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A Comparison of Factors Affecting Verbal Aggression Between Japan and China: Emotion and Politeness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of politeness on verbal aggression in the different cultural contexts of Japan and China. Questionnaire research was administered to 195 Japanese university students and 255 Chinese university students. In the questionnaire, students were asked to recall an incident within a week or two in which they got angry. They were also asked to indicate (1) the intensity of their anger, (2) the hostility of the other party, (3) the degree of emotional regulation, (4) the action taken, (5) rational behavioral tendency, (6) social distance between self and the other party, (7) relative power of the other party, and (8) ranking of imposition. Participants' behavior in (4) was categorized into verbal aggression and other. Logistic regression analysis was conducted on the data from both countries, with verbal aggression and other categorized from (4) as the objective variables and the remaining variables from (1) through (8), excluding (4), as explanatory variables. The results showed that proximity to the other party increased verbal aggression for both Japanese and Chinese participants. Emotional variables – anger and emotion regulation-affected verbal aggression only among Chinese students.

Keywords: aggression, emotion regulation, politeness, Japan, China.

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Aggression is social behavior aimed at harming or annoying others (Huesmann, 2018). Verbal aggression refers to aggression such that its expressed form is language (Vitaro et al., 2006). Infante and Wigley (1986) defined personality trait verbal aggressiveness as attacking the self-concept of the others or to their position. They listed specific verbal aggression as attacking a person's character, abilities, appearance, background, and personality, as well as behavior such as threatening, shouting, profanity, rejecting and refuting.

Verbal aggression is now common on social media. Verbal aggression can damage the victim's self-concept, disrupt communication in groups and organizations, cause conflict, and paralyze organizations (Hamilton, 2012). Roberto (1999) found that boys with high trait verbal aggressiveness were more likely to be suspended for fighting than those with low trait verbal aggressiveness. Savage and Tokunaga (2017) found that trait verbal aggressiveness was positively correlated with cyber bullying perpetration. Roberto et al. (2014) found that trait verbal aggressiveness was a significant predictor of cyberbullying among high school students.

In the context of aggression research, verbal aggression has been seen as one of the manifested forms of aggression. The *social information processing model (SIP)*(Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge et al., 1986) is one of the most important theories explaining aggression. In studies taking the position of SIP, verbal aggression has been understood as one form of manifestation of aggressiveness, as has physical aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Factors that increase aggression in social conflict situations have been identified as attributing hostile intentions to the other party, intensity of self-anger, poor use of emotion regulation, generating more aggressive responses and evaluating aggressive responses more positively (Verhoef et al., 2019; Oostermeijer et al., 2016, Orobio de Castro et al., 2005).

It is known that aggression is influenced by the relationship between the offender and the victim, in addition to intra-individual factors of the offender (Smits & De Boeck, 2007). For example, Higher social status of the other party inhibits aggressive reactions (Allan & Gilbert, 2001). Similarly, trying to avoid negative consequences (Averill, 1983; Beatty & McCroskey, 1997) or to avoid aggressive counterattacks by the other party (Deffenbacher et al., 1996), is also known to suppress aggressive responses.

The *Politeness* studies provide valuable insights into the effects of the offender-victim relationship on verbal aggression. In the context of politeness research, offensive language is positioned at the far end of a continuum ranging from polite to rude. The politeness dimension locates genteel messages at one end of the axis and barbaric and aggressive at the other end (Hamilton, 2012).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is defined as verbal behavior that considers the maintenance of smooth relationships. Goffman (1967) defined *face* an important concept in politeness theory, as follows: ' as the positive social value a person

effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.' (p.5). He also described it as a self-defining image based on a person's social attributes that others can also share. Brown and Levinson (1987) found that people cooperate to maintain each other's face during interaction, but that some linguistic activities threaten a person's face. They referred to such behavior as the *face-threatening act (FTA)* and the threat level of that behavior to the face as the f*ace-threatening level*. Brown and Levinson (1987) identified social distance, relative power, and the ranking of imposition of the behavior as factors that determine the face-threatening level of a behavior. In other words, the greater the social distance between the speaker and listener, the higher the social status of the listener compared to the speaker, and the greater the amount of load on the listener in carrying out the speaker's request, the higher the face-threatening level is.

Statements with a high face-threatening level are highly aggressive. This is because statements with high face threat level are those that damage the listener's self-esteem. From this, it is expected that the variables related to the relationship between the speaker (offender) and the listener (victim), which are taken up in the politeness theory, will influence verbal aggression.

In addition to intra-individual variables such as anger, emotion regulation, and attribution of hostility to the other party, which have traditionally been examined in aggression research, this study addressed inter-individual factors that have been examined in politeness research. We comprehensively examined the effects of these variables on verbal aggression.

It is also known that aggression is influenced by culture. Fung et al. (2018) studied reactive and proactive aggression in adolescents aged 11-20 years in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Uruguay, and Spain. This international comparative study of aggression found that among these countries, Uruguayan adolescents were the most aggressive, and that general, proactive, and reactive aggression increased with age, but the age effect differed between countries. Archer (2006) found in a comparative study in 16 countries, including the USA, UK, Germany, and Japan, that women's tendency to be victims of partner violence decreased with increase in gender equality and individualism. Ersan et al. (2020) conducted research about driver aggression, abnormal behavior, and positive driving. The results revealed country-specific differences in hostile aggression, retaliatory tendency, and positive motor behavior. They suggested that these differences were of cultural origin.

Culture has also been found to influence anger and its processing, which is closely related to aggression. Megreya et al. (2018) conducted a questionnaire survey consisting of three psychological scales which measure emotion regulation using university students in four Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking countries and USA. The results revealed that culture played an important role in shaping less adaptive emotion regulation strategies and their association with negative and positive emotions, but less so for positive strategies. Boiger et al. (2018) conducted a survey of Japanese, US, and Belgian students in response to hypothetical situations that aroused anger and shame. They found several types of anger and shame, and that which type a participant belonged to was not influenced by ethnicity, SES, gender, or personality, but was mainly predicted by the culture of origin. Deng and Cheng (2019) conducted research using Chinese and European Americans to examine their

implicit attitudes towards emotion regulation. The results revealed that (1) the Chinese rated emotional expression more negatively than European-Americans, and (2) the Chinese rated the importance of emotional expression lower than European-Americans. Kawabata and Ohbuchi (2016) conducted a survey using vignettes for Japanese and Russian university students. They found that the use of reappraisal, suppression and distraction, a form of emotion regulation, had different effects on participants' depressive affect in each country.

Culture influences all aspects of politeness (Culpeper, 2011). Culpeper (2011) found that the word please, which expresses politeness, is used twice as much in the UK as in the US. He noted that this is only because in the U.S. people use different expressions to express politeness than those used in the U.K. Ogiermann (2009) conducted a study of a discourse completion test with university students in the UK, Germany, Poland, and Russia. They used a hypothetical situation in which participants asked a friend to borrow notes for a class. The results showed that the imperative form was used more frequently in Russia, Poland, Germany, and the UK, in the order, and that the interrogative form was preferred in the UK and Germany. Indirect requests were used more frequently in the UK and Germany, and more direct requests in Poland and Russia. Zhu & Bao (2010) compared politeness in Western cultures and China. They found that Chinese principles of politeness emphasize distinctions based on social status, whereas Western interpersonal relationships are based on parallel relationships and do not favor distinctions based on status. They showed that Chinese-style modesty is looked down upon in Western society. Hi et al. (1986) conducted a questionnaire survey of Japanese and American university students to ask them about their politeness in making requests in the situation to borrow someone's pen. They found that the Japanese showed very high agreement on the appropriate form of request with respect to the other person's occupation/status, age, degree of acquaintance and situation, while the Americans showed greater variation between these characteristics of the person or situation and the appropriate form of request. The results suggested that in decision-making, consideration of the above-mentioned conditions accounted for a greater proportion of requests in the Japanese than in the American. Thus, if culture has influences on whether a behavior is polite or impolite, one would expect culture to influence verbal aggression as an impolite behavior.

In this study, to examine the influence of culture on verbal aggression, the effects of intra-individual variables - affective and cognitive variables - and inter-individual variables - social relationships between offender and victim - on verbal aggression were compared in both Japan and China. Japan and China were selected for the research because they share the same "collectivism" as other Asian cultural spheres but have very different cultures regarding "anger" and "aggression. Zhao (2002) conducted research of Japanese and Chinese people, asking them to rate the degree to which they expressed the six emotions of joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust in public and private situations. The results showed that all the emotions were expressed more strongly in private than in public situations for both countries. In the public situation, Japanese expressed joy, and fear more strongly than Chinese, while Chinese expressed anger more strongly than Japanese. Fang (2009) compared expressions related to anger in Japanese and Chinese and found that many Japanese expressions showed a controlled and non-expressive attitude towards

anger, whereas there were no such expressions in Chinese. He pointed out that the reason for this is that in Chinese culture, there is a belief that acquaintances get to know each other better by frankly expressing their feelings, including anger, and that anger and quarrel are considered an important part of human relationships.

From these previous studies, we predicted the following. Hostile intent attribution of the other party will increase verbal aggression in both Japanese and Chinese (Hypothesis 1). The rational behavioral tendency will decrease verbal aggression in both Japanese and Chinese (Hypothesis 2). In Chinese, anger intensity and lower tendency to use emotion regulation will increase verbal aggression (Hypothesis 3), whereas no such tendency will be found in Japanese (Hypothesis 4). Regarding the politeness variable, since both countries belong to an Asian cultural sphere that emphasizes collectivity, we hypothesized that in both Japanese and Chinese, social proximity to the other party will suppress verbal aggression (Hypothesis 5), the other party's high social status will suppress verbal aggression (Hypothesis 6), and higher ranking of imposition on the other party will suppresses verbal aggression (Hypothesis 7).

Methods

Participants

One hundred and ninety-five Japanese university students (95 males, 100 females, mean age19.5 years, *SD*=0.9) and 255 Chinese university students (76 males, 179 females, mean age19.9 years, *SD*=1.9) participated the study. The students were briefed about the research and asked to cooperate in the class. Participants were told that cooperation in the research was voluntary and that they would not be disadvantaged by nonparticipation. The research was conducted only to those who agreed.

Procedure

The survey was administered in a group setting at the end of the class. Only participants who agreed to participate in the survey were included after being informed in writing and orally about the purpose of the survey. Questionnaires in the form of printed booklets were distributed and collected after participants had answered them.

Materials

The instruction was: "Recall an event in the last week or two when you were angry with someone.". Participants were asked the following questions about the event.
1. Content of the event: Participants were asked to write about the event that angerd them.
2. Relationship with the other party: Participants were asked to write about the relationship between themselves and the person they were angry with.
3. Feeling of anger: Participants were asked "How angry were you at the time?" and then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from very weak: 1 to very strong: 9.

4. Emotion regulation: Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would take the following actions to make them feel better: distraction ("talk about it with someone" and "do something fun"), suppression ("avoid thinking about it" and "forget it"), reappraisal ("it was an accident" and "I had bad luck"). They were then asked to rate them on a 9-point scale from not at all: 1 to very much: 9.
5. Hostile intent attribution: Participants were asked "How hostile do you think the other party was towards you?" and then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from very weak: 1 to very strong: 9.
6. Actions taken at the time: Participants were asked "How did you express your anger? The responses were coded by the researchers into verbal aggression and other behaviors.
7. Rational behavioral tendency: Participants were asked "How good do you think the behavior in (6) is considered by those around you?" and then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from not at all good: 1 to very good: 9.
8. Social distance between self and the other party: Participants were asked "Is the relationship between you and the person you were angry with close or distant?" and then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from very distant: 1 to very close: 9.
9. Relative power of the other party: Participants were asked "Compared to you, is the person you were angry with high status or low status?" and then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from very low: 1 to very high: 9.
10. Ranking of imposition: Participants were asked, "How burdensome are the actions you took against the person you were angry with?". They were then asked to rate it on a 9-point scale from very light: 1 to very heavy: 9.

Results

Actions taken by participants when they got angry were categorized by the authors as verbal aggression or other, based on a pre-developed coding table. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of each variable.

To examine cultural differences, we conducted t-test for each variable between Japanese and China samples. The results showed that the anger score was significantly higher for the Japanese than for Chinese ($t = -6.84$, $p < .001$), and the rational behavior tendency score was significantly higher for the Chinese than Japanese ($t = 6.58$, $p < .001$).

The objects of anger were classified into four categories: family, friends, seniors/supervisors, and non-acquaintances. In categorizing responses, if it was not clear to whom the anger was directed, it was included in non-acquaintances. The dating partners were included as friends. Among Japanese university students, family members accounted for 15%, friends for 31%, seniors or superiors for 14%, and non-acquaintances for 40% of anger targets. Among Chinese university students, family members accounted for 6%, friends for 33% , seniors or superiors for 5%, and non- acquaintances for 56% of anger targets.

Table 1.
Nationality Differences in all Measures

	Japan (*n* = 195)		China (*n* = 255)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Anger	6.95	1.94	5.55	2.41
Hostile attribution	3.55	2.63	3.31	2.61
Rational behavioral tendency	4.89	2.27	6.22	2.03
Social distance	4.59	3.05	4.35	2.94
Relative power	5.45	1.85	5.13	1.71
Ranking of imposition	3.48	2.53	3.81	2.44
Distraction	5.86	2.20	6.03	1.64
Suppression	4.95	2.62	5.54	2.14
Reappraisal	5.84	2.36	5.22	2.18

Table 2.
Odd Ratios for Verbal Aggression in Japanese University Students

Covariate	β	Odd ratios	*p*-value
Anger	.04	1.04	.74
Hostile attribution	-.08	.92	.33
Rational behavioral tendency	-.07	.93	.42
Social distance	.18	1.20	.02
Relative power	-.22	.80	.08
Ranking of imposition	.17	1.18	.05
Distraction	-.12	.88	.22
Suppression	-.03	.97	.71
Reappraisal	-.09	.91	.34

We conducted a logistic regression analysis to determine the effect of each variable on the occurrence of verbal aggression. Table 2 shows the results of analyses of Japanese students. Table 3 shows the results of Chinese students.

Only in Chinese university students, the intensity of anger tended to increase verbal aggression. Attributions of hostile intent did not affect verbal aggression in both countries. Rational behavioral tendency tended to decrease verbal aggression in Chinese students. Social proximity to the other party increased verbal aggression in both countries. Only among Japanese students, ranking of imposition on the other party tended to increase verbal aggression. To the extent that distraction and reappraisal were used, these are types of emotion regulation, suppressed verbal aggression.

Table 3.

Odd Ratios for Verbal Aggression in Chinese University Students

Covariate	β	Odd ratios	*p-value*
Anger	.19	1.21	.05
Hostile attribution	-.07	.93	.42
Rational behavioral tendency	-.16	.85	.09
Social distance	.15	1.16	.04
Relative power	.06	1.06	.63
Ranking of imposition	.01	1.01	.94
Distraction	-.32	.73	.01
Suppression	.07	1.07	.50
Reappraisal	-.22	.81	.03

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Hostile intent attribution of the other party did not increase verbal aggression in our sample among university students in both Japan and China. This was different from the results of previous studies. One possible reason for this is that the participants in this study were non-clinical university students, who were considered to have relatively low aggression. Bosch and Monshouwer et al.(2002) and Verhoef et al., (2019) have found that children with serious aggression problem were more likely to show a stronger link between attribution of hostile intent and aggression. Therefore, it is considered that the attribution of hostile intent had a smaller effect on aggression in general university students who were considered to have low aggression, such as the participants of the present study.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported. However, only among Chinese students, a higher tendency toward rational behavior tended to lower verbal aggression. In other words, participants who believed they had engaged in socially valued behavior even in an angry situation were less likely to engage in verbal aggression. Considering the results of Hypotheses 3 and 4, the results suggested that anger is more likely to influence the decision process of verbal aggression among Chinese students. On the other hand, Japanese students showed that verbal aggression was used in a more deliberative manner.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were partially supported. Only among Chinese students, anger tended to increase verbal aggression, and a higher tendency to use reappraisal and distraction, as emotion regulation, suppressed verbal aggression. This might be due to the different cultural positioning of verbal aggression in Japan and China, as pointed out in previous studies. In Japanese university students, verbal aggression was less influenced by affective processes and more determined by cognitive processes, whereas in Chinese university students, the decision process of verbal aggression was more influenced by

affective process.

Hypothesis 5 was not supported. Contrary to the hypothesis, social proximity to the other party increased verbal aggression in Japanese and Chinese students. Previous research on the effects of social distance on politeness has shown both that the closer the social distance, the more polite expressions tend to be used (Holtgraves, & Yang, 1990, 1992) and, conversely, the farther the social distance, the more polite expressions tend to be used (Baxter, 1984). The results of our study indicated that verbal aggression, as impolite expression, was more likely to be used when the relationship with the other party was closer. Two possibilities seem to emerge from these results. One possibility is that the proximity of the relationship to the other party made the angry situation more private one, which reduced the suppression of verbal aggression. As shown in Zhao (2002), emotional expression was generally suppressed in public situations in both Japan and China. Another possibility is that proximity to the other party was a low face-threatening level condition, and that this allowed them to exhibit verbal aggression. In other words, it is possible that social proximity to the partner reduced the face-threatening level of the situation, which in turn increased verbal aggression.

Hypothesis 6 was not supported. However, only among Japanese students, the higher social status of the other party tended to suppress verbal aggression. This result suggested that Japanese university students were more deliberate and considered the social context when expressing aggression.

Hypothesis 7 was not supported. Rather, only Japanese students showed a tendency for higher ranking of imposition of the other party to increase verbal aggression, contrary to the hypothesis. This suggested that, unlike their Chinese counterparts, Japanese students tended to use verbal aggression with the intent to harm the other party. This suggests that the meanings of verbal aggression differed between Japanese and Chinese cultures. In China, verbal aggression might be used as a method of intimate communication in close relationships, in Japan, on the other hand, verbal aggression might be expressed only when one wants to hurt the other person. Further study is needed on this point.

Conclusion

In this study, we compared the effects of politeness on verbal aggression in the different cultural contexts of Japan and China. For this purpose, we focused on the factors that have been examined in politeness research, such as social distance, the other party's social status, and the ranking of imposition of the behavior, as well as the perception of the other party's hostile intentions, own anger, and emotion regulation, which have been examined in aggression research. Comparisons were made between Japanese and Chinese university students, who belong to the same Asian cultural spheres but differ considerably in terms of the expression of emotions in social contexts.

The results revealed that both politeness and aggression factors had effects on verbal aggression. That is, the politeness factor, close social distance increased verbal aggression in both Japanese and Chinese students. Only among Japanese, there were tendencies for the other party's high status to suppress verbal aggression and for the ranking of imposition

on the other party to increase verbal aggression. Only in Chinese students, anger increased verbal aggression and emotion regulation decreased verbal aggression. The results suggested that emotions had a significant influence on the decision process in verbal aggression among Chinese students, while verbal aggression was used more intentionally among Japanese students.

The results of our study indicated that a wider range of factors need to be considered for verbal aggression than has been previously addressed, and that the way in which these factors are affected is influenced by the cultural factors underlying verbal aggression. The reason for this wide range of factors involved is that verbal aggression harms the other party by threatening his/her face. In other words, verbal aggression threatens or harms the social self-image of the other party and is therefore considered to involve more social and cultural factors than physical aggression, which directly harms the other party. This may also be a reason why the factors that define verbal aggression are heavily influenced by cultural context, since situations that threaten face or the social self-image of the other person have different aspects depending on the cultural context. Our study suggested that in China, where frank expressions of emotions are culturally accepted in interpersonal relationships, verbal aggression is influenced by anger and its control, whereas in Japan, where people are expected to suppress the expression of negative emotions in all interpersonal relationship, verbal aggression tends to be used more instrumentally.

The limitations of our study lie mainly in the following two points. First, since our study used the recall method, the possibility that the participants' subjectivity and distortions were included cannot be ruled out. Since verbal aggression is not a socially desirable behavior, it is possible that these distortions affected the results. It will be necessary to confirm the findings of our study by using more experimental or fieldwork methods.

The second limitation of our study is that the research was restricted to a comparison of two Asian countries, Japan, and China. Although these two countries have quite different aspects as Asian cultural spheres, comparative studies with Western countries, which are more individualistic cultures, and other cultural spheres will be required to further clarify the influence of cultural backgrounds on verbal aggression.

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