



Understanding “Harmful Cultural Practices”

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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Interest in the norms and behaviors which underpin violence against women and girls has increased in tandem with global commitments to women’s empowerment.

In March of this year, we organized a two-day [interdisciplinary workshop, Understanding ‘Harmful Cultural Practices’ at UC Santa Barbara \(UCSB\)](#). Funded by the College of Letters and Science and the [Broom Center for Demography](#), the workshop brought together evolutionary anthropologists with scholars from across the social and health sciences to foster new dialog about both the origins and drivers of so-called harmful cultural practices, and the design and impact of intervention strategies.

The term “harmful cultural practice” has been used by the international development sector since the 1990s to refer to normative behaviors in low-income populations deemed inherently harmful to women and girls. Most commonly, the term is used with reference to female genital cutting (FGC), “child marriage” and intimate partner violence (IPV), but occasionally is extended to dowry and bridewealth payments, polygynous marriage, and son-preference.

Interest in the norms and behaviors which underpin violence against women and girls has increased in tandem with global commitments to women’s empowerment. In some instances, controversial intervention programs have been implemented and met with resistance.



Panel discussion on female genital cutting. Left to right: Gerry Mackie, Karisa Cloward, Mhairi Gibson, and Kathryn Yount. David Lawson

Anthropologists have long critiqued attempts from the development sector to shift gender norms, highlighting ethnocentric bias and culturally-insensitive approaches. Evolutionary anthropologists have more recently begun to consider how we might make sense of seemingly harmful behaviors in terms of adaptation to current and past environments, focusing on strategic conflicts of interest between men and women, and between parents and their children, as well as the transmission of social norms which maintain these practices. This work is providing fresh insights regarding the extent to which these practices may bring both harm and benefits to different members of society. An important challenge lies in communicating this research to other applied social scientists and policy-makers (see our recent [review paper](#) for a discussion of the applied potential of evolutionary anthropology). To this end our workshop aimed to open up new channels of cross-disciplinary dialog.

Kathryn Yount (Global Health, Emory University) opened the workshop with a stimulating overview of the global incidence of FGC, child marriage, and IPV. Building on the work by Lori Heise, she described a socio-ecological model of violence against women, illustrating how gender norms interrelate across multiple levels, ranging from the individual and immediate family to the regional and global scale. Yount identified how this framework organizes existing research into an intelligible whole and identifies gaps in our understanding. Additional sessions were organized around specific topics.

FGC session: **Karisa Cloward** (Political Science, South Methodist University) discussed her book *When Norms Collide*. Drawing on field research among the Maasai of Kenya, Cloward discussed how international pressure to conform to new gender norms leads to misrepresentation in the measurement of local attitudes. **Mhairi Gibson** (Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol) followed this with a call for more accurate data in FGC research. Using indirect survey methods, Gibson identified concealment of support for FGC in Ethiopia, most notably among elites, elderly and educated individuals. **Gerry Mackie** (Center for Global Justice, UC San Diego) discussed the role of criminalization in FGC abandonment. In a wide-ranging talk, Mackie considered why criminalization is ineffective and presented new data further highlighting inaccuracy in self-report data on FGC.



Susan Schaffnit presenting her research on early marriage in Tanzania. David Lawson

Child marriage session: **Erica Field** (Economics, Duke University) reported on a randomized control trial in Bangladesh. Field concluded that financial incentives were more effective in delaying marriage than a female empowerment training program, raising important questions about the drivers of early marriage. **Susan Schaffnit** (Anthropology, UCSB) reported on research in northwestern Tanzania. Challenging the view that child marriage is always harmful, Schaffnit noted that the majority of "child marriages" concerned late adolescents not children, girls were instrumental in the choice to marry, and well-being was not necessarily reduced by marrying under 18 years of age. Finally, **Nicholas Syrett** (Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, University of Kansas) reviewed findings from his book *American Child Bride*. Syrett argued that while child marriage often led to exploitation, it also brought benefits to minors, including emancipation from parents, ability to claim inheritance and wages and the legitimization of pregnancies. He discussed current efforts to ban child marriage in the United States, arguing that we need to disentangle the legal transformation that minors achieve via marriage from the institution of marriage itself.

Intimate partner violence session: **Jonathan Stieglitz** (Anthropology, Institute for Advance Study in Toulouse) presented data on IPV collected among the Tsimane of Bolivia. Stieglitz contrasted two

causal explanations of IPV as a threat to achieve a male's selfish interest or as an impulsive behavior driven from stress or an antisocial personality, suggesting that a hybrid of these models best explained the incidence of IPV. [Janet Howard](#) (Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol) used data from African Demographic and Health Surveys to explore predictions that IPV would be more common in contexts of concern over paternity and where there is sexual conflict over reproductive interests. Results suggest that both individual circumstances and group social norms linked to paternity concerns may be part of an explanation (but do not fully account) for physical violence against women. Finally, [Brooke Scelza](#) (Anthropology, UCLA) discussed her research among the Himba of Namibia. Scelza argued that both serial and concurrent partnerships may benefit Himba women, highlighting diversity in gender norms and challenging public health research which conceptualizes such partnerships as risky sexual behavior.

A second day brought together invited speakers with delegates working on a wider array of harmful cultural practices to talk about cross-cutting issues. Discussion sessions focused on arising contradictions and evidence gaps in the existing literature, recommendations for culturally-sensitive policy, and the benefits and difficulties of pursuing interdisciplinary research. While perspectives varied among our workshop delegates, this created stimulating and open discussions. By the end of the workshop, all agreed that further connections between anthropological science, other applied social scientists and development policy-makers and practitioners are needed.

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