

Understanding Collectivism and Female Genital Cutting Through a Family Role-Playing Exercise

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This study is a test of the effectiveness of a classroom role-playing exercise used to increase the understanding of cultural practices with which many Midwestern college students are uncomfortable. I employed a pre-test/post-test comparison group design. Students enrolled in two sections of a general education global issues course ($N = 56$) were asked about their perceptions about, and explanations for, the existence of female genital cutting in Egypt (the country they were studying). One section discussed the issue during a PowerPoint presentation, and the other section participated in an exercise in which they role-played family members deciding whether a daughter or sister would undergo the procedure. A comparison of post-test responses demonstrated increased understanding in both sections, but students in the experimental group better understood the collective implications of the practice on the entire family.

Can role-playing help students better understand why some cultures practice female genital cutting (FGC)? Students enrolled in a general education course at a mostly racially and ethnically homogenous state university in the US Midwest were required to play the roles of family members trying to decide whether or not a daughter would go through with FGC. Through this experience, students were expected to gain a deeper understanding of the controversial issue and how the practice affects more than just the individual females who are cut. They were required to contemplate the consequences of not going through with the procedure and the social and economic factors affecting those family decisions. Results show that student understanding of FGC did improve after the exercise, but more importantly, students were able to recognize the collective implications of a family's decision to require a daughter or sister to experience the controversial procedure. Hopefully, by increasing student understanding of a cultural practice many misunderstood and might even view as objectionable, ethnocentrism toward that culture as a whole was decreased.

Previous Research

The controversy over female genital cutting (FGC) is due in part to misperceptions about who is involved in the decision to participate in the ritual and the consequences of that decision for all actors. Thus, it is important to provide students the information about the individuals and organizations involved in the debate. That was the ultimate goal of the exercise and class discussion. As Kratz (1999) found, most students require additional information about the health, cultural and moral as well as human rights issues pertaining to FGC. In addition to not knowing anything about FGC, previous research shows that most students in the United States find it difficult to overcome their

individualist cultural perceptions while considering all of these issues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986). Because they cannot see outside of their individualist cultural lenses, students find it difficult to comprehend why anyone would agree to participate in something that not only poses health risks, but also affects such a personal part of one's body and life.

People from individualist societies focus on one's own interests and needs. Those from collectivist cultures consider the context of their needs within the interests of their "in-groups" (Hofstede, 1986, p. 307). Many African countries, including Egypt, have been classified as containing mostly collectivist cultural traits (Hofstede, 1984). Important life decisions—whether to marry, whom to marry, which jobs to take and more—are made based upon the consequences such decisions might have on the identity of other group members or the group as a whole. As Bellah et al. (1985) found, students in the US tend to focus on the individual rights, health concerns or issues of self-determination with less consideration of the consequences of actions on their families or communities. Additionally, there is a tendency to view women in less developed countries as having little choice in their lives (Kratz, 1999) or that FGC is "degrading" to women or a form of "torture" (Nnaemeka, 2005, p. 30). It is difficult for many students in the United States to understand how FGC is a choice that establishes women's identities within the context of their culture and community (Lionnet, 2005; Ntarangwi, 2007).

Discussing FGC is unavoidable in any course in which cross-cultural differences between the United States and any of the Northern African countries are examined. In the general education course I teach, one of the assigned readings is *Global Sociology* (Schneider & Silverman, 2009), which contains a chapter on Egypt and, inevitably, a discussion of FGC. My goal was to discuss FGC in class in a way that allowed students to begin to put aside their ethnocentrism on this issue.

Role-playing is a common teaching technique used in social science courses. In particular, setting up hypothetical family groups is useful in developing deeper understandings of issues that families face (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2005; Koropecj-Cox, Cain, & Coran, 2005). "Role-play allows students to develop and expand their understanding of family emotions, dilemmas, dynamics, and diversity in ways not possible through didactic instruction alone" (Browning et al., 2005, p. 4). Through role-playing, students not only increase their understanding of an issue because they must take the role of the other, they also increase their empathy toward people who must face similar problems (Browning et al., 2005).

I tested whether a role-playing activity in which students were required to take on the roles of family members deciding whether to have FGC performed on a daughter and sister would improve their understanding of this very complex issue. Through role-playing, students were hypothesized to better understand the cultural and demographic contexts of FGC. Additionally, such an exercise enhanced students' comprehension of the collective decision that families make about what is usually perceived as such a personal act.

Description of the Study

In order to test whether this role-playing exercise increased students' understanding of this cultural practice, I employed a comparison group, pre-test and post-test design. I administered a set of pre-test open-ended questions asking students to write short essays that allowed me to assess their knowledge and understanding of female genital cutting and why it exists (see Appendix A). Once students completed either the instructor-led presentation and discussion (in the control group) or the role-playing and discussion (in the experimental group), they were asked to write short essay answers to the same questions used in the pre-test in order to assess whether their understanding of FGC had changed.

The samples of both groups included undergraduates at a Midwestern state university enrolled in two sections of a general education course. The student population at the university was 89% White, non-Hispanic and 58% female. The experimental group—the group asked to role-play—consisted of 33 students enrolled in one section of the course. The control group consisted of 23 students enrolled in a second section of the course. Because this was a general education course, students with majors from all three colleges of the university were represented, and students from all levels of education (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) were in the sample. I received approval from the university's

Institutional Review Board in order to conduct the in-class experiment.

During their 85-minute class periods, the experimental and control groups were both provided relevant information about Egypt, along with descriptions of the most common type of FGC in Egypt, explanations of the societal functions of the procedure and the risks involved. Specifically, as a class and led by the instructor, they discussed information provided in a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation and discussion for both groups, were based upon material in their assigned readings and illustrated how male unemployment and women's increased educational attainment and participation in the labor force have contributed to gender role conflict and increased concerns about marriageability. Both sections discussed how there is a belief that FGC purifies a girl, and that an adult woman who is not cut is viewed as unclean or unfeminine, but that ultimately the concern is that men prefer to marry women who have been cut, so uncut women are possible burdens on their families (Schneider & Silverman, 2009). Both sections discussed the health and psychological risks of FGC, and how, as outside non-governmental groups (NGO's) brought more attention to those risks, beliefs about the cultural value of FGC became more entrenched (Slackman, 2007).

Those enrolled in the section of the course treated as the experimental group were asked to break into groups of three or four students and were required to assign family roles (mother Mina, father Yussef, 15-year-old son Hassan, and young daughter Nafre) to each member. They were asked to decide whether or not Nafre would go through with the procedure, using the demographic and employment data provided to them as a base for their decision. They also had to consider how their decision would affect Hassan, Nafre's older brother (see Appendix B for the exercise instructions). Hypothetical characters of this family were introduced in the textbook, *Global Sociology: Introducing Five Contemporary Societies* by Schneider and Silverman (2009), so if the students had completed the required readings, they were familiar with their stories already. I added to their story by introducing other family members and additional background information.

Once the students made their decision, they were asked to report that verdict and their rationale with the rest of the class. After the class discussion students were asked to read a short *New York Times* article (Slackman, 2007) about female genital cutting in Egypt.

Students enrolled in the section treated as the control group were given the same chapter in the textbook (Schneider & Silverman, 2009) and *New York Times* article (Slackman, 2007) to read and that same PowerPoint presentation to discuss, so the only

difference between the two groups was that the control group did not participate in the role-playing exercise.

I compared answers to the short essay question between the control and experimental group and before and after the role-playing and the discussion. Specifically, I read through each of the written answers and conducted a qualitative content analysis. Since the answers were rather short and concise, there was really only one noteworthy difference in the themes that emerged. Students in the control group mentioned individual consequences of FGC, while students in the experimental group mentioned consequences of FGC for the family as a collective.

This exercise was also used as an assessment tool for one of the learning outcomes for this particular general education course, so I scored each essay on a scale of 0 to 5. A score of 0 indicated no understanding of female genital cutting, and a score of 5 indicated a thorough understanding of the issue which included what it was, the justifications for the practice, who makes those justifications, the consequences of not undergoing through with the procedure and the implications of outsiders getting involved in the issue.

Results

Analyses of the scores awarded to the pre-test and post-test answers students provided in both the experimental and the control groups showed that both methods of teaching about FGC were effective (see Table 1). Mean scores on the post-tests improved for both groups, and scores in the post-tests were not significantly different. One issue was that a few of the students in the role-playing group exhibited a significant and slightly better understanding of FGC in the pre-test. The course can be counted as an elective in the Anthropology minor, so a few students might have read about and discussed FGC in other classes.

Upon reading students’ answers to the questions about FGC, it was obvious that before the role-playing exercise or lecture and discussions a majority of the students had no knowledge about or understanding of FGC. At the end of the classes, all but five students in

either the control or experimental groups expressed improved comprehension of the issue. Those five students’ answers to the pre-test questions demonstrated a basic understanding of FGC, indicating they had probably either discussed this issue in previous courses or had read the assigned readings ahead of class time (something the rest of the students obviously had not done).

Pre-Test Understandings of FGC

Pre-test answers to the questions, What is female genital cutting? What are the justifications for this practice and who makes those justifications? What happens to girls if they do not undergo this procedure? What are the implications of outsiders getting involved in this issue?, often demonstrated no understanding (these questions were used as part of the General Education Assessment for this course in 2010-2011). For example, one student simply wrote, “I don’t know anything about female genital cutting in Egypt.” Another wrote, “The cutting of the female sex organ known as the clitoris. I’m not certain as to what the justifications are and who makes the justifications.” Before the class exercise, lecture and discussions, many students believed the reason for FGC was to prevent sexual pleasure among women. For example, one student wrote:

It’s a procedure that prevents women from having premarital sex. I think the justification has to do with making sure the women are kept “pure.” I have no idea who justifies this, possibly their religion. If they don’t undergo it they could be shunned from society. When outsiders get involved it becomes a hot debate topic because many cultures view this as cruel and barbaric.

This common response suggests that to these students, decreasing sexual desire is a manifest function of the practice, despite the fact that their assigned readings explained that decreasing sexual desire is understood to be a latent function amongst Egyptians who support it (Schneider & Silverman, 2009).

Table 1
t-Test of Mean Scores on Answers to Questions About FGC

	Pre-test score (SD)	Post-test score (SD)	<i>t</i>
PowerPoint/discussion, control group (<i>N</i> = 23)	1.13 (1.100)	1.88 (1.269)	-2.291*
Role-playing/discussion, experimental group (<i>N</i> = 33)	4.13 (.757)	4.06 (.747)	.342

Note. Test scores are on a scale from 0-5.

**p* ≤ .05.

Many students also believed that the justifications for FGC were religious-based, specifically a requirement of Islam: "Female genital cutting is the cutting of the clitoris. This is done as an Islamic religious sacrifice. They (women) are shunned if they do not undergo the procedure." Of course, as they learned through the exercise or presentation in class, as well as through their assigned readings (Schneider & Silverman, 2009), the practice is common in northern African countries, but is not specifically Muslim.

Post-Test Understandings of FGC and Collectivism

After participating in either the role-playing exercise (experimental group) or the lecture (control group) and discussions (both), more students were able to correctly describe what FGC is and why it is practiced. However, there were important differences between the post-test answers provided by students in the experimental and control groups in terms of their descriptions of who justified FGC and why. In the post-test, students in the control group correctly explained what FGC was, why it was performed, what happened if girls do not go through with it and when outsiders get involved. For example, one student wrote:

Female genital cutting is when a female has most if not all of her clitoris removed. The justifications for this practice are that it will make the woman more pure and make sure she doesn't have sex until marriage. If they do not undergo the procedure, they will be less attractive to men and find a hard time finding a husband. When outsiders get involved it sometimes just makes the issue worse because the Egyptians want to preserve their culture.

However, like the majority of students in the control group, this student did not correctly identify who justifies the practice. Most simply mentioned "the culture" or "society" as the source of justification. For example, one student wrote, "You have a higher chance in finding a husband because it makes you look pure. The society makes those justifications. It is passed on from generation to generation."

Post-test answers from the control group were missing an important element. They did not express an understanding of the implications for the procedure on the collective identity of the family within their community. They obviously recognized how girls were affected individually in terms of their personal identities, maintaining their purity and chastity and increasing their likelihood of marrying. However, students in the experimental group, those who had to take on the roles of family members who had to decide

together whether or not a daughter or sister in the family would experience FGC, expressed a deeper understanding of the implications on the family collectively. For example, one student who completed the role-playing exercise wrote, "The parents decide whether the cutting is done. If the girl doesn't do it she is seen as impure and a disgrace to the family." Another wrote,

In Northern Africa, it is justified by everyone in the family who wants young girls to be seen as pure and available for marriage. If not done, it is seen as a dishonor to your family, and these girls are considered not available for marriage.

The answers provided by the students who took part in the role-playing exercise were more complete and expressed an understanding of the collective implications of the procedure. For instance,

Female genital cutting is the removal of the clitoris and labia. The justifications for this practice (as justified by the young girls' parents) include making the girl more pure and more marriageable. If girls do not undergo this procedure they are viewed as impure and less likely to be married. Also, dishonor is brought to the family if the girl does not get the procedure. If outsiders get involved in this issue, it makes supporters of the procedure fight harder to keep it around.

Answers from students who did the role-playing were less likely to focus on individual consequences of not participating in the cultural practice of FGC and more likely to recognize the justifications within the context of the collective identity of the family within the community or culture. Since both the experimental and control groups were presented and discussed the same information about the explanations, justifications and risks associated with FGC, differences in responses could only be attributed to whether or not the respondents participated in the role-playing exercise.

Discussion

The topic of female genital cutting is difficult to discuss, especially among college students coming from an individualist society. It is very difficult for students who are pursuing higher education as part of their personal goal of individual achievement to understand collectivist implications. It is ironic that the thought of having such a private part of a woman's body surgically removed in order to appease cultural and societal expectations is foreign to most college students in the

US, despite their own efforts to adhere to norms of appearance and achievement. Overcoming individualism is extremely difficult, and I doubt one role-playing exercise changed their perspective completely. However, role-playing a family's decision about FGC helped overcome individualistic thinking on this topic simply by putting students in the position of discussing the implications for everyone in the family, not just the daughter or sister of focus.

The role-playing exercise proved to be effective in developing a deeper understanding of the cultural practice and in helping students overcome, at least for one class period, their individualism. Students who played the roles of family members trying to decide whether a young female in the family would go through with the procedure expressed an understanding of the collective implications of the practice. Students in the control group, who discussed the topic throughout a PowerPoint presentation focused on the implications of the practice for the girl only. Role-playing helped students overcome their individualism.

Of course, with any exercise, there might be difficulties. In larger classes, it is more difficult to scrutinize whether or not the students are indeed conducting role-playing and not just discussing the topic of FGC and reinforcing each others' discomfort with the practice. Therefore, it is necessary to move around the room and listen in on students' conversations during the exercise. Instructors might need to redirect any groups that are not following the instructions or reinforce correct information about FGC.

I did expect students to be uncomfortable with this topic. I expected there to be a lot more resistance to discussing it in class than I experienced. However, I believe that allowing students to take on the role of *the other* permitted them to discuss it more objectively. In other words, they all knew that they were discussing the viewpoints of fictional family members, so any discomfort could be deflected onto those characters and not each other personally.

As stated earlier, this family role-playing exercise could be useful in any course in which FGC is discussed. In fact, family role-playing could be used to help students understand the collective implications of any important decision usually viewed as an individual choice in United States culture. Decisions to marry, have, adopt and raise children, divorce, change jobs, move or make an important purchase, could be discussed from the viewpoints of each family member in order to demonstrate how everyone is affected somehow. Besides a general education course on global issues, such decisions could be discussed in any social science or humanities course in which collectivism is

presented. Using role-playing in order to require students to take the perspective of someone with any alternative viewpoint than what they usually take can be useful. Although students are not always excited about or comfortable with role-playing, this tool continues to be useful in facilitating deeper understandings of social and ethical issues.

One concern might be that with the little information and experience of trying to think like an Egyptian family member, students might be inclined to believe they have full understanding of the culture and what life is like to live within it. An instructor who uses role-playing in this manner would also have to go keep an eye out for such arrogance. Overall, I believe that the potential gains of role-playing outweigh such a risk. While the specific goal of this exercise was to increase their understanding of FGC and collectivism, the main objective is for students to realize that a cultural practice they had originally viewed as strange or irrational had a practical or rational explanation. In other words, requiring students to look through cultural lenses different from their own, by taking the role of the other, can decrease ethnocentric beliefs.

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Appendix A
Pre-Test and Post-Test Questions for Assessment

What is female genital cutting?

What are the justifications for this practice and who makes those justifications?

What happens to girls if they do not undergo this procedure?

What are the implications of outsiders getting involved in this issue?

Appendix B
Exercise Instructions: A Family's Decision

You are a rural farming family living in Bisat, at that edge of Egypt's western desert. Assign the following roles:

1. Yussef: 42, husband, father, farmer, part-time factory worker
2. Mina: 40, wife, mother, farmer
3. Hassan: 15, son, brother
4. Nafre: 13, daughter, sister

Important background information:

- There is no land in Bisat for Hassan to eventually take over and farm on his own, and on which to raise his family.
- "Every year 1.2 million people enter the labor force for the first time and half of them cannot find jobs (Schneider and Silverman 2010: 235).
- This affects Nafre's aspirations too. Her father's sister's son (her cousin Lalu) had been chosen for her as a marriage partner because Lalu's father was able to purchase an acre of land for him to farm in the future.
- However, because of his "fortune" he is a very desirable marriage partner and there are many other families (many relatives) hoping to establish a marriage contract with him and his family.

Your family must now make a very important decision. Should Nafre undergo female genital cutting?

1. What are the risks and benefits of this procedure?
2. What are the risks and benefits of NOT undergoing this procedure?
3. What factors (religious, economic, social, health, or others) did you consider when making your decision?
4. How does this affect Hassan, directly or indirectly?

Hold a family meeting and discuss this decision. What did you decide? Why?