

# Cross Cultural Analysis of Character Strengths and Virtues: A British-Iranian Comparison

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## Abstract

A total of 296 (101 male) participants from Great Britain and 235 (101 male) from Iran completed a questionnaire which measured respondents' self-assessed character strengths based on the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA)*. It used a shortened version used in previous cross-cultural studies. It aimed to investigate culture and sex differences in, and the factor structure of, Character Strengths as well as the six Virtues which are the "higher order" classification of the strengths. Females gave higher ratings than males on Kindness, Loving, Gratitude and Enthusiasm, but lower ratings on Good Judgement and Bravery. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis provided some evidence for the six Virtues. In all, there were 8/24 significant effects for culture and 9/24 for sex, with 3 significant interactions. There was more nationality than gender main effects on the analysis of the Virtues, with British students providing significantly higher estimates on all, except Wisdom. British participants and the latter gave higher estimates on the Virtues Justice and Humanity. Possible reasons for both gender and cultural differences are speculated and discussed, and directions for further research are outlined.

## Keywords

Strengths, Virtues, Culture, Iran, Great Britain, Gender

## 1. Introduction

Character strengths and virtues are the individual difference characteristics associated with positive psychology (Mayerson, 2020). Whilst various cross-cultural studies have shown the cross-cultural similarity and convergence in the ratings

of strengths various studies have shown consistent sex differences (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Linley et al., 2007; Shimai et al., 2006). Furnham & Lester (2012) devised a 24-item self-assessment measure of Strengths. Their aim was to see if similar sex difference would occur for simple self-ratings on single item, labelled strengths (as opposed to those derived from a 240-item measure). Many studies have used this measure in cross-cultural studies (Furnham & Ahmetoglu, 2014; Neto et al., 2014). This study uses that measure to explore culture differences in self-perceived strengths and virtues.

Part of the major research effort of the relatively new positive psychology movement has been to provide a description, and then a classification, of strengths and virtues. This was reported by Peterson & Seligman (2004) who provided the first taxonomy and a 240-item measure of those 24 strengths. These 24 strengths have a “higher order” structure of six virtues: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence. The measure has already attracted a number of research papers. Indeed the VIA character strengths have been validated against observer reports and there are numerous factor analytic studies looking at the structure of the strengths (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006; Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b). This paper will examine the structure of self-rated strengths using a shortened version (24 items) of the better known 240-item measure of strengths. A central issue is whether the factor structure describing the six virtues can be recovered from the 24 ratings.

Linley et al. (2007) used the internet to test 17,056 British respondents and they found few age correlates but numerous sex differences in all 24 strengths. Females scored higher on these strengths compared to males, particularly interpersonal strengths such as Kindness, Love and Social Intelligence while males scored higher on Creativity. The top three strengths for males were Open-minded, Fairness and Curiosity which for females they were Fairness, Kindness and Open-mindedness. Shimai et al. (2006) in a Japanese and American comparison using the VIA found 10 of the 24 showed sex differences and the results were similar across cultures. This study will also do a cross-cultural comparison given the very limited number of studies in this area.

Furnham & Lester (2012) tested a total of 366 participants from Great Britain and the United States and aimed to investigate sex differences in, and the factor structure of, character strengths as well as demographic, ideological, personality and core self-evaluation correlates of the six virtues which are the “higher order” classification of the strengths. Females gave higher ratings than males on Kindness, Loving, Gratitude and Enthusiasm, but lower ratings on Good Judgement and Bravery. There were very few culture differences. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis provided good evidence for the higher order classification of the six virtues. Regressions looking at demographic (gender, age, education), ideological (religion, politics) and personality determinant of these strengths showed personality factors were always most powerful predictors of the self-rated strength and virtues. Political and religious beliefs and Extraversion seemed

consistent predictors of self-assessed strengths.

This study compared Britons and Iranians. There has been over the past few years a number of studies that have compared Iranians and “westerners” from a number of countries (Atari, 2017; Atari et al., 2019, 2020, 2022) to explore the role of culture on beliefs and behaviour. Whilst there have been a number of British studies in this area of strengths (Linley, 2008; Linley & Harrington, 2006; Lyons & Linley, 2008) there have been few in other non-English speaking countries. This study compares the self-assessed strengths of people at opposite ends on the European continent.

The present paper was also able to determine whether self-estimated differences between the sexes mirrored the actual scores resulting from Linley et al.’s study. The literature on self-estimated intelligence would suggest females would rate “emotional and relationship strengths” and virtues higher than males who, in turn, would rate cognitive abilities more highly.

The present study aims to investigate gender and nationality correlates and predictors of the 24-character strengths. The following hypotheses were tested.

1) Males will give significantly higher self-estimates on Courage, females on Humanity and Love as these showed biggest sex differences in earlier research (Linley et al., 2007).

2) The factor structure of the self-estimates will support the six Virtue model (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Previous studies with the VIA measure has provided only modest empirical support for the classification of the 24 strength into the 6 virtues but it is assumed this data will provide better evidence for the classification because of the difference in the ratings of the strengths.

3) Turkish would on average give higher ratings than the British students based on the stress of Virtues in a predominantly Muslim society.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

There were 296 (101 males, 195 female) British and 235 (101 male, 134 female) Iranian participants. They ranged in age from 17 to 27 years with a median of 19 years and a mean of 21.41 years. Participants in both countries were university students studying human science subjects including psychology. Participants were approached on university campus and were selected based on availability. Only those who were either British or Iranian were selected.

### 2.2. Measures

**The questionnaire**—Self-Rated Character Strengths (Furnham et al., 2009). This involved participants rating character strengths on an IQ based normal, bell-curve distribution with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 points. There were 24 of these, each with a brief description/explanation (see **Table 1**). They were shown a picture of a normal distribution and then the following instructions: “*Look at the following scale and simply put a number between 55 and 145*”

**Table 1.** Cultural differences between strengths.

Personal strengths	UK		UK		Iran		Iran		Cultural Differences	Gender Differences	Gender × Culture
	Male		Female		Male		Female				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	F	F
1. Curiosity: interest in, intrigued by many things	111.55	21.47	108.24	22.91	116.19	13.09	115.93	11.58	16.941 ***	1.069	1.619
2. Love of learning: knowing more, reading understanding	112.30	23.94	108.29	22.38	116.03	14.99	113.03	13.79	6.769 **	4.504 *	0.244
3. Good judgment: critical thinking, rationality, open mindedness	116.52	20.11	110.85	21.84	115.59	14.02	112.88	14.85	0.166	8.460 **	0.987
4. Ingenuity: originality, practical intelligence, street smart	112.54	21.52	100.14	19.71	110.84	16.34	107.26	15.03	2.827	28.084 ***	10.183 **
5. Social intelligence: emotional intelligence, good with feelings	110.59	24.93	113.31	22.61	109.81	18.60	113.03	15.17	0.134	3.464	0.035
6. Wisdom: seeing the big picture, having perspective	113.10	19.70	107.84	19.05	111.85	15.80	110.70	14.26	0.134	4.398 *	2.859
7. Bravery: courage, valour, fearlessness	107.93	22.53	100.04	24.94	106.55	17.47	99.96	16.39	0.318	17.989 ***	0.255
8. Persistence: perseverance, diligence, industriousness	105.39	24.85	102.77	23.01	107.02	15.79	105.70	16.59	1.625	1.182	0.258
9. Integrity: honesty, genuineness, truthful	122.83	21.39	120.89	19.96	113.12	16.90	114.57	14.90	31.572 ***	0.000	1.666
10. Kindness: generosity, empathic, helpful	123.93	17.58	123.49	20.13	111.32	19.10	119.12	13.97	37.189 ***	7.360 **	9.061 **
11. Loving: able to love & be loved; deep sustained feelings	120.02	24.82	122.29	20.10	108.50	18.59	116.69	16.79	29.09 ***	11.040 **	3.612
12. Citizenship: team worker, loyalty, duty to others	112.42	21.02	113.95	21.96	109.20	18.08	111.94	14.44	3.322	2.290	0.242
13. Fairness: moral valuing, equality and equity	119.89	17.93	118.95	18.35	111.30	15.54	113.00	12.64	34.594 ***	0.288	1.527
14. Leadership: able to motivate groups, inclusive, focused	110.28	23.36	102.44	24.11	108.93	19.01	107.52	18.08	0.875	6.492 *	4.09 *
15. Self-control: able to regulate emotions, non-impulsive	104.31	23.05	99.01	22.62	104.56	18.47	104.24	16.13	2.338	2.459	2.901
16. Prudence: cautious, far-sighted, deliberative, discreet	107.66	24.65	107.30	23.04	105.73	17.55	104.03	13.63	3.516	0.173	0.046
17. Humility: modesty, unpretentious, humble	109.39	23.66	109.59	21.93	105.96	17.50	107.51	12.78	3.822	0.518	0.332
18. Appreciative of beauty: seeking excellence, awe/wonder	111.30	23.14	111.98	21.82	113.57	18.39	111.91	15.82	0.298	0.025	0.364
19. Gratitude: thankful, grateful	115.31	21.64	115.67	20.49	111.69	14.86	115.26	13.89	2.792	2.688	1.852
20. Optimism: hopefulness, future-mindedness, positive	109.30	26.00	107.51	24.40	107.93	20.07	111.03	18.34	0.197	0.277	2.297
21. Spirituality: faith, philosophy, sense of purpose/calling	113.79	25.08	110.06	24.19	102.02	22.56	102.49	20.93	30.418 ***	0.339	1.956
22. Forgiveness: mercy, benevolent, kind	111.93	22.66	112.86	20.83	105.95	17.26	108.94	15.56	10.906 **	1.830	0.546
23. Playfulness: humour, funny, childlike	116.90	24.16	115.50	25.82	115.64	16.35	117.29	15.35	0.006	0.024	0.975
24. Enthusiasm: passion, zest, infectious, engaged	108.93	22.91	113.13	21.78	111.70	16.31	115.09	14.90	2.222	6.369 *	0.048

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

*based on what you think reflects each particular strength compared to the general population. For example, if you put 120 you think that you are fairly high*

*but a score of 105 means you are only just above average. You can put any number between 55 and 145. Please try to be accurate and honest in your answers*". Pilot work showed that participants had no difficulty with rating each strength on that scale.

### 2.3. Procedure

Student participants of various different disciplines (computing, economics, psychology) were tested in class anonymously and recruited by the authors. Non students were part of a departmental panel. All were volunteers. The nature of the study was explained after the questionnaire was completed. Departmental ethics committee approval was obtained. The response rate was 98%. The order of the questionnaire sections was counter-balanced.

### 3. Results

**Table 1** shows that the UK and Iran samples show mean differences in some of the strength items. Iran reports higher levels of curiosity, love of learning, ingenuity, and self-control. The UK reports higher levels of integrity, kindness, loving, fairness, spirituality and forgiveness.

**Table 2** shows the factor loadings for each sample. Eigenvalues suggest 7 factors for both samples rather than the expected 6-factor solution. The shading in the table indicates the theoretical factor structure. Wisdom for both seems to be split in to 2 factors with Curiosity and Love of learning loading on one factor and good judgment, ingenuity, social and wisdom loading on another separator factor. Bravery and persistence from Courage load together but integrity for the Iranian sample is loading with the items from Love and Justice but in the UK sample integrity does not seem to load well on any factor. The Humanity factor is consistent for both samples; however, citizenship and fairness from Justice appear to load on this factor for the Iranian sample. The items for Temperance load well on this factor though, humility for both samples has some cross-loading. The items for the final factor of Transcendence have considerable cross-loading.

**Table 3** shows the reliabilities for each virtue and all of the strength items. The alphas for the Iranian sample are reasonable with only Courage being below 0.60. In the UK sample both Courage and Justice fall below 0.60.

**Table 4** shows the factor loadings for each virtue.

**Table 5** shows the mean differences for each virtue between the samples. The Iranian sample shows a significantly higher level of Wisdom. The UK sample shows a significantly higher level of Love and Justice.

A  $2 \times 2$  MANOVA of the data for the items and virtues using gender and culture as factors shows that gender and culture are both significant but the interaction was not significant (Wilks Lambda  $p = 0.215$  for virtues and Wilks Lambda  $p = 0.116$  for strengths). However, when Age was included as a covariate both interactions approached significance: (Wilks Lambda  $p = 0.137$  for virtues and Wilks Lambda  $p = 0.060$  for strengths).

**Table 2.** Factor loadings.

Personal strengths	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	UK	Iran	UK	Iran	UK	Iran	UK	Iran	UK	Iran	UK	Iran	UK	Iran
1. Curiosity											0.572	0.760		
2. Love of learning											0.546	0.623		
3. Good judgment			0.573		0.323	0.603								
4. Ingenuity			0.432			0.622					0.404			
5. Social intelligence	0.466		0.339			0.531								
6. Wisdom			0.656			0.331								
7. Bravery			0.518							0.533				
8. Persistence			0.353							0.528				
9. Integrity		0.530			0.387									
10. Kindness	0.524	0.788												
11. Loving	0.735	0.536												
12. Citizenship		0.519												0.602
13. Fairness		0.524	0.322		0.419									0.423
14. Leadership			0.426			0.375				0.495				
15. Self-control							0.487	0.594						
16. Prudence							0.721	0.634						
17. Humility		0.395			0.677		0.570	0.329						
18. Appreciative of beauty											0.398			0.327
19. Gratitude	0.560		0.454											0.311
20. Optimism			0.687				0.308		0.368					
21. Spirituality	0.416		0.537											
22. Forgiveness	0.394	0.308	0.520	0.513										
23. Playfulness			0.332				0.636							0.412
24. Enthusiasm							0.724			0.366				0.585
Eigenvalue	5.104	6.133	2.438	2.311	1.887	1.703	1.495	1.326	1.175	1.179	1.105	1.099	1.078	1.018
Variance	21.27	25.56	10.15	9.63	7.86	7.10	6.23	5.53	4.91	4.91	4.60	4.58	4.49	4.24

**Table 3.** Alphas for virtues (factors) and total scale.

	UK	Iran
Wisdom	0.66	0.68
Courage	0.34	0.54
Humanity	0.64	0.71
Justice	0.49	0.64
Temperance	0.66	0.67
Transcendence	0.70	0.76
All items	0.83	0.87

**Table 4.** Factor loadings for the virtues.

	UK	Iran
Wisdom	0.627	0.591
Courage	0.574	0.602
Humanity	0.489	0.579
Justice	0.665	0.758
Temperance	0.430	0.489
Transcendence	0.686	0.719
Eigenvalue	2.69	2.96
Variance	45%	49%

**Table 5.** ANOVA of virtues.

	UK Mean	UK SD	Iran Mean	Iran SD	F	
Wisdom	110.05	13.36	112.69	9.13	9.08	**
Courage	109.63	15.06	107.67	11.69	3.56	
Humanity	122.51	17.77	115.47	14.93	30.84	***
Justice	112.79	15.04	110.49	12.23	4.74	*
Temperance	106.06	17.79	105.46	12.15	0.26	
Transcendence	112.43	13.81	111.79	10.90	1.47	

A discriminant analysis showed that Fairness, Integrity, Kindness, Spirituality and Loving were the top 5 items that discriminated between the UK and Iranian samples.

#### 4. Discussion

Most of the research done on strengths asks people to complete the 240-item VIA measure which has 10 behavioral items to assess each strength. Thus, rating themselves on a five-point scale indicating whether each statement describes what they are like, items like “I find the world an interesting place” is used to measure curiosity and “I always let bygones be bygones” measures forgiveness. This research project followed a similar methodology but used a new strength-labelled short scale. It examined the relationship between three sorts of variables, demographic, ideological and personality and self-assessed strengths.

Some very interesting results were found reflecting both cultural and gender differences between Iranian and British participants. First of all, factor analysis showed the existence of seven rather than the six virtues suggested by Peterson & Seligman (2004). Iranians rated themselves as wiser but the British thought of themselves as more humane and just. The reason why seven factors for the virtues emerged was that both Iranians and British participants’ self-perception of the virtue “wisdom” was split into two separate factors: “love for learning” and “curiosity” loaded into one factor and “good judgement”, “ingenuity” and “so-

cial intelligence” on another. The latter seems to represent the logical and cognitive aspects of wisdom, whereas the former may represent emotional and more subjective aspects. Overall, British participants gave higher estimates of themselves as compared to their Iranian counterparts (means of 114.13 vs. 110.42) and this difference was mainly due to British females giving generally higher estimates than both British and Iranian males as well as Iranian females (mean = 115.42).

There is some evidence that “humility” may be a prominent characteristic in many eastern cultures. For example, [Aghababaei et al. \(2016\)](#) studied 1375 participants from Iran, Poland and Malaysia and found that the honesty-humility dimension to be the strongest personality characteristic in Iranians and Malaysians. Also this dimension was one of the strongest personality correlates of religiosity. Regardless of religiosity, humility has been found to be encouraged more in eastern cultures ([Tong, Tan, Chor, & Koh, 2016](#)). Humility has been defined as synonymous with “modesty” and “humbleness”, as a quality of having a modest or low view of one’s importance ([Sahragard, 2003](#)). In the Iranian culture, to acknowledge one’s aptitudes and strengths in public may be regarded as “boasting” or “showing off” and thus may be regarded as impolite, to say the least, and is very much discouraged ([Sahragard, 2003](#)). This may be a cultural feature which may partly explain why Iranian participants in the present study, rated their overall strengths lower than their British counterparts. This may also explain the latter’s higher ratings of character strengths such as forgiveness and spirituality, which contrary to our findings, may be expected to be seen more in a religiously oriented culture.

As expected, overall gender differences showed that females’ self-perception of “emotional strengths” such as loving and kindness were significantly higher than males’ self-ratings. In contrast, male participants gave significantly higher ratings to “practical strengths”, namely, ingenuity, bravery, love for learning, leadership and wisdom. These results are in line with those reported by [Furnham & Ahmetoglu \(2014\)](#); [Furnham & Lester \(2012\)](#) and [Linley et al. \(2007\)](#). According to the authors of *Character Strengths and Virtues*, [Peterson & Seligman \(2004\)](#) strengths are affected by situational themes. Two situational variables that may influence strengths expression could be gender and sex roles. In a meta-analysis study of gender and age differences in character strengths, [Heintz, Kramm, & Ruch \(2017\)](#) found that although males and females do not differ significantly in their positive psychological functioning, females gave significantly higher ratings on “appreciation of beauty”, “loving”, “kindness” and “gratitude”. These differences may be due to effects of socialization of sex roles in different societies.

The most highly rated character strengths for British participants were kindness, integrity, loving and fairness. For Iranians, the most highly rated strengths were playfulness, enthusiasm, integrity, gratitude, love of learning and good judgement. Indeed British and Iranian participants differed significantly on these character strengths. Despite the fact that [Peterson & Seligman \(2004\)](#) have claimed that virtues and character strengths are universal entities, some positive psy-



chologists (Park & Peterson, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), have suggested that possible cultural differences should be investigated. There is some recent evidence to suggest that people in different cultures may define character strengths differently, or at least, reiteration on certain aspects of character strengths may be different. In one qualitative study, as a result of interviewing ten Iranian psychologists and focus group discussions with 13 Iranian adolescents, Jabbari, Shahidi, Mazaheri, & Panaghi (2019, in Press) found that Iranian adolescents, as well as Iranian experts made no distinction in defining “bravery” and “assertiveness”. Furthermore, Iranians understood “honesty” as being relative. Both Iranian adolescents and experts believed that telling “white lies”, for example, was an inseparable part of being honest. Interestingly, “zest” was seen as the expression of both negative and positive emotions and the emphasis on “love” by Iranian experts was between humans and other objects rather than interpersonal love.

Similarly, there seems to be some evidence, albeit speculative, that the experience of romantic love may be subtly different between eastern and western cultures. Bajoghli, Joshangahi, & Gaber (2013) found that in Iranian medical students, experience of romantic love may be related to signs of hypomania and reduced depression but also to higher symptoms of state anxiety. Comparing Iranian adults with their counterparts from Switzerland, Bajoghli, Hosboer-Trachsler, & Brand (2009) found that males in general and Swiss males, in particular reported a more ambivalent attitude towards love. Females reported more anxiety and Iranian females in particular, reported an increased fear of being betrayed. The anxiety reported by Iranians when experiencing romantic love may explain the higher scores reported by British participants on “love” and “kindness”, as compared to Iranians in the present study. Also, this may be one possible reason why in the factor analysis done in the present study, items for the virtue “justice” (fairness and citizenship) seem to load together with the virtue “humanity” (which includes love and kindness) for the Iranian sample only.

These inter-cultural studies, though sparse and speculative, reiterate the importance of investigating cultural differences as far as character strengths and virtues are concerned. This includes studying the meaning different cultures may give to virtues and character strengths. Very few studies have been conducted in this regard. One reason for this lack of strong research is the diversity of cultures and the ambiguity that exists in defining cultural characteristics of different societies. Both Iran and Britain are good examples of this. Britain, as most western cultures, is a multi-cultural society, enjoying a mix of various traditions and cultures from America, Europe and Asia. Similarly, Iran is a multi-ethnic society, comprising of ethnic groups such as Kurds, Turks, Fars, etc. Hence it is practically impossible to define cultural characteristics independently and clearly. In one study, Abdollahimohammad, Jaafar, & Abul Rahim (2014) studied similarities and differences in cultural values between Iran and Malaysia. Although both countries were found to be restraint oriented and avoidant toward uncertainty (which are typical characteristics of eastern and middle-eastern societies), Iranians were low on other aspects of traditional eastern culture such

as power orientation, collectivism and masculinity. Indicating that a subtle mix of eastern and western values may exist in the Iranian culture.

In conclusion, results of the present study in fact highlight these very subtle but indeed significant cultural differences and reiterate the importance of investigating character strengths and virtues in the light of complex cultural characteristics of Iran and Britain. We suggest a more qualitative approach as the results of the present study suggest complex and subtle qualities of how individuals may understand and apply their positive psychological functioning in the context of their cultural background.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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