Relationships between Psychosocial Characteristics and Democratic Values in Iranians: A Cross-Cultural Study

Kaviani H and Kinman G

School of Psychology, University of Bedfordshire, UK

Research Article

*For Correspondence

Kaviani H, School of Psychology, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, LU1 3JU, UK, Tel: +44 (0)1582 743765.

E-mail: Hossein.Kaviani@beds.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the extent to which differences in people's socio-political attitudes and behaviours are underpinned by individual characteristics. Two groups of volunteers: (a) an Iranian sample that have been resident in UK for less than two years, and (b) a British sample, took part in this study. A series of validated scales was used to examine differences in levels of empathy, theory of mind, flexibility, suggestibility, emotionality, openness, normative identity style, interpersonal trust, cooperativeness, emotionality, prosocial behaviour, egalitarian sex role, and authoritarianism between groups. Self-reported socio-political tendency, in terms of adherence to democracy, was also assessed. The results show significant differences in levels of these variables between the two cultural groups. Furthermore, the findings shed some light on the psychological and social factors that are related to democratic values and that predict this outcome in the two groups. Implications of the findings for policy makers and educational systems are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the past four decades, Middle Eastern countries have experienced regime changes, either by revolutions (such as Iran and Egypt) or foreign forces (such as Afghanistan and Iraq), and they are still striving to establish democratic political systems in their societies. In the context of the current political changes in Middle Eastern countries, it could be argued that particular individual characteristics may underpin anti-democratic attitudes and support of authoritarian regimes, as opposed to attitudes which allow egalitarian and liberal political systems to flourish. Much of the research that has examined potential individual differences as predictors of democratic attitudes is very old which shows that more insight is needed into contemporary contexts.

The notion that personality characteristics can influence people's socio-political tendencies has a long history in the social sciences [1]. Pertinent to socio-cognitive and motivational theories, personality characteristics have a clear role to play in internalizing ideas congruent with psychological needs, or in repelling those that are incongruent with them [1-3]. Miklikowska [4] found a link between support for democratic values and several individual difference variables including authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, normative identity style, openness and empathy in a sample of Finnish adolescents. As yet, however, little is known about how psychological characteristics may underpin the social and political tendencies of members of emerging democracies in the Middle East. In line with Miklikowska's [4] novel findings, it might be hypothesised that the differences in people's socio-political attitudes and behaviours are underpinned by individual characteristics (socially learned and/or genetically programed) which, in turn, may be influenced by their cultural background. The assumption that political attitudes are genetically influenced has gained some empirical support [5,6]. According to research findings on the factorial structure of personality, this may be connected to well-documented genetic factors that underpin certain personality traits [7-10]. There are, however, opposing theories which support lasting impact of environmental forces [11].

Adherence to democracy would imply that individuals are able to distinguish between nondemocratic and democratic social processes such as equality, impartial justice, universal suffrage, and freedom of expression [12]. It could therefore be argued that empathy and its cognitive components (i.e. theory of mind or perspective taking) are particularly pertinent to adherence to democratic values. Empathy encompasses people's concern for others and the extent to which they are able to take their perspective [13,14]. Individuals high on empathy are typically understanding, tolerant, tender, caring and compassionate [15,16] and, perhaps as a consequence, are prone to support democratic values such as freedom of speech, equality and respect for

minority rights [13]. It is therefore logical that Rifkin maintains that empathy is "the soul of democracy" [17]. He further argues that the ability to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves is a "deeply democratizing experience". Drawing on the notion of empathic cultures as well as individuals, Rifkin concludes that "the more empathic the culture, the more democratic its values and governing institutions". There is also a clear connection between empathy and prosocial behaviour (altruism) [18]. Indeed, democracy has been considered to be ''primarily a mode of associated living'' [19]. In line with this notion, prosocial behaviour as well as empathy may be a contributing factor to support for democracy.

Previous research also suggests that those who support democratic values tend to score more highly on measures of psychological flexibility and lower on authoritarianism than less democratic individuals [20-22]. It could also be argued that openness to new experiences, in addition to psychological flexibility, might foster tolerance of difference [23]. Hence, people who are psychologically inflexible and less open to novel experiences could be more prone to perceive political differences as a threat and, as a consequence, would tend to oppose what might be seen as 'alien' political norms [21].

Interpersonal trust is a further factor that might foster democratic values [22,24]. There is evidence that people who are more inclined to trust others are typically more tolerant [22] and more prepared for democratic participation [25]. With this in mind, interpersonal trust might encourage co-operation and team work: both of which seem crucial to building a democratic environment and facilitating equitable political participation. Cooperativeness, an additional personality characteristic associated with positive social relationships [26], might also be linked to political tendency but, as yet, this has not been investigated.

Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) is a further factor which may attenuate the tendency to democratic values. RWA is in line with, and influenced by, a propensity towards social cohesion, conformity and security which can be threatened by a perceived culture of civil liberties [27]. It could therefore be argued that RWA could lead to an expression of dispositional prejudice [28,29] and negatively predict adherence to democratic values [27].

Another individual difference variable that might discourage the development of democratic values is normative identity style. Identity style is a social cognition reflecting how individuals perceive and process reality [30]. People high on normative style consider and comply with the expectations of significant others and incorporate them into their decision making. They typically conform to conservative opinions and tend to avoid any experiences and values that challenge their internalized beliefs [31]. This can result in less flexibility and tolerance [30] and, potentially, anti-democratic factors such as authoritarianism [32].

A review of the literature highlights further variables which may be associated with adherence to democracy, such as emotionality, suggestibility and egalitarian sex role. Emotionality (or neuroticism) is concerned with negative emotions such as fear, nervousness and sadness [33]. People experiencing negative emotions are less enthusiastic about political participation, such as voting, which will clearly have a negative impact on democratic values in a society [34]. Suggestibility is a personality trait which reflects the extent to which an individual accepts information uncritically [35]. In other words, people high on suggestibility tend to take statements at face value without engaging in critical thinking which, in turn, may have a negative impact on political participation as a democratic value [36]. Furthermore, as mentioned above, democracy is associated with support for egalitarian values such as gender equality [13,37]. This might be particularly pertinent in Middle Eastern countries, where different norms and roles are culturally defined and legally prescribed for men and women.

To summarise, this study examines whether specific psychosocial factors predict socio-political tendencies, attitudes and behaviour in people with Middle Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds. Based on the literature reviewed above, a range of relevant constructs has been selected: empathy, theory of mind (ToM), cooperativeness, openness to experience, interpersonal trust, normative identity style, egalitarian sex role, flexibility, emotionality, suggestibility, prosocial behaviour, authoritarianism, and democratic values. In order to develop a model with theoretical and practical utility that explains the complex interrelationships of these factors and their relevance to democratic values, these variables will be organized into two levels: personality and social. The personality level encompasses empathy, ToM, flexibility, suggestibility, emotionality, and openness. The social level encompasses normative identity style, interpersonal trust, cooperativeness, prosocial behaviour, egalitarian sex role, and authoritarianism.

We examined differences in levels of each of these variables between two groups of young adults: (a) an Iranian sample who had been living in the UK for less than two years at the time of the study; (b) a native British sample. For several centuries, there have been a series of fundamental laws in place in Britain to limit the exercise of power and protect people's rights in Britain, whilst a century ago for the first time in Iranian history, a revolution took place to define the limits of power and individual freedoms [38]. It is anticipated that the findings will help identify potential psychological, culture-bound characteristics that may impede the development of a modernised, politically tolerant society. Iran, with a population of about 73 million, is one of the youngest societies in the Middle East, with more than 60% of the population being under 30 years old [39]. The relative youth of the population may make this country particularly open to socio-political movements and change. Iranians are pioneers in the region in terms of striving towards political reform, with at least four unsuccessful movements and revolutions over the last century in an attempt to establish democratic political system and a civil society [40].

METHOD

Participants and procedure:

A total of 244 students participated in this study from two independent groups: Iranians (n = 143) and British (n = 101). All participants were studying in UK universities. **Table 1** sets out the demographic characteristics of each group. The Iranian sample comprised students who had been residing in the UK for less than two years at the time the study was conducted, and were therefore considered to have a Middle Eastern cultural background. The British sample consisted of students who were born and raised in the UK, and represented the group with a Western cultural background. Participants who disclosed a multi-cultural background were excluded. The data from seven Iranian and two British participants were eliminated from the analysis because they did not respond to all measures. Iranian and British participants completed hard copies of Farsi (Persian language) and English versions of the measures respectively.

Table 1. Demographic variability in Iranian and British samples.

PG=Postgraduate, UG=Undergraduate, HS=High School.

Variables	Persian	British	Total
Sample size	136 (58%)	99 (42%)	235
Gender Men Women	58 (43%) 78 (57%)	38 (38%) 61 (62%)	96 (42%) 139 (58%)
Age	M=27.77 SD=5.76	M=26.76 SD=6.06	26.31 SD=5.90
Education PG UG HS/College	77 (57%) 40 (29%) 19 (14%)	21 (21%) 69 (69%) 9 (9%)	98 (42%) 109 (46%) 27 (12%)

With mediation of some Iranian cultural organizations in England, volunteers were invited to participate in the study by online advertisements. To recruit the British sample, undergraduate and postgraduate students of University of Bedfordshire were invited to participate by oral announcement in classrooms.

Measures:

As discussed above, the individual difference variables utilised in this study were divided into two levels (personality and social) and there was one outcome variable (support for democratic values). For all scales, higher scores represented higher levels of the variables measured unless otherwise indicated. Of these measures, openness to experience, emotionality, and cooperativeness had been previously validated with Iranian samples [41-43]. The correlations between scores on these three measures and other scales were deemed as evidence for convergent/divergent validity of other related measures utilized in the present study [44-46]. Most of the below mentioned measures include reversed items.

Personality level

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ): This measure consists of 16 items which assess empathy (one's ability to understand others' emotions). An example of an item is "I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me". Items are rated on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) [47].

Theory of mind (ToM) or Perspective Taking (PT sub-scale from IRI): This measure comprises 7 items (e.g. ''When I am upset at someone, I usually try to 'put myself in his/her shoes' for a while'') which assess one's ability to understand others' thoughts and viewpoints. Respondents rate items on a scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me well) to 5 (describes me well) [48].

Flexibility (From HEXACO Personality Inventory): This sub-scale assesses people's readiness to change, particularly in relation to social decision making. It comprises 10 items, for example: "When people tell me that I'm wrong, my first reaction is to argue with them". Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) [49].

Openness to experience (From Neo-PI-R): Three sub-scales, Actions, Ideas and Values, were selected to measure this variable. Actions (8 items; e.g., "I often try new and foreign foods") represents willingness to embrace new experiences. Ideas (8 items; e.g. "I have a lot of intellectual curiosity") measures the tendency to consider new, and possibly unconventional ideas. Values (8 items; e.g. "I believe that the different ideas of right and wrong that people in other societies have may be valid for them") represents willingness to consider new and possibly unconventional ideas. Items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) [50].

Suggestibility (SSS-21): This measure, derived from the Multidimensional Iowa Suggestibility Scale (MISS), encompasses 21 items assessing a general tendency to accept and internalise messages uncritically. (e.g. "I am easily influenced by other people's opinions"). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all, or very slightly) to 5 (a lot) [35].

Emotionality (Neuroticism scale from EPQ-R-Short Form): Emotionality, referring to negative emotions experienced in everyday life, consists of 12 items such as "Do you ever feel 'just miserable' for no reason?" Each item is answered as yes or no [33].

Social level

Normative Identity Style (NIS): This scale assesses the extent to which people believe they are in harmony with the expectations of significant others and referent groups and embrace collective ideas such as religion, family, and nationality. It has 9 items (e.g. "I automatically adopt and follow the values I was brought up with"). Each item is rated on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me) [51].

Interpersonal trust: This scale evaluates the extent to which people trust others in social contexts. It comprises 12 items, e.g. "It is better to be cautious of people you have just met until you know them better''. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) [52].

Cooperativeness (From TCI: Temperament and Character Inventory): This subscale measures tolerance and helpfulness in social situations. It consists of 25 items (e.g. "I usually respect the opinions of others"). Responses for each item are either 'true' or 'false' [26].

Prosocial behaviour: This Scale encompasses 20 items listing altruistic behaviours such as: "I have given a stranger a lift in my car."). Each behaviour is rated on a 5-point scale denoting frequency ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) [53].

Egalitarian Sex Role Attitude: This scale has 16 items measuring attitudes towards gender equal roles. A sample item is "The differences of capabilities between individuals are more numerous than those between men and women". Response options range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) [54].

Authoritarianism (RWA: Right Wing Authoritarianism): This was measured by 12 items assessing authoritarian submissiveness, aggression and conventionalism: e.g."Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in our society today". Items are rated on a 4-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) [55].

Outcome variable

Support for Democratic values (SDV): This scale assesses people's support for democracy and commitment to democratic behaviour. It consists of 10 items (e.g. "Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than other forms of government'') Response options range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) [4].

Translation & back-translation procedure

We utilised the recommended procedure of translation and back-translation [56] in order to generate Farsi versions of the measures (except Openness, Cooperativeness, and Emotionality scales which had been previously translated and validated). To maintain the equivalence between the original and translated measures, the following steps were taken. Firstly, two native Farsi-speakers independently translated items of the measures from English to Farsi. They were instructed to provide as literal translation as was possible. Secondly, a committee comprising the two translators and a bilingual (Farsi-English) qualified psychologist reviewed each of the translations and arrived at one final translation for each measure. Thirdly, the Farsi translations were translated back to English by another bilingual English-Farsi speaker. Fourthly, a native British psychologist compared the original measures and the back-translations. Finally, a committee comprising three bilingual qualified psychologists made any amendments required, taking into account the comments and feedback from the fourth step, and comparison of the items across the original, Farsi and back-translated measures. The committee also considered items or words that were potentially culturally inappropriate, and adapted them accordingly. For example the word 'Russian' in item 10 of the SDV ('If a Russian was elected in a local government election, the people should not allow him to take office.') was changed to 'an immigrant'.

Data analysis

SPSS for Windows, version 21 was used to analyse the data. Various statistical procedures including Cronbach's Alpha, Pearson correlations and independent samples t-tests assessed internal consistencies, convergent/divergent validity and between-group differences respectively. Correlations were also used to examine the strength of relationships between variables for both groups. Separate multiple hierarchical regression analysis was used to identify the predictors of democratic values in Iranian and British samples. The variables were entered in three steps: namely demographic, personality and social levels. Demographic variables were entered in the first step to control for their potential effects. Emotionality and cooperativeness, that utilised dichotomous response scales, were recoded as dummy variables (i.e. 0 and 1).

RESULTS

Descriptive data:

Table 1 provides the demographic details of the Iranian and British participants. In both groups, there were more female

participants (57% and 62% in Iranian and British groups respectively) than males. An independent samples t-test indicated that there was no significant age difference between Iranian (M =27.77, SD = 5.76) and British (M=26.76, SD=6.06) participants. As can be seen, the majority of Iranian participants (57%) hold a post-graduate degree while most of the British sample (69%) was educated to undergraduate level.

Reliability:

The summary details on internal consistencies for each of the measures are presented in **Table 2** for two groups. Cronbach's alpha for most of the measures ranged from fairly low to strong (Iranians: from .56 to .86; British: From .54 to.88) [57].

Table 2. Internal consistencies (Cronbach's alpha*) for the two groups and the sample as a whole.

Measures	Iranian	British	The whole sample
Empathy	0.66	54	0.63
Flexibility	0.65	0.74	0.71
Theory of mind	0.62	0.74	0.69
Egalitarian sex role	0.81	0.73	0.85
Normative identity style	0.80	0.77	0.79
Interpersonal Trust	0.58	0.54	0.56
Openness	0.82	0.82	0.83
Suggestibility	0.74	0.80	0.75
Cooperativeness	0.56	0.81	0.72
Emotionality	0.83	0.88	0.85
Prosocial behaviour	0.86	0.87	0.87
Authoritarianism	0.69	0.70	0.69
Democratic values	0.67	0.72	0.71

Inter-correlations:

Pearson's correlations were calculated between the variables for the two samples separately shown in **Table 3**. For both groups, adherence to democratic values was positively correlated with empathy, theory of mind, flexibility, interpersonal trust, openness, and cooperativeness; and negatively associated with normative identity style, suggestibility, emotionality and authoritarianism. The pattern of relationships between adherence to democratic values and these variables were generally similar but, as can be seen, the coefficients for flexibility and prosocial behaviour were stronger for the British sample, whereas openness to experience, suggestibility and emotionality were stronger for the Iranian sample. Emotionality in the Iranian group and authoritarianism in the British sample had the strongest relationship with adherence to democracy. No significant relationship was found between egalitarian sex role and adherence to democratic values.

Convergent/divergent validity:

To detect the convergent/divergent validity of the translated questionnaires, a series of Pearson's correlations was conducted on the Iranian sample. As can be seen from **Table 3**, with the exception of Egalitarian Sex Role, the correlations between the previously validated measures in Farsi (i.e., openness, cooperativeness, and emotionality) provide some evidence for convergent or divergent validity for all newly translated measures (r =.25. to .44, p<.01). Nonetheless, emotionality shows significant (negative) associations with only interpersonal trust and democratic values.

Group differences:

A series of independent t-tests was performed between two groups (Iranian and British) to examine whether there are any differences in mean levels of any of the study variables. **Table 4** summarizes these results.

Significant differences were found between groups for the majority of the study variables. As can be seen from **Table 4**, the mean scores for Iranian participants were lower than their British counterparts on empathy, flexibility, theory of mind, trust, openness and prosocial behaviour, and higher on normative identity style, suggestibility, emotionality, and authoritarianism. The Iranian sample also reported a significantly lower level of adherence to democratic values.

Multiple regression analysis:

As discussed above, the predictor variables were divided into two levels: personality (empathy, theory of mind, flexibility, suggestibility, emotionality and openness) and social (normative identity style, interpersonal trust, cooperativeness, prosocial behaviour, egalitarian sex role and authoritarianism). We ran hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine the predictive value of each of the measures in the whole sample. Multiple regression analysis was conducted separately for each group. Demographic variables (age, gender and education) was entered in the first step, personality level variables in the second step, and social level variables in the third step. **Table 5** summarizes essential details of the regression analyses for the Iranian and British samples

Table 3. Inter-correlations among variables in *Iranian and British* *(in bold)* groups.

*P< 0.01

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Empathy	1												
2. Theory of mind	0.29* **0.33***	1											
3. Flexibility	0.43* **37***	0.27* **0.19***	1										
4. Egalitarian sex role	0.09 **0.12**	0.14* **0.17***	0.10 **0.07**	1									
5. Normative identity style	-0.16* **-0.17***	-0.14* **-0.10**	-0.17* **-0.09**	0.06 **0.09**	1								
6.Interpersonal Trust	0.22* **0.26***	0.30* **0.27***	0.09 **.0.06**	0.06 **0.09**	-0.17* **-21***	1							
7. Openness	.0.44* **0.40***	0.38* **0.42***	0.29* **0.24***	0.07 **0.12**	-0.37* **-35***	0.43* **0.29***	1						
8. Suggestibility	-0.09 **-0.12**	0.19* **-0.17***	-0.17* **-0.14***	-0.05 **0.06**	0.26* **0.31***	-0.41* **-0.30***	-0.31* **-0.37***	1					
9. Cooperativeness	0.28* **0.23***	0.34* **0.31***	0.38* **0.35***	0.07 **0.10**	-31* **-0.24***	0.41* **0.29***	0.22* **0.27***	-43* **-0.35***	1				
10. Emotionality	-0.05 **0.03**	-0.10 **-0.05**	0.04 **0.09**	0.0 **0.05**	0.08 **0.04**	-0.27* **-0.33***	-0.11 **-0.16***	0.25* **0.34***	-0.04 **0.10**	1			
11. Prosocial behaviour	0.27* **0.32***	0.03 **0.15***	0.17* **0.10**	0.02 **0.08**	-0.13* **-0.19***	0.09 **0.15***	0.27* **0.10**	0.09 **-0.07**	0.11 **0.13**	-13 **-0.13**	1		
12. Authoritarianism	-0.29* **-0.20***	-0.24* **-0.19***	-0.24* **-0.09**	0.09 **0.04**	0.33* **0.25***	0.43* **0.21***	-0.38* **0.23***	0.23* **0.09**	-28* **0.11**	-0.06 **0.04**	0.02 **0.07**	1	
13. Democratic values	0.17* **0.22***	0.20* **0.29***	0.20* **0.19***	0.00 **0.09**	-0.19* **-0.16***	0.28* **.0.25***	0.36* **0.28***	-0.32* **-0.17***	0.31* **0.34***	-40* **-0.21***	0.25* **0.44***	--0.40* **-0.45***	-0.1

Table 4. Mean (SD) and Independent t-test results on the measured variables.

	Mean (SD)		t-value p<
	Iranian	British	
Empathy	53.90 (4.33)	57.00 (4.84)	5.18 001
Theory of mind	21.80 (2.35)	25.25 (3.40)	7.23 .001
Flexibility	21.18 (3.44)	24.68 (4.60)	6.69 .001
Egalitarian sex role	45.40 (5.76)	46.42 (4.40)	1.48 .14 ns
Normative identity style	25.11 (3.30)	22.57 (4.82)	4.80 001
Interpersonal Trust	24.43 (3.13)	29.46 (2.78)	12.79 .001
Openness	72.65 (6.13)	85.56 (7.94)	14.08 0.001
Suggestibility	23.46 (3.20)	18.93 (4.29)	9.17 .001
Cooperativeness	14.04 (2.51)	19.88 (2.6)	16.09 .001
Emotionality	8.37 (6.45)	6.56 (3.47)	2.59 0.02
Prosocial behaviour	54.64 (5.47)	56.48 (8.51)	2.02 0.05
Authoritarianism	35.30 (3.88)	29.92 (4.31)	10.04 .001
Democratic values	25.38 (2.38)	29.53 (4.01)	8.18 .001

Model summary:

In Iranian sample, the model accounts for 34% of the variance in democratic values. Age and gender, entered in Step 1 explained 1% of the variance, but this was not significant. The personality variables, entered in Step 2, accounted for a further

27% of the incremental variance with emotionality making a significant contribution. Theory of mind appeared to be the second strongest predictor of the outcome variable, but this did not reach the acceptable level of significance (p=.07). The social variables entered in Step 3 explained a further 6% of variance with no individual factor making significant contributions.

Table 5. Regression analysis at personality and social levels.

Note. *p <, **p < 0.05, 0.01

Step1: Demographics	Iranian		British	
	Beta	R2 Change	Beta	R2 Change
Age	0.01		0.03	
Gender	-0.06		0.05	
Education	0.03		0.02	
		0.01, ns		0.05, ns
Step 2: Personality level				
Empathy	0.08		0.01	
ToM	0.14		0.20*	
Flexibility	0.06		0.02	
Suggestibility	-0.06		-0.09	
Emotionality	-0.49**		0.17	
Openness	0.04		0.03	
		0.27, p<0.001		0.23, p<0.001
Step 3: Social level				
Normative identity style	-0.01		0.07	
Interpersonal trust	.0.09		0.22	
Cooperativeness	0.14		0.2	
Prosocial behaviour	0.05		0.27	
Egalitarian sex role	0.05		0.1	
Authoritarianism	-0.06		-0.12	
		0.06, ns		0.05, ns

For the British sample, the model explained 33% of variance in democratic values. In Step 1, age and gender accounted for 5% of the variance, but this was not significant. The personality variables, entered in Step 2, explained 23% of the variance with theory of mind making a significant contribution. The second strongest predictor was emotionality, which approached the acceptable significance level (p=.08). Social variables, entered in Step 3, accounted for 5% of the variance, but no individual variable made a significant contribution.

To summarise, demographic variables entered in Step 1 and the social variables entered in Step 2 failed to make a significant contribution to the variance in democratic values. Evidence was found that personality variables were more powerful predictors of this outcome for both groups. More specifically, for the Iranian group, adherence to democratic values was mainly explained by emotionality and the contribution made by theory of mind approached acceptable statistical significance. For the British sample, however, theory of mind was the primary predictor with emotionality making a marginally significant contribution to the overall variance of adherence to democratic values.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore potential variations in patterns of individual difference variables linked to adherence to democratic values in groups with different cultural backgrounds, namely British and Iranian. The personality and social variables that predicted this outcome were also examined.

Differences in predictor and outcome variables:

Iranian participants scored lower than the British sample on many of the variables hypothesised to be of relevance to the acceptance of democratic values: i.e. empathy, flexibility, theory of mind, trust, openness, prosocial behaviour and higher on other potentially relevant factors such as normative identity style, suggestibility, emotionality and authoritarianism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Iranian participants also reported a significantly lower level of adherence to democratic values than their British counterparts. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that the relationships between psychosocial variables and adherence to democratic values and the pattern of predictors of this factor might differ according to cultural group. These findings provide some initial support for the notion that there might be different personality and socio-political profiles across Western and Middle Eastern societies that are associated with attitudes towards democratic values.

The British sample tended to report higher levels of empathy than the Iranian group, both its emotional aspects (i.e., empathic concern) and cognitive components (i.e., theory of mind or perspective taking) which assess the extent to which an individual

is able to perceive the world from other people's perspective [13,14]. The British sample also scored more highly in prosocial behaviour [19], which is likely to give rise to understanding others and, arguably, preparedness for democratic action.

Differences between groups also emerged in levels of openness to experience and psychological flexibility, with the British group scoring more highly. This might lead to increased recognition of political differences in society [21] which, in turn, could foster tolerance [23]. The higher levels of interpersonal trust and cooperativeness found in the British sample may also enhance acceptance of difference [22] and democratic participation [25]. Furthermore, it was argued that support for egalitarian sex roles (in terms of belief in gender equality) would correspond with support for democratic values, as it tends to be synonymous with beliefs in equality in general [13,37]. Interestingly, in the present study, Iranians did not differ from their British counterparts on the attitudes towards egalitarian sex role reported. Students from the Middle East who study abroad may not be representative of the wider population; living in a culture that promotes equality between the sexes might modify their views and attitudes in this regard. Nonetheless, egalitarian sex role was not a key predictor of adherence to democracy for both groups.

People scoring more highly on right wing authoritarianism tend to think and act in keeping with social cohesion, conformity, and security, and oppose individual autonomy and civic liberties [27]. Normative identity style reflects the tendency to perceive and act based on significant others' expectations [30] and adherence to conservative opinions [31]. This study found that the Iranian sample reported higher levels of both authoritarianism and normative identity style than the British group. This corresponds with the findings of previous research suggesting that these factors constrain support for democratic norms [1,27]. Between-group differences on suggestibility found in the present study might also influence adherence to democracy. There is evidence that the more suggestible an individual is, the more likely they accept and internalize information uncritically [35] which, in turn, may predispose them to go with the flow of cohesive, conservative norms.

Links between personality/social variables and adherence to democracy

Significant relationships were found between the majority of the psychosocial variables included in this study and adherence to democracy. Some differences were found, however, in the strength of these associations. On the whole, flexibility and prosocial behaviour were more strongly related to democratic values for the British sample, whereas the associations with openness to experience, suggestibility and emotionality were stronger for the Iranian sample. These factors, and their implications, are discussed further below.

The findings of this study provide a preliminary profile of the individual difference factors that might underpin adherence to democracy and how these might differ according to culture. For both groups, theory of mind (significant in the British and marginally significant in the Iranian sample) and emotionality (significant in Iranians and approaching statistical significance for the British group) were the personality variables which were linked most strongly with democratic values. The pattern of predictors might be explained by the fact that Iranians have experienced more negative emotions in response to socio-economic adversities over the past four decades [58]. In addition, recent research findings show that Iranian children typically score lower than their western counterparts on theory of mind, in terms of their understanding of diversity in people's beliefs and desires [59]. The findings suggest that difficulty in taking the perspective of others and attempting to understand their thoughts and viewpoints, together with a tendency to experience negative emotions in daily life, may be key issues in discouraging the development of democratic values in this society. This can be interpreted in light of the growing literature on the role of emotion in political attitudes and behaviours [23,60,61]. There is evidence that social interactions and political participations are negatively influenced by negative emotionality [31,62]. Accordingly, individuals high on emotionality (or neuroticism) may be more reluctant to initiate wider social involvement including political socialization. Conversely, individuals who experience less negative emotion may be more inclined to respond with positive emotional tone and attitude to political ideas which are inclusive and respectful of others [63].

The findings of this study partially support those of Miklikowska [4] who found a link between support for democratic values and authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, normative identity style, openness and empathy in a large sample of secondary school students in Finland. While interpersonal trust was a key predictor of the outcome variable for both the Iranian and British sample in the present study, as discussed above, authoritarianism was only relevant for the latter group. Nonetheless, authoritarianism and other study variables were strongly correlated with democratic values for both groups highlighting their potential contribution to such values. In the regression analyses, the contribution of normative identity style, openness and empathy did not reach acceptable significance, but an individual difference variable, theory of mind, which is congruent with empathy (the cognitive component of empathy), was a significant (or marginally significant) predictor of the variance in democratic values for both samples.

Implications

The present study extends what is known about the predisposing factors for adherence to the principles of democratic governance, such as the right for freedom of expression, equality, tolerance, impartial justice, or the need for limits on majority power [12]. As such, the findings have pivotal social and political implications. They have the potential to inform practical guidelines to be used by political strategists, policy makers, and educational systems. Findings could be taken into consideration when planning campaigns to encourage adherence to democracy, particularly where cultural sensitivities are involved. The introduction

of formal democratic institutions is vital, but not sufficient to facilitate the democratization process and the survival of democracy in cultures where such values may not be widely accepted. Citizens who fully embrace democratic values at a personal level are also required. As suggested by Niemi et al. [64], it is important that civic educational systems aim to promote democratic values via their curricula to children at an early stage. Although the findings of this study are preliminary and further research is required, it seems worthwhile for the public educational system to consider how they could be translated into interventions to encourage the development of factors that underpin democratic values at different levels of education. The importance of empathy, theory of mind, prosocial behaviour, trust and cooperativeness and the potential dangers of authoritarianism for the wider social group should be emphasised in schools using a range of creative, evidence-based techniques that acknowledge any cultural sensitivities.

The study had some limitations. The Iranian and British samples were drawn from the student population and, consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to the wider populations of either country who may hold a more traditional views and values. For example, students in general may be more open to novel experiences and intellectually curious, and less likely to espouse authoritarian views, whereas international students will be exposed to political ideas and practices that differ dramatically from those of their home country. Nonetheless, students are likely to reflect the traits and values inherent in their own culture and, as such, can provide valuable insight into such issues. It is acknowledged, however, that participants who reflect the overall pattern of demographics and educational level inherent in each country would provide more reliable information. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the findings of the younger generation of Iranians represented in the present study might not be applicable to other Middle Eastern countries owing to the fact that Iranian society has experienced a longer history of democratic movements compared to other societies in the region [40].

The results of this study offer further evidence for reliability and validity of the measures utilised and provide a foundation upon which to develop future studies with representative groups in different Middle Eastern countries. At the time of writing this paper, the authors plan to utilise similar methodology with more culturally diverse samples from other Middle East societies who speak other languages (e.g., Arabic and Turkish). Concerning recent developments and consequences with regard to the so-called 'Arab Spring', the findings would help identify possible psychological, culture-bound characteristics that might impede the development of a modernised, politically tolerant society in the region.

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