Religious affiliation and intercultural sensitivity: Interculturality between Shia & Sunni Muslims in Iran ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Intercultural sensitivity is one of the most important factors that significantly influence effective communication. This paper aims to investigate intercultural sensitivity among the followers of two Muslim sects, the Shia and Sunni in Iran. To this end, we have applied Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity theory as a conceptual framework. This theory states that the development of communication among people decreases their intercultural sensitivity levels. In this paper, religious affiliation has been assumed as an index of development of communication among the inhabitants of three cities in Iran. We measured the levels of intercultural sensitivity in two groups separately and have concluded that development of communication has decreased their intercultural sensitivity. We also found that, according to the six stages of intercultural sensitivity model, the orientation of these groups towards each other is "Minimization" (Bennett, 1998, p. 27), meaning that they tend to highlight their similarities and to ignore their differences.

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1. Introduction

Higher levels of multicultural contact in the age of globalization have tended to make people more skilled and competent in their intercultural communication. Effective intercultural communication has become a significant global skill through the increasing interaction of people with different cultural backgrounds (Knutson & Posirisuk, 2006). Intercultural communication competence is commonly understood as "the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208).

The learning of skills related to intercultural communication competence is considered important since cultural differences can lead to differences in meaning and/or expectations that require higher levels of communicative ability to interpret (Lustig & Koester, 1996). Moreover, communicating with people who have different cultural backgrounds is often associated with unfavourable emotional reactions (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002) that might lead to 'intercultural anxiety' (Stephan & Stephan, 1992, p. 89). Indeed, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence are closely related. "Greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422). While these two terms have been defined in different ways, they generally point to managing cultural differences in a suitable way (Jokikokko, 2005).

Intercultural sensitivity is a key concept in both the theoretical analysis of peoples' adaptation to different cultures and in practical programs intended to prepare people to encounter different cultures effectively and appropriately (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). According to Rey (1997, p. 161) "religion is not only an element of culture but can be a culture in itself, with

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☆ The paper was reviewed and accepted by the prior Editor-in-Chief, Dan Landis.

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shared worldviews, assumptions and practices". Religious differences have the potential to cause severe sensitivity among people. According to Bennett (1986) development of communication among people decreases their intercultural sensitivity. Applying Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this study aims to examine the relationship between religious affiliation and intercultural sensitivity between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iran.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of Shia and Sunni Muslims

Muslims are divided into two main sects, Shia and Sunni. Both groups agree on three fundamental Islamic principles, namely *Tawhid* (monotheism), *Qiyamah* (Day of Judgment) and *Nubuwwah* (Prophethood). Although they have similar beliefs, rituals and practices, some minor differences make them distinct from one another.

There was no split between Muslims when the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was alive but Shia–Sunni sectarianism appeared immediately after he passed away (Amin, n.d.). One group believed that the prophet did not nominate a successor, indicating that Muslims should select a new leader by election (Succession to Muhammad, n.d.) by means of which they chose Abu-Bakr as the leader of their community. Since then this group has been known as Sunni Muslims. The other group did not accept this notion and believed that Imam Ali (the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad) was his successor. This group has since been known as Shia Muslims. Their main argument is that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) appointed Imam Ali as his successor in *Ghadir Khumm* during his "Farewell Pilgrimage" (Sanders, 1992, p. 97) to Mecca. This event "constituted the single most important piece of evidence with which they legitimized Ali's succession" (Sanders, 1992, p. 88). "According to Shia Islam, Ali was the rightly successor to Muhammad, both as political leader of the community and as spiritual leader" (Campbell, 2008, p. 435).

In addition to this basic disagreement there are also minor differences in the daily practices of Sunni and Shia Muslims, such as the modality of *Wudu*, *Salat* (pray) and *Sawm* (Fast). Similarly, while both sects consider the *Quran* their most important religious book, their interpretations of the *Quran* are sometimes different. Both Shia and Sunni Muslims have several branches. The most important Sunni branches include *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*. The three main Shia branches are the *Twelver*, *Ismaili* and *Zaidiyya*.

According to the Pew Research Centre (2009), 1.57 billion of the world's 6.8 billion people are Muslims. Of the total Muslim population, 87–90% are Sunni while 10–13% are Shia. Most of the world's Shia Muslims are distributed in four countries – Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. Iran has the largest Shia population, 66–70 million in total, which is roughly 40% of the world's Shia population.

Iranian Sunni communities include several different ethnicities spread across vast geographic distances; the most well known are the Kurds, Turkmen and Baloochis. For this study, the sample group was made up of Twelver Shia and Turkmen Hanafi Sunnis in Golestan province in Northern Iran.

2.2. Previous studies on religion and intercultural sensitivity

Religion, as one of the main determinants of cultural identity, may contribute positively to the levels of intercultural sensitivity in social encounters among people. Unfortunately, only a handful of studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between religious identity and intercultural sensitivity.

Triandis and Triandis (1960) examined the roles of race, social class, religion and nationality in determining social distance. Their study suggested that race and social class play a more significant role as determinants of social distance than religion or nationality.

Social discrimination against minority religious groups has always been a problematic issue in intercultural communication. Ameli, Elahi, and Merali (2004) studied the extent and modality of social discrimination against Muslims in UK. Having applied both qualitative and quantitative approaches, they found that Muslims experience a vast range of discriminative actions from "hostile behavior to abuse, assault and alienation" (Ameli, Elahi, et al., 2004, p. 67). The results also suggest that about 80% of respondents mentioned that they have experienced discrimination because they were Muslim; indicating that negative stereotypes and viewpoints about Islam and Muslims has had a positive role for such discriminative behavior against Muslims.

The types and patterning of social relationships play an important role in promoting affiliation between people from different societies. In Northern Ireland, such patterns have lead to conflict, particularly with regard to the delineation of borders between Catholic and Protestant communities (Easthope, 1976). Accordingly, in order to reduce sensitivity levels between these two groups, it follows that these communication patterns should be reconstructed. Two empirical studies have considered some factors that could potentially improve the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

The first of these studies was conducted by Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, and Voci (2004) and examined the role of personal friendships between Catholics and Protestants in reducing prejudice. Their study showed that out-group friendships decreased the negative bias between the two groups. Interestingly enough, the results of this study also revealed that having friends from the out-group positively reduced anxiety about further communication with out-group members.

In a similar research project, Hargie, Dickson, Mallett, and Stringer (2008) studied communicative aspects of social identity among Irish Protestants and Catholics to investigate the interplay of self-disclosure and development of cross-group friendships in reducing prejudice towards out-group members. They found that cross-group relationships can lead to self-disclosure and consequently to improved attitudes towards out-group members; however, a degree of trust of out-group members is an important precondition in these kinds of relationships.

Ali (2010) has studied the Shia–Sunni relationship in Northern Pakistan through a 'sectarian imaginaries' (p. 738) perspective. She believes that sectarian imaginary is a specific kind of sectarianism that constitutes belief and behavior, based on a special kind of attitude called *taasub*.[1] She has attempted to make clear the point that state practices cause a kind of sectarian paranoia, unleashing anxieties that make people avoid inter-sect interaction.

Most of the studies that have examined the relationships between Shia and Sunni Muslims have considered the political aspects of their relations rather than analysing their intercultural sensitivity. Behuria's (2004) study of Sunni–Shia relations in Pakistan, for example, focused on the political aspect of the issue and Wimmer's (2003) study explored democracy and ethno-religious identities in Iraq.

Iran is an Islamic country with a 90–95% Shia population and a minority Sunni community. Despite an extensive search we were not able to find any past or present research, from an intercultural sensitivity approach, into the relationship between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iran. Involving the two mainstream Muslim sects who live side by side in Iran, this article would present a new approach in the domain of intercultural sensitivity.

3. Conceptual framework: intercultural sensitivity theory

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was applied as a theoretical tool to examine intercultural relations between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iran. Intercultural sensitivity theory basically states that development of communication among people decreases their intercultural sensitivity.

The DMIS is a six-stage process containing three ethnocentric and three ethnorelative stages. Through these consecutive stages, people would be able to construct their cultural orientation towards people from other cultural contexts.

Ethnocentrism has three stages: 'Denial of differences', 'Defence of differences' and 'Minimization of differences'. Ethnorelativism also has three stages: 'Acceptance of differences', 'Adaptation to cultural differences' and 'Integration into cultural difference'.

At the first stage, 'Denial of differences', people believe that their culture is both unique and superior to all others. Accordingly, "they are unable to construe cultural differences in complex ways" (Bennett, 1998, p. 26). This stage can be further categorised into two sub-stages, 'Isolation' and 'Separation' (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003, p. 470).

At the second stage people have a negative assessment of differences. They "have more ability to construe cultural difference, but they attach negative evaluations to it" (Bennett, 1998, p. 27). They try to preserve their opinions because they feel threatened by differences. 'Defence of differences' can be further categorised into three sub-stages, 'Superiority', 'Denigration' and 'Reversal' (Paige et al., 2003, p. 470).

The final stage of ethnocentrism is 'Minimization of differences', in which people "recognize and accept superficial cultural differences such as eating customs and other social norms" (Bennett, 1998, p. 27). The significant point at this stage is that people highlight their similarities and try to ignore their most general differences. At this step people learn to respect and accept other people's differences. 'Minimization of differences' can be further categorised into two sub-stages, 'Physical universalism' and 'Transcendent universalism' (Bennett, 1986, p. 190).

At the first stage of ethnorelativism, 'Acceptance of differences', people understand cultural differences and respect others' values, rituals and manners. The person who is at this step does not evaluate differences by the standards of his own group. This stage can be further categorised into two sub-stages, 'Behavioural relativism' and 'Value relativism' (Paige et al., 2003, p. 471).

The second stage of ethnorelativism is 'Adaptation to cultural differences'. At this step "people use knowledge about their own and others' cultures to intentionally shift into a different cultural frame of reference" (Bennett, 1998, p. 28). Consequently, their outlook is extended to accept some pertinent ideas from other cultural contexts. Moreover, this stage can be further categorised into two sub-stages, 'Empathy' and 'Pluralism' (Bennett, 1986, p. 185).

The final stage is 'Integration into cultural differences', in which peoples' self-awareness is expanded and moves in and out of different cultural outlooks. In addition, they define their identity at the boundary of varied cultures (Hammer et al., 2003). They define themselves as cultural marginal's so that "they constitute a valuable and perhaps crucial resource for creating a world that is hospitable to the great diversity of humanity" (Bennett, 1986, p. 194). The person who is situated in this step has the least possible amount of intercultural sensitivity.

Generally speaking, these six steps show various orientations towards cultural differences. As time passes and people expand their cultural experiences through communication, their ethnocentric worldviews will be discoloured. In this way, they may become more flexible with regard to ethnorelativism.

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[1] It is somehow difficult to translate this notion, however its closest translation to English is 'a kind of ethnocentrism'.

The development of communication occurs in a wide variety of situations, and as such has a wide range of definitions. Some studies define it as the length of time a person spends in a different cultural context, for example studying in a foreign country (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Fuller, 2007; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Jackson, 2008; Straffon, 2003; Williams, 2005). DeJaeghere and Zhang (2008) in their study of American teachers' intercultural competence development, defined development of communication as the number of years of experience a teacher has, along with number of years of experience in a given school district. It is also possible for people to extend their communications via different types of media, including the Internet.

In this paper, religious affiliation has been assumed as the index of development of interpersonal communication. This research has been conducted to examine the relationship between religious affiliation and people's intercultural sensitivity levels. In addition, this study seeks to answer the following potentially controversial questions:

1. In which step of intercultural sensitivity is the Sunni group situated?
2. In which step of intercultural sensitivity is the Shia group situated?
3. Is there any significant relationship between religious affiliation and the Sunni group's extent of intercultural sensitivity?
4. Is there any significant relationship between religious affiliation and the Shia group's extent of intercultural sensitivity?

4. Research methods

This research was conducted using a mixed-methodology comprises both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A combined questionnaire containing open-ended and close-ended questions was utilised to measure intercultural sensitivity among followers of two religious groups. This method has been widely used by scholars in recent years; for instance, Fuller (2007) utilised it to assess the intercultural sensitivity of theology students while Ameli, Azam, and Merali (2004) made use of it in a study whose results appeared in *British Muslims' Expectations of The Government*. Similarly, Straffon (2003) applied this approach in his study assessing the intercultural sensitivity of international high school students.

4.1. Instrument

To understand the participants' orientations towards each other according to the DMIS, we developed a questionnaire. In the first part of the questionnaire participants were asked to provide their demographic information, including age, sex and education. The second part included a collection of 27 close-ended questions designed by the authors using the Likert type scale. The questionnaire was designed according to the first five stages of the DMIS and their sub-stages, as described in the conceptual framework. We developed a 27-item measurement that included two items for the first stage (Denial), seven items for the second stage (Defence), seven items for the third stage (Minimization) and six and five items for the fourth and fifth stages (Acceptance and Adaptation), respectively. We did not include the sixth step of intercultural sensitivity and its sub-stages in the questionnaire as "no items were found to form pure contextual evaluation or constructive marginality substages, nor did items from the two substages form an integration construct" (Paige et al., 2003, p. 472).

A pre-test was run using 23 subjects to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire. The calculated Cronbach alpha was 0.75 and indicated that the questionnaire was reliable. The third part of the questionnaire contained one open-ended question regarding the subject's ethnocentric orientation.

4.2. Procedure and participants

In this study we selected three proximate cities within Golestan province in Northern Iran, using differences in religious affiliation as an index of development of interpersonal communication among their inhabitants. In the first city, Gorgan, most of the population (approximately 80%) were Shia, with the Sunni community constituting a minority. We traced a converse trend in the second city, Agh Ghala, in which most of the population (nearly 85%) were Sunni. Based on our observations during fieldwork in this region, interpersonal communication between the two groups was not well developed. Due to the small sizes of the Shia group in Agh Ghala and the Sunni group in Gorgan, they had fewer opportunities to communicate or socialise with the majority groups. In Gonbad Kavoos, where the populations of Shias and Sunnis were roughly equal, people had more chances to develop their interpersonal communication and become familiar with each other's culture and religion in everyday life, in settings such as schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods and so forth.

The sample group included 400 Shia and Sunni Muslims from the three cities mentioned above. To increase the accuracy of our results, the proportion of Shia and Sunni in our sample was determined by their total population in each city. Table 1 presents details about the number of Shia and Sunni in each city, separately.

In Gorgan the participants were selected from among the employees of two institutions and the residents of two neighbourhoods. Likewise, in Agh Ghala the participants were selected from among the employees of one institution and the residents of three neighbourhoods. Finally, in Gonbad Kavoos we selected our participants from among the inhabitants of two neighbourhoods and the employees of two institutions. As the research topic was relatively sensitive and we were concerned that participants might not express their real attitudes, seven local persons were recruited to distribute the questionnaires and to collect them from the participants, as well as to provide them with some information about the project. The participants were given roughly an hour to complete the questionnaire.

Table 1
Sample size in terms of religion and the city of residence.

City	Shia		Sunni	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gorgan	100	50.8%	33	16.3%
Agh Gala	33	16.8%	90	44.3%
Gonbad Kavoos	64	32.5%	70	43.5%
Did not mention	0	0	10	4.9%
Total	197	100	203	100

Table 2
The results of Binomial test for different steps of intercultural sensitivity of Sunni group.

Steps of intercultural sensitivity	Category		Number	Observed prob	Asympt sig two tailed
Denial of differences	1	≤ 3	113	0.60	0.009[a]
	2	>3	76	0.40	
Defence of differences	1	≤ 3	26	0.15	0.000[a]
	2	>3	152	0.85	
Minimization of differences	1	≤ 3	15	0.08	0.000[a]
	2	>3	175	0.92	
Acceptance of differences	1	≤ 3	27	0.14	0.000[a]
	2	>3	163	0.86	
Adaptation of differences	1	≤ 3	61	0.33	0.000[a]
	2	>3	125	0.67	

[a] Based on Z Approximation.
Note: Significant level is 0.05 (two tailed).

4.3. Analyses of data

For the purpose of this study, three main statistical tests were applied to assess the research hypotheses: (i) the Binomial test was used to understand the orientation of the Sunni and Shia groups towards one another according to different steps of intercultural sensitivity. This test is not able to show the intensity of sensitivity of two groups. (ii) Therefore, the Friedman test was utilised to evaluate the intensity of the Sunni and Shia respondents' orientations. (iii) The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to understand whether there is any significant relationship between religious affiliation and intercultural sensitivity of two groups. It also shows the intensity of sensitivity in each city.

5. Results

The findings of this research are presented in three sections. In the first part, the level of intercultural sensitivity for each group is measured, so as to clarify which stage of the DMIS each group is situated in. In the second part, we test the relationship between the participants' level of intercultural sensitivity and their religious affiliation. In section three, we analyse participants' responses to one open-ended question regarding intercultural sensitivity.

In the first section, we tried to determine the position of the Sunni group in terms of intercultural sensitivity, in order to identify a bias towards either ethnocentrism or ethnorelativism with regard to their Shia counterparts.

Question 1: In which step of intercultural sensitivity is the Sunni group situated? Table 2 indicates the results.

Based on this table, the sensitivity level of Sunni people is a mixture of Bennett's five intercultural sensitivity stages. This point can be deduced from the significant levels calculated for each stage.

The intensity of orientation for this group, however, is not equal in every stage. The results of the Friedman test are presented in Table 3, in which Mean rank signifies the intensity of sensitivity for each stage.

Table 3 indicates that the most common orientation of Sunnis towards Shias is stage 3, 'Minimization of differences'. The second and the third most common trends were a tendency to accept differences (stage 4) and to defend their differences (stage 2), respectively. 'Adaptation of differences' (stage 5) and 'Denial of differences' (stage 1) are the two least common attitudes adopted by Sunnis towards Shias. In the second part, we examine the Shia position in relation to Sunnis.

Table 3
The results of Friedman test to identify the intensity of sensitivity in the Sunni group.

Steps of intercultural sensitivity	Mean rank
Denial of differences	2.28
Defence of differences	3.14
Minimization of differences	3.91
Acceptance of differences	3.36
Adaptation of differences	2.30

Table 4
The results of the Binomial test for different steps of intercultural sensitivity of the Shia group.

Steps of intercultural sensitivity	Category		Number	Observed prob	Asympt Sig two tailed
Denial of differences	1	≤ 3	98	0.51	0.886[a]
	2	>3	95	0.49	
Defence of differences	1	≤ 3	44	0.24	0.000[a]
	2	>3	140	0.76	
Minimization of differences	1	≤ 3	14	0.07	0.000[a]
	2	>3	175	0.93	
Acceptance of differences	1	≤ 3	17	0.09	0.000[a]
	2	>3	172	0.91	
Adaptation of differences	1	≤ 3	61	0.33	0.000[a]
	2	>3	125	0.67	

[a] Based on Z Approximation.
Note: Significant level is 0.05 (two tailed).

Table 5
The result of the Friedman test to identify the intensity of sensitivity of the Shia group.

Steps in intercultural sensitivity	Mean rank
Defence of differences	3.04
Minimization of differences	3.77
Acceptance of differences	3.37
Adaptation of differences	2.52

Table 6
The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test to identify the relationship between religious affiliation and the intercultural sensitivity of the Sunni group.

	Sensitivity
Chi square	8.146
Df	2
Asympt sig	0.017

Note: Significant level is 0.05 (two tailed).

Question 2: In which step of intercultural sensitivity is the Shia group situated? To measure the intercultural sensitivity of the Shia group, we followed exactly the same process as in the previous section. Table 4 demonstrates the results.

The significance levels in Table 4 indicate that the Shia group tend to be located in every step of intercultural sensitivity, with the exception of stage 1, 'Denial of differences'. Table 5 shows the intensity of their sensitivity.

As Table 5 demonstrates, the most common sensitivity level the Shia respondents displayed with regard to Sunnis was stage 3, 'Minimization of differences'. Like the Sunni group, they preferred to highlight their similarities to the other group, rather than their differences. The second most common trend was a tendency to accept differences (stage 4). Finally, the mean rank in Table 5 indicates that the Shia group's lowest sensitivity levels were in stage 2 ('Defence of Differences') and stage 5 ('Adaptation of Differences'), respectively. The only difference between the general attitude of this group and the Sunni Muslims is that the Shia respondents do not show a tendency to deny their differences (stage 1).

In the following sections findings are presented in three parts. In the first part, the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and religious affiliation for Sunni people in different cities is tested. In the second part, the same test is conducted with Shia people, while in the last part the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and religious affiliation for the whole sample is calculated, regardless of religion.

5.1. Religious affiliation and intercultural sensitivity of the Sunni group

Question 3: 'Is there any significant relationship between religious affiliation and the Sunni group's extent of intercultural sensitivity?' The results of assessing this hypothesis are presented in Table 6.

As Table 6 indicates, there is a significant relationship between the intercultural sensitivity levels of the Sunni respondents and their religious affiliation. Mean ranks in Table 7 represent the intensity of sensitivity in each city.

Table 7
The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test to identify the intensity of the Sunni group's sensitivity in different cities.

City of residence	Number	Mean rank
Gonbad Kavoos	57	65.28
Gorgan	28	71.25
Agh Ghala	66	87.27
Total	151	–

Table 8
The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test to identify the relationship between religious affiliation and the intercultural sensitivity of the Shia group.

	Sensitivity
Chi square	1.972
Df	2
Asympt sig	0.373

Note: Significant level is 0.05 (two tailed).

Table 9
The results of Kruskal–Wallis test to identify the relationship between religious affiliation and the intercultural sensitivity of the two groups.

	Sensitivity
Chi square	7.357
Df	2
Asympt sig	0.025

Note: Significant level is 0.05 (two tailed).

As Table 7 illustrates, the highest level of intercultural sensitivity was recorded in Agh Ghala, in which the majority of the population were Sunni. The second-highest level of intercultural sensitivity was found in Gorgan, the city with a significant Shia majority. It is clear from the table that the lowest level of intercultural sensitivity held by Sunni Muslims towards their Shia brethren is found in Gonbad Kavoos, where the population of the two groups is almost equal.

5.2. Religious affiliation and intercultural sensitivity of the Shia group

Question 4: 'Is there any significant relationship between the extent of intercultural sensitivity of the Shia group and their religious affiliation?' the results of assessing this hypothesis are presented in Table 8.

The results reveal no significant relationship between religious affiliation and the intercultural sensitivity of Shia respondents towards Sunnis.

5.3. Intercultural sensitivity of Shias and Sunnis towards each other in different cities

In this section we measured the intercultural sensitivity of the whole sample, regardless of their religion. Table 9 shows the results.

The results indicate a positive relationship between religious affiliation and the extent of the intercultural sensitivity of respondents in our sample. This suggests that patterns of population spread in different cities affect intercultural orientations between the Shia and Sunni groups. Table 10 indicates the intensity of intercultural sensitivity in each city.

Table 10 shows that the lowest sensitivity level among the sample is in Gonbad Kavoos, the city in which there are nearly equal numbers of Shia and Sunni Muslims, and in which they have a relatively close relationship. The highest sensitivity levels exist in Agh Ghala and Gorgan, respectively.

6. Results of qualitative analysis

The analysis of the open-ended question helps us understand the participants' cultural viewpoints better. In this section, participants were asked to answer a question about the second stage of intercultural sensitivity, 'Defence of differences'. They were given the following question: *If your children want to make a decision about choosing their religion freely, will you persuade or dissuade them?*

Of 11 participants who responded to this question, 5 indicated that should they encounter such a situation, they would encourage their children to make their own decision about their religion.

> I have three children. I would let all of them choose their religion freely according to the social circumstances in which they live and I will only answer their religious questions.
> Male, Sunni above 50 years old, resident of Gorgan

Table 10
The results of Kruskal–Wallis test to identify the intensity of sensitivity in different cities.

City of residence	Number	Mean Rank
Gonbad Kavoos	110	143.73
Gorgan	119	162.99
Agh Ghala	92	179.07
Total	321	–

> I would let my child to think freely and I only would guide him as I believe that he is free and is able to make correct decisions with consultation.
> Male, Shia, 37 years old, resident of Gorgan

> I would persuade my child to investigate different religions profoundly and then select the perfect one. My duty is just guiding him, if necessary.
> Male, Shia, 47 years old, resident of Gorgan

> Yes. I think he is able to choose his preferred religion freely if he has access to sufficient information about that.
> Female, 22 years old, resident of Gonbad Kavoos

> Everyone must investigate about his religion and find the desirable one accordingly.
> Male, Shia, 47 years old, resident of Gonbad Kavoos

These answers suggest that this group of people let their children probe into different religions, rather than persuading them to follow their own religion. As they do not feel threatened by religious differences, they believe that restricting their children's choices is not a good way to protect their beliefs. Because of this, they do not react defensively towards differences.

On the other hand, four other participants answered this question more cautiously. They believed that it was better for parents to be careful about their childrens' decisions.

> Obliging people to do something has never had a good result. On the other hand, giving unlimited freedom to teenagers or young people who don't have enough experience causes some troubles. It is true that everyone can choose his way logically, but undoubtedly it is necessary to use other's opinions and to consult with them in order to make a decision about such an important issue.
> Male, Sunni, 22 years old, resident of Agh Ghala

> Considering the fact that parents have a great responsibility towards their children, it is an inevitable and crucial point for them to guide their children.
> Male, Shia, above 50 years old, resident of Gorgan

> It is difficult to answer this question. The answer depends on the situation you are in. It is acceptable only if a suitable situation for probing into different religions and opinions has been provided.
> Male, Sunni, 42 years old, resident of Gonbad Kavoos

> I would dissuade him/her unless he/she makes his education and knowledge up to date and tries to familiarise him/herself completely with different ethnicities and customs.
> Female, Shia, 22 years old, resident of Gorgan

The last group stated that it is not a good idea for children to make decisions about their religion freely.

> I belong to the Sunni community. I have attempted a lot to familiarize my child with my religion, rituals and opinions since he/she has been born. Although I respect other religions completely, I won't let him/her lean towards them.
> Male, Sunni, 42 years old, resident of Agh Ghala

> I would dissuade my children from choosing other religions.
> Male, Sunni, 27 years old, resident of Agh Ghala

It seems that this group have a strong tendency to protect their religious opinions, as they do not show any desire to get familiar with others' viewpoints. In this case they defend their differences, which place them in the ethnocentric stage.

7. Discussion

Effective intercultural communication requires certain properties of both sides of the communication, i.e. the sender and receiver of the message. One important factor is that "communication subjects understand, respect, tolerate, or accept cultural differences" (Peng, 2006, p. 43). In other words, they should have empathy, the skill which enables individuals to understand the other groups' attitudes (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004). In such contexts, considering and trying to decrease intercultural sensitivity is crucial in effective intercultural communication, as lower intercultural sensitivity leads to better intercultural communication.

In this paper, we tried to find some important factors that affect cultural sensitivity. First, we measured the levels of intercultural sensitivity among Shia and Sunni groups in Golestan province in Iran. The results suggested that both Shias and Sunnis were in stage 3 of Bennett's intercultural sensitivity scale, Minimization of differences, indicating that they believe there is a basic similarity among all Muslims. For this reason, they tend to highlight their similarities rather than their differences. Although the two groups are different in some aspects, they have common principles and opinions that keep them aligned. Moreover, they believe that they would improve their society and live better together if they ignored one another's differences, by adhering to Bennett's (1986, p. 190) idea that "there are some things that are true everywhere".

The results also indicated that both groups' attitudes towards one another were similar at every stage except the first. The Sunni group showed low levels of 'Denial of differences' towards the Shia, suggesting that they have more ethnocentric viewpoints in comparison to the Shia group. Considering the situation of Sunnis in Iran, this result makes sense. In general the Sunni communities in Iran are a minority and they work hard to preserve their ethnic and religious identity. Further, they tend to protect their rituals, opinions and customs against a Shia-majority backdrop. In this case, they face a major barrier against their wish to establish effective intercultural communication. "One of the greatest sources of difficulties in intercultural relations is the belief that other cultures pose a threat to one's own culture" (Stephan, Diaz-loving, & Duran, 2000, p. 240). So, in comparison with the Shia group, they are more sensitive and also less interested in religious differences.

A significant relationship between the amount of intercultural sensitivity of the Sunni groups and their religious affiliation was found in part two, so the answer to the third research question was positive. As the results indicated, the Sunni inhabitants of Agh Ghala had the highest sensitivity levels of the sample group. Most of the population in this city are Sunni and only a marginal number of Shia people live there. For this reason, the two groups do not have the chance to develop their interpersonal communication. After Agh Ghala, the highest sensitivity level was observed in Gorgan. Having sensitivity towards others in this city should be viewed as natural, because in this city the majority of the population is Shia, who have poor interpersonal communication with the Sunnis. The lowest level of intercultural sensitivity was observed in Gonbad Kavoos, the city in which the two groups are roughly equal in proportion and in which there are more opportunities for them to develop their interpersonal communication in settings such as schools, neighbourhoods, offices, shopping centres and so forth.

The answer to the fourth question was negative and we could not find a significant relationship between the sensitivity levels of the Shia group and their religious affiliation. As we saw, the Shia group in Iran have lower sensitivity levels than the Sunni Muslims. One important reason is that more than 95% of Iranians are Shia (Pew Research Centre, 2009). Accordingly, they don't feel threatened by others and are not worried about protecting their religious identity, so that in comparison to the Sunni group their religious affiliation did not affect their attitudes towards the other group in any significant manner.

Additionally, we found a significant relationship between sensitivity levels for the whole sample, regardless of their religion and their religious affiliation. Consequently, the main hypothesis of the paper was confirmed.

The analysis of the open-ended question revealed that most of the participants who responded to the question in an ethnorelative tone were living in Gonbad Kavoos and Gorgan. On the contrary, the people who defended their differences were mainly living in Agh Ghala. It seems that, because of restricted communication levels, residents of Agh Ghala tended to preserve their opinions and were reluctant to persuade their children to probe into other religions. Over all, the results of this research demonstrated that religious affiliations in an area can affect the intensity of the intercultural sensitivity of its residents.

The Iranian Sunni community includes several different ethnicities spread across a vast geographic area. The most well known groups are the Kurds, Turkmen and Baloochis. Undoubtedly, these groups have different attitudes with respect to maintaining communication and cultural relationships with the Shia majority, primarily as a result of their different historical and cultural backgrounds. While this research has studied the relationship between Shia and Sunni Turkmen groups, it would also be helpful to study the intercultural relationships of Sunni ethnic groups living in other parts of Iran and under different cultural conditions. Moreover, future research exploring intercultural sensitivity between these two groups should investigate the stereotypes each holds about the other. Having knowledge of Shia and Sunni schemas can efficiently help scholars of intercultural studies to acquire information about their subjects' attitudes and suggest ways in which they can reduce their cultural sensitivity towards each other. Finally, it seems crucial for researchers to investigate the new communication ambience and rules governing intercultural communication between Shia and Sunni groups in virtual space on the Internet.

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