



Individual Competitiveness, Sense of Defeat, and Organizational Commitment: Comparisons Between Iranian and USA Employees

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Abstract

Competition can result in improved productivity, but it can also result in feelings of defeat in those who lose the competition. According to Balconi and Vanutelli (2016), competition involving interpersonal interactions implies a process of social comparison. Competition may produce multiple effects directly related to self-perception and the social significance of the competition. The present study compared staff employees in universities in Iran and the USA (150 respondents in each country) to determine whether organizational commitment, competitiveness and feelings of defeat are associated. Iranian and American employees did not differ in their mean scores on organizational commitment, competitiveness or feelings of defeat. In both countries, those scoring higher for competitiveness had lower scores for feelings of defeat. However, while scores for organizational commitment and competitiveness were positively associated for the American employees, the association was negative for the Iranian employees.

Key words: Individual competitiveness; Organizational commitment; Sense of defeat

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INTRODUCTION

Deutsch (1949) defined individual competitiveness as the search for, or effort to gain, something that another person is trying to obtain at the same time. Individual competition occurs between two or more individuals or groups who are directly in conflict. Competing with others can have a variety of causes and motivations, and many theories have been proposed to explain why people compete. Nicholls (1989) and Franken and Brown (1995) suggested two different motivations for individual competition: (a) to gain supremacy over others, and (b) to improve one's own performance.

In competitive situations, one person's achievement means that the other people in the competition will fail to achieve their goals. Research indicates that cooperative behaviors result in the development of good relationships more than do individualistic or competitive experiences. Feshbach and Weiner (1991) found that children in their early years showed more behaviors based on mutual cooperation than on competitive behaviors, and children cooperated more in both their games and ordinary behavior. Even at two years of age, children exhibited empathy towards people in difficulty and tried to help them.

In Iranian high school students, Ghanaatpisheh (2005) reported that academic competition has a different impact depending on whether the competition is between individuals or between groups. If defeated students are punished, individual students are less likely to work to improve themselves, whereas groups of students are more likely to work harder. Group members encourage each other, while students competing alone receive no support. Yousefi et.al (2011) found that Iranian men enjoyed individual competition more than women, while Ahmadi et al. (2011) found that student athletes enjoyed competition more than non-athletes.

Studies by Franken and Brown (1995, 1996) found that not all people think about winning or overcoming others. Having a competitive approach in most situations

does not necessarily indicate general hostility toward the world. However, individual competition can take on a maladaptive nature when individuals *must* win or defeat others. Franken and Princh (1996) proposed three principal hypotheses for why some people were willing to compete in all situations. First, there is both a winner and a loser in every competitive situation. Thus, if a person does not want to lose, he or she should compete seriously against others. Second, people's competitiveness might increase their talents. The competitive situation can provide desirable conditions to improve a person's performance. Finally, competitive situations can be a motivational tool.

There is the possibility that people who need to win will view the world from a negative perspective. They might feel that they live in a hostile world and the only way to survive is to win and defeat others. These people try to survive by maximizing their chances of winning. Weiner (2012) noted that people with a strong desire to compete attribute their success to their own ability and effort and attribute defeat to bad luck or the situation. People with less of a desire to compete assign the victory to luck and defeat to lack of ability. Attributing defeat to lack of ability usually brings about unpleasant results, including feelings of hopelessness and a reduced desire to perform better since they believe that they do not have the ability to succeed.

The study of individual competition, therefore, is related to the study of defeat since a sense of defeat is common among those who compete. Price (1972) saw sense of defeat as the result of direct interpersonal fighting or competition. The sense of defeat has been studied by scientists who focus on animals. When there is a fight between animals, one will be the winner and one will be the loser. An animal that feels defeated can continue until it is killed, or it can apply mechanisms (behaviors) to reduce the tension and potential damage, protecting itself against its rival. The loser communicates a message through some behavior, and its rival retreats in order not to inflict more damage.

Gilbert and Allen (1998) saw the sense of defeat as resulting from a failed struggle and the loss of social rank. The sense of defeat can be related directly to interpersonal conflicts, as well as to defeat in achieving social and physical resources. Gilbert (2006) described three situations in which people are more likely to experience the sense of defeat: (a) defeat in reaching one's goal and losing supporting resources; (b) the individual is criticized and ignored by others; and (c) individuals might be attacked by others and, as a result, compare themselves unfavorably with others and internalize this negative evaluation.

In a study conducted in Iran and the USA, Tarsafi et al. (2015) showed that scores on measures of hopelessness, defeat, entrapment, and depression were strongly associated. In both Iran and the USA, scores for defeat and entrapment were strong predictors of past suicidal ideation

and attempted suicide. Overall, the Iranian respondents had higher scores on measures of defeat, entrapment, hopelessness, and depression, but less often reported prior suicidal ideation. Thus, the defeat-entrapment theory of depression and suicidal behavior appears to have validity in both Iran and USA.

Work environments are among those in which people are likely to compete and, as a result, win or lose. This will have an impact on their sense of defeat. In this respect, it is important to pay attention to people's commitment to their work, as lack of organizational commitment will facilitate withdrawing from competition and the risk of defeat. Organizational commitment has been defined as a psychological link between employees and the organization. Mowday et al. (1974) saw organizational commitment as composed of three elements: (a) acceptance and belief in the values and aims of the organization, (b) a willingness to meet the organization's aims, and (c) a strong desire to remain in the organization.

Cohen and Lowenberg (1990) found that organizations whose members had high organizational commitment had workers who showed high performance and efficiency and a low level of absenteeism. Organizational commitment develops in stable environments and enables employees to show their creativity and ability. Employees who are committed will be unhappy to leave the organization and will seek challenging work activities. Mathieu and Zajak (2009) argued that an organization's members develop commitment when they are able to satisfy values and needs through their work relationships, as can be found in teams or groups. Mathieu and Zajak (2009) noted four preconditions for organizational commitment: job characteristics, role conditions, personal variables, and the group's effect. In Iran, Mosadeghrad et al. (2008) showed that job satisfaction and organizational commitment were inter-related and associated with turnover.

In summary, in most situations, people compete to reach a goal (or reward) and, as a result, they create environments full of pressure, threat, frustration, and defeat. The level of people's organizational commitment influences their competitive behavior, and a potential outcome associated with individual competition is a sense of defeat.

In addition, the cultural context can affect these variables and associations. For example, Madsen (1971) demonstrated the existence of substantial differences in the degree to which children of different subcultures cooperate or compete on an experimental task. Madsen developed a two-person experimental task for use in the study of age and cultural differences in the cooperative-competitive behavior of children in a small Mexican town and in California. The results indicated a higher level of cooperation among the Mexican children than among the Anglo-American children and an increase in nonadaptive competition with age among the Anglo-American children. Madsen concluded that American

culture emphasizes individual competition.

According to several studies of Iranian culture (e.g., Ghorbani, et al., 2004; Hofstede, 2001; Joshanloo & Ghaedi, 2009), Iran is a collectivistic culture. Ghorbani, et al. (2004) noted that collectivism is viewed as more typical of non-Western societies and centers on interpersonal relationships that promote group harmony through appropriate functioning of roles, duties and obligations. Collectivist values include nurturance, compliance, inhibited hedonism, and interdependency. The present study was designed to compare Iran and the USA on these variables and relationships. Tarsafi et al. (2015) found that Iranian university students obtained higher scores on a measure of defeat and, in addition, felt more trapped both by external circumstances in their life and by internal characteristics, compared with American university students. The present research examined the level of organizational commitment and sense of defeat, and their association with individual competitiveness, in two samples of university employees, one drawn from Iran and the other from the USA.

METHOD

Participants

In Iran, individuals were selected from the Alameh Tabataba'i University, Kharazmi University, and Tehran University. In the USA, employees were selected from New Mexico University, Illinois University, and Boston University. All participants were full-time employees. In Iran, the questionnaire was paper-and-pencil, while in the USA the questionnaire was online. Participants were staff members rather than faculty members and were informed that their responses would be confidential.

There were 150 Iranian employees surveyed, and all questionnaires were completed. A total of 250 USA employees were emailed the online link and, when 150 surveys were completed, data collection was stopped. Employees were 25-58 years old, and both men and women responded. In Iran, there were 109 women (mean age = 35.6 years, *SD* = 8.3) and 41 men (mean age = 40.4, *SD* = 6.3). In the USA, there were 62 women (mean age = 42.4, *SD* = 6.2) and 88 men (mean age = 41.4, *SD* = 6.3).

Measures

In Iranian, we used translated questionnaires which had been used in the past and for which norms were available. In USA, we used the original questionnaires for the three variables.

The Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Porter et al., 1979) has 15 items answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*. Cronbach's alpha for the original sample was .78. A sample item is "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful." Cronbach alphas were .70

for the Iranian sample in the present study and .91 for the American sample.

The Defeat Questionnaire (Gilbert & Allan, 1998) has 16 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*. A sample item is "I feel I did not achieve what I want in my life." The Farsi version was developed by Tarsafi et al. (2015) who reported a Cronbach alpha for their sample of .91. For the present samples, alphas were .91 for the Iranian sample and .94 for the American sample.

The Individual Competition Questionnaire (Franken & Brown, 1995) has 19 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*. Cronbach's alpha for the original sample was .78. A sample item is "I try harder when I am in individual competition with others." In our research, Cronbach alphas for the Iranian and American samples were .70 and .89, respectively.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS. Statistical tests indicated that the data were normal, and so parametric statistics were used.

RESULTS

The means scores (and standard deviations) for the Iranian and American samples are shown in Table 1. No significant differences were found between the two samples on any of the three measures. The inter-correlations among variables for the two samples are reported in Table 1. It can be seen that organizational commitment has a very different association in Iran from that in the USA. In the Iranian sample, individual competition was associated negatively with both organizational commitment and defeat. In contrast, in the American sample, individual competition was associated positively with organizational commitment and negatively with defeat scores. It is also noteworthy that the associations were stronger in the USA sample than the Iranian sample.

Table 1
Descriptive data for the scales

Means and SDs	Iran		USA		<i>t</i> (<i>df</i> =298)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Organizational commitment	57.4	8.5	57.9	16.9	.34 <i>ns</i>
Defeat	44.2	7.4	44.3	12.2	.91 <i>ns</i>
Individual competition	40.8	8.5	47.6	17.5	.89 <i>ns</i>

Pearson correlations	Iran	USA
Individual competition & Defeat	-0.31**	-0.73**
Individual competition & Commitment	-0.17*	+0.83**
Defeat & Commitment	+0.20*	-0.87**

Note: *ns* = non-significant

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .001

Multiple regressions were used to predict competitiveness in each nation using organizational commitment, sense of defeat, sex and age (see Table 2). It can be seen in the table that the variables (organizational commitment, sense of defeat, sex and age) were more successful in predicting competitiveness in the American sample than in the Iranian sample ($R = 0.83$ and 0.38 , respectively). Organizational commitment predicted competitiveness positively in the American sample but negatively in the Iranian sample.

Table 2
Regression to predict competition (betas shown)

	Iran	USA
Commitment	-.29**	+.79**
Defeat	-.06	-.04
Sex	+.13	+.02
Age	-.16*	+.05
Multiple R	.38	.83

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

In multiple regressions, only commitment scores predicted competitiveness in both nations, albeit in opposite directions.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Organizational commitment has advantages for organizations. Research by others cited in the introduction above (Cohen & Lowenberg, 1990; Swab & Johnson, 2018; Mathieu & Zajak, 2009; Mosadeghrad et al., 2008), indicate that organizational commitment reduces staff turnover and increases productivity and efficiency, both of which are ideal for the organization. However, managers have the option as to whether to encourage competition between individuals in their organization. There are, of course, other considerations in companies. Maslow (1998) stressed the value in having work satisfy the major psychological needs of people: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem and self-actualization. The results of the present study indicate organizational commitment is associated with greater competitiveness in American staff but decreases competitiveness in Iranian staff, indicating the importance of culture in these associations.

Practical implications

The purpose of this research was to compare defeat, organizational commitment and individual competition in two nations, Iran and the USA. The USA is recognized as an economically developed country, while Iran is a developing country, this study compared the correlates of individual competition as a function of the culture. The results indicated that, although organizational

commitment predicts individual competition in both populations, feeling a sense of defeat failed to predict individual competition. However, the results also indicated that there are significant differences in how organizational commitment affects competitiveness in the two countries, and these differences have implications on how management should treat employees in the two countries.

Our results suggest that managers in Iran should minimize competition between staff whereas managers in the USA should encourage competition. This can be done explicitly through planning, for example, by overtly posting the productivity of individuals or groups, or less overtly by the comments made by managers to individual staff members. Managers should remember, however, that competition results in defeat for some staff members, and they should ensure that losers in the competition do not feel depressed and hopeless.

The present study had several limitations. The samples were restricted to university staff. Employees in other types of institutions and companies may provide different results. We also did not ask for the job title of the staff members because this might have eliminated the anonymity for some staff members. Future research could limit the samples to employees at a particular level, for example, secretaries.

The present study has shown the importance of cultural considerations. Countries have been found to differ in individualism versus collectivism (Triandis, 1972), as well as many other personality traits, and companies and their managers need to take into account these cultural differences. Nations differ in religion and cultural diversity, and also in environmental and other factors (such as urban/rural) that may affect the extent to which employees feel comfortable competing against one another. For example, as noted in the Introduction above, Madsen (1971) compared children in California and Mexico and found that Mexican children showed a higher level of cooperation whereas Californian children had a higher level of competitiveness. There were also differences between children from rural and from urban areas. Thus, the social environment has an influence on the formation of competitive behavior.

Data Availability: The data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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