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# *Teaching about female genital mutilation/cutting in Africa: complex questions of culture, "development" and human rights*

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**Symposium: Teaching Geographies of Sexualities: 20 years on**
**for *Journal of Geography in Higher Education***
**Edited by Martin Zebracki and Joe Hall**

# Title of paper: Teaching about Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Africa: complex questions of culture, "development" and human rights

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**Abstract**
Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) has risen up the global advocacy agenda and is recognised as an important child-safeguarding issue. The topic crystallises key debates in my module, *Culture and Development in Africa*, and enables Geography undergraduates to explore complex intersections of childhood, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in diverse African communities. In this paper, in light of in my efforts to teach for social transformation, I reflect on the inquiry-based learning approach I adopt and on its potential benefits. Conscious of postcolonial feminist critiques of processes of racialized "Othering", I discuss dilemmas about how to frame FGM/C and support students' critical engagement with the conflicting, sometimes confusing, discourses of cultural relativism and universal human rights. I seek to foster independent learning and research skills using a "real world" NGO assignment. Qualitative feedback suggests students develop more in-depth subject-knowledge, reflections on the ethics of "development", changes in self-theories and gain important skilful practices that may enhance their employability. Linking my teaching to my work with a charity tackling FGM/C has enabled co-learners to regard this as both a cultural practice that affects "distant others", and as a form of gender-based heteronormative violence and child abuse that has resonance in the local community.

**Key words:**
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**Symposium for *Journal of Geography in Higher Education***
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# Teaching about Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Africa: complex questions of culture, "development" and human rights

## Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) has risen up the global advocacy agenda and is recognised as an important child-safeguarding issue. The topic crystallises key debates in my module, *Culture and Development in Africa*, and enables Geography undergraduates to explore complex intersections of childhood, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in diverse African communities. In this paper, in light of in my efforts to teach for social transformation, I reflect on the inquiry-based learning approach I adopt and on its potential benefits. Conscious of postcolonial feminist critiques of processes of racialized "Othering", I discuss dilemmas about how to frame FGM/C and support students' critical engagement with the conflicting, sometimes confusing, discourses of cultural relativism and universal human rights. I seek to foster independent learning and research skills using a "real world" NGO assignment. Qualitative feedback suggests students develop more in-depth subject-knowledge, reflections on the ethics of "development", changes in self-theories and gain important skilful practices that may enhance their employability. Linking my teaching to my work with a charity tackling FGM/C has enabled co-learners to regard this as both a cultural practice that affects "distant others", and as a form of gender-based heteronormative violence and child abuse that has resonance in the local community.

## Introduction

Sexuality is often perceived as a 'private affair' that has little to do with development (Corrêa and Jolly, 2008). Nevertheless, sexuality does represent an implicit focus of many development programmes, ranging from women's reproductive health, early pregnancies, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections, to gender-based violence (Camargo, 2006;). A 'sexualities and development lens' focuses on the rights of sexual minorities, while also seeking to challenge hegemonic norms of heterosexuality and patriarchal privilege in the Majority world[1] (Brown et al., 2010; Jolly, 2000).

In my third year Geography undergraduate option on *Culture and Development in Africa*, I seek to highlight the normative and restrictive nature of constructions of heterosexuality and to consider the ways in which development policy and practice often reproduce dominant social and cultural norms around embodiment, sexuality and marriage. Such hegemonic norms may result in the restriction of opportunities available to girls, boys, women, men, and transgender people. I encourage students to analyse the intersection of sexuality with other axes of social difference (Corrêa and Jolly, 2008).

Protection of "the girl child" from "harmful cultural practices" represents a key target of development interventions. Indeed, early and forced marriage, female genital

mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and other "harmful practices" are explicitly identified under Sustainable Development Goal 5 concerning gender equality (UN, 2018). Within practising communities, FGM/C may be regarded as an important initiation rite which secures girls' marriage prospects (Amroth et al., 2001). It is practised in diverse African countries from the Atlantic coast to the Horn of Africa, in areas of the Middle East such as Iraq and Yemen, and in some countries in Asia such as Indonesia (UNICEF, 2018). There are wide variations in prevalence; UNICEF (2018) suggests that the practice is almost universal in Somalia, Guinea, and Djibouti, with levels around 90 per cent, while it affects only 1 per cent of girls and women in Cameroon and Uganda. Given the continuing legacies of European imperialism and neocolonialism in many African countries, development interventions led by "outsiders" that aim to eradicate the practice are often contentious and may be regarded as a 'donor driven' concern that lacks respect for "African culture".

Citing bell hooks' (1994, p.12) argument that 'the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy', Wellens et al. (2006, p. 126) suggest that the discipline of Geography is particularly well-placed to both teach about and for 'the kinds of changes that can help to create a world which is more equal and more sustainable'. The authors argue that teaching *about* social transformation and global inequalities can lead to teaching *for* social transformation, by 'deconstructing students' initial hostility, sympathy or paternalism' towards marginalised 'others' and 'promoting cultural empathy' (Wellens et al., 2006, p. 121). Efforts to teach about cultural difference, social justice, and human rights seem increasingly important in the twenty-first century, given the recent rise in populist politics, hard right activism, and the 'hostile environment' reactively created in response to migrants and other marginalised groups in the US, UK, and many other countries in the Minority world[1].

In this paper, I reflect on my experiences of teaching about FGM/C as part of my third-year Geography undergraduate module, *Culture and Development in Africa*. I discuss the research-based approach I use to facilitate critical thinking about intersecting inequalities, the ethics of "development" and the power dynamics involved in defining "culture". I reflect on my dilemmas as a White British feminist geographer in framing the topic within the module and demonstrate how I facilitate exploration of this and other topics through an inquiry-based learning approach modelled on "real world" examples of NGO development proposals. I analyse qualitative evaluation feedback obtained from the first cohort of Geography students taking this optional module in relation to my goal of developing research-based teaching for social transformation (Wellens et al., 2006). Finally, I highlight the continuing popularity of the topics of FGM/C and sexualities among students and demonstrate how I seek to "bring home" its relevance by linking classroom discussions to my work with a local charity tackling FGM/C among the African diaspora. I first give an overview of my approach to research-based teaching.

**Research-based teaching for social transformation**

After four years of post-doctoral research, I sought from the outset of my lectureship to develop a 'research-based' approach to my teaching that promoted the active participation of students (Healey, 2005a). I was keen to use inquiry-based learning, since this approach appears to offer greater opportunities for social transformation and deep learning than seems possible with other approaches (Healey, 2005a; Kolb, 1984; Wellens et al, 2008). Furthermore, some studies suggest that students may find learning in inquiry or research-based modes beneficial (Healey et al., 2010; Spronken-Smith et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2008). Effective research-teaching synergies cannot be assumed, however, and need to be constantly worked on in active engagements by both teachers and students (Healey, 2005b). The 'co-learning' approach advocated by Le Heron et al. (2006) appears particularly pertinent in inquiry-based learning approaches that seek to 're-link research and teaching'. A co-learning approach involves a relationship between teachers and students that is less hierarchical than normal, since both regarded as 'co-learners'.

As feminist geographers have long emphasised, reflecting on ethics and positionality and on how these may shape worldviews and the production of knowledge is crucial for research and teaching (Skelton, 2007; Valentine, 2007). A 'social learning process', however, can challenge both students and teachers to recognise our own self-theories and critically analyse our worldviews (Wellens et al, 2006). I have found the USEM view of employability produced in the Skills Plus project helpful in reflecting on self-theories and changes in worldviews and critical engagement skills for social transformation among co-learners. This framework consists of four interrelated components: understanding; skilful practices (procedural knowledge or generic skills); efficacy beliefs (students' self-theories and beliefs about their ability to make a difference); and metacognition (self-awareness about learning and 'capacity to reflect on, in and for action' (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Yorke and Knight, 2006). As I discuss in relation to qualitative evaluation feedback about my teaching, students' responses showed evidence of changes in efficacy beliefs and metacognition that may foster lifelong learning and employability. Moreover, their feedback suggested they had developed more nuanced understandings of the ethics and cultural politics of "development", including how to frame and investigate sensitive topics and develop culturally appropriate methods to tackle FGM/C and other social injustices.

Scott's (2002, p.27) observation that breaking the link between research and teaching amounts to 'separating the inseparable' in the knowledge society now seems ironic in the current higher education climate in England. Introduced in 2017 to assess the quality of teaching, learning environment, and student outcomes in universities and colleges in England, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) represents a new tool of performance management. It parallels the more established Research Excellence Framework (REF), which assesses the quality of research and its impacts beyond academia. Meanwhile some academics are being coerced or otherwise persuaded into adopting either "teaching-intensive" or "research-intensive" careers in the neoliberal academy, in the face of unrealistic expectations to excel in both teaching and research, in addition to fulfilling the requirements of "academic citizenship". Turner et al. (2008) refer to the experience academic staff may have with fragmented identities, and highlight the fact that when teaching and research are

maintained as separate activities in separate silos they are less likely to be able to integrate teaching and research effectively (see also Colbeck, 1998). Turner et al. thus recommend that staff involved in teaching strive to develop integrated academic identities and be provided with support and opportunity to implement effective pedagogy and course design for research-based teaching and learning.

Given these concerns, it seems ever more important to ensure that academics are supported in developing research-based teaching. Published research on inquiry-based learning in Geography and elsewhere is limited (Spronken-Smith et al., 2008). This article seeks to contribute to the small, but growing body of evidence about the benefits of 'co-learning' through inquiry-based approaches, for academics as well as for students (Spronken-Smith et al., 2008). Indeed, less hierarchical relationships between students and teachers and more interactive, participatory modes of engagement seem particularly appropriate when teaching for social justice (Pain, 2009).

**Facilitating inquiry-based learning about bodies, culture and development in Africa**

As a new lecturer and convenor of a new Geography third-year undergraduate option, I was able to design a module based around my research interests in Africa and preferred teaching methods, in accordance with departmental conventions. I tried to develop both a 'research-led' and 'research-based' (Griffiths, 2004) approach to teaching to promote co-learners' active participation, research, and independent learning skills. Integral to the work of many development geographers is teaching about gender inequalities, "Other" cultures, and postcolonial debates about 'the West and the rest' (Hall, 2002; McEwan, 2001). Yet only recently have I found more sufficient academic literature on bodies, sexualities, and development in the Majority world to include on the course reading list (see Brown et al., 2010). Learning about the ways in which bodies are constituted through space at a range of scales and discovering the interconnections between bodies and places are political (Nast and Pile, 1998) are insights central to many of the topics discussed on my module, *Culture and Development in Africa,* from gender, households and families, childhood and youth, to the cultural politics of sexualities, HIV, disability, and care.

When designing assessments that aim to enhance inquiry-based learning and employability, Robinson (2008, p.67) advocates an element of role play to highlight the "real world" relevance of a particular assessment style. As a Masters student, I had found an assessment task to design a research proposal for a specific case study in Honduras, South America very rewarding, enjoying the independent thinking and creative nature of the task. It also proved a useful experience in a subsequent work context, when I was planning and writing grant proposals with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Tanzania. I decided to design a coursework assignment that asked students to imagine they worked for an NGO in Sub-Saharan Africa and were responsible for investigating, planning, and writing a proposal for a new area of development work or research related to socio-cultural aspects of development. Students had a free choice of topics, which enabled them to study issues they

were most interested in and plan development activities or research projects that would tackle the "problem".

Gibbs and Simpson (2004) and others emphasise the importance of aligning learning outcomes with assessments and specifying assessment criteria. When designing the learning outcomes for my module, I ensured that all five of the assessable learning outcomes would be assessed by the development proposal assignment, but also included one learning outcome specifically focused on this: 'Demonstrate a critical engagement with culture and development processes by researching, planning and writing a cultural development project proposal'.

To prepare students for the coursework assignment, I facilitated a workshop that used different "real world" examples of development and research proposals from NGOs working in Sudan and Tanzania as the basis for small group discussions. I used a research proposal I had co-developed with Tanzanian colleagues for Comic Relief when I was working with a local street children NGO. I was fortunate that a friend who had recently returned from working with Tearfund in Sudan was willing to provide a different example of a funding proposal for a humanitarian programme for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Darfur. Students also benefited from hearing about the situation of IDPs in Darfur and his experiences of development work, as part of our discussions about mobilities and migration. In the development proposal workshop, we brainstormed the essential elements and what makes for a successful proposal and discussed possible ways of structuring the coursework assignment.

**Dilemmas about framing FGM/C in African contexts**

As a white British feminist geographer, I find myself confronted with dilemmas in how I represent FGM/C in African contexts and frame the topic to foster students' critical analysis. I am conscious of critiques by postcolonial feminists' levelled at "Western" feminist discourses on "Third-world women" that construct them as "archetypal victims" of male violence and denies their agency. Thus, I seek to introduce the topic from differing perspectives in specific communities in Eastern and Western Africa, and emphasise the agency of girls and women and of FGM/C practitioners, and consider the viewpoints held by men and religious leaders (Tomàs, Kaplan & Le Charles, 2018). As Mohanty (1988) and others argue, analyses of "male violence" must be theorised and interpreted *within* specific societies in order to better understand it and effectively organise to challenge it.

Indeed, some argue that the use of the emotive word "mutilation" in FGM is inappropriate and prefer to refer to the practice as female genital cutting, excision or female circumcision. In this article and in my teaching, I use FGM/C to highlight the contested nature of the term. As Spivak (1994), Butler (1997), and other feminists have argued, language is not value-free, but already invokes racialized processes of "Othering" and the power to define, categorise, and subordinate. I find that the term FGM is more commonly used, however, among local and national stakeholders in the UK.

When I first designed the module, my lecture on the 'Development and the body' sought to demonstrate how the cultural politics of the body are often highly contested. FGM/C seemed to follow on well from discussions of the homophobia, harassment, and violence that sexual minorities may face in some African countries. I sought to demonstrate how violence and discrimination against girls, LGBTQ+ people, or disabled people may be justified in the name of "culture". My teaching sought to show that socio-cultural meanings attached to practices and beliefs about "the body" are constantly being reproduced through unequal power relations and hegemonic discourses. It became apparent from the student-led seminars that students had a keen interest in discussing FGM/C, sexualities, and disability in more depth. More literature was available on both sexualities and disability in the Majority world by then, and so I decided to separate these topics to spend more time on each, and moved the main discussion of FGM/C to the week on 'Children and youth'.

By framing FGM/C in this way, and by discussing the practice in the context of initiation rites and other socially expected youth transitions in African societies, I highlight the geographical and historical specificity of constructions of childhood and youth globally which may differ from universal children's rights discourses. These discussions are situated mid-way through the course, when co-learners have been introduced to critical thinking and postcolonial perspectives about representations of Africa and African people, including by exploring patriarchal power relations within the "family" and considering the gendered space of the household. As Ansell (2002) highlights, there is a need to acknowledge the politics and ethics of representation that we inevitably encounter when teaching about the "Other", especially when the "Other" may be geographically and metaphorically "distant" from Minority world students' personal experiences. While several students in the class have often travelled to Eastern or Southern Africa for short periods for tourism, study abroad placements, and/or volunteer purposes, the majority are White British and may have little prior awareness about the everyday realities of people's lives in African countries.

Given students' "distance" from the field,[2] I have found the use of short films and video-clips about a range of socio-cultural issues in Africa an effective way of providing students with more immediate, visually engaging, insights into the everyday lives of African people in different settings. The use of short films helps to generate discussion about representations of the 'Other' in the media, among donor agencies, charitable giving, and global advocacy campaigns and holds the mirror up to self-theories, beliefs, and images of Africa. When I first taught about FGM/C, I used the United Nations IRIN (2005) video, *Razor's Edge: The Controversy of Female Genital Mutilation*, to provide insights into socio-cultural webs of meaning surrounding the practice. The video portrayed the practice as a key transition in girls' pathway towards "womanhood" as part of the so-called "secret societies" in Sierra Leone and signalled to the community that a young woman was ready for sex, marriage, and childbirth.

When showing this video in class, however, I found myself warning students beforehand that they might find some of the images distressing. Attending to my own and some students'

distress at watching the cutting and hearing a girl's screams (re-enacted by actors) during parts of the film, I decided not to show the film thereafter. The portrayal of graphic violence perpetrated on girls conflicted with my ethic of care, both for the students and for myself. Reflecting further on the issues raised by the film, I realise it was an emotive representation of FGM/C, whose underlying intention appeared to be to shock "Western" viewers and promote efforts to eradicate the practice. The girls were sometimes portrayed as passive victims of patriarchal cultures, while at other times the film suggested they had some agency to resist the practice by running away from home. I considered that these implicit meanings and ethical concerns about unintentionally causing harm or distress were at odds with my teaching and could give out conflicting messages to students about the cultural politics of the representation of gendered violence and the agency of children and youth. Thus, I decided not to videos depicting the practice, although students sometimes choose to show short films about FGM/C in the seminars they lead. More recently, I have used an interactive global map of the prevalence of FGM/C (IRIN, 2015) to demonstrate the diversity of ethnicities, religious communities, and cultural contexts where FGM/C is practised. Students interested in the topic are encouraged to do independent research and to raise the topic themselves for further discussion in seminars if they so wish.

Mohanty (1988) and other postcolonial feminists have argued that unless rights-based interventions on FGM/C and other harmful cultural practices affecting women in the Majority world are led by women and men (and I would add girls and boys) from communities where these customs are practised, and are connected to broader structural issues of education, health, and poverty reduction programmes, such interventions are in danger of being based on neocolonial attitudes that lack understanding for 'non-Western' cultures (Gruenbaum, 1996; Parker, 1999). The material I use when teaching about FGM/C helps to highlight broader socio-economic structural constraints facing FGM/C practitioners, who are usually older women accorded considerable status in the community and whose livelihoods may depend on their role. I encourage students to analyse practitioners' roles in light of a wider context of patriarchal beliefs, cultural norms, and structural inequalities. Locating FGM/C as part of girls' socially-expected transitions to womanhood also invites further reflections on the gendered nature of other youth transitions, and wider structural inequalities, which, for example, reduce girls' access to secondary education. Thus, co-learners are encouraged to explore the plurality of childhoods in Sub-Saharan Africa (Evans, 2004; Twum-Danso, 2016) and reflect on the ways in which socio-cultural constructions of childhood and youth intersect with gender, sexuality, and ethnicity to produce specific effects that disadvantage some children in particular communities.

Presenting FGM/C as a contested, often illegal, socio-cultural practice that is the target of development interventions, I also encourage students to engage with the highly polarised debate between cultural relativism and human rights-based approaches. From a cultural relativist stance, FGM/C may be regarded as a cultural tradition that is important to particular ethnic and religious groups as a significant initiation rite in girls' transition to womanhood (Tomàs et al, 2018). It may be viewed as necessary by men and women within particular communities in securing a girl's marriage prospects. Those who refuse to undergo

circumcision may be ostracised (Almroth et al., 2001). A rights-based, usually biomedical, approach, on the other hand, views FGM/C as a harmful cultural practice which represents a violation of girls' and women's human rights, especially those of bodily integrity and sexuality. This perspective highlights the negative impacts on girls' health such as mental illness due to psychological trauma, long term physical impairments and health concerns or even death (Parker, 1999; Kimani et al, 2016).

Co-learners grapple with the complexities of the potential conflict between development interventions designed from these differing standpoints. For example, rights-based development interventions that seek to eliminate FGM/C may be criticised for not understanding the importance of such practices to local communities and for glossing over significant differences in practices among the diverse ethnic groups that adhere to FGM/C (Gruenbaum, 1996). FGM/C rights-based interventions may also be criticised as being driven by "Western" donor concerns that "lack respect" for particular cultures and perpetuate colonial and modernist discourses that construct culture and tradition as "backward" (Mohanty, 1988; see also Potter et al, 2012). Proponents of human rights-based approaches, meanwhile, find cultural relativist stances inadequate in tackling the issue and lacking in politics. Indeed, cultural relativist perspectives may be considered to condone gender-based heteronormative violence and as failing to safeguard girls' rights to life, non-violence, security, sexual and reproductive health, and wellbeing.

Such polarised perspectives pose dilemmas for me as a feminist geographer with personal experience of gender-based violence. I do not wish to condone the practice, viewing it as a violation of girls' bodies that may have long-term consequences in terms of disability, reproductive health, mental illness and sexuality. Yet I do want to foster students' critical engagement with sensitive questions of cultural difference and learning about the need to start from people's own cultural webs of meaning in particular places in order to achieve change. Thus rather than presenting a "neat" straightforward picture of this contentious practice, I seek to encourage co-learners to engage with the polarised perspectives of cultural relativism and human rights discourses, as well as more nuanced positions in-between. Our discussions raise pertinent questions that underpin the whole module, such as: who defines "culture" and "tradition"? Whose voices are heard? Whose view counts most? What constitutes "development"? Who defines "development"? How can we achieve meaningful change and progressive social transformation? As we also discuss in relation to the stigmatisation and violence that some people of minority sexualities and other groups may face, notions of "culture" and "tradition" are often appropriated by powerful actors to impose their views on societies.

When teaching this topic, I have found that the emphasis on understanding the specific socio-cultural context and the cultural appropriateness of development interventions developed throughout the course can cause some confusion about the cultural relativism-human rights debate. Students sometimes equate cultural relativism with recognising cultural diversity and are worried about critiquing notions of "African culture" or practices of FGM/C. They are sometimes unsure about whether to advocate for human rights-based approaches to tackle the

issue. Recognising this dilemma, I have sought to be clearer in our discussions about the potential value of rights-based approaches, as well as their potentially problematic nature (Tsikata, 2007). I also point to participatory community-led approaches (Diop & Askew, 2009) and other "bottom-up" alternatives as holding considerable promise for shifting deeply engrained cultural attitudes towards a more equal society.

As Preis (2002) observes, the stalemate of the universality-relativity debate is due to the fact that both stances draw on an unproblematic, outmoded notion of "culture" as a static, homogeneous, bounded unit. As we engage in co-learning through the range of socio-cultural issues explored in the course, we develop insights into culture as a 'porous array' of everyday practices, shared meanings, symbols and discourses that are multi-vocal and constantly shifting (Rosaldo, 1989, cited in Preis, 2002). Locating FGM/C as part of wider discussions about children and youth and sexualities in the Majority world throws light on the power dynamics of adult-child relations, compulsory heterosexuality, and gendered youth transitions and on how these intersect with wider structural inequalities in diverse communities.

**Teaching for social transformation?**

Towards the end of teaching the first cohort of students on this module, I sought specific feedback from students about the inquiry-based learning approach adopted. Students provided anonymous qualitative feedback comments on post-it notes" in response to four questions: What were you most worried about? How could the preparation and support be improved? What did you gain from researching and writing the development proposal assignment? How might you use this experience/ skills in future? In this section, I analyse students' feedback[3] and discuss how it was used to refine my approach.

Students seemed to enjoy the fact that the assignment was based on a "real world" scenario and they could apply their subject understanding to a particular problem. For a small number of students, the deeper understanding of the complexities of development work in Africa that they gained appeared to influence their self-theories and beliefs about their ability to make a difference, as well as their 'capacity to reflect on, in and for action' (Yorke and Knight, 2006, p.5). For example:

> I have thought a lot more about how to help. I never realised how much aid/ work was needed to solve one problem.
>
> Deeper understanding of the difficulties of development in Africa. A desire to do something more practical and to assess contemporary situations better.
>
> A different way of thinking about the problems in other countries and about the difficulties there.
>
> Thinking about how to solve problems rather than just write about them.

> Experience in writing development proposals made me think about appropriate ways of developing communities.

These comments suggest that the inquiry-based learning approach adopted may help to foster students' reflection on the ethics of "development" and the complexities of "intervening" in the Majority world. Gaining a more "bottom-up" perspective on the issues facing people in African communities and designing a culturally appropriate development/research project may help to deconstruct hegemonic worldviews and representations of African people and places, and thereby promote 'cultural empathy' (Wellens et al., 2006).

Barnett (2007) suggests that pedagogical space provides the student with not just epistemological or practical challenges, but also challenges to her/his own being, which may have ontological advantages. The qualitative feedback suggested that the inquiry-based learning approach had challenged students and helped to foster their independent research and lifelong learning skills, which many found beneficial:

> Uni needs more independent thinking like this. Fed up of rigid assessments such as in other modules.

> I think it made me study more independently and thoroughly.

> It was very refreshing being allowed to write about anything we wanted to. It let me gain knowledge about the aspects of Africa I'm interested in.

> Greater ability to link ideas within the course.

The free choice of topic enabled students to develop their own interests and expertise on particular issues, which they could also draw on in the written exam. Many students identified a range of skilful practices that they had gained, which they thought would be useful in their future employment. Skills identified included writing reports or proposals, critical analysis of a problem, research skills, and creativity. Students could see how the skilful practices they had gained translated into employability, as these comments illustrate:

> Doing something different challenges you and gives you something helpful you can use in later life as opposed to just another essay.

> How to write/ structure/ research proposals. The scale of work that would go into an actual project.

> Creativity of assignments, persuasive writing.

> Extremely helpful in knowing how to write proposals. Useful transferable skills.

> The type of approach to it is different to other courses we have done and provides a more "real" world approach.

Good way of formulating ideas and processing into a plan of action.

> Different structure (to an) essay. Useful in later life for submitting applications etc.

> If I ever need to write a proposal in a future job, I'll know what to do.

Some students demonstrated critical reflexivity about their own knowledge and ability to work or study in cross-cultural or development contexts in future:

> Ability to look at any development in light of more than just the developer's agenda!

> In future will understand more about how difficult aid can be.

> Cultural aspect of the module can be used in masters course.
> Knowledge of 3rd world.

> Could be helpful to demonstrate report building, gaining support to a project.

> Better knowledge of how thorough proposal research has to be.

These and other comments suggest that the inquiry-based learning approach helped to develop students' critical thinking and metacognition, key aspects of the USEM framework of employability (Knight and Yorke, 2004).

The more open curriculum space, however, was not welcomed by all students. Students' anxieties related predominantly to their own sense of efficacy, including a lack of confidence about undertaking an unfamiliar task compared to a traditional essay; concern about the appropriateness of their proposed approach, in view of their lack of personal experience of development work in Africa; and self-management and decision-making issues. Some highlighted their "distance" from Africa and their apprehensions about proposing potential solutions to tackle complex questions of culture and development:

> Difficult as not seen study personally (not been and seen issues)

> Lack of first-hand experience and knowledge in development/Africa.

> Not knowing how to help or what to suggest … An essay would be easier, analysing development theory etc.

> Found it hard to know what development initiatives were suitable in the area as I hadn't been.

Some students clearly found the open choice of topic difficult at first, and several commented informally that they were finding it 'hard to get started' and to 'knuckle down'. As Barnett (2007) suggests, a more "open-ended curricula" constitutes, 'a risk of *self-organisation',* since this often demands a greater level of responsibility on the part of the student to undertake independent research and manage their time. Prior to the submission of coursework, many wanted clarifications on the role play element of imagining they were working for an NGO, how geographically specific they had to be about the proposed project, the scale of the project, the use of case studies, and the format and structure of the assignment.

When I analysed students' marks obtained for this method of assessment compared to their performance in other human and physical geography modules within the same term, almost half of the students on the module (47%; 18 out of total of 38 students) did at least as well or better in this assignment, while 39% (15 students) did not do as well in this assignment. A higher proportion of the female students than male students did better on this assignment compared to assignments on other modules (38% of the women did better; 29% of the men). This finding supports others showing that women in many subjects often achieve higher marks than men in 'free response' assignments compared to more structured questions or end of year examinations (Wakeford, 2007).

Facilitating a more open-ended pedagogical space may also result in greater singularity and differentiation between students (Barnett, 2007). The top grade of 85% was awarded for an outstanding development proposal that aimed to facilitate the abandonment of FGM/C in rural northern Sudan. It outlined an original, participatory community-based programme that sought to facilitate young men's active participation and engage with key stakeholders. The proposal showed a high level of critical engagement with debates about culture and rights, gender analysis and participatory development and developed feasible, convincing strategies to tackle the issue. The rationale, objectives, activities, and outcomes were clearly linked using a logframe and demonstrated an awareness of the limitations and potential difficulties. The student went on to pursue his research interests in bodies, disability, and youth sexualities by studying for both a Masters and PhD. At the other end of the scale, one student did not hand in an assignment and did not provide any extenuating circumstances and so obtained a grade of 0%. Not engaging with the open-ended nature of the task seemed to be a calculated risk for that student, since he managed to pass the module on the basis of the grades obtained for his exam and seminar presentation. In general, students who were hesitant about engaging in a less hierarchical, pedagogical relationship with me and were reluctant to seek guidance on their ideas as they developed their project, often achieved lower marks for the assignment (assessed anonymously).

**Refining the co-learning process**

Following the students' feedback, I refined the preparation and support I provided to later cohorts of students. In addition to the original workshop discussing NGO proposals, I added a second workshop focused on peer assessment of former students' proposals. I sought the students' prior consent for their work to be used in this way with future cohorts of students and anonymised their work. In small groups, students discussed the strengths and weaknesses that characterised a previous student's proposal, used the assessment criteria to decide on the mark they thought it justified, and tried to match it to one of my marks and feedback comments, provided separately. Marking previous students' proposals on a range of topics proved to be an enjoyable exercise (students were often much harsher markers than I had been!) while also enabling them to become more familiar with the format of a proposal and the assessment criteria. I added to the guidance document 10 steps to consider when developing and writing the assignment to take account of students' difficulties 'getting started', and provided additional useful references about the process. I seek to identify students who have not yet decided on their coursework topic at an earlier stage and encourage them to discuss their ideas with me. These refinements seem to have made the proposal assignment more accessible to students who are less comfortable with the more open-ended pedagogic space offered; no students in subsequent cohorts failed to hand in a coursework assignment and their feedback suggests that their anxieties have been managed to some extent by the guidance provided.

I have been somewhat surprised at the continuing popularity of the highly contested topics of FGM/C and sexual rights in student-led seminars and coursework assignments. I seek to highlight the growing movement to end FGM/C led by young African activists and diverse communities and we reflect on why FGM/C has risen up the advocacy and political agenda in recent years at the global, national and local levels. Alongside increasing recognition of the importance of child safeguarding responsibilities in the UK, global commitments to tackle FGM are evidenced in the International Day of Zero Tolerance of FGM (6 February) and in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Under Goal 5 on Gender Equality, Target 5.3 calls for the 'Elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation' (UN, 2018). The African Union, the European Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations General Assembly have all called for an end to FGM.

The growing activism among African youth through social change communications initiatives such as The Girl Generation (2018), funded by the UK Department for International Development among others, and the affiliated Global Youth Network, with their tagline, Together to End FGM, are to be welcomed. I try to encourage students to reflect on the cultural politics of social change communications within communities and explore the complexities and place-based specificities of FGM/C and other "harmful practices" from a range of perspectives. The World Health Organisation (2011) suggests that while there have been reductions in prevalence, this has been accompanied by changes in trends, such the growing medicalisation of FGM and the fact that girls are affected at a younger age than in previous generations. In the 'Me Too' social media era, we must not lose sight of the

challenges of achieving meaningful changes in gender discriminatory attitudes and culturally engrained practices at different spatial scales.

Through my work as a trustee of a local charity, Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality (ACRE) in Reading, a town in the South-East of England, I have recently engaged with external speakers involved in establishing the Rose Centre and asked them to share their experiences of supporting women who have experienced FGM/C and of raising awareness and facilitating discussions within practising communities and across ethnic, cultural, and religious divides. The equalities coordinator highlighted the fact that Reading and the Thames Valley have been identified as "hotspots" for FGM/C in the UK and had hitherto lacked culturally appropriate support services. She shared how ACRE's work in partnership with Utulivu and other African diaspora community groups is raising awareness and achieving change. Activities include, for example, a monthly women's support group, a men's group and a range of initiatives to support survivors' psychosocial and cultural wellbeing, in addition to providing access to specialist healthcare.

The active involvement of practitioners in the co-learning process has helped students to regard this issue as both affecting "distant others" and as a form of gender-based heteronormative violence and child abuse that has resonance in the local community. It helps to illustrate the intersecting inequalities that underpin the course, linking questions of the body, children's rights, gender-based violence, and sexualities to our discussions on mobilities and migration among African diaspora communities. Furthermore, co-learners are able to see how awareness of cultural diversity and equalities issues may enhance their employability. This insight was brought home to me when I saw one student at graduation who had obtained a high mark for her proposal focused on FGM/C. She had just started a teaching assistant job in a secondary school and was pleased to tell me that the child safeguarding training she had received had included FGM, which she felt confident about, due to her exploration of the issue in African contexts. I plan to facilitate further co-learning opportunities for students, practitioners and community members working on FGM/C locally in the near future.

**Conclusion**

While some students are hesitant to engage with questions of the 'body', sexualities, and culture— reflecting the wider reluctance of development discourses to engage with what are often considered 'private' issues— many students show considerable interest in grappling with the complexities of FGM/C in diverse African societies. My dilemmas about how to frame FGM/C within my Geography undergraduate module and my changing approach to the use of an emotive video, have helped me to reflect on the ethics of representing gender-based heteronormative violence perpetrated against girls, and engage in a co-learning process with students. Re-locating discussions about FGM/C from lectures focused on bodies and sexualities to explorations of childhood and gendered youth transitions has underscored the importance of analysing the differential effects of intersecting inequalities for girls, boys, women, and men in particular places.

Students' feedback about the benefits and challenges of the inquiry-based learning approach suggests that open pedagogical spaces can enable the development of critical thinking around the cultural politics of FGM/C, the body and sexualities in African contexts and potentially around other challenging, sensitive topics. The approach also fostered cross-cultural reflexivity about the ethics and challenges of development work in the Majority world. It enabled co-learners to make linkages between the topics explored on the course, deepening their subject-based knowledge. For some, the approach appeared to enhance their efficacy beliefs and metacognition, which they valued in terms of employability. My analysis of students' grades for the coursework assignment in comparison to those undertaken in equivalent modules suggests that facilitating a more open-ended pedagogical space may also result in greater singularity and differentiation between students (Barnett, 2007).

Based on my experience and co-learners' feedback, inquiry-based learning approaches may be particularly appropriate when teaching for social transformation. Indeed, the identified benefits of the approach address several of the goals of Bigelow et al.'s (1994) vision of teaching for social justice, including: critical and linked to real world problems; multicultural, anti-racist, and pro-justice; culturally sensitive; and concerned with issues beyond the classroom walls (cited in Wellens et al., 2006). The identified benefits also address several of the generic and social skills that UK geography honours graduates are expected to develop, as outlined in the geography subject-benchmark statement (QAA, 2014). These include: autonomous learning; metacognition; self-awareness and self-management; empathy and insight; awareness of responsibility as a local, national, and international citizen with a global perspective; the skills to engage in lifelong learning; and a creative approach to problem solving (QAA, 2014, p.12). Furthermore, student feedback about what had been gained by experiencing the research-based process can be mapped onto the four interrelated components of the USEM concept of employability, in terms of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition (Knight and Yorke, 2004).

Students' concerns about the unfamiliar assessment reveal the ontological value of extending curriculum space (Barnett, 2007). It is important to find ways to manage their anxieties and ensure all students are able to benefit from more interactive, pedagogical relationships with teachers, whose roles are identified as facilitators and co-learners rather than as instructors engaged in the transmission of knowledge. Nevertheless, facilitating inquiry-based learning can be time-consuming, as I have found with growing numbers of students taking my optional third-year module.

While this paper has discussed an inquiry-based learning assessment within an individual module, the wider literature suggests that embedding this approach from an early stage across the curriculum may work best in enhancing students' academic performance, research skills, and employability (Healey, 2005b; Spronken-Smith et al., 2008). The nature of systems of higher education has a significant bearing on how we are constrained or supported in efforts to teach for social transformation (Wellens et al., 2006). Indeed, encouragement and support

for teachers to take on a facilitating role is crucial for inquiry-based learning approaches to be effective (Spronken-Smith et al., 2008).

By exploring FGM/C in the UK context as well as in Africa, students learn about a culturally sensitive, formerly taboo, topic facing diaspora communities and develop their analyses of intersecting inequalities and the socio-cultural and legal policy context closer to "home". The increased political priority accorded to tackling FGM/C and the growing global advocacy movement, alongside greater recognition of child safeguarding responsibilities to protect girls in practising communities in the UK, highlight the relevance of students' work to the global agenda for sustainable development, equality and human rights. Meeting practitioners working to achieve change at the local scale also helps to demonstrate how the grassroots participatory approaches students have read about actually work in practice. Such opportunities may help to reduce the "distance" British students may initially perceive between their personal experiences and the lived realities of 'the rest' (Hall, 2002) in the Majority world. Moreover, facilitating spaces of encounter and dialogue across cultural difference may provide further insights into processes of racialisation and the "Othering" of diaspora communities. Exploring such culturally sensitive, messy, contested "real world" problems, whether they are close by or at a distance, can only help to further our goals of teaching for progressive social transformation in the twenty-first century.

**Endnotes**

1. I use the terms Majority and Minority Worlds to refer to the global South and global North, respectively, in order to acknowledge that the "majority" of the world's population and land mass are located in the former. While I recognise that these terms risk obscuring complex and extensive diversities, they nevertheless can help to shift the balance of worldviews that frequently privilege "western" and "northern" perspectives (Punch, 2003).
2. It should be acknowledged that some UK universities run engaging Geography undergraduate fieldclasses to various African countries (see Robson, 2002) and Development Studies undergraduate students at the University of Reading may study abroad in Uganda as part of their degree.
3. Parts of this paper are a synthesis and revision of some of the arguments originally developed in my unpublished project assignment for my Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, University of Reading which evaluated this method of assessment.

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