

## Self-Portraits: Possible Selves in European-American, Chilean, Japanese and Japanese-American Cultural Contexts

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*Possible selves of students from European-American (EA), Chilean (CH), Japanese-American (JA), and Japanese (JN) cultural contexts were analyzed, revealing differences in the emphasis given to various content themes. EA possible selves focus on intrapersonal themes (i.e., “fear being dependent”), consistent with cultural emphases on uniqueness and independent development. In JN, JA and CH contexts, career and education themes dominate possible selves, consistent with particularly strong cultural emphasis on professional and academic accomplishments. The cultural contexts also differ in their predominant configurations of possible selves—EA and CH possible selves often show balance (expected and feared selves of similar theme but opposing valence, i.e., “expect to graduate from college” and “fear dropping out of college”) while JN and JA selves more frequently match (expected and feared selves of similar thematic content and valence, i.e., “expect to be idle” and “fear being idle”).*

In the process of human development, possible selves serve to focus and direct behavior towards or away from the expected, desired and dreaded end-states they represent (Cross & Markus, 1991; Hooker, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Personalizing an individual's enduring goals, aspirations, fears and anxieties, possible selves reflect the individual's significant ongoing concerns, and may bear the stamp of the individual's significant experiences (Harter, 1988; Hoelter, 1985; Markus, 1977; Marsh, 1986; Stryker, 1980). Accordingly, the hopes of the high-school academic star for further academic

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achievement are unlikely to be abstract and vague; instead they are likely to be manifest in images of the self attending an elite college, winning a scholarship, or being admired by teachers and other students. Similarly, when a student athlete loses an athletic competition, the failure will be manifest in specific fears of being rejected by the coach or in not being selected for the varsity team. For an adult, expected possible selves might be “the carefree and unburdened self,” “the loving mother self,” or the “struggling in middle-management self,” while feared selves might include “the unemployed self” or “the sick with cancer self.”

### *Sociocultural Shaping of Possible Selves*

The idea of “what I might become” is a vision tailored by stage of life, and also by historical and sociocultural context (Cross & Markus, 1991; Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996). In middle-class America, the smallest train in *The Little Engine That Could* conquers the mountain through optimism, determination and industry. Sleepy toddlers in Chile learn that storybook characters like *La Tenquita* realize their potential by accepting and embracing their family responsibilities. In Japan, tales of the struggles of the one-inch-tall *Issunboshi* suggest that individual development and strength arise from knowing and accepting one’s potential weaknesses. The values and prescriptions inherent in cultural products from bedtime stories to history lessons to television commercials send subtle and not so subtle messages about how to be, both now and in the future. These culture-specific images and ideas about the nature and process of personal development are likely to become threads of the self-concepts that individuals weave for themselves (e.g., Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Bond, 1988; Cole, 1991; Kim & Berry, 1993; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder, 1990; Shweder & LeVine, 1984; Triandis, 1995). Through an assessment of *possible selves*, the present research examines variation in understandings of individual potential and motivation among students from four cultural contexts—European-American, Chilean, Japanese and Japanese-American.

As self-relevant cognitions of enduring goals, aspirations, fears and threats, possible selves function as a framework and guide for individual development (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These representations enable people to achieve some behavioral control and self-directed growth by guiding the development of specific plans and strategies for action (Gollwitzer, 1989; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985; Wurf & Markus, 1991). Just as the self-concept incorporates knowledge about the current self and its accomplishments, failures and characteristics, it also includes knowledge about what the self might eventually achieve or become. We reason that possible selves will, like the current self-concept, be shaped by culturally prevalent ways of understanding and being a self (Inglehart, Markus, & Brown, 1989; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Nurius, 1987; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997).

Overall, we anticipate that students sampled from elite university contexts will show considerable overlap in their aspirations and expectations (e.g., pursuing higher education, starting a career) and thus will show some similarity in possible selves, regardless of their cultural context. At the same time, however, we hypothesize that these students will also show some systematic differences in the dominant themes and configuration of their possible selves, and that these differences will reflect the understandings of the process and priorities of individual development prevalent in their cultural contexts.

*Variation in Thematic Content of Possible Selves*

Concepts of both current and possible selves are substantially shaped by a person's experiences of normative patterns of sociocultural participation—ways of being a person in the world, or *selfways* (Day, Borkowski, Punzo, & Howespien, 1994; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Markus et al., 1997; Oyserman et al., 1995). In addition to incorporating key cultural ideas and values, selfways represent contextualized senses of how to be a “good,” “mature,” or “successful” person as well as ways in which one can be “bad,” “an outcast,” or “a failure.”

European American selfways, for example, emphasize individuality and independence—the “I think therefore I am” Cartesian view of the self. From the Bill of Rights to the various contemporary Right-to-Life statutes, the American legal and political systems foster the view that the individual is an independent agent, ideally operating under the purview of “inalienable rights” with free and self-regulated will (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Many features of popular culture espouse the virtues of maintaining one's individuality (Kim & Markus, 1999). Burger King, for example, encourages people to “Have it your way, right away” and BMW suggests that the path to excellence demands “Finding your own road.” Everyday social practices such as career advancement through self-promotion and the cultural mandate of “making up your own mind” on an issue underscore the view that the European-American selves should pursue achievement through individuality, independence and autonomy, and that these themes are likely to figure prominently in their concepts of personal development (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Bruner, 1986). One's educational and career choices are cast as opportunities to express one's individual abilities, preferences and skills.

Common Japanese selfways, by contrast, emphasize dedication to finding one's appropriate and harmonious place in the encompassing social network. In Japanese cultural contexts, interdependence is at the very foundation of being a person, and one's actions are seen as having inevitable consequences for others in one's ingroup. The Japanese legal system, for example, assigns greater weight to the social consequences of criminal action when sentencing than does the American system, reflecting greater emphasis on one's accountability for the consequences others must endure (Dean, 1997). In everyday practices of eating, drinking, working and playing, Japanese are encouraged to actively strive for smooth group interaction, free from the distractions and disruptions accompanying independent behavior (Heine et al., 1999). Appropriate behavior in Japanese cultural contexts requires explicitly referencing the expectations and desires of others in one's social network, and the recognition of social responsibilities is likely to play an important role in conceptualizing future behavior.

Among the most important social responsibilities are those associated with education and career development. In East Asian contexts, education is critical; it is less about opportunity and achievement and more about becoming an acceptable or competent human being. In Japan, Stevenson, Lee, and Nerison-Low (1998) report that learning is equated to what it means to be “alive.” To stop learning is to “decay or stagnate as a person” (p.181) (Fryberg & Markus, under review; Stevenson, Lee, & Nerison-Low, 1998).

Less is known about the selfways of Chilean contexts, although research in other Latin-American cultural contexts suggests that maintaining social networks and

family ties are likely to be highly salient in common understandings of how to be a person (Gaines, 1995). In Mexico, for example, one's "connections" decisively establish one's credibility as well as providing the frame-of-reference for self-evaluation (Condon, 1985). On the basis of the few analyses of selves in Latin-American cultural contexts that exist, we can speculate that Chileans may also place significant emphasis on awareness and reference to the expectations and desires of others (Day et al., 1994). It is likely, however, that a desire to express one's individuality will also influence Chilean self-concepts. Songs and films popular in Latin America, for example, commonly reflect the notion that each person has a unique spirit. Similarly, one's relationship to God is understood as intimate and highly personalized (Condon, 1985). A simultaneous emphasis on individuality and social accountability might suggest that representations of Chilean potential will reflect individuals' unique contributions to the omnipresent network of social relationships in which they are embedded, and to which they are responsible.

The possible selves of Japanese-American students may provide a window into how people contend with multiple selfways, some of which may even conflict in their prescriptions of how to be a person. Recent studies indicate that Asian-Americans can employ both European-American and Asian selfways (Heine et al., 1999; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). The family contexts of Japanese-American students may demand the use of Japanese models, values, and practices, while their educational or professional worlds promote European-American structures and meanings. It is likely, then, that the possible selves of Japanese-Americans will reflect both significant responsibilities to their social networks and also the importance of expressing individuality and independent abilities.

#### *Motivation and Variance in Configuration of Possible Selves*

Feared and expected possible selves function as motivational resources (Oyserman et al., 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b). In particular, feared selves (i.e., not finishing college) are more effective motivators when they are *balanced* with clear and well-developed expected possible selves that serve to outline the interests and activities that may prevent undesirable end-states (i.e., graduating with honors). Similarly, expected selves are seen as more potent motivators in concert with vivid feared selves that make the consequences of certain destructive interests or pursuits particularly meaningful and self-relevant. Motivation appears to be grounded in approaching optimistic, or even idealistic, aspirations and avoiding potential threats and failures. We reason, therefore, that a balance among possible selves may be relatively common in the European-American cultural contexts because they promote positive and optimistic evaluations of the self.

In contexts with different understandings of the nature of motivated behavior, however, possible selves may occur in alternative configurations that reflect the relevant motivational tendencies. Specifically in contexts like those of Japan, in which motivation is grounded primarily in an awareness of potential difficulties and negative states and in realizing ways of coping with them, feared and expected selves of the same valence and domain—called here *matched selves*—may serve as a motivational resource. In these contexts, a person's fears and potential disadvantages are incorporated into their concept of the future, thereby encouraging the individual to address and direct energy towards working with and through the difficulties (Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1999). These cases may reflect an underlying assumption that certain problems cannot be avoided, and that

motivation arises through accepting and adapting to them. With the present research, we plan to examine the understandings of matched and balanced selves as motivational resources in each of the cultural contexts that we sampled.

## **Overview of the Study**

In this study, we investigate the similarities and differences in possible selves generated by students participating in differing cultural contexts. Given the European-American cultural emphasis on individuality and self-determination, and in line with previous research (Cross & Markus, 1991; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a), we expect to find intrapersonal characteristics to be most strongly represented among European-American possible selves. The repertoires of possible selves generated by Japanese and Japanese-Americans are likely to reflect the cultural priority assigned to fulfilling the role of the “good” student and these students should emphasize academic and career-related possible selves (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Since less is known about the prevalent norms and expectations for Chileans, we are uncertain about the likely content of their possible selves, though the simultaneous emphasis on both individuality (Condon, 1985) and relationality (Anaya & Cole, 2001) that has been observed in some Latin-American contexts suggests that their possible selves may reflect significant attention to both intrapersonal and interpersonal concerns.

We also analyze the configuration among the feared and expected selves of the university students in the four contexts. Following previous research (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a), we will assess the relative prevalence of balance among feared and expected selves (e.g., “I fear I will do poorly in school” and “I expect to do well in school”) in the possible selves of the university students. Among American students, balance has been observed to motivate students to attain the positive self, avoid the negative possible self and to increase perseverance (Oyserman et al., 1995). We reasoned, however, that students in different cultural contexts with different priorities and emphases may employ different configurations of possible selves in the service of motivation. For example, given the great prevalence of negative self-conceptions in Japanese self-concepts and a cultural sensitivity to falling short of other’s expectations or of the desired standard in a given situation (Kanagawa et al., 2001; Takata, 1987), feared possible selves may have greater significance in motivation for the Japanese. In this context, expected selves may align with, rather than oppose, feared selves (e.g., “I fear I will do poorly in school” and “I expect I will do poorly in school”). This configuration may reflect the cultural emphasis on being aware of instances in which one is falling short of expectations so that this knowledge can be used as a guide to motivation and self-improvement.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

One hundred and fifty-four college students aged 18 to 26 were recruited to participate in the study through various methods (word-of-mouth, community bulletin boards and e-mail lists). Fifty-six of the 154 students were recruited from Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley, 28 (15 women, 13 men) of them being European-American (EA) and 28 (16 women, 12 men) Japanese-

American (JA). The remaining participants were forty-nine (25 women, 24 men) Chilean (CH) students from Universidad de Chile and Universidad La Catolica, as well as 49 (25 women, 24 men) Japanese (JN) students from Tokyo University. Subjects were paid US\$10 (or its equivalent in their national currency) for their participation in the study. While JA participants were either first or second generation (i.e., they had either emigrated from Japan to the United States, or been born to Japanese émigrés in the USA), the EA, JN and CH participants were all at least fourth-generation natives of America, Japan and Chile, respectively.

### **Materials and Procedure**

*Open-ended questions.* All participants filled out an open-ended questionnaire used by Oyserman and Markus (1990a; 1990b) to elicit information about their possible selves. Participants were asked to list at least three expected and at least three feared selves for the next year. The probes for the expected and feared selves followed these examples:

*Expected selves:* Thinking about yourself in the future, please tell me about the three possible selves that you think are most likely to be true of you in the next year. These are possible selves you *expect* to be true of you. Rank the three expected selves that are most meaningful to you.

*Feared selves:* Now think about ways you would not like to be next year. Ways you would like to avoid being or fear being. These could be ways you are now but want to avoid or things you want to avoid being like. Rank the three feared selves that are most meaningful to you.

A well-established, reliable coding scheme developed by Oyserman and colleagues (Hooker, 1999; Oyserman et al., 1995; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993; Robinson, Davis, & Meara, 2003) and which was based on earlier systems by Little (1983), Klinger (1975) and Greene (1986), was used to analyze the data. Each expected and feared self was coded into one of the following six thematic content categories:

1. *Intrapersonal:* e.g., anxious, happy, rich, excited about the future.
2. *Interpersonal:* e.g., keep in touch with friends, strengthen relationships.
3. *Career/education:* e.g., worried about future job, applying to medical school.
4. *Extracurricular:* e.g., involved in club activities, swim more.
5. *Attainment of material goods:* e.g., have a regular income, have a car, buy new clothes.
6. *Health-related:* e.g., in shape, less tired all the time, recovered from surgery.

Then, for each category of expected self and each category of feared self, the respondent received a content score ranging from 0 (0 selves in the category) to 3 (3 total selves in the category). The categories included in the analyses are those which account for at least 10% of the responses from one of the cultural groups.

We also calculated totals of *balanced* or *matched* pairs of possible selves for each subject. A *balanced* pair of selves was defined as a pair of expected and feared selves similar in thematic content but opposed in valence. A *matched* pair of selves was defined as a pair of expected and feared selves similar in thematic content and valence. For example, a balanced pair of possible selves might include the expected

self of “finding and accepting a job offer in Hawaii,” and the opposing feared self of “being unsuccessful in my job search in Hawaii.” In contrast, a matching pair of possible selves might include the expected self, “needing to improve my relationship with my father,” and the feared self, “needing to improve my relationship with my father.” Each subject thus received a score for balanced and for matched pair configurations ranging from 0 (no pairs) to 3 (all paired) in each domain of possible selves.

*Demographic information.* Students were asked to indicate the highest level of education achieved by their mother and father, as well as the highest level of education that they expected to achieve personally. They were also asked to indicate their gender and age.

The questionnaire, which was constructed in English, was translated into Japanese and Spanish and then back-translated to ensure reasonable comparability across cultures.

After participants arrived at the laboratory, they were told that the purpose of the study was to gather self-descriptions. They were given a pen and a private, quiet room in which to fill out the 30-minute questionnaire, which included both the open-ended and close-ended surveys.

*Coding.* Using the coding system described above, two bilingual (English and Spanish) individuals blind to the study hypotheses coded fifty open-ended response sets from the EA, JA and CH samples. The inter-rater agreement averaged .96. One of those individuals then coded the remaining fifty-six open-ended response sets from those samples. Two bilingual (English and Japanese) individuals coded twenty open-ended response sets from the JN sample, again using the coding system described above. The inter-rater agreement averaged .92. One of the coders then coded the remaining twenty-nine open-ended response sets.

## Results

### *Expected Selves*

Means and standard deviations for each analyzed category of expected self by cultural group are shown in Table 1. Looking first at possible expected selves across the four cultural contexts, the content scores for each category of expected self were analyzed with a 4 (culture: EA, JA, CH, JN)  $\times$  4 (category of expected self: intrapersonal, interpersonal, career/education, extracurricular) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with category of expected self as a within-culture variable. Two of the six categories of possible selves (health-related and attainment of material goods) were not included in these analyses because fewer than 10% of the responses fell into each of those categories.

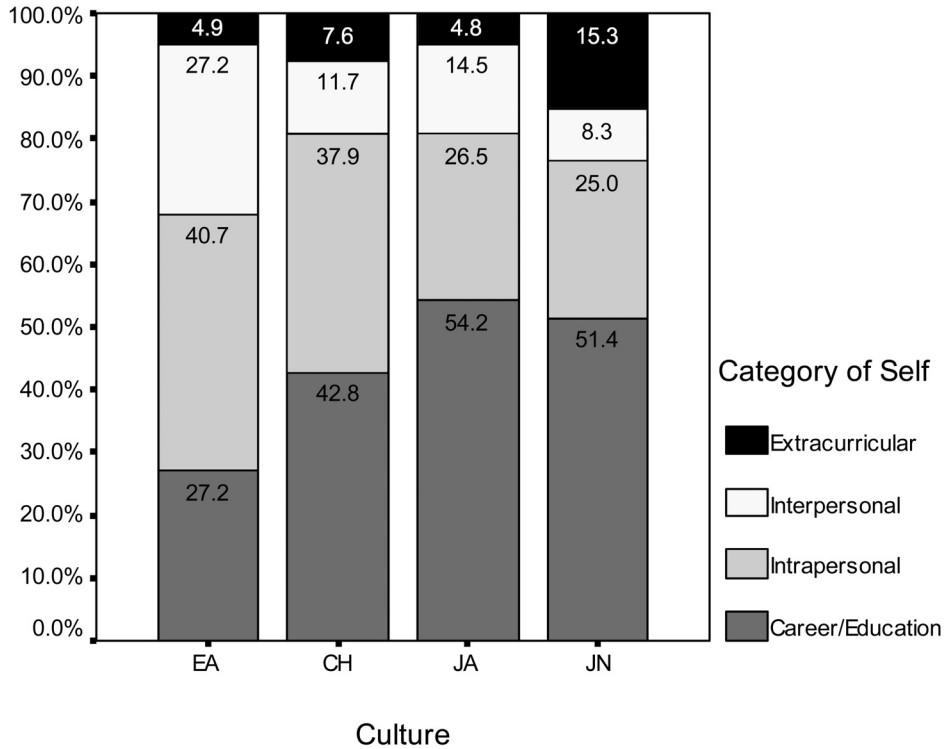
The analyses yielded a main effect of culture  $F(12, 154) = 3.58, p < .001$ . *Between groups*, there were also significant cultural differences in all four of the categories of expected self analyzed—intrapersonal  $F(3, 154) = 2.59, p < .06$ , interpersonal  $F(3, 154) = 4.95, p < .005$ , career/education  $F(3, 154) = 4.89, p < .005$ , and extracurricular  $F(3, 154) = 3.12, p < .05$ . In line with our hypotheses, the CH ( $p < .09$ ), the JA ( $p < .005$ ) and the JN ( $p < .01$ ) reported significantly more career/education selves than did the EA. Unexpectedly, however, the EA reported significantly more

**TABLE 1** Mean Prevalence Scores of Expected Selves

Category of expected selves	Means			
	EA	CH	JA	JP
Intrapersonal	1.18 (1.02)	1.12 (1.05)	0.79 (0.99)	0.69 (0.78)
Elevate my cultural and spiritual levels”				
“To be an emotionally balanced man”				
“I will be a well rounded person, same as now, able to focus better”				
Interpersonal	0.79 (0.88)	0.35 (0.66)	0.43 (0.50)	0.23 (0.47)
“Will be able to have a boyfriend”				
“To be a person who is in peace with everyone”				
“I’ll be keeping in touch with the friends I made this year”				
Career/Education	0.79 (0.63)	1.27 (0.93)	1.61 (0.92)	1.42 (0.87)
“Working really hard for classes”				
“Applying to/interviewing at Medical schools”				
“To work for the first time, to be successful in my studies, to have a stable employment”				
Extracurricular	0.14 (0.45)	0.22 (0.47)	0.14 (0.36)	0.42 (0.57)
“Cruising around”				
“Will be writing a novel”				
“Become a master magician”				

interpersonal selves than both the CH ( $p < .05$ ) and the JN ( $p = .001$ ). Both the EA and the CH generated more intrapersonal selves than the JA and JN, although these comparisons did not achieve conventional levels of significance.

Next we analyzed the content of possible selves *within* cultural context. For the four analyzed categories of expected self, Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of responses generated by each of the cultural groups in our study. Consistent with our hypotheses and the self-focused themes of the European-American selfways, the EA generated more expected selves in the intrapersonal category (40.7%) than in any other single category. The career/education category and the interpersonal categories were the next most frequent (27.2%). By contrast, The CH, JA and JN students



**FIGURE 1** Proportional frequency of expected selves categories in European-American, Chilean, Japanese-American and Japanese participant responses.

display similar response patterns, which appear to reflect the widespread significance attached to academic and professional achievement in each of these cultures. The most frequently mentioned category of expected self for these three groups was the career/education category (CH 42.8%; JA 54.2%; JN 51.4%), followed by intrapersonal selves (CH 37.9%; JA 26.5%; JN 25.0%). The average number of interpersonal selves were low for these three groups, at third most common for the JA and CH respondents (JA 14.5%; CH 11.7%), and least most common for the JN (8.3%). The JN were the only group, however, to report a notable number of extracurricular selves (15.3%), while for all other groups that category did not achieve the minimum 10% response rate.

#### *Feared Selves*

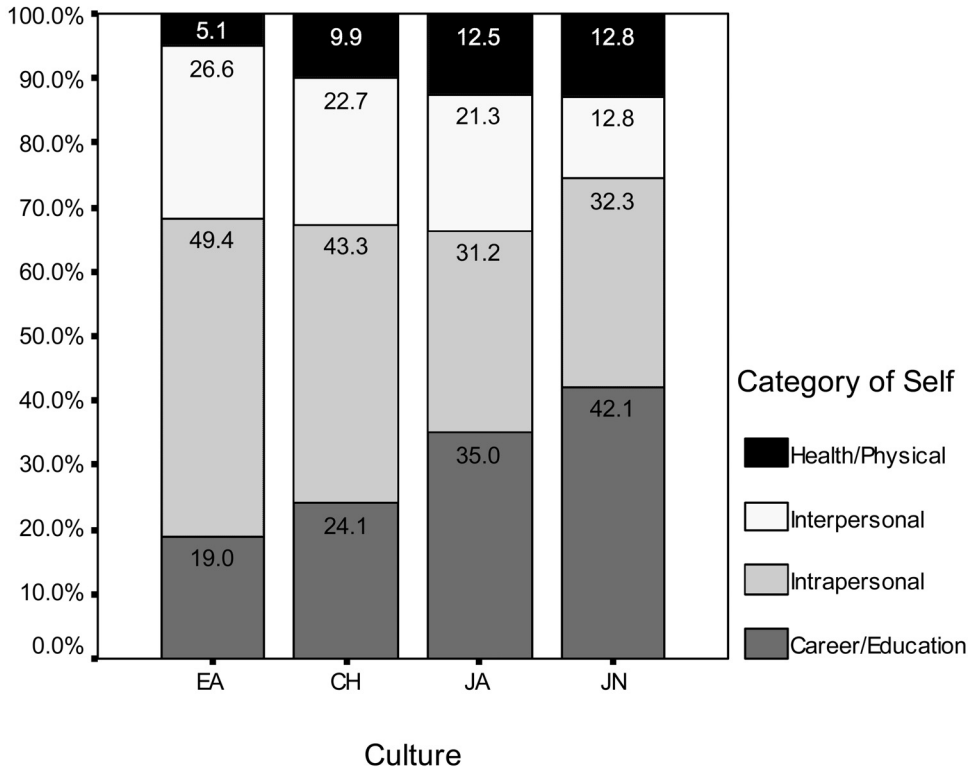
Looking at possible feared selves, means and standard deviations for each analyzed category of feared self by cultural group are shown in Table 2. The content scores for each category of feared self were analyzed with a four (culture: EA, JA, CH, JN)  $\times$  four (category of feared self: intrapersonal, interpersonal, career/education, health/physical) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with category of feared self as a within-culture variable. Two of the six categories of possible selves (extracurricular and attainment of material goods) were not included in these analyses because fewer than 10% of the responses fell into each of those categories.

**TABLE 2** Mean Prevalence Scores of Feared Selves

<i>Category of feared selves</i>	<i>Means</i>			
	<i>EA</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>JA</i>	<i>JP</i>
Intrapersonal “To become a selfish man that only thinks of himself” “Not having grown spiritually” “Confused, lonely, dependent, couch potato”	1.39 (1.13)	1.24 (1.18)	0.89 (0.99)	0.83 (0.81)
Interpersonal “Having an abusive/ codependent relationship” “Instability with my friends and significant other” “My closest friends will have abandoned me”	0.75 (0.84)	0.65 (0.81)	0.61 (0.69)	0.33 (0.62)
Career/Education “Getting no responses from medical schools (rejections)” “Failing classes” “Unemployed after graduation”	0.54 (0.58)	0.69 (0.92)	1.00 (0.72)	1.08 (0.88)
Physical Health “Turn into a fat blimp” “Will be dead” “Poor eater—not eating balanced or well-cooked meals”	0.14 (0.36)	0.29 (0.58)	0.36 (0.62)	0.33 (0.62)

The analyses yielded a main effect of culture  $F(12, 154) = 2.67, p < .005$ . There were also significant cultural differences *between groups* in three of the four categories of self analyzed—intrapersonal  $F(3, 154) = 2.64, p < .06$ , interpersonal  $F(3, 154) = 2.67, p = .05$  and career/education  $F(3, 154) = 3.60, p < .05$ . Although the EA reported marginally more selves than the JN in the intrapersonal category ( $p < .09$ ) as expected, they also unexpectedly surpassed the JN in responses categorized as interpersonal ( $p < .07$ ) category with marginal significance. Consistent with our hypotheses, the JN reported more career/education selves than the EA ( $p < .05$ ).

For the four analyzed categories of feared self, Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of expected selves *within* cultural groups. As with the expected selves, the EA again focused on intrapersonal selves (49.4%) and interpersonal selves (26.6%) most often among the four categories, showing a greater tendency to generate selves in each of

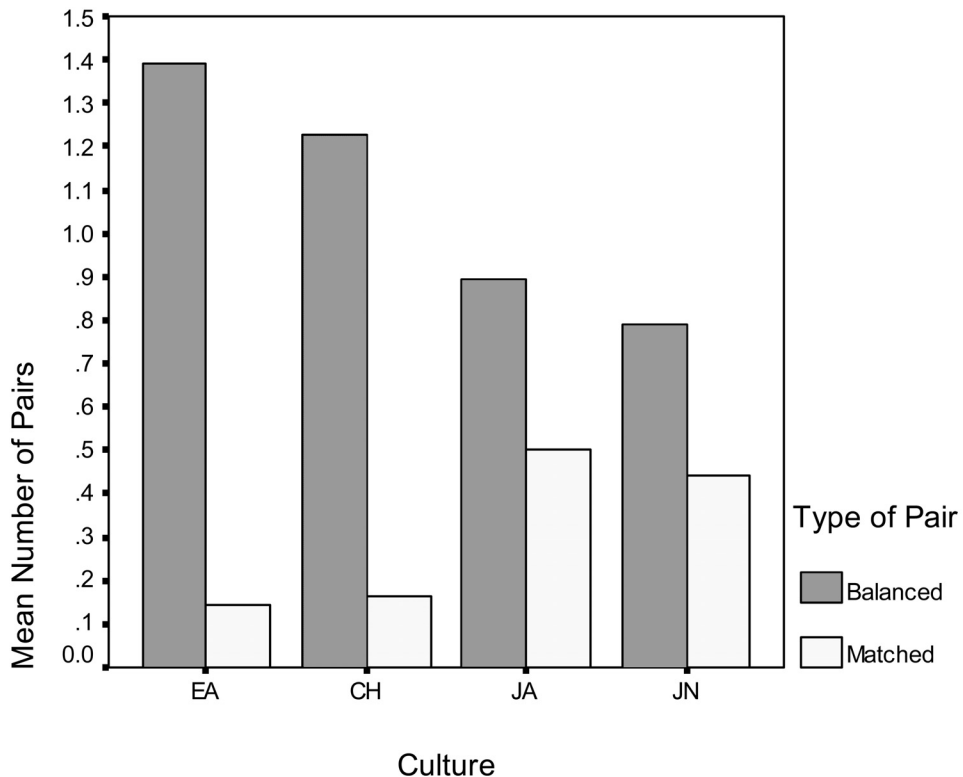


**FIGURE 2** Proportional frequency of feared selves categories in European-American, Chilean, Japanese-American and Japanese participant responses.

these categories of self than respondents in other cultural contexts. In contrast to the expected selves results, the CH were similar to the EA and reported intrapersonal selves more often than the other categories (43.3%), although they continued to show a stronger propensity than the EA to report career/education selves (CH 24.1%; EA 19.0%) over interpersonal feared selves, which was their third most common category of response. Repeating their expected selves response pattern, the JA and the JN showed the strongest inclination among the cultural groups towards career/education feared selves (JA 35.0%; JN 42.1%), followed by intrapersonal (JA 31.2%; JN 32.3%), and interpersonal feared selves (JA 21.3%; JN 12.8%) as their three most common categories. Career/education feared selves were least important to EA, who reported them as their third most common category (19.0%). Physical health feared selves were the least most common category of feared self for all of the cultural groups (EA 5.1%; CH 9.9%; JA 12.1%; JN 12.8%) though for both the JA and the JN it achieved the minimum 10% response rate for analysis.

*Configuration of Possible Selves*

Figure 3 illustrates the mean scores for each culture for both balanced and matched-pair self configurations. These scores were analyzed with a four (culture: EA, JA, CH, JN) × two (configuration of selves: balanced, matched) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with configuration of selves as a within-culture variable.



**FIGURE 3** Prevalence of balanced and matched selves among European-American, Chilean, Japanese-American and Japanese participants.

The analyses yielded a main effect of culture  $F(6, 157) = 3.32, p < .005$ , and both the balanced  $F(3, 157) = 4.09, p < .01$ , and matched  $F(3, 157) = 4.17, p < .01$  configuration scores showed significant cultural differences. Consistent with our expectations, the JN showed significantly fewer balanced pairs than both EA ( $.79 < 1.39, p < .05$ ) and CH ( $.79 < 1.22, p < .06$ ), and more matched pairs than both of those groups ( $.44 > .14[\text{EA}], p < .10$ ;  $.44 > .16[\text{CH}], p < .06$ ). In contrast, the JA also reported more matched pairs than both the EA ( $.50 > .14, p < .08$ ) and the CH ( $.50 > .16, p < .05$ ).

Finally, none of these demographic variables were shown to have any significant effects on content or configuration of possible selves. Notably, there was very little variation within these samples in parent education or in individual educational aspiration.

## Discussion

Education in elite universities worldwide promotes similar understandings of the appropriate avenues through which to pursue personal success. We expected that this common academic context would produce some commonality in the possible selves of the students in the study. Indeed, the same four categories (career/education, intrapersonal concerns, interpersonal concerns, and extracurricular

activities) were sufficient to capture over 90% of the expected selves generated by students in each of the four cultural contexts analyzed. Likewise, four categories (career/education, intrapersonal concerns, interpersonal concerns and physical health concerns) captured over 90% of the feared selves generated by each set of students.

There were, however, differences within cultural contexts in the prevalence of these categories of possible selves. Like *The Little Engine That Could*, European-American subjects seemed to conceptualize their future primarily in terms of internal attributes and intrapersonal characteristics and abilities. European-American cultural contexts promote an understanding of the individual as distinct from others and developing independently from them (Heine et al., 1999). These views focus attention primarily to intrapersonal qualities, and accordingly we found that the possible selves from participants within this cultural context show a notable concern with intrapersonal issues (i.e., being “satisfied” or “well rounded”). The relative popularity of both career/education selves and interpersonal relationships is consistent with the emphasis on education, career and relationships as primary avenues through which European-American youth, especially those with access to elite educations, are encouraged to pursue personal growth.

The Japanese subjects generated nearly twice as many career/education expected selves and more than twice as many career/education feared selves as the European-Americans. The fact that the Japanese subjects conceptualize their future predominantly in terms of their academic accomplishment may reflect the extreme significance accorded to education in the development or improvement of the person in Asian cultural contexts (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Although lifetime employment is now beginning to erode in Japan, one’s career is still a foundational element of adult life. More so than in the USA, the particulars of one’s education (e.g., where you’ve gone to school, what you’ve studied) define one’s future (Stevenson et al., 1998). As the tale of *Issunboshi* teaches, there is a place for everyone in society, even for a one-inch man. Yet situating oneself properly in the world cannot be accomplished without considerable hardship, effort and perseverance in culturally sanctioned domains like education.

Considering the pervasive influence of social networks in Japanese cultural contexts, interpersonal concerns may seem surprisingly rare among the responses of our Japanese subjects. It may be that in Japan, however, most activity, including academic activity, is rooted in and requires social relationships, so much so that the development of a social network (i.e., making friends) may not be experienced as an explicit task (Lewis, 1995). Notably, Kanagawa and colleagues (Kanagawa et al., 2001) also found that Japanese students generated fewer self-descriptors coded as focused on relations than did Americans.

Given the scant research in the American psychological literature on individuals in Latin-American contexts, it is difficult to interpret the findings on the content and configuration of Chilean possible selves. Overall, Chileans show similarities to both European-Americans and the Japanese. Like the European-Americans, Chileans generated more intrapersonal selves than the Japanese-Americans and the Japanese. Like the Japanese, Chileans generated more career/education possible selves than the European-Americans. Similarly, Chileans were less likely to mention social relationships as possible selves, perhaps reflecting that social behavior in Chile, as in Japan, is understood as inherently relational and maintaining relationships is relatively unlikely to be manifest as an explicit or autonomous goal. Interpersonal relationships were, however, nearly twice as frequently mentioned in Chilean feared

selves as in their expected selves. A desire for the positive consequences that accompanies an emphasis on individuality may be coupled with a worry that the expression of individuality may pose threats to the vital system of social networks and social relationships (Cabrera, 1978; Condon, 1985; Day, Borkowski, Dietmeyer, & Howespian, 1992; Day et al., 1994).

In general, Japanese-American possible selves mirrored Japanese possible selves, which is not surprising considering the probable continuing influence of the participants' Japanese family contexts. Notably, Japanese-Americans generated more interpersonal selves than the Japanese subjects, especially with regard to feared selves. This may reflect the differences in the degree to which interpersonal relationships are embedded in the social structures of each cultural context. As noted above, in Japan, the thoroughly pervasive system of social networks may make the maintenance and development of relationships an implicit, rather than overt goal. By contrast, the American value and prioritization of independence encourages the conceptualization of relationships as individually chosen and selectively developed (Adams, 2001). In some contexts of life in the United States, therefore, Japanese-Americans may be encouraged to view relationships more like their European-American counterparts. In addition, Japanese-Americans separated from their families in Japan may also feel more of a need to establish an American social network in order to compensate for their distance from their family.

Though past research on the motivational function of possible selves has principally credited a balance between possible selves—expected and feared selves of opposing valence but similar thematic content—with directing and intensifying motivation (Oyserman & Markus, 1990b), we found another configuration that may also have motivational consequences. While European and Chilean subjects reported significantly more balanced selves than did Japanese and Japanese-Americans, the latter two groups were distinguished by significantly more matched selves—thematically similar possible selves that match each other in valence.

Balanced selves function by contrasting highly personalized and desired end-states with similarly detailed feared end-states in order to draw attention to both the potential rewards for “right” action and the consequences for failure. Motivation thus capitalizes on both the avoidance reaction to the feared self and the approach reaction to the desired self. For European-Americans, numerous studies document a cultural inclination toward positive self-relevant information, positive self-evaluation and positive self-concept maintenance (Bradley, 1978; Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 1998; Greenwald, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller & Ross, 1975; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1986; Tesser & Campbell, 1982). Those findings suggest that generating positive or self-enhancing views of the self to balance self-relevant fears is a normative process in the European American cultural context. Indeed, the cultural support for the development of positive expectations can be seen in any number of elements of popular culture encouraging people to “aim high,” to “go for the gold” and to prevent anyone from “keeping you down.” These positive expectations are often expressed in relation to undesirable outcomes that are manifest in feared selves. The avoidance that individuals have to these negative end-states appears to focus attention on pursuit of expected selves (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

The Chilean respondents manifest a pattern of balanced selves that is similar to that of the European-Americans. Considering the emphasis on optimism and the strong religious influence indicating eventual deliverance through faith in God (Condon, 1985; Jaynes, 2003) prevalent in local cultural contexts, the utilization of

positive expectations to balance negative fears appears to resonate with likely Chilean norms.

Balanced selves, however, are far less prevalent in the Japanese and Japanese-American samples, perhaps because the positive self-regard associated with their development is less prevalent in these cultural contexts. In contrast to the self-enhancement bias of European-Americans, the Japanese and Japanese-Americans evince a robust tendency towards self-criticism (Doi, 1973; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Johnson, 1993; Kashiwagi, 1986; Kitayama et al., 1997; Roland, 1988; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Consistent with this tendency, Japanese and Japanese-American participants in our study tended to generate matched selves—negative expected and feared selves of similar thematic content (e.g., “expect to be idle” and “fear to be idle”)—far more than the European-American or Chilean subjects. Heine and colleagues (Heine et al., 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1999) have found that negative self-evaluation may have few negative consequences for the Japanese, and in fact, the individual’s negative self-assessment appears to motivate personal improvement (e.g., Befu, 1986; Doi, 1973; Johnson, 1993; Kashiwagi, 1986). Instead of focusing on avoidance of negative outcomes, the Japanese and Japanese-American cultural contexts may purposefully direct attention towards them to promote informed and responsible reactions to undesirable situations and to foster the development of successful preventative skills.

Because our study focused on the explicit content of possible selves rather than on their implicit nuances, future studies should use a more fine-grained coding scheme in order to more fully understand how differences in possible selves translate into motivational tendencies. For example, it is not only the interpersonal possible selves that have social origins and consequences. All possible selves, even the intrapersonal ones, are likely to have some social underpinnings. For example, exploring the different implications of self-focused intrapersonal selves (i.e., “proud of myself”) and other-referencing intrapersonal selves (i.e., “obedient”) on behavior may help us to better understand whether such distinctions have substantive implications for behavior.

The current sample was restricted with respect to age and educational attainment. In further studies, it would also be instructive to examine the possible selves of other age groups, or of participants from different educational backgrounds within each cultural context. Future researchers should also examine differing cultural interpretations of “expected” versus “desired” selves. In European-American contexts, the optimistic, self-enhancing strategies for achievement are likely to produce similar interpretations of these two terms, while in contexts like that of the Japanese, “desired” selves may diverge significantly in meaning from “expected” selves. Finally, it will be useful to examine the relationship between matched possible selves and performance to determine if, as hypothesized, this configuration, like the balanced configuration, is associated with enhanced performance in particular domains.

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