Promoting Success or Preventing Failure: Cultural Differences in Motivation by Positive and Negative Role Models

Penelope Lockwood  
Tara C. Marshall  
University of Toronto  
Pamela Sadler  
Wilfrid Laurier University

In two studies, cross-cultural differences in reactions to positive and negative role models were examined. The authors predicted that individuals from collectivistic cultures, who have a stronger prevention orientation, would be most motivated by negative role models, who highlight a strategy of avoiding failure; individuals from individualistic cultures, who have a stronger promotion focus, would be most motivated by positive role models, who highlight a strategy of pursuing success. In Study 1, the authors examined participants' reported preferences for positive and negative role models. Asian Canadian participants reported finding negative models more motivating than did European Canadians; self-construals and regulatory focus mediated cultural differences in reactions to role models. In Study 2, the authors examined the impact of role models on the academic motivation of Asian Canadian and European Canadian participants. Asian Canadians were motivated only by a negative model, and European Canadians were motivated only by a positive model.

Keywords: social comparison; culture; motivation; role models; regulatory focus

It is commonly assumed that both positive and negative role models can motivate individuals to change their behavior. A positive role model, an individual who has achieved outstanding success, can motivate others to pursue similar excellence. A negative role model, an individual who has experienced some kind of failure or misfortune, can motivate others to avoid similar distress. For example, it is expected that by highlighting the example of a student who has dropped out of university, an HIV-positive patient, or a person who has suffered injury as a result of drinking and driving, one can motivate an audience to study harder, practice safer sex, or avoid driving while drunk.

Successful others can inspire individuals by exemplifying the success that one can achieve, providing a guide to achieving such success (cf. Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990; Collins, 1996; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Taylor, Wayment, & Carillo, 1996; Wood, 1989). Unsuccessful others, in contrast, can motivate individuals by exemplifying the problems that may lie ahead, emphasizing the behaviors that should be avoided to avert a similar disaster (cf. Aspinwall, 1997; Buunk et al., 1990; Wood & VanderZee, 1997). It is not clear however that positive and negative examples will be equally motivating for all people. In past research, we found that although participants were spontaneously inspired by positive role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999), they typically viewed negative role models as irrelevant (Lockwood, 2002). When the positive models represented an attainable outcome, participants hoped to

Authors' Note: Penelope Lockwood and Tara C. Marshall, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto; Pamela Sadler, Wilfrid Laurier University. This research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to the first author. We are grateful to Erik Woody for his advice with statistical analyses and to Susan Furs, Niki Capogiannis, and Stephanie Cassin for their assistance with data collection. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Penelope Lockwood, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 3G3 (e-mail: lockwood@psych.utoronto.ca).  

PSPB, Vol. 31 No. 3, March 2005 379-392  
DOI: 10.1177/0146167204271598  
© 2005 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.
become like the more successful other in the future and so were motivated to work harder (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). In contrast, even when a negative model represented an outcome to which participants were vulnerable, they tended to see this outcome as implausible, and consequently their motivation was unaffected. Only when they were forced to draw parallels between themselves and the other and consider the model as a possible future self were they motivated to avoid this outcome (Lockwood, 2002). These results suggest that negative role models typically lack the strong motivational impact that positive role models have.

This pattern of findings, however, may be unique to individuals in Western, individualistic cultures. Members of individualistic cultures tend to have strong independent self-construals and focus on the self as a distinct, unique individual (for reviews see Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). They are motivated to stand out from their group as someone who is exceptional and successful (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). They tend to focus on their personal achievements and aspirations and exhibit an attributional bias aimed at enhancing their self-esteem (Heine & Lehman, 1997). Indeed, they view information about successes as more relevant to their self-esteem than information about failures (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). It seems likely that positive role models may be especially relevant to people in individualistic cultures. The positive model demonstrates the kinds of achievements that are possible and the strategies needed to attain such successes.

Indeed, positive role models highlight a strategy that may be particularly relevant to the regulatory focus of North Americans. Recent evidence suggests that members of individualistic cultures tend to favor promotion over prevention strategies, focusing on the positive outcomes they hope to approach rather than the negative outcomes they hope to avoid (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). Promotion-focused individuals are especially attuned to information relating to the pursuit of success (Higgins, 1997, 1998). They tend to notice and recall information pertaining to success achieved by other people (Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992) and show especially high motivation and persistence on tasks that are framed in terms of promoting successful outcomes (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). The concern with self-enhancement and personal achievement that characterizes individuals with strongly independent self-construals appears to be positively associated with promotion strategies: North Americans tend to view events framed in terms of winning as more important than events framed in terms of losing and exhibit stronger emotional reactions to gains than losses (Lee et al., 2000); they are also especially likely to report striving for approach rather than avoidance goals (Elliot et al., 2001). In addition, North Americans are more likely to persist on a task following a success than a failure experience, suggesting that they are more motivated to pursue success than they are to correct their mistakes (Heine et al., 2001). Members of cultures that emphasize independent self-construals may therefore find positive role models to be especially motivating. These models illustrate desirable outcomes to be pursued and demonstrate strategies that can be used to achieve a similar degree of success. Negative role models, on the other hand, provide little information about the achievements to which one can aspire or the means by which one may attain such achievements.

In contrast, in Eastern, more collectivistic cultures, individuals may be particularly motivated by negative role models. Members of collectivistic cultures tend to have strong interdependent self-construals, focusing on the self as part of a web of interpersonal relationships (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). They are motivated to fit in with their group and maintain social harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, they tend to focus on their responsibilities and obligations to others and try to avoid behaviors that might cause social disruptions or disappoint significant others in their lives (Heine et al., 1999). They are especially prone to self-criticism, seeking information about faults that need to be corrected (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). Indeed, these individuals view information about failures as more relevant to their self-esteem than information about successes (Kitayama et al., 1997). It therefore seems reasonable that negative role models will be especially important to members of collectivistic cultures. By paying attention to the example set by the negative model, these individuals can glean information about the personal faults that they need to correct and the strategies that are needed to prevent failures in the future.

Indeed, the avoidance strategy highlighted by negative role models may be especially compatible with the regulatory concerns that are emphasized in East Asian cultures. Whereas North Americans favor a promotion focus, striving to achieve success, East Asians tend to adopt a prevention focus, striving to avert failures (Lee et al., 2000). Prevention-focused individuals are especially attuned to information relating to the avoidance of failure (Higgins, 1997). They tend to notice and recall information pertaining to the failures experienced by other people (Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992) and show especially high motivation and persistence on tasks that are framed in terms of preventing unsuccessful outcomes (Shah et al., 1998). The concern with duties and obligations that characterizes individuals with strongly
interdependent self-construals appears to be positively associated with such prevention strategies: East Asians view events framed in terms of losing as more important than events framed in terms of winning and exhibit stronger emotional reactions to losses than gains (Lee et al., 2000); they also report striving for avoidance rather than approaching goals (Elliot et al., 2001). In addition, East Asians show greater task persistence following a failure than a success experience, suggesting that they are particularly concerned with preventing similar failures in the future (Heine et al., 2001). Members of cultures that emphasize interdependent self-construals may therefore find negative role models to be especially motivating. These models illustrate undesirable outcomes to be avoided and highlight strategies that can be used to prevent similar failures. Positive models, on the other hand, provide little information about the shortcomings that one needs to correct or the means by which one may avoid future failures.

Consistent with the possibility that cultural background may affect responses to role models, recent research suggests that individuals are motivated by role models only when the models are congruent with their regulatory concerns (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). In two studies, when a promotion focus was temporarily activated through a priming task, students were motivated by a successful recent graduate who had achieved a plum job but not by an unsuccessful recent graduate who had ended up working in a fast food restaurant. In contrast, when a prevention focus was primed, participants were motivated by the unsuccessful but not the successful recent graduate. Given that promotion is emphasized in Western cultures and prevention is emphasized in Eastern cultures, we might expect corresponding differences in how members of these cultures react to positive and negative role models.

In sum, past research has found that individuals from Eastern cultures tend to focus on avoiding negative outcomes, whereas those from Western cultures tend to focus on promoting positive outcomes (Elliot et al., 2001). These differences in regulatory concerns appear to be at least partially mediated by cultural differences in self-construal: Interdependent self-construals are associated with prevention orientation, whereas independent self-construals are associated with promotion orientation (Lee et al., 2000). Finally, past research indicates that prevention-focused individuals tend to be more motivated by negative models, whereas promotion-focused individuals tend to be more motivated by positive models (Lockwood et al., 2002).

Figure 1 shows the resulting theoretical model, in which self-construal partly mediates the relationship of cultural background to regulatory focus and regulatory focus in turn mediates the relationship of cultural background and self-construal to motivation by role models. In the present research, we provide the first test of this full model. The model specifies a separate chain of effects for each of the two types of motivational outcomes, reflecting the fact that the respective pairs of variables (interdependent and independent self-construal, prevention and promotion focus, and negative-model and positive-model motivation) are not conceptual opposites but reasonably independent. The two parallel processes, represented by the upper and lower limbs of the model, are hypothesized not to affect each other (indicated by the lack of crossing paths) and to share only the common impact of cultural background.

With this proposed theoretical model as a framework, we examined the reactions of participants from East Asian and Western European cultural backgrounds to positive and negative role models. In Study 1, we examined participants’ beliefs about whether they would be more motivated by positive or negative role models. In Study 2, we exposed participants to positive and negative role models and then examined the impact of the models on their motivation. We predicted that negative models would be more motivating to the participants with an East Asian cultural background than to those with a Western European background, whereas positive role models would be more motivating to participants with a Western European cultural background than to those with an East Asian background. Study 1 also examined self-construals and regulatory focus as hypothesized mediators of these differences.

**STUDY 1: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS ABOUT THE MOTIVATING IMPACT OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ROLE MODELS**

We first examined participants’ beliefs about whether they would be more motivated by positive or negative role models. Student participants from East Asian and Western European cultural backgrounds were asked to indicate how motivated they would be by a series of positive and negative academic role models. They also completed measures assessing their self-construals and their regulatory focus. We expected that individuals from East Asian and Western European cultural backgrounds would differ in their responses to positive and negative role models. More specifically, we expected that East Asian Canadian participants would have stronger interdependent self-construals, which would be associated with a stronger prevention focus, which in turn would be associated with greater motivation by negative role models. In contrast, we expected that European Canadian participants would have stronger independent self-construals, which would be associated with a stronger promotion focus, which in turn would be associated with greater motivation by positive role models.
Method

Participants. Participants were 58 Asian Canadian (28 men and 30 women) and 23 European Canadian (13 men and 10 women) students recruited from summer classes at the University of Toronto. Participants were each paid $10 for taking part in the study. There were no gender effects on any of the variables, therefore gender is not discussed further. Participants filled out an initial one-page sign-up form in which they provided information about their cultural background along with more general contact and demographic information. Participants were selected for the study if they identified their cultural background as East Asian or Western European. Asian Canadian participants had lived in Canada for significantly fewer years (M = 9.4) than had European Canadian participants (M = 20.5), F(1, 78) = 70.15, p < .0001. The mean age of Asian Canadian participants (M = 20.21) did not differ significantly from that of European Canadian participants (M = 20.57), F(1, 79) = 1.02, p = .31. Among Asian Canadian participants, cultural backgrounds included Hong Kong (n = 23), Taiwan (n = 11), South Korea (n = 6), China (n = 6), and other (e.g., Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, etc.; n = 12).

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a study on adjustment to university life. They were told that the researchers were interested in finding out about the factors that affect students’ experiences, adjustment, and behaviors.

Participants first completed Singelis’s (1994) Self-Construal Scale. Ratings on the 12 independence and 12 interdependence items were made on a 7-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Next, participants completed a measure of regulatory focus (Lockwood et al., 2002); this scale includes 9 items assessing prevention concerns (e.g., “I frequently think about how I can prevent failures in my life”) and 9 items assessing promotion concerns (e.g., “I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations”). Ratings on the promotion and prevention items were made using a 9-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 9 (very true of me).

Next, participants were told that the researchers were interested in finding out how people motivate themselves:

Sometimes, we are motivated to avoid becoming like a person who is experiencing problems, and sometimes we are motivated to strive to become like a person who is experiencing success. Both positive and negative examples can motivate us to change our behaviors. We are interested in the kinds of examples that might motivate YOU to work harder.

Participants then rated the extent to which they would be motivated by six positive models (e.g., “someone from my major who is getting straight A+s,” “a person who graduated from my program and was offered a fantastic job”) and six negative models (e.g., “someone from my major who has been placed on academic probation,” “a person who graduated from my program and couldn’t get the job he/she wanted”). The positive and negative models were presented in random order. Ratings were
made on a 7-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all motivated) to 7 (very motivated).

Results and Discussion

Means and standard deviations on all variables for Asian Canadian and European Canadian participants are presented in Table 1.

Self-construals. The independence (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .60 \)) and interdependence (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .63 \)) subscales were moderately reliable; the two subscales were not correlated, \( r = -.04, p = .70 \). As predicted, Asian Canadian participants had higher interdependent self-construals than did European Canadians, \( F(1, 79) = 4.52, p = .04 \). Unexpectedly, Asian Canadians’ independent self-construals were only marginally lower than those of European Canadians, \( F(1, 79) = 2.82, p = .10 \). Participants were selected based on their cultural background rather than on their actual subjective identification with a particular cultural group. Indeed, many of the East Asian participants had spent a large portion of their lives in Canada and so may have had considerable exposure to the predominantly independence-oriented North American culture; these individuals may have identified almost as much with North American as with East Asian culture. Thus, the Asian Canadian participants may have developed self-construals that reflected aspects of both their Asian cultural background and the North American cultural environment in which they were living.

Regulatory focus. The regulatory focus measure includes a promotion and a prevention subscale; both were reliable (promotion \( \alpha = .73 \), prevention \( \alpha = .82 \)). The two subscales were not correlated, \( r = .03, p = .82 \). As predicted, Asian Canadian participants had a stronger prevention focus than did European Canadian participants, \( F(1, 79) = 20.21, p < .0001 \). Unexpectedly, the promotion focus of Asian Canadian and European Canadian participants did not differ significantly, \( F(1, 79) = 1.74, p = .19 \). These individuals may have developed a prevention focus through their family background but may also have developed a promotion focus through their contact with North American culture.

Consistent with previous research (Elliot et al., 2001), independent self-construals were positively correlated with promotion focus \( (r = .22, p = .05) \) but not with prevention focus \( (r = -.12, p = .31) \); interdependent self-construals were positively correlated with prevention focus \( (r = .30, p = .007) \) but not with promotion focus \( (r = -.08, p = .46) \).

Motivation by negative and positive role models. The negative role model items were combined into a single index (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .76 \)). The positive role model items were also combined into a single index (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .84 \)). To examine cultural differences in perceived motivation by role models, we conducted a mixed factorial ANOVA, with cultural background (Asian Canadian or European Canadian) as a between-participants variable and role model type (positive or negative) as a within-participants variable. As expected, the cultural background by role model type interaction was significant, \( F(1, 79) = 5.93, p = .02 \). Asian Canadians rated negative role models as significantly more motivating than did European Canadians, \( F(1, 79) = 11.95, p < .001 \). However, Asian Canadians and European Canadians did not differ significantly in their ratings of the motivating impact of positive models, \( F(1, 79) = .12, p = .73 \). As noted earlier, the independent self-construals and promotion focus of the Asian Canadian participants in our sample were almost as high as those of European Canadians; consequently, positive examples may have been motivating for both groups.

We next examined self-construals as predictors of motivation by positive and negative role models. We first regressed motivation by negative models on interdependent and independent self-construals simultaneously. As we would expect, interdependent self-construals predicted motivation by negative role models, \( \beta = .55, p < .002 \), but independent self-construals did not, \( \beta = -.15, p = .36 \). Next, we regressed motivation by positive models on both forms of self-construal. Independent self-construals predicted motivation by positive models, \( \beta = .36, p = .05 \), but interdependent self-construals did not, \( \beta = .18, p = .32 \).

We then examined regulatory orientations as predictors of motivation by positive and negative role models. We regressed motivation by each kind of model on prevention and promotion focus simultaneously. Prevention focus predicted motivation by negative models, \( \beta = .54, p < .0001 \), but promotion focus did not, \( \beta = -.03, p = .76 \). In contrast, promotion focus predicted motivation by positive models, \( \beta = .49, p < .0001 \), but prevention focus did not, \( \beta = .14, p = .11 \).

Structural equation model to evaluate mediation hypotheses. The regression analyses revealed that both self-
construals and regulatory focus demonstrate relationships with motivation by role models that are consistent with our hypotheses. To further evaluate the role of these variables as hypothesized mediators, we applied structural equation modeling to the data from Study 1 to estimate the integrative model previously shown in Figure 1.

The resulting parameter estimates, obtained using Amos 5.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999), are shown in Figure 2. (By convention, all measured variables are shown in rectangles, and all variables labeled Z represent unexplained variance in the corresponding criterion variable to which they point.) This model fit very well, $\chi^2(13, N = 81) = 14.35, ns$, Comparative Fit Index = 0.98, root mean square error of approximation = 0.04, probability of close fit = 0.53. Model fit is a reflection of the fixed parameters (i.e., those paths that are set to zero) in the proposed model, not the path estimates (McDonald & Ho, 2002). To better understand the implications of the excellent fit of the present model, note that there are two kinds of omitted paths in this model. First, there are the omitted crossing paths from one chain to the other (e.g., the omitted path from prevention focus to motivation by positive models). These represent the hypothesis that the two parallel processes, one for each type of motivation, do not affect each other. Second, within each chain there are omitted direct-effect paths to motivation (e.g., for the upper chain, omitted direct effects of cultural background and interdependent self-construal on motivation by negative models). These represent the hypothesis that any effects on motivation are fully mediated by regulatory focus. The excellent fit of the model simultaneously supports both of these hypotheses.

The standardized path coefficients (as shown in Figure 2) likewise support our mediation hypotheses, particularly for the variables in the upper chain of the model. More specifically, cultural background significantly affected interdependent self-construal, which in turn significantly affected prevention focus. In addition, controlling for interdependent self-construal, cultural background directly affected prevention focus. These results suggest that interdependent self-construal is a partial mediator of the relationship between cultural background and prevention focus. In contrast, the excellent fit of the model despite the lack of direct paths between the other variables in the top part of the diagram supports the hypothesis that prevention focus fully mediates the relationship of cultural background and interdependent self-construal to motivation by negative role models.

The results from the lower chain of the model were generally weaker but still in the predicted direction. Although the effect of cultural background on independent self-construal was in the predicted direction, it was marginally significant, as was the effect of independent self-construal on promotion focus; however, promotion focus in turn significantly affected motivation by positive role models, as predicted. Controlling for independent self-construal, the direct effect of cultural background on promotion focus was not statistically significant. These results provide tentative evidence that independent self-construal may mediate the relationship between cultural background and promotion focus and somewhat stronger evidence that promotion focus may mediate the relationship between independent self-construal and motivation by positive role models.

**Summary and discussion.** Overall, consistent with previous research, we found cultural differences in regulatory focus and self-construals: Asian Canadians had stronger prevention orientations and more interdependent self-construals than did European Canadians. Also consistent with previous research, differences in regulatory focus were associated with motivation by role models: Promotion focus was associated with motivation by positive models, and prevention focus was associated with motivation by negative models. Moreover, Study 1 not only replicated these previously studied effects but also demonstrated how self-construal and regulatory focus mediate cultural differences in motivation by positive and negative role models. Asian Canadians’ stronger interdependent self-construals were associated with prevention focus, which in turn predicted motivation by negative models. In contrast, European Canadians’ stronger independent self-construals were associated with promotion focus, which predicted motivation by positive models. This pattern of relationships is consistent with our hypotheses; individuals from cultures that place a strong emphasis on independence are likely to be especially motivated by exemplars of success. Individuals from cultures that place a strong emphasis on interdependence are likely to be especially motivated by exemplars of failure. Study 1 thus provides new evidence indicating that culture and self-construals are connected to motivation by positive and negative role models.

Contrary to our predictions however, European Canadians were not more motivated by the positive exemplars than were Asian Canadians. We surmise that the Asian participants in this study, who had lived in Canada for an average of 9 years, may have been exposed to sufficient North American culture to develop a relatively strong promotion focus. Individuals who have been exposed to both collectivistic and individualistic cultures may be motivated to some degree by both negative and positive role models. To examine the possibility that regulatory focus and self-construal can change with exposure to
North American culture, we assessed the relationship between these variables and the length of time that East Asian individuals had lived in Canada. First, in a sample of 316 introductory psychology students who identified their ethnic background as East Asian, participants rated themselves on a subset of five promotion and five prevention items (Cronbach’s alphas = .59 and .70, respectively); they also indicated how long they had lived in Canada on a 10-point scale (1 = less than 1 year; 2 = 1 to 2 years; 3 = 2 to 3 years; 4 = 3 to 4 years; 5 = 4 to 5 years; 6 = 5 to 10 years; 7 = 10 to 15 years; 8 = 15 to 20 years; 9 = more than 20 years but not my entire life; 10 = my entire life). Promotion focus was weakly but positively correlated with length of time in Canada, \( r = .14, p = .01 \); prevention focus was not related to length of time in Canada, \( r = .05, p = .39 \). Second, in a separate sample of 563 introductory psychology students who identified their ethnic background as East Asian, participants rated themselves on a subset of five independence and five interdependence items (Cronbach’s alphas = .47 and .55, respectively); they also indicated how long they had lived in Canada on the 10-point scale. Independence was weakly but positively correlated with length of time in Canada, \( r = .09, p = .03 \); interdependence was not significantly correlated with length of time in Canada, \( r = -.06, p = .16 \). Thus, as individuals of East Asian cultural origins spend more time in Canada, their promotion orientation and independent self-construals grow somewhat stronger. In these samples, the correlations with length of time in Canada were quite low, possibly due to the relatively poor reliability of the reduced promotion and independence scales. In addition, number of years in Canada is an imperfect proxy for acculturation: Some East Asian Canadians may have adopted North American cultural values relatively quickly; others, living in close-knit family environments in which East Asian cultural influences remained strong, may have experienced less acculturation despite longer sojourns in North America. Overall, however, it seems likely that East Asians who have spent more time in Western environments will be somewhat more promotion focused and more independent and consequently more likely to be motivated by positive role models.

**STUDY 2: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE MOTIVATING IMPACT OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ROLE MODELS**

In Study 2, we sought additional evidence for our hypothesis that Asian Canadians and European Canadi-
In addition, in Study 1, we examined participants’ beliefs about how their motivation levels would be affected by positive and negative role models. Individuals’ theories about how they would respond, however, may not accurately reflect the degree to which they would actually be motivated by such models. Asian Canadians may be inspired by positive models but due to a bias toward modesty (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) might be unwilling to admit that they believe they could become like the outstanding other in the future. Alternatively, European Canadians, who tend to pay less attention to information about failures (Heine et al., 1999), may be unaware that negative models can boost their motivation levels. Accordingly, in a second study, we examined participants’ actual reactions to role models.

We also used Study 2 to rule out an alternative explanation for our findings. It is possible that new migrants to Canada may be more motivated by negative role models not because they have a stronger prevention focus but rather because they have lower academic expectations and more negative perceptions of their academic competence. Indeed, the Asian Canadian participants in Study 1 took part in the study in a context in which many students were studying in a second language and may therefore have been experiencing academic difficulties; they may simply have seen themselves as more likely to experience problems like those of the negative role model than would those students studying in their first language. In general, individuals choose comparison to others who have achieved a similar performance level (e.g., Hakmiller, 1966; Wheeler, 1966) or who are similar on attributes related to performance (for a review, see Goethals & Darley, 1977); for example, an aspiring skater can better assess her athletic skill by comparing herself to another athlete at the same level who has had a successful career. In addition, in Study 1, we examined participants’ beliefs about how their motivation levels would be affected by positive and negative role models. Individuals’ theories about how they would respond, however, may not accurately reflect the degree to which they would actually be motivated by such models. Asian Canadians may be inspired by positive models but due to a bias toward modesty (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) might be unwilling to admit that they believe they could become like the outstanding other in the future. Alternatively, European Canadians, who tend to pay less attention to information about failures (Heine et al., 1999), may be unaware that negative models can boost their motivation levels. Accordingly, in a second study, we examined participants’ actual reactions to role models.

We also used Study 2 to rule out an alternative explanation for our findings. It is possible that new migrants to Canada may be more motivated by negative role models not because they have a stronger prevention focus but rather because they have lower academic expectations and more negative perceptions of their academic competence. Indeed, the Asian Canadian participants in Study 1 took part in the study in a context in which many students were studying in a second language and may therefore have been experiencing academic difficulties; they may simply have seen themselves as more likely to experience problems like those of the negative role model than would those students studying in their first language. In general, individuals choose comparison to others who have achieved a similar performance level (e.g., Hakmiller, 1966; Wheeler, 1966) or who are similar on attributes related to performance (for a review, see Goethals & Darley, 1977); for example, an aspiring skater can better assess her athletic skill by comparing herself to another athlete at the same level who has had a successful career.

Participants read about a highly successful or highly unsuccessful student and then rated their own academic motivation. They also rated the degree to which they perceived the model as relevant to themselves. We expected that Asian Canadian participants would be more motivated by the negative than the positive model and would view the negative model as more relevant. In contrast, we expected that European Canadian participants would be more motivated by the positive than the negative model and would view the positive model as more relevant.

Method

Participants. Participants were 47 Asian Canadian (19 men and 28 women) and 45 European Canadian (20 men and 25 women) students who took part in the study for course credit. To ensure that participants would be able to view the models as potential future selves, we selected participants at the beginning of the fall term of their first year of university. All participants read about a model who had completed his or her first year and thus was sufficiently far advanced from the participants’ own academic stage that the model’s experiences would seem like a plausible future outcome.

Five participants were excluded because they had changed their academic major since they were recruited for the study and so were exposed to a nonrelevant role model (targets were matched with participants on academic major because previous research found that participants were unaffected by a role model in a domain that they viewed as irrelevant; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Altogether, 44 Asian Canadian and 43 European Canadian participants were included in the analyses. Gender had no impact on any of the variables and therefore will not be discussed further.

Procedure. About 2 to 6 weeks after the prescreening, participants were invited to take part in a study on adjustment to university life. They were informed that the Psychology Department had been gathering data to investigate the factors associated with academic success and failure; the researchers were interested in learning about students’ impressions of other individuals’ experiences and also in the participants’ own level of academic adjustment.
Positive and negative role model descriptions. Participants were then exposed to a positive or negative role model. First, they read a one-page sign-up sheet that included blanks for name, phone number, gender, academic major, and cultural background. The sign-up sheet had been filled in by hand, ostensibly by a participant in a previous study; the name and phone number were blacked out in marker as though to preserve the anonymity of this bogus student. Participants were always exposed to a target who was matched with them on gender, academic major, and cultural background. For example, a female European Canadian chemistry student would read about a female chemistry student with a Western European cultural background. We matched participants on cultural background because we reasoned that it was possible that Asian participants might otherwise assume that the role model was non-Asian; such an outgroup member might be viewed as irrelevant.

The page following the sign-up sheet was a self-description, ostensibly written by the same person. In the positive model condition, the target described successful academic experiences and finished the self-description by noting, 

I found that my second term went even better than the first. I kept my grades up, but balanced my studies with extracurricular activities. I just found out that my final marks exceeded my expectations. In fact, I won a U of T award for outstanding first-year accomplishment. Overall, I would say that my first year has been fantastic.

In the negative model condition, the target described experiencing academic difficulties and finished the self-description by noting, 

I fell behind again in my second term. My courses seemed even harder and I couldn’t keep up. My marks were pretty pitiful—I did so poorly that I was put on academic probation, and I may not be able to continue here at U of T. Overall, I would say that my first year has been a disaster.

Role model adjustment ratings. Next, participants rated the target they read about on five items tapping academic adjustment (e.g., “How successful do you think this person is?” “How well-adjusted do you think this person is?”). Ratings were made on a 9-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 11 (very true).

Motivation ratings. Participants then went on to “Part 2” of the study in which they were asked to provide information about their own activities and adjustment. Participants first rated themselves on 18 items designed to tap into their academic motivation (e.g., “I plan to study harder,” “I plan to spend more time at the library,” “I plan to keep up with my reading assignments”). Ratings were made on an 11-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 11 (very true).

Relevance ratings. Next, participants rated the degree to which they viewed the target as relevant to themselves; they read that people often seek information about themselves by comparing themselves to other people. We tend to judge our own abilities, skills, interests etc. by looking at how well the people around us are doing. Some people are more relevant to us than others for the purpose of comparison. How relevant is this person to you for the purpose of comparison?

Participants then rated the target’s relevance on an 11-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all relevant) to 11 (very relevant).

Comparative adjustment. Participants also completed a manipulation check in which they rated how their own level of adjustment compared to that of the person they read about. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale with endpoints ranging from −3 (I am doing much worse than this person) to +3 (I am doing much better than this person).

Past and future academic performance. Finally, participants were asked to provide their final high school average and the average grade they expected to receive in their final year of university.

A no target control condition was also included in which participants rated themselves on the motivation items without first reading about a role model.

In sum, the study had a 2 (cultural background: East Asian or Western European) by 3 (role model: positive, negative, or no model) between-participants design. At the end of the experimental session, all participants were probed for suspicion and then debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Self-likeing and self-competence. The self-liking subscale items were combined into a single index after first reversing the negative items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$). Asian Canadian ($M = 3.39$) and European Canadian ($M = 3.34$) participants did not differ significantly in their self-liking, $F(1, 69) = .05, p = .82$. The self-competence subscale items were also combined into a single index after first reversing the negative items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$). Asian Canadian participants’ self-competence ratings ($M = 3.03$) were marginally lower than those of European Canadian participants ($M = 3.30$), $F(1, 69) = 3.22, p = .08$.

Academic background and expectations. The graduating high school averages of Asian Canadian ($M = 85.07$) and European Canadian ($M = 84.38$) students did not differ significantly, $F(1, 84) = .33, p = .57$, neither did the expected university averages of Asian Canadians ($M =$...
73.51) and European Canadians ($M=75.17$) also did not differ, $F(1, 83) = 1.08, p = .30$; both groups expected to graduate with a relatively strong academic record.

**Role model adjustment.** Ratings of the target’s adjustment were combined to form a single index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .99$). The main effect of condition was highly significant, $F(1, 53) = 333.92, p < .0001$. Participants rated the positive role model ($M = 7.95$) as significantly better adjusted than the negative role model ($M = 2.39$). Unexpectedly, the main effect of cultural background was also significant, $F(1, 53) = 7.01, p = .01$; Asian Canadian participants rated the positive ($M = 7.43$) and negative ($M = 2.10$) models as somewhat less well adjusted than did European Canadians ($Ms = 8.46$ and 2.69, respectively). The model condition by cultural background interaction was not significant, $F(1, 53) = .52, p = .47$.

**Comparative adjustment.** Participants rated their own adjustment as better than that of the negative model ($M = 1.96$) and worse than that of the positive model ($M = -1.62$). This main effect of condition was highly significant, $F(1, 53) = 198.62, p < .0001$. The main effect of cultural background was not significant, $F(1, 53) = 20, p = .66$, suggesting that although Asian Canadians rated the models’ adjustment more negatively than did European Canadians, they did not view their own level of adjustment relative to the model more positively; Asian Canadians appeared to have more negative perceptions of both their own and the models’ adjustment than did European Canadians. The condition by cultural background interaction was not significant, $F(1, 53) = .34, p = .56$. Thus, we were successful in creating positive and negative models that were viewed about equally positively and negatively relative to the self by Asian Canadians and European Canadians.

**Motivation.** Motivation ratings were combined to form a single index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$). As may be seen in Figure 3, Asian Canadian participants were more motivated by a negative than a positive model, whereas European Canadians were more motivated by a positive than a negative model; this condition by cultural background interaction was significant, $F(2, 81) = 5.83, p < .004$. This interaction remained significant after controlling for both the self-competence and self-liking subscales of the SCSL Scale, $F(2, 63) = 3.07, p = .05$. The interaction also remained significant after controlling for high school average and expected graduating average, $F(2, 77) = 5.07, p = .01$. This suggests that the different reactions of Asian Canadian and European Canadian participants cannot be explained by differences in how these two groups viewed their abilities or how well they were expecting to perform academically.

We had predicted that participants would be motivated only by models that were congruent with the regulatory focus favored by their culture. As expected, Asian Canadian participants exposed to a negative model were more motivated than were Asian Canadians exposed to a positive model, $t(81) = 1.96, p = .053$, or no model, $t(81) = 2.47, p = .02$. The motivation of Asian Canadians exposed to a positive model did not differ significantly from the motivation of those exposed to no model, $t(81) = .14, p = .89$. In contrast, European Canadians exposed to a positive model were more motivated than were European Canadians exposed to a negative model, $t(81) = 2.79, p = .007$, or no model, $t(81) = 2.80, p = .006$. The motivation of European Canadians exposed to a negative model did not differ from the motivation of those exposed to no model, $t(81) = 10, p = .92$. Thus, Asian Canadians were motivated only by negative models, and European Canadians were motivated only by positive models.

**Relevance.** The role model condition by cultural background interaction was significant, $F(1, 53) = 5.10, p = .03$. As may be seen in Figure 4, Asian Canadians viewed the negative model to be more relevant than the positive model, $F(1, 53) = 3.84, p = .06$. In contrast, European Canadians viewed the positive model to be more relevant than the negative model; however, this contrast did not reach significance, $F(1, 53) = 1.57, p = .21$. Thus, Asian Canadians viewed a model to be most relevant when that model fit their regulatory concerns.

Overall, the results of Study 2 support our hypothesis that individuals will be most motivated by role models that are congruent with their culturally relevant regulatory orientations. Asian Canadians, who are more likely...
to have strong prevention concerns, were motivated by negative models, who highlighted their preferred strategy of avoiding failure. European Canadians, who are more likely to have strong promotion concerns, were motivated by positive models, who emphasized their favored strategy of pursuing success. Models incongruent with an individual’s culturally relevant regulatory focus had no impact on motivation.

Consistent with our hypotheses, neither self-esteem nor academic performance accounted for different reactions to role models by the different cultural groups. Thus, it seems unlikely that Asian Canadians are motivated only by negative models simply because they view their own abilities and future prospects negatively or that European Canadians are motivated only by positive models because they view themselves highly positively and expect to excel in the future. Instead, it appears that cultural differences in regulatory strategies determine the motivating impact of role models.

It could be argued that Asian Canadian participants responded differently to the role models because of their status as a minority group; they may have viewed the success or failure of an ingroup member differently than would European Canadians. Indeed, in one study, Black female participants viewed their own performance more negatively following exposure to an unsuccessful Black woman than a successful Black woman; the performance of the other confirmed or refuted the stereotype of Black Americans as academically unsuccessful and consequently had implications for participants’ own abilities (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). It seems unlikely, however, that such ingroup effects could account for the pattern of results obtained in Study 2; it is not clear why Asian Canadians would be motivated by an unsuccessful ingroup member but not by a successful ingroup member. Indeed, one might expect that to the extent the target is viewed as particularly relevant because of shared ethnic identity, both the positive and negative role models would exert a strong impact on motivation. This was not the case. Moreover, in Study 1, in which no information about the role models’ cultural background was provided, we obtained a similar pattern of results. Thus, it seems unlikely that the different reactions of Asian Canadian and European Canadian participants to the positive and negative role model can be explained by the model’s status as a minority ingroup member among Asian participants. Instead, these results support our hypothesis that Asian Canadians are more motivated by negative role models because they have especially strong prevention concerns.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Taken together, these studies provide strong evidence that cultural differences in regulatory orientation play a key role in determining the motivating impact positive and negative role models. Individuals from East Asian cultures that emphasize the goal of avoiding undesirable outcomes will be especially motivated by negative role models. Individuals from Western European cultures that emphasize the goal of promoting positive outcomes will be especially motivated by positive role models. Individuals with more interdependent self-construals are concerned about their duties and obligations and are especially motivated to avoid situations that might lead to a failure to live up to these responsibilities; negative role models provide a cogent example of such a failure and highlight strategies for avoiding a similarly unpleasant outcome. Individuals with more independent self-construals are concerned with achieving success and enhancing the self and consequently are especially motivated to pursue activities that could assist them in attaining positive outcomes; positive role models provide a vivid example of such success and highlight strategies for achieving such an outcome.

In these studies, we examined the impact of role models who represented success or failure without providing information about the source of the target’s outcome. In his model of regulatory focus, Higgins (1997; Higgins et al., 2001) argued that regulatory focus may be characterized by specific strategic means: Promotion-focused individuals’ goal pursuit will be characterized by eagerness; prevention-focused individuals’ goal pursuit will be characterized by vigilance. It may be the case that individuals will be especially motivated by a role model when the model’s success or failure arises from the presence or absence of the specific strategic means that fits the individuals’ regulatory orientation (Higgins, 2000). For example, East Asians may be particularly motivated by a
negative role model whose unfortunate circumstances can be traced to carelessness, a failure to exercise caution. A worse-off student who fails because he or she spends too much time partying will likely be more motivating than a worse-off student who has failed due to a lack of enthusiasm for his or her studies. The imprudent model provides more information about the kinds of behaviors that one should be vigilant to avoid to prevent a similarly negative outcome. In contrast, North Americans, who are more concerned with promotion, may be especially motivated by a positive model who has achieved success through eagerness. A go-getter who has become rich through his or her enthusiastic pursuit of success may thus be more motivating than someone who has achieved financial security by carefully saving and protecting his or her money. The go-getter provides more useful information on the eagerness-related strategies that should be adopted to promote a similarly positive outcome. Thus, the source of the negative or positive role models’ outcome as well as the valence of that outcome may be important in determining the degree to which the model is motivating: individuals with more interdependent self-construals may be especially motivated by negative models who have failed due to insufficient vigilance, and individuals with more independent self-construals may be especially motivated by positive models who have achieved success through eagerness.

These studies have important implications for research on social comparison. Traditionally, theorists have argued that individuals use upward comparisons to more successful others to serve self-improvement goals but use downward comparisons to less successful others to serve self-enhancement goals (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). A more successful other provides information on the achievements for which one can strive and can motivate one to adopt behaviors conducive to attaining similar success in the future (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). A worse-off other, in contrast, provides evidence of one’s relative success, allowing one to bask in one’s superiority over another individual (Wills, 1981). The present research, however, suggests that the functions of upward and downward comparisons may vary across cultures. For example, individuals from Eastern cultures may use downward comparisons to serve self-improvement rather than self-enhancement needs. Rather than enjoying their superiority over the less successful individual, East Asians may use the example of the other as a means of identifying and correcting their own shortcomings. Recent evidence suggests that downward comparisons can also be motivating for North Americans but only when they are forced to reflect on how they might become like the other in the future (Lockwood, 2002). Moreover, although such a downward comparison can enhance motivation among North Americans, the process of imagining a self like a worse-off other can be highly threatening to the self (Wood & VanderZee, 1997); indeed, the activation of avoidance motivation may reduce subjective well-being among individuals with strongly independent self-construals (Elliot et al., 2001). Among Asians however, we might expect downward comparisons to be motivating without threatening well-being; because the process of avoiding the role model’s negative fate is consistent with the culturally emphasized prevention orientation, the subjective well-being of individuals with strongly interdependent self-construals will likely be unaffected or possibly even enhanced by an encounter with a negative role model (cf. Elliot et al., 2001).

By demonstrating that East Asian and European Canadians differ in the degree to which they perceive positive and negative role models to be motivating and in the extent to which positive and negative models activate plans to engage in specific behaviors, these studies take an important first step in identifying cultural differences in responses to role models. Considerable evidence suggests that specific behavioral intentions predict actual planned behaviors (e.g., Ajzen, 1991, 1996; Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Nevertheless, the relationship between intentions and behaviors is far from perfect. In future research, it will be important to examine the long-term behavioral consequences of exposure to role models among different cultural groups.

In this research, we have emphasized cultural differences in responses to positive and negative role models. It is important to note, however, that situational fluctuations in self-construals can also affect reactions to successful and unsuccessful others (cf. Stapel & Koomen, 2001). At times, East Asians may become more independent and North Americans may become more interdependent. For example, when North Americans are in a situation that emphasizes the interdependence rather than independence of the self, such as participating in a team sporting event, their prevention orientation is enhanced (Lee et al., 2000); in such situations, they may be especially motivated by negative models. Similarly, when East Asians are asked to think about ways in which they are different from friends and family members, they exhibit stronger independent self-construals (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991); when independent selves are highlighted, Asians may become more promotion focused and consequently may be inspired by positive models. To maximize the effectiveness of role models, one should consider both the chronically accessible self-construals of different cultural groups and the situational cues that can be used to activate promotion or prevention orientations in a target audience.
REFERENCES


Received June 10, 2002
Revision accepted June 7, 2004