

Global moral philosophies: A sample of Estonia, Iran, Thailand, Chile, Perú and the USA

Track: Culture, Social and Ethical Issues

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Abstract

This study sought to compare ethical idealism and relativism differ in the US, Chile, Perú, Iran, Thailand and Estonia. Survey data related to Ethics Position Questionnaire collected from these countries examined how age and gender relate to ethical idealism and relativism. South American respondents were the most idealistic, whereas Asians (Iran and Thailand) were the least. Results were reversed for relativism. Chile was the least relativistic country whereas Baltic Estonia was the most. Across countries younger respondents were less idealistic and tended to reject moral rules, whereas as expected, women were more idealistic than men.

Introduction

Research has shown that ethics is important in coping with crisis situations (Alsua, Alas and Carneiro, 2012). Ferrell and Fraedrich (1997) define ethical issues as problems, situations or opportunities that require a person or organization to choose among several actions that must be evaluated as right or wrong. Gini (2004) considers ethics to involve the assessment and evaluation of values, because all life is value-laden. As the economic downturn has influenced most countries all over the world, especially in Europe, Central Asia and North America, the topic of ethics has grown in importance. Global managers could indeed benefit from information about factors influencing ethical behavior.

Research suggests that gender and age are two of the most influential variables in ethical judgments (Lund, 2008; Alas & Edwards, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the connections between individuals and the two ethical orientations – gender and age in the context of six different countries across the globe. The research question centers on how age and gender influence personal moral philosophy in these six countries.

The paper starts with theory about ethical idealism and relativism, followed by analysis of empirical study in six countries: Chile, Perú, Iran, Thailand, the United States and Estonia. Finally, results are presented.

Theoretical framework

According to Spence & Van Heekeren (2005), ethics can simply be defined as a set of prescriptive rules, principles, values and virtues of character that inform and guide interpersonal and intrapersonal conduct: that is, the conduct of people towards each other and the conduct of

people towards themselves. Ethics position theory (EPT) maintains that individuals' personal moral philosophies influence their judgments, actions, and emotions in ethically intense situations (Forsyth, D. R., Ernest, H., O'Boyle, Jr. M. Mc. Daniel, M., 2008). This theory is stressing two dimensions: idealism, is that individuals assume that desirable consequences can be obtained via the right action (Forsyth, 1980), and relativism, is that individuals reject universal moral rules when make ethical judgments. The definitions demonstrate that ethical relativism is presented in the process of moral justification (McDonald, 2010), while idealism is caring the outcomes of the process.

Ethical Relativism and Idealism

Ethical idealism and relativism are two orientations of moral philosophy (Fernando & Chowdhury, 2010). Ethical relativism argues that no universal ethical rules exist that apply to everyone. Because what is right or wrong is based on the social cultural system (Oumlil & Balloun, 2009), most relativistic individuals believe that moral actions depend on the nature of the situation (Forsyth, 1992). Ethical relativism argues that moral norms vary among different cultures (Hartikainen & Torstila, 2004). Since ethics are relative to a specific culture, the ethical standards of individuals under different social and culture backgrounds may differ. Therefore, social and cultural systems are the determination and evaluation of ethical beliefs (Ruegger & King, 1992).

Highly relativistic individuals reject universal moral principles (Forsyth, 1992), but non-relativistic individuals accept universal principles when making ethical judgments (Bass, Barnett & Brown, 1998). Against relativism, ethical idealism emphasizes how individuals regard a situation's moral weight by the consequences that actions have on people. Idealists believe that good outcomes for all can be achieved by morally correct actions and they emphasize how to

bring positive consequences for everyone affected by their decisions, (Alsua, Alas & Carneiro, 2012). According to non-idealists morally correct actions could also lead to negative consequences (ibid).

Factors Influencing Ethical Conduct

Gender differences

Ethical conduct is influenced by both situational pushes and pulls and the characteristics of the individual, that is, individual differences (Trevino & Katherine, 1999). According to previous studies demographic characteristics as age and gender have an impact on ethics. For example, Kim & Choi, (2003) and Dawson (1997) believe that gender is one of the most important demographic variable which has influencing on individual's ethical decisions.

Research has shown different findings in the relationship between gender and ethics. According to Bass (1998) women seem more idealistic than their male counterparts and they are more concerned about relationships and feelings (Gilligan, 1982). While several studies found that women seemed to have higher ethical attitudes than men (Cohen, Pant & Sharp, 2001).

Singhapakdi, Mohammed, Y. A., Ranwas, J.K., & Mohd, I.A., (1999) support this argument that women tend to be more idealistic and less relativistic than men.

Notwithstanding, Singhapakdi et al's research, Hartikainen and Torstila's (2004) affirm that there is no significant and/or small effect due to gender difference. Even more, Marques and Azevedo-Pereira (2009) found opposite results: males appeared to be more ethical attitudes than females. Therefore, it becomes more important to investigate this issue.

Hypothesis 1a: Women are more idealistic than men.

Hypothesis 1b: Men are more relativistic than women.

Age differences

The findings of connections between age and ethics vary too. Terpstra (1994) believes that people become more ethical as they grow older. As age increases, people become less concerned with wealth and advancement and more interested in personal growth (Chonko, Wotruba & Loe, 2003). Indeed, Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs & Lieberman (1983) argue for that because individual's moral development mostly due to life experiences, age is related to ethical behaviors. For example, older sales managers were found to be less relativistic and also more idealistic than their younger counterparts (Bass et al., 1998).

At the same time, according to Forsyth's (1980), older people seem less idealistic than younger people and Marques and Azevedo-Pereira (2008) found older individuals more relativistic than younger ones. Other scholars, for instance, have found that there is no relation between age and idealism, but age is significantly negatively related to relativism (Alas & Edwards, 2007). Hence, the followed two hypotheses were formed up,

Hypothesis 2a: Younger people are more idealistic than older people.

Hypothesis 2b: Younger people are less relativist than older people.

The Study

Research was conducted in six countries from 3 different continents between 2012 and 2013: America, Asia, and Europe. From a total of 1118 respondents, 233 were from Chile, 236, from Iran, 222 from the United States, 217 from Thailand, and from 228 from Estonia.

According to gender, 46.1% were male, and 53.9% were female. According to age, respondents were divided into three groups – respondents below 35 years belong to the “younger” group, and

those above 25 years belong to the “older” group. Between 35 and 45 is the “middle” group. The younger group comprised 32% of all respondents, middle 44.4%, and older 23.6%.

The Method

Authors used the Ethics Position Questionnaire developed Forsyth (1980). The first 10 questions measure idealism and the last 10 items measure relativism. The scale followed a 5-point-scale Likert-scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of idealism or relativism. A two-factor confirmatory factor analysis with an Oblimin rotation, to allow for the possibility of correlation, and Kaiser normalization indicated that items load nicely into the two factors, idealism and relativism except for one item (Q7) from the idealism scale (Forsyth, 1980). This factor was not considered in subsequent analyses. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .86 for the idealism scale and .78 for the relativism scale. The original English language questionnaire was translated into Spanish, Estonian, Thai and Farsi and back translated into English to detect any inconsistencies.

The first scale, *Relativism*, suggests that ethical variety exists in different situations and societies. What one person considers being moral may be judged to be immoral by another person, and different types of morality cannot be treated in terms of “right” or “wrong” because what is moral depends on the situation. The second scale, *Idealism*, suggests that one should never psychologically or physically harm another person, and one should not perform an action that might threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual.

Results

The analysis begins with the comparison of the six countries followed by comparisons according to gender and age. In order to find statistically significant differences, ANOVA test were used.

There were statistically significant differences among countries in both scales. Idealism highest was in Perú, followed by Chile, Estonia, USA and Thailand. Idealism was the lowest in Iran. Relativism highest was in Estonia, followed by Thailand, Iran and USA. Chile and Perú had the lowest relativism. Table 1 summarizes the means for each country.

Table 1: Summary for Idealism and Relativism

Country		Idealism	Relativism
Estonia	N	228	228
	Mean	4,0119	3,445
	Std. Deviation	,54300	,5392
Perú	N	110	110
	Mean	4,2970	3,136
	Std. Deviation	,53151	,7032
Thailand	N	217	217
	Mean	3,4767	3,341
	Std. Deviation	,64207	,5415
USA	N	222	222
	Mean	3,7027	3,155
	Std. Deviation	,78106	,6999
Iran	N	108	108
	Mean	3,4393	3,320
	Std. Deviation	,58527	,5446
Chile	N	233	233
	Mean	4,2451	3,135
	Std. Deviation	,56402	,7674
Total	N	1118	1118

Table 2: Analysis of Variance for Idealism and Relativism

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Idealism	Between Groups	117,236	5	23,447	60,348	,000
	Within Groups	432,048	1112	,389		
	Total	549,284	1117			
Relativism	Between Groups	17,394	5	3,479	8,412	,000
	Within Groups	459,874	1112	,414		
	Total	477,268	1117			

An ANOVA (see Table 2) confirmed that these means are statistically significant.

A test of pairwise comparisons using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference indicated that these differences are mostly significant (see Table 3 for results). For example, Estonia is significantly less idealistic than Chile and Perú but more idealistic than the US, Thailand, and especially Iran. Two interesting findings emerge in terms of idealism. The two South American

countries emerge as the most idealistic. Chile and Perú are equally idealistic and significantly more than North Americans (US), Baltic Europeans (Estonia) and Asians (Iran and Thailand). On the other hand, the two Asian countries also form a block at the lower end of idealism that is significantly different than the rest.

In terms of relativism, Chile and Perú also form a South American block with the lowest relativism. Respondents in Chile, the least relativistic country, were significantly less relativistic than Estonia and Thailand. Estonia stands out as the most relativistic country with a significant higher relativism than Chile, Perú and the US.

Table 3: Multiple Comparisons using Tukey's HSD

Dependent Variable	Country	Country	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
IDEALISM	Estonia	Perú	-,28511*	,07236	,001	-,4917	-,0785
		Thailand	,53516*	,05911	,000	,3664	,7039
		USA	,30916*	,05877	,000	,1414	,4769
		Iran	,57256*	,07281	,000	,3647	,7804
		Chile	-,23325*	,05807	,001	-,3990	-,0675
	Perú	Estonia	,28511*	,07236	,001	,0785	,4917
		Thailand	,82027*	,07296	,000	,6120	1,0285
		USA	,59427*	,07268	,000	,3868	,8017
		Iran	,85767*	,08444	,000	,6166	1,0987
		Chile	,05186	,07211	,980	-,1540	,2577
	Thailand	Estonia	-,53516*	,05911	,000	-,7039	-,3664
		Perú	-,82027*	,07296	,000	-1,0285	-,6120
		USA	-,22600*	,05950	,002	-,3959	-,0561
		Iran	,03740	,07340	,996	-,1721	,2469
		Chile	-,76841*	,05880	,000	-,9363	-,6005
	USA	Estonia	-,30916*	,05877	,000	-,4769	-,1414
		Perú	-,59427*	,07268	,000	-,8017	-,3868
		Thailand	,22600*	,05950	,002	,0561	,3959
		Iran	,26340*	,07313	,004	,0546	,4722
		Chile	-,54241*	,05846	,000	-,7093	-,3755
	Iran	Estonia	-,57256*	,07281	,000	-,7804	-,3647
		Perú	-,85767*	,08444	,000	-1,0987	-,6166
		Thailand	-,03740	,07340	,996	-,2469	,1721
		USA	-,26340*	,07313	,004	-,4722	-,0546
		Chile	-,80581*	,07256	,000	-1,0129	-,5987
	Chile	Estonia	,23325*	,05807	,001	,0675	,3990
		Perú	-,05186	,07211	,980	-,2577	,1540
		Thailand	,76841*	,05880	,000	,6005	,9363

Relativism	USA	,54241*	,05846	,000	,3755	,7093	
	Iran	,80581*	,07256	,000	,5987	1,0129	
	Estonia	Perú	,3087*	,0747	,001	,096	,522
		Thailand	,1045	,0610	,523	-,070	,279
		USA	,2906*	,0606	,000	,117	,464
		Iran	,1247	,0751	,558	-,090	,339
		Chile	,3099*	,0599	,000	,139	,481
	Perú	Estonia	-,3087*	,0747	,001	-,522	-,096
		Thailand	-,2042	,0753	,073	-,419	,011
		USA	-,0181	,0750	1,000	-,232	,196
		Iran	-,1840	,0871	,282	-,433	,065
		Chile	,0012	,0744	1,000	-,211	,214
	Thailand	Estonia	-,1045	,0610	,523	-,279	,070
		Perú	,2042	,0753	,073	-,011	,419
		USA	,1860*	,0614	,030	,011	,361
		Iran	,0202	,0757	1,000	-,196	,236
		Chile	,2054*	,0607	,010	,032	,379
	USA	Estonia	-,2906*	,0606	,000	-,464	-,117
		Perú	,0181	,0750	1,000	-,196	,232
		Thailand	-,1860*	,0614	,030	-,361	-,011
Iran		-,1659	,0754	,239	-,381	,050	
Chile		,0193	,0603	1,000	-,153	,191	
Iran	Estonia	-,1247	,0751	,558	-,339	,090	
	Perú	,1840	,0871	,282	-,065	,433	
	Thailand	-,0202	,0757	1,000	-,236	,196	
	USA	,1659	,0754	,239	-,050	,381	
	Chile	,1852	,0749	,133	-,029	,399	
Chile	Estonia	-,3099*	,0599	,000	-,481	-,139	
	Perú	-,0012	,0744	1,000	-,214	,211	
	Thailand	-,2054*	,0607	,010	-,379	-,032	
	USA	-,0193	,0603	1,000	-,191	,153	
	Iran	-,1852	,0749	,133	-,399	,029	

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Next, we performed a comparison based on gender difference. Means are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Idealism and Relativism by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Idealism	Male	515	3,7782	,72750	,03206
	Female	603	3,9446	,66915	,02725
Relativism	Male	515	3,271	,6669	,0294
	Female	603	3,251	,6426	,0262

In order to assess homogeneity of variance we performed a Levene's test for equality of variance. In the case of idealism, Levene's test rejected the null hypothesis that variability is equal. Therefore, a t-test was carried to compare means under the assumption that equal variance cannot be assumed (see Table 5). Results indicate a significant difference of gender for idealism, but not for relativism. Idealism was significantly higher among women, whereas relativism seemed slightly higher for men, albeit this difference was not significant.

Table 5: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Idealism	Equal variances assumed	4,513	,034	-	1116	,000	-,16646	,04180	-,24847	-,08445
	Equal variances not assumed			3,982	1054,896	,000	-,16646	,04207	-,24902	-,08390
RELAT	Equal variances assumed	,447	,504	3,956	1116	,619	,0195	,0392	-,0575	,0965
	Equal variances not assumed			,498	1075,175	,620	,0195	,0393	-,0577	,0967

A comparative analysis was conducted between the three *age groups* as well (Tables 6 and 7). According to the ANOVA test a statistically significant difference appeared in both scales for age; idealism scale $F(2; 1117) = 46.187, p = .000$ and relativism $F(2; 1117) = 8.396, p = .000$. A post hoc Tukey's HSD test showed that the younger carried the weight of these differences. Table 7 shows that young people's moral philosophies are significantly less idealistic and more relativistic than the rest of the age groups. That is, youngsters tend to reject moral norms and, contrary to expectations, they are less idealistic. In other words, they are less likely to emphasize how to bring positive consequences for everyone affected by their decisions and they assume that during a moral course of action one must make decisions that unfortunately may harm some.

Table 6: Summary for Idealism and Relativism by Age

Age group		Idealism	Relativism
Younger	N	358	358
	Mean	3,5856	3,363
	Std. Deviation	,70291	,6288
Middle	N	496	496
	Mean	3,9954	3,244
	Std. Deviation	,64654	,6075
Older	N	264	264
	Mean	4,0114	3,150
	Std. Deviation	,68652	,7459
Total	N	1118	1118
	Mean	3,8680	3,260
	Std. Deviation	,70125	,6537

Table 7: Multiple Comparisons of Idealism and Relativism by Age Group using Tukey's HSD

Dependent Variable	Age Group	Age Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
						Idealism	Young <25
		Older	-,42575*	,05472	,000	-,5542	-,2973

Relativism	Middle	Young	,40979*	,04678	,000	,3000	,5196
	>25<35	Older	-,01596	,05139	,948	-,1366	,1046
	Older >35	Young	,42575*	,05472	,000	,2973	,5542
		Middle	,01596	,05139	,948	-,1046	,1366
	Young <25	Middle	,1185*	,0450	,023	,013	,224
		Older	,2125*	,0527	,000	,089	,336
	Middle	Young	-,1185*	,0450	,023	-,224	-,013
	>25<35	Older	,0939	,0495	,139	-,022	,210
	Older >35	Young	-,2125*	,0527	,000	-,336	-,089
		Middle	-,0939	,0495	,139	-,210	,022

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

These results on ethical ideologies across the world brought some interesting findings, some expected (Forsyth, 1992), some not. When comparing moral philosophies across the world, Chile and Perú formed a solid bloc of an absolutist morality of high significantly high idealism (welfare of everyone involved) and low relativism (validity of universal moral rules). This is consistent with the strong Catholic tradition in that part of the world (Alsua et al, 2012). On the other hand, Thailand and Iran formed an Asian block with significantly low idealism (they are more likely to accept that in the course of a moral action some people may be hurt) (Mujtaba, Tajaddini &Chen, 2011).

As expected, men were significantly less idealistic than significant differences in their views on the value of universal moral rules. Among age groups, the middle and older groups showed similar ideologies. Nevertheless, the Millennial generation (under 25) posited a significant subjectivist morality (Forsyth, 1980; Lu, 1997). These youngsters are subjectivists. They do not see the value of global moral norms (morality is determined by the situation) and they assume that, sometimes, moral decisions may not benefit everyone therefore their moral decisions are often determined by personal considerations.

Future research should examine how these gender and age differences play for each country. For example, are Iranian women more or less idealistic than US women? Also, further research using a historical institutionalist perspective (North, 1982) may help explain and predict some of the findings. Do older Estonians who have a memory of the communist past have a reason for being more relativistic than youngest Estonians who have always lived in democracy? (Geppert, 2003; Taaler, 1995; Taagepera, 1993). Also, how do moral values associated with a particular religion influence society's ethical ideologies? (Paz, 1987). If Chile's Catholicism can be connected to its absolutist morality, what can be said of Buddhism in Thailand or Shi'a Islam in Iran? What about in-group versus out-group idealism and relativism? Are groups and societies more or less relativistic or idealistic towards their groups versus others in outside groups? This would be very interesting because an individual's ethic may be more idealistic towards members of his/her "guanxi" than towards outsiders. A case in point on the significance of the in-group and the out-group: One of the co-authors spent some time in Asia. On one occasion a business partner shared his amazement at what he called Western (he meant US) naiveté in terms of ethical assumptions. "Americans are a gullible bunch; they seem to trust everyone at first, even if they do not know that person. Their default assumption is that someone is telling them the truth unless it is proven otherwise. We East Asians are the opposite. If we don't know you we assume that you are always lying, unless proven otherwise. We will only trust you until we have known you for a long time, and we have developed a long-term relationship of trust with you. We tend to be trustworthy only to our inner relationship circle, our Guanxi (Zhang, 2004; Ip, 2009).

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