

Similarities and differences in cultural values between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students

Abdolghani Abdollahimohammad¹, Rogayah Jaafar², Ahmad F. Abul Rahim²

ABSTRACT

Background: Cultural values are invisible and relatively constant in societies. The purpose of the present study is to find diversities in cultural values of Iranian and Malaysian nursing students.

Materials and Methods: Convenience sampling method was used for this comparative-descriptive study to gather the data from full-time undergraduate degree nursing students in Iran and Malaysia. The data were collected using Values Survey Module 2008 and were analyzed by independent *t*-test.

Results: The means of power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance values were significantly different between the two study populations.

Conclusions: The academics should acknowledge diversities in cultural values, especially in power distance index, to minimize misconceptions in teaching-learning environments.

Key words: Cultural values, Iran, Malaysia, nursing students

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a broad concept with more than 160 definitions.^[1] The most cited definition is of Hofstede: “The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.”^[2] This definition implies that culture is not a characteristic of individuals, but encompasses a number of people with the same education and life experience.^[3]

Cultural differences manifest in practices and values. Practices are visible and unstable, and include symbols (words, gestures, picture, or objects), heroes, and rituals. Values include power distance (PD), individualism (IDV), masculinity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UA), long-term orientation (LTO), and indulgence versus restraint (IVR). They are core of the culture and considerably stable. People achieve them unconsciously, but implicitly through socialization in the early period of life.^[3,4]

The number of international students, especially Iranians, is increasing in Malaysia. The Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia declared that about 10% of foreign students in 2009 were Iranians. The number of Malaysian students who pursue higher education abroad is increasing as well.^[5] In addition, the variety of international students with different cultural backgrounds may lead to cultural synergy or sometimes may cause misunderstanding. Therefore, academic staffs should improve their knowledge of cultural diversities to understand students' behavior better and minimize the misunderstandings in educational system. Thus, this study helps not only academics to gain a deep perspective of cultural values and associated behaviors in educational systems but also students who are interested in studying abroad.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This comparative-descriptive study was conducted in 2009 to compare the cultural values of full-time undergraduate degree nursing students in Zabol Medical University (ZBMU), Sistan and Baluchestan, Iran and University Sains Malaysia (USM), Kelantan, Malaysia. Convenience sampling method was used to gather the data from the two study populations. The participants were born and lived in Iran or Malaysia. To compare the means of two study populations, *a priori* sample size was estimated based on α of 0.05, power (1- β) of 0.80, and a medium effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.5. The minimum required sample size was 64 per group for a two-tailed *t*-test study. Overall, 241 nursing students participated in the current study.

¹Department of Nursing, Nursing and Midwifery school, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Zabol, Sistan and Baluchestan, Iran, ²Department of Medical Education, Medical School, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia

Address for correspondence: Dr.Abdolghani Abdollahimohammad, Department of Nursing, Nursing and Midwifery School, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Ferdowsi St, Zabol, Iran.
E-mail: abdalqani@gmail.com

Submitted: 11-Jul-13; Accepted: 20-Jan-14

Data were collected using Values Survey Module 2008 (VSM08) questionnaire. The VSM08 was developed for comparing culturally influenced values and sentiments of similar respondents from two or more countries, or sometimes regions within countries, by Hofstede and colleagues. The VSM08 consists of 28 questions for 7 cultural values, with 4 questions for each value. The cultural values include PD, IDV, MAS, UA, LTO, and IVR. The questions were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale. The score of each cultural value was derived from the mean score of the questions based on the formula that was proposed by Hofstede. Every value normally has a range of about 100 points. The PD index formula, for instance, is “35 (m07 - m02) + 25 (m23 - m26).”^[6] The VSM08 is a reliable and valid questionnaire. The Cronbach’s α for cultural values ranged from 0.715 to 0.842.^[6]

The questionnaire was translated into Farsi and back-translated to English by two bilingual experts. The homogeneity of original and back-translated questionnaires was then evaluated by the researcher. After receiving the consenting approval from the ethical board of USM, Malaysian and Iranian nursing students were invited to respond to English and Farsi versions, respectively. Informed consent was achieved through a cover letter. The questionnaires were distributed during regular class hours to achieve an optimum response rate. The independent *t*-test with SPSS 17 was run to analyze the differences in cultural values between the study populations.

RESULTS

Of the participants, 123 were Iranians and 118 were Malaysians. The response rate was 94.5%. Majority of the Malaysian nursing students were females (99.2%) and Muslims (78.8%). Most of the Iranian nursing students were females (57.8%) and Muslims (99.2%) as well. The average age of the Iranian and Malaysian nursing students was 21.38 (0.14) and 22.66 (0.32) years, respectively.

Table 1 shows a significant difference in the means of PD ($P < 0.001$), IDV ($P < 0.001$), and UA ($P = 0.038$) between the Iranian and Malaysian nursing students. However, there was no significant difference in the means of masculinity, LTO, and indulgence versus restraint values ($P > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The mean difference of PD was 44 for the two study populations and was intact compared with Hofstede’s^[7] study. The findings supported Hofstede and Hofstede’s^[2] argument that differences between countries regarding PD are static and move to low PD levels without changing mutual ranking. Hofstede^[2,8] stated that Malaysia, compared to Iran, is a high PD country. High PD societies, compared to low PD ones, are teacher-centered in the educational system. Students may have to follow the teacher’s outline, stand up when teachers enter the classroom, and speak up in class only when invited to. Teachers are treated with respect and never publicly contradicted or criticized.^[2,7]

The IDV index was significantly different between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students, but both are collectivist countries.^[2,7] The findings supported the arguments by Yong^[9] and Zhou^[10] that the Asian countries are collectivists. In the collectivist societies, the purpose of education is to keep dependency among people. Confrontations are avoided or at least formulated not to hurt anyone. Learning is more often seen as a one-time process and the emphasis is to learn “how to do” things.^[2] The mean difference of UA was 18 between the study populations and was relatively intact when compared to Hofstede’s^[7] study. Iran is a high UA country, but Malaysia is a low one.^[2,7] Students in high UA societies favor structured learning situations with precise objectives, detailed assignments, and strict timetables than those in low UA societies. They are also more resistant to change and unknown situations. Students expect the teachers to be experts and have all the answers. Cryptic academic language is respected. Intellectual disagreement in academic matters is felt as personal disloyalty.^[2,7,11]

Table 1: Comparison of cultural values between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students

Cultural values	Iranian (n=123)		Malaysian (n=118)		Mean difference	95% CI	t-test ^a (df)	P value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD				
PDI	9.31	62.90	53.86	54.53	-44.55	-59.51, -29.58	-5.88 (239)	<0.001
IDV	10.61	33.56	28.90	44.64	-18.29	-28.35, -8.23	-3.58 (217.05)	<0.001
MAS	1.22	46.42	10.80	46.76	-9.58	-21.41, 2.24	-1.60 (239)	0.112
UAI	33.74	71.07	15.51	64.19	18.23	1.02, 35.44	2.09 (239)	0.038
LTO	37.97	68.17	28.01	61.02	9.96	-6.48, 26.40	1.19 (239)	0.234
IVR	33.01	63.79	45.38	62.60	-12.37	-28.42, 3.67	-1.52 (239)	0.132

^aIndependent t-test, PDI: Power distance index, IDV: Individualism, MAS: Masculinity, UAI: Uncertainty avoidance index, LTO: Long-term orientation, IVR: Indulgence versus restraint, SD: Standard deviation, CI: Confidence interval

There was no significant difference between the Iranian and Malaysian scores in masculinity index; both countries are feminine.^[2,7] In feminine societies, there is no difference in the emotional roles between men and women. Both men and women are tender, nurturing, modest, and concerned with the quality of life. The average students are considered the norm. Any attempt to be excellent is easily ridiculed and leads to jealousy. Failure is relatively a minor incident. Teachers praise and encourage weaker students rather than good ones. Teachers' friendliness and social skills and students' social adaptation play a bigger role in evaluation.^[2,7]

There was no difference between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students regarding LTO index. This result is out of line with Hofstede and Hofstede's argument that the LTO index score of Iranians was lower than that of Malaysians.^[2] However, short-term orientation culture is predominant in both countries. The short-term orientation correlates with self-enhancement, which reduces students' interest in self-improvement activities.^[8] Students tend to remain immutable, less cooperative, and highly competitive. They also seek positive information about themselves and dismiss negative thoughts about their own selves.^[12]

There was also no significant difference in indulgence versus restraint value between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students. The results indicate both countries are restraint. People in restraint societies are hardworking and neglectful of their own needs.^[12] Nursing students have less time to enjoy life because of the nursing curriculum.

Although the study was established based on a well-known cultural theory and compared nursing students in two Asian countries, the results cannot be generalized across other regions and programs offered within Iran and Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

A close relationship between students and instructors, with less ambiguity in educational system is more favorable for Iranian nursing students. Besides, the major role of nursing schools in forming feminine characteristics among students is significant. The academics should acknowledge the diversities in behaviors because of cultural differences, especially in PD and UA indices, to minimize misconceptions in educational systems.

The main message of this study is that behaviors may be similar or different based on cultural backgrounds and the students and academics must acknowledge these diversities to improve themselves and the educational systems.

Despite limitations, the current study could be an important basis for cross-cultural studies in nursing education, especially

for Iranians and Malaysians, to develop or replicate similar research within different populations in their own settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge late Lim Phaik Hooi for her constant wise guidance, Kamarul Imran Musa for the counseling services with data analysis, Hairul Nizam Ismail and Mahmoud Bamery for their comments on instrumentation, all academic staffs in the Department of Medical Education and the nursing schools for their help and cooperation, and last but not the least, the nursing students for their cooperation in getting such relevant data.

REFERENCES

- Hanusch F. A product of their culture: Using a value systems approach to understand the work practices of journalists. *IntCommun Gazette* 2009;71:613-26.
- Hofstede G, Hofstede GJ. *Culture and organization: Software of the mind*. 2nd ed. New York, USA: McGraw Hill Companies; 2005.
- Reimann M, Lünemann UF, Chase RB. Uncertainty avoidance as a moderator of the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. *J Ser Res* 2008;11:63-73.
- Nazarian A, Atkinson PM. The relationship between national culture and organisational effectiveness: The case Iranian private sector organisations. *Int J Manage Mark Acad* 2012;1:73-81.
- Karim F. Unfair to blame foreign students. *New-Straits-Times* 2009. Available from: http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/articles/4putr/Article/. [Last accessed on 2009 Jan 12].
- Hofstede G, Hofstede GJ, Minkov M, Vinken H. *Values survey module 2008 Manual*. [Questionnaire] 2008;1-17. Available from: <http://feweb.uvt.nl/center/hofstede/VSM08.html>. [Last cited on 2008 May 12].
- Hofstede G. *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. 2nd ed. London, England: Sage publications, Inc; 2001.
- Hofstede G, Hofstede GJ, Minkov M. *Culture and organizations: Software of the mind-International cooperation and its importance for survival*. London, England: The McGraw Hill Companies; 2010.
- Yong FL. A study on the cultural values, perceptual learning styles, and attitudes toward oracy skills of Malaysian tertiary students. *Eur J Soc Sci* 2010;13:478-92.
- Zhou X. Cultural dimensions and framing the internet in China: A cross-cultural study of newspapers' coverage in Hong Kong, Singapore, the US and the UK. *Int Commun Gazette* 2008;70:117-36.
- Joy S, Kolb DA. Are there cultural differences in learning style? *Int J Intercult Relat* 2009;33:69-85.
- Minkov M. What makes us different and similar: A new interpretation of the World Values Survey and other cross-cultural data. Bulgaria: Klasika y Stil Publishing House; 2007.

How to cite: Abdollahimohammad A, Jaafar R, Rahim AFA. Similarities and differences in cultural values between Iranian and Malaysian nursing students. *Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research* 2014;19:542-4.

Source of Support: The manuscript was derived from a PhD thesis. **Conflict of Interest:** Nil