



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Cognitive Development



The right to literacy and cultural change: Zulu adolescents in post-apartheid rural South Africa[☆]



Kathryn Day^{*,1}

University of California, Berkeley, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Moral development
Human rights
Literacy
Cultural practices
Cultural change

ABSTRACT

This study examined the conceptions of the right to literacy of rural Zulu adolescents in post-apartheid South Africa. Its aim was to investigate the development of human rights in a traditional society during an era of historic change. Adolescents in three age groups ($N=72$, mean ages 11-1, 15-9, and 18-9) endorsed the right to literacy in principle. In nine conflict assessments involving the preservation of culture, parental authority, and gender roles, participants supported the right to literacy (64–100%), but also maintained traditional values of respect and duties of elder care. Twenty-four percent proposed novel concepts integrating the right to literacy with indigenous practices such as family decision-making processes. These findings suggest that conceptions of rights and collectivistic values need not be antagonistic. It is argued that analyses of the ontogenesis, cultural practices, and historical settings of conceptions of human rights are integral to resolving questions of universality.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

[☆] This research was submitted in partial fulfillment of the doctoral degree requirements for the University of California, Berkeley. Some data were presented at the Jean Piaget Society Conference in Park City, Utah, June 2009, and at the Jean Piaget Society Conference in Toronto, Ontario, CA, in June 2012. My thanks to Elliot Turiel and Geoffrey Saxe at UC Berkeley, and my appreciation to the Family Literacy Project in South Africa, its director, Lynn Stefano, and the translators, Florence Molefe, Joyce Ndlovu and Nathi Khanyile.

* Correspondence to: 3074 Bateman Street, Berkeley, CA 94705. Present address: 432 N. Market St., Salem, VA 24153.
Tel.: +1 510 705 8797.

E-mail address: kthrynday@gmail.com

¹ Graduate School of Education, Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

1. Introduction

Human rights were assigned universal status by international consensus in response to the atrocities of the Second World War. Yet, whether human rights are understood and valued across cultures remains in dispute. “Non-Western” countries such as India and South Africa contain many tribal societies whose ethical systems sometimes conflict with generally accepted human rights (Armstrong et al., 1995; Kaime, 2005). Little is known about how members of these groups appraise their rights. There is disagreement, with implications for philosophy, political science, and cultural and moral psychology, over whether conceptions of human rights are native to these groups or imposed upon them (Bielefeldt, 2000; Helwig, 2006; Sen, 1997; Shweder, 2012). Cognitive developmental psychologists can contribute to answering this question by investigating conceptions of human rights in traditional groups in their transition to rights-based democratic systems. Accordingly, this paper concerns the developing concepts of the right to literacy of rural South African Zulu adolescents, members of the first post-apartheid generation. I examine their appraisals of principles that define the right to literacy, along with their judgments of conflicts between the right to literacy and their cultural values and practices.

Are rights part of the non-Western world? Many cultural theorists dispute their legitimacy outside the West, arguing that rights contradict key values in the worldviews of Africans and Asians. They assert that a culture’s position on an individualistic/collectivistic continuum frames the cognitions and emotions of its members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 2001). Rights exemplify an emphasis on the autonomous individual that is antipathetic to the core belief of collectivism – namely, that the needs of the self should be subordinated to those of the community (Miller, 2005). Collectivistic cultures, when exposed to Western values, undergo a global change toward individualism (Haidt, 2012; Kitayama, Conway, Pietromonaco, Park, & Plaut, 2010), eroding their original position along the individualistic/collectivistic continuum.

Other variations on cultural determinism include pluralistic theories in which one type of morality predominates in any given culture (Haidt, 2012; Jensen, 2008). According to one tri-partite theory (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997), the Ethic of Autonomy includes the well-being of individuals, fairness, and rights; the Ethic of Community, duties to others, customs, and group welfare; and the Ethic of Divinity, spirituality. Rights are more salient in Autonomy-based cultures such as the US and Northern Europe than in Africa and Asia.

By contrast, social domain theory, a cognitive-developmental perspective, includes psychological conceptions of rights in a moral domain with a developmental pathway distinct from social conventions (Turiel, 1983). In this view, conceptions of rights develop similarly in non-Western and Western cultures. Supporting this premise, high proportions of both Mainland Chinese adolescents and adolescent Druze Arabs in Israel endorse conceptions of rights (Lahat, Helwig, Yang, Tan, & Liu, 2009; Turiel & Wainryb, 1998). Culture plays a role in the degree to which rights are subordinated to local values such as authority, but this also depends on context and on the particular right involved.

The political concept of human rights arose in a particular historic context. We therefore ask whether the contexts of history and cultural practices also pertain to the psychology of human rights. Data were collected in 2008 in South Africa, just as the first generation of post-apartheid students were preparing to leave school. This was therefore an unusual opportunity to learn something about the interplay between adolescent moral development and traditional social practices in an era of historic transition. Adolescents come to understand the alterability of social conventions and their purpose in facilitating social interactions (Turiel, 1983). Given their knowledge of both indigenous and modern worlds, adolescents in cultural transition may aspire to reform traditions in line with their aims for the future (Erikson, 1968). To examine this possibility, I use a developmental cognitive-historical framework (Saxe, 1999, 2012; Saxe & Esmonde, 2012) to make at least preliminary interpretations.

This study draws on previous research taking a constructivist perspective on conceptions of rights and cultural change. In two rural Zulu communities, I examined conceptions of the right to literacy, a critical requisite for social and economic growth in the developing world.

The first prediction for this study, based on social constructivist theory and in contrast to cultural psychological theories, was addressed through questions about the right to literacy in abstract terms. It was predicted that the right to literacy in the abstract would be endorsed by most respondents, and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/916509>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/916509>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)