

COMPARISON OF PARENTING STYLES, SOCIAL COMPETENCES AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF YOUTHS IN ITALY AND SERBIA

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore how parental styles and social competencies predict the conflict management strategies of young adults in Italy and Serbia, as well as to explore the differences among those variables and their relations in different cultural contexts. Data were collected in Serbia (N=288) and in Italy (N=476) with young adults (18-30 age). They responded to a questionnaire composed of several scales. Social competencies were measured by MSCS and included empathy, emotional regulation, and verbal and non-verbal skills. Perception of the parenting styles was measured by the EMBU and showed two factors: authoritarian or democratic styles. The conflict management styles, based on the Dual Concern Model, showed three factors: Cooperative, Competitive, and Defensive. It was expected that differences in parenting styles and social competencies will have different impacts on preferences for conflict management strategies.

Multiple regressions showed that Cooperative style was predicted by similar variables in both cultures which include verbal communication as a personality trait, empathy, and emotional regulation, while non-verbal skills predict cooperative strategies only in the Serbian sample. The defensive style was predicted by the different variables in the two cultures. In the Italian sample, they were predicted by authoritarian parenting style, verbal communication as a personality trait, and verbal communication as an ability, while in the Serbian sample, they were predicted only by empathy. The competitive style was predicted by emotional regulation and verbal communication as an ability in both cultures, as well as by the democratic parenting style and empathy but only in the Italian sample.

Keywords: *Conflict management strategies, parental styles, social skills, cross-culture.*

1. Introduction

Conflicts are inevitable aspects of human behaviour having different causes, intensities, and consequences among individuals and cultures. The lack of skills for dealing with them in a constructive way contributes to a lot of individual and social problems, breaking interpersonal, even international relation and generally decreasing a life quality of people. Therefore, to avoid or minimize the risk of possible negative or even violent consequences, it is important to understand the factors that may contribute to a different approach to conflict situations (French et al., 2018; Julien et al., 2003; Komarraju et al., 2012;). Previous studies have shown that conflict management strategies are related to specific personality traits or attitudes (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Wood, & Bell, 2008, Laca et al., 2006, Dzamonja et al, 2022) and the preference for specific strategies varies across cultures (Croucher et al., 2012; Doucet et al., 2009; Kim-Jo et al., 2010; Purohit, & Simmers, 2006; Vokic & Sontor, 2009).

2. Objectives

The aim of the paper is to explore how parental styles and social competencies predict the conflict management styles of young adults in Italy and Serbia. Also, we were interested to explore the differences among expression and relations of those variables in different cultural contexts.

The study was based on one of the most prominent models of motivational orientation towards conflicts, the Dual Concern Model (Rahim, 2011; Pruitt, 1981; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The social

competences were defined as the heterogeneous complex of different *motivation/skills* level behaviors and abilities that underlie successful social interactions (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

3. Method

This study involved 764 young people from Serbia (N=288; 69% females) and Italy (N=476; 61% females). The participants' age varied from 18 to 30 (M=21.54, SD=2.80). Data were collected online and participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The research was approved by the Ethical Research Committee from Belgrade and Sapienza Universities.

The conflict management strategies, based on the Dual Concern Model (Deucht, M., 2000), measured by *The Dutch Test of Conflict Handling* - DUTCH (Janssen & van de Vliert, 1996) showed three factors: Cooperative ($\alpha = .88$), Competitive ($\alpha = .72$), and Defensive ($\alpha = .72$). Social competencies were measured by shorter version of MSCS (Trevisan et al, 2018) which included empathy ($\alpha = .87$), emotional regulation ($\alpha = .81$), verbal conversation skills ($\alpha = .78$) and non-verbal skills ($\alpha = .87$). Perception of the parenting styles was measured by the EMBU (Arrindell et al., 1999) questionnaire and showed two factors: authoritarian ($\alpha = .87$) or democratic styles ($\alpha = .82$).

The multiple regression analyses were applied with 5 social competencies and 2 parental styles as predictors and 3 conflict management strategies as criterion variables.

4. Results

Young people from Serbia have significantly higher scores at empathy ($M_{diff} = 1.51$, $t(670,167) = 3.843$, $p < .001$), verbal conversation trait ($M_{diff} = 0.91$, $t(689,418) = 5.631$, $p < .001$) and non-verbal skills ($M_{diff} = 1.91$, $t(668,485) = 5.021$, $p < .001$). They also experience higher democratic parental style ($M_{diff} = 1.80$, $t(765) = 5.188$, $p < .001$) while there were no significant differences at authoritarian parental style ($M_{diff} = 0.67$, $t(765) = 1.307$, $p = .191$) and emotional regulation ($M_{diff} = -0.43$, $t(511,562) = -0.955$, $p = .340$).

Regression analyses showed that verbal communication as a trait, empathy and emotional regulation were significant predictors of Cooperativeness in both samples, and non-verbal skills only in Serbian youths (Table 1). The whole model explained 34% of the variance of the Cooperative strategy in the Serbian sample ($R^2_{adj} = .34$, $F(7,278) = 22.326$, $p < .001$) and even 41% of the variance in the Italian sample ($R^2_{adj} = .41$, $F(7,468) = 48.536$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Regression analyses for Cooperative conflict management strategy.

		Beta coefficients	t	p
Authoritarian parental style	Serbians	.007	.120	.905
	Italians	.027	.634	.526
Democratic parental style	Serbians	.076	1.342	.181
	Italians	.083	1.919	.056
Verbal conversation skills	Serbians	.242	3.665	.000
	Italians	.289	5.625	.000
Non-verbal skills	Serbians	.201	2.999	.003
	Italians	.050	1.007	.314
Empathy	Serbians	.167	2.670	.008
	Italians	.319	6.507	.000
Emotional regulation	Serbians	.239	4.714	.000
	Italians	.141	3.781	.000

Regression analyses showed that only authoritarian parental style and verbal conversation 1 skills were significant predictors of Defensiveness, but only for Italian youths and empathy for Serbian (Table 2). The whole model explained only 4% of the variance of the Cooperative strategy in the Serbian ($R^2_{adj} = .04$, $F(7,278) = 2.750$, $p < .01$) and 6% of the variance in the Italian sample ($R^2_{adj} = .06$, $F(7,468) = 4.993$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Regression analyses for Defensive conflict management strategy.

		Beta coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Authoritarian parental style	Serbians	.081	1.180	.239
	Italians	.164	2.995	.003
Democratic parental style	Serbians	.016	.232	.817
	Italians	.102	1.849	.065
Verbal conversation skills	Serbians	-.038	-.533	.594
	Italians	-.250	-4.745	.000
Non-verbal skills	Serbians	-.031	-.376	.707
	Italians	-.004	-.056	.956
Empathy	Serbians	.161	2.121	.035
	Italians	-.083	-1.341	.180
Emotional regulation	Serbians	.021	.349	.727
	Italians	.053	1.127	.261

Finally, verbal conversation skills and emotional regulation (negatively) contribute to the prediction of Competitiveness in both samples. Democratic parental style as well as empathy (negatively) were significant predictors only for Serbian youths (Table 3.). The whole model explained 12% of the variance of the Competitive strategy in the Serbian ($R^2_{adj} = .121$, $F(7,278) = 6.606$, $p < .001$) and 10% of the variance in the Italian sample ($R^2_{adj} = .10$, $F(7,468) = 8.799$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Regression analyses for Competitive conflict management strategy.

		Beta coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Authoritarian parental style	Serbians	.045	.684	.494
	Italians	-.020	-.378	.706
Democratic parental style	Serbians	.148	2.241	.026
	Italians	.078	1.449	.148
Verbal converssation skills	Serbians	.216	3.159	.002
	Italians	.287	5.583	.000
Non-verbal skills	Serbians	.109	1.403	.162
	Italians	.108	1.749	.081
Empathy	Serbians	-.149	-2.057	.041
	Italians	-.098	-1.613	.107
Emotional regulation	Serbians	-.179	-3.047	.003
	Italians	-.149	-3.242	.001

5. Discussion

Interestingly, young people from Serbia perceived higher levels of different communication skills (empathy, verbal and non-verbal skills) and democratic parental style compared with Italians, while there were no significant differences in authoritarian parental style and emotional regulation. The obtained result is hard to explain bearing in mind the widespread (auto)perception that Serbia can be described as a conflict society. We can speculate that such an environmental (social) climate contributes to developing or to self-perception of good personal communication skills to be able to cope with challenging social situations.

Multiple regressions showed that Cooperative strategies were predicted by similar communication skills in both cultures. It is obvious that for successful collaboration is necessary to understand the feelings and needs of other people, regulate the expression of emotions and have good verbal skills to express them to others. Probably, in the Serbian sample, non-verbal skills play a more important role to clarify “underlying messages” in a potentially conflict relations which could prevent conflict and improve cooperation. Also, there was no contribution of parental style for a cooperative approach to conflict that would be expected for ademocratic style.

It is interesting that Defensive strategies were predicted by the different variables in the two cultures. In the Italian sample, they were predicted by an authoritarian parenting style, while verbal skills negatively contribute to defensiveness. It seems evident that if parents insisted that children should obey them and if young persons have less verbal skills, they would try to avoid conflict and accommodate

others' wishes and needs. Contrary to that, in the Serbian sample, defensiveness is predicted only by empathy which could be explained by recognition and importance of others' feelings and needs and willingness to give them some priority. Still, it is not clear how to explain those cultural differences. But since the small percentage of the variance of Defensive strategies could be explained by communication skills and parental style, we believe that other factors, like personality traits and situational variables could contribute more to the prediction of defensiveness. Other studies confirmed that Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Introversion in addition to the negative perception of conflicts and world "as a competitive jungle" explained defensive behavior in conflict situations (Dzamonja Ignjatovic et al. 2022)

Competitive strategies were predicted by lower levels of emotional regulation and higher verbal conversation skills in both cultures. It is obvious that lower frustration tolerance and anger expression accompanied by higher self-perception of verbal skills could lead to competition to win and beat the others. Besides that, a lower level of empathy makes it easier to express personal interest over others in more collectivistic societies such as Serbian. It is also interesting that the democratic parenting style contributes to the prediction of Competitive strategies among Serbian, probably experienced as "permission" to resist while that parenting style increases cooperativeness in the Italian youths.

6. Conclusion

Social communication competences predict mostly Cooperative strategies, while it seems that other approaches to conflict are more predicted by other variables. Besides a lot of similarities in factors that contribute to the prediction of specific conflict management strategies in the two cultures, there were also some differences that could be explained by the influence of broader social contexts. Those societal variables were not included in this study. Besides that, there are other personal and situational factors that could play an important role in the preference of a specific conflict strategy that should be more explored in the future.

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