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Aggression and emotions: cultural and individual differences

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CHAPTER

8

SUMMARY &
NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

SUMMARY

Aggression among peers harms adolescent well-being, and is detrimental to aggressors and victims alike. Research in Western countries suggests that emotional dysregulation, which includes the intensity and reactivity of negative emotions (e.g., anger, shame and guilt), is an important cause of aggression and its related behaviours (e.g., bullying) in adolescents. Yet, regarding Eastern adolescents, it is important to consider the influence of emotional functioning on aggressive behaviours within a cultural context. Every culture has its own set of norms and values that shape culturally appropriate ways of thinking and behaving. Therefore, information gained from cross-cultural perspectives could contribute to a better understanding of the way emotions and aggression work in different cultural contexts. This would support the development of culturally relevant strategies to curb adolescent aggression in different cultures.

The aim of this thesis was to examine aggressive behaviours in relation to the underlying emotional functioning of adolescents in social contexts with different cultural backgrounds. In this thesis, cultural background is included as a variable in two ways. First, the thesis uses a more traditional approach in the literature where two groups of adolescents are compared based on the country where they live and grow up (i.e., Malaysia or the Netherlands). Secondly, we looked at the influence of culture on the individual level, by looking at the extent to which adolescents endorse cultural values.

In order to meet these three objectives, the first step was to ensure that all instruments used for data collection were applicable to both cultures involved. **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3** of this thesis describe the process of translating two psychological questionnaires (originally designed for Western samples) into Malay (the national language of Malaysia), and of validating the measures in Malaysian adolescent samples. Overall, findings showed that the psychometric properties of the questionnaires were (respectively) good and adequate. In addition, the structures of these two questionnaires (the Instrument for Reactive and Proactive Aggression or IRPA, and the Individualistic-Collectivistic Value Questionnaire for Youth) were very similar across cultures (in **Chapter 2** and **3**, respectively).

Guilt and its relation to aggression and bullying

In studies from Western cultures or countries, guilt is regarded as an adaptive social emotion that motivates apologies and compensatory behavior for wrongdoing. The reparative nature of guilt helps to heal and restore damaged 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 endorse individualism (Realo, Koido, Ceulemans, & Allik, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). The available

information from Eastern countries on any link between guilt and aggression revealed a gap in the literature. To address this gap, this thesis examined the association between guilt and aggression in Malaysia, a representative Eastern country that strongly endorses collectivism.

When examining the relationship between guilt and reactive versus proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents, a similar pattern was found to that previously identified in studies conducted in Western countries. **Chapter 2** discusses the finding that less guilt was related to higher levels of proactive aggression in Malaysian young adolescents, while no relationship was found between guilt and reactive aggression. **Chapter 4** further explores these relationships by examining cultural differences, i.e., individualism versus collectivism dimensions of culture at the country level (Netherlands versus Malaysia) and at the individual level. Results showed that at the country level or macro level, more guilt was related to less reactive aggression and to less proactive aggression in both countries. However, collapsed over country, at the individual or micro level, more guilt was related only to less proactive aggression in adolescents who endorsed more strongly individualistic values. **Chapter 5** examines the relationship between guilt and bullying. Bullying is a form of aggression that a person intentionally and repeatedly carries out towards another person who is in a weaker position (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). 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 the Dutch adolescents. However, when collapsed over country, at the individual level, higher levels of guilt were related to less bullying in adolescents who endorsed more strongly collectivistic values.

Shame and its relation to aggression and bullying

Shame is a social emotion like guilt. However, shame and guilt have more similarities than dissimilarities. While guilt is incurred by a specific wrongdoing, shame is incurred by negative judgements of others directed at the self (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Also, shame is an 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 Asia tend to value shame more positively. However, due to the limited literature available, we found no evidence of a research literature on variations in shame-proneness in relation to amplified or inhibited aggression and bullying in Eastern cultures. This made cross-cultural comparisons difficult.

Three chapters of this thesis attempted to close the gap left by previous studies. In **Chapter 2** we found that, like guilt, shame was unrelated to reactive aggression, yet negatively correlated with proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents. In **Chapter 4**

we found that higher levels of shame were related to less proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents, but to more reactive aggression in Dutch adolescents. Moreover, higher levels of shame were related to less proactive aggression in adolescents who endorsed individualistic cultural values, regardless of country of origin. In **Chapter 5**, shame is examined in relation to bullying. It was found that higher levels of shame were related to more bullying in Dutch adolescents and lower levels of shame were related to less bullying in adolescents who endorsed more collectivistic values. Overall, **Chapters 2, 4 and 5** reveal both protective and harmful roles for shame, respectively, in relation to aggressive behaviors, where the direction of these roles appeared to depend on cultural values at the country and individual levels.

Anger and fear and their relations to aggression and 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 to withdraw from the situation in flight, due to 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 (**Chapter 2** and **5**) attempt to fill the gap in the literature. Regarding anger, **Chapter 2** discusses the finding that higher levels of anger were related to more reactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents. **Chapter 5** discusses how a cross-cultural study revealed similarities in Dutch and Malaysian samples, where higher levels of anger were related to more bullying; however the effects were more apparent for Malaysian adolescents.

Regarding fear, **Chapter 5** shows that no country difference was observed in 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. Collectivistic values would seem to promote group harmony, and may serve to inhibit aggression. In the absence of these values, fear may provoke a defensive mechanism that increases aggression.

Coping styles in aggression and friendship

Coping strategies, including approach, maladaptive and avoidant strategies, and how people utilize them to cope with life stressors, are well documented in the literature (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Windle & Windle, 1996). This literature addresses how these strategies influence adolescents' approach to dealing with their friendship conflicts, as well as with their maladaptive behaviours such as

aggression and bullying. Yet the majority of past studies were conducted in Western cultures, and information on whether different coping strategies could either increase or inhibit aggression or bullying in Eastern cultures is scarce. Consequently, cultural comparison has been difficult.

In this thesis, two chapters address the role of coping strategies in adolescent aggression, while taking into account cultural differences at the country and individual levels. We theorized that 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., that prioritize individual autonomy and self-fulfillment), it is considered to be more effective, and associated with better outcomes (with more positive friendship qualities) to solve conflicts by using approach coping strategies, as in directly confronting the other person or requesting support (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007; Wright, Banerjee, Hoek, Rieffe, & Novin, 2010). Meanwhile, in Eastern societies that emphasize collectivism (i.e., that prioritize social harmony and stability), avoidant coping is expected to work better for reducing conflict, as in 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). Thus, while previous work has shown differences in coping strategies (i.e., approach versus avoidant) at the country level, the question remains: Does approach coping work better in individualistic-oriented adolescents, while avoidance coping works better in collectivistic-oriented adolescents, regardless of country?

Chapter 4 discusses unexpected results. It was found that avoidant coping was related to more proactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents; and regardless of country, approach and avoidant coping were related to more proactive aggression, especially in adolescents who endorsed individualistic values. Possibly, this is because avoidant strategies such as withdrawal and distancing oneself from conflicts with friends may not only delay conflict resolution, but reflect irresponsibility. Also this may have constituted a problem to adolescents who endorsed individualistic values: their focus on the peer conflict above all might increase the risk of instrumental aggression. In **Chapter 6** we discuss how cultural values may moderate the relationship between coping strategies and friendship quality. With regard to positive friendship, 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 quality, 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.

Conclusion

We started this thesis with a lot of questions: Is shame a risk factor for reactive aggression in Malaysian adolescents? Can guilt play a protective role against bullying

in Malaysian adolescents? Can avoidant coping lead to more positive friendship in Malaysian adolescents? Does culture influence behavioural and emotional responses in adolescents? If so, how? Indeed, the eagerness to answer these questions is what drove us to conduct this cross-cultural study in Malaysia and the Netherlands.

Some outcomes were generalizable across countries. For instance, we found that emotional experiences such as guilt and adaptive coping strategies were important in mitigating aggressive behaviours and building harmonious peer interactions in both Malaysia and the Netherlands. Yet, some outcomes were specific to a certain country. For instance, shame played a protective role against aggressive behaviours for our Malaysian sample, while being a risk factor for our Dutch sample. More importantly, we now know that the different manifestation of behaviours between Malaysian and Dutch adolescents does not only depend on their cultural background (i.e., the country that they live). It also depends on the way they endorse certain cultural values, and their view of interpersonal closeness with significant others. All in all, we believe this thesis has begun to fill a significant gap in the literature by shedding light on adolescent aggressive behaviours and their relations with emotional regulation in a Western and non-Western sample.



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