

# American and Finnish College Students' Traits and Interactions with Their Instructors

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## Abstract

This cross-cultural investigation sought to compare American and Finnish university students' communication and personality traits (i.e., argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness) as well as out-of-class communication with their instructors. American ( $N = 286$ ) and Finnish ( $N = 113$ ) university students completed several self-report measures. The results of a MANOVA, an independent samples  $t$ -test, Pearson correlational analyses, and Fisher's  $z$  tests revealed significant cultural differences, although the relationships between students' traits and their out-of-class communication with instructors remained relatively similar in both samples.

**Keywords:** *argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, verbal aggressiveness, out-of-class communication, Finland, cultural differences, Hofstede*

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## Introduction

In recent years, communication scholars have extended the study of argumentativeness, assertiveness, and verbal aggressiveness to an intercultural perspective (e.g., Avtgis, Rancer, Kanjeva, & Chory, 2008; Croucher, 2013). Surprisingly, Machiavellianism, which is related to assertiveness and verbal aggressiveness (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998), has not been studied across cultures. In the United States, these communication and personality traits have been linked to university students' tendencies to engage in various communicative behaviors with their instructors (Mansson, Myers, & Martin, 2011, 2012; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 2006). To extend this line of inquiry, this study aims to compare American and Finnish university students' argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness, as well as how these traits are associated with students' out-of-class communication with instructors.

*Argumentativeness* is a positive communication trait that refers to people's tendencies to defend their positions on controversial issues and verbally refute the other person's position on that issue (Infante & Rancer, 1982). *Assertiveness* is also a positive communication trait (Infante, 1987) that refers to people's tendencies to defend their rights by expressing their opinions and making requests without jeopardizing the rights of others (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). *Machiavellianism*, however, is a destructive personality trait that refers to people's ability to deceive, persuade, and manipulate others for personal gain (Becker & O'Hair, 2007; Mudrack & Mason, 1995). *Verbal aggressiveness* is also a destructive communication trait (Infante & Rancer, 1996) that refers to people's tendencies "to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication" (Infante, 1987, p. 164).

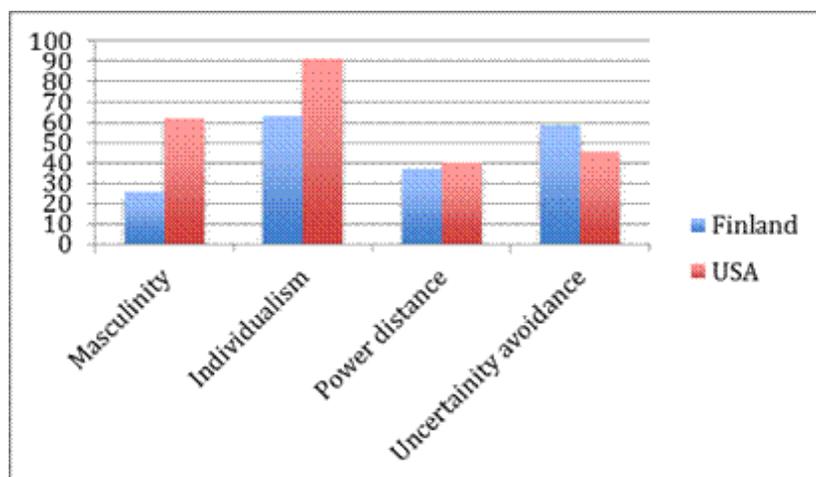
*Student-instructor out-of-class communication* (OCC) refers to structured/unstructured, non-required student-instructor interactions (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). Most student-instructor OCC is initiated by students (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003); however, students' involvement in OCC with their instructors is closely related to their communication and personality traits. Communicatively apprehensive students refrain from engaging in OCC with their instructors (Martin & Myers, 2006),

whereas academically competitive (Shimotsu, Mansson, & Myers, 2012), argumentative, assertive (Mansson et al., 2012), and cognitively flexible (Martin & Myers, 2006) students often engage in OCC with their instructors. These studies support the claim that students' traits are associated with their communicative behaviors (McCroskey & Richmond, 2006). However, people's traits are a function of their cultural background (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Thus, it is possible that not only university students' traits may differ across cultures, but also their communicative behaviors.

Hofstede's (1991) theoretical framework has been prominent in cross-cultural communication research for many years. He argued most countries can be characterized on four primary continuous cultural dimensions: masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. The *masculinity-femininity* dimension refers to the degree of competitiveness, assertiveness, and dominance expected by the members of a culture and how well defined or blurred their gender roles are. **The individualism-collectivism dimension** refers to the degree of interdependence among the members of a culture. The *power distance* dimension refers to the degree to which **the (less powerful) members of a culture tolerate power inequalities**. The *uncertainty avoidance* dimension refers to the extent to which members of a society tolerate and/or avoid ambiguous situations, if they try to control the future, and whether or not they have developed institutions and beliefs that help them avoid or manage uncertain situations (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

A comparison of the U.S. and Finland on these four cultural dimensions clearly illustrates significant cultural differences (see Figure 1). To date, however, little is known about how these cultural differences between Finland and the U.S. impact their trait-like attributes. Moreover, McCroskey et al. (1990) argued cross-cultural comparison studies are needed to enhance the generalizability of extant research findings and to reduce external validity threats to studies conducted within the U.S. One year later, Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, and Richmond (1991) concluded that, compared to American students, Finnish students perceive themselves as more competent communicators, but they are surprisingly less willing to communicate and more apprehensive about communicating. Based on these seminal studies, Klopff (1997) noted that continued cross-cultural studies are essential to the study of human communication. The emphasis on such studies has been placed on cultural variations in communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and self-perceived communication competence (e.g., Hsu, 2004). Hofstede (2001) also argued that national cultures are reflected in the educational systems and it is essential that instructors are aware of how students' cultural backgrounds impact student behaviors. This may be of particular importance to American and Finnish instructors for three reasons. First, there is an increased prevalence of foreign students studying in the U.S. (Haynie, 2014). Second, Finland continues to work to internationalize their educational system and attract international students (CIMO, 2015). Second Author, X. X. (2016) found argumentativeness and other communication traits differ between the U.S. and Finland. Similarly, Second Author et al. (2016) found that Finnish and American students differ in their self-reported emotional interest and classroom motivation, with U.S. students scoring higher. The authors asserted that U.S. students, unlike Finnish students, approach university/university classrooms more critically because: more open communication encouraged in the U.S., Finns are low-expressive in the classroom, tuition is a key motivator (there is no tuition in Finland), and in Finland egalitarianism is pushed over achievement. Third, with the increased internationalization of Finnish education it is essential to better understand the communication styles of Finnish students to help debunk the "myth" of the silent Finn. As Olbertz-Siitonen and Siitonen (2015) asserted, the "myth" of the silent Finn (Carbaugh, 2005; Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985, 1997) lacks empirical evidence. Thus, the study of Finnish communication behaviors, styles, and traits is essential to understanding Finns and Finnish culture.

**Figure 1:** *Cultural Differences Between Finland and the United States.*



*Note. High levels of masculinity = low levels of femininity and vice versa. High levels of individualism = low levels of collectivism and vice versa.*

In 2004, Hofstede and McCrae (2004) urged researchers to conduct systematic, quantitative comparison studies of trait-like attributes among equivalent samples from different cultures. Similarly, McCrae (2011) argued that researchers are “urged to respect human diversity and to question the assumption that American college students are an adequate sample of humanity. There is a moral as well as a scientific imperative to study people everywhere” (para. 1). McCrae further argued it is essential to explore trait-like attributes, which impact people’s lives, such as “health behaviors, vocational interests, creativity, political views, ... so the question of how they are shaped is crucial” (para. 8). In accordance with these recommendations, scholars (e.g., Avtgis et al., 2008; Croucher, 2013) have also argued that aggressive communication and personality traits may differ across cultures. However, even though the notion that individuals’ cultural backgrounds influence their traits (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), which in turn influence their communicative behaviors (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), is well documented within the U.S., it is unclear how cultural differences between the U.S. and Finland contribute to variations in university students’ communication and personality traits, as well as how these traits are related to their communicative behaviors. To explore these ambiguities, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1:** Is there a difference between American and Finnish university students’ self-reported argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness?

**RQ2:** Is there a difference between American and Finnish university students’ self-reported OCC with their instructors?

**RQ3:** Does the extent to which argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness are associated with OCC differ between American and Finnish university students?

## Participants

American university students ( $n = 286$ , 54.8% females,  $M_{age} = 20.45$ ,  $SD = 2.63$ ) were recruited from introductory communication courses at two universities in the northeastern U.S. The American students were first-year students ( $n = 79$ ), sophomores ( $n = 85$ ), juniors ( $n = 70$ ), and seniors ( $n = 52$ ). Additionally, Finnish university students ( $n = 113$ , 76.1% females;  $M_{age} = 23.32$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ) were recruited from introductory communication and English language courses at a university in central Finland. The Finnish students were first-year students ( $n = 24$ ), sophomores ( $n = 16$ ), juniors ( $n = 28$ ), and seniors ( $n = 45$ ).

## Procedures and Instruments

Both the American and the Finnish participants completed a questionnaire during regular class time. For the Finnish sample, the questionnaire was first translated to Finnish and then back translated to English by several people who were not associated with the study. The translators were native Finnish speakers (translation reliability = .89). In addition to the demographic items profiled above, the questionnaire consisted of five established scales that have yielded good reliability coefficients in previous studies. Table 1 contains the reliability coefficient, mean, and standard deviation for all scales used in this study.

**Table 1:** Reliability Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for the American and the Finnish Samples.

Variable	American Sample			Finnish Sample		
	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$
1. Argumentativeness***	.78	30.19	5.94	.88	31.97	6.35
2. Assertiveness	.70	27.69	5.46	.66	28.14	4.58
3. Machiavellianism***	.87	23.00	7.05	.76	18.62	4.68
4. Verbal Aggressiveness*	.72	24.09	5.39	.68	22.85	4.56
5. Out-of-class comm.	.88	24.44	7.16	.86	24.07	6.44

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### ***The Argumentativeness Scale***

This scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982) consists of 20 items that measure the respondents' tendencies to engage in argumentative behaviors. In this study, a 10-item version of the scale was used (Infante, Anderson, Martin, Herington, & Kim, 1993). Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*almost never true*) to 5 (*almost always true*).

### ***The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule***

This scale (Rathus, 1973) consists of 30 items that measure the respondents' tendencies to engage in assertive behaviors in a variety of contexts. In this study, a 9-item version (Mansson et al., 2012) of the scale was used. Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### ***The Machiavellianism Scale***

This scale (Mudrack & Mason, 1995) consists of 10 items that measure the respondents' likelihood of being deceptive and egocentric. Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### ***The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale***

This scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986) consists of 20 items that measures the respondents' tendencies to enact aggressive communication behaviors. In this study, a 10-item version of the scale was used (Infante et al., 1993). Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*almost never true*) to 5 (*almost always true*).

### ***The Out-of-Class Interaction Scale***

This scale (Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005) consists of 9 items that measure the respondents' tendencies to engage in OCC with their instructors. Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

## Data Analyses

RQ1 was explored using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Cultural background (coded as 1 = Americans, 2 = Finns) served as the independent variable; argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness served as the dependent variables. RQ2 was explored using an independent samples *t*-test in which cultural background served as the independent variable and OCC with instructors served as the dependent variable. RQ3 was explored using eight Pearson correlations followed by Fisher's *z* tests to examine if the extent to which OCC is associated with the four student traits differ between American and Finnish university students.

## Results

RQ1 inquired if there is a difference between American and Finnish university students' self-reported argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness. The MANOVA revealed a significant model, *Wilks' A* = .87,  $F(4, 388) = 14.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ , power = 1.00. Significant univariate effects were found for argumentativeness,  $F(1, 391) = 6.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ , power = .73, Machiavellianism,  $F(1, 391) = 37.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ , power = 1.00, and verbal aggressiveness,  $F(1, 391) = 4.57, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , power = .57. No significant univariate effect was found for assertiveness,  $F(1, 391) = .44, p = .51, \eta^2 = .00$ , power = .10. A comparison of mean scores (see Table 1) indicated the Finnish students reported higher levels of argumentativeness, but lower levels of Machiavellianism and verbal aggressiveness than American students.

RQ2 inquired if there is a difference between American and Finnish university students' self-reported OCC with instructors. The independent samples *t*-test was not significant,  $t(156) = .48, p = .11$ . Mean scores are reported in Table 1.

RQ3 inquired if the extent to which students' OCC with instructors is associated with their argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness differ between American and Finnish university students. The results of the first set of Pearson correlations indicated American students' OCC with instructors is related positively to their argumentativeness ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ) and their assertiveness ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ), but American students' OCC with instructors is not significantly related to their Machiavellianism ( $r = -.09, p = .15$ ) or their verbal aggressiveness ( $r = -.09, p = .12$ ). The results of the second set of Pearson correlations indicated that Finnish students' OCC with instructors is related positively to their assertiveness ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ), but Finnish students' OCC with instructors is not significantly related to their argumentativeness ( $r = .10, p = .31$ ), Machiavellianism ( $r = -.02, p = .84$ ) or their verbal aggressiveness ( $r = .11, p = .26$ ). The results of follow-up Fisher's *z* tests indicated the relationship between OCC and verbal aggressiveness ( $z = -1.78, p < .05$ ) is stronger among Finnish students than American students. No significant differences were found for the relationships between OCC and argumentativeness ( $z = .63, p = .26$ ), assertiveness ( $z = .75, p = .23$ ), or Machiavellianism ( $z = -.61, p = .27$ ).

## Discussion

This study compared American and Finnish university students' argumentativeness, assertiveness, Machiavellianism, and verbal aggressiveness, their OCC with instructors, and the associations among these variables. In support of Hofstede and McCrae's (2004) claim that people's traits vary as a function of their cultural backgrounds, the Finnish students reported higher levels of argumentativeness, but lower levels of Machiavellianism and verbal aggressiveness (VA) than the American students, but no

differences were found for students' assertiveness or OCC with their instructors. However, the relationships between students' traits and OCC with instructors remained similar across the two cultures. The only difference was that the association between VA and OCC is stronger in Finland than in the U.S.

The fact that the American students reported higher levels of VA and Machiavellianism may be a function of the elevated levels of individualism and masculinity in the U.S. compared to Finland. In individualistic and masculine cultures, people strive for individual success and achievements, and the ability to dominate and influence others are perceived favorably (Hofstede, 2001). Conversely, in feminine cultures such as Finland, aggressiveness is perceived as unproductive (Ala-Kortesmaa & Isotalus, 2014; Carbaugh, 1995; Carbaugh, Berry, & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006; Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009) and people value the development and maintenance of supportive and friendly relationships (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that American students reported higher levels of VA and Machiavellianism than the Finnish students did. However, based on this argument, it is somewhat perplexing that the American students were less argumentative and assertive than the Finnish students.

One reason why the Finnish students are more argumentative than American students may be that, in Finland, a solution-oriented form of communication is seen as the most appropriate way to communicate (Ala-Kortesmaa & Isotalus, 2014; Carbaugh, 1995; Lehtonen, 1993; Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 2011; Second Author et al., 2016; Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Thus, it is possible Finnish students are not by nature more argumentative than American students, but that their need to resolve disagreements in a productive manner contributed to their comparatively high levels of argumentativeness. Moreover, conceptual and linguistic differences of argumentativeness may also have contributed to the argumentativeness differences found between Finland and the U.S. Because the most appropriate word for "argument" in Finnish is *väittelyjä*, which refers to a positive/constructive kind of argument or debate, Finnish students may have had a more favorable attitude toward argumentativeness than the American students.

The non-significant difference found for students' OCC with their instructors in conjunction with the fact that only one significant, yet weak, correlation was obtained between Finnish students' OCC and their trait-like attributes suggest that instructor behaviors may be more closely related to students' tendencies to engage in OCC with their instructors than students' cultural background and traits. Within the U.S., researchers have established a clear relationship between a plethora of instructor communicative behaviors and students' OCC with their instructors (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Myers et al., 2005; Nadler & Nadler, 2001). Thus, similar relationships may be found in Finland, which warrants future research endeavors. In support of this argument, Zhang (2006) reported that Chinese students' tendencies to engage in OCC with their instructors are related to instructor verbal immediacy.

The findings obtained in this study are of particular importance to American and Finnish university instructors as these results may explain why some students elect to engage in OCC with their instructors, whereas other students choose not to engage in OCC with their instructors. Moreover, these findings provide an initial step for cross-cultural traits researchers in that we not only compared communication and personality traits across these two cultures, but we also examined the extent to which these traits are associated with students' tendencies to engage in OCC with their instructors. Although previous studies have compared numerous traits across cultures, those studies have not examined how traits are related to communicative behaviors across cultures, which has prevented researchers from making predictions about communicative behaviors across cultures as functions of various communication and personality traits.

As such, this investigation contributes to our understanding of cultural variations in aggressive communication and personality traits. Although researchers have examined cultural differences in argumentativeness, VA, and assertiveness, considerably less is known about the extent to which individuals' cultural background influence their Machiavellianism. Research shows Americans are less verbally aggressive than Thais (Croucher, 2013), but more argumentative than Turks (Croucher, Otten, et al., 2013). Other studies suggest Americans are more assertive than Finns, Japanese, Koreans (Thompson & Klopff, 1991), and Russians (Christophel, 1996). However, this is the first study to compare Machiavellianism across cultures. Moreover, considering the mixed results of prior cross-cultural investigations, scholars should continue to examine the interplay among culture, traits, and communicative behaviors.

One area of future research is to examine cultural differences in other student communicative behaviors, such as students' motives for communicating with their instructors. To date, it has been determined that American students engage in more relational, participatory, functional, excuse-making, and sycophantic communication with their instructors than Swedish students do (Mansson & Myers, 2009). Similarly, compared to South Korean students, American students partake in more participatory communication with their instructors (Mansson & Lee, 2014), but they engage in less relational, participatory, sycophantic, and general student-instructor OCC than Chinese students do (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2012; Zhang, 2006). A second area of future research is to explore the links between argumentativeness, aggressiveness, and the perception of silence among Finns. Instead of accepting the myth of the silent Finn, research should explore relationships between communicative behaviors, traits, and styles to see how these relate to the "myth" of silence among Finns (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015).

Beyond these directions for continued cross-cultural investigations, this study also is indicative of four limitations. The first two limitations are the fact that the samples consisted of only university students and that the Finnish sample was relatively small (i.e.,  $n = 113$ ), which limits our ability to generalize these findings to other populations. The third limitation is that the cultural dimensions (i.e., masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) were not assessed separately. As such, this study does not reveal any insight into the extent to which each of these cultural dimensions is associated with students' traits and communicative behaviors. Thus, it may be more appropriate to assess these variables rather than simply relying on Hofstede's theoretical framework in future investigations.

The fourth limitation is the low reliabilities for the VA (.68) and the assertiveness (.66) scales in the Finnish sample. One possible reason for the low reliabilities is the item wording (Boyle & Harrison, 1981), which did not translate perfectly from English to Finnish. Relatedly, although these two scales are treated as unidimensional measures, they have been found to be problematic in prior studies. Factor analyses of the VA scale often result in two or more factors, with positively and negatively worded items loading on separate factors (Croucher, DeMaris, Turner, & Spencer, 2013). Similarly, the factor structure of both the 30-item and the 9-item versions of the assertiveness schedule have been questioned (Mansson et al., 2012; Plax et al., 2001). Thus, the low reliabilities for the VA and assertiveness scales may have contributed to the limited relationships obtained between these variables and student-instructor OCC in the Finnish sample. Thus, scholars should replicate Avtgis et al.'s (2008) cross-cultural factor analysis study to gain further insight into conceptual and operational differences across cultures.

This study contributes to a continuously growing body of cross-cultural traits research. In addition to examining argumentativeness, assertiveness, and verbal aggressiveness, which have been studied in prior cross-cultural studies, this study also compared Machiavellianism across the two cultures. Moreover, this study advances extant research about the relationships between traits and communicative behaviors. With a few exceptions (e.g., Mansson & Myers, 2009), little is known about the association between students' traits and their communicative behaviors outside of the U.S.

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