Beliefs and expectations about the future of personal life and future of the world in a sample of Iranian and Canadian students
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Abstract

This study was aimed to assess expectations about future of personal life and future of the world among a sample of Iranian and Canadian students. 60 Iranians from Tehran and Shahid Beheshti Universities in Iran and and 62 Canadians from Carleton University in Canada completed a researcher made questionnaire asking their beliefs and expectations in four areas such as personal future, generational comparison, future of the world and personal life goals. The results showed that both Iranian and Canadian participants were more optimistic about their personal future than about the future of the world but Iranians were less optimistic about the future of the world than were Canadians. Both groups expect to be richer and have a higher quality of life than their parents, and both expect their children to have a lower quality of life than their parents and to be poorer than themselves. Cultural differences were found in the importance Iranians and Canadians attach to life goals. Results and implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Culture is a fuzzy and complicated construct which makes its definition also complicated (Riggio & Feldman, 2005). Culture touches on all aspects of our lives. It involves subjective and objective elements (Triandis, 1972). The subjective elements of culture are psychological and thus Culture influences many psychological processes, such as attitudes, beliefs, norms, opinions, values, and behaviors and perceptions of the future (Husman & Shell, 2008; Riggio & Feldman, 2005). Culture itself is also influenced by these beliefs, behaviours, and perceptions (Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Culture and individuals have reciprocal influence on each other; Individual needs and goals have social consequences and personal and collective goals may be interchangeable in shaping collective norms and values and practices that define the culture (Güth, Ploner, & Regner, 2009; Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Future time perception (FTP) is a process relates to the perception of the time and is rooted in social context and culture. The needs of individual turn to the goals within FTP (Husman & Shell, 2008). Research on the development of students' mental representations of the future has been begun (Suddendorf & Busby, 2005). Perception of the future has behavioral and motivational consequences and valuing of the future has been shown to be associated with adaptive behavior and positive motivation like

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academic achievement study persistence and individual goals (Husman & Shell, 2008; Malka & Covington, 2005). In theoretical terms, individual goal setting is related to motivational processes and probability of goal realization is can lead to two evaluative processes of society and culture: first, the context which facilitate successful development, second, the structure of given society (Malmberg, Ehman, & Lithen, 2005).

One way social psychologists assess the differences in beliefs, expectations, and personal goals in different cultures and understand relationships with different people is by classifying them into categories that approximate the psychological categories we create (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). The ingroup–outgroup classification is one of the oldest and best studied in social psychology and sociology and recently in cognitive investigation of neural mechanism of intergroup (Bruneau & Saxe, 2010). The ingroup–outgroup distinction is applicable to all cultures and societies. Recognizing these similarities and differences forms the basis for understanding how culture can influence ingroup and outgroup relationships and guide our social behaviors (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). Allport (1954) recognized that attachment to one’s ingroups does not necessarily require hostility toward outgroups (Brewer, 1999). Over the years, Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis regarding the positive effects of intergroup contact on outgroup attitudes has gained strong empirical support. However, according to recent longitudinal and meta-analytic studies with adult and adolescent samples (Binder et al, 2009; Feddes et al., 2009; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), the effects of intergroup contact on outgroup attitudes are small, or even nonexistent, among minority members; whereas they are significant and positive among majority group members (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Mähönen, & Liebkind, 2010). Studies have largely overlooked the interplay between social norms, intergroup contact and attitudes (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2010). There is strong empirical evidence suggesting that both perceived and actual parental (e.g., Barrett, 2007) and peer norms (e.g., Nesdale et al., 2007) affect children’s and adolescents’ outgroup attitudes (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2010). Gender difference has also been discussed in attitudes toward ingroups and outgroups (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2009).

Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that people of different cultures perceive relationships differently. These differences highlight the diverse ways in which people of different cultures can perceive ingroups and outgroups, and the different psychological meanings attributed to them. These differences are related to differences in cultural values (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). Triandis and his colleagues (1988) have examined how self–ingroup and self–outgroup relationships differ across cultures by using the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism to understand cultural differences in social behavior. Individualism–collectivism (IC) is one of the important social psychological dimensions of culture which refers to the extent a culture promotes individual needs, wishes, desires, and values over group and collective ones. In individualistic cultures like USA and Canada, we can see these features: People have more ingroups, People are not as attached to any single ingroup, because there are numerous ingroups to which they can be attached, Survival of the individuals and the society is more dependent on the successful and effective functioning of individuals rather than groups, People make relatively fewer distinctions between ingroups and outgroups, and emotionally suppress expressions of negative feelings and more pressure to display positive feelings. There is a greater degree of harmony, cohesion, and cooperation within their ingroups. In collectivistic cultures such as Asian countries we can see these features: People have fewer ingroups, People are very attached to the ingroups they belong to, Survival of the individuals and the society is more dependent on the successful and effective functioning of the groups rather than individuals, People make greater distinctions between ingroup and outgroup and emotionally are encouraged to express negative feelings, and suppress display of positive feelings reserved for ingroups. There is less harmony and cohesion within groups and place less importance on conformity of individuals to group norms (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). This difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in ingroup membership has important consequences in beliefs, expectations, wishes, desires, and values. Yet the prevailing approach to the study of ethnocentrism, ingroup bias, and prejudice presumes that ingroup love and outgroup hate are reciprocally related (Brewer, 1999). These differences in the meaning of ingroup and outgroup relationships produce differences in the types of behaviors and emotions people engage in when interacting with others (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007).

A major goal of social psychology is to find links between what goes on in the world and what goes on inside our heads. The fact that we are aware of our own beliefs, feelings, and desires makes us experts on where they come from and differences seen culturally help us recognize cross cultural differences in beliefs, feelings, desires and expectations (Riggio & Feldman, 2005). Since individual needs and goals have social consequences, understanding of individual need, values, goals, beliefs and expectations allow us to formulate norms and values in
different cultures. In addition, beliefs about future are associated to different behavioral and motivational consequences and for these reasons research on beliefs and perceptions across time perspective have useful outcomes (Husman & Shell, 2008). Considering that Cultures are defined by a variety of things and these things include beliefs and behaviors (Schaller & Crandall, 2004), and regarding few investigations done in attitudes and beliefs about future (Suddendorf & Busby, 2005), this study attempts to assess beliefs and expectations about future of personal life and future of the world among a sample of Iranian and Canadian students in order to compare them regarding the ingroup/outgroup attitudes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Sixty Iranian (23 males, 29 females) and 62 Canadian university students participated in this study. Canadians were attending Carleton University in Ottawa; Iranians were attending Tehran University or Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran. The mean age for Canadians was 20.9 and the mean age for Iranians was 20.2. All Iranian participants were Muslem. Canadian students identified themselves as Catholic (19%), Protestant (36%) Jewish (14%) and other (31%).

2.2. Instruments

The questionnaire for this study was developed by the researchers. The data collected included background information that asking questions such as gender, age, education, religiosity and television use. This was followed by four sets of questions. The first set of questions was related to participant’s beliefs about their personal future and asked questions such as, “what are the chances you will marry someone from a different culture than your culture in the next 10 years”. The second set of questions was related to generational comparisons and asked participants to rate how they see their future quality of life compared to the quality of their parents’ life and their future children. The third set consisted of questions related to the participants’ beliefs about the future of the world, and the fourth set consisted of questions related to participants’ own life goals.

2.3. Procedure

University students from Carleton University in Canada and Tehran and Shahid Beheshti Universities in Iran were invited to take part in this study. Those who approved, gave verbal consent prior to commencement of the study and completed the self-report questionnaires. Participant were debriefed about the study and thanked for taking part.

2.4. Statistical analysis

The data was analyzed employing descriptive tables and figures in order to compare differences in study variables in both groups. T-test was used in order to compare the means of both groups in areas of generational comparison, beliefs about the future of the world, and importance of life goals.

3. Results

3.1. Beliefs about personal future

The results showed differences between Canadians and Iranians regarding the planning of their future family life. As shown in table 1, Iranians estimate of getting married in the next ten years were higher than that of Canadians. Moreover, Iranian estimates of marriage outside their own culture were lower than for Canadians. Concerning the number of children desired, Canadians estimated having more children than did Iranians. We also asked participants to estimate the chances of being rich or poor twenty years from now. Iranians estimated higher chances of being rich than did Canadians. Results showed similar findings when we asked participants to report how poor they saw themselves twenty years from now. Iranians again reported higher estimates of being poor
twenty years from now than did Canadians. When asking participants to estimate how happy they believed they would be twenty years from now, Iranians estimates were much lower than were Canadians. Canadians expected to live longer than did Iranians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal future</th>
<th>Iran/Mean percentage</th>
<th>Canada/Mean percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the chances you will get married?</td>
<td>76.50</td>
<td>64.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are the chances you will marry someone from a different culture?</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>38.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How many children do you wish to have?</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( P < 0.05 \)

3.2. Generational comparisons

We also asked students to rate how they see their future quality of life compared to the quality of their parents’ life and children. The results revealed that notably Iranians and Canadians believed that they would be richer and have a higher quality of life than their parents, and that their children would have a lower quality of life and be poorer than themselves. There were small cultural differences: In comparison to Canadians, Iranians believed they would be significantly richer than their children (\( t (120) = -2.0, p <.05 \)) and have a significantly higher quality of life (\( t (120) = -2.1, p<0.05 \)) than their parents.

3.3. Beliefs about the future of the world

Comparing the scores of both groups, the results showed that Iranians were less optimistic about the future of the world than were Canadians. Iranians estimates about a third world war, a war in their own country and the chances of a worldwide pandemic were significantly higher than were for Canadians. Iranians estimates regarding the future availability of oil supplies and the disappearance of their country from the world map were also significantly higher than were for Canadians. Surprisingly, however, Iranians were more optimistic than Canadians when asked to estimate the possibility that a cure for cancer would be found, that there would be world peace and that we would all speak a common language.

3.4. Importance of life goals

Lastly, we asked both Canadians and Iranians questions regarding their most important life goals. As shown in table 2, we found that while Canadians considered important to live a long life and to have a good marriage, Iranians considered important to be rich, to lead a peaceful life, to be honest, to be well educated, to be famous, and to lead a religious life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Goals</th>
<th>Iran</th>
<th>Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well Educated</td>
<td>6.71 *</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Marriage</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>6.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Honest</td>
<td>6.67 *</td>
<td>6.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Children</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>6.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a peaceful life</td>
<td>6.65 *</td>
<td>5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have good friends</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>6.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting life</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>5.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of present study was to investigate Canadian and Iranian young adults’ views, beliefs and expectations about their personal future and the future of the world. The study found cultural differences between groups as expected. Many of these differences reflect well known disparities in the two cultures, as there is reciprocal relationship between beliefs and cultures and considering that individual beliefs and goals lead to social consequences and can define cultures (Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Iranians, for example, place far greater emphasis on traditional family life than do Canadians. Indeed, in this study we found that for Iranians it is important to get married in the near future, to marry within their own culture and to have children. Canadians, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on having a long life and less emphasis on having a good marriage. Additionally, Canadians are more optimistic about their personal future than are Iranians. Indeed, Canadians, contrary to Iranians, expect to be happy, to live a long life, and to be rich. Surprisingly, however, Canadians as well as Iranians, also expect to be poorer twenty years from now. Iranians were less optimistic about the future of the world than were Canadians. It can be explained that Iranians’ pessimism could reflect the falling economy of Iran and the general pessimism that now infects the country. Both Iranians and Canadians believed that they would be richer and have a higher quality of life than their parents and their children. There is also difference between the two groups in importance of life goals. Scharell and Crandall (2004) proposed that how individual goals shape culture. According to this explanation, differences in goals between Iranians and Canadians reflect differences in their cultures. Many of these differences reflect well known differences in the two cultures

An explanation about Iranians’ pessimism, suggest that as individuals in collective cultures are emotionally encouraged to express negative feelings; suppress display of positive feelings reserved for ingroups (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007) thus more pessimism is expressed by Iranians. Therefore, negative emotions can be resulted in negative thoughts (Beck, 1976). Another explanation can be offered by role of language and cognition in cultural products like beliefs and goals. Recent advances in cognitive psychology and cultural studies reveal that use of language in human interactions play an important role in the evaluation and maintenance of cultural representations such as beliefs, individual goals, and expectations (Scharell & Crandall, 2004). According to this explanation, expression of negative feelings verbally can affect evaluation of self and future negatively as is expressed by pessimism in Iranians. The differences in personal goals between Canadians and Iranians would be accounted partly by the individualism–collectivism (IC). “Moral life” and “Religious life” are two life goals which are more emphasized on by Iranians than by Canadians. In collectivistic cultures including many Asian and South American cultures, individuals have greater commitments to their groups such as religious groups they belong to (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). In addition, people of collectivistic cultures are more apt to adopt the advice of others, especially those in authority positions within that culture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007), and religion is an authority figure, thus is more accepted by them. “Be Intelligent” and “Exciting life” are two life goals which are more emphasized on by Canadians than by Iranians which reflect the individualistic tendency of Canadians and is consistent with some

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Goal</th>
<th>Mean Iranian</th>
<th>Mean Canadian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable life</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral life</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get along</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Intelligent</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>6.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Travel</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>5.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be rich</td>
<td>5.27*</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting life</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long life</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious life</td>
<td>3.85*</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invent something</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Remembered</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be famous</td>
<td>3.03*</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do something important</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>5.67*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p< 0.05
needs such as survival of the individuals and successful functioning of individuals in an individualistic culture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007).

The similarities between the two groups indicate that both groups have pessimistic views about future of the world which reflect the pessimistic views that young generations have about the future of the world. Both Canadians and Iranians believed they would be better off than their parents and their future children. As cited by Manaster, Greer and Kleiber (1985), similar findings support Gillespie and Allport’s (1955) assumption that “youths’ attitudes, values and philosophies of life reveal the impact of both national culture and the current situation”. Implying from results, by examining the students’ beliefs about their time and their own abilities, educational psychologists can help students how to manage the passage of the time (Husman & Shell, 2008). Social psychologists can also recognize the similarities and differences of cultures and their influence on ingroup and outgroup relationships (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007) and structure and context of given culture (Malmberg et al., 2005). Further research is suggested to investigate the mediators to the relationship between culture and the world and future. Prospective studies should also consider normal population from different ages.

References