

## Thomas M. Achenbach and Leslie A. Rescorla, *Multicultural Understanding of Child and Adolescent Psychopathology: Implications for Mental Health Assessment*

Guilford Press, New York, 2007, ISBN 10:1593853483

Jennifer L. Tackett · Tsasha Awong

Published online: 13 October 2007  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2007

The importance of a multicultural perspective in the domain of psychopathology has been gaining increasing attention. In particular, with the fields of psychology and psychiatry working towards a fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the relevance of a multicultural approach has been highlighted by leaders in the field as imperative for a comprehensive understanding of clinical disorders. In this volume, Achenbach and Rescorla tackle this important issue with an emphasis on mental health assessment, providing an updated summary of an extensive literature and discussing key issues germane to the topic. This timely volume will be of interest to clinicians, researchers, students and educators working in the area of childhood psychopathology and is also positioned to play an important role in informing the integration of multicultural issues in *DSM-V*.

In discussions regarding the role of a multicultural perspective in *DSM-V*, researchers have noted the importance of an individual's sociocultural context not only for understanding the origins and nature of problem behaviors, but also for understanding the broader environment that influences the outcomes of such behavior (Alarcon et al. 2002). An important distinction in cross-cultural work is the differentiation of emic approaches from etic approaches—that is, differentiating assessment instruments (in this case) that are derived from within a given culture

(emic) from those instruments that are derived in one culture and then transplanted for use in other cultures (etic). Achenbach and Rescorla discuss this tricky issue, as do Alarcon et al. (2002) in their *Research Agenda on Culture and Psychiatric Diagnosis*, both sets of authors acknowledging the benefit to internal validity of the emic approach while also recognizing the importance of the etic approach in our ability to compare individuals from different cultures with one another. Achenbach and Rescorla clearly state that their book approaches this issue from the etic viewpoint—a fact that should not be missed by readers who may be hoping for deeper theoretical discussions best served by an emic perspective. While this book can serve as an impressive compendium of childhood psychopathology assessment across cultures, the authors additionally take on primary topics in assessment of childhood psychopathology that are not limited to the cross-cultural domain. In particular, much of the book addresses two major (and in some ways, competing) approaches to assessment of childhood psychopathology: the “empirically based” approach (EBA) and the “diagnostically based” approach (DBA). Certainly, these differing tactics have proven a pervasive and fundamental issue in childhood psychopathology research and practice, and their inclusion as a basic theme in the current edition expand the potential audience and impact of this work.

Achenbach and Rescorla begin their volume by briefly introducing the topic and defining important terms in both the cross-cultural arena as well as the domain of assessment of childhood psychopathology. The next two chapters review the “empirically based” and “diagnostically based” approaches that serve as an organizing theme for the rest of the volume. Readers familiar with Achenbach's previous work on this topic (e.g., Achenbach and McConaughy 1997) will not find much new here. Alternately, readers

---

J. L. Tackett (✉)  
Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St.  
George Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 3G3  
e-mail: tackett@psych.utoronto.ca

T. Awong  
Department of Psychology, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria  
Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5B 2K3  
e-mail: tsasha.awong@ryerson.ca

uninterested in the more technical aspects of diagnostic nomenclature and assessment may not find these chapters particularly engaging. Nonetheless, Achenbach and Rescorla appropriately set forth the key issues differentiating these two approaches and provide necessary details for full comprehension of the discussion that follows.

The authors then move into the major portion of the text, which involves the culmination of cross-cultural findings from both the EBA and DBA to assessment of childhood psychopathology and salient correlates. Specifically, evidence is reviewed for cross-cultural differences on overall psychopathology scores, on correlates to psychopathology scores, and on problem patterns according to the different approaches. This evidence is first reviewed for the EBA domain and next for the DBA domain. On p. 69 of the text, the authors review their inclusion criteria, which specified a focus on research studies employing a minimum sample size of 300 participants per culture. This is notable because it is quite a strict threshold to meet, not only for previous research but also for future studies as well. While the authors provide justification for this cut-off from a psychometric perspective, it will be helpful to consider the future of cross-cultural research within a more practical perspective. One question facing cross-cultural researchers is how to conduct reliable and valid etic (or between-culture) studies within the limitations of resources that most researchers face.

Despite this strict criterion, Achenbach and Rescorla were able to include data from an impressive number of countries, particularly for their review of the EBA which focused heavily on data collected with the Achenbach family of instruments (e.g., the Child Behavior Checklist, or CBCL) but also included measures such as the Conners Rating Scales and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman 1997). Myriad specific findings of potential interest for further inquiry were reported (e.g., the highest externalizing behavior problems for girls were found in Iran and Jamaica across 21 cultures). Major themes were also noted, such as the tendency for externalizing behaviors to be more common in boys than girls while the reverse was true for internalizing behaviors. The correlates of behavior problems that were reviewed include socioeconomic status, marital status, diagnoses, referral status, genetic correlates, and findings for immigrant children, again focusing on the Achenbach family of instruments but including other measures when possible (i.e., when studies existed which met the inclusion criteria). Next, the authors examined evidence for “patterns” of problems across various cultures, as evidenced by cross-sectional statistical covariation via factor analytic investigations. Such work can provide an important link from etic to emic perspectives by directly testing the assumption that factor structures derived in one culture hold up well in other cultures (and if they do not, by shedding light on the specific cross-cultural differences that emerge).

As the authors move into discussion of these topics from the DBA context, they note the significantly lesser availability of relevant studies meeting their inclusion criteria. Achenbach and Rescorla do offer discussion into different research methods that have predominated DBA studies, and review the limited studies that have been conducted. Again, they offer expanded discourse around related issues key to assessment of childhood psychopathology such as differences in diagnostic decisions made by psychiatrists from different cultures, which also leads into the question of how clinician-determined decisions differ from information gleaned from other sources, and the comparison of categorical and dimensional frameworks. They discuss correlates of behavior problems within the DBA framework but again find a dearth of studies compared to those previously reviewed from the EBA vantage point. They include the topic of comorbidity in their discussion here. Next, Achenbach and Rescorla provide some direct comparison of findings from the EBA and DBA perspectives, particularly in terms of reliability, validity, and prevalence rates. They also dive into some of the more fundamental differences between the two approaches, such as their distinct organizational systems.

Toward the end of the text, Achenbach and Rescorla summarize some of the many challenges that face multicultural researchers interested in childhood behavior problems. Specifically, they discuss methodological hindrances such as the long-standing issue over how to deal with multiple informants as well as conceptual roadblocks such as the difficulty in identifying the most valid constructs to measure in a given culture. The authors finish their book by discussing some of the reasons they see for conducting multicultural research in the domain of childhood psychopathology. In these final words, they briefly describe some of the implications such work has for assessment, prevention, and treatment.

Although the book is comprehensive and effectively summarizes a vast array of international findings on child and adolescent psychopathology, some overall critical commentary on the text is warranted. The first consideration for interested readers is that the book’s title implies discussions of “multicultural understanding”; however, the volume does not explore in great detail how culture shapes the development of psychopathology in children. On p. 150, Achenbach and Rescorla briefly discuss acculturation of Turkish and Moroccan adolescents living in the Netherlands as a possible explanation for the rates of problem scores found among those groups. But beyond this, cross-cultural psychologists, psychiatrists, and clinicians may be left wanting for more analysis and interpretation of the many multicultural findings that are presented throughout the book. Ultimately, readers who are involved in cross-cultural research or practice will be left to ponder the meanings of

cultural similarities and differences reported in the book on their own.

As mentioned earlier in this report, Achenbach and Rescorla acknowledge the value of both emic and etic perspectives in cross-cultural psychology, and they are clear in stating that the findings presented in their book are based on an etic, or comparative, approach. In particular, the EBA approach to assessing problems in children and adolescents is described by the authors as beneficial because it allows direct comparisons in a relatively objective way. However, many developmental psychologists have challenged the idea that comparative research is objective (e.g., Garcia Coll et al. 1996; Greenfield 1994). And, in a recent Special Issue of the journal *Child Development*, the editors urged researchers to focus on identifying causal pathways through which various cultural factors impact child development, rather than identifying mere differences or similarities (Quintana et al. 2006; see also Parron 1997). Given these challenges, future directions for later editions of this book, or for other volumes exploring multicultural assessment of psychopathology in children, should consider supplementing the findings based on an etic approach with studies that have used an emic, or within-culture, approach. As noted by Gielen (2000), neither perspective alone is advantageous, but both perspectives together can provide compelling information about culture and development. Achenbach and Rescorla have done an impressive job of compiling vast amounts of data based on a comparative framework, and the next steps are to identify (1) the extent to which we should consider cultural differences as causative in child psychopathology (e.g., Bird 1996) and, after that, (2) how relevant cultural differences affect the measurement, reporting, and expression of particular disorders in childhood and adolescence.

In line with the first point above, culture provides one of the important contexts in which development occurs. And within particular cultures, there are often central issues that face individuals growing up in that culture—yet that unique combination of “issues” may not be key for individuals in other cultures (Chao and Tseng 2002; McAdoo 2002). In light of these differences, providing a de-contextualized account of multicultural research is, of course, undesirable. With regard to the second future direction, Achenbach and Rescorla set the stage well by discussing methodological discrepancies that may have accounted for some of the cultural differences reported in their book. For example, on p. 191, they draw the reader’s attention to the possibility that different completion rates and departures from standard interviewing practices in some countries contribute to differences between cultures. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is its focus on how methodology affects our knowledge of child psychopathology. While the book suggests that different methodological practices in different

cultures are a drawback because they hinder our ability to make valid comparisons, it should also be acknowledged that cultural customs, beliefs, and central issues inform researchers about the most appropriate way to gather information from individuals from those cultures. It has also been shown that cultural norms and beliefs about mental illness, mental health professionals, parenting, and children’s development impact the reporting of psychopathology in children (Vendlinski et al. 2006; Zwirs et al. 2006). Furthermore, cultural differences in social desirability and conformity also impact the assessment and reporting of psychopathology (Bird 1996). All in all, there are many issues to consider beyond those presented in the book; these issues, perhaps, move away from Achenbach and Rescorla’s focus, but nonetheless are important for a true multicultural understanding.

In summary, Achenbach and Rescorla present a comprehensive and well-written book covering a vast literature on assessment of childhood psychopathology across a number of cultures. With the expansive literature that is summarized here, many specific and potentially interesting findings were not discussed in detail (obviously, for reasons of necessity). However, the findings presented in this text provide a rich resource for future hypotheses and could serve as a useful tool in that regard for students and researchers in this area. Throughout the text, Achenbach and Rescorla repeatedly discuss such fundamental issues in the assessment of childhood psychopathology as combining information from multiple informants and using “top-down” versus “bottom-up” approaches to assessing behavior problems, expanding the scope of this book beyond the cross-cultural domain. This text provides a nice presentation of what we have learned so far, but more importantly, highlights how much we have to learn in working toward a multicultural understanding of childhood and adolescent mental health problems.

## References

- Achenbach, T. M., & McConaughy, S. H. (1997). *Empirically based assessment of child and adolescent psychopathology: Practical applications* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Alarcon, R. D., Alegria, M., Bell, C. C., Boyce, C., Kirmayer, L. J., Lin, K. M., et al. (2002). Beyond the funhouse mirrors: Research agenda on culture and psychiatric diagnosis. In D. J. Kupfer, M. B. First, & D. A. Regier (Eds.), *A research agenda for DSM-V* (pp. 219–281). Washington: American Psychiatric Association.
- Bird, H. R. (1996). Epidemiology of childhood disorders in a cross-cultural context. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 37, 35–49.
- Chao, R., & Tseng, V. (2002). Parenting of Asians. In M. Bornstein (Ed.) *Handbook of parenting: Vol 4, Social conditions and applied parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 59–94). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Garcia Coll, C., Crnic, K., Lamberty, G., Wasik, H., Jenkins, R., Garcia, H., et al. (1996). An integrative model for the study

- of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67, 1891–1914.
- Gielen, U. P. (2000). The cross-cultural study of human development: An opinionated historical introduction. In U. P. Gielen, & J. Roopnarine (Eds.) *Childhood and adolescence: Cross-cultural perspectives and applications* (pp. 3–45). Westport: Praeger.
- Goodman, R. (1997). The strengths and difficulties questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581–586.
- Greenfield, P. M. (1994). Independence and interdependence as developmental scripts: Implications for theory, research, and practice. In P. M. Greenfield, & R. R. Cocking (Eds.) *Cross-cultural roots of minority child development* (pp. 1–37). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McAdoo, H. P. (2002). African American parenting. In M. Bornstein (Ed.) *Handbook of parenting: Vol 4, Social conditions and applied parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 47–58). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Parron, D. L. (1997). The fusion of cultural horizons: cultural influences on the assessment of psychopathology on children. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1, 156–159.
- Quintana, S. M., Aboud, F. E., Chao, R. K., Contreras-Grau, J., Cross, W. E. Jr, Hudley, C., et al. (2006). Race, ethnicity, and culture in child development: contemporary research and future directions. *Child Development: Special Issue on Race, Culture, and Ethnicity in Child Development*, 77, 1129–1141.
- Vendlinski, M., Silk, J., Shaw, D., & Lane, T. (2006). Ethnic differences in relations between family process and child internalizing problems. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47, 960–969.
- Zwirs, B. W., Burger, H., Buitelar, J. K., & Schulp, T. W. (2006). Ethnic differences in parental detection of externalizing disorders. *European Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 15, 418–426.

Copyright of Journal of Youth & Adolescence is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.