



8-1-2002

Social Motives and Their Development in Cultural Context

Hans-Joachim Kornadt

University of the Saarland, Saarbrücken, Germany, h.kornadt@mx.uni-saarland.de

Recommended Citation

Kornadt, H. (2002). Social Motives and Their Development in Cultural Context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 5(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1048>

Social Motives and Their Development in Cultural Context

Abstract

This chapter deals with differences in social motives between cultures and with their development. First, social motives are described as complex functional systems. Then aggressiveness and achievement motivation are dealt with as examples. Assumptions about biological factors are discussed and cultural differences are reported. Based on cross-cultural research variations in early mother-child relations and in cultural norms and values are dealt with as main sources of individual and cultural differences.

Introduction

An exact definition "social motives" is elusive. With the exception of a few motives like hunger and thirst, nearly all motives are socially relevant or somehow directed toward social outcomes. Examples include affiliation, aggression, altruism, achievement, approval, power and numerous others. All these motives have many basic characteristics in common. This is especially the case in the way they motivate specific goal-directed behavior and in the fundamental process of how they develop. Therefore, only a selection of two social motives will be discussed here in more detail: the aggression motive and the achievement motive. The main difference between these is to be seen in their biological aspects. From early reports by missionaries and travelers, and especially from studies by anthropologists and psychologists, we know that cultures differ greatly with respect to aggressiveness and achievement.

Aggressiveness

Taking as indicators such phenomena as the frequency of war-like conflicts, violent crimes, head-hunting or even malevolent sorcery, one can readily differentiate between "aggressive" and "non-aggressive" cultures. For example, the Kwoma, Apache, Comanche, Rajiup, Eipo and Janamali belong to the more aggressive group of cultures, whereas the Hopi, !Ko-Bushman, Semai and Hutterites are described as low or non-aggressive (Kornadt, Eckensberger, & Emminghaus, 1980). Of course, here cultures are described globally as one entity, leaving aside intra-cultural differences between individuals.

The question is: what causes these differences in aggressiveness? Some answers are given from a biological point of view. The first scientist to adopt this line of reasoning was Sigmund Freud. He postulated sexuality (Eros) in its broader meaning as the general driving force to live and later also postulated a "death-drive" (Thanatos) as its antagonistic force and source of aggression. Those drives are viewed as biologically-rooted motivational forces. Another view was that of William McDougall who assumed a number of "instincts", and among these an "aggression instinct". Perhaps the most famous perspective was the aggression theory of Konrad Lorenz (1966). He postulated a kind of aggression energy which becomes permanently produced and accumulated if not released by some aggressive act. Furthermore, it is also known that aggressiveness like other biological conditions as, e. g., weight or height, is based on genetically-caused individual differences. However, can the differences between cultures simply be based on these direct biological factors? In this case we would have to assume that whole cultures differ in their biological outfit. This was assumed in "race theories" that were once fairly common. There is, however, no empirical evidence to support "race" assumptions. In order to answer this question, three further areas have to be studied:

1. In which other ways do cultures differ?
2. How are motives defined in modern psychology?

3. How do motives and individual differences among them develop, and which factors influence this development?

Cultures differ basically with respect to their ecological and socio-economic conditions. For example, the living conditions of hunters and gatherers are basically different from those of herdsmen and farmers. Accordingly, people in pastoral cultures were frequently described to be more aggressive than people from farming cultures. In their famous Six Cultures Study, Whiting and Whiting (1975) showed that the family and household structure are also influential. In cultures with patrilineal extended families and polygynous mother-child-households, the children were more aggressive as compared to cultures with nuclear families and close relationship of mother and father; here children were more prosocial. Another factor in which cultures differ and which is relevant for aggressiveness are the diverse culturally-sanctioned social rules, a culture's values and its dominant religious beliefs. For example, in Japan values of non-aggressiveness, politeness and considerateness characterize all social interaction. These values go back to a long Confucian-Buddhist tradition. Compared to Western cultures with similar industrialization and modernization, only very low violence and interpersonal aggression is reported for Japan (Kornadt, 2002; Kornadt & Tachibana, 1999).

In modern psychological research on motivation it has been shown that a motive is no homogenous single phenomenon as assumed by early drive and instinct theories. Since the fundamental work of McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell (1953) we know that motives are complex systems which are characterized by various components which interact in complicated ways. Some of these components are cognitively-structured goals (in aggression, for instance, it may be to "eliminate sources of frustration forcibly"). These may be activated by certain conditions ("anger") and those which are connected to the attainment of goals ("satisfaction"); habituated interpretation of motive-relevant situations ("frustration was initiated intentionally and basing on malevolent goals"); and affect- and goal-directed habits of behavior. These all are connected in a functional system.

These components are relevant in principle in all social motives, and of course in their specific thematic phenomenology for each motive. Thus, it becomes clear that for such a complicated system no simple biological condition can be assumed. For its development a longer period of learning and development is needed in which the above-mentioned socio-cultural conditions are effective.

Modern research has also shown that biological conditions are important, however, but only partially and in complicated ways. For aggression, recent findings (twin research, neurochemical and neurophysiological research) have shown that indeed a biological basis of development of aggression exists (affective and learning dispositions), and that hormonal factors play a role. An exceptional clear example for this is the universally strong increase of aggressiveness in male adolescents during puberty. This correlates with a steep increase and an slow decline of the male sex hormone testosterone.

In general, the sociocultural developmental conditions are more important than the biological. They are also more intensively studied, and in the context of this chapter they are more interesting. It has been known for some time and has been confirmed that in

"aggressive" cultures (e. g., Mundugumor) socialization conditions are more harsh and related to punishment and rejection; or painful and "aggressive" initiation rites are typical. This behavior conforms to the ideal of the strong, dominant, harsh, assertive, and unyielding male and insensitive warriors. In contrast, in "non-aggressive" cultures, e. g., the Semai, children are treated with empathy and understanding; they learn quite early to control anger, to tolerate frustrations, and expect negative consequences of own aggression. These child-rearing practices are in line with the ideal in these cultures of a mature adult who practices self control, is relaxed, and non-aggressive.

An especially important aspect of the development of aggression and its difference in various cultures has been found in the early mother-child-relation. A cross-cultural longitudinal study could demonstrate that basic differences in conditions for culture-specific aggression are related to the early mother-child-relation (Kornadt, 2002; Kornadt & Tachibana, 1999). Here, aggression and its developmental conditions in two European (Switzerland, Germany) and three East-Asian (Japan, and Bali, Batak from Indonesian cultures) were studied. The sample consisted of adolescents, mothers, and their children. Especially the Japanese adolescents and children showed a significantly lower aggression as compared to the European samples. This is in accordance with the respective cultural values and social rules in these countries. A basic condition for this development was the very close mother-child-relation which is also a part of the Japanese cultural tradition. Japanese mothers know how to establish a certain kind of "one-ness" between themselves and their child (Azuma, 1984). Through it the children experience an intensive security, and consequently have only little frustration and anger; restrictions or rules are not experienced as hostile interference with own goals or as malevolent intentions. Problems are rather experienced as something shared by mother and child which have to be resolved in cooperation together with the mother. Tendencies of the child to pursue his or her own interests against the interests of the mother (or more generally against others persons) (eventually including violent acts) thus do not develop.

Thus a main basis for the development of aggression does not occur in Japanese socialization. This is different when the mother pursues her own interests and does not avoid the frustration of her child`s interests (as is often the case in Western cultures); here the mother`s own (legitimate) interests are contrasted with those of the child, thus underlining separateness and differences between mother and child.

Moreover, in Japan aggressive behavior is negatively sanctioned and seen as immature and non-social. Thus the child grows up without sufficient opportunities to observe aggressive models, or to be a victim of aggression oneself; thus aggressive behavior hardly is successful in social interactions. Therefore, for the child`s further development insufficient conditions are provided which foster or stimulate the development of aggression. However, it has to be mentioned here that social change in Japan is related to an increasing "Westernisation" which affects traditional mother-child relations.

Achievement Motivation

Differences between cultures have often been reported with respect to achievement, diligence, and the relevance of effort. However, this has been less reliably documented than results on aggressiveness. Also, intra-cultural differences over time have been reported. McClelland (1961) investigated indicators of the achievement motive and economic growth and decline varying over time in different cultures for more than 1000 years. When the achievement motive was high, the productivity (e. g. number of patents) was also high some time later.

The achievement motive is defined as the motive to be successful, to perform well, to be capable, to "maintain or to improve the standard of excellence". Two components are distinguished: the hope of success as the partial motive to try to reach a certain goal, and fear of failure, which often leads to the avoidance of the achievement-related situations, and to avoid the negative effects of failure on the self-esteem.

Based on this broad definition, achievement motive has normally been measured by a special TAT (Thematic Apperception Test). Using this instrument cross-culturally, the achievement motive was often found to be higher in Western than in other cultures. This was even the case in industrialized Asian cultures. For example, Australian students were lower in achievement motive than Chinese students from Hongkong. Turkish-speaking Turkish students had lower achievement motivation than English-speaking students. Arabs from Kuwait were lower than Americans.

However, in the meantime, things are changing. More and more results show that East Asian persons are higher in achievement motivation than Western people, especially Americans. This is even the case with Japanese and Chinese Americans, also in the second generation of immigrants who live and have been raised in the USA.

Careful analyses have revealed that some of the former data are misleading. If the broad definition of "achievement" and "success" is narrowly interpreted as achievement in competitive situations, then Western people seem to perform better than people from other cultures who rather reject direct competition. People in those cultures are accustomed and motivated to work in and for the benefit of the group.

These analyses of cross-cultural data resulted in the conclusion that the original broad and generalized theoretical definition of achievement cannot be narrowly conceptualised simply in the Western sense of entrepreneurship and academic achievement. In other cultures the concept of success and achievement rather can involve excellent social relations, excellent performance in sports, or perhaps in hunting and fishing or even in social persuasion and cheating. That means the theoretically-generalized term "achievement" will always be realized in culture-specific domains. At least in this respect cultures differ in the norms and values which are relevant. This depends on the one hand on the ecological and economic circumstances and their demands as already mentioned with respect to aggressiveness. On the other hand, the religious background is also important. In cultures with a Confucian, Hinduist, or Buddhist tradition, or in so-called "collectivistic" cultures (Hofstede, 2001) most people within them tend to dislike individuals who try to be better than their friends as braggarts or blowhards.

Instead, all kinds of group- or community-oriented achievement is highly esteemed. These socio-cultural conditions are also relevant in the process of development of the achievement motive. Here, as for aggressiveness, is the early mother-child relation the first important influencing factor. Children who are securely attached to their caring and sensitive mothers feel supported to explore the environment and to test their growing abilities.

In this way, a kind of "mastery motive" is to be seen as universal. How far, then, the achievement motive will develop depends on what kind of opportunities, incentives, and encouragement (or even discouragement) is provided. From studies by McClelland et al. (1953) we know the importance of early "independence training". "Early" has to be understood in relation to the developmental age of the child. According to cross-cultural studies, this stage seems to be reached with eight years of age though individual differences need to be taken into account. It will certainly depend on the social values and norms which are dominant in the respective (sub-) culture regarding which domain the achievement motive will then develop.

To summarize, we have selected two important social motives, aggression and achievement, and have demonstrated some universalities and some culture-specificities in processes of their development. One of the challenges of cross-cultural research is to try and specify how these motives are activated in specific cultures and consequently how the motivational domain of human behavior can be understood in a more complete way.

References

- Azuma, H. (1984). Secondary control as a heterogeneous category. *American Psychologist, 39*, 970-971.
- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kornadt, H.-J. (2002). Biology, culture and childrearing: The development of social motives. In H. Keller, Y. H. Poortinga, & A. Schälmerich (Eds.), *Between biology and culture: Perspectives on ontogenetic development* (pp. 191-211). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Kornadt, H.-J., Eckensberger, L. H., & Emminghaus, W. B. (1980). Cross-cultural research on motivation and its contribution to a general theory of motivation. In H. C. Triandis & W. J. Lonner (Eds.), *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology: Vol. 3. Basic processes* (pp. 223-321). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kornadt, H. J., & Tachibana, Y. (1999). Early child-rearing and social motives after nine years: A cross-cultural longitudinal study. In W. J. Lonner, D. L. Dinnel, D. K. Forgays, & S. A. Hayes (Eds.), *Merging past, present, and future in cross-cultural psychology: Selected papers from the Fourteenth International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology* (pp. 429-441). Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Lorenz, K. (1966). *On aggression*. New York: Harcourt.
- McClelland, D. C. (1961). *The achieving society*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand.

McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., & Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The achievement motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Whiting, B. B., & Whiting, J. W. M. (1975). *Children of six cultures: A psycho-cultural analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

About the Author

Hans-Joachim Kornadt is Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology at the University of the Saarland, Saarbrücken, and advisor to the University of Erfurt. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Marburg. 1964 - 66 he carried out research in East Africa. From 1968 - 84 he was vice-director of the Social-Psychological Research Center for Development Planning, Saarbrücken. Since 1978 he has conducted research on the development of social motives and socialization in East- and Southeast-Asia and East Germany. He was a member of the National Science Advisory Council (Wissenschaftsrat) from 1975-81 and President of the German Psychological Association from 1982-84. Other positions he has held include being Chair of the Advisory Board of the German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo, 1991-95; Chairman of the Advisory Board, Max Planck Institute for Psychological Research, Munich, 1984-2000; and presently (since 1989) President of the German-Japanese Society for Social Sciences. Awards and honors he has received include the Japanese-German Research Award (Humboldt/JSPS) 1987/88; Fellow at Keio University, 1987/88; Order of Merit (Saarlandischer Verdienstorden), 1995; Honorary Member, German Psychological Association, 1998.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the components of a complex functional motivational system ?
2. How important are biological factors in social motives?
3. What influences levels of aggressiveness, both individually and culturally?
4. Does the general level of achievement motive in a culture influence its economic productivity ?
5. In which way is child rearing important in the development of specific motives?
6. How do cultural norms and values influence the development of various motives, such as achievement, aggression, and power?