Aggression and emotions: cultural and individual differences

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CHAPTER 7

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Aggression has a negative impact on adolescent well-being. It gives aggressors the power to do harm to others, and it can damage aggressors and victims alike. Unhealthy friendships, low academic performance, poor mental health, and proneness to problematic behavior are some of its adverse consequences (Cillessen, Jiang, West, & Laszkowski, 2005; Fite, Hendrickson, Rubens, Gabrielli, & Evans, 2013; Marsee, Weems, & Taylor, 2008). Research suggests that the intensity and reactivity of negative emotions (e.g., anger, shame and guilt) as well as emotion dysregulation are often considered to be the root causes of aggression. Yet, many of these previous studies were conducted in Western countries. Regarding Eastern adolescents, although studying how emotional functioning contributes to aggressive behavior could help generate new knowledge, it would also be helpful to understand whether the influence of emotion on aggressive behavior differs based on cultural context. The information gained could be valuable, especially for developing culturally relevant strategies to curb adolescent aggression in different cultures.

The aim of this thesis was 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 (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).

However, before doing so, we had to make sure that all instruments that we used to collect the data were applicable to both cultures involved. Therefore, we first translated instruments available in English into Malay, and later validated these to confirm that the factor structure of the translated version was similar enough to the original version. The outcomes from the translation and validation processes are described in the following section.

The use of measures across cultures and languages

The adaptation of Western-based psychological measures in research by non-Western scholars is not strange or new. An enormous number of studies have translated measures that were developed in Western countries, and a significant proportion of studies come from Eastern countries. However, only in recent decades have researchers in Eastern countries made efforts to validate these questionnaires before adopting them in their own research settings. Indeed, although the way people behave, think, and feel is similar across cultures, there are also some culturally embedded differences. As in the examples given in the Introduction of this thesis, not all people eat pork, and not all societies allow suicide. While we appreciate how cultures differ from each other, yet, this is also our concern when it comes to apply Western-based psychological measures in a non-Western sample. In specific, not all measurement items that derived solely from research on Western settings can be understood clearly by non-Western samples. Therefore, adopting Western research concepts and measurements in a non-Western research setting demands careful

evaluation, not only of the quality of the translation, but also of the applicability of each concept in different cultural contexts.

In this thesis, the process of translating and validating three Western-based psychological questionnaires into Malay (the national language of Malaysia) were described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 (also in Dutch language). Overall, our findings showed that the psychometric properties of the questionnaire were good and adequate. Indeed, the structure of the Instrument for Reactive and Proactive Aggression (IRPA) and the Individualistic-Collectivistic Value Questionnaire for Youth were found to be very similar across cultures (in Chapter 2 and 3 respectively), which may suggest the universal adaptability of these concepts and questionnaires.

MAIN FINDINGS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

Guilt and aggression or bullying

Based on studies from Western cultures or countries, guilt has been regarded as an adaptive social emotion that is capable of motivating apologies for wrongdoing. The reparative nature of guilt helps to heal and restore broken relationships. Indeed, all these positive consequences of guilt help people inhibit their desire to be aggressive (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Cermak, & Rosza, 2002). Yet, guilt is a culturally constructed emotion, and many scholars argue that it is more salient and prevalent in Western societies that emphasize individualism (Realo, Koido, Ceulemans, & Allik, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). The limited information available from Eastern countries on the link between guilt and aggression revealed a gap in the literature. To address this, we examined the association between guilt and aggression in Malaysia, a culture that is representative of an Eastern country that strongly emphasizes collectivism.

When examining the relationship between guilt and reactive and proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents, we found a similar pattern as previously shown by studies conducted in Western countries. For example, Chapter 2 showed that less guilt was related to higher levels of proactive aggression in Malaysian young adolescents, but no relationship was found between guilt and reactive aggression. In Chapter 4, we further studied these relationships by taking into account cultural differences – in particular the individualism and collectivism dimension of culture – at the country (Malaysia versus Netherlands) and individual levels. The results showed that at a larger scale (i.e., at the country level), higher levels of guilt were related to less reactive and proactive aggression in both countries. Collapsed over country, at a smaller scale (i.e., at the individual level), higher levels of guilt were related to less proactive aggression in adolescents who endorsed higher levels of individualistic values. In Chapter 5, we examined the relationship between guilt and bullying. Bullying is known as a form of aggression that can comprise of reactive and proactive motives (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Using similar analyses as in Chapter 4 (i.e., hierarchical regression analyses), a comparison between countries confirmed that higher levels of guilt were related to less bullying for both

countries, although the influence of guilt was more apparent in Dutch adolescents. Again, collapsed over country, at the individual level, higher levels of guilt were now related to less bullying in adolescents who endorsed higher levels of collectivistic values.

Taken together, these findings highlight two important points. First, the potential protective role of guilt against aggressive behaviors seems similar across countries and cultures. While literature suggests that one country may emphasize guilt more than another (Benedict, 1946; Hofstede, 2011), it is also suggested that guilt is a universal experience that conveys similar meaning across the globe; to motivate other-directed behaviour – reparation – where a wrongdoer has the responsibility to repair the harm he or she has caused (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). Feelings of guilt about one's own wrongdoing motivate people to confess their mistakes, apologize, and ask for forgiveness, in an effort to resolve interpersonal conflicts and improve their relationship (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). This seems to apply to cultures from West and East, alike.

Second, while guilt can protect against aggressive behaviours across cultures, the motivation may be different depending on individual cultural orientations. In our research, we observed that feeling guilty led to less proactive aggression in individualistic-oriented adolescents and less bullying in collectivistic-oriented adolescents, regardless of country of origin. Possibly, for adolescents who endorsed individualistic values, guilt motivated them to take responsibility for their own actions, especially the bad ones. Meanwhile, for the adolescents who endorsed collectivistic values, guilt helped them to amend relationship with others, thereby maintaining in-group harmony.

Putting these points together, we can see in a broader context that it is insufficient to consider only a country-based comparison to understand individual preference related to guilt. Also considering individual cultural orientations could provide additional information to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Shame and aggression or bullying

Shame is a social emotion like guilt. However, in nature, these two emotions share fewer similarities than dissimilarities. While guilt is incurred by a specific wrongdoing, shame is incurred by negative judgements of others directed at the self (Baumeister et al., 1994). Also, shame is an avoidance-oriented emotion that motivates escape and withdrawal from social relationships, which contrasts with the nature of guilt, which motivates reparation and prosocial actions (de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2007). Yet, like guilt, shame is a culturally embedded psychological construct. While individuals in Western societies tend to view shame as a negative, aversive, and painful emotion, those in non-Western societies such as in East Asian region tend to value shame more positively. However, due to limited literature available, it was unknown whether variations in shame-proneness can inflict or inhibit more aggression and bullying in Eastern cultures, thus making cross-cultural comparison difficult.

Three chapters of this thesis attempt to close the gap left by previous studies. In Chapter 2, we found that like guilt, shame was not related to reactive aggression, but instead, was negatively related to proactive aggression, but only in Malaysian adolescents. In Chapter 4, we also found that higher levels of shame were related to less proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents, and in addition, that higher levels of shame were related to higher levels of reactive aggression in Dutch adolescents. In addition, higher levels of shame were related to less proactive aggression in adolescents who endorsed individualistic cultural values. In Chapter 5, bullying was our outcome variable. In this study, higher levels of shame were related to more bullying in Dutch adolescents, but lower levels of shame were related to less bullying in adolescents who endorsed high collectivistic values. Overall, the three chapters highlight that the potential protective versus harmful role of shame in relation to aggressive behaviors depends on cultural values, at the country and individual levels.

More specifically, two points should be noted regarding the findings. First, shame can play a maladaptive role in Western countries such as the Netherlands, as is commonly suggested by the literature (Fessler, 2004; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992; Triandis et al., 1988). It is plausible that in Western countries that privilege individual autonomy, shame is commonly treated as a very painful and distressing experience. In that case, shame brings about humiliation and embarrassment, which potentially put one's self-esteem at risk. To protect their self-confidence, Western adolescents are motivated by shame to exhibit aggressive reactions towards disapproving peers (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Broekhof, Bos, Camodeca, & Rieffe, 2018; Broekhof, Bos, & Rieffe, submitted; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011).

Second, in Eastern countries such as Malaysia, shame seems adaptive. As suggested by previous work (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Fung, 1999; Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004), shame acts as a behavioral control in Eastern cultures, particularly to prevent individuals from violating the social rules. Although it is regarded as a painful emotion that needs to be avoided at all costs, its relations with losing face may explain why East Asian people value this emotion so much. In East Asian countries, people prefer to escape from feeling shame due to its direct consequence of losing face, to the self and to significant others (Bedford, 2004; Li et al., 2004). Losing face is a serious matter in Eastern cultures that can bring damages to individuals' social prestige, reputation, self-esteem and dignity within their social-context (Bedford, 2004). Later, it can affect an individual's ability to function well in society (Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). Therefore, it is important for East Asian adolescents to exhibit appropriate behaviors that match their norms and values for the sake of face-saving, and most importantly, to maintain harmony and coherence in society (Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This can prevent negative behaviors such as aggression, bullying, and other kinds of violence from happening.

Third, individual endorsement of cultural values influences the role of shame in insulating against aggressive behaviors differently, from the cross-country comparison

perspective. In our case, individualistic-oriented adolescents exhibited less proactive aggression when feeling more shame, while collectivitistic-oriented adolescents bullied less when the intensity of their shame feeling was low. Indeed, these findings contrast with what we found when comparing across countries. This inconsistency shows again that while there are country differences that can be expected from what we know from previous works on the preference of shame (i.e., collectivistic cultures value shame more than individualistic cultures), these differences may not be explained by individuals' individualistic and collectivistic orientation, as one would tend to think.

Anger and fear in aggression or bullying

Anger and fear are like two sides of the same coin (Lazarus, 1991): both are basic emotions with negative valence, but each has a different motivational direction and response. For example, when an individual is harmed, he or she can choose whether to approach the situation by responding with anger and attack, or choose to withdraw from the situation in flight, due to feeling fear. However, arousing fear can also trigger a defensive reaction, such as aggressive acts of retaliation (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Pulkkinen, 1996). While basic emotions such as anger and fear are recognised and experienced similarly worldwide (Ekman & Friesen, 2003; Huang, 1997), there are questions regarding whether the similarities lead to the same consequences, in terms of aggression and bullying across cultures, or differ depending on individual differences in cultural values.

In this thesis, two chapters (i.e., **Chapter 2** and **5**) attempt to fill the gap in the literature. The follows are the summary of findings of the chapters. Regarding anger, we found that higher levels of anger were related to more reactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents in **Chapter 2**. In **Chapter 5**, our cross-cultural study revealed similarity in both Dutch and Malaysian samples that higher levels of anger were related to more bullying, but the effects were more apparent for Malaysian adolescents. These outcomes are consistent with previous studies conducted in Western countries that found that anger is related to more reactive aggression in adolescents (Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010; Rieffe et al., 2016; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2002).

Regarding fear, **Chapter 5** shows no country difference was observed on the relationship between fear and bullying. However, across countries, adolescents who endorsed lower levels of collectivistic values bullied more when experiencing higher levels of fear. Again, collectivistic values seem to endorse group harmony, but in the absence of these values, fear can act as a defensive mechanism.

Coping styles in aggression and friendship

Coping strategies and how people adopt them to cope with life stressors are well-documented (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Windle & Windle, 1996). This includes how these strategies influence adolescents' approach

to dealing with their friendship conflicts, as well as with their maladaptive behaviors such as aggression and bullying. Yet, the majority of past studies were conducted in Western cultures, and the information on whether the different coping strategies could inflict or inhibit more aggression and bullying in Eastern cultures is scarce. Consequently, cultural comparison is difficult to make.

In this thesis, two chapters attempt to address this issue, taking into account cultural differences on country and individual levels. This is because certain coping strategies may be more useful and effective in one cultural context than another. For example, in Western societies that emphasize individualism (i.e., prioritize individual autonomy and self-fulfillment), solving conflicts directly using approach coping strategies, such as confronting or requesting support is more effective, and associated with better outcomes (e.g., positive friendship qualities) (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007; Wright, Banerjee, Hoek, Rieffe, & Novin, 2010). Meanwhile, in Eastern societies that emphasize collectivism (i.e., prioritize social harmony and stability), avoidant coping is expected to work better for reducing conflict by withdrawing from a conflict situation or distracting oneself from the worrying thoughts that emerged from the conflict (French, Pidada, Denoma, McDonald, & Lawton, 2005; Haar & Krahé, 1999; Novin, Rieffe, Banerjee, Miers, & Cheung, 2011). While previous work has shown this difference at the country level, one question remains to be answered: Does approach coping also work better in individualistic-oriented adolescents, while avoidance coping works better in collectivistic-oriented adolescents, regardless of country?

In **Chapter 4**, our findings showed quite the opposite. It was found that avoidant coping was related to more proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents. Regardless of country, approach and avoidant coping were related to more proactive aggression, especially in adolescents who endorsed individualistic values. In **Chapter 6**, we investigate how cultural values moderate the relationship between coping strategies and friendship quality. With regard to positive friendship, the results showed that higher levels of approach coping were related to more positive friendships in both Dutch and Malaysian samples, but the effects were more pronounced in the latter. With regard to negative friendship, higher levels of avoidance were related to more negative friendships in Malaysian adolescents. Also, for adolescents who were close with their friends, negative friendship was related to more maladaptive coping and less approach coping.

Despite similarities with previous research, these outcomes tell us three important things. First, across countries, approach strategies may be used more effectively when interacting with friends, but may not work well when trying to solve a conflict with a peer. Possibly, with a friend, adolescents would approach the situation in a more constructive way, whereas with a peer, the adolescent might do it in a more blunt way.

Second, we found that the influence of avoidant coping on aggression and friendship quality did differ between countries, yet the pattern contradicted to our expectations. Indeed, by using avoidant coping, we expected that Malaysian adolescents would

gain positive behavioural outcomes (i.e., less aggression, more positive friendship) than their Dutch peers. However, our analyses show the opposite. Possibly, avoidant strategies such as withdrawal and distancing self from conflicts in the case of friends will not only delay conflict resolution, but may also reflect irresponsibility. Indeed, in friendship, it is always important to be responsible for every (negative) action in order to maintain good relationships with friends. However, being irresponsible to friends by ignoring their needs for a harmonious relationship can only trump self-interest for one's own goals, which in our case, promoting proactive aggression and being dominant in friendship. Yet, this might be different when the conflict concerns outgroup members, but future research could further look into this..

Third, individual cultural orientations can influence the role of coping strategies against aggression. In general, coping strategies function to keep a balance between an individual's and others' goals during conflicts. However, for adolescents who endorsed individualistic values, this may have constituted a problem. Possibly, their strong need to achieve their own goals, with less focus on achieving social goals (e.g., maintaining harmonious relationships), may have caused an imbalance. Therefore, despite whatever strategies these adolescents chose in order to cope with a conflict situation (whether approach or avoidant), their focus on the peer conflict above all might increase the risk of instrumental aggression.

Limitations and directions for future research

The current thesis has contributed to the existing knowledge regarding the link between emotional functioning and aggression and its related behaviors, across two different cultures. While it is commonly practiced to assume an individual's cultural values based on his or her country-of-origin, as per Hofstede's cultural theory (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede, Jan Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), research often does not directly test cultural values, and therefore cannot assume that cultural values underlie the country differences we found.

However, some limitations deserve consideration. First, as mentioned several times in the previous chapters, our data, which is cross-sectional in nature, prevents us from establishing causal relationships between emotion functioning and aggression. Thus, this limitation may mean that the direction of causality remains open for debate. To address this limitation, we suggest future research to adopt a longitudinal or experimental design, to examine causal effects and directions between variables, cross-culturally.

Second, all instruments used in this thesis are based on self-report questionnaires, and they were all developed first in Western countries. Although self-report might be the most convenient way of examining internal states, social adaptive and maladaptive behaviours such as aggression, friendship, and bullying might be also measured using a multi-informant and/or multi-method approach to increase the external validity of the outcomes. For example, peer nominations are widely used to study group processes and bullying within a class or group.

Third, the selection of one Eastern and one Western country provide some representation of collectivistic versus individualistic societies, respectively. However it limits the degree to which our findings can be generalized. As every country is unique, with its own values and norms, our findings may not be applicable to populations in other Eastern or Western countries. As such, we suggest that future investigators who may wish to replicate our methodology should include more Eastern and Western countries for a more representative sample.

Fourth, our data did not include participants' demographic information. Including information on socioeconomic status, such as household income, parental employment, and level of education may, for example, provide more in-depth information about whether aggression and the selection of coping strategies or proneness to certain moral emotions by adolescents can be influenced by differences in socioeconomic status, within and among different countries.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, we aimed to unravel whether the influence of emotion regulation on adolescent social behaviors (i.e., aggression and friendship) varies between cultural background and values. While past studies often used country comparisons as representative of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures, we opted to see how these values differed per individual. With regard to cross-country comparison, the studies in this thesis have replicated some important findings of previous research. Most notably, our findings support the claim that shame plays a protective role against wrongdoing in Eastern adolescents, but Western adolescents are at risk of committing aggression when experiencing intense shame. Yet, similarities between the countries were evident too. For example, guilt protected against aggressive behaviours in both Malaysian and Dutch samples, which was definitely new and little previously explored. In regard to individual cultural orientation, our studies have revealed contrasting findings from the established cross-cultural comparison studies. For instance, we found that higher levels of shame protected individualistic-oriented adolescents against aggressive behaviours, but low levels of shame were needed for collectivistic-oriented adolescents to have the same outcome. The discrepancies in findings between the two cultural contexts suggests the need to consider individual cultural orientation in order to have a complete picture on how culture influences psychological functioning in adolescence, since comparing countries alone provides limited insight.

To conclude, in efforts to promote socially appropriate behaviors in adolescents, the understanding of cultural patterns of emotional regulation is crucially needed. Thus, we hope that this work will spark the interest of future researchers to investigate other cultural dimensions that might stimulate adaptive and positive emotional regulation. For example, Malaysia is one of the countries with the highest level of power distance (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) and due to this status, it may directly or indirectly influence Malaysian adolescents' proneness

to shame and guilt or their preference in applying coping strategies. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that emotional experiences such as shame and guilt as well as adaptive coping strategies are important in promoting harmonious peer interactions. This could be useful basic knowledge for professionals in developing countries like Malaysia, for the purpose of developing plans to mitigate the prevalence of aggression and its related behaviors in its youth.

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