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# Mobilizing Culture as an Asset: A Transdisciplinary Effort to Rethink Gender Violence

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## Abstract

The contested relationship between gender violence and the “culture concept” can be found in the cultural defense of gender violence, gender violence linked to postcolonial retraditionalizations of family life, the underpolicing of gender violence associated with communities labeled as culturally backward, and the overpolicing of activities categorized by human rights advocates as harmful traditional practices. Culture has been used to defend, explain, or excuse gender violence, and seen as a barrier to the elimination of gender violence. Here, however, the authors analyze how culture has been mobilized strategically as a resource in the struggle against gender violence.

## Keywords

culture, transdisciplinarity, university

Above all, in the spirit of Ignatius “cura personalis” calls for an atmosphere of mutual trust – a trust which is always difficult to win, always easy to lose. (Kolvenbach, 2007, p. 13)

Anthropologist Adam Kuper (1999) presciently noted that “*Everyone* [emphasis in original] is into culture” (p. 2). For anthropologists, the proliferation of the concept of culture in nonacademic and consumer-based domains has been both terrifying to watch and fascinating to analyze. The concept of culture found beyond the academy can be traced directly to 20th century anthropologists who defined village, tribal, and indigenous life as *culture*,

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while comparatively few analyses focused on the cultural life of nonindigenous American society (Baker, 2010). Consequently, culture is commonly understood as belonging to so-called *others*, while Westerners remain culture free (Taylor, 2003). From an anthropological perspective, everyone has culture: a way of thinking, moving, and being that shapes and is shaped by the way an individual sees and experiences the world (Tylor, 1958/1871). There is no such thing as an action, policy, institution, or practice that is culturally neutral. Yet, as culture has entered into political discussions, anthropologists have attempted to describe, and at times, to intervene in conversations that perpetuate a problematic, static, and ahistorical use of culture. One of the more interesting struggles over culture has emerged in the now-global movement against gender violence.

Based on our efforts to transform how university community members think about and address gender violence, we explore here the notion of *culture as an asset*. By “asset” we mean that within each culture there exist locally relevant concepts that can be consciously and purposely mobilized to reaffirm identity and demarcate community boundaries, as well as to focus attention and generate institutional commitment toward rethinking gender violence. First, we review the contested relationship between culture and gender violence, and then we introduce the cultural concept of *cura personalis* mobilized by a community seeking to end gender violence. We continue by analyzing our transdisciplinary efforts to mobilize this cultural concept against gender violence, and we conclude with a reflection on the possible consequences and challenges associated with such efforts.

## Culture and Gender Violence

The last two decades have witnessed greater awareness of and organizing against a range of behaviors and forms of structural inequality conceptualized together as gender violence. This category of injury includes sexual violence, rape as a weapon of war, intimate partner violence, and violence against gender and sexually nonconforming persons (Merry, 2009). Anthropologists have identified places where gender violence is considered rare (Nash, 1990), criminalized yet prevalent (Adelman, 2004), or naturalized (McClusky, 2001), and have studied locally generated but transnationally circulated cultural norms of un/acceptable violence (e.g., Adelman, 2000; Hautzinger, 2007; Lazarus-Black, 2007; Merry, 2006; Plesset, 2006; Wies, 2008, 2009). Anthropologists emphasize that culture cannot be labeled as intrinsically nonviolent or violent. Rather, cultural concepts, institutions, and practices are always changing, which encourage or deter systemic forms of gender violence.

However, gender violence continues to be described in narrow and static cultural terms. Activists have embraced a culturally neutralized framework of individual human rights while advancing the wholesale rejection of community-based “harmful traditional practices” such as female genital cutting and polygyny (Merry, 2006; Shell-Duncan, 2008). This problematic binary holds certain cultures as devoid of women’s rights (i.e., in the global South), while positing that gender violence results from individual pathologies (i.e., in the global North). A similar culturally essentialist binary between the civilized “self” and the primitive “Other” frames the presumption that gender violence is culturally entrenched and thus unworthy of intervention (Adelman, Erez, & Shalhoub-Kevorkian,

2003), or that gender violence is somehow justified as a bulwark against cultural imperialism. This fractured approach also reinforces Western practices related to gender violence as “culturally neutral” measures against which other societies’ efforts are assessed. Such negative relationships between gender violence and culture limit engagement with the complex history and political economy of any particular place or people.

The movement against gender violence now recognizes the strategic asset culture provides and seeks to minimize the social distance between “us” and “them” (The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women [UNSRVAW], 2009). The recognition that specific configurations of political economies engender gender violence has revealed promising outcomes in New Zealand (Haldane, 2008, 2009) and Cuba (Weissman & Weissman, 2010), where locally meaningful cultural concepts have been activated to change the ways people think about and respond to gender violence. In both cases, activists recognize that there are no culturally neutral approaches to ending gender violence, and identify cultural concepts to make headway against the scope and scale of violence in their communities.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the self-conscious cultural turn in the struggle against gender violence comes from legal scholar Leslye Obiora (2009) who argues that “the wholesale dismissal of culture is a luxury feminist advocates cannot afford because there is not much else to work with” (p. 6). Obiora’s pronouncement reveals the realpolitik of gender violence activism: we must engage with what *is* to pursue what *should be*. Why should “culture” be monopolized as a tool of gender violence when it could be co-opted to undermine gender violence? To exemplify this, we provide a U.S.-based case study where the strategic use of culture was mobilized against gender violence. The local community recognized the value of their own culture and used it as an asset to help disclose the open secret of sexual violence on college campuses (Center for Public Integrity, 2009-2010).

## **The Culture of Sexual Violence on U.S. University Campuses**

Colleges and universities impart the importance of cultural concepts to community members by enculturating them into the institution’s mission, values, and behavioral expectations during new student and employee orientations and faculty forums. As written explanations of the community’s culture, the university’s mission statement establishes the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, enforced through ongoing oversight and management of community members who are expected to share a common set of values and a particular worldview. Most universities make explicit their stance against gender violence in both written statements and in campus-based programming and services.

Notwithstanding such institutional rhetoric and activities against gender violence, research suggests universities are not safe and respectful learning environments. The extent of gender violence victimization among college women is greater than the overall population, with high rates of sexual violence (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000), physical assault (Leonard, Quigley, & Collins, 2002), and stalking (Logan, Leukefeld, & Walker, 2000). Despite the prevalence of sexual violence against university women students, only about 4

in 10 colleges and universities offer any sexual violence-related training (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

Of course, as noted above, culture is neither static nor homogenous, and university culture, like off-campus culture in general, varies (Sanday, 1996). The Midwestern campus we worked with, Xavier University, a private, religiously affiliated institution, with about 7,000 students, is similar to other U.S. universities in that its handling of sexual violence occurs within a larger social context that reinforces a culture of secrecy and victim blaming, and where reported incidents are understood as individual aberrations rather than manifestations of structural inequality. What makes this university unique is its formative cultural identity as a Jesuit educational institution, driven by the cultural concept *cura personalis*.

## Cura Personalis

In 1534, Ignatius of Loyola and six male companions formed the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order known as the Jesuits, around the central tenet of *cura personalis*. *Cura personalis*, Latin for “care for the person,” reflects the Jesuit intent to care for a person’s mind, body, and spirit. It is “both a characteristic of spiritual accompaniment and a constitutive element in Jesuit education and formation” (Kolvenbach, 2007, p. 10). For these men, *cura personalis* was the foundation of their new religious order, whose members cared for each other while growing intellectually.

*Cura personalis* as a key cultural concept compels individuals to act and think at multiple levels. At the individual level, *cura personalis* speaks to the notion that “no one can manage on his own” (Kolvenbach, 2007, p. 11). *Cura personalis* guides members of the community to understand that they are responsible for the well-being of those around them; asking for help and support is normal and necessary for collective growth. *Cura personalis* is also used to situate individuals within structures of global interconnectedness and has been used to substantiate the need to care for all people, in both the immediate and global community.

## Mobilizing Cura Personalis

Today, *cura personalis* permeates the missions and activities of the more than two dozen Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Jesuit leaders in higher education deploy this concept in an effort to foster a unique identity and draw boundaries between Jesuit culture and the outside world. The Xavier University website and student handbook (Xavier University, 2009) detail the notion of *cura personalis* as a cultural concept:

Xavier University is based on a Catholic, Jesuit tradition and is committed to supporting the intrinsic value of each human being. This tradition is dedicated to providing students with a caring, supportive, and developmentally enriching environment that focuses on the whole person, influenced by justice and love . . . all members of

the community share responsibility for the health and safety of fellow students and for the regulation of student conduct. [These] standards . . . are designed to foster the ethical, developmental, and personal integrity of students and to promote an environment that is in accord with the values of respect for oneself, respect for others, respect for authority, respect for community, respect for property, and respect for University values—honesty and integrity. Choosing to join this community obligates you to act in a manner that is consistent with these principles. The power of “X” is building respect for self, others, and the world. (p. 17)

Thus, using the language of *cura personalis*, the institution urges students to tend to themselves and to the world around them.

Although the Jesuit concept *cura personalis* does not explicitly address sexual violence, if followed logically, its tenets preclude its perpetration. Nevertheless, the university’s use and adoption of the cultural concept of *cura personalis* has not prevented sexual violence from occurring among students. Reports of sexual violence at Xavier, both official and anecdotal, have circulated among faculty, staff, and students; in the student and local newspapers; and on websites. In February, 2009, a newspaper article described a sexual assault case involving two university students (Kurtzman, 2009). The case was familiar in its details: it involved two heterosexual undergraduate students from the university, an off-campus party, and alcohol. Originally reported to local law enforcement, the case was referred to the campus judicial board. Both the victim and the accused were dissatisfied with how the incident was handled. The article was based from the victim’s perspective, and was timed to coincide with a university Board of Trustees meeting.

Xavier’s President reacted quickly to Board and community members’ calls for a response to the publicity that challenged the institution’s cultural values and its image as a leader in Jesuit education. Motivated by the desire to protect the institution and its core values, the President invested significant funds, and took a not insignificant risk, to host a national conference on gender violence. Thus, the newspaper article was a catalyst for the university to deliberately mobilize the cultural concept of *cura personalis* to redress gender violence on its campus, and to remind the wider community of its core cultural value.

## Transdisciplinary Mobilization of Culture

The director of the Xavier University Women’s Center was given the responsibility for the forum’s vision, plan and execution, with the understanding that the event would be public, thereby allowing internal and external community to witness how the Jesuit community responded to gender violence. The director of the Women’s Center invoked the cultural concept of *cura personalis* that had been lying dormant with regard to gender violence. Rather than ignoring, blaming or rejecting Jesuit culture, she proposed that the institution incorporate it into a strategy for responding to gender violence and transform the university’s approach to gender violence prevention and intervention. By integrating *cura personalis* with commonly regarded feminist frameworks of gender violence prevention, the director

was able to persuade university community members who were skeptical of possibilities for change in the institution's relationship to sexual violence.

Scholars and practitioners from multiple disciplines engaged with gender violence were invited to the campus for the dialogue and conference. Those invited from outside the campus included faculty and staff experts in anthropology, psychology, social work, and student services (e.g., Counseling Services and Residence Life). Internal invitees included a similar transdisciplinary array: faculty members, student services leaders, and a graduate student from the doctorate in psychology program. The transdisciplinary breadth of the group reflected the very core of *cura personalis* in that attention was given to a range of issues that might affect an individual and to those that assume responsibilities for caring for the whole person within the community.

The day-long dialogue allowed members of the campus community to explain the contested culture of the university: denial about sexual violence and other forms of gender violence, victim blaming, and the persistence of individual-based explanations for sexual violence. Most importantly, the dialogue allowed Xavier University cultural insiders to explain the notion of *cura personalis* and its place within Xavier's university culture, while naïve outsiders questioned local assumptions and shared best practices. The dialogue and dinner were pivotal encounters where conference organizers' key concerns were legitimized and reinforced by the invited guests.

The conference drew more than 425 participants from the region's colleges and universities and a significant number of social service practitioners. The day included a welcome from the university president, which echoed the words he shared in the printed program:

It is impossible for us to imagine advancing efforts to truly care for the whole person when gender-based violence affects individuals every day. It is therefore of primary importance that an institution dedicated to caring for the whole person place the elimination of gender-based violence at the forefront of our efforts. *Cura personalis* is also a means for conceptualizing our human interdependence—care for all people if you will. Thus, we must recognize that violence perpetrated against a young woman in Rwanda resonates to affect a young man living in Cincinnati. The pain of one woman suffering in the aftermath of a sexual assault on a college campus contributes to the all too often silent suffering of a father hundreds of miles away. And indeed this anguish is transposed to the women and men working endlessly to prevent acts of gender-based violence while creating a culture of caring for victims and survivors.

By deploying *cura personalis* at the forefront, the institution's leader reinforced the central tenets of *cura personalis*: that the whole person and community affected by gender violence should be cared for, that all members of the community share responsibility for delivering that care, and that we are connected in a global sense to care for each other.

The keynote address, delivered by an anthropologist with cross-cultural expertise in how communities mobilize indigenous cultural concepts against gender violence, further incorporated the cultural concept of *cura personalis*. The following four workshop sessions facilitated by the transdisciplinary group shared best practices in gender violence

intervention and prevention that could be adopted within a culture rooted in the ideology of *cura personalis*.

## Reflections on Transdisciplinary Efforts

While the concept of culture has been used in the movement against gender violence in seemingly harmful ways, this example illustrates that cultural concepts can be used as an asset to address gender violence. In the anthropological sense, culture is learned and therefore communities have the opportunity to harness cultural concepts to influence members' attitudes and behaviors. Above all else, mobilizing culture as an asset relies upon the notion that culture is mutable.

Xavier University, like other U.S. colleges and universities, is embedded in a cultural context where local law enforcement continues to be ill-equipped to work with known-assailant sexual violence; the judicial board remains the central component of the university's management of sexual violence; university staff who engage directly with the issue endure marginalization; and students face the ambiguous line between sexuality and violence. While all has not been settled or solved at Xavier University, recommendations have been made and an ad hoc committee on gender violence was formed. By harnessing a locally meaningful cultural concept, leaders and members in the community mobilized their culture as an asset in a larger movement against gender violence.

For nearly four decades, feminists have challenged the relationship between gender violence and culture in a variety of ways: by rejecting culture, by creating their own culture, and by critiquing and trying to change culture on their terms. Here we have offered a glimpse of an effort to use a locally meaningful cultural concept to engage *with* culture. For decades, community organizers have practiced this approach as a rule: talk to people in their own language, and give them the tools they need to solve self-identified problems. In this case, university leaders were concerned with protecting the institution and its cultural heritage. Conference organizers, qua insiders, shared this cultural knowledge, and made the object of concern (i.e., the legacy of *cura personalis*) its own solution. As a hopeful result, "care for the whole person" now means educating the university community about sexual violence and creating new ways of thinking about its causes and consequences.

Is such cultural engagement always the answer? This is a difficult question to answer because the politics of compromise looms large in the global movement against gender violence. In this case, students, faculty and staff reinterpreted its core cultural concept of *cura personalis* to emphasize the importance of and safety for all members of the community. In the short term, Xavier will most likely improve its anti-sexual violence intervention and prevention programming and services. Such institutionalized management of sexual violence as a social problem may not be sufficient, but it may be an effective way to build relationships that in the long term will sustain transdisciplinary efforts against gender violence.

The recognition of a cultural concept as an asset, to actively transform the structure of an institution, demonstrates how culture matters, that we all have culture, and how front-line workers, activists and scholars working in collaboration across the disciplines can

mobilize culture. Through this example, we recognize that all cultures have meaningful cultural concepts that can be mobilized in the movement against gender violence.

### Authors' Note

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## Bios

**Madelaine Adelman** is an associate professor of justice and social inquiry at Arizona State University, Tempe. Her research centers on the politics of gender violence in the Middle East and the U.S., and the struggle over religion, sexuality and safety in public schools. Her work has appeared in social science journals including *Law and Society Review*, *Violence Against Women*, and *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. She and Miriam Elman have co-edited a forthcoming volume entitled *Jerusalem: Conflict and Cooperation in a Contested City*

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**Hillary Haldane** is an assistant professor of anthropology at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut. Her research focuses on comparative indigeneity, gender-based violence, and the instrumental use of “culture” in therapeutic care. Her research on the frontline of gender-based violence has appeared in *Practicing Anthropology* and *Global Public Health*. Her coedited volume (with Jennifer R. Wies), *Anthropology at the Front Lines of Gender-Based Violence* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), presents a global survey of frontline workers in the gender-based violence movement.

**Jennifer R. Wies** focuses her research on frontline laborers who care for vulnerable populations, including victims of gender-based violence, people with HIV/AIDS, children, and college women. She has published her work in the journals *Global Public Health* and *Human Organization*, and in the edited collection, *Empowering Women in Higher Education and Student Affairs* (Stylus, 2011). In 2007, she became the founding director of the Xavier University Women’s Center, dedicating her energies to creating a center that simultaneously provides resources, advances education, and promotes research. Now, as an assistant professor of anthropology at Eastern Kentucky University, she continues her work as a medical and practicing anthropologist.