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Individualism, Collectivism, and Chinese Adolescents' Aggression: Intracultural Variations

Yan Li[1]*, Mo Wang[2], Cixin Wang[3], and Junqi Shi[4]*

[1]*Department of Psychology, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois*
[2]*Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland*
[3]*Department of Educational Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska*
[4]*Department of Psychology, Peking University, Beijing, People's Republic of China*

This study examined the relations between cultural values (i.e., individualism and collectivism) and aggression among 460 (234 girls) Chinese adolescents. Conflict level and social status insecurity were examined as potential explaining mechanisms for these relations. The results showed that adolescents' endorsement of collectivism was negatively related to their use of overt and relational aggression as reported by teachers and peers, whereas positive associations were found between the endorsement of individualism and adolescent aggression. Adolescents' conflict level and social status insecurity accounted for a significant part of these associations. Findings of this study demonstrate the importance of examining intracultural variations of cultural values in relation to adolescent aggression as well as the process variables in explaining the relations. Aggr. Behav. 36:187–194, 2010.
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Keywords: cultural value; individualism; collectivism; overt aggression; relational aggression; conflict level; social status insecurity; Chinese adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Cultural contexts highly influence children's social development [Chen and French, 2008]. Cross-cultural research has revealed significant differences in aggression among children and adolescents across countries [Crystal et al., 1994; French et al., 2002; Ramirez et al., 2001]. Recent research has started using the cultural values (e.g., individualism and collectivism) at the national level to explain cross-cultural differences in aggression [Archer, 2001; Bergeron and Schneider, 2005; Forbes et al., 2009].

Despite these significant advances in our understanding of the associations between cultural values and youth aggression, several issues remain to be addressed. One major overlooked aspect is the investigation of *intracultural* variations of cultural values, which may contribute to our understanding of explaining factors for individual differences in aggression within a particular culture. Furthermore, there is only limited research that has empirically examined the potential mechanisms underlying the associations between cultural values and youth aggression [Bond, 2004]. Last, employing a multi-informant method to examine different forms of adolescent aggression is necessary considering the recent advances in this research area [Archer, 2004; Putallaz et al., 2007].

This study employs an intracultural framework to examine the potential mechanisms that link cultural values to adolescent aggression. Adolescents' endorsements of cultural values (i.e., collectivism and individualism) are posited to relate to adolescent aggression, which is, at least partly, connected through the more proximal factors (i.e., conflict level and social status insecurity). In light of the research on different forms of aggression [Archer and Coyne, 2005], both overt (e.g., physical and verbal aggression) and relational (e.g., social manipulations, malicious gossips) aggression are included

*Correspondence to: Yan Li, Department of Psychology, DePaul University, 2219 N. Kenmore Ave., Chicago, IL 60614. E-mail: yli34@depaul.edu or Junqi Shi, Department of Psychology, Peking University, Beijing 100871, People's Republic of China. E-mail: junqi_shi@pku.edu.cn

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in this study. To assess these behaviors more comprehensively, a multi-informant approach is used that includes both peer and teacher reports.

Cross-Cultural Research on Adolescent Aggression

Earlier research has demonstrated national differences in the mean levels of aggression among youths and adults [Bergeron and Schneider, 2005; Crystal et al., 1994; French et al., 2002; Forbes et al., 2009; Fry, 1998; Ramirez et al., 2001]. For instance, Chinese adolescents scored lower on aggressive feelings than their American counterparts [Crystal et al., 1994]. Two major approaches have been employed in earlier research to explain the cross-cultural differences in aggression. The traditional approach attributes the cross-cultural differences in aggression to the national-level differences in cultural characteristics [e.g., Forbes et al., 2009; French et al., 2002; Ramirez et al., 2001]. Researchers using this approach do not necessarily measure cultural characteristics in their study, but rely on the cultural stereotypes or the cultural characteristics generated from the earlier research for different nations [e.g., Hofstede, 1980].

A more recent approach proposes to "unpack" culture and search for explanatory cultural factors to account for cross-national differences in aggression [Archer, 2001; Bergeron and Schneider, 2005]. Specifically, Bergeron and Schneider [2005] empirically related several cultural values to peer-directed aggression at the national level. For instance, they found that individualism positively related to peer-directed aggression, whereas collectivism and conservatism negatively related to aggression. This approach evidently provides more direct examinations of cultural values and their associations with youth aggression at the national level.

Despite these advances, little attention has been given to the variations of cultural values within cultures. Diverse ethnic and cultural groups are often present within a nation, and thus great individual variations in the endorsement of cultural values within a nation may be observed [Fiske, 2002]. Additionally, multiple cultural values (e.g., individualism and collectivism) may coexist within societies and can be simultaneously endorsed by individuals [Oyserman et al., 2002; Rhee et al., 1996; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008].

Individualism, Collectivism, and Aggression

The most prominent cultural values used to describe cultural characteristics are individualism and collectivism [Hofstede, 1980; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995]. Individualism emphasizes the independence from groups/collectives (e.g., family, class), whereas collectivism emphasizes the interdependence of individuals. The individualistic and collectivistic values can be distinguished with different attributes [e.g., the priority of personal goals vs. in-group goals; Triandis, 1995]. They have been used to describe cultural differences across nations. Many Western countries score higher on individualism, whereas many Asian countries, such as China, score higher on collectivism [Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995].

Cultural values and beliefs may inhibit or encourage individuals' expressions of overt aggression [Bond, 2004]. Individuals endorsing an individualistic orientation tend to value competition and self-reliance, whereas those endorsing collectivism tend to value interdependence, family integrity, and cooperation [Triandis, 1995]. With an individualistic orientation, aggression may be seen as a more acceptable means to win competitions and to achieve self-reliance, whereas it may be seen as more of a disruptive conduct by individuals with a collectivistic orientation. In addition, because group harmony is expected in collectivistic cultures, overt aggression may be seen as a threat to harmony, and thus highly discouraged by individuals with a strong collectivistic orientation [Bond, 2004; Triandis, 1989].

Research on cultural correlates of relational aggression is scarce, probably because the research on this type of aggression is relatively more recent [Archer and Coyne, 2005]. Despite its covertness, relational aggression hurts interpersonal relationships and group harmony. Therefore, relational aggression may be perceived negatively and even suppressed by individuals with a collectivistic orientation. In contrast, such negative association may not necessarily be observed for individuals with a strong individualistic orientation because maintaining group harmony may not be the primary concerns for them [Triandis, 1995].

Conflict Level, Cultural Values, and Aggression

Peer conflict arises when children oppose or resist against one another [Shantz, 1987]. Children and adolescents may use various strategies to manage peer conflict, including aggressive strategies. Spetter et al. [1992] found that grade-school boys' responses to hypothetical peer conflict situations included physical and indirect aggression. Other research shows that there is an increased use of aggression (both direct and indirect forms) from preadolescence to adolescence in dealing with peer conflict [Lindeman et al., 1997]. More recent research also found

positive associations between the use of aggressive strategies (physical and social aggression) and peer conflict among adolescents [Xie et al., 2002]. These findings suggest a positive linkage between the amount of peer conflict that adolescents experience and the aggressive behaviors they exhibit.

The amount of conflict adolescents experience may be related to their cultural value endorsement. Emphasizing individualism, adolescents are more likely to insist on personal goals and show self-assertiveness, and thus are more likely to have a higher level of peer conflict. In contrast, such behaviors are less likely observed for collectivistic individuals who value communal goals and harmonious relationships more. Earlier research has shown that Chinese children displayed far less conflict and more cooperative behaviors than Canadian children [Orlick et al., 1990]. Such cross-cultural pattern is expected for the intracultural variations, such that higher endorsement of collectivism is related to a lower level of conflict; conversely, higher endorsement of individualism is related to a higher level of conflict.

Social Status Insecurity, Cultural Values, and Aggression

From preadolescence to adolescence, youth show increasing concerns about their social status among peers [LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002]. Worrying or feeling threatened about one's popularity and social standing may prompt adolescents to defend their current social status by using aggressive strategies. Preadolescents may use relational aggression to maintain their influence and status in their cliques [Adler and Adler, 1995]. Consistently, both physical and relational aggression have been shown to positively correlate with perceived popularity among adolescents [LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002]. Children, who are oversensitive about peer acceptance, display more aggression over time [Downey et al., 1998]. Similarly, children who are pessimistic about their social status are more likely to aggress against peers who give them negative feedback [Sandstrom and Herlan, 2007]. These studies call attention to examine the insecure feelings about social status to account for adolescent aggression.

Social status insecurity may be distinctly related to collectivistic and individualistic cultural orientations. The realization of personal goals is emphasized to a greater extent among adolescents endorsing individualistic values [Triandis, 1989]. As an important social goal during adolescence [LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002], achieving a higher social status may be more emphasized and even more intensely competed for among adolescents with a high individualistic orientation, which may result in a higher level of insecure feeling among adolescents. In contrast, less stress may be placed on competing for social status for collectivistic individuals. Therefore, a positive and a negative association may be observed for social status insecurity with individualism and collectivism, respectively.

Hypothesis

Based on the forgoing review of the literature and key concepts, we hypothesize that adolescents' endorsement of collectivism will be negatively related to their overt and relational aggression as reported by teachers and peers. Conversely, adolescents' endorsement of individualism will be positively related to these aggression outcomes. The associations will be, at least partly, explained by adolescents' conflict level and social status insecurity.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 460 adolescents (226 boys, 234 girls) as well as 10 teachers from 10 classrooms in the 7th and 8th grades, in a public middle school in a Mideast province in China. Participants' average age was 13.42 years (SD = .62). Participants came from middle and working class families. The majority of the participants' parents received high school or lower education (84 and 83% for mothers and fathers, respectively) and the rest received college or graduate-level education. Most of the adolescents (94%) lived in two-parent households.

Procedure

Adolescents, their teachers, and parents were informed about the study through letters and group meetings. They were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that participation in this study was voluntary. Participating students completed a package of questionnaires during a school session. In the peer nomination procedure, participants nominated three students in their own class who fit each statement and put down their identification numbers shown on a class roster. Teachers rated each participating student's level of aggression.

Measures

All measures were translated into Chinese, using the translation and back-translation technique by two researchers fluent in both English and Chinese.

Teacher report. Teachers reported adolescents' aggressive behaviors using the Children's Social Behavior Scale—Teacher Form (CSBS-TF) [Crick, 1996]. This measure includes four overt aggression items (e.g., "This student hits, shoves, or pushes peers") and seven relational aggression items (e.g., "This student spreads rumors or gossips about some peers"). Two additional items reflecting non-verbal social/relational aggression were also included [e.g., "This child makes mean faces to hurt others' feelings"; Underwood et al., 2008]. Teachers rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Never true of this child" to 5 = "Always true of this child"). Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the items for boys and girls, and one relational aggression item of the CSBS-TF was removed. Two parcels for overt aggression and three parcels for relational aggression were formed. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed that these parcels were significant indicators for the teacher-rated overt (standardized factor loadings: .93 and .88) and relational aggression (standardized factor loadings: .93, .94, and .95).

Peer nominations. Peer-nominated aggression was obtained using the CSBS [Crick and Grotpeter, 1995]. Adolescents were asked to nominate three classmates for each item. Three items assessed overt aggression (e.g., "Hits, pushes others") and four items assessed relational aggression (e.g., "When mad, gets even by keeping the person from being in their group of friends"). CFA results showed that these items were significant indicators with standardized factor loadings of .85, .88, and .97 for the peer-nominated overt aggression, and .63, .86, .87, and .91 for the peer-nominated relational aggression.

Individualism and collectivism. The Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism measure [Triandis and Gelfand, 1998] was adopted for this study. Some items were modified to suit the school setting. There were eight items for collectivism (e.g., "I feel good when I cooperate with others") and individualism (e.g., "I'd rather depend on myself than others"), respectively. Participants rated each statement on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = "Absolutely disagree" to 9 = "Absolutely agree"). Two parcels were formed for each cultural value construct. CFA results showed that they were significant indicators with standardized factor loadings of .58 and .75 for individualism and .50 and .76 for collectivism.

Social status insecurity. Three items were used to assess adolescents' feeling of insecurity about their social status and social standing (e.g., "I feel that my social status in the class is threatened"). Adolescents rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). These items were significant indicators of the social status insecurity construct with standardized factor loadings of .50, .62, and .80.

Conflict level. Two items were used to assess the conflict level that adolescents experienced with their peers (e.g., "I have some minor problems with classmates"). Participants rated how often each statement happened to them on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = "Never" to 5 = "All the time"). CFA results showed that these two conflict items were significant indicators of conflict level with standardized factor loadings of .73 and .79.

RESULTS

The CFA model showed that the constructs were well measured with significant factor loadings of indicators, as reported in the measure section ($\chi^2 = 351.14$, df = 188, $P < .01$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .04). For the brevity of this article, we did not include the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of indicator variables. Interested readers may request this information from the first author. The current hypotheses were tested with structural models (using Mplus 5.1). To control the possible effects, adolescent age and gender were controlled as covariates. The model is shown in Figure 1 and fits the data adequately ($\chi^2 = 360.27$, df = 196, $P < .01$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .04). A second model was estimated with direct paths added from cultural values (i.e., collectivism and individualism) to aggression. However, there was no significant improvement in the fit of this model over the first one ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8.58$, Δdf = 8, $P = .36$). Consequently, the model without direct paths (see Fig. 1), which is more parsimonious, was retained.

As shown in Figure 1, the conflict level was positively associated with adolescents' overt and relational aggression as reported by both teachers and peers. Likewise, social status insecurity positively linked to teacher-rated overt aggression and also marginally linked to teacher-rated relational aggression. As expected, collectivism negatively related to conflict level and social status insecurity, whereas individualism positively related to these two variables.

To examine our hypotheses that conflict level and social status insecurity account for a significant part of the relations between the cultural variables and adolescent aggression, we conducted Sobel tests of

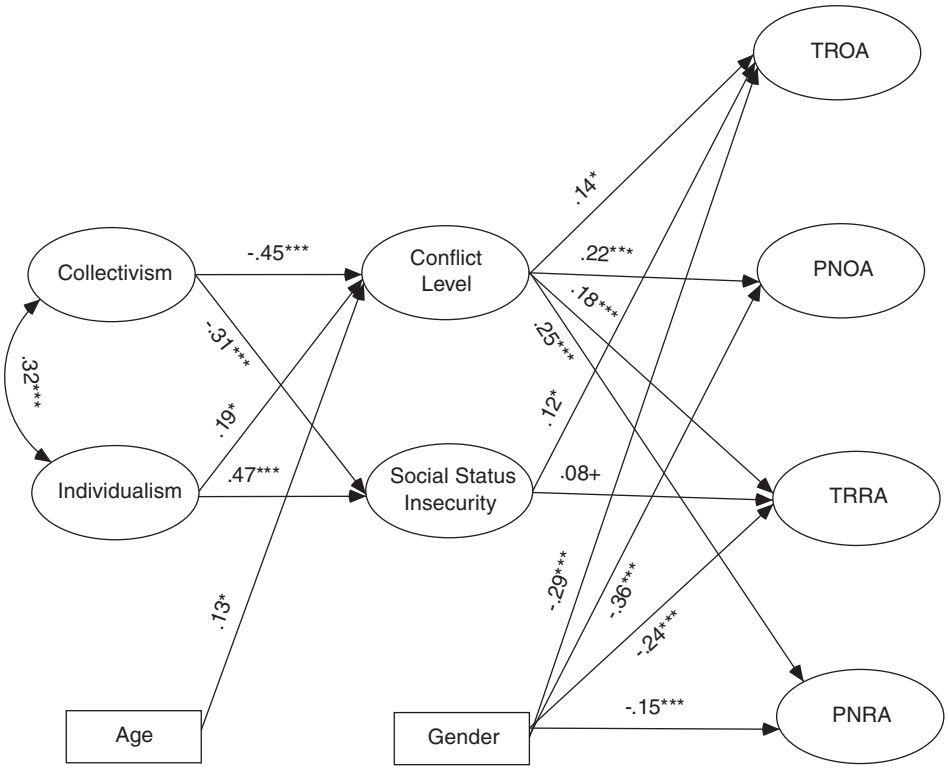

Fig. 1. Standardized Structural Model Results. TROA, teacher-rated overt aggression; PNOA, peer-nominated overt aggression; TRRA, teacher-rated relational aggression; PNRA, peer-nominated relational aggression. Adolescent age and gender were controlled as covariates in the model. To facilitate reading, the nonsignificant paths and disturbance terms were omitted. For gender, 1 = boy; 2 = girl. $^{***}P<.001$, $^{**}P<.01$, $^{*}P<.05$, $+<.10$.

the paths from cultural variables through conflict level and social status insecurity to adolescent aggression. Results showed that collectivism was negatively associated to adolescent aggression through the links of conflict level (teacher-rated overt aggression: $\beta = -.06$, $P<.05$; peer-nominated overt aggression: $\beta = -.10$, $P<.01$; teacher-rated relational aggression: $\beta = -.08$, $P<.01$; peer-nominated relational aggression: $\beta = -.11$, $P<.001$). Similarly, collectivism negatively related to teacher-rated overt aggression through social status insecurity ($\beta = -.04$, $P<.05$). The positive associations between individualism and adolescent aggression were also connected by conflict level (teacher-rated overt aggression: $\beta = .03$, $P<.05$; peer-nominated overt aggression: $\beta = .04$, $P<.05$; teacher-rated relational aggression: $\beta = .03$, $P<.05$; peer-nominated relational aggression: $\beta = .05$, $P<.05$). Likewise, individualism positively related to teacher-rated overt aggression through social status insecurity ($\beta = .06$, $P<.05$). Coupled with the fact that adding direct paths between the cultural and aggression variables did not significantly improve the fit of the model, these results imply that the relation between the cultural and aggression variables is accounted for to a great extent by the relations between the cultural variables and conflict level/social status insecurity combined with the relations between conflict level/social status insecurity and aggression.

Because this study used concurrent data to examine the indirect associations between cultural values and adolescent aggression, an alternative model with reverse paths from aggression to cultural values connecting through conflict level and social status insecurity was conducted to help clarify the direction of associations. The paths from age and gender remained the same as in the proposed model. This alternative model fit the data significantly worse than the model in Figure 1 ($\chi^2 = 989.74$, df = 206, $P<.001$, CFI = .87, TLI = .84, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .15), indicating that the direction of the effects is more likely to be from cultural values through the conflict and social status variables to aggression than in the reverse direction.

Although structural equation modeling has a better control of measurement errors and allows significance testing of indirect effects, hierarchical multiple regression offers a stepwise examination of associations among variables. Therefore, hierarchical multiple regressions were also conducted for each aggression outcome: Block 1 included age, gender,

collectivism, and individualism, whereas Block 2 included conflict level and social status insecurity in addition to the Block 1 variables. All R^2 for Block 1 and R^2 changes for Block 2 were significant in theses regressions ($Ps < .05$). In Block 1, collectivism negatively predicted peer-nominated overt aggression ($\beta = -.09$, $P < .05$) and teacher-rated relational aggression ($\beta = -.08$, $P < .05$), and also marginally predicted peer-nominated relational aggression ($\beta = -.06$, $P < .10$). However, these associations became nonsignificant in Block 2 where conflict level positively predicted these aggression outcomes ($Ps < .01$). Also, in Block 1, individualism positively predicted teacher-rated overt ($\beta = .11$, $P < .01$) and relational ($\beta = .15$, $P < .001$) aggression and marginally predicted peer-nominated overt aggression ($\beta = .06$, $P < .10$). In Block 2, individualism no longer predicted peer-nominated overt aggression and predicted teacher-rated overt ($\beta = .07$, $P < .10$) and relational ($\beta = .13$, $P < .01$) aggression to a lesser degree, whereas conflict level positively predicted these aggression variables ($Ps < .01$) and social status insecurity positively predicted teacher-rated overt aggression ($\beta = .08$, $P < .05$). The regression results were consistent with the structural model results and provided additional support for the hypotheses that conflict level and social status insecurity account for the relations between the cultural variables and aggression.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed associations between individualistic and collectivistic cultural values and aggressive behaviors among Chinese adolescents, and demonstrated two processes explaining these associations, conflict level and social status insecurity. Findings of this study highlight the importance of examining intracultural variations of cultural values in explaining individual differences in adolescent aggression.

Supporting earlier arguments [Rhee et al., 1996; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008] this study shows that Chinese adolescents may endorse both collectivistic and individualistic cultural values. These two value systems are not necessarily positioned on a bipolar dimension [Triandis, 1995]. This dual endorsement may be understood by the multifaceted context in which adolescents develop. Chinese adolescents may endorse a stronger collectivistic orientation in the relationship context, but may be highly individualistic in the academic achievement context. Earlier research has demonstrated that Chinese children's self-concept displays social relatedness in the context of relationships and family, but has a strong autonomous component in the domain of learning and achievement [Wang and Li, 2003].

In accordance with the findings at the national level [Bergeron and Schneider, 2005], this study showed that individualism positively related to adolescents' overt and relational aggression, whereas collectivism showed negative associations within the Chinese cultural context. These associations were primarily connected by the conflict level that adolescents experience. Components of individualism, such as emphasis on personal goals and self-assertiveness, may engage adolescents in more peer conflict. In contrast, valuing submission to the collectives, cooperation, and harmonious relationships [Triandis, 1995] involves adolescents in less conflict. Taken together with the earlier cross-cultural findings [Orlick et al., 1990], a higher level of collectivism is associated with less peer conflict at both the cross-cultural and intracultural levels. Furthermore, consistent with the earlier research [Xie et al., 2002], the present research suggests that frequent conflict may hinder adolescents' emotional regulations and inhibition of aggressive impulses, and thus increase their use of aggressive strategies in dealing with peer conflict.

The hypotheses regarding social status insecurity were partly supported, primarily for the teacher-rated aggression. Social status insecurity served as an explanatory mechanism for the associations between individualism/collectivism and teacher-rated overt aggression. The feeling of insecurity about social status may hinder adolescents' emotional regulations and lead to a propensity of using aggressive strategies to maintain status among peers. These linkages shed light on the search for intrapersonal factors to account for adolescent aggression. Unlike teacher reports, peer reports of adolescent aggression did not demonstrate linkages with social status insecurity. Although both provide valid and unique observation, teachers and peers disagree to a certain extent regarding the aggressive behaviors they observe [Archer, 2004; Putallaz et al., 2007]. It could be that the reputational bias (i.e., the most aggressive peers get nominated the most frequently) presented in peer nominations may be strong enough to mask the variations in aggressive behavior that are owing to status insecurity. Future research using diverse methodologies is needed to further understand the implication of social status insecurity on adolescent aggressive behaviors.

Several limitations of this study should be noted along with future directions. First, the associations

found in this study should be understood with caution, given the cross-sectional design of this study. Causal inferences cannot be made regarding the relations among the variables examined in the study. Although the comparison of the model in Figure 1 with one alternative reversed model suggested that the direction of effects is more likely to be from the cultural variables through conflict and social status variables to aggression than vice versa; such comparisons are not proof. Reverse or bidirectional associations can still exist among some or all of these variables. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the direction of relationships among cultural values, explanatory variables, and adolescent aggression as well as to understand the long-term effect of cultural values on adolescent aggression.

Second, other cultural values may also explain adolescent aggressive behaviors, such as Conservatism and Integration, as shown by the research on national-level variations [Bergeron and Schneider, 2005]. Also, traditional Chinese cultural values, such as Confucianism and social harmony [Bond, 2004], may be uniquely related to Chinese adolescents' aggressive behavior. Future research may examine the intracultural variations of these potential cultural values in relation to adolescent aggression. Finally, other factors at different aspects of the ecological systems or at the intrapersonal level may also convey the influences of culture to adolescent aggression [Chen and French, 2008]. Furthermore, the strength of associations may vary depending on the national mean level of cultural values as well as adolescents' normative beliefs about different forms of aggression [Huesmann and Guerra, 1997; Nelson et al., 2008]. Future research is needed to examine other possible explanatory mechanisms and the moderating factors for the association between cultural values and adolescent aggression.

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