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Imagining the future: A cross-cultural perspective on possible selves [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of culture on the qualitative and quantitative features of possible selves. Young adults from Turkey ($n = 55$), Serbia ($n = 64$), and the United Kingdom ($n = 73$) generated images of eight possible selves (e.g. I will be a doctor) which were dated and rated for vividness, positivity, imagery perspective, rehearsal, and according to whether or not they involved other people. All possible selves were coded according to categories (e.g. job, parenthood, self-improvement). There were cross-cultural differences in the types of possible selves generated and in the ratings for vividness, positivity, and rehearsal. Across all three cultures, specific possible selves were more frequently generated than abstract possible selves. Specific possible selves were rated as significantly more vivid and were dated as emerging later than abstract possible selves. Results are discussed with reference to cultural life scripts and the effects of culture on future cognitions.

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1. Introduction

To what extent does culture affect the way people think about their future? It is commonly accepted that culture impacts on self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), influencing how we define ourselves (Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Wang, 2001, 2004) and how we remember our earliest (Wang, 2006) and most self-defining memories (Jobson & O'Kearney, 2008). In the field of autobiographical memory, it has been suggested that cultural life scripts organize the retrieval of memories across the lifespan, influencing the way people construct both their past (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004), and future (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010). Thus, culture is argued to play a central role in the construction of our identities and in how we recall the past and imagine the future. One key method of examining people's expectations for the future is to ask them to generate possible selves, that is, identities that people anticipate becoming in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This study bridges the fields of possible selves and cultural life scripts, by examining the commonalities and differences in the ways young adults from three nations (the United Kingdom, Serbia, and Turkey) imagine who they will become in the future. By the use of a new coding scheme it also provides novel findings on cross-cultural differences in the contents of possible selves.

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1.1. Interdependent and independent cultures

Research suggests that culture can affect the way people process information, impacting on emotion, motivation, and cognition (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the domain of memory research, for example, cross-cultural differences have been found in the content of autobiographical memories (Conway, Wang, Hanyu, & Haque, 2005; Wang & Conway, 2004), self-defining memories (Jobson & O’Kearney, 2008), earliest memories (Wang, 2006) and the centrality of memories of positive and negative life events (Zaragoza Scherman, Salgado, Shao, & Berntsen, 2014). These cross-cultural effects typically have been interpreted to reflect the use of relatedness (i.e. referring to a wider social group) or autonomous (i.e. referring to the self) focus, depending on whether the participant is from an independent/individualist or interdependent/collectivist culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, Jobson and O’Kearney (2008) found that Australian participants (independent culture) provided more elaborate autonomous memories, whereas Asian participants (interdependent culture) generated more elaborate relatedness memories.

Rhee et al. (1995) examined self-descriptions (i.e., ‘I am’ statements) from participants in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. They found that participants who strongly identified as Asian Americans tended to generate a higher proportion of social, and lower proportion of autonomous, self-descriptions compared to European Americans. Similarly, Wang (2001) examined the self-descriptions generated by American and Chinese college students. The American students tended to describe themselves using autonomous traits (such as being studious) more frequently than the Chinese students, who generated more collective, social descriptions (such as being a sister). Conway et al. (2005) compared the distribution of autobiographical memories from participants in Japan, China, Bangladesh, England, and the United States, and analysed the content of these memories in the Chinese and American samples. They found that the temporal distribution of memories was relatively stable across cultures, with all five groups showing similar lifespan retrieval curves, characterised by childhood amnesia during the first five years of life and increased retrieval during the reminiscence bump period of ages ten to thirty (e.g. Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). In contrast, there were cross-cultural differences in the content of Chinese and American participants’ memories. The Chinese group’s memories contained more events that involved interdependent (e.g., social) self-focus, whereas the American group recalled more events associated with an autonomous self-focus. Related findings were more recently reported by Zaragoza Scherman, Salgado, Shao, and Berntsen (2015). Although studies such as these suggest important differences in the ways members of different cultures define themselves and recall the past, we know less about the effect of culture on future cognitions. Here we begin to fill this gap by examining possible selves across cultures.

1.2. Possible selves

Possible selves are ideas about who a person might become in the future. They are thought to be highly goal-related, incentivizing behaviour by acting as an outcome to be achieved or avoided (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, a feared possible self of being someone who fails school exams might motivate a student to revise. Alternatively, a desired possible self of being able to drive to visit friends and family might prompt someone to book driving lessons.

Possible selves provide a valuable framework for studying cultural differences in identity as previous research has established that possible selves can influence behaviour (e.g. Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). For example, Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) showed that possession of academic possible selves, linked with plausible strategies for their attainment, was related to improved school attendance and academic performance. Hoppmann, Gerstorf, Smith, and Klumb (2007) studied the relationship between possible selves and behaviour in older adults. They found that having hoped-for possible selves relating to health and social relations was associated with a higher probability of engaging in activities within these domains. Importantly, those who engaged in hope-related daily activities had a higher probability of survival over a 10 year period. As reviewed by Lee et al. (2015) possible selves have been measured in various ways, including the content of a person’s most important possible self (Hooker & Kaus, 1992), the presence of a single target possible self such as being a “problem drinker” (Corte & Szalacha, 2010) or the number of feared (Oyserman & Markus, 1990), or expected possible selves (Aloise-Young, Hennigan, & Leong, 2001). For example, Aloise-Young et al. (2001) found that possessing a lower number of positive possible selves was related to adolescent alcohol use and cigarette smoking.

Together, these studies highlight the important role of possible selves in shaping behaviour. Recent theoretical developments suggest that possible selves may impact on behaviour through their role in self-regulatory processes that influence both motivation and behaviour (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; vanDellen & Hoyle, 2008). This work on the goal-directed function of possible selves, although predominantly from the field of social psychology, reflects cognitive models of the self, such as the Self Memory System (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), which conceptualizes the self as a goal hierarchy. As the work reviewed above demonstrates (e.g. Aloise-Young et al., 2001; Hoppmann et al., 2007; Oyserman et al., 2006), the way we think about our future goals has implications for the way we live our lives.

In spite of the large body of cross-cultural work comparing self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wang, 2001, 2004), autobiographical memories (Wang, 2006; Wang & Conway, 2004) and life scripts (e.g., Ottsen & Berntsen, 2014; Rubin, Berntsen, & Hutson, 2009) to our knowledge, no work has directly compared the possible selves of people living in different countries. Previous research has focused on the possible selves of participants from a range of specific cultures including aboriginals (Senior & Chenhall, 2012) and Latinos (Yowell, 2000). Studies that have directly compared possible selves of participants from different cultures have been based on participants living in one country. For example, work by Oyserman and

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