reflection, create questions that allow students to brainstorm about their identity, their future, and their goals. For example, "What makes me unique?" or "What kind of life do I want to have in 20 years?" The vision board prompts are questions that students answer on a sheet of paper and attach to the back of their vision boards. With these questions, you may ask students to explain the meaning of their boards (e.g. the story my vision board tells about me is …), to identify important components of their identities (e.g. interests, values, support systems) and to name their future goals (e.g., in the future I would like to be …). Ask students to include a specific, short-term goal that will help them reach their long-term goals. For the final reflection prompts, create questions that ask students to reflect upon the process of creating their vision boards and identify concrete small steps that will help them attain their goals. For example, "What was most difficult about this process for you?" or "How did you decide which pictures to include in your vision board?"

3. Ask students to complete the initial reflection before starting their vision boards. Do this through individual journaling or through discussion. Alternatively, have students reflect on previous career-related learning experiences (e.g., class activities, field trips, guest speakers, influences of family and friends) as they relate to their identities and their futures. This can help them apply their past learning to their vision boards in a way that aligns with the cyclical nature of learning in SCCT.

4. Provide students with instructions about how to create their vision boards. Clear instructions can assist students in understanding the purpose of the activity (e.g., to create a metaphorical representation of themselves). Invite them to create their vision boards in unique ways that represent who they are. Consider showing students multiple examples of vision boards so they can see a variety of ways to approach their boards. These examples may come from an internet image search, previous students who have agreed to share their vision boards, or boards of your own creation.

5. Provide students time and support to create their vision boards. As students are working, monitor the process and offer encouragement. Consider asking students clarifying questions about their boards that require them to think about their goals and their futures. For example, you might ask students to clarify the meaning they ascribe to certain images or what drew them to a particular image. Depending on the prompts and instructions, it is likely that the creation of vision boards will take adolescents multiple hour-long group counseling sessions. Counselors may choose to start a brief discussion at the beginning of a session where students revisit their vision boards to refresh students' memories and help them intentionally connect their vision boards to their futures.

6. After students complete their vision boards, provide time for them to share their creations with peers. After sharing, ask them about their process and how they will achieve their goals using the final reflection questions generated before the activity. To facilitate identity development and self-efficacy, you may help students identify similarities and difference across vision boards and brainstorm ways that unique identities may lead to career and educational achievement.

7. Allow students to keep their boards and tell them to consider displaying their boards in a visible place (e.g. their bedroom, their classroom) to remind them of their goals. Encourage them to share their boards with other important people in their lives.

Implications and considerations

The identity exploration involved in creating vision boards can have a positive impact on students' self-efficacy and outcome expectations, particularly when combined with positive social support. Leveraging students' self-efficacy beliefs and identity development, counselors can use vision boards to encourage students to list specific and attainable long- and short-term goals and to inspire them to work towards those goals. In line with the SCCT model, goal setting can help vision boards extend beyond self-reflection and identity definition and move toward shaping behavior. Counselors can help students think about ways to change their behavior that could help them attain their goals.

To facilitate this, counselors might challenge students on their low or inaccurate self-efficacy beliefs. To do this, counselors could ask students about times when they have overcome barriers or reinforce students' beliefs in abilities that are undervalued by society. For example, a school counselor might challenge a high school student's low self-efficacy about their potential for success in engineering by facilitating a discussion around the student's analytical abilities or high math grades. Then, the school counselor could have the student create a vision board diagramming self-affirming ways of thinking.

In a supportive setting, vision boards also can serve to help students affirm or validate their socially stigmatized identities. For example, a school counselor working with a bullied high school student who identifies as queer might feeling empowered and affirmed in their identity by creating vision boards. School counselors can also use vision boards in a group or classroom guidance setting to help students in marginalized groups find solidarity and share their common experiences or learn from the strengths, interests, supports, barriers, and goals of their peers.

Finally, considering the role of the counselor as an authority figure, the possibility of "group think" is important when using vision boards. Creating an environment where students can construct their vision boards on their own terms is important, especially for adolescents who may worry about judgment from their peers. Counselors should encourage unique expression before students begin vision boarding. For instance, a counselor may remind students that this is not an evaluative activity that adults will critique or grade. Pre-writing may also assist in facilitating individual expression because students are able to generate their own ideas before seeing their peers' work.

A case study example

The following section is a description of how middle school students ($N = 25$) in a summer camp created vision boards. Students created vision boards during a camp that took place at a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States. We invited rising 8th grade students who were part of Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) programs in five rural, low-income counties throughout the state to attend the three-day/two-night summer camp. The summer camp participants were from five middle schools. There were 16 girls and 9 boys, half of whom identified as White and half as African American or Latino/a. Per school websites, the free and reduced lunch rates at their schools ranged from 40–98%. The university IRB reviewed and granted an exemption to this project as a study of secondary data (i.e., de-identified photographs of the posters created by the students during the camp). Campers did have parental permission to participate in all camp activities, and had signed waivers indicating their understanding that photographs would be taken in the course of camp activities. None of the photographs included images of the students.

We theoretically grounded the camp in SCCT and designed it to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their identities in conjunction with educational and career aspirations. During the camp, students immersed themselves in the university setting including staying in a residence hall, touring campus, and eating at the dining hall. In addition to creating vision boards, students participated in a variety of learning experiences including listening to a panel of college students describe their college experiences, completing a values sorting activity, reflecting on their heroes or role models, identifying future goals, touring a civil rights museum, and taking part in experiential challenge activities as a group.

The creation of vision boards served as a capstone exercise to pull together students' experiences. After each activity in the camp, students received a reflection guide that helped them develop their identities, interests, and goals for their future. For example, after doing a values sort activity, students ranked their top values and wrote a short reflection about how those values might guide their future academic and career choices. Each evening, students used these reflection sheets as a starting point for constructing their vision boards with the supervision of counseling Master's students who served as the camp counselors. We provided students with a black trifold poster board on which to create their vision board. During this unstructured time to work on the boards in small groups, students could use a variety of materials to create their vision boards. The graduate students worked with the middle school students in small groups to discuss the day's activities and offer support in creating the vision boards.

Students placed their top five values on the left panel of their boards and a specific goal (including steps to reach the goal) on the right panel. Early on in the camp, students worked with a peer to trace their upper body on large white pieces of paper and cut out the resulting silhouette. Students glued these cutouts in the center panel of the vision boards and placed words and images that represented their identities around them. Additionally, students completed the following four sentences about themselves and attached their answers to the back of their vision boards: (a) In the future I would like to be …; (b) In order to be that person I picture in the future, I will need to …; (c) Some of my key values are …; (d) The story my vision board tells about me is …

Upon completion, we displayed the vision boards along a hallway before the camp's closing event and invited parents, family members, GEAR UP staff, and university staff to see the boards and discuss them with students. Students also had prepared a short description of their boards to share. With this sharing experience, we sought to strengthen students' connections with positive support systems in their career and educational decision making. At the conclusion of the camp, staff photographed the vision boards and students took their boards home.

Sample vision boards

This section provides three photos of vision boards created by students during the summer camp. For each photo, we also provide the students' descriptions of the meaning of their boards and our own perception of how their boards are representative of common themes across other students' vision boards. The authors provide these interpretations as an example of how counselors might identify common themes and within-theme differences among vision boards to help students realize the value in underused abilities or undervalued identities.
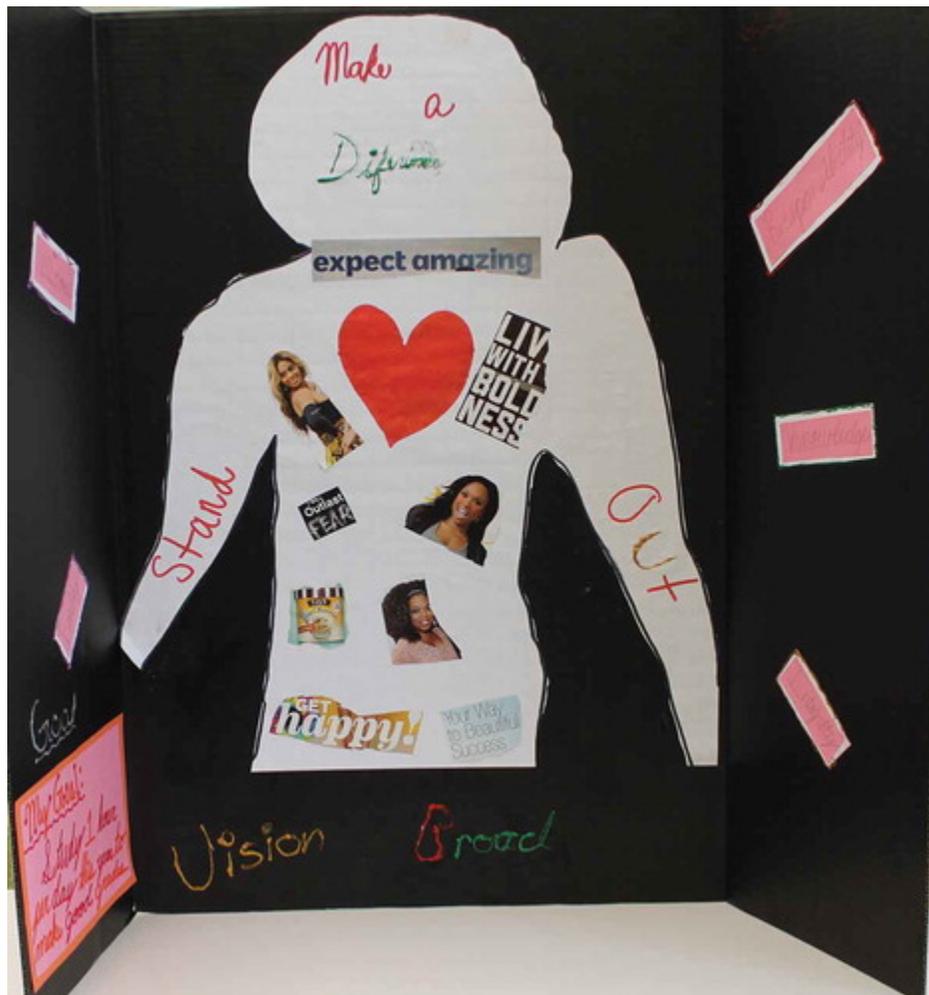

Figure 1. Vision board 1.

The story this of vision board, according to its creator, is "about things that describe me, things I like, and things that inspire me." We viewed this board and numerous others as representing strength, leadership, drive, independence, and individualism. This vision board showed the way this student drew inspiration from powerful role models by including clippings of Oprah and Beyoncé. Similar students looked towards the future with specific academic or career goals involving leadership and prestige, such as a surgeon, a lawyer, and a doctor. Goals within this theme expressed a sense of purposefulness, hard work, and focus combined with optimism and a desire to overcome obstacles. These students conceptualized this effort as making themselves stand out, encapsulated by the phrases "Do more!" and "Expect amazing."

The creator of this vision board stated, "I want to work to bring unity to the world." Numerous students created their vision boards with a similar focus on the importance of relationships. Some expressed a desire to serve others in their future careers as a cosmetologist, nurse, and the President. These vision boards emphasized the value of family, friendship, freedom, and justice. In general, these students expressed coherent and integrated statements about the importance of friendship and family. Some of these vision boards focused on important personal relationships. Others expressed a desire to create positive changes in the world. For example, one vision board included the words "world with new values" and "revolutionary." Some mentioned advancement, achievement, or fame as values, but framed these qualities in terms of their impact on other people.

Figure 2. Vision board 2.

This vision board creator viewed the project as a representation of how "I love to travel" and how this student wanted to work as a photographer for National Geographic. This student seemed intentional about filing their board with striking images in an aesthetically pleasing way. Like numerous others, this student viewed the creation of this board as an expressive endeavor. For example, many students intentionally chose colors that represented their personalities, ranging from a variety of bright colors throughout their displays to others who chose to use only colors and photos that fit a specific color palette. These vision boards also demonstrated intentionality about the placement of elements. For example, the vision board above contained a series of wavy red lines in all of the empty spaces within the silhouette. All of these students approached their boards with artistry, but approached creativity in relation to their identity in different ways. Some students wanted the appearance of their vision boards to show their individuality. These students seemed to view their vision board as a way of demonstrating that their identities defied easy definition, instead choosing to let their uniqueness shine. These boards often presented a wide variety of striking images and bright colors combined with words that emphasized individuality. Other students demonstrated a creative passion coupled with an attractive aesthetic. One such board presented images of jewelry and hairstyles. The creator of this board stated that their work told the story of them as "a hard worker who cares about others and my fashion sense!"

Figure 3. Vision board 3.

Summary

Creating vision boards provided the summer camp students with an opportunity to define and explore their identities and educational/career goals, and their finished products served as a visual reminder of what they had learned. The vision boards served as a working space where students could process their learning from the educational and career exploration experiences at the camp, find strength and meaning in their identities, identify key values and interests, and build positive self-beliefs about their futures. In this way, the creation of the boards mirrored the key constructs and circular nature of SCCT (e.g., person-based variables, learning experiences, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, interests and goals, contextual supports and barriers for achieving those goals) (Lent et al., 1994). Camp staff noticed how the vision boards could be grouped along the lines of career interest categories (e.g., artistic, social, enterprising). Yet, every student expressed their identity and aspirations in unique ways on their vision boards. Students described themselves and their futures in personal and unique ways and many boards defied easy categorization. The various ways students described their identities and aspirations points to the potential for richness and complexity in vision boarding as a tool to facilitate career exploration and identity development. Accordingly, it seems important for counselors to avoid simple categorizations of vision boards, especially when working with students who may have been defined in limiting ways based on their marginalized identities.

Adaptations to counselor education

Counselor educators may utilize vision boards to facilitate professional development for counselors-in-training, counselor educators-in-training, or other counselor educators. According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, counselor educators are tasked with facilitating their students' multicultural competence (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016, Professional Counseling Identity, Section 2, F.2). Using vision boards, students could engage multicultural topics (e.g., "How might my cultural identities influence the helping relationship?") that elicit both cognitive and affective responses. Such classroom activities may facilitate discussion and accommodate various learning styles.

Vision boards may also enhance self-awareness or have a self-evaluative function. Instructors or supervisors may use vision boards to assist graduate students in documenting their learning throughout the semester. For instance, a university supervisor may use the prompt, "After each meeting with your site supervisor, add a new image to your vision board to describe what you learned about yourself as a counselor." At the end of the semester, supervisees could present these vision boards to their peers to share their experiences and growth in internship. Used in this way, the vision board could serve multiple purposes; the supervisees could gain self-awareness, learn to self-evaluate, and grow in their professional identity. Using a creative mode of expression may suit some counselors-in-training more than others, but has the potential to uncover unique and complex facets of their experiences.

Counselor educators may also use vision boards to assist in the development of teaching, research, or supervision identities in other counselor educators or counselor educators-in-training. For example, vision boards can help new instructors name and process their identities,

strengths, and goals as a teacher. Some novice instructors with limited teaching experience can find developing a teaching philosophy difficult. Vision boarding may assist instructors to approach this process with less anxiety and more playfulness. Moreover, counselor educators may use vision boards to enhance self-efficacy and identity exploration related to a variety of roles in counselor education (e.g., teaching, research, supervision, service).

Limitations

Creating vision boards requires creativity and metaphorical thinking. Students who think in more literal ways or who do not identify as creative may struggle with creating vision boards. Some may view the process as a test of their artistic ability or may fear the judgement of others. Even though it is important to emphasize the non-evaluative and self-exploratory nature of creating vision boards, it seems inevitable that some students will enjoy it more than others. Additionally, students who think in more concrete ways may struggle with assigning meaning to the images or words on their vision boards that go beyond a list of their favorite things. Therefore, vision boards may not be appropriate for all students and it is important to understand students' abilities before presenting a vision board activity.

The commercialism of magazine advertisements can also shape students' thinking about their identities. Although students have the opportunity to include their own drawings or words on their vision boards, in our experience, many felt drawn to magazines. Students relying on magazines to create their vision boards are limited by the magazine's contents. Advertisements often make up a large percentage of magazines and are often its most eye-catching content. Vision boarding with magazines runs the risk of limiting students' perception of their identity in terms of the products they like or want. Additionally, some magazines may not have ethnically and culturally diverse people and topics represented within their pages. However, students creating vision boards can also use their creativity to put their own spin on the images and words from advertisements. Numerous participants in our camp took pictures and words from advertisements and used them in unique ways where they took on new meaning. To address the limitations of magazines, counselors could supplement them with a wide variety of materials or modalities such as creating electronic vision boards using an online image search, writing poetry, or taking photos.

In general, vision boards help students define their identities in positive and aspirational ways that build their self-efficacy. However, some students who have low self-efficacy and outcome expectations may experience confusion or conflict within their identities that may challenge them in the creation process. Additionally, if peers or others will view the vision boards, students may feel reluctant to include parts of their identities about which they feel uncertain or embarrassed. Counselors who would like to focus on more confusing or intimate parts of students' identities should think through how to utilize the activity within confidential conversations.

Conclusion

Vision boards are a flexible tool for fostering identity development and self-efficacy and for inspiring career and educational aspirations for under-represented youth. In group and individual counseling as well as classroom guidance lessons, school counselors can use vision boards to

promote career and college readiness (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2014). Adolescents can explore future-oriented topics that might feel cerebral or overwhelming with this concrete and open-ended approach. Especially for students who experience numerous barriers to their career development, creating and sharing vision boards is a way to celebrate students' uniqueness and strengths in ways that can open up their awareness to future possibilities.

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