Motivational relations with peers and teachers among German and Turkish adolescents: A cross-cultural perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Universally, both peers and teachers play an important role in fostering students' well-being, school engagement and their academic motivation, thereby contributing to students' academic success. Simultaneously interpersonal relations (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Yildirim, 2012) as well as possible achievement motives (Maehr, 1974), marked by collectivism or individualism, are deeply rooted in social structures (Hofstede, 1986). However, the specific differences in school contexts across cultures remain poorly investigated. To close this gap, the current study uses the Relationship and Motivation scale devised by Raufelder, Jagenow, Drury, Hoferichter and Bukowski (2013) to explore potential differences between German and Turkish adolescents in their socio-motivational relations with peers and teachers. The results of intercultural comparison suggest that while Turkish adolescents tend to be motivated through relations with both peers and teachers, German adolescents reveal more individual learning behavior. This finding illustrates that peers and teachers have different effects on students' academic motivation in different cultures, suggesting important practical implications for modern intercultural societies.

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1. Introduction

Academic motivation presents one of the most influential factors that determine not only an individual's learning and performance, but also well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 2000a), postulates that all motivated behavior is based on one's fulfillment of the competence, relatedness and autonomy needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) that are basic to every individual and affected by social contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b). In other words, the perceived need satisfaction may vary depending on sociocultural aspects in different school contexts. The literature addressing adolescents' motivation suggests that particularly during this developmental period academic motivation (which here is defined as the drive to achieve academically) is subject to decline (e.g., Gnambs & Hanfstingl, 2015). However, this observation seems to relate to Western rather than Eastern societies (Lee, 2007). Not only educational systems and curricula, but also social context (Maehr, 1974) might provide explanation to this phenomenon. The aim of the current study is not only to explore the role of social context as an influential factor for students' academic motivation, but also to relate this association to a broader cultural context (e.g., Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich, 2003).

In the broadest sense, culture refers to the behavioral code and system of meaning of an entire society wherein a school system is rooted, and possesses certain characteristics such as collectivism and individualism (Hofstede, 1986). Previous research has argued that, in terms of achievement, Western individualistic cultures (according to the classification of Hofstede, 1986) tend to be rather centered on ego-goals and foster more individual learning behavior, whereas collectivistic cultures promote group goals and accordingly place greater emphasis on intense collaboration with others (McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). Therefore, the social component of school deserves special attention, as drawing on SDT peers and teachers as motivators can affect a student's feelings of relatedness, autonomy and competence (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), but might play a differentiated role in various cultural contexts. Interestingly, though the existing research taps both at commonalities [e.g., the factors underlying a motivational process (Ryan & Deci, 2000)] and context-specific differences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McInerney et al., 1997), still little research, exploring intercultural differences in mechanisms of students' academic motivation in adolescence exists. However, particularly in today's globalized world there is growing need of not only recognition of the influence of culture-specific values on students'academic behavior (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011), but also of exploration of institutional contexts, facilitating academic motivation of students stemming from different cultures (Hudley & Daoud, 2008). The present study suggests that social relations at school present an important factor in motivational processes (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) as they may increase (Wentzel, 1999) or

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undermine students' academic motivation (Buhs, Herald, & Ladd, 2006; DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It explores the socio-motivational dependency on peers and teachers by considering potential differences in two different cultural contexts: in Germany and in Turkey.

1.1. Positive and negative peer effects on adolescents' academic motivation

Particularly during adolescence, the role of peers universally increases as individuals spend more time with friends rather than family and rely on their peers' opinions and attitudes more (Makara, 2013). In the school context, the existing findings suggest that students who feel accepted by their classmates demonstrate greater interest in class and more academic motivation (Osterman, 2000), which increases their chances for academic success and reduces the level of school avoidance (Hallinan, 2008). Moreover, students who have positive relations with their peers report higher level of school engagement and more positive feelings and attitudes towards school than students without strong peer relations (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

In contrast, students who do not have any friends at school show lower levels of achievement and academic motivation and experience a higher level of emotional stress. These factors negatively affect these students' academic performance (Wentzel, McNamara Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). During the period of adolescence and school transition, peers may also introduce more competition in the classroom while constituting a new reference group for progress evaluation (Harter, 1996). Moreover, the presence of this new reference group affects not only students' academic motivation, but also their self-concept (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006). Overall, individuals' academic motivation and need satisfaction is affected by their peers' academic motivation, learning behavior and perceived support (Raufelder, Drury, Jagenow, Hoferichter, & Bukowski, 2013).

1.2. Positive and negative teacher effects on adolescents' academic motivation

Teachers present another influential social factor, affecting students' academic, social and psychological development (Brown & Theobald, 1999; Cook, Deng, & Morgano, 2007; Fend, 1998). For most students, positive relations with teachers not only support their learning and emotional development in the educational process by fostering their academic motivation and achievement (Atkinson, 2000; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003), but also strengthen the feeling of being in a safe environment, which further facilitates the learning process (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). In addition, Sivan and Chan (2013) suggest that teachers' awareness of the importance of positive relations with students is essential for motivational processes and can provide significant support for students' academic success.

The existing literature as well as empirical evidence tap at the decline in the quality of the teacher-student relationship, starting at the age of 12 (Bokhorst et al., 2010). Particularly in secondary schools, students perceive their teachers as more distant and less supportive than in elementary school. Furthermore, research reports that students between 6th and 8th grade increasingly perceive their teachers as evaluative and controlling (Harter, 1996). Controlling behavior, in turn, suggests fewer opportunities for self-expression in the classroom and lower teacher-student support, which results in students' disengagement and extremely low academic motivation (Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In general, the more students perceive their teacher as controlling, the less intrinsically motivated they are (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In other words, an individual's academic motivation and need satisfaction is affected by his or her teachers' supportive behavior and motivation (Raufelder, Drury et al., 2013).

1.3. Lerner's developmental contextualism

Lerner's developmental contextualism (Lerner, 1986, 1991, 1998) constructs the theory of human ontogenetic development, focusing on constant interaction between a developing individual and his or her context. Linking this theory to adolescents' academic motivation not only crystalizes the importance of peers' and teachers' contextual roles, but also highlights the relevance of culture as an important contextual framework. If academic motivation is understood as a component of the dynamic reciprocity between a developing adolescent and his or her social context, then cultural differences can be expected to emerge within different school contexts (e.g., in teacher-student relationships or peer relationships). Based on Lerner's developmental contextualism, this study aimed to examine whether socio-motivational relations in schools have a different impact on students' academic motivation across different cultural contexts. The contrast between countries marked by individualism or collectivism is of specific interest as it implies different forms of interaction and interrelation patterns among individuals (Hofstede, 1986). The cultural values transferred by the socialization into a particular cultural context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) may be related to students' learning and achievement behavior patterns. The existing cultural comparative research reports that students in collectivistic societies are more inclined to cooperate and support one another than students in individualistic societies (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Yildirim, 2012). It follows that interpersonal relations at school may have a stronger role in countries marked by collectivism than in countries marked by individualism (Urdan, 2009). In contrast, students coming from individualistic societies are reported to cherish independence and self-fulfillment (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003), emphasizing competition rather than collaboration among individuals during their education (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011) and thus rather individual learning behavior than group work.

1.4. Turkey

Traditionally Turkey displays a deeply rooted collectivist social structure (Kagitçibasi, 1996; Phalet & Hagendoorn, 1996). That is, the Turkish society is characterized by a high value put on the interdependency of its members (Kagitçibasi, 1996). Although this is the case, together with the growth of urbanization and industrialization (Greenfeld, 2009) some individualistic trends begin to appear (Gormus & Aydın, 2008).

When the focus is changed from social context to educational structure, it is seen that Turkey has a centralized educational system, regulated by the Ministry of National Education. In Turkey, placement and transition from middle school to secondary school takes place when students are at the age of 13–14. After, these students are placed into the schools depending on their scores which they get from the nationwide exam (Ministry of National Education, 2014). The educational system is rather theory- than practice-oriented. In 2005 there was an attempt to introduce a new approach to education, namely constructivism focused on students' individual cognitive skills (Hazır Bıkmaz, 2006).

Considering interpersonal relations of Turkish students in educational context, it is seen that existing publications addressing these relations in Turkey point out that students have a great desire to be accepted by their peers, feel respected or loved (e.g., Bayhan & Işıtan, 2010; Demir, Baran, & Ulusoy, 2005). Research taking a cultural comparative approach also suggests that Turkish students report a stronger need for relatedness in comparison to students from other cultures (e.g., Guay, Senecal, Marsh, & Dowson, 2005; Güngör, Karasawa, Boiger, Dincer, & Mesquita, 2014). At the same time the authoritarian and patriarchal social structure (Palut, 2009) may contribute to a perception of a teacher as authoritative person and thus induce a degree of distance between students and teachers in Turkish classroom.