

# Case Report

## A Cross-cultural Comparison of Objectivity in Childhood Games: Iran and the United States

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### ABSTRACT

Games have been introduced as a means for studying cross-cultural differences and societies. This paper presents a case study in analogous games played by children in two different countries with two different cultures – Iran and the United States. Four examples are presented to demonstrate that games played by Iranian children are subject to less objectivity in their rules. Therefore, nonobjectivity may be a phenomenon that has roots in the society and the many differences between the two societies may very well be the results of this fundamental difference. If the presence of objectivity in childhood game rules could be, in actuality, indicative of objectivity in social and civil interactions in the everyday lives of the people, the direction of causality remains to be established. In other words, it remains unclear whether the games influence the culture or are influenced by the mandates of the society.

**Key words:** *Cross-cultural study, games, objectivity*

### INTRODUCTION

While the objectivity and nonobjectivity of rules have been discussed and pondered on in many ways and from many aspects, there is reason to propose further implications for the subject of objectivity in sociological settings. The ‘objective law’ has already found its place on the cornerstone of the modern society, as Rand<sup>[1]</sup> put it: ‘That which cannot be formulated into an objective law, cannot be made the subject of legislation – not in a free country, not if we are to have a government of laws and not of men’. In another instance, Rand<sup>[2]</sup> claims: ‘An objective law protects a country’s freedom; only a non-objective law can give a statist the chance he seeks:

A chance to impose his arbitrary will’. Even for those who are not devoted followers of objectivist theory, such a hypothesis is by no means inconceivable; a thorough examination of the objective rules throughout various authoritative bodies will demonstrate to some extent the grounds of this claim. By this means, objectivity has become a main prerequisite for most regulatory processes.

What is interesting, however, is that a closer observation will provide us with a reason to believe that nonobjective rules maintain roots that delve deep into the culture of the people, rather than simply express a preference of a governing system. Even before laws are implemented and internal organizational regulations are written, the nonobjectivity of rules lies in plain sight within the body of the society itself.

Governing laws are yet only one aspect of objectivity. The mere realization of differentiating objective and nonobjective, or semi-objective, in the heart of a society can be the entire difference between developing and developed, or between traditional and modern.

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Although the dichotomy of objectivity and nonobjectivity (or perhaps subjectivity) may be philosophically questionable, for the purpose of evaluating the hypothesis, I will refer to a ‘hard science’ definition of objectivity: A phenomenon for which observer agreement is maximal, or, in other words, observer variance is minimal.<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, a reasonable interobserver reliability could be considered here as acceptably objective.

This paper presents the differences in analogous games played by children in the United States and Iran in order to exemplify a profound fundamental difference between the two societies.

## CASE REPORT

### Dodgeball vs Vasati

Dodgeball is a game that American children are quite familiar with and consists of two teams restricted to their own side of the court, trying to hit opponent team members with one or numerous balls. The winner is the team that eliminates all opponent team members either by hitting them with the ball or by making a successful ‘catch’ on an opponent throw. Once the ball hits the ground, it is considered ‘dead’: Neither will it eliminate players by hitting them nor can it be used to make a catch.

Of the same familiarity in Iran is the game of *Vasati*, which can be translated as ‘in the middle’. The game has similar concepts but is played without a certain team winning ultimately. Two lines are drawn on two sides of a field. One team is randomly chosen as the defender and must stay within the field. The other team – the offenders – must stay outside the field boundaries. The offensive team will attempt to hit the defensive players with one or numerous balls. The defensive team must dodge the balls to attempt getting eliminated or catch the balls before they hit the ground. If they successfully catch the ball, an eliminated team member returns to the game, and if no player is eliminated at the time, the catch can be saved for later, so when a player is hit, he or she will not be eliminated. When all players are eliminated, the teams change places.

The odd part is that when a ball hits the ground, it is not ‘dead’. The defensive team can no longer catch it, but it can still result in the elimination of the player it hits. The obvious loophole in the game results in the common strategy of always throwing the ball to the ground first and anticipating hitting players on the subsequent bounces. By this means, the offensive team never gives away the advantage of getting eliminated players back into the game. The more troublesome side of this loophole is that when a ball lands and stops

inside the field, by objective rules, no one can pick it up. The offense cannot enter the field, and defense should be eliminated when they touch it.

The problem is resolved nonobjectively by the fact that when this occurs, the defense returns the ball to the offense whenever the ball slows or stops in the middle of the field. In other words, the ball is considered ‘dead’ when the subjective perception of the players regards the ball as ‘no longer able to eliminate anyone’.

### Table tennis

In official table tennis games, the first serve is determined randomly. In unofficial games, however, it is common to ‘volley for serve’. This includes throwing the ball into play and having the person who wins this point deliver the first serve.

Throwing the ball into play can create a slight advantage for one of the players, depending on how it is thrown and how the throw is answered. To counter this advantage, rules may state that the ball must change hands three to four times. This will, in effect, ensure a game play stage in which no one has an advantage over the other.

In Iran, this rule is interpreted as such that for a ‘volley for serve’, it is not allowed to use a ‘smash’. What the exact definition of a ‘smash’ is, however, depends on the players’ perception: When the ball speed seems high for one of the players, he or she may claim a foul.

### Half-court basketball

In half-court basketball – either one-on-one basketball or team basketball – for most cases in the United States, a ‘clearing point’ is designated. The game is played in a way similar to full-court basketball, with the exception that the half-court is actually considered the court of the defending team. Therefore, if the defending team takes possession of the ball, they cannot immediately score but must retreat to the clearing point (usually the half-court line, and in some cases, the three-point boundary). Once they retreat to the clearing point, the court becomes that of the opponent and the team can score freely.

In Iran, in many cases, the game is played without the clearing rule or without understanding of its applications. The problem that arises from such playing is when the ball is thrown toward the basket, and the defenders significantly influence its direction of flight. When a score is made, it is in most cases subjectively called as a score for the offending team – the person who made the throw, and not the defect. All cases are not as simple; for example, if the ball curls the rim of the basket and a member of the defending team pushes

it in, it may not be clear whether the ball would have entered without the assistance or not.

### Hide and seek

Hide and seek is played in many variants in every country. The most common variant in the United States is a combination with 'tag', where the person who is 'it' must find and tag hiding players. The person who is tagged first is 'it' in the following round. The hiding players can be 'safe' by reaching home base before they are tagged.

Another variant does not include the chasing and tagging but relies on finding the players. In this version it is not usual to include a mechanism for becoming 'safe'.

In Iran, it is usual to play a variant in which the players are supposed to be found and claimed to be seen by saying 'suk-suk' instead of tagging. In contrast, they can become 'safe' by returning to home base and saying 'suk-suk' first. Because this game relies on the subjective act of 'seeing' instead of 'tagging', it is somehow awkward in the sense that there is no proof that the person has been seen or found, as the only measure for this is the subjective claim of the seeker. In addition, the seeker may resort to staying at home base and calling *suk-suk* by guessing the whereabouts of the hiding players without actually finding anyone.

## DISCUSSION

Ever since the pioneering article by Roberts *et al.*,<sup>[4]</sup> games have become a ponderable subject to those interested in defining fundamental differences in cross-cultural studies. The work of Roberts *et al.*<sup>[4]</sup> introduces games, for the first time, as cultural phenomena carefully reflecting needs and perhaps occult characteristics of the society that creates or embraces them.

Many others have since demonstrated the usefulness in studying games<sup>[5-8]</sup> and the implications for modeling the societies they dwell in on the basis of a range of theories stemming from various fields from psychoanalysis to natural selection. The main theme of most studies, as was the original study by Roberts *et al.*,<sup>[4]</sup> is to classify games by certain specifications and compare societies by the prevalence of each type. The current paper, however, attempts to highlight the fundamental differences in a number of similar games between two cultures, which, the author believes, can be as revealing in nature.

For example, Roberts *et al.*<sup>[4]</sup> made the claim that the type of games that appear in society reflects the needs of that society and could be as expressive as art forms; strategic games are related to social complexity, chance

games are related to religion, and physical games have a correlation with the physical skills and demands, or geographical location of the people. This is in accord with the hypothesis that games are a means of developing skills that would increase the individual's social status and probability of surviving.

The same can be said about the case studies in the current report; if one is to live in a society where objective rules govern, it may be advantageous to have practiced exercising play in such an environment. In contrast, it may be advantageous to learn how to play differently in a society where negotiating, cooperating, begging, sweet-talking, threatening, and bribing can prove useful. Of course, the very opposite may also be true; if there is an association between objective rules in games and the society, it is not clear whether the direction of causality is such.

The case may be not that these skills are taught because they are necessary for success; it may be that because they are taught, they become prevalent. The children of yesterday learned the same games, and now they have become the people that decide on the governing rules; would it be unexpected if the regulations are plagued by the very same train of thought? After all, this is how the people are taught to create and implement rules. It is possible that objectivity requires learning and one who has not seen it in effect will later fail to recognize the implications of the matter.

The main bias of this and other studies in this regard is the nonobjectivity of the study itself. Few, if any, standard measurable criteria exist for studying games and the conclusions drawn from the present study may very well be premature or subject to bias of the personal experiences of the author. However, such observations, even though they are only observations, are of profound importance. If the claim could be sustained, many cross-cultural differences could be explained. Political negotiations that tend to go awry and become incoherent for both sides could have roots in this very fundamental difference in perspective. Concepts such as legitimate, freedom, authoritative, totalitarian, and human rights all depend on the interpretation of objectivity.

The realization that this misconception of objectivity could originate not from the governing system but from the body of the society itself – from the general population – is the key to many issues in politics, sociology, and psychology. If the hypothesis that game rules maintain less objectivity in less-developed countries is given consideration, the conclusion of maintaining a lesser understanding of objectivity in the society is inevitable. This is independent of the direction of causality; whether nonobjectivity is

transferred from the society to games or from games to the society, it can be assumed to be a profoundly intrinsic characteristic of the society.

Therefore, the presented hypothesis is a subject well worth further consideration, and both the validation of the claim and its implications depend on future research and discussion.

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