Is Ethical Sensitivity Culturally Bound?
A Multiple Case Study from the Netherlands, Finland and Iran


1 Objectives
In this study we investigated the culture-invariant and culture-dependent nature of ethical sensitivity within the educational contexts of three countries, of which two, Finland and The Netherlands, represent western cultures, and one, Iran, eastern cultures. Our aim was to identify the culturally bound elements of ethical sensitivity in our data. We also enhanced the validity of our instrument, the Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ), with regard to using it in different cultural contexts.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Ethical sensitivity
According to Narvaez (2006), moral experts demonstrate holistic orientations in one or more of four processes or skills: ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and ethical action (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009). Even though all of these skills are essential, the most important is ethical sensitivity, since it is needed in identifying and understanding ethical problems and their cues. “Ethical sensitivity is the emphatic interpretation of a situation in determining who is involved, what actions to take, and what possible reactions and outcomes might ensue” (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009, 39). Ethical sensitivity can be described as the ability to see the moral aspect of a situation. As with any skills, ethical skills, too, can be learned and developed (Narvaez, 2006).

Narvaez (2001; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009) has operationalized ethical sensitivity into seven skills: (1) reading and expressing emotions, (2) taking the perspectives of others; (3) caring by connecting to others; (4) working with interpersonal and group differences; (5) preventing social bias; (6) generating interpretations and options; and (7) identifying the consequences of actions and options. Narvaez’s (2001) operationalization has guided our Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) development work. The Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) has been previously used with secondary school and higher education students (Author & Nokelainen, 2007; 2011; Author, Author & Author, 2013), as well as in the context of teacher education (Author & Author, 2012;
To further our understanding of ethical sensitivity as an essential aspect of moral theory, we examined it in different cultures.

### 2.2 National cultures in The Netherlands, Finland and Iran

We employed the cultural theory proposed by Hofstede et al. (2010) to examine the culturally related aspects of ethical sensitivity in The Netherlands, Finland, and Iran. Table 1 shows that The Netherlands, Finland, and Iran share certain cultural dimensions. However, we mainly look at the dimensions in which the countries show significant differences.

Table 1. Dimensions of national cultures in The Netherlands, Finland, and Iran
(see Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of national cultures</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iran</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity – femininity</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism – collectivism</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Collectivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power distance</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indulgence – restraint</td>
<td>Indulgence</td>
<td>Indulgence</td>
<td>Restraint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term – short-term orientation</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, Finland and The Netherlands have more cultural similarities with each other than with Iran. They clearly differ from Iran in terms of collectivity-individualism and power distance. The three countries, however, reflect common features as regards the femininity-masculinity dimension of culture. Accordingly, considering the main task of this research, we examined how such cultural differences and similarities have affected the level and pattern of ethical sensitivity within the educational context of the three countries.

### 3 Methods

The Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) (Author & Nokelainen 2007; 2011) is based on Narvaez’s operationalization of ethical sensitivity (Narvaez, 2001). The instrument consists of 28 items on a Likert scale of 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) (see Table 3). The items have been designed to apply to people from different backgrounds and cultures. This allows for the use of the instrument in a multicultural society and in cross-cultural studies such as the study presented here. The statements describe the issues and values that respondents consider personally important. Each of the seven dimensions is operationalized with four statements.
4 Data
A nonprobability sample (N=2053) was collected with an Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) in Finland (n=864, 42%), Iran (n=556, 27%), and The Netherlands (n=633, 31%). In Finland each respondent was personally invited to complete the Internet version of the questionnaire. In Iran and The Netherlands the participants were asked to evaluate in writing their attitudes towards the statements measuring ethical sensitivity. The Finnish sample consisted of elementary and secondary school teachers (n=522) and university students (n=342). All of the Iranians were Kurdish elementary or secondary school teachers (n=556), and the Dutch participants were university students (n=633). The Dutch participants’ age ranged from 17 to 67 (M= 20.63, SD=2.98), and the Iranian 20 to 55 (M= 35.08, SD= 6.35). The Finnish group did not report their age.

5 Results

5.1 Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of ethical sensitivity
We explored the factor structure of ethical sensitivity based on data from the three different contexts. To do this, we first conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The analyses resulted in a new factor structure consisting of four factors and 16 items which explained a 53.16 variance in the data. Relying on previous research concerning the Ethical Sensitivity Scale and considering the wording and meaning of the items, we named the four factors as follows: factor 1 caring by connecting to others (27.98 of variance) (CCO), factor 2 taking the perspective of others (11.33 of variance) (TPO), factor 3 reading ethical issues (7.48 of variance) (REI), and factor 4 identifying the consequences of actions and options (6.37 of variance) (ICAO).

5.2 Cross-cultural comparison of ethical sensitivity
To examine the cross-cultural differences in ethical sensitivity, a one-way between-subjects multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was conducted. A statistically significant Box's M test {F(20, 11977096.511) = 9.81, p < 0.01, Box’s M = 196.77} indicted unequal variance-covariance matrices of ethical sensitivity across the Finnish, Iranian and Dutch samples and thus necessitated the use of Pillai’s trace in assessing the multivariate differences. The results of this showed a statistically significant multivariate effect in the model. In other words, significant differences were evident between the ethical sensitivity vectors of the three countries’ participants {Pillai’s trace = 0.48, F(8, 4096) = 163.32, p < 0.01, $\eta_p^2 = 0.24$}. Relying on these results, the next aim was to discover how
the different dimensions of ethical sensitivity were affected by the nationality of the participants. We therefore conducted univariate ANOVAs on each dimension of ethical sensitivity. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 2. Level of ethical sensitivity in The Netherlands, Finland, and Iran

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Netherlands M (Sd)</th>
<th>Finland M (Sd)</th>
<th>Iran M (Sd)</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCO</td>
<td>3.83 (0.50)</td>
<td>4.18 (0.45)</td>
<td>4.37 (0.53)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>188.65</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPO</td>
<td>3.87 (0.52)</td>
<td>4.17 (0.50)</td>
<td>3.68 (0.61)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>141.89</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REI</td>
<td>3.00 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.64 (0.55)</td>
<td>3.87 (0.51)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>385.53</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICAO</td>
<td>3.75 (0.48)</td>
<td>4.04 (0.46)</td>
<td>4.00 (0.57)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>65.72</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results indicated that all four dimensions of ethical sensitivity were significantly affected by the participants’ nationality.

The Dutch group showed the lowest scores in most dimensions, therefore we controlled the effect of age since the Dutch sample was younger (M = 20.63) than the Iranian (M = 35.08) (unfortunately we had no age data for the Finnish group). To do this, we conducted a covariate factor analysis (ANCOVA) with three variables: ethical sensitivity as the dependent variable (the computed mean of the four dimensions), nationality as the independent factor, and age as the covariate. The results showed that age had a statistically significant effect on the relationship between nationality and ethical sensitivity: \( F (1, 1186) = 22.08, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.018 \). In line with this, the marginal mean (after controlling for the effects of age) of both groups significantly changed compared with the main mean. The main mean of the ethical sensitivity for the Dutch group was 3.62 against 3.99 for the Iranian, while the marginal means were 3.90 and 3.70 for the Iranian and Dutch groups respectively, indicating a 0.20 decrease in range.
5.3 Modeling of ethical sensitivity based on nationality

We wanted to examine the relationship between the dimensions of ethical sensitivity based on the nationality of participants. These relationships are shown in Figure 1.

In order to build the models shown in Figure 1, we first identified the central dimension of ethical sensitivity and then looked at how the other elements were related to this central element in each country. Considering the amount of variance explained by the dimensions of ethical sensitivity in the first stage of the analysis (CFA), we considered caring by connecting to others (CCO) as the central dimension. This dimension explained 27.93 of the whole variance (53.16) explained by the model. In addition, CCO theoretically is the core idea in ethical sensitivity since the dimensions of reading ethical issues (REI), taking perspectives of others (TPO), and identifying the consequences of actions and options (ICAO) somehow affect caring for others. Thus we decided to consider CCO as the dependent variable and the other three dimensions as independent variables in order to examine how these three dimensions affect CCO. Conducting several rounds of multiple regression
analysis and bivariate correlation, we did a preliminary examination in order to build a casual model for each country. Then we conducted a path analysis to test the final model for the three countries.

As can be seen in Figure 1, ICAO and TPO had significant direct effects on CCO with path coefficients of ($\beta = .33, p < 0.01$) for TPO and ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$) for ICAO. In addition, REI had an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.01$) on CCO by mediating ICAO, and ICAO had an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$) by mediating TPO. REI showed no significant direct or indirect effects by mediating TPO on CCO. In addition, the endogenous variables of CCO explained a strong amount of variance at 0.27 but variables ICAO and TPO demonstrated moderate variances at 0.15 and 0.13 respectively.

The Dutch path analysis is also shown in Figure 1. Considering the causal relationship between the dimensions, as can be seen, this model is different from the Finnish model in that REI had indirect effects through both ICOA ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$) and TPO($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$) on CCO. In addition, ICOA had a stronger direct path coefficient ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$) toward CCO than TPO ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01$). In the Finnish group TPO was a stronger predictor of CCO. The variances explained by the endogenous variables were 0.16 for CCO, 0.20 for ICAO, and 0.03 for TPO. The last model of ethical sensitivity was Iran’s case, shown in Figure 1. Examining this, we can see the biggest difference in the Finnish and Dutch models, where TPO had no direct effect on CCO, but showed indirect effects by mediating REI ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.01$) and ICAO($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$). As well, while in the Finnish and Dutch models REI had no direct effect, in the Iranian case there was a direct effect ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$) on CCO. The results of the Iranian path analysis showed similarities with the Dutch sample in that ICAO ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.01$) and REI ($\beta = 0.40, p < 0.01$) showed the strongest direct and indirect effects on CCO, respectively.

6 Scientific or scholarly significance of the study

The analysis revealed that caring by connecting to others is a central and culturally invariant dimension of ethical sensitivity in educational contexts. Considering the other dimensions of ethical sensitivity, taking the perspective of others is particularly culturally dependent, taking into account differences in the examined countries’ cultural dimensions of power distance and collectivity. This finding is applicable to moral education in multicultural educational contexts. Teacher educators and other educational policymakers should work with teachers and school leaders to be sensitive to the ethical conflicts of students in accordance with their cultural differences.
References


