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Adolescent and adult reasoning about gender roles and fairness in Benin, West Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examined reasoning about gender roles in a traditional society in Benin, West Africa. Ninety-seven male and female adolescents and adults evaluated conflicts between a husband and a wife over gender norms to determine whether gender norms, are judged to be moral or conventional. Although most attributed decision-making power to the husband, justifications and evaluations that supported challenges to traditional gender roles indicate that social roles were seen as alterable conventions. In addition, concerns with punishment of one spouse were associated with endorsing the other spouse as decision-maker, indicating that endorsements of authority may be coerced. Very few age differences were found, indicating that adults are not more enculturated into an acceptance of hierarchy than adolescents. However, adults were more likely than adolescents to perceive coercion.

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Concepts of rights, justice and welfare are held by children, adolescents, and adults across a wide range of cultures (Turiel, 2002). Yet most, if not all, cultures include some social traditions that can be characterized as at odds with these moral constructs, especially in the perpetuation of male dominance and female subordination, although there exists wide variation across cultures. How does growing up in a context in which males are in positions of greater authority than females affect reasoning about gender equity?

Some cultural psychologists suggest that growing up in a hierarchical culture leads to an acceptance or even a valuing of hierarchy through a process of enculturation, where hierarchy is judged to be the best system for the good of the group as a whole (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). For example, Shweder et al. (1987) state that “hierarchy protects the

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vulnerable from exploitation, while rewarding the powerful for caring for the weak” (p. 79). Some cultural psychologists have gone further to suggest that authority practices are not just valued; they are judged part of a moral code that also includes traditional gender roles more broadly conceived (Haidt & Joseph, 2008; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997).

In contrast, some developmental psychologists suggest that hierarchy may not be valued or considered part of a moral code, even when children grow up within a hierarchical tradition. Research from a social domain perspective demonstrates that the moral domain, consisting of rights, justice and welfare, is developed by people around the world, including in countries with a tradition of gender hierarchy—for example, in China (Yau & Smetana, 2003); in Nigeria (Hollos, Leis, & Turiel, 1986); and in Zambia (Zimba, 1994). In fact, concepts of justice are applied even to local traditions of male entitlement (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994).

The present study examines whether growing up in a culture with gender hierarchy leads to a valuing of traditional gender roles to the degree that they are judged to be part of a moral code. From a social domain perspective, issues of authority and gender roles are not part of the moral domain, but are conventions (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Laupa, Turiel, & Cowan, 1995). Conventions are defined as culturally variable components of social systems. For example, girls but not boys wear barrettes, but this is seen as alterable; it could be acceptable for a boy to wear a barrette in some cultures. Roles regarding authority are also variable. For example, in some cultures, mothers, not fathers, decide what is to be eaten for dinner, but this arrangement is also alterable. Moral issues are not seen as alterable. For example, it is not acceptable to harm an innocent person in any cultural context.

Thus, the moral and conventional domains are distinguished by their *alterability*—the idea that a different context cannot change a moral principle (Turiel, 1983). Conventional concerns, in contrast, are variable and can be altered in a new context. The present study examines whether gender norms are regarded as alterable and thus meet the criteria for being conventional. *Justifications* also differ for moral versus conventional concerns. Moral justifications make reference to non-culture specific consequences which involve rights, justice or welfare. Conventional justifications refer to culture-specific ways of doing things. In the present study, it was expected that judgments about authority would be based on conventional justifications, and judgments in support of the welfare of the family would be based on moral justifications.

Finally, the possibility of *enculturation* was examined by investigating whether adults are more entrenched in cultural traditions of hierarchy than adolescents. Cultural psychology models of morals as being culture-specific (Shweder et al., 1997) might predict that adherence to cultural norms would increase with more socialization. However, previous research has found minimal age differences between adolescents and adults in judgments about gender equity (Neff, 2001). In addition, the ability to distinguish between the moral and conventional domains is well established by adolescence, and social domain theorists would not expect age differences in the ability to distinguish the two domains.

The question of whether gender norms are judged to be moral or conventional in a traditional culture has important implications. Gender norms regarded as conventional and alterable imply a stronger possibility of movement toward equitable relations between the sexes. If people around the world can apply ideas regarding justice even to entrenched cultural traditions like gender hierarchy, then striving for equity could come from within even very traditional cultures. The present study examines these issues in Benin, West Africa, a region that is often characterized as collectivistic (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002) and hierarchical (United Nations Human Development report for Benin, 2007).

In addition to the main goal of determining whether gender norms are judged to be moral or conventional, there were three other goals of this research. The first was to examine how moral and conventional issues are weighed when they are in conflict. Issues of gender hierarchy involve both conventional issues of social roles and moral issues related to rights, justice and welfare. Some research has examined conflicts between conventional authority and morality. Studies in an Arab community in Israel (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994), in India (Neff, 2001; Shweder et al., 1987), and in Colombia (Mensing, 2003) show that adolescents and adults often endorse traditional male authority, even in cases where there are moral consequences including unfairness. In fact, Wainryb and Turiel (1994) found that women often endorsed male entitlement, even while they called it unfair. Thus, in the present study it was expected that participants would sometimes privilege male authority over concerns with fairness. However, even when conventional concerns take precedence over moral concerns, they are still

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