Aggression and emotions: cultural and individual differences
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CHAPTER | 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Aggression is described as "any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment" (Baron & Richardson, 1994, page 7). Occasionally, aggression is necessary, for example to help stop danger or a life-threatening situation. Yet in everyday life, aggression is viewed as maladaptive because of its negative impact on people's social relationships.

Research shows that children start to display aggressive behaviour as early as 17 months of age (Tremblay et al., 2004). However, aggressive behaviours in toddlerhood are still socially acceptable, because it is regarded as children's unregulated strategies for showing their frustration with achieving their goals. As they mature, children acquire emotional and social skills from their environment – such as through observing and learning from interactions with their parents, siblings, and teachers – which helps them obtain their goals in ways that do not necessarily jeopardise their relationships (Baron & Richardson, 2004). This positive development helps children and adolescents control and reduce their aggression.

However, some adolescents are prone to commit aggression. For example, bullying, which is a form of aggression, is commonly experienced in adolescents globally. For instance, about 38% adolescents have been involved in bullying in the United States (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014), 10.6% to 18.8% adolescents in Western European countries such as the Netherlands (Craig et al., 2009), and ranging from 18.5% to 71.4% adolescents in East Asian countries (Laeheem, Kuning, Mcneil, & Besag, 2008; Mat Hussin, Abd Aziz, Hasim, & Sahril, 2014; Pradubmook-Sherer & Sherer, 2016; Yodprang, Kuning, & McNeil, 2009). In Malaysia, bullying has a high prevalence, involving 20.0% to 53.2% of Malaysian children and adolescents (Wan Ismail, Nik Jaafar, Sidi, Midin, & Shah, 2014).

Back in the 1980's and 1990's, most Malaysian researchers focused their studies on juvenile delinquency and crime. Fewer studies focused on aggression in more common, everyday-life situations of most adolescents, such as bullying and fights among peers. In recent years, very few studies have been conducted in Malaysia to understand the roots of aggression in Malaysian children and adolescents. For example, Kong, Maria Chong, and Samsilah (2012) determined the main aggressive behaviours that are frequently shown by school children, with hostility as the most frequent and physical aggression as the less frequent behaviour. Earlier, Yahaya, Boon, Ramli, Hashim and Idris (2010) examined the perception of secondary school students toward aggression, finding that aggressive behaviours were driven by factors such as school environment, lack of attention by parents and own attitude. In addition, previous researchers only focused on one dimension of aggression, the form in which the aggression took place (e.g., physical aggression or verbal aggression). To date, none considered different functions of aggression, such as proactive versus reactive aggression.

What is proactive and reactive aggression? Why they are important to study? Proactive aggression refers to goal-oriented aggressive behaviour that anticipates rewards, as the benefits of that behaviour (Kempes, Matthys, de Vries, & van Engeland,

2005; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2002). Bullying is considered a form of this type of aggression, because it is aimed at gaining power (Crick & Dodge, 1999; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). Proactive aggression can exist even without provocation or any feelings of anger. In contrast, reactive aggression refers to aggressive behaviour in response to provocation or a perceived threat, and it has an emotional basis, most commonly related to anger (Vitaro & Brendgen, 2005; Green, 2001). Research results support the importance of making a distinction, as proactive aggression is related to callous unemotional traits, higher psychopathic tendencies, and fewer empathic responses; but reactive aggression in contrast is related to intense negative emotions and peer victimization (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010; Polman, De Castro, Thomaes, & Van Aken, 2009). In other words, the two types of aggression are distinct in terms of situation (existence of provocation) and emotion (arousal of anger).

By studying both proactive and reactive aggression, one can examine the root cause of aggression in adolescents: whether the problems are related to emotional (e.g., anger) or instrumental aspects (e.g., gaining power), or a combination of both. Information thus gained will be beneficial, and can be used to develop plans or strategies to prevent child aggression from becoming more severe, especially in school settings. Undoubtedly, the presence of aggressive children and bullies at school can explain teaching and learning difficulties in the classroom (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003), while also exposing adolescents to danger at school, including risk of injury and psychological distress (Dill, Vernberg, Fonagy, Twemlow, & Gamm, 2004; Sun & Shek, 2012).

The **aim of this thesis** is to examine aggressive behaviours, aggression-related behaviours, and emotions that influence adolescents' social relationships on a daily basis. The thesis takes a cultural approach by comparing Malaysian and Dutch adolescents (at the country level), by examining adolescents' endorsement of cultural values (at the individual level), and by examining adolescents' perception of closeness to friends and family members (at the interpersonal level).

The **significance of this thesis** is threefold: 1) The majority of studies examining adolescents' aggressive and aggressive-related behaviours and emotions stem from samples from Western societies, such as the US and Western Europe. Little is known about proactive and reactive aggression in adolescents from other parts of the world, including Malaysia. Therefore, the current thesis will provide insight into which outcomes are generalizable across countries, and which outcomes are specific to a certain country. 2) Similarly, this thesis brings the field forward by examining possible underlying cultural mechanisms that may explain differences between countries. Where comparisons between Malaysian and Dutch adolescents can provide insight into how behaviours may manifest differently between countries, considering adolescents' endorsement of cultural values and their perception of interpersonal closeness may help explain why the groups might differ. 3) As noted before, there is a high level of juvenile delinquency and student misconduct in Malaysia. Malaysia is

therefore a valuable country in which to study adolescents' aggressive and aggressive-related behaviours and emotions. Outcomes and related suggestions are expected to be particularly valuable for Malaysian and Dutch practitioners dealing with aggressive behaviours.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The social-ecological model by Bronfenbrenner (1994) postulates five different ecological systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) with which an individual (at the centre of the circle) interacts, and which help in shaping the developmental outcomes of him or herself (see Figure 1).

In this thesis, our attention is first on the individual adolescent, including the adolescent's aggressive and aggressive-related behaviour and emotions. Next, our focus is on two ecological systems from Bronfenbrenner's model. The first system is the microsystem, the closest support system to adolescents. This system includes the peer group. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that peers serve as one of the two primary dimensions of influence for adolescent socialization, besides family (parents and siblings). Parents play an undeniable role in shaping children's attitudes at home. However, as adolescents spend increasingly more time in and out of school with their peers, and shift their focus accordingly, close friends and other interactions with peers become more influential during adolescence (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

The second system from Bronfenbrenner's model that will be considered in this thesis is the macrosystem, which is a larger system that encompasses norms, values and cultures. Although this system may seem far removed from an individual's direct
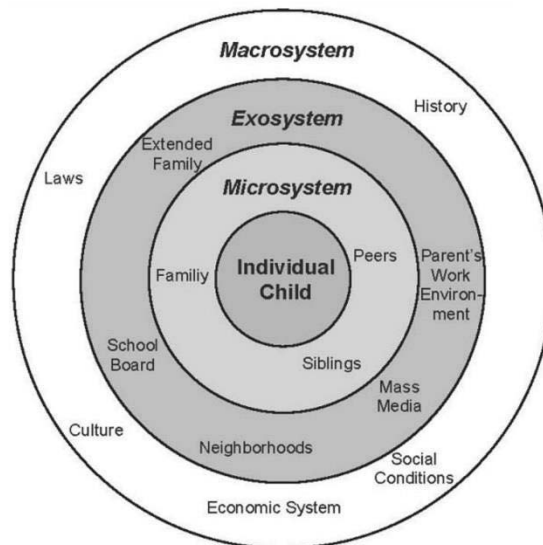

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model
(Graphic source: https://munsonmissions.org/tag/bronfenbrenner/)

world, it influences how the individual thinks, feels, and behaves. From birth, children are raised within a cultural context in which they internalize cultural values, norms, and practices.

Taken together, Bronfenbrenner's model provides a framework for examining the adolescents' aggressive and aggression-related behaviours and emotions in a socio-cultural context.

Cultural values

Every culture has its own set of values, and these values shape individual ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001). A simple example that shows how culture can influence behaviour is that eating pork can be considered to be tasty and tempting in many societies, but unacceptable in others. Another example, perhaps more complex, is that committing suicide can be regarded as being against the law, *haram* (according to Islamic law; meaning: forbidden) and taboo in many countries, but some countries allow it for medical reasons, or see it as honourable (Abdel-Khalek, 2004; Chen, Choi, & Sawada, 2009; Van Der Maas et al., 1996). These examples indicate how important culture is to one's life; how culture teaches what feelings are appropriate; and influences what actions are to be taken. The same influence might also be visible in adolescent aggression. In this thesis, we concentrate our attention on cultural values, namely individualism and collectivism, in the context of adolescent aggression and aggression-related behaviour and emotions.

Traditionally, cross-cultural psychological research distinguishes between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, predominantly seen in Western societies such as in the Netherlands and the United States, individuals tend to perceive the self as being independent and autonomous, and separate from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In these cultures, individuals highlight the concerns, needs, and welfare of the self (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Matsumoto, 1990). Individualistic values therefore reflect doing one's own thing, individual freedom, and personal uniqueness, regardless of what others might think (Triandis, 1995). Collectivistic cultures, in contrast, are predominantly seen in (East) Asian societies, as in Malaysia and Japan. In these cultures, individuals tend to perceive the self as being dependent on and part of their social group, such as family and friends. In these cultures, individuals focus on the concerns, needs, and welfare of the group. Collectivistic values therefore reflect group membership, social harmony, and cohesion (Triandis, 1995).

The contrasting characteristics between individualism and collectivism may reflect how unique the values are embedded in one's culture. Also, it may explain differences in people's propensity for aggression. For example, a person who highly endorses individualistic values may behave aggressively to protect him/herself from losing self-esteem if someone "attacks" his/her positive self-evaluation, or restricts his/her highly valued independence (Salmivalli, 2001). However, the antecedents for aggression may be different for someone who highly endorses collectivistic values. Since these individuals may strive for harmonious and conflict-free relationships,

anyone or anything that can reduce their group identity, or make relational ties between in-group members more fragile, could be considered a threat. To maintain their stable position in their group, they might do whatever it takes, which could include bringing harm to those who threaten this highly valued group-identity and harmony (Triandis, 1995).

Note that these different antecedents for aggression based on cultural differences would apply especially to reactive aggression, i.e., aggression as a reaction to a perceived threat. Since proactive aggression can arise without provocation or anger feelings (Vitaro et al., 2002), we see no reason that cultural values would affect the occurrence of this kind of aggression in adolescents' daily life situations. To the best of our knowledge, no other study has yet taken into account the role of different cultural orientations in the functions of aggression. This study is the first to do so.

A dilemma to be solved when studying cultural differences is to choose the best methodological approach to assess the effect that culture can have on behaviour, or in this case, aggressive and aggressive-related behaviour and emotions in particular. To date, different levels of analysis can been employed that all have their advantages and disadvantages (Wang, 2018).

At a country-level of analysis, individuals from typical individualistic countries (e.g., the Netherlands) and typical collectivistic countries (e.g., Malaysia) are compared. Whether countries are referred to as individualistic or collectivistic stems from Hofstede's (1984) country scores on individualism and collectivism. Hofstede's approach suggests that the country-of-origin can be reliably classified according to an individualism-collectivism dimension that is considered to be static in nature. Hofstede's approach is supported and widely used internationally, and many studies have deepened our understanding in this respect. Yet, one major flaw of this approach is that its broad, macro-level view may oversimplify individual identities and differences within cultures. Not all Western people are fully individualistic-oriented, and Eastern people also exhibit more or less individualistic characteristics, depending on the situation. Moreover, by comparing individuals from different countries researchers can assume, but cannot be certain what is driving any differences they may find. The underlying mechanism might be cultural factors, but might also be other factors such as language, SES, or level of urbanisation (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

At an individual level of analysis, individuals' endorsement of cultural values is taken into account. Cross-cultural psychologists like Oyserman et al. (2002) and Singelis (1994) argued that it is important to measure individualism and collectivism at the individual level, since both cultural values are not mutually exclusive and can coexist within a person. Examining the unique level of collectivism and individualism within participants of a study opens the possibility of examining the extent to which certain values are more or less important to each participant, and affect psychological functioning on an intra- and interpersonal level, as in aggression and emotion regulation.

At an interpersonal level of analysis, researchers consider the perception of closeness between individuals. Individuals who construe the self as being part of their social group (e.g., friend and family) perceive themselves as being closer to members of their social group than those who construe the self as independent from others. A study by Holland, Roeder, Baaren, Brandt and Hannover (2004), for example, suggests that self-other closeness is more visible in individuals who are loyal and dependent on other people than individuals who are self-centred. Studies have used this interpersonal level of analysis as a way to measure individualism and collectivism (e.g., Uleman, Bardoliwalla, Rhee, Toyama, & Semin, 2003; Uskul, Hynie, & Lalonde, 2004). Note that individualism-collectivism in this approach are two sides of one dimension (interpersonal connectedness), and a person is either high on one and low on the other, or vice versa.

In this thesis, we have employed all of the above three levels of analysis to examine the effect of culture on adolescents' aggressive behaviour, aggressive-related behaviour, and emotions.

Emotion regulation

Emotions are an important aspect of daily life, because they serve social and communicative roles. Feeling happy, for example, signals that something good has happened and the situation is free from conflicts and tensions. This can bring positivity and closeness to a relationship between two individuals (e.g., friendship) (Demir, Doğan, & Procsal, 2013; van Workum, Scholte, Cillessen, Lodder, & Giletta, 2013). Meanwhile, feeling angry signals that someone else's action is perceived as undesirable and blameworthy, which can put a friendship at risk or evoke aggression (Bowker, Rubin, Burgess, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2006). Therefore, to preserve good relationships and be able to function optimally within their environment, adolescents must learn how to regulate their emotions adequately, and communicate them appropriately.

Research suggests that children and adolescents who are able to better regulate their emotions tend to develop better self-control skills, particularly in managing the excessive experience of negative emotions (Loeber & Hay, 1997). Moreover, deficits in emotion regulation will increase the likelihood of developing psychopathology (Cole & Deater-deckard, 2009; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010), emotional-base problems (Garnefski, Kraaij, Terwogt, Jellesma, & Rieffe, 2007; Suveg & Zeman, 2004) and aggression (Röll, Koglin, & Petermann, 2012). In fact, adolescents with higher capability for regulating their own emotions effectively show lower levels of aggression (de Castro, Merk, Koops, Veerman, & Bosch, 2005; Laible, Carlo, Panfile, Eye, & Parker, 2010; Marsee & Frick, 2007; Mclaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Mennin, & Nolen-hoeksema, 2011; Röll et al., 2012).

Emotion regulation is defined as a process where a person monitors, evaluates and modifies his or her emotion within him/herself internally, or externally with other people, in the emotion communication (Thompson, 1994). Gross and Thompson

Situation   Attention   Appraisal   Response

Figure 2. Emotion Process

(2007), (Figure 2) explain that emotion regulation starts with the emotion-generative process. Normally, the experience of an emotion begins with a psychologically relevant **situation**. For example, you are studying for your examination and suddenly you hear loud music from your neighbor's house. Since the noise interrupts your reading, your **attention** is now directed to the situation. During that time, your body also experiences physiological changes (e.g., increase in heart rate and blood pressure), a clear indication of emotional arousal. **Appraisal** takes place when emotional information conveyed by the visual and auditory channels is sent to the brain to be evaluated cognitively. Then, possibly different action tendencies can be identified; whether you want to let your neighbor know how annoyed you are with the noise; or you just continue with reading, trying to ignore the music, or you go out for a while and have some drinks. The **actual response** is the action that is chosen and executed.

Yet, before executing any action, several aspects need to be considered, in which cultural differences may play a role. The so-called cognitive control system accounts for a reappraisal of the emotion, and enables people to adaptively respond to an emotionally arousing situation (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Question is, what is adaptive? Different social demands might call for different emotional reactions, and these differ by culture. For example, is it important to keep a harmonious relationship with your neighbor (collectivistic goal), or do you want to pass your exam (Individualistic goal)?

To discuss emotion regulation from a cross-cultural perspective, we consider three aspects of emotion regulation, namely: emotional reactivity and coping strategies. These two aspects are chosen based on the idea that the establishment of a successful exchange of emotional information can only occur when children and adolescents: (i) are aware of the intensity of their own emotions, (ii) understand their own and others' emotions, and (iii) react appropriately to their and others' emotions (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001).

Emotional reactivity refers to the varying intensities and levels of emotional arousal induced by specific stimuli (Shapero & Steinberg, 2013). In this thesis, we examine the intensity of basic emotions such as anger and fear, and moral emotions such as shame and guilt. Research argues that basic emotions – anger and fear – are universally recognised and experienced, although the expression may differ, with Asian adolescents being less confrontational in conflict situations than their peers from individualistic societies (Novin, Rieffe, Banerjee, Miers, & Cheung, 2011). Therefore, the intensity of these emotions is expected to be similar, across cultures. Yet, this may not be the case for moral emotions. According to the literature, shame and guilt are regarded as more culturally bound, rather than universal in nature (Benedict,

1946; Hofstede, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Shame is seen as more adaptive, appreciated, and necessary in Eastern societies, as guilt is in Western societies (Anolli & Pascucci, 2005; Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006). Yet, compared to guilt, shame creates more negative consequences, such as aggression. – especially when shame is expressed when one experiences losing face – in Eastern cultures (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004; Midlarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari, & Plante, 2006; Yoshioka & Choi, 2005). It is therefore yet unknown how these different emotions are related to aggression, across cultures.

Coping strategies refer to regulating the emotional impact of a stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this thesis, three kinds of coping styles are examined, namely approach coping, avoidant coping, and maladaptive coping. Approach coping refers to active attempts to resolve the conflict, including confronting the friend directly and seeking social support to talk about what happened (Wright, Banerjee, Hoek, Rieffe, & Novin, 2010). It is normally related to positive and favorable outcomes, such as low levels of aggressive behaviors (Blechman, Prinz, & Dumas, 1995; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Avoidant strategies refer to the attempt to withdraw from the situation, including walking away from the conflict and seeking distraction (cognitively or behaviorally) (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Wright et al., 2010). Avoidant coping can bring more negative social consequences that include increased anger and aggression (Blechman et al., 1995; D'zurilla, Chang, & Sanna, 2003; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Maladaptive strategies refer to internalizing behaviors (e.g., ruminating and worrying) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., hitting and screaming). Compared with approach and avoidant coping, these coping strategies are more negative in nature. Several studies have shown the ineffectiveness of maladaptive coping in reducing aggression. Instead, maladaptive coping promotes more aggressive behaviors (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Hampel, Manhal, & Hayer, 2009). However, note that these studies were all conducted in Western societies, and that information about the effectiveness of different coping strategies is yet unknown in East Asian societies, such as in Malaysia.

Peer interactions

Peers can be defined as the same-age group of people such as classmates and school friends. Having a friend is important for sharing experiences, feelings, and thoughts on life, and it greatly influences the formation of a given person's behaviour (Berndt, 1982, 2002; Hamzah, Suandi, Krauss, Hamzah, & Tamam, 2014). Peers play an important role in human life, especially in human development and growth. Effective relationships with peers can enhance one's psychological wellbeing and happiness (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010), and peers are the most influential group during adolescence, besides family.

Adolescents usually rely upon their peers as significant sources to inflate self-esteem, gain self-identity, acquire social support, and learn essential social skills

(Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Also, relationships with peers help adolescents to stave off feelings of isolation and hopelessness (Cheng & Furnham, 2002). Moreover, close relationships between peers facilitate learning and improve academic outcomes (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). As a result, adolescents who are closely affiliated with their peer group are often better in academic achievement, which gives them greater potential to be successful in later stages of life. An ideal friendship is always born from these positiviteness.

However, peer relations in adolescents are not necessarily always positive. There are times and situations when the peer-to-peer relationship can go wrong. Jealousy, dominance, competition, and betrayal are the most common causes that can hinder peer interactions (Adams & Laursen, 2007; Berndt, 2004). Consequently, behaviors such as aggression and bullying can be enacted, as powerful tools to demand respect from peers. These problematic behaviors have damaging consequences in many aspects of an individual's development (i.e., physical, emotional and social). Although powerful, bullies often have difficulty building intimate and positive relationships with peers. This situation creates identity confusion in bullies, a psychological crisis that contains a sense of isolation, feeling insecure, and negative self-concept (Erikson, 1994). With all the loneliness, they struggle to transition successfully to adult life.

Indeed, previous literature has suggested that aggression in adolescence is primarily influenced by peer interactions (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Hartup, 2005). The presence of positive interaction and empathy between individuals in a peer group will decrease the likelihood of aggression (Girard et al., 2011). In contrast, negative peer interaction, including peer rejection, increases the tendency of rejected adolescents to behave aggressively, over non-rejected adolescents (Dodge et al., 2003; Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010).

Note that some features of peer relationships can be culturally influenced, either directly or indirectly, and this could further influence aggressive behaviors in children. For example, in collectivistic cultures, such as in Malaysia, which emphasize values such as interdependence and conformity, interpersonal relationship is usually built upon harmonious, supportive, and non-confrontational relationships (Benjamin, Schneider, Greenman, & Hum, 2001; French, Rianasari, Pidada, Nelwan, & Buhrmester, 2001; Zhang et al., 2013). These characteristics are in contrast to those in individualistic cultures, such as the Netherlands, where self-determination, independence, and self-reliance are highly valued (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Consequently, children in collectivistic cultures report less peer conflict than those in individualistic cultures (Benjamin et al., 2001; Orlick, Zhou, & Partington, 1990).

AIM AND OUTLINE OF THIS THESIS

The overarching aim of this thesis is to examine aggressive behaviours, aggressive-related behaviours and emotions that influence adolescents' social relationships on a daily basis. The thesis takes a cultural approach by comparing Malaysian and Dutch adolescents (country level), by examining adolescents' endorsement of cultural

values (individual level), and by examining adolescents' perception of how close to friends and family members (interpersonal level). This aim is reflected in the following chapters, which consist of two validation papers and three empirical papers:

Chapter 2 describes the process of translation and validation of the Malaysian version of a self-report Instrument for Reactive and Proactive Aggression (IRPA). Construct and concurrent validity of the questionnaire were tested, with related constructs such as delinquency and victimization.

In **Chapter 3**, we examined the validity of the Individualism-Collectivism Questionnaire for Youth in a Malaysian and a Dutch population. In the following **Chapter 4**, we studied the moderating effects of individualism and collectivism at country and individual levels on the relationship between coping strategies and moral emotions with reactive versus proactive aggression.

In **Chapter 5**, we investigated the relationship between emotional reactivity (fear, anger, shame and guilt) with bullying and victimization across individual and cultural variation in a Malaysian and Dutch adolescent samples.

In **Chapter 6**, we examined how closeness to friends and cultural differences affect the relationships between coping strategies and friendship quality in Malaysian and Dutch adolescents.

In **Chapter 7**, the General Discussion, we present the overall findings of this study and their implications.

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