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# CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

*Edmund W. Gordon*<sup>†</sup>

If one were to advance as the ultimate standard of morality the prohibition of inhumane and exploitative behavior, one would, no doubt, outlaw war, poverty, capitalism, female and male circumcision, and capital punishment, as well as both geographic and economic colonialism. However, the problems with universal prohibitions involve definition and compliance. As horrible as many of us in the West might consider the practices and consequences of these several candidates for prohibition, gaining consensus around their definition as inhumane and exploitative would be difficult if not impossible. Extending such consensus worldwide would be even less likely. Without such universal consensus coupled with economic, educational, and social intervention, the expectation of worldwide compliance would be unreasonable. Professor Obiora aptly quotes Nakajima on this point.<sup>1</sup> Obviously human behavior may be constrained, even coerced, by laws, but it tends to proceed on the basis of beliefs and custom. Obiora argues that efforts at controlling and changing current practices of female circumcision must go beyond moralistic condemnation and legal prohibition, if the humane ends behind some of these efforts at control are to be achieved.

Obiora wisely recognizes that the various forms of female circumcision are deeply grounded in cultural identity and cultural practice, and that this groundedness must inform any effort at controlling or preventing the practice.<sup>2</sup> In the light of these in-

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1. L. Amede Obiora, *Bridges and Barricades: Rethinking Polemics and Intransigence in the Campaign Against Female Circumcision*, 47 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 122 (1996).

2. See Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 28-34, 115-42.

sights her program of intervention is a rational one, but is at most ameliorative. Of possibly greater significance is the fact that her interventions, perhaps appropriately, do not fully respect the argument with which she begins the paper. If we are to fully honor the integrity of cultural diversity and cultural identity, who has the right to change their modes of expression? If these cultural forms are to be modified, who defines the nature of the education and clinicalization by which they are changed? Obiora chooses to privilege a standard appropriate to modern, technologically advanced cultures. I think I agree with her. Her conclusions and suggestions for intervention are culturally comfortable for me, but they are epistemologically irritating because her solutions are insufficiently accommodative of extant cultural variations.

Every culture seems to legitimize its own conveniences as well as its own sins, stupidities, and transgressions. With increasing cultural, economic, and political globalization, inconsistencies and contradictions between factors that are to be universally legitimized become highlighted. In practice, the achievement of some universal standards thus becomes a question of who has the power of specification. Why is female circumcision more heinous a crime than is capital punishment, capitalist exploitation, or the waging of aggressive war, except for the fact that the latter three practices are legitimized by the technologically and economically dominant societies of the world? Why do we not mount social initiatives to prohibit war, to make illegal government sanctioned murder, and to eliminate the privilege of profit making over the serving of human need?

At the core are questions related to the intersections between culture, human behavior, and the structures of social control and domination. We recognize culture as a pervasive and ubiquitous cause and product of human behavior. The origins of complex human behavior are rooted in cultural experience. Yet the cultures that produce human behavior are themselves the products of human activity. In the course of the production of culture, particular cultural forms achieve hegemony within specific communities and across communities that share similar spacial, temporal, and valua-tive existences. What enables the achievement of hegemony is the power to control and dominate distributions of power, resources, and status. It is this power to determine cultural currency that also influences behavioral maintenance and behavioral change. It is for these and other reasons that Obiora asserts the critical role played

by cultural practice and cultural identity in the persistence and change of a cultural form like female circumcision.<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists and anthropologists such as Cole, Gay, Glick, and Sharp, have concluded that regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, or class differences among human groups, there are no corresponding differences in cognitive and affective processes.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is held that the basic processes of mentation in the human species (such as association, recall, perception, inference, and comparison) are common. It is the prior experiences, situations, and meanings that form the context for the development and expression of these processes. Because experiences, situations, and meanings are culturally determined, the quality of the development of a process, the conditions under which it is expressed,<sup>5</sup> and even our ability to recognize its manifestations is dependent upon cultural phenomena that are often mediated through ethnic, gender, or class identity.

Obiora's discussion of the cultural importance of female circumcision provides an example of the importance of discussing the culturally embedded nature of human experience and its meanings. We have tended to frame our conceptions of being placed at-risk, or of vulnerability to risk factors or abuse, within values derived from the hegemonic culture. Practices which are aberrant within that frame are thought of as negative or traumatic. What we have not accounted for in this conception of at-risk status is the fact that many of the individuals who may experience the most severe stressors do not report psychological or social dysfunction.<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Rollock, and Miller have suggested that threats to the integrity of behavioral development and adaptation may exist along a continuum, with the degree of threat better defined by existential meaning than by "reality" factors; the individual's reaction to the threat may depend upon the actual perception or the connotation that is permitted by the context in which the phenomenon is experienced.<sup>7</sup> Obiora reminds us that despite the actual complications

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3. See *id.* at 115-42.

4. See MICHAEL COLE ET AL., *THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING AND THINKING* (1971) (comparing the performance of American and Kpelle (Liberian) children on tests of cognitive skills).

5. See *id.*

6. See Paul F. Biting et al., *Philosophical and Conceptual Issues Related to Students at Risk*, in *STUDENTS AT RISK IN AT-RISK SCHOOLS* 17, 27-30 (Hershot C. Waxman et al. eds., 1992); Edmund W. Gordon and Lauren D. Song, *Variations in the Experience of Resilience*, in *EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE IN INNER-CITY AMERICA* 27 (Margaret Wang and Edmund W. Gordon eds., 1994).

7. See Edmund W. Gordon et al., *Coping With Communicentric Bias in Knowledge*

and problems sometimes associated with the worst practices of female genital mutilation, the practice does serve cultural and social purposes, and the avoidance of the practice is associated with negative consequences for the uncircumcised person and her family.<sup>8</sup> Barbaric and irrational as the practice may appear in one cultural frame, in another frame the practice meets criteria for rationality.

Culture is a construct with a wide variety of definitions and conceptions. Some authors have sought to distinguish between material and non-material aspects of culture. Belief systems, attitudes, and attributions are examples of non-material culture, while tools, skills, and artifacts serve as examples of material culture. We hold however, that at its core, culture is responsible for all human behavior. That is, when we speak of culture, we are speaking of both the cause and the product of human affect and cognition.

Geertz and Tyler are among those who have provided us with widely accepted indices and definitions for culture.<sup>9</sup> In his perception of culture, Tyler included knowledge, beliefs, art, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,<sup>10</sup> while Geertz viewed culture as an "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols . . . by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."<sup>11</sup> We see, then, an effort to discuss culture in terms of objects or tools as well as language and shared conceptual schemata. In joining these perceptions of culture, we can derive five fundamental dimensions of the construct:

- (1) The judgmental or normative dimension is a reflection of society's standards and values, which often provides the constraints within which thought is facilitated;
  
- (2) The cognitive dimension consists of categories of mentation (such as social perceptions, conceptions, attribution, and connotations) that are often expressed through language;

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*Production in the Social Sciences*, EDUC. RESEARCHER, Apr. 1990, at 14.

8. See Obiora, *supra* note 1, at 23-25, 131-32

9. See Clifford Geertz, *Religions as a Cultural System*, in *THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES* 87 (1973); RALPH W. TYLER, *BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION* (1949).

10. See TYLER, *supra* note 9.

11. Geertz, *supra* note 9 at 89.

(3) The affective dimension refers to the emotional structure of a social unit and its common feelings, sources of motivation, and so on;

(4) The skill dimension relates to those special capabilities the members of a culture develop in order to meet the demands of their social and techno/economic environment;<sup>12</sup> and,

(5) The technological dimension refers not only to different or more highly developed technological practices, but, more importantly, it refers to the impact of the different information inherent in these practices on cognitive and affective behaviors.

These dimensions serve to emphasize those characteristics by which a culture may be identified or by which the culture of a group may be characterized. It is in this descriptive definition of culture that we begin to see the reference points for one's social or group identity, as well as the experiences that provide a context for one's conception of one's own (as well as others') patterns of behavior.

The function of culture in human activity, however, does not end with its role as a descriptive concept. In addition to providing the referents for group identity, culture also provides the stimuli and the consequences of human behavioral patterns. Thus, culture also serves as an explanatory construct. As mentioned earlier, when we discuss cultural information in terms of description, we are articulating the status phenomenon of culture, and in general are referring to the social identity of individuals,<sup>13</sup> the group to which the individual belongs, as well as describing the effect of this identity on an individual's access to resources. When we seek to explain behavior, however, and discuss the influence of one's personal identity, the group to which one feels that one belongs or with which one identifies, we begin to wonder how particular language and belief systems, specific objects and tools, not to mention

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12. See JOHN U. OGBU, *MINORITY EDUCATION AND CASTE* 201-12 (1978) (discussing the relation of skill development to employment opportunities).

13. See IRVING GOFFMAN, *STIGMA: NOTES ON THE MANAGEMENT OF SPOILED IDENTITY* (1963) (describing the social dynamics of relationships in which a personal characteristic perceived as a flaw is a significant factor).

technological advances, influence or enable the behavior of individuals who experience them. When we examine ways of thinking, such as linear and sequential thought, the tendency to generate abstractions, field dependence or independence in one's perceptions, social connotations, or technical taxonomies, as well as allowable metaphors, we become aware of culture as a vehicle for cognition. Ultimately, culture provides the constraints within which affective and cognitive manifestations of mentation are enabled.

Furthermore, culture serves as a mediator for learning in two fundamental respects. According to Vygotsky's notions of cognitive development, learning occurs within social interaction.<sup>14</sup> That is, in contrast to the Piagetian conception of self-constructed knowledge, Vygotsky argued that the development of higher psychological functions is rooted in children's primary social interactions.<sup>15</sup> Learning, under the cultural/historical theory of behavior, consists of three fundamental activities: transmission of knowledge and cognitive skills, cultivation of cognitive abilities, and the encouragement of these cognitive abilities. According to this conception, knowledge in one's culture is socially transmitted by adults and capable peers to children. The adult or capable peer, in joint activity, serves as a role model or expert tutor on a task that allows for cognitive processes to be demonstrated and then practiced and learned. New cognitive abilities emerge as the adult works with the child on tasks that may have originally been too demanding for the child. As the pair work in collaboration, with the adult providing encouragement as well as appropriate feedback, the child gradually begins to take on the responsibility of the task. While initiating the activity within the child's "zone of proximal development," with time, the adult begins to remove support as the child becomes more competent at the task.<sup>16</sup> Crucial in this process are the shared cultural experiences and identities of the adult and child. It is in this form of social scaffolding that we see the mechanism for growth and development in emergent affective and cognitive functioning.

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14. See L. S. VYGOTSKY, *MIND IN SOCIETY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES* (Michael Cole et al. eds., 1978) (translating and organizing material originally written in Russian between 1930 and 1939).

15. See *id.* at 79-91.

16. *Id.*

We cannot overstate the importance of an individual's group and personal identity in the social interaction that comprises the learning process. A human characteristic, perhaps secondary only to status and functional characteristics, is one's sense of self, mediated by culture, which provides the fuel for the social interaction inherent in learning behavior. It is not only through cultural encounters that human cognition develops, but it is also through these same social interactions that we begin to recognize our identity. Culture provides the reference points that allow one to recognize oneself not only in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, but also to acknowledge that one is separate from others. It is this complex sense of self that one brings to the classroom, that must in turn be met and integrated into the dynamic culture of the learning environment in order for optimal development to occur. This interaction between self and the learning environment is dialectical in nature. Not only will the learning process enable one to grow and change in fundamental ways, but one's development will clearly impact on the culture of the learning environment.

We have discussed the impact of culture on what one does and how one does it. Similarly, we have also addressed the manner in which culture frames as well as enables one's feelings and thoughts concerning what one does. The question arises, however, by what mechanism does culture serve as the vehicle and context for human activity? This question can be answered across several levels of understanding; biological, psychological, and social. We will begin at the biological, cellular level and work our way up to the arena of social institutions.

Work in the field of cell assemblies and synaptogenesis provides new perspectives on the interrelationships between neural activity, experience, and behavior. Specifically, Hebb has discussed a model for understanding the relationship between brain function and experience.<sup>17</sup> Neural cells differentiate, and, based on experience, associate with each other as "cell assemblies." While a single cell may associate with several assemblies, under appropriate stimulation, specific assemblies are activated.<sup>18</sup> It is possible to argue, then, that it is culture that provides the stimuli and the context through which experience actively shapes the organization of brain

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17. See D. O. HEBB, *THE ORGANIZATION OF BEHAVIOR: A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY* (1949).

18. See *id.* at 69-74.



cells. Further, with respect to reinforcement, it is certainly culture that serves to give meaning to the overt expressions of behavioral products of these cell assemblies, meanings, and reinforcements, which in turn allow the behavioral products to become established patterns of behavior activity.

In addition to the association or differentiation patterns of cells, the density of synaptic connections is also fundamentally determined by experiences during the late pre-natal and early post-natal periods of development.<sup>19</sup> During the process of synaptogenesis, synaptic connections are first over-produced, followed by a later period of selective degeneration.<sup>20</sup> Greenough has theorized that experience, in its role as activator of neural activity, is responsible both for the organization of synapses, as well as for the selection of which synapses will degenerate.<sup>21</sup>

Greenough further advanced a theory of experience-expectant and experience-dependent processes to account for the relationship between synaptic connections and experience.<sup>22</sup> Briefly, the experience-expectant theory hypothesizes that relevant or normal experience results in normal neural activity that in turn maintains typical synaptic connections.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, an absence of experience or atypical experience may lead to irregular synaptic connections. In Greenough's second theory, the experience-dependent hypothesis states that specific neural activity, which results in the formation of synapses, is the result of new information processing on the part of the organism.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear, then, on the biological level, that a dynamic interaction exists between the environment and human development. This is also true for the interaction between social institutions and human behavioral patterns. Socio-cultural context is mediated through institutional structures as well as personal interaction. This socio-cultural context, in the form of family, religious institutions, schools, and the like, provides the stimuli (for example values, norms, skills, and technological devices) that form the organization of cognitive and affective behavior in much the same way that

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19. See William T. Greenough et al., *Experience and Brain Development*, 38 *CHILD DEV.* 539, 541 (1987).

20. See *id.* at 543.

21. See *id.* at 539-43.

22. See *id.* at 540.

23. See *id.* at 540-46.

24. See Greenough et al., *supra* note 19, at 540, 546-51.

experience shapes synaptic connections. It should be understood, however, that the relationship between culture and social institutions is a reciprocal one. The relations between education and culture serve to exemplify the dialectical nature of change. Our educational system exists as a subset of our broader social context. Over the course of time, our society has moved to embrace the concept of education for all citizens. In turn, however, this educated citizenry is now capable of creating tremendous change within our culture.

On the micro level, the experience of the socio-cultural context is mediated through personal social interactions. It is here, in teaching interactions that take the form of social scaffolding, that learners develop a system of knowledge structures and affective cognitive skills that are congruent with the values, beliefs, and conventions of their socio-cultural group. The interaction between learner and significant other is premised on reciprocity. While it provides the learner with the opportunity to develop personal attributions, dispositions, and motivations to behave in essentially appropriate ways, the growth of the learner creates new demands on the tutor.

Ultimately, it is the social institution that may come to replace, or function in parallel with, the significant other, both as a source of reinforcement and a vehicle for the normative dimensions of culture. It is through the processes of assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation of schemata that cultural transmission occurs. Schematization then is the mechanism by which conceptual structures come to represent cognitive, conative, and affective components of phenomena experienced. In accommodation, then, the acquisition and replication of stimulus/response/situation triads are related to existing schemata, while, in adaptation, the existing schemata or emerging conceptual frames are adapted to the demands of currently perceived or changing conditions. Behavior change that occurs outside of such accommodation and adaptation tends not to become a stable and internalized part of the learner's repertoire.

Thus it is that Obiora challenges the polemics and intransigence in the campaign against female circumcision. It is clear that she finds the abuses and excesses associated with the practice as unacceptable as do many of the most vocal opponents. However, her well-reasoned position is both protective of the broader and long-term interests of the females upon whom the custom is practiced and respectful of the cultural/economic and social contexts in which the practice is maintained.

In this commentary I have sought to bring to the support of her position some of the insights from the intersection between our growing knowledge of culture, pedagogy, and psychology. What is left unaddressed in the original paper and this commentary are issues related to personal choice and the political economy of female status. With respect to choice, there are the problems associated with culturally and parentally imposed decisions. In too many instances girls and women cannot be said to have free and independent choice with respect to the practice of circumcision. Rather the choice is imposed upon them by the pressure of custom and/or parental preference. Free choice is further complicated by the status of women and the political economies by which such inferior status is imposed. So long as the control and abuse of females and their bodies serve and/or complement the political and economic arrangements of societies that practice female circumcision, moralistic polemics and legalisms will contribute little to the elimination of the practice.