Is stress perceived differently in relationships with parents and peers? Inter- and intra-regional comparisons on adolescents from 21 nations

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how adolescents (mean age of 15 years) from 21 countries perceived parent- and peer-related stress. Across countries, adolescents perceived parent-related stress at considerably greater levels than peer-related stress. Adolescents assigned to six geographical regions differed significantly in overall stress levels as well as in the disparity between perceived stress levels in the parent and peer domain. Regional comparisons revealed that adolescents from Southern Europe exhibited the highest levels of parent-related stress, followed by adolescents from Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. The stress levels of adolescents from Central European and North American countries were generally quite low. Correspondence analyses revealed distinctive patterns of perceived stress in close relationships, depending on the region. The discussion focuses on different parental styles and cultural values as potential influential factors for differences in stress perception between regions.

Families represent one of the most important developmental contexts for adolescents throughout the world. The family is also the context in which adolescents experience most of their everyday conflicts and stressful situations. Friendships with peers often serve as a refuge from the stressfulness of the family home. The peer context, however, is associated with a number of its own specific stressors (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 4), "stress occurs neither in the person nor in the situation, although it is dependent upon both. It arises much more from the way, which the person evaluates his or her resources". Although stressful experiences in close relationships with parents and peers are typical for adolescents around the globe (Schlegel, 2001), the culture adolescents live in, for example, the "shared beliefs, practices, behaviors and attitudes that are characteristic of a particular group which is communicated from one generation to the other" (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2005, p. 4) may influence what is and what is not perceived as stressful. Marked culturally-based differences in adolescents' family experiences (Georgas, Berry, van de Vijver, Kagitcibasi, & Poortinga, 2006) could contribute to varying levels of parent-related stress. Similarly, the importance assigned to adolescent peer culture in European and North American countries might not be paralleled in other regions of the world (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002) and thus might result in different levels of peer-related stress, depending on the culture or region. However, the global spread of adolescent culture (Reich, Subramenyam, & Espinoza, 2012) could also have resulted in a globalization of perceived stress in close relationships with parents and peers (Schlegel, 2001), although it is unclear to which degree.

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This study investigates typical stressors in the parents and peer domains experienced by adolescents from 21 nations. We were particularly interested in similarities and differences in the stress perception of adolescents from different regions of the world. Our particular focus lies on whether adolescents within one region, which are assumed to share similar cultural values and child-rearing practices, converge in their perceptions of stress levels in relationships with parents and peers.

Stress in the parents and peer domains from a cultural perspective

The suggestions that a global youth culture is emerging in which young people worldwide share the same challenges and concerns notwithstanding (Schlegel, 2001), evidence in the developmental literature suggests that culture is one of the important determinants of developmental processes (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Accordingly, cultural values and parenting behavior are supposed to influence the stress perceived in close relationships. In many Western societies, independence is valued greatly and parenting behavior is thought to foster the development of autonomy in the offspring (see Hofstede, 1991; for a critical review see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). As adolescents begin to seek more autonomy in their families, the potential for stress in the family rises. Consequently, parents and adolescents must adapt to new ways of interacting with one another and many norms and rules must be re-negotiated (Steinberg, 2001). Disputes between parents and adolescents typically center around issues such as spending time outside the home, the involvement in peer activities, and the choice of appearance (Noakes & Rinaldi, 2006; Rice & Dolgin, 2005).

The function and significance of relationships with friends also change, and the peer group assumes an important role in the lives of adolescents (Rubin et al., 1998). Apart from positive and supportive functions, relationships with peers and friends also harbor a potential source of stress. One major concern of adolescents is being rejected by their peers, which is reported by over half of adolescents as the major stressor related to the peer context (Bowker, Bukowski, Hymel, & Sippola, 2000). Furthermore, the emergence of more intimate friendships alongside commonly shared activities spark conflicts in exclusive, dyadic friendships (Linden-Andersen, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2009), which have been linked to issues such as similarity, intimacy, and self-disclosure (Reich et al., 2012; Thomas, 2012).

Until recently, the vast majority of studies on relationship stress was conducted on white, middle-class samples (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011), and the influence of cultural context was largely ignored. However, the overall value orientation in a given culture may impact the stress factors in close relationships. Among other cultural dimensions, Oyserman et al. (2002) demonstrated that the orientation toward independent or interdependent values in social interactions represents a critical continuum along which a specific culture is nested. Most Western cultures (e.g., in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe) show a greater orientation to individualism and are characterized by the encouragement of adolescent autonomy from parents and personal choice of friends. Other cultures (e.g., many Asian and Latin American countries) particularly value harmony and interdependence among family members. Although the overall value orientation might be typical for a specific region of the world, within-culture variations might exist and corresponding differences in stress perceptions of adolescents from different countries representing a culture or region (Herman, Lucas, & Friedrich, 2008).

In individualistic Western cultures, stress with parents is generally regarded as a normal part of family relations during adolescence, with conflicts having a clear function in the child's development of autonomy and individuation (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). In contrast, interdependence with the extended family is a main socialization goal in countries with cultures upholding collectivistic values. More traditional cultures (e.g., in Asian countries) endorse the use of an authoritative, restrictive parenting style and are less likely to encourage children to be independent (Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, & Silbereisen, 2010). There might be higher parental control and thus more parent–child stress in countries formerly governed according to communist principles (Stetsenko, 2002).

The significance of friends and the peer group may also vary across cultures. In Western cultures, among the main functions of interaction in peer groups are to fulfill individual needs such as identity development and experiencing companionship, mutuality, and intimacy in close friendships (Rubin et al., 1998) and to serve as a training ground for the initiation of romantic affairs (Brown et al., 2002). Compared to Western cultures, cultures with a strong interdependent orientation may place greater emphasis on the importance of peer groups for developing socially acceptable behaviors and learning social standards (Chen, Chang, & He, 2003). Adolescents are therefore encouraged to develop social skills that will maintain harmonious relationships with others. However, in recent years the lifestyles of youths living in regions once characterized as having socially interdependent or collectivistic cultures have changed (Ataca, 2006; Zhang, Wang, & Fuligni, 2006), and thus it is an open question whether the stress perceived in close relationships with parents and peers is more similar or different in adolescents stemming from different regions of the world.

The present study

This study explores the amount of stress perceived in relationships with parents and peers in adolescents living in different cultural contexts around the globe. To achieve this goal, we selected samples of adolescents from 21 countries that varied with respect to the relative vigor of their independent versus interdependent cultural orientations, different child-rearing styles, and different economic conditions. We investigated stress perception via a self-report measure in adolescents living in comparably modern urban contexts to rule out the possibility of tapping differences related to rural and urban developmental contexts. We selected participants in midadolescence (around the age of 15 years), because they show a heightened orientation toward peers, often wish for less parental control over their social lives, and make greater investments