

## **The Cross-Cultural Schemata of Iranian-American People Toward Each Other: A Qualitative Approach**

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This study explores cross-cultural schemata: abstract mental structures that one makes according to his/her past experiences or shared knowledge about the members of other cultures and thus makes them more understandable. Iran and the U.S. are two belligerent countries which have a contemporary history of hostility (see Shaghasemi, Heisey, & Mirani (2009) for a review on the history of their relations). But, the two nations have always been understood to be in the shadow of the relations between their governments. Given the history of hostility between the two countries, what is the image of one citizen in the eyes of the other?

Two groups of students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tehran and the School of Communication Studies at Kent State University participated in a qualitative study. Respondents were asked about their image of the people of the other country prior to being asked how they got such an image. Our results showed that Iranian respondents had more positive cross-cultural schemata toward American people than perceptions Americans had for their Iranian counterparts. For both groups, the mass media were the primary sources of their schemata.

In our “media-saturated world” (Williams, 2003, p. 64) and the continuous flow of images and information from the media, how can a citizen imagine the people of another country when s/he has never seen that country before? What happens when our typical citizen is an Iranian or an American who looks to the other side and tries to shape a general understanding?

As our world is getting smaller and smaller, people rely more and more on the media to get information on previously unimportant issues. This is where much debate in the history of media studies has been shaped. The point, however, is that almost all communications scholars agree that the media affect our understanding of the world, as the media have power to shape our perceptions (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Miller, Davis, Henderson, Markovic, & Ortiz, 2005; Perse, 2008).

Today, one of the most international concerns of the world is the nuclear activities of Iran and the U.S. policy toward them. It seems to some that the world is again at the threshold of another war in the Middle East. Both sides—with some omissions—are democracies and need to achieve popular support for their programs and both accuse the other side of violation of the principles of democracy. Of course, the perception of the people of each country toward their counterparts in the other country is important and serves political ends. This is the very reason we want to evaluate these perceptions. This study will explore the cross-cultural schemata of the people of Iran and America toward each other. A review on the previous works in the field will shed light on the way we want to go.

### Review of Literature

Before us, some other researchers have tried to examine Iranian-American perceptions of each other. Tadayon (1982) showed that the reputation of Iranians in the U.S. was damaged after the hostage crisis. World Public Opinion Organization (2007) showed that 49% of Iranians had an unfavorable opinion of the American people and 45% had a favorable opinion. These results also showed that 49% of Americans said they had an unfavorable opinion of the Iranian people while only 29% said they had a favorable opinion. Ahmad Zadeh, Sabaghi, Motamedi, and Esmaeili (2005) showed that Americans do not believe in common stereotypes about Iranians in the Western media. This study also showed that Iranians have positive stereotypes about American people. Mirani, Soofi, Ahmad-Zadeh-Namvar, and Haghgoei (2006) showed similar results for Iranians but the project failed because Americans did not respond to their questionnaire. Ahmad-Zadeh-Namvar (2008) found that Americans show more negative perceptions of Iranians than Iranians had of Americans. Heisey and Sharifzadeh (2009) explored the role of political representation of Americans and Iranians as expressed in the visual rhetoric of teenagers. Their study revealed that almost all of the drawings of Iranians and Americans show the influence of the media in the political images that are portrayed in them (for more works on the Iranian-American perceptions see Heisey, 2008; Johnston Conover, Mingst, & Sigelman, 1980; Shaghasemi, Heisey, & Mirani, 2009). All cited works here are related to the method of cognition people use to know others. But what is cognition and how does it work?

### Cognition and Schemata

When most people think about cognition, they probably think about what they studied in school or college. But what they are likely to neglect is the kind of knowledge that is shared by almost everybody. One of the problems raised by the complications of this field is social cognitions. While some psychologists (Simon, 1976) see no substantial difference between cognition and social cognitions, others like Zajonc (1989), believe in a gap between the two. Because social cognition is a representational construct (Hall, 1997; Lewis Glass, Holyak, & Lester-Santa, 1979; Monteil & Huguet, 1999), it is not located in the mind of a single individual (Hutchins, 1993).

Boski (1988), Goodwin (1994), and Williams (2003) maintain that central to the organization of human cognition are processes of classification. In fact, category systems have vertical dimensions based upon level of abstraction and a horizontal dimension based upon object equivalence (Revell DeLong, Minshall, & Larntz, 1986). One type of classification, according to Pennington (2000), that makes a less prejudiced image of other people is called "schema." The concept of the schema can be traced to Plato and Aristotle, but Kant is generally considered to be the first to talk about schemata as organizing structures that mediate how we see and interpret the world (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005).

According to Mandler (1979), a schema "is formed on the basis of past experience with objects, scenes, or events and consists of a set of (usually unconscious) expectation about what things look like and/or the order in which they occur" (quoted in Nishida, Hammer, & Wiseman, 1998, p. 501). For Fiske and Linville (1980, p. 543), "the schema concept refers to cognitive structures of organized prior knowledge, abstracted from experience with specific

instances....” Endicott, Bock, and Narvaez (2003, p. 408) give a more compact definition of schema and say, “the term, schema, refers to a network of information that functions to organize an individual’s knowledge and experiences.” Werner, Rhodes, & Partain (1998) hold that the schema is a generic term for a variety of memory structures that lead people to expect to see or experience certain things in certain settings. For Foldy (2006, p. 351), “schemata are knowledge structures or mental templates that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form or meaning.” Oller defines a schema as “the kind of organization that enables its user to handle certain kinds of tasks more efficiently than would otherwise be possible” (Sasaki, 2000, p. 92), while Fiske and Taylor (1991, p. 139) define schemas, or schemata, as “people’s cognitive structures that represent knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relation among its attributes.” These structures are organized as prior knowledge and shape what is perceived and remembered, but they are involving people and situations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Nishida (1999, p. 577) holds a similar stance: “Schemata are generalized collections of knowledge of past experiences which are organized into related knowledge groups and are used to guide our behaviors in familiar situations.”

One of the main differences between schemata and stereotypes is that the schemata are flexible but the stereotypes are hardened. Therefore, hardening of schemata could be argued to suggest a sloppiness of thought when this happens (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004). A schema thus may become a stereotype when this occurs.

Reviewing the literature of cognition, categorization, classification and schemata, gives us a new understanding of the concept of “schema.” A schema can be defined as an abstract mental structure that one makes according to his/her past experience and shared knowledge in order to make the world more understandable.

Werner, Rhodes, and Partain (1998) believe that there are three kinds of schemata: frames, prototypes, and stereotypes (as we saw earlier, the present study does not perceive stereotypes, as schemata), and scripts. Oller classified schemata into three kinds: content, formal and abstract schemata (see Sasaki, 2000), while Mayer, Rapp III, and Williams (1993) speak about type schemata, significant other schemata, and “other” kinds of schemata. Siew Ming (1997) considers content schemata and places them vis-à-vis linguistic schemata. Malcolm and Sharifian (2002) argue that each type of schemata can be universal, idiosyncratic, cultural, or societal. Pazy (1994) recognizes 11 types of schemata and categorizes 10 of them in three types: time, scope, and agent schemata. For Nishida (1999), there are eight types of schemata: fact-and-concept, person, self, role, context, procedure, strategy, and emotion. According to Stockwell (2003), schemata can be divided into (a) situational types (such as the restaurant), (b) personal schemata (that embody behavior and social roles), and (c) instrumental schemata (that contain our knowledge of undertaking actions and practicing skills).

According to our way of approaching Iranian and American perceptions of each other, we will provide our new kind of classification of schemata.

### Cross-Cultural Schemata

Often complex cognitive systems emerge out of knowledge that develops among the members of a cultural group over time. Such knowledge, according to Sharifian (2003), gives

rise to the notion of cultural cognition. When different groups know about the existence of each other, the notion of cross-cultural schemata emerges. Cultural schemata play a crucial role in cross-cultural understanding. Cultural schemata are conceptual structures that enable an individual to store perceptual and conceptual information about his or her culture and interpret cultural experiences and expressions (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002). For Chin (1999, p. 244), "cultural schemata are cognitive representations of phenomena intersubjectively shared by a social group, and their existence is inferred by reference to obvious facts that everyone in the group shares." According to Cole (1996, p. 126, as cited in Smagorinski, Susan Cook, & Reed, 2005), cultural schemata are "patterns of elementary schemata that make up the meaning system characteristic of any cultural group." According to Marková (2003), we share the cultural schemata of others and their actions, or the sedimented stocks of intersubjective knowledge that are re-cycled through similar experiences. As we see here, the notion of cultural schemata is not directly about the "other" people but is something that is shared among "us." So if we want to study the image of one group of people in the eyes of the other group, it is important to use a framework that encompasses the shared or individual mental structures toward other cultural groups. This framework is cross-cultural schemata, we think. Therefore, we define cross-cultural schemata as "abstract mental structures that one makes according to his/her past experiences or shared knowledge about the members of other cultures and thus makes them more understandable." Of course, this trait can be treated evaluatively according to cultural contexts of both parties. So, we can simply classify cross-cultural schemata as: positive, negative, and neutral or uniform.

#### Method and Participants

Each semester the School of Communication Studies at Kent State University administers a mass questionnaire to all students enrolled in the basic communication course who agree to participate. The administrator of the mass testing agreed to add our two questions to the end of their questionnaire on a sheet called, "Intercultural Survey." The Survey sheet asked for gender, age, ethnicity (African American, Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, Other), and class level (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate Student, Other).

Below this demographic portion of the sheet at the top of the page were the instructions for responding to the following two questions:

1. What are your perceptions or images of the citizens of Iran?
2. What are the sources of these perceptions?

Of the 255 American respondents, 146 or 57% were female and 109 or 43% male. Eighty-five percent of the females identified themselves as Caucasian and 90% of the males were Caucasian. Eleven percent of the females identified themselves as African American and 6% of the males were African American. Other ethnic groups indicated were Hispanic (7 total), Asian (3), Arab (2), Native American (1), Haitian (1), Ghanian (1). Eighty-three percent of the females were underclassmen (Freshman and Sophomore) and 78% of the males were underclassmen. In age, the respondents ranged from 18 to 33 with most of them from 18 to 24. Only four were in their thirties.

Simultaneously, data for the Iranian case were collected from undergraduate students of social sciences in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The University of Tehran by direct interview. We decided to use an interview instead of a survey because the sensitivity of the issue in Iran could affect the responses. Therefore, we chose two BA students, male and female, from the same faculty to attract trust of our respondents. The same two questions were asked by replacing Iran with America. In this case, 209 responses were collected. Of the 209 respondents, 106 or 51% were female and 103 or 49% male, all from the same race and nationality. In age, the respondents ranged from 18 to 31 with most of them from 20 to 24. Only two were in their thirties.

The data were analyzed separately but by the same method. All data were categorized and some categories were subcategorized. The “Negativity,” “Positivity” or “Neutrality” of these cross-cultural schemata was evaluated according to the language of the responses comparing to the cultural context of the respondents. Our qualitative approach analyzed the responses in depth without any predetermined hypotheses. The categories emerged from the wording of the responses.

### Findings

#### *American Cross-Cultural Schemata of Iranian Citizens*

American responses were divided into five categories: Positive, Negative, Mixed, Blank or No Comment, Mistook Iraq for Iran. The percentages, by gender, in each of the five categories were calculated and resulted in the following results. Only two of the five categories had significant differences by gender—the Negative and the Mistook Iraq for Iran. In each case, the breakdown by gender is of that particular category, not of the total.

#### *Examples of the Responses*

*Don't know/no comment.* An average of 11.5% of the 255 respondents said they don't know anything about Iran and thus had no comment. Of the 146 female responses, 11% said they don't know about Iran and thus had no comment and of the 109 male responses, 10% said they don't know or had no comment. Some examples of the Don't Know/No Comment answers are: “I don't follow these things”; “I don't know much about the citizens of Iran”; “I do not concern myself with world issues”; and “I have no thoughts on the citizens of Iran. I have never been there so I cannot formulate an opinion on them.”

*Positive responses.* A small minority of the respondents wrote that they had cross-cultural schemata that could be called positive. Of this group, an almost equal number of them were female and male. An average of 17.5% of the 255 respondents expressed positive comments about the citizens of Iran. Sixteen point four percent of the female respondents were positive and 16.5% of the male respondents were positive. There are three subcategories: (1) Viewed as Normal, Innocent, Good—51%, (2) Cultural Aspects Emphasized—31%, and (3) Have Respect and Affection for the Iranians—9.5%.

Some examples of the “Normal, Innocent, Good positive” comments are: “I think most of them are innocent;” “I think they are good, faithful citizens facing oppression;” “I think that

they are people just like us who want to have all the same freedoms and liberties that we do”; “They are good peace loving people unlike their leaders”; and “Smart people.”

Examples of comments in the “Cultural Aspects” category are: “They are fine within their own societal context”; “They have a different lifestyle, culture, but have some similarities to the U.S. democratic system”; “They are people like Americans, but have different beliefs and lifestyles than we do”; and “I think that although our cultures seem to collide that they are people just like us. All differences are purely cultural.”

Examples of comments in the category “Have Respect and Affection for the Iranians” are: “My father’s a [sic] Iranian. So in a sense my family is from there so I honor and respect them as human beings”; and “Since I myself have family who are from Iran my perceptions are that most are good people. I know people who live in Iran and it seems like they go about their lives just as we do.”

*Negative responses.* Compared to the small minority having positive perceptions, almost half of the respondents had what are characterized as negative perceptions. An overall average of 47% of the respondents gave negative perceptions. Forty-one percent of the female respondents were negative and 54% of the male respondents were negative. The responses fell into six subcategories: Poor, Need Help, Oppressed, Evil, Bad Government, and Wear Turbans. Examples in each category follow:

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Poor, Uneducated, Ignorant, Suffering” are: “Poor and underprivileged”; “People who suffer”; “Unwealthy [sic]”; “Repressed, poor”; “Uneducated, ignorant”; and “Poverty is the first term I think of.”

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Need Help, Bad Situation, Feel Sorry for Them” are: “I feel bad for the citizens of Iran because of all they have to deal with all of the time”; “People who are controlled and don’t know anything better”; and “Sad.”

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Oppressed, Mistreated” are: “I believe they are oppressed and deserve more freedoms”; and “They live a bad lifestyle and women get treated unfairly.”

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Evil, Dangerous, Violent, Crazy, Not Nice” are: “They are crazy”; “Violent”; “Hope they aren’t going to do something stupid”; “Terrorists”; “Out of control”; “They are dangerous people”; “They are not nice”; and “I don’t like any of them. I don’t think they deserve to be treated with respect because they are all taught to hate the U.S.”

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Bad Government, They Fear and Hate the U.S., Enemies” are: “They are fearful of the United States taking over their country like we did in Iraq”; “They hate America”; “I feel bad for them because of the bad government”; “They are secretly taking over our country”; “American enemies”; “A country we need to keep our eye [on]”; “Muslim people that hate Americans”; “Controlled under a harmful, dangerous government”; and “Not bad people, bad government.”

Examples of comments from the subcategory “Wear Turbans, Towels, Cover Their Faces” are: “Women as inferior”; “I hate how they (women) have to wear certain clothes”; “Women having to cover every inch of their body with some form of clothing and not being able to show their faces”; “Towel wearing, dark skinned people”; “Turbans”; “I don’t understand why women are required to cover their face”; and “Mad people with turbans.”

*Mixed responses.* About 13% of the responses were labeled as Mixed; that is, their cross-cultural schemata were some positive and some negative, or they recognized that the citizens

of Iran could not be put into one category or the other. 12% of the female respondents were mixed and 13.6% of the male respondents were mixed. Examples follow:

Examples from the subcategory “Some harmful, some normal” are: “I think that there [sic] is a mixture of violent bad people and innocent good-willed people;” “Both positive and negative. There are good and bad people in the world so it is hard for me to stereotype a nation;” and “I believe some people are harmful and controlling to the general public while others are normal citizens trying to make a living and looking for outsiders to help them.”

Examples from the subcategory “They are caught in the middle” are: “Poor, hard workers, thirsty for information;” “The citizens of Iran seem to me to be caught in between two sides. I feel they just want to be in control of their own lives and not be bombarded with all of the negative things going on around them;” and “People who will become an enemy of our country’s in the future due to poor government relations for no fault of their own or mine.”

Examples of from the “Neutral” subcategory are: “Mixed feelings;” “Many are Muslim, but many are also big oil businessman [sic];” “Neutral. I try not to hold biases to cultures due to media hype;” “Muslim people, oil minners [sic];” “Middle Eastern;” and “Unclear as to what freedom and democracy really consist of.”

*Mistook Iraq for Iran responses.* Ten percent of the respondents mistook the country of Iraq for the country of Iran. The language of their answers disclosed that they thought Iraq was Iran. Many more of the female respondents (15%) than the males (2%) made this mistake. This means that 20% of the 255 respondents (10% didn’t know and 10% got mixed up about which country was which) were ignorant of Iran and unable to adequately answer a question about the citizens of that country. Examples are: “They are stuck in the middle of a horrible battle. Some are thankful for the U.S. interference and some are against it;” “I feel bad for them. I feel America is carried away with the war;” “Beaten, hardship. It’s hard for the people living there with the war;” “Same as Americans are, some are wanting the fighting to stop while others are wanting it to continue;” “First thing that comes to mind though is the war;” “They are all suffering from the war;” and “I feel badly for their lives being turned upside down because war in their country.”

#### Examples of Sources of Their Perceptions

The second question in the Intercultural Survey that the 255 respondents answered was, “What are the sources of these perceptions?” Their answers to this question were categorized in the same way that the perceptions were. The first category, “Don’t Know/No Comment,” had no responses for sources. In each case, the breakdown by gender is of that particular category, not of the total.

#### *Positive Response Sources*

The survey sheets with positive responses were examined for the types of sources given for these positive cross-cultural schemata. Generally, the sources identified fell into four categories: Media, Own Thoughts, Family and Friends, and Teachers.

*Media.* Of the positive responses, 42% of these indicated that the media, whether print or electronic, were their sources. Of this total, 34% of the media sources were from female answers and 51% were from male.

*Own thoughts and beliefs.* Of the positive responses, 25% said that their sources were their own thoughts and beliefs. The breakdown was 28% for female, 22% for male.

*Family and friends.* Of the positive responses, 15% said their sources were their own family and friends. The breakdown was 12% for female and 19% for male.

*Teachers and school.* Of the positive responses, 13% said their sources were their teachers or their school situation. The gender breakdown was 15% for female and only 7% for male.

#### *Negative Response Sources*

The negative response sheets were examined to determine respondents' sources for their perceptions. Again, they fell into the same four categories: Media, Own Thoughts, Family and Friends, and Teachers. The percentages, however, were quite different. The media had a substantially greater impact in forming these negative cross-cultural schemata than the other categories.

*Media.* Attributing the media for their negative cross-cultural schemata of Iranian citizens were 79% of the total, with the breakdown being 79% female and 78% male.

*Family, friends and other persons.* Of the negative responses, only 8% of the total said their sources were family and friends. The gender breakdown was 10% for female, 6% for male.

*Own thoughts, beliefs, and previous knowledge.* The sources of the negative responses attributed to their own thoughts and beliefs were 7.9 % of the total, with the breakdown being 5% female and 11% male.

*Teachers and school.* Only a very small percentage of the respondents attributed their sources for their negative responses to their teachers or school environment. Only 2.6% of the total were in this category, with the breakdown being 4.2% female and less than 1% (.9%) male.

#### *Mixed Response Sources*

The mixed responses were examined and the same four groups of sources were identified.

*Media.* A majority of the mixed responses attributed their sources to the media. The percentages were 70% of the total, with the breakdown being 78% female and 59% male.

*Own thoughts, beliefs, and previous knowledge.* A small percentage of the mixed responses gave their own beliefs as the source of their cross-cultural schemata. The breakdown was 18.7% total, with 10% female and 29% male.

*Family, friends, other persons.* Only a very small percentage of the mixed respondents gave family and friends as their sources. The results were 8% for female and 0% for male.

*Teachers and school.* The category of teachers and school as their sources for the mixed respondents constituted 0% for female and 11% for male. Examples are: "School, teachers"; and "Discussions in class."



### *Mistook Iraq for Iran Sources*

*Media.* Fifty-four percent of the total responses that confused Iraq for Iran indicated media as their sources, with the breakdown being 62% female and 16% male.

*Family and friends.* Twenty percent of the responses indicated family and friends as the sources, with the breakdown being 17% female and 33% male.

*Own thoughts and beliefs.* Twenty-five percent of the responses said own thoughts and beliefs were the sources, with the breakdown being 24% female and 33% male.

### Iranian Cross-Cultural Schemata of American Citizens

The percentages, by gender, in each of the three categories were calculated. The results are summarized below. In all cases, there were significant differences by gender.

### *Examples of the Responses*

*Positive responses.* An average of 51% of the 209 respondents expressed positive comments about the citizens of the U.S. Of the 106 female responses, 39% were positive, and of the 103 male responses, 64% were positive. There are six subcategories here: (1) Viewed as Law-abiding and Orderly—31%, (2) Affluent—22%, (3) Humanitarian, Religious and Ethical—19%, (4) Joyous, and Good-looking—14%, (5) Knowledgeable—11%, and (6) Someone Like Everybody—3%.

Some examples of the “Law-abiding and Orderly” positive comments are: “An orderly citizen”; “A logical citizen who respects the common decisions”; “Have civil awareness and respect the freedom of other people”; “Purposeful and punctual”; “Religious and legalistic”; and “Their lives are well scheduled and have well defined rights that do not defy the other’s rights.”

Examples from the “Affluent” category are: “They are opulent, wealthy and hard working”; “They live in a safe country and have no financial problems”; “Bon vivant and a united nation”; “They are rational consumerists”; “Have open society and believe in the principals of enlightenment. They are well-off and they are afraid of terrorism”; “Luxurious”; and “Rich people who care about other people.”

Examples of “Humanitarian, Religious and Ethical” comments are: “They are highly bound to ethics, religious beliefs, and humanity”; “They are very nice”; “Civilized, pioneer, and ethical”; “As far as possible, they avoid war”; “They want freedom for all”; “They are against terror and they prefer negotiation instead of war”; and “Adaptable and kind in different situations.”

Examples of comments in the subcategory “Joyous, and Good-looking” are: “A person who wears jean and enjoys eating”; “A liberal person who likes dance and strange clothes”; “Patriot and live happily”; “A person who combs his short blonde hair up and wears black jeans, Mel Gibson maybe”; and “They are symbols of modern lovers.”

Examples of “Knowledgeable” comments are: “A logical person, an intellectual who uses politics to serve social welfare and individual freedom”; “Always think about future and try to make the world a better place to live”; and “Politically well informed.”

Examples from the subcategory “Someone Like Everybody” are: “They are like other citizens”; and “A very common person like us.”

*Negative responses.* The pure negative attitudes toward Americans are significantly low among the Iranian respondents. Of the 209 respondents, only 25% expressed negative attitudes toward Americans. Of the 106 female responses, 29% were negative, and of the 103 male responses, 19% were negative. These negative cultural schemata are divided into five subcategories: (1) Bully—31%, (2) Immoral—23%, (3) Drone—22%, (4) Ignorant—16%, and (5) Selfish—8%.

Some examples of the “Bully” comments are: “Paternalistic; They think they are polices [sic]”; “Tyrant, wild, murderer”; “A domineering person”; “Overbearing and contestor”; “No emotions, solipsist”; and “They seek science for inhuman use.”

Some examples of the “Immoral” comments are: “A fair-haired freewheeling and selfish person”; “They are superstitiously religious”; “They have no commitment to family”; “They are irresponsible”; “A profit seeking person who likes sex”; and “An indifferent, licentious and superficial person.”

Some examples of the “Drone” negative comments are: “Glutton, fat, and freeloader”; “A luxurious and indifferent person”; and “People who work hard and are always besotted by eating.”

Some examples of the “Ignorant” comments are: “Stupid racists”; “An unaware citizen who is confused by propaganda and makes decision ignorantly”; and “A bumpkin and partly religious person who has low political understanding.”

Some examples from the “Selfish” subcategory are: “They are never content to anything and they want everything for themselves”; and “Being American means being selfish; They claim democracy but they want this only for themselves and they are aggressive to other’s rights.”

*Mixed responses.* About 24% of the responses were labeled as Mixed; that is, their cross-cultural schemata were some positive and some negative, or recognized that the citizens of the U.S. could not be put into one category or the other. Of the 106 female responses, 32% were mixed, and of the 103 male responses, 17% were mixed. There are five subcategories in this category: (1) Viewed as Orderly and Rough—27%, (2) Knowledgeable and Domineering—24%, (3) Good-looking and Wanton—21%, (4) Joyous, and Stupid—15%, (5) Depressed and Rich —13%.

Examples from the “Orderly and Rough” subcategory are: “I think they are aggressive and they know how to express it”; “They are domineering, rigorous, contestor, and patriot”; “Rough, supremacist and disciplined”; “In born killer, simple, and law-abiding”; and “Nice, real Christian, superficial, and a bit violent.”

Examples from the “Knowledgeable and Domineering” subcategory are: “He/she is a very clever person who enjoys power”; “Self sufficient, domineering, and punctual”; “A selfish, developed, intellectual person”; and “A citizen who is in a high culture stance but his/her moods take shape by media.”

Examples from the “Good-looking and Wanton” subcategory are: “They have happy faces. They are violent, and bum”; “They remind me with racism, beauty, freedom of speech, post modernism and order”; “Irresponsible in ethical issues, likes sport jeans, and is selfish”; and “Good-looking, impartial, sexy and happy.”

Examples from the “Joyous, and Stupid” subcategory are: “Swinging, religious, and without the ability to foresee changes”; “They are happy and nothing can surprise them”; and “Stupid people that living in a democracy has made them democrats.”

Examples from the “Depressed and Rich” subcategory are: “They work hard and have lost their emotions”; and “He/she has a very painful life. This hard working person works from the dawn to night but has no time to enjoy his/her income.”

*Examples of sources of Iranian cross-cultural schemata.* The second question in the interview was, “What are the sources of these perceptions?” Their answers to this question were categorized in the same way that the cross-cultural schemata were.

#### *Positive Response Sources*

The response sheets with positive responses were examined for the types of sources given for these positive cross-cultural schemata. Generally, the sources identified fell into three categories: Media, Family and Friends, and Teachers. Examples of each category are provided.

*Media.* Of the positive responses, 78% of these indicated that the media, whether print or electronic, were their sources. Of this total, 25% of the media sources were from female answers and 75% were from male.

*Family and friends.* Of the positive responses, 9% said their sources were their own family and friends. The breakdown was 5% for female and 12% for male.

*Teachers and school.* Of the positive responses, 13% said their sources were their teachers or their school situation. The gender breakdown was 15% for female and only 9% for male.

#### *Negative Response Sources*

The negative response sheets were examined to determine what the respondents said their sources were for these. Again, they fell into the same three categories: media, family and friends, and teachers. The percentages, however, were the same. The media here also had a substantially greater impact in forming these negative cross-cultural schemata than the other categories.

*Media.* Attributing the media for their negative cross-cultural schemata of American citizens were 81% of the total, with 83% female and 79% male.

*Family, friends and other persons.* Of the negative responses, only 12% of the total said their sources were family and friends. The gender breakdown was 9% for female, 13% for male.

*Teachers and school.* Only 7% of the Iranian respondents attributed the source of their negative cross-cultural schemata to their teachers and school.

#### *Mixed Response Sources*

*Media.* Of the mixed responses, 68% said their sources were Media in general. The breakdown was 64% for male and 73% for female.

*Family, friends, other persons.* About 12% of mixed respondents gave family and friends as their sources. The results were 15% for female and 8% for male.

*Teachers and school.* Attributing Teachers and School for their mixed cross-cultural schemata of American citizens were 19% of the total, with 22% female and 16% male.

### Discussion

In this study we examined cross-cultural schemata among two groups of American and Iranian students toward each other. The differences in these cross-cultural schemata obtained in our results are discussed in the following cross-cultural observations.

1. More Americans have no schemata of Iranians or mistook Iraq for Iran than is true of Iranians of Americans. Twenty percent of the American responses said they “Don’t Know” anything about Iranians or “mistook Iraq for Iran,” demonstrating a lack of awareness and knowledge of them.

The Iranians had no responses in this category. This suggests that Iranian students have more “cultural globality” than Americans. Pan (2008) claims that “cultural globality” may be measured by “awareness, knowledge, and tolerance of other cultures” (p. 238). This can be attributed also to the fact that today about half of Middle Eastern internet users live in Iran (see for example [worldinternetstats.com](http://worldinternetstats.com)) and although owning satellite dishes is illegal in Iran, over three million homes have satellite television—and the average Iranian family has 4.6 members (Sazegara, 2005). On the other hand, Hollywood cinema has many fans inside Iran. Iran does not follow the copyright law, so Iranians can easily find fake versions of DVDs for only \$1. In all of these sources, America is strongly present.

Another explanation of the Iranian awareness of America is that the social sciences in Iran are English language-oriented and Iranian students read many books regarding contemporary America. This fact is reflected in some of Iranian cross-cultural schemata toward Americans. As we will see, the very reading of books can also culminate in negative cross-cultural schemata.

2. Iranian students were more than three times as positive about Americans compared to the Americans about Iranians. Over 51% of the Iranian responses were positive about Americans while only 16% of the Americans were positive about Iranians. Furthermore, the Iranian positive responses fell into six different subcategories while the American positive responses had only three subcategories. The range of positive responses was far greater for the Iranians.

The American respondents who answered that they perceived Iranian citizens to be “normal, equal, and good,” the largest of the three subcategories of positive, conform to the third stage of “Minimization of difference” in Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity where people “hold to the view that basically human beings are the same” with an “emphasis on similarities, not differences” (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yersheva, & DeJaeghere, 2003, p. 470). Over 50% of the positive American responses indicated that sources (personal relationships and other persons) other than the media contributed to their cross-cultural schemata, while only about 18% of the negative respondents indicated that their sources were other than the media. The several respondents who said they had personal family members who were Iranian all said they had positive cross-cultural schemata of Iranian citizens. The personal connections apparently overpowered the negative impact of

media for these persons, as we can see in the sources for negative and positive cross-cultural schemata Americans and Iranians have for each other.

Positive responses among Americans seem to be more humanistic and abstract. This type of attitude, as we will see, is in harmony with their sources for their positive cross-cultural schemata of Iranians.

Positive responses among Iranian students can be attributed to different causes. First, Iranian students, particularly those who study at the University of Tehran, have a radical stance toward their government's policy and in recent years some serious confrontations have happened between students and anti-riot police. One explanation for positive cultural schemata of Iranian respondents toward American citizens can be that they see Americans as people who care about Iranian people, support them via their media, grant asylum to their activists, condemn the behavior of their government when they jail students, and give Iranian students voice when they seek their security.

A second reason for positive cross-cultural schemata can be the type of representation Americans have in Iran. Iran and the U.S. ceased their relations with each other following the incidents of 1979. This has constructed a particular representation of Americans in Iran. Nowadays, most of the American people who visit Iran are academic persons who attend conferences or work on research programs. According to intercultural contact theory by Gordon Allport (1954), personal contact can reduce intercultural conflicts provided by some conditions. In this case, we can see that many Iranian respondents perceive American scholars who visit them and see them as "American people."

Third, Iranians, as we saw, are staunch consumers of American media products. Some Iranian responses are similar to what Hollywood tries to show as an "American" citizen. In gender, on the American side, there was the same number of male and female positive responses (16%), while for Iran, more males were positive than females (64% to 39%).

3. The American students were twice as negative about Iranians than Iranians were of Americans. On average, almost 50% of the Americans had negative cross-cultural schemata of Iranians, while only 25% of Iranians had negative cross-cultural schemata of Americans. Americans had six subcategories of negatives while the Iranians had five.

Negative attitudes of Americans toward Iranians are, to a high degree, in compliance with what Western media represent about Iran and generally the Middle East. The negative cross-cultural schemata of the Iranians being "evil, dangerous, violent" is an example of what Oren and Bar-Tal (2007) term "delegitimization" which they define as "stereotypes with extremely negative connotations...aimed at denying the other group's humanity" (p. 112).

In terms of specific names of leaders or specific incidents being mentioned that might have triggered responses, there were no individuals, such as President George Bush or other American government officials named as sources for their cross-cultural schemata, though in six instances "the government" was mentioned as a source for their negative or mixed cross-cultural schemata. In the case of the Iranian government, the "president" of Iran was mentioned once and the term Iran's "dictator" was mentioned, but never his name, as contributing to the negative cross-cultural schemata of Iranian citizens. The incident of 9/11 (the September 11, 2001 attack on the U.S.) was mentioned four times as being a source of their negative cross-cultural schemata and "the war," meaning the war taking place in Iraq, was mentioned five times as a source of the negative perceptions of Iranians.

Answers for the Iranian respondents show different results. In gender, there is a significant difference between male and female responses. While of the 106 female responses, 29% were negative, this amount for 103 male responses was not more than 19%. One explanation for such an outcome can be the issue of the “role of women” in Eastern and Western cultures. Unlike what many Western scholars think, Eastern women are the main reproducers of their own limitations. What Western women know as “suppression,” may be perceived as “support” or “security” among Eastern women. Many Eastern women do not believe in the kind of freedom that Western woman enjoy and call it perverseness. Intriguingly, although few Iranian respondents pointed to their own readings for their negative cross-cultural schemata of Americans, we can trace the critical literature of contemporary American culture and society in their responses.

4. In the mixed perceptions response category, the Americans had about 15% (similar for each gender) and the Iranians had 32% for females and 17% for males.

5. Regarding the media as the source for their positive schemata, the American case and the Iranian case were very dissimilar. In the American case, 42% said the media were their sources while on the Iranian side, it was 78%. It is perhaps because of the fact that Iranian media give a more positive picture of American people. Another reason, as previously mentioned, is that Iranians are permanent consumers of Western media products. In mentioning media as their sources for positive cross-cultural schemata, some Iranian respondents explicitly explain it.

### Conclusion

The overall conclusions of the study were twofold. First, Iranians have more positive cross-cultural schemata of Americans than Americans do of Iranians in both degree and range. On the basis of this study, we would argue that Iranian students demonstrate what Zoreda (2005) calls “the creation of interculturality” or the ability to have “affective awareness” and “cognitive flexibility” regarding persons of another culture (p. 229). Second, the media are attributed by both American and Iranian as being the primary source of their schemata, both positive and negative. This suggests several corollary observations.

First, Iranian media cover more positively the American scene than do the American media of the Iranians.

Second, the American media under the Bush Administration, in the context of a very negative U.S. governmental view of Iran, were implicitly serving the government’s intention of making Iran look unfavorable. They did not challenge the government’s characterization of Iranians by doing their own investigation and offering alternative data of the other culture.

Third, personal experience of persons and knowing people of the other culture can throw off the negativity of the media in the formation of schemata. This is consistent with the research findings that “simply having ingroup friends who have outgroup friends relates to diminished prejudice” (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007, p. 413). The Americans’ own thoughts and beliefs account for almost one quarter of their source of a positive influence. This did not occur for the Iranians because Americans don’t live in Iran like Iranians live in America and because the Iranian media are more positive to begin with of the other culture.

Fourth, there is a similarity in the nature of the positive responses by both countries but a dissimilarity in the nature of the negative responses. The positive responses on both sides tend to focus on who the others are as people. For example, the Americans said they saw Iranians as other human beings and as simply people from another culture. The Iranians said they saw Americans as being humanistic, happy, and educated. However, when we examine the nature of the negative responses, we see a difference between the two countries. The Americans who responded negatively see the Iranians for the kind of conditions they are living in. For example, they see them as living in poor, oppressed, violent, fearful, inferior conditions. The Iranians, on the other hand, see the Americans negatively not for the conditions they live in, but for their bad behavior in the world. For example, they see them as acting in bullying, immoral, stupid, gluttonous, and selfish ways. This raises the question as to whether it is easier to be positive about someone's cultural identity (who someone is as a human being) and whether it is easier to be negative about seeing how someone lives (compared to one's own situation) and seeing how someone behaves (compared to one's own behavior). Looking at the cross-cultural schemata of another's culture helps in the formation of understanding differences. As Chen (2005) has argued:

Through the cognitive process, we acquire knowledge and characteristics of our own and others' culture, and further draw a picture or map of the culture to reflect the degree of our understanding. Global communication competence not only demands the understanding of one's own and one's counterparts' cultures, but also requires both passive and active understanding. (p. 8)

There was identifiable evidence in these responses that some respondents were quite aware that their cross-cultural schemata were based upon the impact of the media, while others were consciously allowing their personal connections with others to influence their perceptions more than the media.

#### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

The study has a number of limitations. First, the data are from university students, not from the working classes or the elites. Research should be conducted on different groups in the society, economically, geographically, and in age. Second, the data are from countries whose governments view each other as "enemy." What would the results look like if the countries were friendly or allies? Third, the data are from countries across the globe from each other. How would the results differ if the countries were neighbors? Fourth, the coding of the responses was done by one person in each case instead of a team of persons arriving at consensus. We believe, however, the general results would be similar even with intercoder reliability. Another variation on the coding would be to have the responses coded by the researcher from the other culture.

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