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## ***Culture: a neglected factor in social norms research and practice***

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Since 2000 the frame of reference for my work in public health has been a cultural lens and a focus on social norms and social norms change. My cultural perspective can be explained on the one hand, by my interest and study in the fields of anthropology, community development, social work, transcultural nursing, community psychology and most recently indigenous psychology, all fields that view individuals as embedded in family, community and cultural systems. On the other hand, I have been involved in community level research and program evaluations on MCH and RH issues primarily in Africa, but also in Asia and Latin America and through that work I became increasingly aware of and concerned with what I view as a gap between cultural context and health development policies, research and interventions.

The past few years, especially through our relationship with the USAID funded PASSAGES Project and the Institute of Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, we have been more directly involved in the *social norms community*. This has been an occasion to understand how social norms are viewed in programs and addressed in the social norm literature. Both myself and my African colleagues have continuously been surprised that many discussions, frameworks and publications on social norms (produced by many international organizations) pay little or no attention to the relationship between social norms and culture. Perhaps this omission can be attributed to the fact that often those discussing and publishing on social norms come from disciplines that give limited attention to cultural parameters such as: behavioral and clinical psychology; epidemiology; and demography.

### **Global concern for the cultural dimension of development**

At the global level, for at least the past 30 years there has been discussion of the link between culture and development. In 1982, a world conference on cultural policies was organized by UNESCO in Mexico City where it was concluded that "Culture constitutes a fundamental dimension of the development process" (1982, p.2). Concerned with the absence of attention to culture in global development efforts, in 1992, World Bank Vice-President, Seragelin, from Egypt, organized a forum on Culture and Development in Africa. In his keynote speech he advocated for a cultural framework for development that gives attention to countries and communities cultural identity and values (1994). The Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner, the late Wangari Maathai, maintained that Africa's cultural values and heritage constitute a resource that is necessary for sustainable development.

More recently, in the development of the SDGs, a large coalition of organizations from the Global South asserted that there can be no sustainable development without promoting cultural values and identity and they proposed that "culture" should be one of the central pillars of sustainable development. They argued that "culture is both a driver and an enabler of sustainable development". Unfortunately, they did not succeed in having their proposal accepted. These examples demonstrate

the longstanding and growing concern that cultural identity and resources should be taken into account in all development efforts.

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## **Culture: a missing piece in global health**

In the field of global health and development the need for research and programs to give more attention to culture is increasingly heard. Concerned with inadequate attention to cultural parameters in public health research and programs in the US, an expert panel assembled by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) produced "A Cultural Framework for Health" (2014) wherein they assert that culture is the least defined and tested variable in health research.<sup>1</sup> In the Social Science & Medicine article based on that work, Kagawa-Singer and colleagues (2016) contend that culture is the missing link in health research. While they recognize that there is no consensus on the definition or facets of culture, they assert that "All human behavior is culturally informed" (p. 237) and while their discussion focuses on the US context, that confirm that this precept has global relevance:

*Culture is an essential pan-human process for survival and well-being that enables us to interpret the worlds in which we live through beliefs, attitudes, practices, and spiritual and emotional explanations that we use to create norms of ways of being in social institutions that codify these norms. (p.242).*

Concerned with cultural diversity in the US, the NIH panel members express concern with the ethnocentric orientation of most health research that clashes with the increasingly varied cultural demographics in the US. They critique the fact that "concepts of human behavior, assumed to be universal, are developed from western cultural norms that are quite ethnocentric" (p.237) e.g. based on Euro-American perceptions of reality. Kagawa-Singer, et al. refer to the important paper by Henrich et al., (2010) based on extensive analysis of the ethnocentric orientation in social science research at the global level "that reflects and mimics the structure and values of western societies."

### **The link between culture and health-related social norms**

There are numerous definitions of culture. Many of them related to health refer to knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP), beliefs, traditions, rituals, etc. of specific groups. Specifically in the US, behavioral and social psychology have had a big influence on health education and communication research which focuses primarily on investigating these aspects of culture which mainly involve cognitive level factors.

The vast majority of research dealing with different public health issues concerning women, children and adolescents, focuses on the cognitive dimensions of the health issues studied, e.g. child nutrition or child marriage. Reflecting this orientation, many conceptual frameworks, research methods and tools focus on assessing KAP.

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<sup>1</sup> NIH report, A Cultural Framework for Health is the result of 18 months of work by 30 experts from seven disciplines — psychology, anthropology, medicine, nursing, psychiatry, public health and sociology — who worked together to develop a consensus definition of culture and recommendations on how to more accurately apply it in health research.

In our programs, we refer to the dual-pronged concept of health culture proposed by Hazel Weidman, an American medical anthropologist at the University of Miami (1988). She identifies two facets of health culture related 1) to the cognitive and conceptual structure; and 2) to the social system in which health issues are embedded. In her schema, the *cognitive dimension* refers to KAP, values and beliefs related to specific health issues. The *social system dimension* refers to family strategies, roles of family members, influences, health-seeking patterns, social networks of relationships that influence health status and health behavior. Weidman asserts that understanding health-related behavior “requires that individual behavior be understood within the context of health culture from both a cognitive and a social system point of view” (p. 272). And she maintains that there is an intimate relationship between health-related behaviors, the social systems in which they are embedded and the norms which are products of those culturally constructed social contexts.

## The origins of social norms

I have always wondered why I have found little discussion in the social norms literature of the origins of social norms and how they are communicated within family and community systems. , From our work in West Africa related to traditional norms that support child marriage or FGM/C, for example, based on various studies carried out in our program and also from comments from community members during group activities and interviews, we see a clear link between cultural traditions and social norms. This observation relates to the second facet of Weidman’s construct of health culture which refers to the context, or social system in which different family and community members use their authority, especially elders, to perpetuate social norms.

Regarding the origin of social norms, the following text was written by my colleague, Mamadou Coulibaly, in January 2021.

### ***A contribution to the Challenge Dialogue Session on Social Norms (Jan 2021)***

*In African societies that I am familiar with, social norms related, for example, to marriage, FGM and family planning are embedded in the culture. They are defined by elders and passed down from generation to generation. And it is the elders who are responsible and who are the moral authority to ensure that these norms are respected. Our communities, whether urban or rural, are carefully structured and are hierarchical with elders, adults and young people. For many matters related to the life of the society including marriage, FGM, pregnancy, maternal and child health and family planning, the norms are defined by the elders. For all of these matters, decision-making is collective, not individual. Rules and roles are well-defined and strategies are developed by elders to support the development and growth of young people.*

*Young people learn from elders and elders take pleasure in playing this teaching role given their objective which is to pass onto to young people a stable society. Social norms are shared by the members of the community and, therefore, in more collectivist societies like ours, changing norms requires collective change.*

*As an African, it is these norms that nurture our collective spirit of interdependence and responsibility to the groups of which we are a part. People’s identity is defined by the social ties that bind them together. In this context, the individual is obliged to conform to the group norms while at the same time he/she enjoys the support of the members of the group.*

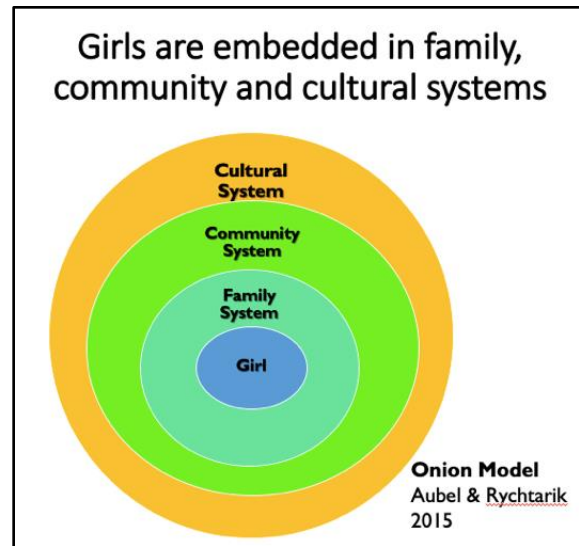
*Mamadou Coulibaly  
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## The cultural system and social norms that affect adolescent development

Much of the literature on social norms suggests that social norms are rooted in individual perceptions and rational reflection and decision-making within individuals' reference groups. The 2020 article by anthropologists Edberg and Krieger is one of the few that critiques the individual-centered notion of social norms. These authors argue that the prevailing constructs of social norms are decontextualized insofar as they give limited attention to the wider social and cultural environments in which individuals are embedded. They assert that norms are manifestations of "the deeper structure of power, meaning or social representation" (p.6) that characterize specific cultural and social contexts.

As regards the origins of such age-old social norms, the idea that they are culturally embedded, supported by the work of both Edberg & Kreiger (2020) and Weidman (1988), the Onion Model visualizes how we see this relationship. While nowadays many are using concentric circles to suggest a more ecological view of individuals in social contexts, it is curious that few of these diagrams include the cultural system, or layer. Girls' embeddedness in the onion, surrounded by family, community and finally cultural systems, clearly suggests that: girls have limited autonomy to think and do as they like; there are multiple categories of people around them with values, attitudes, expectations, practices, etc. that they transmit to girls; the social norms regarding acceptable and unacceptable

behaviors are transmitted to them by multiple family and community actors. The basic onion construct exists in all societies, however, in non-western, more collectivist cultures, where there is a hierarchy according to age and gender, and where elders' status and experienced is more valued, the pressure on girls to conform is greater. From a systems perspective, the efforts of an adolescent girl to change the norms affecting her life, for example, those related to child marriage, will invariably be met with resistance from other actors within the family and community systems surrounding girls who support this age-old practice. From a systems perspective such conflict is to be expected and implies that sustainable change requires change in the attitudes of those other family and community actors who are part of the social context in which girls are embedded.



## The power of values and social norms in individualist and collectivist cultures

As stated above, the onion phenomenon exists in all cultures, however, the relationship between individuals embedded in the onion, and others in the several systems around them differ significantly in *individualist* and in *collectivist cultures*. Early research on these two types of cultures, on a continuum between individualist and collectivist cultures, was reported on by Geert Hofstede (1980), who was both a sociologist and anthropologist. The fundamental difference between these two types of cultural contexts concerns the relationship between the individual and the group. The differences between the two have been described in various ways including:

- Individualist cultures emphasize the "I" versus the "we" in collectivist cultures (Prilleltensky, 2019).

- Collectivist describes societies in which tightly-integrated relationships link extended families and others into in-groups where there is undoubted loyalty and support to each other when a conflict arises.
- Independence vs. interdependency
- Conformity vs individuality and creativity

Hofstede's *Cultural Dimensions Theory* catalyzed development of a new research tradition in cultural psychology (1980). Social psychologist, Kim and colleagues (2008), explain that one of the main contributions of cultural psychology has been to categorize fundamental cultural differences between two types of societies, individualist and collectivist, where relationships between the self and others contrast significantly. They summarize the distinctive characteristics of individualist and collectivist cultures and state that those differences reflect different cultural expectations and norms.

In individualist cultures such as the US, the dominant model of the self-views the self as independent and regards a person as possessing a set of self-defining attributes, which are used to take action in the expression of personal beliefs and the achievement of personal goals.

In collectivist cultures, such as in many parts of Asia, the dominant model of the self-views the self as interdependent, regards a person as a flexible, connected entity who is bound to others, and considers the group goals a primary personal beliefs, needs and goals as secondary (2008, p. 519)

The more recent and extensive discussion of these differences is in the seminal paper by Canadian psychologists Henrich and colleagues (2010) on 'The weirdest people in the world'. Based on their analysis, approximately 88% of all societies are categorized as collectivist and includes non-western societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, The Pacific as well as indigenous people in North America (Native Americans and First Nation people in Canada), in Australia and New Zealand, constituting The Majority World. The remaining 12% of the world's population, referred to as both the western and Minority World, is more individualist, with the US being the most individualist country in the world according to the research conducted by these psychologists.

Specifically related to adolescent development, Herbert Friedman, the former Chief of Adolescent Health and Development at WHO, pointed out the differences between more "communal" and "individualist" cultures and signaled the need to culturally contextualize adolescent programs. He warned against basing adolescent programs on a "Western framework for human development" (p.1) In his seminal article "Culture and Adolescent Development" (1999) he states that "cultures differ with respect to what they may value most and what they expect from their adolescent children of each sex" (p.2). He expressed concern with the implicit western, individualist values, conveyed through adolescent programs, which clash with those of more communal cultures in non-western countries. He contended that there is a "need to reassess the basis of adolescent health promotion" (p. 1) of international organizations in order to adapt them to cultural values and context.

What are the individualist values that Friedman and others refer to that are related to adolescent development and to the social norms that affect the behavior of both adolescents themselves and others around them? Based on the work of various academics in the fields of anthropology, cultural and indigenous psychology, and also on our own work with communities in West Africa over the past 15 years, we constructed the following table that presents key contrasting characteristics of individualist

and collectivist cultures (Marcus & Kitayama, 1998; Hofstede, 1980; Kagitcibasi, 2007; Henrich et al., 2010; Kim, 2002)

<b>Key differences between individualist and collectivist cultures</b> (that all relate to adolescent development and well-being)	
<b>Characteristics of individualist western societies</b>	<b>Characteristics of collectivist, non-western societies</b>
Independence and autonomy are highly valued.	Interdependency and connectedness are highly valued.
Young people become independent from their families	Young people maintain close relationships with their families
Young people are focused on their own activities and interests.	Young people have responsibilities toward their families.
Young people like to express their individuality.	Young people prefer to conform to the social groups they are part of rather than to be different.
Individual decision-making, agency and action are encouraged.	Collective decision-making predominates and individual decision-making is frowned upon.
Nuclear families predominate and ties with extended family members are weaker.	Multigenerational families predominate and individuals have stronger ties with extended family members.
Innovation, youth and the future are valued.	Family and community history are valued, as are the ancestors.
There are ageist, or negative, attitudes toward elders and the past.	There is respect for the knowledge and experience of elders. Younger family members are expected to follow their advice.

In efforts to understand and to promote change in adolescent-related social norms in non-western contexts, we believe that it is imperative that these parameters be taken into account. In our assessment, most adolescent programs either explicitly or implicitly promote many of the individualist values listed in the table above. For example, Friedman discusses the fact that many adolescent programs focus primarily or only on adolescents and do not systematically involve families in cultures that accord great importance to family relationships and traditions. Unfortunately, there are few researchers or practitioners in the adolescent field, like Friedman, who have drawn attention to the fact that adolescent programs in the collectivist Majority World are based on individualist western values that clash with those of the non-western Minority World (Kagitcibasi, 2007).

In the field of gender studies, there is also a critique from some feminists in the Global South vis-à-vis hegemonic western feminist thinking and calling attention to the prevalence of Euro-American individualist values that clash with the more communal values of the Global South (Oyewumi, 2002; Soetan, 2001). In a discussion of gender values conveyed through the literature on girls' education programs, Fennell & Arnot (2009) (University of Cambridge) contend that "The gender scholarship in education...has been part of the one-way traffic that leaves Western Europe and North America without having been influenced by insights from other cultural traditions" (p.3). These scholars call for the design of girls' education strategies to be decentered from the metropole in order to escape the egocentricity and individualism of Northern feminism echoes the wider call for decolonization in global development.

In terms of future research on social norms related to adolescence, and in light of current discussions regarding the need to decolonize and contextualize health and development programs (Abimbola &

Pai, 2020), we believe that the prevailing conceptual and methodological frames need to be revisited through a cultural lens. As we see it, future research and interventions related to adolescent health and wellbeing will be incomplete if cultural context is not well-understood and systematically taken into account. We do not have a clearly defined framework on exactly how this should be done but we hope that the suggestions that we have made in this note will be relevant in developing such a framework.

## Concluding thoughts from Prof. Barbara Rogoff on inclusion of culture in social science research

One of the prominent scholars who has written extensively on culture and human development is Prof. Barbara Rogoff, at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her work bridges psychology and anthropology. She contends that in many areas of the social sciences there is a need for greater attention to culture.

Cultural research offers scholars the opportunity to reconceptualize their understanding of how things work. This requires...building across disciplinary traditions. In particular, we need to include research that attempts to build cultural understanding of human development by examining how cultural aspects of individual and community functioning mutually define each other in integrated, multifaceted processes. (p.224)

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