Self-reported assertiveness in Swedish and Turkish adolescents: A cross-cultural comparison

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The present cross-cultural study compared self-reported assertiveness in 652 Swedish and 654 Turkish high school students by using a multi-dimensional measure called the Scale for Interpersonal Behavior (SIB). Four hypotheses were tested in the study. First, the hypothesis that Swedish adolescents would be more assertive than their Turkish counterparts was supported by the data. Second, the expectation that Turkish boys would be more assertive than Turkish girls, while there would be no differences between Swedish girls and boys, was not confirmed. In general, girls were found to be more skilled than boys in expressing and dealing with personal limitations. Third, as expected, more assertive adolescents in both Sweden and Turkey reported having more friends and receiving more social support than their less assertive peers. Finally, the data supported the expectation that older adolescents would be more assertive than younger ones. The results are discussed in terms of cultural and gender differences.

Key words: Assertiveness, social support, adolescence, cross-cultural, Swedish and Turkish.

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Assertiveness is an important social skill which promotes personal well-being. Most definitions of assertiveness emphasize direct expression of feelings, desires and thoughts in interpersonal contexts. Definitions of assertive behavior put an emphasis on individual rights. For instance, Alberti and Emmons (1990) stated that "assertive behavior promotes equality in human relationships, enabling us to act in our own best interests, to stand up for ourselves without undue anxiety, to express honest feelings comfortably, to exercise personal rights without denying the rights of others" (p. 7). For Galassi and Galassi (1978), "assertion is the direct and appropriate communication of a person's needs, wants and opinions without punishing, threatening, putting down others, and doing this without fear during the process" (p. 3). According to a definition put forward by Lange and Jakubowski (1976), "assertiveness involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights" (p. 7).

Cross-cultural investigations of assertive behavior with adolescents are scarce. Such studies may reveal important aspects of adolescent social behavior and may satisfy an important research need. Thus, the main purpose of this study was to investigate self-reported assertiveness among Swedish and Turkish adolescents.

Culture is an important variable which influences and shapes social behavior. Each culture considers certain behaviors as more desirable than others. Assertiveness emphasizes an individualistic interpersonal style which is valued in some cultural contexts but not so much in others. Yoshioka (2000) points out the cultural conceptual differences in terms of what constitutes assertiveness. For example, assertiveness is valued highly in West European and North American cultural contexts, where individualistic values predominate, but less so in Asian cultures, where collectivistic values predominate. Therefore, we can expect differences in assertiveness between cultural and/or ethnic groups in accordance with their cultural codes and values. Cross-cultural investigations may shed important light on the culture-bound as well as universal aspects of this important behavioral construct.

Comparative studies of assertive behavior indicate that cultural and/or ethnic groups do differ in self-assertion. For instance, comparing nurses of African, Indian and European origin working in racially segregated hospitals in South Africa, Furnham (1983) found European nurses exhibiting least and African nurses most difficulty in social/interpersonal situations. In another study with European, Indian and African nurses in South Africa, Furnham (1979) reported Europeans to be the most and Indians to be the least assertive. Comparing Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish university students, Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) found Israeli Jewish students showing higher levels of assertiveness than Arab students. Comparing Asian-American and Caucasian-American university students, both Zane, Sue, Hu and Kwon (1991) and Sue, Sue and Ino (1990) found the former group to behave less assertively than the latter in social situations and situations involving strangers. Likewise, comparing Hispanic and Anglo-American female college students, Rodriquez, Johnson and Combs (2001) found Hispanic students to exhibit greater difficulty in behaving assertively than the Anglo-American students. In still another study, Niikura (1999) compared Japanese, Malaysian, Filipino

and US white-collar workers and found Asian workers to be less assertive than their US counterparts.

Sweden and Turkey differ considerably in socio-cultural values, level of economic development and so on. Turkish culture is often described as a *culture of relatedness*, where interdependency is valued (Kagitçibasi, 1996), and the Swedish culture as a *culture of separateness*, where personal autonomy is valued (Daun, 1989). Assertiveness is highly valued within the Swedish culture and this is reflected in the Swedish language. *Självhävdelse* (self-assertion) is regarded as an important behavioral quality. Compared with the Swedish culture, however, assertiveness is not a highly valued behavioral quality within the Turkish culture. The Turkish equivalent for "assertiveness" (*atılganlık*) is a late invention by social scientists to import the concept of assertiveness, and means roughly initiative taking. Based on these observations, for the present study it was hypothesized that Swedish adolescents are more assertive than their Turkish peers.

It is generally assumed that women are less assertive than men. Some studies with college students have supported this assumption. For instance, Chandler, Cook and Dugovics (1978), Hollandsworth and Wall (1977), Kimble, Marsh and Kiska (1984), and Nesbitt (1979) with US, and Adejumo (1981) with Nigerian university students found men to be more assertive than women. A recent study by Costa, Terracciano and McCrae (2001) with college-age and adult samples across 26 cultures showed that men are more assertive than women. A cross-temporal meta-analysis of women's assertiveness in the US between 1931 and 1993 by Twenge (2001) indicated that women's assertiveness varied with their status and roles within society. In a study by Stebbins, Kelly, Tolor and Power (1977) with US subjects, however, male college students were found to be less assert-ive than female students. Some studies indicate that overall generalization of the differences between men and women in personal assertion is unwarranted. In one study, Mathison and Tucker (1982) found US male college students to be more assertive in public situations and in questioning a person of high status but less assertive in dating situations, while females were more assertive in private interpersonal settings and in dating situations but less assertive in ques-tioning a person of high status. In another study, Crassini, Law and Wilson (1979), with US university students, found males to be more assertive than females in asking questions, speaking up during a lecture, standing up for their rights and complaining about poor service, while females were more assertive than males in making and accepting dates. In another study with US university students, Bridges, Sander-man, Breukers, Ranchor and Arrindell (1991) found female students to be more assertive when expressing and dealing with personal limitations and male students to be more assertive when displaying negative feelings.

Male gender role is assumed to be agentic/active, while female gender role is assumed to be communal/passive. Assertiveness is more congruent with the male gender role

stereotypes than with the female gender role stereotypes. Empirical evidence shows indeed that assertiveness is a highly socially desired male gender-role attribute (Cheng, Bond & Chan, 1995). Of special interest are the cultural values related to gender roles in Sweden and Turkey. Though changing rapidly, the traditional gender role stereotypes are still predominant within the Turkish culture compared with the Swedish culture, where the significance of gender role stereotypes has diminished considerably. Comparing a group of retired Swedes with a group of Turks, Imamoglu, Küller, Imamaoglu and Küller (1993) found gender differences to be more pronounced for Turkey compared with Sweden. In a study addressing Turkish adolescents' reactions to assertive versus non-assertive peers, Eskin (1994) found that high school students were more accepting of an assertive male peer than a non-assertive one, but they were more accepting of a non-assertive female target than an assertive one. Thus, for the present study it was hypothesized that Turkish boys are more assertive than Turkish girls, but there are no differences between Swedish girls and boys in terms of assertiveness.

As a developmental period, adolescence is considered to be a transition from childhood to adulthood. The balance of influence on social development during adolescence shifts progressively from parents to peers (Hill, 1993). Given the developmental character of this life period, one can better appreciate the importance of assertiveness. Assertive social skills are instrumental in initiating and maintaining socially sup-portive interpersonal relationships and hence enjoying a better emotional well-being. For instance, deficits in assertive social skills have been shown to be related to depression (Spirito, Hart, Overholser & Halverson, 1990) and loneliness (Jones, 1982; Rook, 1984). Against this background, for the present study it was further hypothesized that the level of assertiveness is posit-ively related to number of friends and perceived social support.

It makes intuitive sense that adolescents learn these social skills as they get older. Indeed, Kimble *et al.* (1984), study-ing college students, found older adolescents to be more assertive than younger ones. Finally, for the present study it was hypothesized that older adolescents are more assertive than younger ones.

To recapitulate: the study examined the self-reported assertiveness in two culturally disparate groups of adolescents. The study tested four hypotheses. (1) Swedish adolescents are more assertive than Turkish adolescents. (2) Turkish boys are more assertive than Turkish girls but there are no differences between girls and boys in Sweden. (3) Assertive-ness is positively related to number of friends and perceived social support. (4) Assertiveness increases with age.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were 406 female and 246 male (*n* = 652) Swedish, and 263 female and 391 male (*n* = 654) Turkish high

school students. Turkish students were younger ($M = 16.24$ years, $SD = 1.37$) than the Swedish ($M = 17.81$ years, $SD = 1.04$), $t(1302) = 23.3$, $p < 0.0001$. The ages of Swedish students ranged from 15 to 20 years and the ages of the Turkish students ranged from 13 to 20 years. The difference in age between the two groups is due to the number of years required for beginning high school education in the two countries. Eight years of education in Turkey and nine years in Sweden are required to begin high school education. The Turkish students had more siblings ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.45$) than the Swedish students ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(1283) = 6.32$, $p < 0.0001$. The educational level, in terms of years of school attendance, of Swedish parents was higher than that of Turkish parents: Swedish mothers, $M = 14.0$ years, $SD = 2.2$, versus Turkish mothers, $M = 8.6$ years, $SD = 4.0$, $t(1304) = 30.0$, $p < 0.0001$; Swedish fathers, $M = 14.6$ years, $SD = 2.0$, versus Turkish fathers, $M = 10.2$, $SD = 4.1$, $t(1304) = 24.4$, $p < 0.0001$. More Swedish students (33.1%) had experienced parental divorce than Turkish students (7.5%), $\chi^2 = 129$, d.f. $= 1$, $p < 0.0001$.

Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of a scale assessing personal assertion, two scales assessing perceived social support from friends and family, and another scale assessing suicide potential was previously used to collect data for a study investigating the role of assertiveness and social support in adolescent suicidal behavior, the results of which were presented by Eskin (1995). The present report focuses on the responses to the assertiveness and social support measures. Thus, the responses to the suicide potential will not be addressed in this article.

The Scale for Interpersonal Behavior (SIB) developed by Arrindell and van der Ende (1985) was used to measure assertiveness. As a multidimensional measure of assertiveness the SIB assesses both negative and positive assertion. The original SIB consists of 50 items, of which 46 are classified into four factorially derived subscales: (1) Display of negative feelings (15 items); (2) Expression of and dealing with personal limitations (14 items); (3) Initiating assertiveness (9 items); and (4) Positive assertion (8 items). In addition, a General assertiveness score is computed on all 50 items.

Each item is rated on a 5-point (1–5) scale ranging from "Never" to "Always" for the frequency of engaging in a specific assertive behavior. In preparing both Swedish and Turkish translations of the SIB, two Positive assertion items, "Telling someone that you like him/her" and "Telling someone that you are fond of him/her", resulted in the same phrase. Consequently, this subscale consisted of 7 items instead of 8, and 49 items for the total scale. The SIB scale scores were computed as sums of items. The scale scores range from 15 to 75 for Display of negative feelings; 14 to 70 for Expression of and dealing with personal limitations; 9 to 45 for Initiating assertiveness; 7 to 35 for Positive assertion subscales; and 49 to 245 for the General assertiveness scale.

Good test–retest and internal consistency reliabilities, and construct and factorial validities with diverse populations, have been reported for the original SIB (see e.g. Arrindell & van der Ende, 1985; Arrindell *et al.*, 1987, 1990; Arrindell, Sanderman & Ranchor, 1990). Similarly, good test–retest and internal consistency reliability estimates were obtained for both Swedish and Turkish versions of the SIB (see Eskin, 1993a,b). The internal consistency reliabilities for the Swedish SIB scales on the present sample ranged from 0.68 to 0.75 and they ranged from 0.65 to 0.86 for the Turkish SIB scales.

The Perceived Social Support (PSS) from Friends (PSS-Fr) and from Family (PSS-Fa) scales developed by Procidano and Heller (1983) were used to measure the extent to which adolescents perceive that their needs for support, information and feedback are fulfilled by friends and family. Each scale consists of 20 statements with three response alternatives; yes, no and do not know. For each item the response indicative of perceived support is scored as +1, and scores range from 0, indicating no perceived social support, to 20, indicating a maximum amount of perceived social support.

Highly adequate internal consistency reliability estimates were reported for the original PSS by Procidano and Heller (1983). Good internal consistency and test–retest reliabilities were obtained for the PSS in independent Swedish and Turkish samples (see Eskin 1993a,b). The internal consistency coefficients for both Swedish and Turkish versions of the PSS on the present sample were computed to be 0.77 for the PSS-Fr and 0.83 for the PSS-Fa scale.

The questionnaire included also questions about students' age, sex, number of siblings and friends, parental education, and divorce.

Procedure

The scales were translated from English into both Swedish and Turkish by the investigator, who is fluent in all three languages. The Swedish translations were checked and corrected by two bilingual experts in psychology and psychiatry. The Turkish translations were checked by two bilingual persons, one of whom was a psychologist of Turkish origin who practices in Stockholm. The final versions of both Swedish and Turkish SIB and PSS were considered to be adequate by these experts.

Data were gathered from six high schools in Stockholm and four high schools in Istanbul. The local school authorities in both cities were contacted first to get the necessary permission for data collection. The schools were contacted by the investigator and asked to participate. Consequently, six schools in Stockholm and four in Istanbul were chosen as the sites of the study. All the schools were coeducational and located in middle-class neighborhoods.

The research project was examined and approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Stockholm University. Students filled in the questionnaire in regular class hours reserved for the study. It took approximately 30–35 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary and students were assured full confidentiality (i.e., they were not required to write either their name or their address). These were indicated in written form at the beginning of the questionnaire and explained by the investigator during the study. The samples consisted of all students who were present on the day of data collection and who consented. Eight Turkish and seven Swedish students declined to participate in the study. Nine questionnaires in the Swedish sample and 14 in the Turkish sample were discarded due to incomplete information.

RESULTS

In order to test the first two hypotheses, a 2 × 2 (country by sex) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the General assertiveness scale and a 2 × 2 (country by sex) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the four SIB subscales were performed.

Hypothesis 1. Swedish adolescents are more assertive than Turkish adolescents

The ANOVA produced a main effect for country on the general assertiveness scale, $F(1, 1305) = 32.4$, $p < 0.0001$. Swedish students scored higher ($M = 164.4$, $SD = 18.1$) than the Turkish students ($M = 158.3$, $SD = 20.0$). The MANOVA gave a significant main effect for country, multivariate

$F(4, 1097) = 8.3$, $p < 0.0001$. Follow-up univariate F-tests showed that there were significant differences between Swedish and Turkish students in terms of Expression of and dealing with personal limitations ($F = 22.6$, $p < 0.0001$), Initiating assertiveness ($F = 14.6$, $p < 0.0001$) and Positive assertion ($F = 6.4$, $p < 0.05$) subscales. Swedish students scored higher than Turkish students on the Expression of and dealing with personal limitations ($M = 51.5$, $SD = 5.3$ vs. $M = 49.4$, $SD = 6.8$), Initiating assertiveness ($M = 30.0$, $SD = 4.7$ vs. $M = 28.6$, $SD = 5.1$) and Positive assertion ($M = 24.1$, $SD = 4.7$ vs. $M = 23.0$, $SD = 5.2$) subscales.

Hypothesis 2. Turkish boys are more assertive than Turkish girls but Swedish boys and girls are equally assertive

This hypothesis was tested by examining the country by sex interaction effects. The results from neither the ANOVA nor the MANOVA provided support for this hypothesis. In other words, the interaction effects were not significant from either the ANOVA, $F(1, 1302) = 0.1$, $p > 0.05$, or MANOVA, multivariate $F(4, 1097) = 0.5$, $p > 0.05$.

The main effect for sex in the ANOVA on the General assertiveness scale was not significant, $F(1, 1305) = 0.1$, $p > 0.05$. However, the MANOVA gave a significant main effect for sex, multivariate $F(4, 1097) = 7.9$, $p < 0.0001$. Univariate F-tests indicated differences between boys and girls on the Expression of and dealing with personal limitations ($F = 10.9$, $p < 0.005$) subscale. Girls scored higher ($M = 51.2$, $SD = 5.8$) than boys ($M = 49.6$, $SD = 6.5$) on this subscale.

Hypothesis 3. Assertiveness is positively related to number of friends and perceived social support

In order to test this hypothesis, Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients between the SIB total scores and number of friends and perceived social support were computed by country and sex.

The SIB total scores were positively related to number of friends in both Swedish girls ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.0001$) and boys ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), but only in Turkish boys ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.0001$), not Turkish girls ($r = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$). SIB total scores were positively related to perceived social support from friends in all groups (Swedish girls, $r = 0.38$; boys, $r = 0.51$; and Turkish girls, $r = 0.36$; boys, $r = 0.33$, all significant at $p < 0.0001$). Finally, SIB total scores were related positively to perceived social support from family in both Swedish girls ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and boys ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.0001$) but only in Turkish boys ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), not Turkish girls ($r = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$).

Hypothesis 4. Older adolescents are more assertive than younger ones

To test this hypothesis, Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients were computed between students' age and

SIB total scores by country and sex. Age was positively related to assertiveness in Swedish boys ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) and girls ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), but only in girls in Turkey ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), not boys ($r = 0.01$, $p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

In accordance with the prevailing cultural values in Sweden and Turkey, Swedish adolescents were expected to be more assertive than their Turkish peers. The expectation was based on the differences in the basic sociocultural values and the valuations of assertiveness as a behavioral pattern in Sweden and Turkey. The results from the study supported this expectation. Swedish adolescents scored significantly higher than their Turkish counterparts on the General assertiveness, Expression of and dealing with personal limitations, Initiating assertiveness, and Positive assertion SIB scales. In other words, Swedish students described themselves as more skilled than the Turkish in admitting personal ignorance about a topic, recognition of one's failure or shortcomings, and expressing one's own opinion.

As pointed out earlier, traditional gender role stereotypes are more prevalent within the Turkish culture than in the Swedish. Accordingly, non-assertive girls are liked more than assertive girls in Turkey (Eskin, 1994). The second hypothesis predicted that Turkish boys would be more assertive than Turkish girls but there would be no differences between Swedish boys and girls. This prediction was not supported by the data. There were no interaction effects on the SIB scale comparisons. Thus, adolescent girls from a society where traditional views about female gender role still prevail described themselves as being as assertive as their male counterparts, as did their equivalents from a society where the rights of women have made considerable progress and gender roles have undergone considerable change.

Contrary to the view that men are more assertive than women, adolescent girls scored higher than boys on the Expression of and dealing with personal limitations SIB subscale. This finding is in line with the literature. In a study with US university students using the SIB, Bridges *et al.* (1991) also found that female students rated themselves higher than male students on this subscale. Thus, it seems that girls are more skilled than boys in admitting personal limitations or weaknesses, which is consistent with the traditional female gender role stereotypes.

The third hypothesis stated that assertive adolescents have more friends and receive more social support than their less assertive counterparts. Results from the study confirmed this prediction. Highly assertive adolescents reported having more friends and perceiving their friendships as more socially supportive than did less assertive adolescents. The research findings suggest that the level of assertiveness determines the extent to which the person benefits from social relationships. For instance, in a study with college students, Elliott and Gramling (1990) found that more assertive

students were more able to benefit from social relationships and experienced fewer depressive symptoms when stressed than their less assertive peers. From these findings, one can speculate that assertiveness training techniques may be used to help socially shy adolescents to learn the skills necessary for initiating and maintaining socially supportive interpersonal relationships. One should keep in mind that such relationships are strong protective factors against an array of adolescent mental health problems and can increase feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. For instance, Glueckauf and Quittner (1992) documented the use of an assertiveness training program in enhancing perceived social efficacy and interpersonal skill in a group of physically disabled adults in wheelchairs.

As pointed out before, the balance of influence on social development during adolescence shifts progressively from parents to peers. With this shift, the individual adolescent starts investing more time and energy in relationships with peers. This is not to deny the importance of family for the adolescent, but the relationships with family members can be regarded as given and hence the individual does not have to "earn" them. One might speculate, then, that the importance of one's assertive social skills are more instrumental for interactions with peers than for relationships with family members. To check whether this speculation is true or not, the differences between correlation coefficients of assertiveness to perceived social support from friends and family were tested by z-test (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). In all groups the correlation coefficients between assertiveness and peer support were significantly larger than the correlation coefficients between assertiveness and family support (Swedish girls, $z = 3.37$, $p < 0.05$; Swedish boys, $z = 3.34$, $p < 0.05$; Turkish girls, $z = 3.30$, $p < 0.05$; and Turkish boys, $z = 2.53$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, assertiveness has a stronger relationship to peer support than family support.

The hypothesis that older students would be more assertive than the younger ones was supported by the data, which is also consistent with the literature (Kimble *et al.*, 1984). Older students described themselves as responding more assertively than younger adolescents. It is possible that, with increasing age, the individual learns interpersonal skills which in turn increase his/her feelings of confidence in interpersonal situations. With the feelings of self-efficacy the individual responds assertively in interactions with others.

Parental education was found to be related to assertiveness only in Turkish girls (maternal education, $r = 0.02$, $p < 0.01$; paternal education, $r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$). It is likely that with increased education (and so socio-economic status), Turkish parents adopt modern views and values about women through which their daughters can interact freely with the social environment. Traditional values with regard to gender roles within the Turkish culture encourage women to depend largely on interactions with family members while allowing more freedom to men to interact with others outside the family. In line with this, Turkish girls' level of assertiveness was unrelated to their number of friends, while

it was related to number of friends in Swedish boys, girls, and in Turkish boys.

One should be cautious about the generalization of results from this study. The use of self-report measures in assessing assertiveness poses problems. The use of self-report measures is susceptible to social desirability. One or more groups may have responded in a socially desirable way to present themselves in a positive light. This issue is especially relevant when comparing culturally disparate groups such as Swedish and Turkish adolescents. Instead, using behavioral measurement techniques may be more relevant and realistic for assessing assertiveness. The correlational nature of the study poses certain difficulties. The observed correlation coefficients in the present study are only correlations. They do not show causality. The study was done with two urban middle-class adolescent student samples. More work is needed to see whether or not these results apply to other adolescent groups, such as rural, non-student youths from different socioeconomic strata. Two additional points should be kept in mind when evaluating the results from this study. First, the study failed to use the back-translation method in translating the SIB into both Swedish and Turkish. Second, although group differences are statistically significant they are, nevertheless, small in magnitude.

Overall, the present comparative study indicated that Swedish students were more assertive than their Turkish counterparts. It also demonstrated that, in contrast to the traditional gender role stereotypes, adolescent girls from two culturally disparate groups were not less assertive than boys. On the contrary, they were more skilled than boys in expressing and dealing with personal limitations. More assertive adolescents had more friends and perceived their friends and families as more supportive than their less assertive peers. Although correlational, the present findings support the use of assertiveness training techniques to teach shy adolescents the skills necessary for initiating social relationships. These techniques do not only teach adolescents assertive social skills but also increase their feelings of self-efficacy. With more feelings of self-efficacy, the individual may not only become more self-confident in interactions with others, but also may overcome the feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness which result from the sense of being unable to express oneself in interpersonal contexts.

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