

Self-reported Peaceful Conflict Resolution Behaviour in Iranian and Finnish Adolescents

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Abstract

The study investigated self-reported conflict behavior in 1,244 Iranian adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; *M* age = 12.7 years, *SD* = 2.1 years) and in 620 Finnish adolescents (324 boys and 296 girls; *M* age = 12.7 years, *SD* = 2.0). The adolescents filled in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire with items inquiring about how they behaved when they themselves were in conflict with their peers, and when they were witnessing conflicts between others. The results showed that the Iranian adolescents were more inclined than the Finnish ones to make compromises and resolve conflicts peacefully. This was in particular true for Iranian boys. The results are in line with Hofstede's (1980) cultural theory, according to which Iran is a typically collectivistic one, while Finland is a typically individualistic one.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, adolescents, Iran, Finland, individualistic and collectivistic societies

Introduction

The aim of the present study was to investigate styles of peaceful conflict resolution among adolescents in two countries, Iran and Finland. According to Hofstede's (1980) categorization system, the Iranian society may be seen as a typically collectivistic one, while the Finnish society is a typically individualistic one. This difference is likely to have consequences for patterns of conflict resolution, which might be observable or measurable not only in adults, but already among adolescents in school contexts.

The individual's way to relate to other members in the group is thought to be a key issue distinguishing between characteristics of societies. The individual's response patterns reflect the degree of individualism or collectivism. According to Hofstede (1980), in the individualistic society, one's self-concept is defined in individual terms whereas in the collectivistic society, an individual is defined with reference to a societal and cultural context. It has to do with how self-image is defined either in terms of "I" or "We". In collectivistic societies, individuals belong to the group that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. In individualistic societies, the main obligations are towards oneself and one's closest family.

Smith, Dugan and Trompenaars (1996) emphasize that the individual's obligations to society is a key item differentiating between individualism and collectivism. The degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members is the fundamental issue distinguishing between individualism and collectivism.

According to Hofstede (1980), the Iranian society is considered to be collectivistic, which manifests itself in close, long-term commitments to the member group, family, the extended family, or extended relationships. The society provides strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility and cares for members of their group. According to Hofstede (*ibid.*), Finland scores as a highly individualistic society, which means that individuals are primarily expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that the differences in values between collectivistic and individualistic societies predict individuals to choose different styles to manage conflict. Individualism values the goals, needs and rights of the

individual over the goals, responsibilities and obligations of the group; the case is contrariwise in regard to collectivism. Individuals in a collectivistic culture define themselves in terms of relationships that consider the group to be more important (Triandis, 1988).

Blake and Mouton (1964) presented the original so called dual concern model for handling of conflicts, also referred to as the "conflict grid," that describes styles for handling conflict within organizations based on two separate dimensions, "concern for people" and "concern for production". Several similar dual concern models have since emerged, most notably the ones by Hall (1969), Thomas and Kilmann (1974), Rahim (1983), Pruitt (1983), and Pruitt and Rubin (1986). These models are all based on some variation of "concern for self" and "concern for other", and, depending on how individuals score on these two dimensions, they can be categorized into four different styles of conflict resolution: contending, problem solving, yielding, and inaction (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Thomas and Kilmann (1974) described five styles of conflict resolution: competing (high concern for self, low concern for others); collaborating (high concern for both self and others); compromising (moderate concern for self and for others); accommodating (low concern for self and high for others); and avoiding (low concern for self and for others). The adaption of the dual concern model to Hofstede's categories of individualistic and collectivistic societies, people belonging to individualistic societies should score higher on behavior expressing the dimension "concern for self", while people living in collectivistic societies should be expected to score higher on behavior expressing the dimension "concern for others". Ting-Toomey (1988) suggests a connection between a collectivistic attitude and indirect communication such as an avoiding style of handling conflict, whereas individualistic societies should have a tendency towards direct modes of expression like a competing style of conflict resolution.

The present study should not be seen as a test of the applicability of the dual concern model to Hofstede's concepts of individualism and collectivism. There are certainly other aspects to the Iranian and Finnish societies besides this particular dimension. It is also notable that Hofstede regarded individualism and collectivism as two opposite poles on one dimension, while the dual concern model treats them as two different dimensions. Nevertheless, there seems to be some similarities between these two theoretical considerations.

Method

Sample

Data were collected from 1,244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age = 12.7 years, SD = 2.1 years) in two cities in Iran, Mashad (n = 644) and Eylam (n = 600) in both public (n = 636) and private schools (n = 608). Another sample was collected with the same method from 620 young adolescents (324 boys and 296 girls; M age = 12.7 years, SD = 2.0) in two cities in Finland, Larsmo (n = 260) and Jakobstad (n = 360). The Finnish data were collected only from public schools, since private schools are very rare in Finland. There was no age difference between the samples from the two countries. However, there was a slight but significant sex difference between males and females of the total aggregated sample (boys: M age = 12.8 years, SD = 2.1; girls: M age = 12.6, SD = 2.1) [$F_{(1, 1860)} = 4.46, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .002$]. Accordingly, age was kept as a covariate in the subsequent MANOVA analysis.

Instrument

Data were collected during school lessons by the use of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, with the same content in both countries. The questionnaire consisted of items pertaining to how often the adolescents claimed to behave in different ways in conflict situations with their peers at school, both in aggressive and non-aggressive manners. Here, only non-aggressive types of conflict behavior will be considered, i.e. peaceful means of conflict resolution. The respondents were asked to state how often, on a five-point scale ranging from 0 to 4 (0 = not at all, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = very often), they behaved as follows (a total of 11 items): *When I myself have been in conflict with others, I have:* (1) tried to convince the other that I am right; (2) tried to find compromises; (3) given in to the will of the other; (4) asked a third party (peer) for help; (5) not done anything about the situation; (6) tried to avoid situations where problems could arise; (7) tried to find new solutions; *Third-party intervention: when others have been in conflict with each other. I have:* (8) tried to calm down the situation; (9) tried to decide who was right; (10) tried to find out how the problem could be resolved; and (11) not involved myself in the conflicts between others. Since the items describe quite different ways of relating to conflicts, although all of them peacefully, it was not meaningful to add them together to a summed scale.

Ethical considerations

The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), as well as guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012).

Results

Means and standard deviations for males and females from Iran and Finland on the eleven variables in the study are presented in Table 1. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with age as covariate, country and sex as independent variables, and the eleven items measuring different types of non-aggressive behavior in conflict situations as dependent variables. The results are presented in Tables 2–4.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females from Iran and Finland on the Eleven Variables in the Study (N = 1,822).

| Variables in the Study | Finland | | Males | | Iran | | Males | |
|---|---------|------|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| <i>When I myself have been in conflict with others, I have ...</i> | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Tried to convince the other that I am right | 2.03 | 0.88 | 2.15 | 0.88 | 2.01 | 1.16 | 1.89 | 1.21 |
| 2. Tried to find compromises | 2.22 | 0.95 | 2.00 | 0.82 | 2.67 | 1.16 | 2.75 | 1.23 |
| 3. Given in to the will of the other | 1.90 | 0.85 | 1.84 | 0.79 | 2.23 | 1.96 | 2.01 | 1.16 |
| 4. Asked a third party for help | 1.46 | 0.90 | 1.37 | 0.91 | 1.98 | 0.81 | 1.85 | 1.28 |
| 5. Not done anything about the situation | 1.23 | 0.85 | 1.40 | 0.81 | 1.33 | 1.25 | 1.15 | 1.25 |
| 6. Tried to avoid situations where problems could arise | 2.20 | 0.98 | 2.12 | 0.96 | 2.76 | 2.24 | 2.69 | 1.44 |
| 7. Tried to find new solutions | 2.38 | 0.92 | 2.05 | 0.87 | 3.13 | 1.10 | 2.98 | 1.20 |
| <i>Third-party intervention when others have been in conflict with each other. I have ...</i> | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Tried to calm down the situation | 2.23 | 0.94 | 2.04 | 0.90 | 2.98 | 1.18 | 2.86 | 1.27 |
| 9. Tried to decide who was right | 0.94 | 0.86 | 1.15 | 0.88 | 2.92 | 1.19 | 2.85 | 1.31 |
| 10. Tried to find out how the problem could be solved | 2.01 | 0.87 | 1.78 | 0.87 | 2.40 | 1.34 | 2.43 | 1.38 |
| 11. Not involved myself in conflicts between others | 1.79 | 0.97 | 1.91 | 1.00 | 1.14 | 1.12 | 1.16 | 1.25 |

As Table 2–4 show, there were significant multivariate effects of age, country, sex, and the interaction between country and sex. Pertaining to sex differences, the univariate analyses showed that females overall scored higher on two items (7 and 8), and there was a tendency for them to score higher on one item (3). Pertaining to country, the univariate analyses showed that adolescents from Iran scored higher than their Finnish counterparts on seven of the eleven items (items no. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10). On two of the items (1 and 11), the Finnish adolescents scored higher; on one item (4) there was a tendency for the Iranian adolescents to score higher. On one item (5), there was no difference between the two countries (see Table 2). A clear pattern emerged. The two items on which the Finnish adolescents scored higher describe individualistic types of behavior, either trying to convince the other (1), or not involving oneself in others' conflicts (11). The Iranian adolescents, on the other hand, reported involving themselves significantly more often in peaceful means of conflict resolution, taking the other's perspective to a higher degree.

Regarding the interaction effect between country and sex, there were significant univariate effects on five items (1, 2, 5, 9, and 10). With respect to items no. 1, 5, and 9, Finnish males scored higher than Finnish females, while it was the other way around for the Iranian adolescents. With respect to items no. 2 and 10, Finnish females scored higher than Finnish males, while it was the opposite in the case of Iranian adolescents. These results indicate that Iranian boys, especially, seem to take responsibility for peaceful conflict resolution, while Finnish boys more than others appear to adhere to individualistic solutions to conflicts.

Table 2

Results of a Sex x Country Multivariate Analysis of Variance with Age as Covariate and Eleven Dependent Variables Measuring Behaviours in Conflict Situations (N = 1,822). Results Regarding **Sex Differences** Are Presented in This Table. For Results Regarding Country, see Table 3, and for the Interaction between Sex and Country, see Table 4. Means and SDs Are Presented in Table 1.

| | F | df | p ≤ | η ² | Group with Higher Mean |
|---|-------|----------|------|----------------|------------------------|
| Multivariate Effect of Age (covariate) | 17.98 | 11, 1807 | .001 | .099 | |
| Effect of Sex | | | | | |
| Multivariate analysis | 2.79 | 11, 1807 | .001 | .017 | |
| Univariate analyses | | | | | |
| <i>When I myself have been in conflict with others, I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 1. Tried to convince the other that I am right | 0.26 | 1, 1817 | ns | .000 | |
| 2. Tried to find compromises | 1.20 | " | ns | .001 | |
| 3. Given in to the will of the other | 3.14 | " | .076 | .002 | (Females) ^a |
| 4. Asked a third party for help | 0.16 | " | ns | .000 | |
| 5. Not done anything about the situation | 0.00 | " | ns | .000 | |
| 6. Tried to avoid situations where problems could arise | 0.76 | " | ns | .000 | |
| 7. Tried to find new solutions | 18.79 | " | .001 | .010 | Females |
| <i>Third-party intervention when others have been in conflict with each other. I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 8. Tried to calm down the situation | 6.61 | " | .010 | .004 | Females |
| 9. Tried to decide who was right | 1.04 | " | ns | .001 | |
| 10. Tried to find out how the problem could be solved | 2.50 | " | ns | .001 | |
| 11. Not involved myself in conflicts between others | 1.44 | " | ns | .001 | |

Note: a indicates a tendency towards a significant difference

Table 3

Results of a Sex x Country Multivariate Analysis of Variance with Age as Covariate and Eleven Dependent Variables Measuring Behaviours in Conflict Situations (N = 1,822). Results Regarding **Differences between Countries** Are Presented in This Table. For Results Regarding Sex Differences, see Table 2, and for the Interaction between Sex and Country, see Table 4. Means and SDs Are Presented in Table 1.

| | F | df | p ≤ | η ² | Group with Higher Mean |
|---|---------|----------|------|----------------|------------------------|
| Effect of Country | | | | | |
| Multivariate analysis | 123.96 | 11, 1807 | .001 | .430 | |
| Univariate analyses | | | | | |
| <i>When I myself have been in conflict with others, I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 1. Tried to convince the other that I am right | 8.05 | 1, 1817 | .005 | .004 | Finland |
| 2. Tried to find compromises | 122.15 | " | .001 | .063 | Iran |
| 3. Given in to the will of the other | 14.35 | " | .001 | .008 | Iran |
| 4. Asked a third party for help | 3.28 | " | .070 | .002 | (Iran) ^a |
| 5. Not done anything about the situation | 1.82 | " | ns | .001 | - |
| 6. Tried to avoid situations where problems could arise | 50.50 | " | .001 | .027 | Iran |
| 7. Tried to find new solutions | 252.26 | " | .001 | .122 | Iran |
| <i>Third-party intervention when others have been in conflict with each other. I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 8. Tried to calm down the situation | 199.64 | " | .001 | .099 | Iran |
| 9. Tried to decide who was right | 1069.67 | " | .001 | .371 | Iran |
| 10. Tried to find out how the problem could be solved | 74.33 | " | .001 | .039 | Iran |
| 11. Not involved myself in conflicts between others | 155.97 | " | .001 | .079 | Finland |

Note: a indicates a tendency towards a significant difference

Table 4

Results of a Sex x Country Multivariate Analysis of Variance with Age as Covariate and Eleven Dependent Variables Measuring Behaviours in Conflict Situations (N = 1,822). Results Regarding the **Interaction between Sex and Country** Are Presented in This Table. For Results Regarding Sex Differences, see Table 2, and for Differences between Countries, see Table 3. Means and SDs are presented in Table 1.

| | F | df | p ≤ | η _p ² | Group Differences in Scores |
|---|------|----------|------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Interaction Effect between Sex x Country</i> | | | | | |
| Multivariate analysis | 3.68 | 11, 1807 | .001 | .022 | |
| Univariate analyses | | | | | |
| <i>When I myself have been in conflict with others, I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 1. Tried to convince the other that I am right | 4.16 | 1, 1817 | .041 | .002 | a) |
| 2. Tried to find compromises | 7.36 | " | .007 | .004 | b) |
| 3. Given in to the will of the other | 1.67 | " | ns | .001 | - |
| 4. Asked a third party for help | 0.01 | " | ns | .000 | - |
| 5. Not done anything about the situation | 9.88 | " | .002 | .005 | a) |
| 6. Tried to avoid situations where problems could arise | 0.01 | " | ns | .000 | - |
| 7. Tried to find new solutions | 2.65 | " | ns | .001 | - |
| <i>Third-party intervention when others have been in conflict with each other. I have ...</i> | | | | | |
| 8. Tried to calm down the situation | 0.33 | " | ns | .000 | - |
| 9. Tried to decide who was right | 6.15 | " | .013 | .003 | c) |
| 10. Tried to find out how the problem could be solved | 4.88 | " | .027 | .003 | b) |
| 11. Not involved myself in conflicts between others | 0.77 | " | ns | .000 | - |

Note: a) Finnish males highest, Iranian males lowest, b) Iranian males highest, Finnish males lowest, c) Iranian females highest, Finnish females lowest

Discussion

The results of the study reveal a distinct pattern. Finnish adolescents scored higher than Iranian ones on the items (1) "I have tried to convince the other that I'm right", and (11) "I have not involved myself in conflicts between others", indicating a typically individualistic manner of relating to conflicts. The Iranian adolescents, on the other hand, scored higher than the Finnish ones on (2) "I have tried to find compromises", (3) "I have given in to the will of the other", (6), "I have tried to avoid situations where problems could arise", (7) "I have tried to find new solutions", (8) "I have tried to calm down the situation" (in the conflicts of others), (9) "I have tried to decide who was right" (in the conflicts of others), and (10) "I have tried to find out how the problem could be solved" (in the conflicts of others). That is, the Iranian adolescents showed much more willingness to compromise and solve conflicts peacefully than the Finnish adolescents did. That is, they showed a much more collectivistic way to relate to conflict resolution. These findings are in line with Hofstede's (1980) characteristics of Finland as being a predominantly individualistic culture, and Iran as being a predominantly collectivistic culture. Keeping the integrity of the group peacefully has a high priority in the Iranian society. It should be noted that Iranian boys scored particularly high on items no. 2 and 10. For some reason, they seem to take peaceful solutions of problems upon their shoulders even more so than Iranian girls.

One facilitating factor for this behaviour could be the role "collective shame" plays in Iranian culture. For Iranian children, it is considered shameful to bring problems between themselves and other children to teachers and parents to solve. They should be able to handle them themselves, within the group. Collectivism in Iranian society implies avoiding the collective shame which would be the case if adolescents bring conflicts higher up in the societal hierarchy (in this case, to teachers or parents) to judge and resolve conflicts within the peer group. The power of collective shame in a collectivistic society might be an incitement to engage people in taking responsibility to resolve conflicts within the group. Shame seems to have a higher weight in regulating social behaviour in a collectivistic society than in an individualistic one. In the Iranian society,

males have to carry more responsibility for solving social conflicts than females. This fact is mirrored in the higher scores for the Iranian males than females in problem solving behaviors in the present study.

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