

## Cultural Diversity and Bioethics

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### Abstract

My main question in this article is as follows: "to which extent cultural diversity should be permitted to influence bio-ethical judgments?" There are cultural heritages, values and traditions which are acceptable and respectable and there are ones which are not so. In this article I concluded that our reasoning based on common ethical sense can guide us through such differentiations. Human dignity as a common notion among most alive cultures and religions thorough the world, can be relied for sketching a plan for further dialogues in this regard.

**Keywords:** *Cultural diversity, Bioethics, Human dignity*

### Introduction

The relation of culture and ethics and their interactions have been subject of many debates and controversies in the history of thoughts, especially during the past decades. The fast pace of globalization and interconnections among various cultures with conflicting ethical values and judgments made this subject so critical and noteworthy.

My main question in this article is as follows: "to which extent cultural diversity should be permitted to influence bioethical judgments?"

In fact, we should answer some questions such as: Is bioethics completely cultural-dependent? Can we speak about totally globalized bioethical values? Or there is an acceptable viewpoint in the midway of these two extremes?

Before answering these questions, we should define the "culture". There are so many definitions of culture in the literature. Originally; culture was a noun of process, belonging to agriculture. After eighteenth century, however, culture" became a more general designation for the "spirit" (whether ideal, religious or national) that informed the "whole way of life" of a distinct people. This "spirit" was believed to be manifest in all human activities, but was most evident in specifically "cultural" activities such as language, morals, and styles of art." (1). The United Nations Educational, Scientific

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined culture as follows: "... culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and in addition to art and literature, it encompasses lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (2) .

### Some Instances for Clarifying the Question

Bioethical judgments are value-based in nature. Based on aforementioned definitions, values are part of cultures and are dependent on and influenced by other parts of cultures, so, indisputably, bioethics is cultural-dependent. We can mention some instance of cultural and religious decision-making about bioethical issues: At which stage of fetal life, a developing fetus becomes a person? Answering this question just by reasoning based on scientific data is very difficult because fetus development is a continuous process and there is no point of abrupt and meaningful change throughout this process. Religions, however, have ideas about the subject of personhood. The fetus is a human person just after ensoulment takes place. Ensoulment is breathing the soul by God into the fetus. According the Roman Catholic Church,

the ensoulment takes place just after conception. According to most Islamic schools, however, the ensoulment takes place 4 months after conception. According to these beliefs, Muslims and Christians have their own ethical opinions and judgments about the abortion, assisted reproduction and contraception. These opinions should be respected and their believers should be free to practice based on them (3).

Concerning informed consent in clinical practice, there are some differences between western and eastern societies. In western societies the most emphasis is on individualized patient's rights and freedoms. In eastern societies, however, extended families play an important role in decision-makings about health for each member of the family. Because the family feels responsible about caring and providing for the ill members, it has the right of participation in the related discussions and decision-makings (4). Therefore, informed consent in such societies has a different meaning and implications than western societies. These differences should be respected.

Now, I want to turn to another question: "Are all cultural beliefs acceptable and respectful?" please note the following examples:

Bride-burning is a sort of dowry death which is killing a young woman by her husband or his family because of her family's inability or refusal to pay additional dowry. Dowry is a gift given from the bride's family to the groom. Bride-burning is a form of domestic violence practiced in parts of the world. In bride-burning cases a man, or his family, burn his wife using an inflammable liquid, leading to death by fire. Bride burning has been recognized as an important public health problem in such countries. It is a historical and cultural issue accounting for around 600-750 deaths per year in one country (5). Also, in the same parts of the world, there is a tradition of burning widows after their husbands' death (6). Both of the above mentioned traditions are part of one or more cultures; however they are not acceptable or respectable in the name of cultural pluralism.

They should be banned even though they are parts of old cultures that many people believe in.

In other parts of the world, there is another tradition according to which people send their elderly away on ice floats when they grow too old to contribute to the family. This is a tradition rooted in the shortage of supplies and hard conditions of life (7). This behavior is part of their culture however is not respectable at all.

As the last example, in some poor areas of the world, many women suffer from deprivation of basic education and coercion to marriage at too young ages (8). Part of this condition may be considered as cultural or even religious. However they are only rooted in poverty and should be eliminated even though they constitute parts of such cultures.

## **Conclusion**

According to the aforementioned instances, we can conclude that there are cultural heritages, values and traditions which are acceptable and respectable and there are ones which are not so. The question now is as follows: How can we distinguish the acceptable cultural elements from unacceptable ones? In our judgments about the above instances, we relied on our common ethical sense. Our reasoning based on such common ethical sense can guide us through such differentiations. International efforts in such a direction have brought about some notable results, one of them, I believe, is the "UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights" (9). Such declarations, of course, are subject of continuous criticism and revision; however, such efforts aimed at sketching a universal framework for ethical judgment are praiseworthy.

The third article of the above mentioned declaration (the first article in the section of principles) stresses on the "Human dignity". This notion, as a common concept among different schools of thought constitutes an invaluable tool for intercultural dialogue. This can be explained by the circumstance that the human rights approach is deficient to deal with these new

emerging challenges.(10) So, considering that alongside the religious and cultural-based assessment of bioethical issues, different societies need to bring ethical notions into their discourse. Human dignity theories could be an invaluable tool for such purpose. I believe that the notion of human dignity, which is a common concept among most existing alive cultures and school of thought, can be relied for sketching a plan and conceptual basis for dialogue about bioethical controversial topics.

As a conclusion, by virtue of ethical common sense and intercultural accepted notions like human dignity, we can distinguish acceptable from unacceptable cultural factors which influence on bioethical judgements.

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