Scientistic attitude and the perceptions of a group of young Iranian women on social justice and ways of resolving cultural conflicts

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Abstract

From a constructivist point of view, helping with the reconstruction of attitudes can empower youth to deal with the many challenges of adult life. Chief among such challenges are the resolution of inter-generational conflicts regarding socio-cultural and economic issues, and the achievement of a sense of social justice in these regards. In post-revolutionary Iran, the youth pose a major challenge to the educators, as they do to the ruling elite, since they constitute a major portion of the society and any inter-generational conflict could lead to alienation and confrontation. Hence, to assess the conflict as perceived by the youth, and ways of resolving it within a framework of social justice could be considered as a first step towards resolution of the conflict and prevention of any possible confrontation. It is expected that having a scientistic attitude could help the youth in dealing with such issues. Given the characteristics of the contemporary Iranian culture and society, the young women are at the forefront of any existing or emerging conflict and as a result, deserve primary attention. If the perceptions of a group of young Iranian women on issues related to social justice, and ways of resolving socio-cultural conflicts can be correlated with the extent of their attitudes being scientistic (i.e. similar to that of a scientist), then it would be the educators who are taken to the task of helping with the reconstruction of the youth’s attitudes and hence, empowering them to meet the challenge.

Keywords: Iranian women, social justice, cultural conflicts, scientistic attitude

Introduction

Within the constructivist framework, the concept of learning is refer to constructing/reconstructing meaning, attitudes, like peace, this issue of construction is among other things, play a primary and important role. It is the multi-dimensional nature of both learning and attitudes that binds them together, although doing anything is affected by the doer’s learned cognitive, affective, and behavioral predispositions, i.e. attitudes. Learning is multidimensional because it involves reconstruction of not only the cognitive structures, but their accompanying affective and behavioral structures as well. Learning is total and tantamount to change (improvement), if all three dimensions are attended to. To separate these, or not attend to them equally, would be of a crippling effect, one that creates imbalance and disequilibrium. The tendency to reach cognitive equilibrium through adaptation is the very cornerstone of Piagetian constructivism. Similarly, in social constructivism of Vygotsky, the dialectics between the individual and the society works the same way. Thus, it can be said that humans have the tendency to seek equilibrium in all dimensions and areas of their existence since disequilibrium is as ever-present as the said tendency itself! In other words, the existence of conflict or imbalance is as inherent in humans’ lives as is their tendency towards justice and equality. However, in addition to these natural tendencies, the way that humans deal with conflicts and seek justice depends on their learned predispositions as well. Learning anything is based more on attitudes towards the subject of learning than the related aptitudes, and in being so, the most and foremost thing to learn/relearn is a constructive attitude towards the subject. One such attitude can be
assumed to be that held by scientists; others can have something similar to this attitude which has been called the scientific attitude (Hameedy, 2005; 2006). Scientific attitude can be helped to be developed by students if the educational approach is a constructivist one (Hameedy, 2007), because in such approaches learning is considered researching, and research is obviously what scientists do the most. Having such an attitude would affect not only the construction of concepts such as social justice and cultural conflict, but the development of values and actions related to these concepts as well.

Social justice, defined as a construct, is embedded in the general concept of justice which has traditionally been defined from two perspectives (Oreyzi, 2004): the Aristotelian perspective that emphasizes proportionality and the Platonic perspective that stresses egalitarianism. On the other hand, social justice, as Oreyzi & Golparvar (2005) points out, can be considered alongside other domains of justice like economic, legal, political, cultural, and personal justice. However, doing so ignores the fact that the first four areas of justice just mentioned are only meaningful within a social setting. Hence, we can talk of the social and individual justices as the two sides of the justice coin which are inseparable. Nevertheless, the social side of the coin of justice, according to Weatherford (1992), has itself two dimensions of distributive and procedural justice; the first refers to the actual distribution of resources among different groups, while the second refers to the processes by which decisions on how to distribute the resources are made. Such a view of social justice is indicative of both its political and economic dimensions and as such refers to the logical distribution of socio-political rights and freedoms as well. The absence of social justice, or even the perception thereof, would be problematic as it could have negative consequences, such as decrease in social participation, to say the least. However, the criteria by which the existence of social justice is measured or perceived, seems to be the determining factor. It has been said that social justice is absent, or perceived to be so, when there is unequal or disproportional distribution of rights and resources, or just when a groups’ basic needs are not met (Oreyzi & Golparvar, 2005).

The post-revolutionary Iran (‘earan/), is a tapestry of many ethnic groups, and is a culturally rich and diverse society with a particular concern about both issues of social justice and cultural conflicts. With the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979, it was not just the political system that changed, as the very culture of the country was, to the extent that was possible in the short run, transformed. Further planning for the long term transformation of the general culture to that of an Islamic society has also been on the agenda of the ruling class. Also on this agenda has been the attainment of social justice. It has been said (Taghvaei & Ghanbari, 2006) that ‘in Islam, the pursuit of social justice is tantamount to securing different material and spiritual dimensions of people’s needs on their paths towards the highest ideals’ (p.101); thus an Islamic government has the duty of providing for such needs among all its citizens, especially the deprived masses (Ibid.). On the other hand, in an Islamic approach to social justice (No-roozee, 2009), justice has been defined as ‘everything being in its appropriate place, with appropriateness being determined by the very nature and meaning of things’ (p.16). However, according to the World Bank (2003, in Sharifzaadeegaan, 2007) despite the improvements in areas of health, education, and reduction of poverty from 40% before the revolution, to 20% in 2003, unemployment seems to continue to fuel poverty, as 40% of the poorest Iranians are unemployed too. The most recent reports (World Bank, 2008) show that the employment ratio has increased from 46% in 1990 to an estimated 48% in 2007 among the 15+ year-olds, while the same ratio among the 15-24 year-olds has increased only from 33% to 35% in the same period. The prevalence of under nourishment is reported to have been 5.0% in 2007. Literacy rates have improved: for females ages 15-24 from 81% in 1990 to 96% in 2007, and for the same category males and period, from 92% to 97%. Proportion of seats held by women in national House of Representatives has increased from 2% to 4% in that period. Share of women employed in the
non-agricultural sector though is estimated to have been the same 13.5% in 2000 as that of 1995. What seems to have improved significantly is the ratio of female to male enrolment in elementary, secondary, and higher education. In 2007, for every 100 males there were 115 females enrolled in Iranian universities, 102 in the secondary schools, and 129 in elementary schools. According to this World Bank report, despite these improvements, the Iranian government continues to confront major challenges. To reduce poverty, it should target the poor more accurately with existing programs. These programs benefit only half of the poor in Iran, about 4.5 million people, or 1.5 million households, as they are not specifically targeted to the poor. Subsidizing things like bread, medicine, energy, and even credit are mostly untargeted as far as the poor is concerned, and favour the rich, as, for example, the richest decile of households benefits 12 times more from gasoline subsidies than the poorest decile. Such disparities could bring about socio-cultural conflicts.

In post-revolutionary Iran, cultural conflicts have not diminished, as some claim, on the contrary, in some ways they have become more pronounced. It can be said that the revolution itself came about, partly, by cultural conflict, as it has been rooted in the confrontation between the home grown and imported cultures. The rampant westernization during the Shah’s reign provoked many violent reactions from the more traditional corners of the country lead by the clerics. The conflict between the domestic and imported cultures, however, did not just start at the time of the last Shah, as it can be traced back to two earlier dynasties. It was the Iran-Ottoman war in late 16th century that first exposed Iranians to western war technology (Serree, 1987) and later on, other encounters opened the door to the importation of other material goods and even socio-cultural institutions from Europe (Haazeree, 1993). It can be said that even that war had its roots in a more basic cultural conflict between Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam, another manifestation of the conflict between tradition and innovation or domestic and imported. Thus any cultural conflict that may exist in today’s Iran stems from either this historical root on the one hand, or from the multi-ethnic nature of the population, on the other. Contemporary Iranian society consists of many ethnic groups some of whom are minority Sunnis as well. Yet, it is the conflict between the old and the new that figures more prominently, manifesting itself now in the forms of country-urban and inter-generational conflicts. The Chairman of the Social Committee in the Iranian Parliament (Bahraami Assadabadi, 2007) considers the cultural conflict experienced by country folk migrating to big cities like Tehran as the main cause of high divorce rate among them. Just as Ebraheemee (2009), considers cultural conflict as the major problem of the Iranian youth, as they struggle to construct their identity by juggling the Iranian, Islamic, and western aspects of their personalities. An official closely tied to the Expediency Council (Saalehee Ameeri, 2008) points to the cultural identity crisis and inter-generational conflict among the youth as a threat to national cohesion. Despite the recognition of the problem not all appropriate questions are posed and as a result, not much reliable research is done in these areas. Questions like whether young Iranian women perceive the concepts of social justice and cultural conflicts scientifically and pursue them in a similar fashion?

A perusal of the Iranian literature on social justice and cultural conflict would be in itself indicative of the spread and strength of attitudes not only towards these social issues, but towards social sciences and scientific solutions to social problems as well. Most of the accessible writings are opinion pieces or at best theoretical in nature and haphazard literature reviews in form. The fact that many are not accessible, as the access to them is denied, is again indicative of prevailing attitudes. The few seemingly empirical studies are mostly descriptive in nature as they examine the relationship between two constructs such as social justice and social welfare (Moemenee, 2004); perspectives on social justice and attitudes towards private schools (Golparvar & Oreyzi, 2004), or attitude towards social justice and criteria for choosing fields of study (Maraashe & Oreyzi, 2004). On the other hand, Kaazemeeepoor (2003), is a national survey indicating that 51% of Iranians consider social justice as being equal distribution of resources, while 28% think that social justice would be maintained if the distribution of resources were competence based; the remaining 21% of the population believes that the distribution should be based on people’s needs. As for the scientific attitudes among Iranians, especially the university community, studies show that their learned predispositions are not that similar to those of scientists. In a comparison of the scientific attitudes of first- and fourth-year students at an all-girl university (Hameedy, 2006) revealed similarly low attitudes among the two groups indicating the ineffectiveness of the current curriculum in promoting such attitudes. Hameedy, Naaheedpoor, Najafiooeoe, & Yaadgaaree (2007) pursued the manifestations of such attitudes among the graduate students, and especially in their theses, failed to demonstrate signs of strong scientific attitudes in these university products. Based on these findings, and the aforementioned theoretical and practical frameworks, it would be both rational and highly probable that a group of young Iranian women willing to participate in a survey would exhibit a rather weak scientific attitude in their perceptions of social justice, cultural conflicts, and ways of dealing with them.

Methods
Two groups of participants were separately gathered in regular classrooms and then informed of a survey being conducted on Iranian youth in which they were invited to participate if interested. Prior to data collection, participants drew their identity number from a stack of cards at random and were asked to put it on their response sheets. The data
Participants were two groups of 23-30 year old female first year graduate students, one attending a semi-public and the other a private university. Both groups, each consisting of 14 students, were familiar with research and measurement. Their selection was solely based on their gender, academic level, and accessibility.

The instruments used in this survey are two questionnaires: an opinion questionnaire and an attitude scale. The opinion questionnaire consists of two parts each containing open-answer questions. Part one simply asks how the respondents define the terms social justice and cultural conflict, and in which areas and to what extent, these phenomenon can be witnessed in Iran. In part two, both concepts are defined and then the participants are asked to indicate the extent to which Iranian women are enjoying social justice as compared to men, in areas such as economic, political, occupational, educational, and legal arenas. Furthermore, they are asked to indicate the extent to which they are experiencing conflicts between themselves and their families, themselves and the society in general, and between their family and the society in general. Finally, they are asked to indicate the way they do or think they should deal with the existing conflicts if any. The attitude scale, on the other hand, is a set of 63 items in three subsets containing affective, behavioral, and cognitive predispositions towards life in general and student life in particular. Each item is accompanied by a four-point scale (1-4) by which the respondents are to indicate the extent, intensity, and frequency of their responses. Thus, unlike the questionnaire that yields verbal data, the attitude scale produces numerical data which are assumed to be at the interval level ranging from 63 to 262 with scores over 189 indicating an attitude approaching scientific attitude. This instrument is the shortened version of another with the reliability of 0.86 (Hameedy, 2006).

**Results**

Data were analyzed by simply ranking members of each group according to their attitude scores and then recording a summary of their responses to the justice and conflict questions in different columns of two 14 x 4 matrices. This way, it was possible to further summarize the responses of the two groups to each of the justice and conflict questions, and also detect any co-variation between the verbal responses and the attitude scores. These scores range from 159 to 197 in the semi-private school group and from 146 to 194 in the private university group. The mean of the first set is calculated to be 171 while the other is 164, although the number of respondents approaching the criterion score is more in the second group. In both groups only one respondent scored above the threshold of 189. Dividing the attitude scores into three intervals of low, medium, and high, we can see any relationship between attitude scores and the verbal data on ways to resolve cultural conflicts.

The verbal data on the respondents’ perception of social justice and the extent to which it has been attained in Iran, in general, indicates that most respondents (+80%) equate social justice with equality in rights and opportunities. The remaining respondents refer to appropriate or proportional distribution of resources based on needs or efforts. The data on the second part of the question shows that the respondents mostly perceive an absence of social justice in their country, regardless of the area (except for education), from economics and law to politics and employment. Only two respondents estimated it to be very little. As for the extent and areas of inequality between women and men, all but three respondents agree that women have as much access to education as men; the three point out that even in education it is men (father, husband, or brother) who determine if a woman can go to school or not! Inequality, according to the respondents, is in all areas such as law and employment, because, as one respondent puts it, the men are governing the land. Another respondent points out that the men and women are mostly equal and the areas of inequality between them are sanctioned by Islam and as such are as just as equality! Those who had defined social justice as appropriate or proportional distribution of rights and opportunities seem to have abandoned their definition when it came to women against men. Such exceptions were not present in the data on cultural conflict.

The verbal data on the definition of cultural conflict, the extent of its prevalence in Iran, the extent and areas in which they/their family might have experienced such conflicts, and ways they have or could use in resolving such conflicts, seem to indicate that although a high number of the respondents (almost half!) define conflict equivalent to having differences, there are those who define it as confrontation and clash of values. The areas of such confrontations are said to be mostly between the government sanctioned culture and the popular culture as represented in women’s dressing. These can be regarded as the same as those who speak of the “authentic” (meaning perhaps original) culture confronting the petty-cultures (not meaning the ethnic groups perhaps) or “Iranian” vs. western culture. It could be said that the official culture is national, Iranian, and Islamic in nature and claimed to be authentic by its proponents as well. The other area of confrontation and conflict, according to the data, is between the culture of the youth and that of their parents’ generation in values and beliefs and especially in ways that women should dress. Two respondents also mentioned the area of male-female relations, while another one spoke of the area of social liberties as a bone of contention vis-à-vis the national culture and the older generation. Most respondents have estimated the said conflicts as being very
widespread and strong, except for one who does not think that the extent of “that which is refused by the dominant culture” is that “eye catching”. One other respondent mentions the existence of ethnic, linguistic, and religious “differences” (variations) in Iran, not strongly expressed because of the dominance of “the sense of being Iranian”. However, the question coming to the reader’s mind could be whether all these estimates come from what the respondents have personally experienced.

The responses on the existence, extent, and areas of conflict experienced by the respondent between self and the family (especially parents), self and the community, and the family and the community in general, are indicative of mostly no conflict between the young women and their families, except for a few who have indicated to be at odds with them in areas of personal freedoms, pre-marital relations, and general values. As for any possible conflict between the respondents and the community in general, the situation is reversed as only a few have said that they have none. For those who have conflict with the community, it is mostly in the area of values associated with women’s dress codes and other social behaviors that are characterized as being male-determined, anti-woman, and socially unjust. One woman has indicated that the main reason for her cultural conflict with the community is that she considers the latter as being too superstitious, while another respondent sees the community’s tendency to justify everything through religion as the source of conflict! On the other hand, the minority sub-group who has indicated not having any, or very little, conflict with the community in general, are those who mention their religious beliefs and values being those of the community. As for the third locus of conflict, between the family and the community, over half of the respondents indicate the existence of such conflicts in all aspects of the culture: beliefs, values, and behaviors and especially those related to the official religion and the dressing issue! Given all the participants’ perception of conflicts existing between them and the community, the final question regarding ways of dealing with these conflicts becomes ever more interesting.

The most frequent way of dealing with the aforementioned conflicts suggested by the respondents is dialogue/counseling and education, but submission and pretense are frequent as well, and more so than increasing religiosity and spirituality, on the one hand, and escape on the other. Reducing westernization, increasing self-reliance, and simply ignoring the conflict were the other suggestions. Comparing the suggestions given by the three groups with attitude scores of low, medium, and high, reveals that most of the respondents in the high score category have suggested the dialogue and education approach, while the majority of the low-score category have made other suggestions including submission, increasing religiosity and spirituality, and decreasing westernization. The middle category, although mentioning dialogue and education at times, also spoke of pretense, escape, and self-reliance as ways of dealing with their experienced cultural conflicts. Perhaps the more interesting observation is the fact that the high score sub-group reported as having more conflicts than the lower score sub-group; the respondent with the lowest score (146) in scientistic attitude has reported as having no conflict with parents and the community, while the respondent with the highest score (194) indicates that she has “much” conflict, “in many areas”, and with both.

**Conclusions**

Constructing peace, both within and without, at the personal and social levels, like the construction of anything else, requires a constructive attitude, which is a matter of construction in and of itself. Much of our constructions or learning are planned, be it at the personal or the social level, but a great deal of them are brought about haphazardly and experientially. Constructive attitudes, like those assumed to be held by scientists, and those that are assumed to be held by others and yet are similar to the ones held by scientists, i.e. scientistic attitudes, are among constructions that are not socially planned for. Some of the most important concepts, like justice and conflict resolution, as precursors to peace, are also among the over sighted constructions. Constructivist systems of education, not only focus on such constructions and plan for them, but do so in a multidimensional approach aiming at the development of not only the cognitive dimension of the learners/constructors, but their affective and behavioral dimensions as well, while realizing that all these would not be possible unless the development of the physical dimension is simultaneously attended to. Any educational system not doing so would leave the door open to imbalanced development and retarded potentialities. Just as any social system not adequately planning for social justice and for the resolution of group conflicts would impede its own development and the actualization of its own potentials.

The post-revolutionary Iran, despite all planning, efforts, and achievements, is still lagging in educational achievement, social justice, and cultural harmony it has hoped for. One area in which the Islamic Republic has seemingly performed well and has managed to reverse the gender inequality is education, and especially higher education wherein women have outnumbered men in recent years. Yet the quality of this education is in question, as is the role of the government in the reversal. If the development of scientistic attitude is taken as an index of this quality, studies have shown that the quality is rather low, something that the present study has also reconfirmed. Although the present study has focused on the relationship between scientistic attitude of young Iranian women and ways they suggest for resolving cultural conflicts, the collected data give clues as to the quality of educational experience they have been going through, in
addition to the more straightforward findings on weak scientific attitude and the dependence of the suggested approaches to cultural conflicts on the relative strength of this kind of attitude. The quality of the respondents’ writings, the scope and depth of their answers, and the absence of specificity in the more constructive approaches they have suggested are all additional signs of weak scientific attitude and low quality education. These findings are as real and alarming as those regarding social justice and cultural conflicts. It should be alarming for both the educators and the policy makers when a group of young and university educated women unanimously complain about the absence of social justice in all domains of their lives, or when the overwhelming majority of them perceive themselves as being treated like second grade citizens. These perceptions further fuel the perceived cultural conflicts between them and their family on one side and the community on the other, which would be a recipe for despair and lower productivity if not social unrest and upheaval. One way to muffle this alarm would be to critically review the conducted study and question the validity of its findings. It is true that looking at the study retrospectively, it has suffered from certain methodological shortcomings, especially if viewed from a positivist point of view, as it has no representational sampling, no rigorous measuring, and no statistical analyzing. Well, it was not conducted within that framework, yet attempts at improving the data collection methods and instruments in order to get more valid data through in-depth interviews, or anonymous and open correspondence with the participants, were not heeded.

References
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