JUSTIFICATION OF AGGRESSION IN SEVERAL ASIAN AND EUROPEAN COUNTRIES WITH DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

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This paper reviews the results of two decades of research on moral approval of aggressive acts conducted in several countries with different religious and cultural backgrounds. A nationally-adapted version of the Lagerspetz and Westman questionnaire was administered to university students in Finland, Poland, Spain, Japan, Iran and India. Respondents had to indicate levels of justification of several aggressive acts of different quality and intensity in the context of different social justifications. Although slight method variations preclude the possibility of direct comparison, the pattern of effects in the different countries leads to interesting conclusions. In all countries: more drastic forms of aggression (e.g., killing, torture) are less accepted than non-dangerous forms of such behavior (e.g., hindering, being ironic); and aggressive acts that are socially justified (in terms of protection of self or other) are clearly more accepted than ones with no such justification (problems of communication). However, there are also some striking differences among the samples studied. Thus, patterns of moral approval of various kinds of aggressive acts are only to some extent common to most cultures, while there are some culturally bound differences in these attitudes.

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Problems of aggression and violence are one of the largest categories of childhood disorders, and plague people's interpersonal, inter-group, and social interactions. This explains the interest that a broad range of disciplines, included developmental psychology, invest in understanding why, which and when individuals engage in different kinds of aggression.

Our present research on aggression leads to two main purposes: First, to uncover theoretical and causal relations among conceptual variables, enriching our understanding of aggression (its models are likely to have more explanatory power if they articulate the ways personality should be associated with aggression). As a second objective, a finer discrimination in its conceptualization could also contribute to refine preventive, therapeutic, and policy interventions aimed at reducing aggression.

Even though non-experimental data, such as the self-reports here reviewed, cannot be used to probe any causal relation, the present review tries to provide strong evidence that an interaction of both biological traits and psychosocial environments impact the likelihood of aggression: physiological explanations require psychosocial counterparts, and vice versa (Anderson, 1997; Ramirez, 2000; Wann et al. 2003). Even if we cannot currently provide definitive answers, we may help to point towards giving more heed to this problem (Barrat & Felthous, 2003).

In a series of previous papers (Ramirez, 1986a, 1991,1993, 2001) I have argued that how and to what extent a person justifies aggression depends on a wide variety of factors, including personality, aspects of lifestyle, such as choice of profession or attitude toward life or the *Weltanschaaung*, and prevailing norms in our own culture. Socio-normative attitudes towards aggression thus influence both:

1) socialization of aggression in the course of individual development, and 2) dynamics of violence in everyday social life (Bonino & Fraçzek, 1996).

This essay reviews and compares the patterns of moral approval of aggressive acts in different circumstances revealed in previous studies conducted with different national samples. Although there are already many studies that make comparisons among a small (usually two) number of nations, our purpose is to offer a broader comparison in the hope that a more global approach can reveal even deeper insights about similarities and differences across different national groups. We expected similar, but not identical features in the overall degree of justification of aggression in the different populations, with some minor gender and cultural differences. To a certain extent their justification would correspond to rules based on common sense: mild acts, such as verbal aggression, would be more acceptable than stronger ones involving physical aggression; gross provocation would permit greater approval than unprovoked aggression; and people would be more likely to approve acts motivated by altruism than those by selfishness.

There is good reason to assume that societies have some moral rules which suggest that different forms of aggression become acceptable under particular circumstances. Are these codes unique to each society? Or, on the contrary, is there a certain universality of norms and beliefs common to all human beings? Although the influence of the psychosocial environment on behavior cannot be disentangled from the biological one, cross-cultural studies can help us understand which biosocial processes are involved in aggression. One way of understanding human aggression therefore is viewing it from a cross-cultural perspective (Segall, 1988). Such a comparison may lead to interesting conclusions, allowing us to consider the extent to which beliefs about the morality of particular aggressive acts might be universal, embedded in our biology, or vary by culture as well as by specific circumstances.

I started asking students from four different Spanish regions how they would accept several categories of aggressive acts of different levels of intensity and

quality in different types of justifying situations. Only minor differences among them were reported (Ramirez, 1986a, 1993). Later the same questionnaire was applied to students from other European countries (Poland and Finland), investigating not only whether the situation affected a person's attitude towards aggression but also whether one's culture and environment had a significant effect on the acceptance of aggressive acts. The degree of acceptance of interpersonal aggression was also very similar in all the populations studied (Ramirez, 1991).

This consistency in moral judgments by people of such different societies would suggest the existence of a certain universal moral code common to all human beings. All the countries studied however were European and, although each had its own culture, language, and customs, they shared to some extent a common Christian background. Before making a more valid general statement applicable to all the humanity it would be advisable to make further comparisons with other cultures with quite different cultural and religious backgrounds.

For this purpose, our cross-cultural studies followed two different strategies. The first was to analyze justifications of aggression in several Oriental societies with different cultures and religious backgrounds: Japan (with a Xintoist background), India (predominantly Hindu), Iran (Shiite Muslims), Bangladesh (Sunni Muslims), Philippines (predominantly Christian), and China, with a mix of Buddhism and Marxist atheism¹. The second strategy was to compare justifications of aggression in countries with different cultures living within the same society, such as South Africa (Theron et al, 2001; Delapuente, 2006) and Canada (Ramirez et al., 2005), where multiculturalism has become a basic value.

The moral justification of several aggressive acts of different quality and intensity was analyzed in the context of different social circumstances. Undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 21² assessed their personal degree of approval of aggression during particular circumstances. All were natives

¹ Here we present the results of three countries: Iran, Japan, and India; research in other Asian cultures is still in progress.

² Data from adolescents are not included.

of their country and had grown up in an urban environment³. Although data were collected from both sexes, here only the average overall data are analyzed.

A questionnaire originally constructed by Lagerspetz and Westman (1980) and subsequently revised by Ramirez (1986a) was applied. Since the degree of approval would depend on the qualities of the behavior observed, its items describe different types of aggressive acts in combination with diverse situations in which they may be conducted. The eight categories of aggressive acts are: hitting, killing, shouting angrily, being ironic, using torture, having a fit of rage, threatening or hindering another person from doing something. Each category of acts is accompanied by a list of six different circumstances in which the aggressive behavior may be justified, namely: in self-defense, in protecting another person, as a consequence of emotional agitation, in defense of one's property, as a punishment, or as a way of overcoming communication difficulties. No examples of the behaviors or extra information are given; the particular meanings of each of the categories are left to the respondents. The response scale for the questionnaire varied from one to another version: a two-point scale (acceptable vs. not acceptable), a three-point scale (always, sometimes, never), and a four-point scale (usually, in some cases, in extreme cases, never)⁴.

The following tables summarize the ranking of the justification of acts and situations⁵ in the different samples (see Tables 1, 2), giving us an idea of to which extent it shows consistency across cultures or varies by culture and by situation. (INSERT TABLE I)

With regard to specific acts:

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³ We selected only urban residents to minimize the effect of other cultural variables (e.g., urban vs. rural).

⁴ The questionnaire has already been used in Finland (Lagerspetz and Westman, 1980; Lagerspetz et al., 1988), Britain (Benton, Kumari, and Brain, 1982), Poland (Fraçzek, 1985; Fraczek, Ramirez, and Torchalska, 1987), Spain (Ramirez, 1986a; 1991; 1993), Japan and the U.S.A. (Ramirez and Fujihara, 1997; Fujihara, Kohyama, Andreu and Ramirez, 1999), Iran (Musazadeh, 1999), India (Sunni, 2005), and South Africa. Its application in other Asian countries (Bangladesh, China, and Philippines) is still in progress.

⁵ Act-situation interactions are not included

- a) It is not surprising to discover that in all populations mildly aggressive acts were more acceptable than stronger and more drastic acts (e.g., striking or shouting met with more approval than killing).
- b) Being ironic was the most justified act, as an average, except in Finland, where it was unexpectedly ranked 5th among six.
- c) Verbal aggression (shouting, being ironic, rage) was considered more acceptable than physically aggressive acts in all cultures; the three different kinds of verbal aggression had a similar degree of approval.
- d) Passive aggression (hindering) was the largest accepted act in the European average and in Iran, but rated only the 4th in India and Japan.
- e) Threat received an higher approval than physical aggression and lower than verbal aggression; it is interesting to point out, though, that it was one of the most highly justified acts in Poland (1st) and in Finland (2nd), whereas it ranked the 5th in Spain and in the Asian samples.
- f) Physical aggression (hitting, killing, torture) was the least justified in all samples; hitting was always more approved than killing and torturing, with no significant differences between these last two.

(INSERT TABLE 2)

With regard to situations:

- a) Gross provocation led to more approval of retaliation than unprovoked aggression (e.g., killing was considered more justified for altruistic reasons than as a mere expression of bad temper).
- b) Socially justified aggressive acts, such as those conducted in protection of self or other, were clearly more accepted than ones with no such justification (e.g. as an expression of emotions, as a result of communication difficulties);
- c) Defensive situations -of self, property, or another person- were generally seen as more morally justified; within them, defending others and self defense received more moral approval than defending property did. Two intriguing exceptions were the Iranian sample, in which defending others

- was only the 5th among six, and the Indian sample, with defense of property also ranking the 5th.
- d) Punishment and emotional reaction had very low level of justification among Europeans, the 5th among six in all of them; but Iranians rated punishment as the most justified situation.
- e) Communication problems as circumstances for aggression action were seen as the least justified, especially among Asians and Spaniards, for whom this situation was absolutely unjustifiable.

A comparison of the results shows a high consistency in the level of approval of interpersonal aggression in all of the samples studied. For instance, certain acts were never justified, regardless of cultural context, and serious aggression was always less accepted than mild aggression (Wann et al., 2003). There were similar trends among people of such contrasting cultures, corresponding to basic rules of "common sense."

These overall similarities in moral approval for aggression by people of such different societies suggest a sharing of similar standards of approval, as if there were some common moral code ruling their justification. Depending upon the situation, some behaviors appear to be considered admissible by most people. In a favorable atmosphere, for instance, people engage in aggression more frequently and with greater intensity than in situations in which there is a predominance of common disapproval (Ramirez, 1996). The moderating role of norms explains the fact that when no norms were present, subjects tend to use the highest levels of coercion. These normative beliefs would also moderate the escalation of aggression, justifying and instigating a proportionate retaliation to unjustified norm-violations (see also: Lee & Tedeschi, 1996). Social rules, disapproving a behavior, might inhibit whatever aggression is supposed to be shown (Berkowitz, 1989); and the violation of a norm can foster justification or approval of aggressive retaliation.

The unsolved but unavoidable question would be whether the moderating role of moral norms common to most human beings (and perhaps universal) might be explained in terms of a common 'natural law' basis, in terms of biological roots common to the human species, or even partially shared with other animal species. Human beings are not alone in their ability to use tools, to communicate in sophisticated ways, to have a conception of mind, and to manipulate others through aggression or reconciliation. *Homo sapiens* may not be the only species to construct a moral order. Empathy, sympathy, cooperation, a sense of justice, and moral systems are not unique to human beings; we share them with other animal species (Ramirez, 1986b).

Empathy (the feeling of what another is feeling) is also shown in chimpanzees. Cooperation is common to many animals; they know one another well enough to synchronize their behavior, and they can predict the outcome of a common effort. Wolves regularly coordinate their hunts and then share the meal; vampire bats share blood by regurgitating it for their offspring; ants, termites and bees are social insects; dolphins and whales quickly close ranks when faced with danger and protect the ones they know best or beach themselves rather than abandon a sick mate; elephants prop up a sick relative and keep a vigil until death is obvious and fondle the bones of their dead.

Moral systems grow not from some lofty sense of equality and righteousness but from the simple need to get along; they are rules to deal with internal competition in a group. What motivates animals to do right or wrong are the necessities and burdens of social living, a constraint we all share; for example, when resources are in short supply, fights break out. Primates combine high intelligence with intense social interaction, forming long-lasting friendships with non-relatives maintained in a tit-for-tat manner. The cognitive basis for morality can be found in the behavior of other animals, which suggests a long evolutionary history for the human approach to social life. Our moral rules must be viewed as part of our biological -that is, evolutionary- heritage, something that connects us

with other animals. The forces of natural selection have molded all animals. If morality is a product of natural selection, an unavoidable outcome of social living, then there is nothing so special about our particular brand of right and wrong (De Waal, 1996). Like people, other animals are organized into networks of rank and status, in which members apply force or respond to coercion; they also make calculated decisions about whom to intimidate and whom to harm. There is a deep connection between people and apes in aggression and violence (Ramirez, 2000).

These biological roots of morality, however, do not preclude the influence of culture on judgments about aggression. Certain cultural differences emerge. Prevailing cultural norms and role expectations in any given society influence what is judged to be healthy self-assertion. Each society has a code, written or not, about acceptance or justification of different forms of aggression in different specific circumstances. This may explain some striking differences among the countries studied both in relation to seriousness, as well as to the kind of justification of manifested aggression:

- a) Irony, which was considered a quite serious offense in Finland, was one of the less harmful behavior in the rest of the samples. This rather 'odd' finding may be due to problems of translation: the Finnish word for 'irony,' is not as mild as the English word; it would perhaps be better translated as mockery, ridicule, or derision.
- b) Justification of aggressive behavior as a means of punishment had very low acceptance in Europe, but relatively high approval in Asia, being even the most justified situation in Iran. A possible explanation, beside eventual problems of translation, is that in Muslim countries punishment is seen as a correct way of treating somebody who has inflicted injury in others.
- c) The level of approval of rage was high in all countries except Finland and Poland. This is consistent with the training of Nordic children, who are expected to express themselves in 'a more reasonable way,' instead of in a rather juvenile, emotional way (e.g., Nordic parents often share decisionmaking about family issues with their children). These children thus learn

- that the expression of emotion and anger is a consequence of a lack of skills.
- d) Nordic European countries and Japan justified emotionality less than Iran, India and Spain. This may be partially explained by the typical 'emotional' warmness of 'Mediterranean' countries, among which, sociologically speaking, these three cultures might be included. This typically feminine stereotype (females approve more of emotional reasons) also agrees with the low masculinity score found in Spaniards by Hofstede (1991) and by Fujihara et al. (1999).
- e) The unexpected low justification of defense of others in Iran, and of defense of property in the Indian sample, ranking only the 5th among six in both cases, could be partially explain by following arguments:
 - 1. Defense of others may not be high in the Iran rank as it may be misinterpreted and then yourself would be subject to corporal punishment; an illustrative anecdote in this context is that, if you run over somebody, you are liable for the death penalty unless you make financial redress to the family of the person killed; this means that a third part would not intervene in any dispute.
 - Defense of property in India does not figure high in the rank due to their conceptions of the self (as an expression of consciousness) and of karma (action/reaction); one would not want to incur reactive karma for something that is impermanent, such as is possession of property.

According to Bandura's social learning theory (1971), predominant attitudes in a society would be an important factor in the expression of aggression: violent acts would be more frequent and intense in a favorable environment than when there is a social disapproval. Although there are cases of violence that clearly cannot be tolerated in any civilized society, such as murder and torture, other behaviors may be labeled as dangerous or socially unacceptable merely because they are offensive to group sensibilities or because they challenge or upset an immoral or unjust status quo. Judgments of aggressiveness reflect the values and interests of

those doing the judging. People prevented from reaching a desired goal may become aggressive when the interference is thought illegitimate or arbitrary. Even justified, reasonable, and legitimate frustrations "for which excusable reasons exist" can activate an instigation to aggression (Dollard et al. 1939; Berkowitz, 1989). Another example may be its high justification in cases of a personal attack, such as self-defense and defense of others, shown in the present research.

Certain situations elicit different behaviors depending upon the characteristics of the person confronted as well as the nature of the particular situation. According to the Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (1991), broad fundamental life values can influence behavior indirectly through their impact on beliefs and attitudes; and following his previous theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), personal attitudes act as mediating variables influencing behavior to the extent that they influence intentions to engage in that behavior (Schreurs et al., 2005). We should not dismiss that culture has a significant effect on the acceptance of aggressive acts. It influences changing attitudes toward aggression, even if some attitudes will not change.

Some differences in culture may be linked to differences in the way the self is construed as well as in societal regulations. Markus and Kitayama (1991) pointed out that there are strikingly different construals of the self, of others, and of the independence of the different construals in different cultures; and that they have a set of specific consequences for cognition, emotion and motivation. Asian cultures, such as Japan, have an interdependent construal of the self, they are socially oriented, and they are concerned with fitting in, belonging, promoting other's goals and being indirect. On the contrary, Europeans typically have an independent view of the self and seek independence from others. Although they did not examine the consequences of such differences on aggression, these differences are expected to affect aggression too: Japanese may be more repressed compared to Westerners. Further, since the laws concerned with activities related to aggression differ in both countries (e.g., having guns is illegal in Japan but legal in America).

These differences may also be linked to different degree of justification of interpersonal aggression.

Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension would lead to a different prediction. According to him (Hofstede, 1991), in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, aggressive behavior of the self and others is acceptable; however, individuals prefer to contain aggression by avoiding conflict and competition (Gudykunst & Antonio, 1993). He also points out that Japan and Spain are high in uncertainty avoidance, while Nordic countries have a low avoidance culture.

Moreover, children and youngsters who are judged to be excessively aggressive, in the core sense of causing or threatening physical injury, often come from poor and fragmented communities and belong to minority groups that have suffered from discrimination and negative social stereotyping. Sometimes, this may be more reflective of social stereotyping than an objective assessment of the individual child's conduct and propensities.

I acknowledge that the results of our analysis are limited in a number of ways. The most important limitation perhaps is that differences across age groups are not the focus of this study, although we have used samples of a large range of ages. We are aware of the importance of studies in childhood from a developmental approach. Characteristics found in childhood may extend into adolescence and adulthood (Coie et al., 1990), Also, most potential lectors of this journal are dedicated to developmental psychology. Space limitations precluded the inclusion of developmental approaches in this paper. Clearly, we need morel research to clarify the role of age in the development of attitudes towards aggression. The cross-sectional nature of the present study prevents any conclusion that supports the assumption that developmental changes in processing information about aggression leads to a decline of its use in direct and physical aggression. As children grow older and mature, they evaluate it more negatively and their justification of aggression becomes lower.

There is a caveat related to the 'generalizability' of the present results. As in most other research, the participants were undergraduate students. Overt expressions of anger are clearly not something observed very often in normal university students; they score low on questionnaires dealing with the frequency of overt aggression and angry and aggressive dispositions. Generalizing to other less educated populations may pose problems. Future studies need to be replicated in other ages, educational levels, and professional backgrounds, because subpopulations defined in terms other than geography may also have different codes for the acceptance of aggression.

A study done in Finland (Lagerspetz et al., 1988) with adults of several professional backgrounds showed that different groups of people within the same country had differing attitudes toward aggression. Soldiers held higher justifications of aggression. Conscientious objectors had more negative attitudes toward aggression. The conscientious objectors had lower total approval scores, and especially for items related to defense, killing, and torturing. Similarly, Bonino and Fraçzek (1996) found that approval of antisocial behavior was greater among adolescents from big cities than among those from rural areas (this was one of the reasons we limited our study to respondents from urban environments.)

Another limitation of the present essay is that the studies on which these comparisons were made are not fully comparable from a methodological point of view. We have different samples, different times of collecting data, different number of alternatives, unavailable original raw data, etc. Also there may be significant distortion due to difficulties with translation. Some of the 'odd' or unexpected results found in the present comparison may be explained in terms of the different meanings of a term applied in each language. Finding words that correspond well in all languages is one persistent dilemma in all cross-cultural research that depends on verbal measures.

The utilization of self-reports has often been criticized because they are likely to be influenced by social desirability: actual behavior needs not conform to ideal models of conduct (Cohen, 1955). Subjects may give only desirable answers to the hypothetical situations described to them (Berkowitz, 1989). We must clarify that our present research with the CAMA does not focus on absolute levels of aggressive behavior, but only on the relationship between the different samples. Also, high self-awareness magnifies the correlates between self-reports and behavior (Scheier et al., 1974; Turner et al., 1975). A meta-analysis done by Bettencourt et al. (2006) has found a positive correlation between aggression, measured by self-reports and personality dimensions. This assures the usefulness of these instruments in the early identification of individuals with a personality prone to aggression and, consequently, in facilitating appropriate treatment (Stanford et al., 1995).

Finally, another important question for future research is to analyze the attitude toward different kinds of aggression. For instance, Wann and colleagues (1998) observed a higher willingness of instrumental aggression than of hostile aggression. it will be quite appropriate therefore to develop instruments that distinguish between them. In this direction, we have recently done a new version of CAMA that distinguishes between hostile-reactive and instrumental-proactive dichotomies of aggression (Ramirez & Andreu, 2006; Andreu, Ramirez, & Raine, 2006).

In conclusion, a comparison of results from the six countries shows similar but not identical levels of justification of aggressive acts in different situations with some minor cultural differences. In all populations: a) mild aggressive acts were more acceptable than serious aggression; b) provoked aggression was approved more than unprovoked aggression; and c) people of all cultures were more likely to approve acts motivated by altruism than by selfishness. These overall results suggest a certain universal moral code, common to all humanity, although with minor differences according to sex, culture, education, and professional

background. Civilizations so far away among them as Centro American Mayas, and Asian Iraq, India, China share similar beliefs, practices, and signals, and the deep common patterns in human development. Aggressiveness is a deeply rooted attitude that overpasses cultural or national borders (Ramírez, 1991; Ramírez & Fujihara, 1997). Thus it can be concluded that: 1) the moral code (average over all combinations of situations and acts of aggression) does not favor aggressive behavior as a means of resolving conflicts, except in 'extreme cases' (Ramirez, 2000); and 2) patterns of moral approval of aggressive acts are only partially common in the contemporary world. Different attitudes among countries and professions are culturally bounded. What we have in common, principles and values that unify us -the common roots of humanity- seems more important than what divides us. As Bernard Russell and Albert Einstein wrote exactly half a century ago, in their 1957 Manifesto, we should "Remember our Humanity!"

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Table 1: Rank of Approval for Aggressive Acts in Urban Students from Several European and Asian Countries

	Finland	Poland	Spain	EURO	Iran	Japa	India	ASIA	
COUNTRY						n			TOTAL
year	1980	1985	1999		1999	1999	2005		
N	83	64	210		492	242	145		
				averag					_
rank				е				average	average
1st	hd	th	ir	hd	hd	ra	ra	ra	ir =
									2,33
2nd	th	ir	ra	ir	ir	ir	ir	ir	hd=
									2,67
3rd	ht	hd	hd	th	ra	sh	sh	hd	ra =
									3,00
4th	sh	sh	sh	sh	sh	hd	hd		sh
								sh	=3,67
5th	ir	ra	th		th	th	th	th	th =
2 1-2				ra					3,83
6th	ra	ht	ht	ht	ht	ki	ht		ht =
our	14	111	110	111	111	KI	110	ht	4,33
7th	ki	to	ki	ki	to	ht	to	to	
/ UI	KI	ιο	KI	KI	ιο	ш	to	10	ki =
0.1		1.			1.		1 .	1.	7,33
8th	to	ki	to	to	ki	to	ki	ki	to =
									7,50

hd = hindering; ir =being ironic; sh = shouting; ra = rage; th = threatening; ht = hitting; ki = killing; to = torturing

Table 2: Rank of Approval for Justifying Situations in Urban Students from Several European and Asian Countries

COUNTRY	Finland	Poland	Spain	EUROPE	Iran	Japan	India	ASIA	TOTAL
year	1980	1985	1999	_	1999	1999	2005	_	
N	83	64	210	_	492	242	145	_	
rank				average				average	average
1st	DO	DO	DO	SD	PU	SD	SD	SD	SD = 1,50
2nd	SD	SD	SD	DO	DP	DO	DO	DO	DO = 2,00
3rd	DP	DP	DP	DP	SD	DP	PU	PU	DP = 3,17
4th	NC	NC	EM	EM	EM	PU	EM	DP	PU = 3,83
5th	PU	PU	PU	NC	DO	EM	DP	EM	EM = 4,83
6th	EM	EM	NC	PU	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC = 7,67

DO = defense of others; SD = self defense; DP = defense of property; PU = punishment; EM = emotional reaction; NC = problems of communication