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### Spot the difference

*A cross-cultural comparison of affective teacher-student relationship quality and associations with shyness between the Netherlands and China*

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# Chapter 8



## General Discussion





## General Discussion

Sharing warm, supportive relationships with teachers is important for students to feel secure to explore the school environment and become well-adjusted at school, such as for their behavioral development and academic achievement (Lei et al., 2016, 2018; Roorda et al., 2011, 2017). Most research about teacher-student relationships, however, has been conducted in Western, individualistic countries (e.g., the United States and the Netherlands). Whether research findings based on Western countries can be generalized to teachers and students in Eastern, collectivistic countries was hardly investigated. Furthermore, the few existing studies that made cross-cultural comparisons of teacher-student relationship quality across countries found inconsistent results. For instance, studies based on students' relationship perceptions tended to find that students in Eastern, collectivistic countries experienced more closeness with teachers than students in Western, individualistic countries (Jia et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2013). Findings based on teachers' relationship perceptions, however, sometimes showed that teachers in Eastern, collectivistic countries experienced less closeness with students than teachers in Western, individualistic countries (Acar et al., 2019; Bear et al., 2014). Hence, more research seems to be needed to explore how teachers and students may experience the quality of their mutual relationships differently across countries. The first aim of this dissertation, therefore, was to investigate whether there were cross-cultural differences in how teachers and students from the Netherlands (a Western, individualistic country) and China (an Eastern, collectivistic country) perceive their mutual relationship. Cross-cultural differences in the relationship quality were examined both in upper elementary school (third-to-sixth grade) and the early school years (kindergarten and first grade). Furthermore, to gain a more complete understanding of cross-cultural differences in students' relationship perceptions, we not only looked at students' conscious relationship perceptions (measured with questionnaires) but also used relationship drawings to measure their unconscious relationship perceptions.

The second aim of the current dissertation was to explore whether there were cross-cultural differences in how students' shyness was linked to the quality of teacher-student relationships across the Netherlands and China. As shyness is depreciated in Western, individualistic countries but was traditionally appreciated in Eastern, collectivistic countries (Chen, 2019; Rubin et al., 2009), we investigated whether shyness was linked to the quality of teacher-student relationships more positively in China than in the Netherlands. Just as for the first aim, associations were investigated both in upper

elementary school and in the early school years, and the relationship quality was assessed by looking at teachers' perceptions, students' conscious perceptions, and students' unconscious perceptions of the relationship. In this final chapter, we integrated the main findings of the previous chapters and tried to provide a helicopter overview of the findings. Following the integrative discussion, the limitations of this dissertation and suggestions for future research were reflected. We ended this chapter with implications for school practice.

### **Cross-Cultural Differences in the Quality of Teacher-Student Relationships**

To be able to make meaningful comparisons across countries, it is important that at least partially strong measurement invariance is reached for the used instruments (Chen, 2008; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). The results of Chapters 2 and 3 supported partially strong measurement invariance across China and the Netherlands for the relationship questionnaires that were used to measure teachers' (the STRS) and students' (the SPARTS and the Y-CATS) conscious relationship perceptions in both upper elementary school and the early school years. Furthermore, Chapter 6 found partially strong invariance across China and the Netherlands for the method used for measuring upper elementary students' unconscious perceptions (relationship drawings). As such, the used instruments, which were originally developed for measuring teacher-student relationship quality in Western, individualistic countries, seem to be applicable for assessing relationship quality in China as well.

After establishing sufficient measurement invariance, the first research aim could be examined. At an overall level, our findings seem to support the idea of the developmental systems model (Pianta et al., 2003) that the quality of teacher-student relationships can be shaped by cultural values and differ across countries. More specifically, Chapters 2, 4, and 7 provided evidence that there were cross-cultural differences in teachers' and students' relationship perceptions. At a more detailed level, however, cross-cultural differences in relationship quality may look different depending on the specific grade levels under investigation (i.e., upper elementary school versus the early school years), the informant that reported the relationship quality (i.e., teacher or student), and the level at which mental representations were measured (i.e., conscious versus unconscious perceptions). We will further elaborate upon this below.

First, in upper elementary school, teachers and students in China seemed to experience more favorable relationships with each other than teachers and students in the Netherlands. More specifically, the results of Chapter 2 showed that both Chinese teachers and students perceived less conflict in their mutual relationships than their Dutch

counterparts. Chinese students also reported more closeness with teachers than Dutch students. As such, our findings are in line with the idea that teacher-student relationships in Eastern, collectivistic countries may contain higher closeness and lower conflict than those in Western, individualistic countries (Chen & French, 2008; Hofstede et al., 2010). Interestingly, cross-cultural differences in conflict were supported by both teachers' and students' relationship perceptions, whereas the difference in closeness was only found in students' perceptions but not in teachers' perceptions (Chapter 2). A possible explanation could be that indications of conflict and negativities in the relationship are more observable and salient than indications of closeness (Hughes, 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2017), and hence, cross-cultural differences in conflict may be more visible and consistent. Supporting this idea, Chapter 7 reveals that the drawings of Chinese students also showed fewer indications of relational negativity (i.e., anger/tension, role reversal, emotional distance/isolation, and global pathology) than the drawings of Dutch students. As such, findings seem to be rather consistent and strong that upper elementary students and teachers in China experience less negativity and conflicts in mutual relationships than their Dutch counterparts. These differences may be due to the higher power distance in China than in the Netherlands, which made Chinese students less likely than their Dutch counterparts to confront teachers or display disruptive behaviors that may raise conflict with teachers (Bear et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2013).

Findings regarding cross-cultural differences in positive relationship dimensions, however, appeared to be less consistent. More specifically, Chapter 2 found evidence for cross-cultural differences in students' conscious perceptions of closeness, but not for teacher-reported closeness. Furthermore, Chapter 7 showed that the drawings of Dutch and Chinese students did not differ in the two positive dimensions (pride/happiness and vitality/creativity). Previous research also showed that findings regarding cross-cultural differences in students' conscious perceptions of closeness were relatively consistent (Jia et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2013), whereas studies focusing on teachers' perceptions of closeness revealed mixed results (c.f., Acar., 2019; Bear et al., 2014; Beyazkurk & Kesner, 2005). Taken together, these findings suggest that cross-cultural differences in the degree of closeness in teacher-student relationships appear to be more dependent on the informant (i.e., teacher or student) of the relationship quality and at which level relationship perceptions are measured (i.e., conscious or unconscious perceptions). Future research, therefore, is encouraged to include multiple perceptions of the relationship quality, to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers and students may experience the positive aspect of their mutual relationships differently across different countries.

The abovementioned findings from the upper elementary sample, however, did not

seem to simply generalize to the relationship between teachers and students in the early school years. As can be seen in Chapter 3, in the early school years, there were no cross-cultural differences in teachers' relationship perceptions at all, not for closeness but also not for conflict. The lack of cross-cultural differences in conflict appeared to be somewhat unexpected, given that findings regarding cross-cultural differences in conflict were relatively strong in the upper elementary sample. As a possible explanation, the higher power distance in China may not make teachers experience fewer confrontations from young children yet, as young children may still lack sufficient self-regulation skills to manage their behaviors and actively avoid confronting teachers (Montroy et al., 2016). Hence, despite the higher power distance in China than in the Netherlands, Chinese teachers did not experience less conflict with young children than Dutch teachers.

When it comes to young children's relationship perceptions, the results were even more surprising, see Chapter 3. In contrast to our expectations (Chen & French, 2008; Hofstede et al., 2010) and results from upper elementary students, young children in China perceived less warmth and more conflict with teachers than young children in the Netherlands. It thus seems that in the early school years, Chinese children experienced less favorable relationships with teachers than children in the Netherlands. A possible reason may be that Chinese teachers are more likely to ask children to be obedient and compliant than Dutch teachers (Hu et al., 2016). As young children may not have sufficient cognitive and self-regulation skills to manage their behaviors and respond to these request (Montroy et al., 2016), Chinese teachers' request for compliance and obedience may make young children in China more likely to feel insecure and irritated with teachers than young children in the Netherlands. Older children, in contrast, have developed better cognitive skills and self-regulation skills to understand and respond to teachers' expectations of conformity. Older children in China may thus experience their relationships with teachers as more harmonious and with fewer confrontations than older children in the Netherlands.

Another explanation for the different findings emerging from young children and upper elementary students could be the instrument that was used to measure students' conscious relationship perceptions. More specifically, the Y-CATS was used to measure young children's relationship perceptions, whereas the SPARTS was used to measure older students' perceptions. Although both questionnaires aim to measure the degree of closeness (called warmth in the Y-CATS) and conflict in children's relationships with teachers, the used statements to measure these dimensions differ across instruments (c.f., Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). In line with this idea, findings appear to be more comparable between young children and older children when the same instrument was used for making cross-cultural comparisons (i.e., relationship drawings). We did posthoc analyses

(not reported in the previous chapters) of the relationship drawings of young children, based on the same sample as included in Chapter 3. The results of posthoc analyses showed that, similar to findings from upper elementary students (Chapter 7), young children in China scored lower on anger/tension and role reversal ( $-.25 < \beta < -.20$ ;  $ps < .001$ ) than their Dutch counterparts; Chinese and Dutch young children scored equally high on pride/happiness and vitality/creativity ( $.05 < \beta < .12$ ;  $ps > .05$ ). Thus, these findings suggest that relationship drawings may be especially helpful when researchers are interested in investigating cross-cultural differences in the relationship perceptions of both young children and older children.

### **Shyness and Teacher-Student Relationships in Cross-Cultural Contexts**

Regarding the second aim, in general, evidence for cross-cultural differences in the associations between shyness and teacher-student relationship quality was less strong than the cross-cultural differences found for the first aim. As such, only part of our findings supported the idea of the developmental systems model (Pianta et al., 2003) that cultural values may also shape how student characteristics are associated with teacher-student relationship quality. More specifically, as was found in Chapter 4, in upper elementary school, the association between shyness and teachers' relationship perceptions did not differ across China and the Netherlands. Unexpectedly (Chen, 2010, 2019), shyness was associated with less teacher-reported closeness both in China and in the Netherlands, and this association was equally strong across countries (Chapter 4). As such, shyness may not link to teacher-student relationship quality more positively in China than in Western countries. A possible explanation is that, in recent decades, shyness has been depreciated in Eastern countries like China due to the influences of Westernization and globalization (Chen, 2019). As a result, Chinese teachers may not perceive shyness more positively than teachers in Western countries anymore (Li et al., 2016). Hence, shyness could be equally harmful to teachers' relationship perceptions in China as in the Netherlands.

Just as for the first aim, research findings based on the upper elementary sample did not simply generalize to the relationship in the early school years. Interestingly, Chapter 5 did find cross-cultural differences in the association between young children's shyness and teacher-reported conflict. Unexpectedly (Chen, 2019; Nurmi, 2012), however, shyness was associated with less teacher-reported conflict in the Netherlands, whereas this association was not significant in China. It thus seems that shyness may be linked with teachers' relationship perceptions in a more positive way in the Netherlands (i.e., with less conflict) than in China. As such, these findings still showed support for the developmental systems model that cultural values play a role in the link between shyness and

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teacher-student relationship quality, only that this link did not differ across countries in the way we expected.

As shown in Chapter 4, cross-cultural differences were also found in the associations between shyness and upper elementary students' conscious relationship perceptions, providing some further support for the developmental systems model (Pianta et al., 2003). In contrast to our expectations (Chen, 2010, 2019), however, shyness was linked to less closeness and more conflict in students' relationship perceptions, and both associations were stronger in China than in the Netherlands. These findings seem to suggest that, as shyness has become a depreciated trait in China (Chen, 2019), it may harm students' conscious relationship perceptions to a larger degree in China than in the Netherlands. A possible explanation may be that the emphasis on social connectedness in collectivistic countries like China may put more pressure on shy students to initiate social interactions with teachers than in Western, individualistic countries (Zhang & Xu, 2019). As a result, shy students in China may be more likely to feel insecure, uncomfortable, and frustrated in relationships with teachers than shy students in the Netherlands. To examine whether these findings would also generalize to the relationship perceptions of young children, we did posthoc analyses based on data from the same sample as used in Chapter 5. Preliminary analyses showed that the associations between young children's social inhibition and their conscious relationship perceptions did not differ across the Netherlands and China ( $.02 < \beta < .07$ ;  $ps > .05$ ). In both countries, social inhibition was associated with less child-perceived conflict with teachers ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p = .013$ ) and was not significantly associated with child-perceived warmth in the relationship ( $\beta = -.04$ ,  $p = .541$ ). It thus seemed that, again, there is a difference in findings for young children and older children. As the findings for young children were preliminary, however, more research is needed to examine the tenability of the results and the possible reasons behind the findings. For now, we would suggest that researchers and school practitioners be cautious when generalizing our findings from upper elementary school to the early school years.

With regard to students' unconscious relationship perceptions, Chapter 7 revealed that the associations between upper elementary students' shyness and the eight drawing dimensions did not differ across countries. Surprisingly, shyness was not significantly associated with students' unconscious relationship perceptions at all, neither in the Dutch sample nor in the Chinese sample. As such, these findings contradicted the findings from upper elementary students' conscious relationship perceptions (see Chapter 4). The inconsistent findings may be due to the different instruments used to measure students' conscious and unconscious relationship perceptions. As shy students tend to feel nervous

and uncomfortable on social occasions (Rubin et al., 2009), completing a questionnaire and consciously reflecting on their relationships with teachers may evoke shy students' insecure and nervous feelings about their relationships with teachers. Thus, more shy students tend to report their relationships with teachers as less favorable than less shy students. Making a relationship drawing, in contrast, is more relaxing and enjoyable for students (Zee et al., 2020). Thus, more shy students may draw their relationships with teachers just as favorably as less shy students. This argument seemed to be supported by results from posthoc analyses of young children's social inhibition and their relationship drawings (based on the same sample used in Chapter 5). That is, both in the Netherlands and China, the associations between young children's social inhibition and all eight relationship drawing dimensions turned out to be non-significant ( $-.08 < r < .13$ ;  $ps > .05$ ). Hence, these results suggest that how students' shyness links to their relationship perceptions may depend on whether students reflect the relationship quality on a conscious level or an unconscious level. Future researchers, therefore, are encouraged to include multiple methods (e.g., questionnaires and relationships drawings), to get a more comprehensive picture of how shyness may affect students' relationship experience with teachers differently across countries.

### **Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This dissertation is one of the first to investigate how teacher-student relationship quality and its associations with shyness may differ across countries. The current dissertation has several strengths, for instance, (1) we employed a multi-informant, multi-method approach to assess the quality of teacher-student relationships, (2) we examined our research aims both in upper elementary school and in the early school years, and (3) by employing the relationship drawings, we investigated cross-cultural differences in students' relationship perceptions in a more comprehensive way than previous cross-cultural studies.

The current dissertation also has some limitations that need to be accounted for. First, we focused on teachers and students in the Netherlands and a relatively developed region in China (Zhejiang province). As such, findings from this dissertation may not necessarily generalize to a larger population, such as teachers and students in other countries or other regions of China. For instance, it has been suggested that in rural, less developed areas in China, the influence of Westernization and globalization is less extensive and the traditional Chinese culture is still playing a dominant role (Chen, 2019). As such, shyness may still be appreciated in these areas and, hence, may still have positive impacts on children's social relationships (Chen, 2019; Chen et al., 2011). Therefore,

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future research may include a more comprehensive sample and explore whether findings from this dissertation generalize to other countries and other regions in China.

Second, the current dissertation employed two cohorts of cross-sectional data to achieve the research aims. The cross-sectional nature of our data prevented us from drawing definite conclusions about the causal influence of students' shyness on teacher-student relationship quality. In addition, with cross-sectional data, we are not able to draw definitive conclusions about whether different findings emerging from early and later school years were due to developmental changes in students. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal data with a cross-lagged design to further examine the causal impacts of shyness on the relationship quality, and explore whether the development of teacher-student relationships from the early school years to upper elementary school differs across countries.

Third, although the current dissertation looked at students' relationship perceptions both at a conscious level and at an unconscious level, we only investigated teachers' relationship perceptions at a conscious level. Our findings based on conscious relationship perceptions showed that cross-cultural differences in teacher-student relationships appeared to depend on whether the teacher or student reported the relationship quality. Hence, it would be relevant to include teachers' unconscious relationship perceptions as well and investigate whether our findings of cross-cultural differences in students' unconscious relationship perceptions apply to teachers' unconscious relationship perceptions. For example, future research may employ the Teacher Relationship Interview (Pianta, 1999; Spilt & Koomen, 2009) to be able to look at both teachers' and students' perceptions at an unconscious level when conducting cross-cultural comparisons.

### **Implications for School Practice**

Although replications of our findings are still needed, this dissertation can provide some suggestions for school practice. A primary message from the current dissertation may be that how teachers and students perceive the quality of teacher-student relationships can differ across countries. As such, it may be important for school practitioners to be cautious when applying research findings and interventions that were based on teachers and students in other countries to the local context.

Second, findings from the current dissertation indicate that nowadays, shyness may harm the quality of teacher-student relationships in China as well. Furthermore, for upper elementary students' relationship perceptions, this detrimental effect of shyness may be even stronger in China than in the Netherlands. Hence, shy students and their teachers in China may especially need intervention to develop healthy relationships with each other.

However, relevant interventions still appear to be lacking in China. As a good starting point, interventions developed in Western countries (e.g., the Interpersonal Skills Training, Roorda et al., 2013) may be adjusted to help develop interventions for Chinese teachers and students.

Third, our findings have repeatedly shown that teachers and students may have different perceptions of their mutual relationships. Furthermore, students' unconscious perceptions of the relationship may also carry different information from conscious relationship perceptions. Therefore, when schools need to evaluate the quality of teacher-student relationships or identify teachers and students experiencing difficult relationships with each other, it is recommended that multiple perceptions and multiple methods be used, to get a more comprehensive view of the relationship quality.

Last but not least, the current dissertation indicates that the quality of teacher-student relationships and how it is impacted by students' shyness, may depend on the developmental stage that students are in (i.e., upper elementary school versus the early school years). Teacher training programs may thus put more emphasis on students' developmental changes throughout elementary school and prepare teachers to deal with changes in students' social behaviors and teacher-student relationships across elementary school.