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Physical Punishment, Aggression, Victimization and Cyberbullying among Iranian Adolescents





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Abstract

The studies in the current thesis investigated adolescent aggressive behavior and victimization from peer aggression (Studies I and II), cyber bullying (Study III), and peaceful conflict resolution (Study IV) in school settings in present-day Iran. Study I and II focused on certain forms of extreme brutal physical punishment at home and at school by adults, and their relationship to aggressive behavior and victimization at school. In Studies III and IV, the findings from Iran were compared with similar data from an adolescent sample from Finland.

Study I was based on data from 1,244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age = 12.7 years, SD = 2.1 years) collected in two cities, Mashad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran. It investigated whether pupils in the schools reported having been exposed to extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by parents, such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones. The results showed that 6.5% of the respondents had had their hands burnt (6.5 % of respondents), and bones broken (4.9 %) as punishment at home. These adolescents scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to all types of aggressive behavior at school that were measured: physical, verbal, and indirect aggression. Notably, EPP had strong associations with the most severe forms of school aggression measured in the study, i.e. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain.

Study II investigated how common it was for pupils to experience extreme forms of physical punishment at school, such as the burning of hands, or having their bones broken, by teachers in Iran. Data were collected from the same sample of 1,244 young adolescents from the cities of Mashad and Eylam in Iran. The results showed that 3.8% of the pupils had had their hands burnt, and 4.8% had had their bones broken by teachers, as punishment. The respondents who had experienced such extreme punishments scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to almost all types of aggressive behavior at school. The study found clear associations between extreme physical punishment (EPP) by teachers and extreme forms of aggression (both perpetration and victimization) at school, such as. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain.

Study III investigated differences in frequencies of both victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying among adolescents from Iran and

Finland. Data from a total of 1,250 adolescents (615 boys, 635 girls) of three age groups (10, 13, and 15 years of age) were collected in Mashhad, Iran ($n = 630$) and Ostrobothnia, Finland ($n = 620$). The questionnaire consisted of variables measuring various types of cyberbullying, such as sending nasty text messages, nasty e-mails, and putting up nasty pictures and films on internet. The findings of the study revealed clear cultural differences in cyberbullying patterns among adolescents of the two countries. Both victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying of all kinds were more frequent in Iran. Both sex and age differences also occurred, but they showed different patterns in Iran and Finland. Girls in Finland used cyberbullying significantly more than Finnish boys. In particular, Finnish girls sent nasty SMS messages, nasty e-mails, and put up humiliating pictures on the internet to a higher degree than Finnish boys. It appears that cyberbullying is a type of aggression that fits the mentality of Finnish girls. This sex difference was not found in Iran.

Study IV 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 four studies of the thesis indicate complex patterns of behavior that clearly differ from those of the comparison group of Finnish adolescents. Although there is no perfect theory of cultural differences, Hofstede's (1980) categories seem to be of aid when we try to explain these differences. Of Hofstede's dimensions, there is one which in particular seems to reflect the difference between the behavior of the Iranian and Finnish adolescents best, namely the dimension of collectivism and individualism. Iran is, according to Hofstede, a collectivistic society, while Finland, as most Western countries, is more individualistic. Another dimension which may be applied is that of power distance: Iran is more hierarchical with a greater power distance than Finland. The findings of the four studies appears to be, to a great extent, explainable in these terms.

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Hassan Jaghoory

List of Original Publications

Study I

Jaghoory, H., Björkqvist, K., & Österman, K. (2013). Extreme physical punishment in the home and its associations with aggression and victimization at school: A study among young adolescents in Iran. *Pediatrics & Therapeutics*, 3:5. doi: 10.4172/2161-0665.1000182

Study II

Jaghoory, H., Björkqvist, K., & Österman, K. (2015). Extreme physical punishment by teachers and its associations with aggression and victimization at school: A study among young adolescents in Iran. *Pediatrics & Therapeutics*, 5:1. doi: 10.4172/2161-0665.1000228

Study III

Jaghoory, H., Björkqvist, K., & Österman, K. (2015). Cyberbullying among adolescents: A comparison between Iran and Finland. *Child & Adolescent Behavior*, 3:6. doi: 10.4172/2375-4494.1000265

Study IV

Jaghoory, H., Björkqvist, K., & Österman, K. (2018). Self-reported peaceful conflict resolution behaviour in Iranian and Finnish adolescents. Accepted for publication in *European Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Research*, 12, 261-266. doi: 10.26417/ejser.v12i1.p261-266

Author contribution

The first author is responsible for the collection of all data, and for writing the main part of the text. The statistical analyses have been conducted jointly within the research group.

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Original Publications

1 Introduction

1.1 Aim of the Study

The overall aim of this thesis is to shed light on adolescent aggressive behavior and victimization from peer aggression in school settings in present-day Iran. This overall aim was divided into sub-aims: The first one was to investigate whether certain forms of extreme physical punishment (EPP), such as the burning of hands and breaking of bones, both (a) at home by a parent and (b) at school by a teacher, still occur in Iran, and how frequent they in that case are. These questions will be covered in articles I and II of the thesis. The second aim was to study whether there is an association between such extreme punishment by teachers and parents and (a) aggressive behavior against peers in school, and (b) victimization from peer aggression at school. These questions will also be covered in articles I and II.

A third aim of the thesis is to compare the frequencies of cyberbullying among adolescents in Iran and Finland (article III). A fourth aim is to compare peaceful conflict resolution behavior among adolescent in Iran and Finland (article IV). Thus, articles II and IV are cross-national comparisons. The rationale behind these two studies is that there are known cultural differences between the two countries: According to Hofstede's (1980) criteria, Iran is a collectivistic, and Finland an individualistic country. Finland is a developed, Western-style democracy, while Iran is a developing country. Accordingly, adolescents from the two countries could also be expected to differ from each other in behavioral aspects.

The primary plan of the researcher was to collect data in five different geographical areas with different socioeconomically levels and cultures in Iran. Rapid economic and political changes, in combination with lack of trustful information from Iran's administrations, made it difficult to follow this plan. Additionally, due to resource limitation and lack of political security, the investigation was therefore limited to two states, one in the eastern and the other in the western part of Iran.

1.2 Background



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of ethnic minorities in Iran.

Iran is one of the largest countries in the Middle East with over 81 million inhabitants. It has borders to the north with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan, to the east with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to the west with Turkey and Iraq. It has two coastlines, to the north with the Caspian Sea and to the south with the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Iran is culturally and socioeconomically very diverse, with several different languages: Persian and Persian dialects are spoken by 58%; Turkish and Turkish dialects by 27%; Kurdish by 9%; Lori by 2%; Baluchi by 1%; Arabic by 1%; and other languages by 2%. With respect to religion, it is predominantly an Islamic country: Muslims constitute 98% of the population (Shi'a 89%, Sunni 9%), and other religions (Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i) only 2% (Hassan, 2007).

During the antiquity, Iran was a great power who competed with the Greeks about the hegemony in the Middle East. One of the earliest and most successful attempts to establish a global, ethnically diverse

community occurred during the sixth century BCE on the Iran plateau (Zarghami, 2013). This was largely due to the policy of tolerance and the open-minded outlook provided by King Cyrus. His general policy was to avoid the infliction of harm upon ordinary people, to spare enemy leaders, and allowing conquered people to keep their own lifestyle after their defeat (Zarghami, 2013). Throughout history, Iran has also experienced periods when it was conquered, and its culture has twice been on the verge of being destroyed. During the conquest by the Arabs in 650 AD, when the religion was changed from Zoroastrism to Islam, all libraries and books were burnt. The Persians were forbidden to speak their own language (Pahlavi Persian). The brutal Mongol invasion in 1219–1221 AD was an even heavier blow to the Iranian culture (Salasi, 2008, p. 54). The mentality of tolerance of the Iranians helped them to adapt themselves, and their culture and language survived. Great thinkers such as Rumi, Avicenna, Omar Khayam, and Zakariya Razi (Arsis) during the middle ages, and millions of highly educated Iranian youngsters in the diaspora around the world in recent decades are examples of the vitality of the Iranian culture.

The data collection took place in two cities, Mashad and Eylam. They were selected because they represent two very different cultural contexts.

Mashhad is the second largest city of Iran with over 3 million inhabitants. It is located in the northeast of the country. It has several universities, mosques, and it is considered to be the holiest city in Iran. The main ethnicity is Persian, and the main economic resources are tourism and food industry. It has more than 27 million visitors per year, mostly pilgrims visiting the holy sites of the city.

Eylam is located in the western part of Iran close to the border with Iraq. It has an estimated 155,000 inhabitants, the majority being of Kurdish ethnicity. The Eylam province suffered heavily during the Iran–Iraq war, with no economic infrastructure left intact. Due to seven years of war, many have lost family and relatives. The Eylam province has one of the highest number of suicide attempts and completed suicides among adolescents in the whole world; the annual completed suicide rate is 10.0 and 26.4 per 100,000 men and women (Janghorbani & Sharifirad, 2005).

2 Theoretical Framework of the Study

2.1 Learning of Aggressive Behavior

Patterns of human behavior seem to be determined partly by genetics and partly by learning processes, and an interaction between the two. Behaviorists described, in the beginning of the 20th century, the principles of operant (Skinnerian) and classical (Pavlovian) conditioning. A behavior which is reinforced (strengthened) through conditioning is likely to be repeated in a similar situation. However, a considerable part of human social behavior is learned through modeling, and not through direct conditioning.

Social learning theory is, or rather used to be, one of the most influential theories on how modeling or observational learning occurs. Basically, it was developed in order to describe how children mimicked aggressive behavior of film models, but it was an attempt to describe how modeling of all kinds occur, also how children mimic their parents or their peers. Bandura, who developed the social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), tried to explain modeling within the broader framework of the behaviorist paradigm. He explained observational learning as *vicarious conditioning*. According to him, an observing individual sees the model behave in a certain, for instance aggressive, way; the model is successful and achieves a specific goal. The behavior is therefore vicariously reinforced; that is, the observer tends to repeat the same behavior when being in a similar situation.

However, several authors have criticized social learning theory for not being able to explain all forms of modeling. For instance, Björkqvist (1997) pointed out that observers may copy also unsuccessful behaviors if the individual in question is exposed to a model behavior very often and thus has few alternatives. Björkqvist considered at least four factors to have an impact on whether an observed behavior is being imitated or not: (1) the degree of similarity between the actual situation and the model situation; (2) the identification with the model in question; an observer is not likely to copy the behavior of a model s/he is not identifying with; (3) the amount of exposure to the model behavior in question, and (4) whether the model is successful or not (Bandura's vicarious conditioning).

Huesmann (1986) explained the social learning process through his cognitive script theory, based on social information processing. A

cognitive script is a pattern of behavior which an individual learns through observation of models such as parents, peers, and film models. These scripts are strengthened through cognitive rehearsal; for instance, aggressive scripts may be strengthened through aggressive fantasies. Cognitive rehearsal also occurs if the individual watches aggressive films over and over again, or plays violent computer games.

Cognitive neoassociation theory (Berkowitz, 1989) is an attempt to explain the link between affect and behavior, such as between anger and aggression. According to the theory, negative affect due to aversive events may stimulate internalized memories, thoughts, and physiological and expressive motoric reactions awakening the fight-or-flight response. Events such as crowding, pain, loud noise, or hot weather could produce a negative affect that could cause anger to appear through cognitive associations; automatic internalized responses become stimulated. Reactions are based on the individual's fight-or-flight tendency. Some individuals may react aggressively to a situation which may lead to a flight response in others.

Thus, it became evident that the behaviorist paradigm was not able to successfully explain modeling as a form of vicarious conditioning, and Bandura (2001) revised his theory to include cognitive and social information processing aspects into it: he therefore decided to call it social cognitive learning theory.

The General Aggression Model (GAM; Allen, Anderson, & Bushman, 2018; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) is an integrative, comprehensive model for the understanding of human aggression, perhaps the most commonly cited explanation of how aggressive behavior develops and which forms it takes. It integrates social, cognitive, personality, developmental and biological factors on aggression. *Proximate processes* of GAM describe how personal and situational aspects affect appraisal and decision processes, which decide trajectories of behavioral patterns: aggressive or non-aggressive. Each cycle of proximate processes serves as a learning trial. *Distal processes* of GAM detail how biological and environmental factors influence personality through changes in knowledge structures. GAM has been applied to explain various forms of aggressive behavior, such as domestic and peer aggression, but also the effects of media violence and violent computer games. In this thesis, GAM is considered to provide the most comprehensive understanding of processes leading to aggressive behavior.

In the present thesis, aggression is defined as behavior which is carried out intentionally, and causing harm to another person who is motivated to avoid that harm. Violence, in turn, is defined as aggression that causes serious physical harm (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2012). According to DeWall and colleagues, an evaluation of how aggressive a specific behavior is can be considered along four different perspectives: (1) the grade of the hostile or agitated affect present; (2) the automaticity of a specific thought, action or feeling, (3) a consideration of the consequences of the aggressive behavior, and (4) how much the goal involves benefiting the aggressor versus harming the victim.

2.2 Hofstede's Theory about Cultural Dimensions

According to Geert Hofstede (1980), human cultures may differ from each other on sex dimensions. According to him, new environmental phenomena will be adapted to each culture through these dimensions. They play an important role in shaping the group dynamics of a society in a new situation, for instance when taking in new technology and adapting to it. The individual's way to relate to other members in the group is thought to be a key issue distinguishing between characteristics of societies. All six dimensions are not relevant for this thesis, but two of them will be discussed here. In article IV, the dimension of individualism vs. collectivism plays a central role. Typically, an individualistic society is one in which members have loose ties between each other. Individuals in such a society are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Personal achievement and individual rights are emphasized. 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 family.

On the other hand, a collectivistic society emphasizes a framework in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them. This kind of tightly knit "we" group serves as a secure protection against the uncertainties in life. In such a society, direct confrontation of another person is avoided as much as possible because it is considered rude and undesirable.

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 also among adolescents in school contexts. This aspect is discussed in article IV.

Article III in this thesis made the somewhat surprising finding that cyber aggression occurred more among Iranian than among Finnish adolescents, despite the fact that Finland is a country which is technologically very developed. This finding could perhaps be understood as a consequence of the collectivistic character of the Iranian society. In Iran, it is not acceptable to perpetrate direct aggression to other children due to the highly inhibitory mechanism of collective shame. Direct confrontation is considered rude and undesirable. However, cyber aggression offers the means of being aggressive in indirect ways, providing an alternative for aggressive outlets.

Another of Hofstede's dimensions is not discussed in any of the four articles, but it could be relevant for the understanding of some of the findings, for instance on physical punishment in articles I and II, This is the dimension of power distance.

The power distance expresses the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept unequal distribution of power. People in societies with a large power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, on the other hand, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power. Finland is a society with a low power distance between members, while the power distance is large in the Iranian society. When this dimension is adapted to family and school, it is reflected in the strict hierarchy and psychological dominance of teachers and parents in their relation to their pupils and children. This fact makes harsh physical punishment of children, both at home and in schools, possible (cf. articles I and II).

3 Physical Punishment

Studies on the physical punishment of children has during the last decades shifted towards an understanding that physical punishment has harmful effects and few, if any at all, positive ones. An extended range of social, psychological, and physical disturbances have been associated with the physical punishment of children. As an example, the study by Straus (2009) showed several harmful concomitants of physical punishment such as suicidal thoughts, depression, school violence, sexual violence, masochistic sex, feelings of alienation, delayed mental development, and poorer academic achievement. The impact of physical punishment on mental disorders has been studied by for instance Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, and Sareen (2006), who showed that experiences of physical punishment during childhood (the child being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, or spanked, or things being thrown at the child) was associated with alcohol abuse, major depression, and externalization problems in adulthood. The study also showed that physical punishment by a loving parent does not make it less damaging for children (Afifi et al., 2006). Another study found an association between physical punishment and mental disorders such as major depression, dysthymia, mania, specific phobias, anxiety, borderline, narcissism, obsessive compulsiveness, schizoid tendencies, antisocial personality, and drug abuse (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012). In a the third study by the same research group (2013), it was found that harsh physical punishment during childhood is associated with higher odds of arthritis, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Sociodemographic variables were controlled for in the studies.

Physical punishment has been linked to aggressive behavior during childhood due to the harsh parenting. A study in southern China by Chang, Schwartz, Dodge and McBride-Chang (2003) showed that harsh parenting including hitting by the mother affected emotion regulation in particular, and harsh parenting by the father was associated with higher levels of aggressive behavior in the children. Studies also have shown a link between physical punishment during childhood and alcohol abuse during adulthood (MacMillan et al., 1999; Österman, Björkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014). According to the Cheng and colleagues in a series of articles (Cheng, Anthony, & Huang, 2010; Cheng et al., 2011a; Cheng, Huang, & Anthony, 2011b) there is a strong association between childhood physical punishment and drinking problems. Children with

experiences of physical punishment were 1.5 times more likely to start drinking alcohol and three times more likely to suffer from alcohol problems. The extension of alcohol problem from onset of drinking to actually having a problem was also more rapid than for individuals who had not been exposed to physical punishment during childhood.

Physical punishment has been associated with number of other negative psychosocial outcomes later in adulthood such as depression (Österman et. al, 2014; Turner & Muller, 2004), anxiety, low self-esteem, drug abuse (Afifi et al., 2012), increased aggression (Gershoff, 2002), and suicide attempts (Österman et al., 2014). Physical punishment may also have an impact on children's social regulating by increasing the risk of victimization and aggressive behavior in school settings (Hong et al., 2012). There is high correlation between punishment at home and victimization/bullying at school (Björkqvist, Österman, & Berg, 2011; Björkqvist & Österman, 2014; Jaghoory, Björkqvist, & Österman, 2013; Söderberg, Björkqvist, Österman, 2016). According to several investigations in Iran, physical punishment is culturally accepted in child upbringing (Oveisi, Eftekhare-Ardabili, Majdzadeh, Mohammadkhani, Alaqband Rad, 2010). Twenty percent of their respondents reported that even severe physical punishment is a necessary solution if the child does not perform well in school. In other words, the dysfunctional model of punishment for the sake of better academic achievement seems to be accepted to a considerable degree in Iran. Education is one of the highest priorities in Iranian society; due to the fact that parents and teachers wish for better and higher education for their children and pupils, physical punishment has been considered an ethically acceptable solution. Additionally, it provides teachers with an acceptable excuse for managing their classroom.

A study by Sheikattari, Stephenson, Assaisi, Eftekhar, and Zamani, (2006) showed that 43% of Iranian pupils reported having been physically punished at school. Mother's addiction, poor parental relationships, and residency in rural areas were risk factors for physical punishment both at home and school. Kuhestani (1997) found positive correlations between physical punishment, academic failure, and depression.

Extreme punishment both at schools and at home has continued to exist in Iran despite the explicit banning of child punishment by the ministry of education and the ministry of justice. Thanks to the advanced communication technology in recent years, several examples

of alleged extreme punishment by teachers in Iran have been filmed and spread via social media and Youtube (see for example <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/376079>).

4 Cyberbullying

The rapid development in advanced information and communication technology (ICT) during the last two decades has changed the patterns of adolescents' social interaction so profoundly that living without social media is difficult for them to even imagine. Interactive technology provides expanded possibilities to enter virtual networks, explore new learning environments, and engage socially in them (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012). In consistence with this development, the awareness of cyberbullying, followed by research activities and publications in the area, has increased rapidly (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen (2012). Cyberbullying is often defined as behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others (Tokunaga, 2010). However, it is not always easy to distinguish between regular aggression and what should be considered as bullying. Olweus (1993) described two crucial aspects that differentiates between non-bullying and bullying aggression: (1) aggression may be a single act, whereas bullying involves repeated acts; and (2) bully-victim relationships characteristically have an imbalance of power, making it difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself. The concept of power imbalance as well as repetitive aggressive behavior in cyberbullying seems to be more complicated than in the traditional forms of bullying (Dooley, Cross, & Pyzalski, 2009). The concept of cyberbullying is not as straightforward as regular bullying: an act of cyberbullying may have a snowball effect due to the technology used. For example, an uploaded picture on the internet may exponentially continue to be distributed by other people. However, in the study by Slonje and colleges (2012), only 9% of the pupils reported that they distributed further harassing material to others. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) pointed out that advanced knowledge of ICT may contribute to a new power balance, completely unrespectable of physical and other forms of traditional power. Researchers worldwide agree on that about a third of adolescents have experienced of cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2008) reported that 32% of boys and over 36% of girls have been victims of cyberbullying. In the same study, less than 18% of boys and 16% of girls reported that they themselves perpetrated cyberbullying towards others online, mostly in chat rooms. Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, and Daciuk (2012) found that over 30% of adolescent students are involved in

cyberbullying, either as victim or perpetrator, while 25% were involved as both bullies and victims. Females were more likely than males to be bully-victims. The amount of hours per day a student is on the internet was a risk factor. Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Blenchak (2009) found that 43.1% of participants in chat rooms in Germany have been victimized by cyberbullying. Katzer (2009) found that 47% of victims of cyberbullying knew their bullies from school, while 34% knew the bullies only from the Internet; 19% knew them from both school and Internet. Like other forms of bullying, cyberbullying have a strong negative impact on both the victims and others involved. Hay, Medrum and Mann (2010) reported a greater negative impact of cyber victimization than from traditional victimization, on measures of internalizing behaviour such as acts of self-harm and suicidal ideation. Victims of cyberbullying have expressed a variety of symptoms such sadness, frustration, anger, being stressed, loneliness, and depression (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Cyberbullying and cyber victimization are suggested to be associated with both psychiatric and psychosomatic problems (Sourander, Brunstein Klomek, Ikonen, Lindroos, & Luntamo, 2010). Cyber victimization was related to living in a family with more than two parents, emotional and peer problems, and perceived difficulties, whereas cyberbullying was found to be related to hyperactivity, conduct problems, frequent smoking, perceived difficulties, and drunkenness. Adolescents with depressive symptoms have a three time greater risk to become targets of Internet harassment compared with adolescents with milder symptomatology (Ybarra, 2004).

Regarding the situation of cyberbullying in Iran, information is scarce. Besides the study presented in this thesis, an online search provided no results.

5 Method

5.1 Sample

The data in articles I and II were collected from 1244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age = 12.7 yrs, SD = 2.1 yrs) in two cities, Mashhad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran.

The data in article III were collected from 630 school children from three age groups (10, 13, and 15 years of age) in Mashhad, Iran, in both public and private schools (totaling 12 schools). Data from a comparison group (same age groups, n = 620, totaling 10 schools) from Ostrobothnia, Finland, were also collected. Participating schools were selected in order to be as representative as possible for the regions in question. The total sample consisted of 1250 adolescents (615 boys, 635 girls), mean age = 12.7 years, SD = 2.1. The age distribution was similar in Iran and Finland, and among boys and girls.

Article IV consisted of an Iranian sample which was the same as in articles I and II (n = 1244), and a Finnish sample, which was the same as the Finnish control sample in article III (n = 620).

5.2 Instrument

Data were collected with the use of paper-and-pencil questionnaires. In articles I and II, the participating pupils reported whether they had been exposed to extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by parents (Article I) or teachers (Article II), such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones. Whether they had been exposed to EPP or not then served as independent variables in MANOVAs, with various types of aggression and victimization in school settings as dependent variables.

The questionnaire used in Article III consisted of variables measuring various types of cyberbullying, such as sending nasty phone calls, nasty text messages, nasty e-mails, and putting up nasty pictures and films on Internet.

In Article IV, Iranian and Finnish adolescents responded to a questionnaire about non-aggressive conflict resolution; that is, how they reacted when they themselves had a conflict with a peer at school, and likewise, how they reacted in third-person situations, when they witnessed conflicts between other adolescents.

5.3 Procedure

Data was collected during regular school hours, by help of a paper- and-pencil questionnaire. All pupils who were present filled in the questionnaires, the response rate thus being 100% of those present.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the ethical board of Åbo Akademi University, and conducted with the informed consent of school authorities in Iran and Finland, and the parents of the children. 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).

6 Overview of the Original Studies

6.1 Study I: Extreme Punishment by Parents and Aggression and Victimization in School

Study I was based on data from 1,244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age = 12.7 years, SD = 2.1 years) collected in two cities, Mashad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran. It investigated whether pupils in the schools reported having been exposed to extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by parents, such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones. The results showed that 6.5% of the respondents had had their hands burnt (6.5 % of respondents), and bones broken (4.9 %) as punishment at home.

These adolescents scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to all types of aggressive behavior at school that were measured: physical, verbal, and indirect aggression. Notably, EPP had strong associations with the most severe forms of school aggression measured in the study, i.e. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain.

Accordingly, the findings of the study showed that experiences of extremely harsh forms of physical punishment, of types virtually nonexistent in Western society, were reported by about 1/20 of the respondents. One per cent of the respondents had experienced EPP “very often”. The reasons for these disciplinary methods’ existence in Iranian society may be several. Cultural tradition is certainly an important contributing explanation. Iranian culture is considered to be of a collective nature (Hofstede, 1980), meaning that individuals have closer psychological and physical contact with others in daily life than the case is in non-collective cultures. This may facilitate the acceptance of extreme types of physical punishment as justified and tolerable without even reflecting upon whether it is a question of improper violation of the children’s integrity.

Another of Hofstede’s dimensions, which was not discussed in the original Article 1, but still could be relevant for the understanding of its findings, is the dimension of power distance.

The power distance expresses the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept unequal distribution of power. People in societies with a large power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification. When this

dimension is adapted to Iranian families, it is reflected in the strict hierarchy and psychological dominance of parents in their relation to their children. This fact makes harsh physical punishment of children possible.

The study found clear associations between EPP at home and aggression at school, both perpetration of aggression towards others, and victimization to the aggressive behavior of others. Since the present study is not longitudinal, it is not possible to draw conclusions about cause and effect. It is worth noting that the strongest associations were with the most extreme form of school aggression measured.

6.2 Study II: Extreme Physical Punishments by Teachers and Aggression and Victimization in School

The aim of Study II was to investigate how common it was for pupils to experience extreme forms of physical punishment at school, such as the burning of hands, or having their bones broken, by teachers in Iran. Data were collected from 1,244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; *M* age = 12.7 years, *SD* = 2.1 years) in two cities, Mashad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran. The results showed that 3.8% of the pupils had had their hands burnt, and 4.8% had had their bones broken by teachers, as punishment. The respondents who had experienced such extreme punishments scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to almost all types of aggressive behavior at school. Furthermore, the study found clear associations between extreme physical punishment (EPP) by teachers and extreme forms of aggression (both perpetration and victimization) at school, such as. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain. Directions of cause and effect may of course only be speculated upon. It is of course possible that the extreme forms of punishment were directed against them due to their own aggressiveness directed to other pupils. However, it does not explain the strong associations also with victimization to aggressive behavior by others. It appears illogical that they were punished for being victims. Obviously, being a victim does not deserve punishment. Therefore, something else appears to be going on. The strong associations between EPP at school and at home are noteworthy.

Historically, the cultural tradition of schools in Iran is one of hard, inflexible and high demands. Despite the fact that Iranian culture is considered to be feminine rather than masculine (Hofstede, 1980), the

schools in Iran seem to primarily focus on high achievement and not so much on emotional needs. One purpose of Iranian education seems to be to strengthen the pupils' social status and fulfil powerful social collective demands, in accordance with the high cultural collectivism in Iran. Perhaps therefore, the teachers fail to identify the pupils' individual values and goals, and do not respect their psychological and physical boundaries. On the other hand, low achievement of the pupils goes hand in hand with the teacher's individual perception of achievement. This fact may facilitate the acceptance of extreme types of physical punishment as justified and tolerable, without even reflecting upon whether it is a question of improper violation of the children's integrity. Another cultural dimension explained by Hofstede (1980), which was not discussed in the original Article II, but still could be relevant for the understanding of its findings, is the dimension of power distance.

The power distance expresses the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept unequal distribution of power. Due to the large power distance which characterizes Iranian society, both parents and pupils accept the hierarchical order of the schools and accept the behavior of the teacher without requiring further justification. This fact makes harsh physical punishment of children possible.

6.3 Study III: Cyberbullying in Iranian and Finnish Schools

Study III aimed at investigating differences in frequencies of both victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying among adolescents from Iran and Finland. Data from a total of 1,250 adolescents (615 boys, 635 girls) of three age groups (10, 13, and 15 years of age) were collected in Mashhad, Iran ($n = 630$) and Ostrobothnia, Finland ($n = 620$). The questionnaire consisted of variables measuring various types of cyberbullying, such as sending nasty text messages, nasty e-mails, and putting up nasty pictures and films on internet. The findings of the study revealed clear cultural differences in cyberbullying patterns among adolescents of the two countries. Both victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying of all kinds were more frequent in Iran. Both sex and age differences also occurred, but they showed different patterns in Iran and Finland. Girls in Finland used cyberbullying significantly more than Finnish boys. In particular, Finnish girls sent nasty SMS messages, nasty e-mails, and put up humiliating pictures on the internet to a higher degree than Finnish boys. It appears that cyberbullying is a type of

aggression that fits the mentality of Finnish girls. This sex difference was not found in Iran.

The overall higher levels of cyberbullying in Iran suggest that there are considerable cultural differences in the regulation of aggressive outlets among adolescents of the two countries studied. It may seem surprising that cyberbullying appeared more frequently in Iran, as Finland is technologically a highly advanced country, where mobile phones and internet facilities are more easily available than in Iran. Accordingly, Finnish adolescents should have better opportunities for cyberbullying than their Iranian counterparts. The findings of this study does not offer a solution, but it may again have something to do with the higher levels of collectivism in Iran. Iranian adolescents are likely to be more reluctant to be overtly aggressive in comparison with Finnish adolescents, who show less restraint, do to their higher individualism. Instead, it might be easier for them to express aggression indirectly, in the form of cyber aggression. If this interpretation is correct, it reflects some of the difficult psychosocial challenges that Iranian society faces.

Another surprising finding was that the youngest age group among the Iranians, the 10-year-olds, had the highest scores of putting up humiliating pictures and films of others on the internet. Again, the present study does not offer a solution to why this is the case. In Finland, this age difference did not occur. On the other hand, the 15-year-old Iranians used their mobile phones more for bullying purposes (both in the form of SMS messages and in the form of nasty phone calls) than the younger age groups. These discrepancies may reflect differences in maturity and adaptation to the cyber world at the time when the data were collected.

6.4 Study IV: Peaceful Conflict Resolution in Iranian and Finnish Adolescents

Study IV 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.

Different styles of conflict resolution are commonly explained on basis of the 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”. Blake and Mouton (1964) presented the original version of this model. 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).

If the dual concern model is adapted to Hofstede’s (1980) 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. The results of Study IV clearly seem to be in line with Hofstede’s (1980) cultural theory, according to which Iran is a typically collectivistic one, and Finland a typically individualistic one.

7 Conclusive Remarks

The present thesis does not cover every aspect of aggressive behavior and conflict resolution among Iranian adolescents of today. However, the four studies of the thesis indicate complex patterns of behavior that clearly differ from those of the comparison group of Finnish adolescents. Although there is no perfect theory of cultural differences, Hofstede's (1980) categories seem to be of aid when we try to explain these differences. Of Hofstede's dimensions, there is one which in particular seems to reflect the difference between the behavior of the Iranian and Finnish adolescents best, namely the dimension of collectivism and individualism. Iran is, according to Hofstede, a collectivistic society, while Finland, as most Western countries, is more individualistic. Another dimension which may be applied is that of power distance: Iran is more hierarchical with a greater power distance than Finland. The findings of the four studies appears to be, to a great extent, explainable in these terms.

The collectivism in Iran seems to have some unique features, formed by its traumatic history, in which shame appears to play a twofold role. The following thoughts are speculative, and there are no empirical data in this thesis to show the correctness of them. However, the findings of the thesis show some paradoxical behavioral patterns which begs an explanation: on one hand, we find well-behaving Iranian youth with peaceful conflict resolution strategies, more peaceful than the Finnish youth (Article IV). On the other hand, we find Iranian adults, parents and teachers, who are able to expose children to extreme punishments (Articles I and II). Article III showed higher scores for cyberbullying among Iranian than among Finnish youth. How are these conflicting patterns of behavior to be explained? The Iranian psyche appears to be very restrained and controlled, but at the same time, Iranians (or at least some of them) are able to act with great cruelty even against loved ones, in certain situations.

In Iran, a culture-specific collective shame seems to exist, which might be caused by a sense of a disintegrated identity. When Persia was conquered by the Arabs, they received their religion, but at the same time they lost much of their original national identity. Accordingly, Iranians suffer from an inferiority complex in relation to the Arabs who conquered them and, at the same time, brought them the knowledge about Allah. Again, this is speculative, but the later confrontation with

Western culture might have further enhanced this feeling of collective shame and helplessness. Iranians' paradoxical behavior in emotionally stressful situations may reflect this divided mentality. The collective feeling of shame paralyzes, but at the same time, there is underlying aggression.

We are living in the so called "global village" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968), in which cultural differences are rapidly getting erased. It is difficult to predict whether Iranian society, too, will develop into a more individualistic society, and which characteristics will be dominant in the Iranian psyche in the future. Iran is, for its future development, to a large extent dependent on world politics and world economy.

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Physical Punishment, Aggression, Victimization and Cyberbullying among Iranian Adolescents

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on adolescent aggressive behavior and victimization from peer aggression in school settings in present-day Iran, and its association with certain forms of extreme physical punishment (EPP), such as the burning of hands and breaking of bones, either by a parent and a teacher, in Iran. Other aims of the thesis are to compare frequencies of cyberbullying among adolescents in Iran and Finland, and to compare the use of peaceful conflict resolution strategies among adolescents in these two countries.

Significant differences in conflict behavior were found between adolescents from the two countries, and sex differences in conflict behavior likewise differed in Iran and in Finland. Some of these differences may be explained by the higher levels of collectivism and power distance in Iranian in comparison with Finnish society.