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# Feminism and Women's Autonomy: The Challenge of Female Genital Cutting

Terminology for the multiform phenomenon I shall discuss is itself a matter of vexed controversy. Some scholars prefer the expression "female circumcision" on the grounds that this is the expression preferred by women who are now subject to the practice. To adopt any other language, they maintain, would be to show disrespect for these women and their cultures and perhaps to engage in cultural imperialism. Other scholars opt for medicalized terminology—either "female genital surgery" or "female genital operations." Still other scholars prefer the expression "female genital mutilation" on the grounds that no other language expresses the suffering inflicted by this practice and that other labels implicitly condone a cruel practice that sustains male dominance by tormenting women.

I have adopted the expression "female genital cutting" in order to address several concerns. On the one hand, I see the medicalized terminology and the culturally relative terminology as euphemistic. Although the medicalized expressions accurately represent the hygienic conditions of the hospitals in which some Euro-American and African female genital cutting is performed, they give the false impression that female genital cutting is always a sanitary procedure performed with anesthesia. Unfortunately, the procedure is frequently performed under unsafe conditions, and it never improves women's health. The culturally relative terminology is also euphemistic because the analogy with male circumcision suggests a relatively risk-free, minor procedure that

does not interfere with sexual pleasure. Although one form of the female procedure is aptly analogized to male circumcision, most forms are not.

On the other hand, the morally condemnatory language of "female genital mutilation" prejudices the question of women's autonomy via-à-vis this practice. Since there is a presumption that a person who chooses to be mutilated does not choose autonomously, this language is question begging in the context of my present topic. Moreover, I suspect that Euro-Americans are attracted to this language largely because they do not imagine that women like themselves have in the past consented to such "mutilation" and that mothers in their own society today continue to authorize comparable procedures on their daughters, and consequently they fail to empathize with contemporary women in other societies who make similar choices. Thus, I have sought terminology designed to avoid denying the pain and impairment often associated with female genital cutting but also to avoid presuming that women involved in the practice have no autonomy.

Many Euro-Americans might doubt that there is any basis for ascribing autonomy to women whose cultures mandate female genital cutting. Yet the feminist literature on female genital cutting provides ample evidence that many women exercise effective agency with respect to this practice. One striking finding is that autonomy is to be found among accommodators as well as resisters, and that neither group can be presumed to enjoy greater autonomy than the other. If this is so, one cannot identify autonomy or lack of it simply by looking at what people choose or refuse. Autonomy must dwell in the process of deciding, not in the nature of the action decided upon. Moreover, students of female genital cutting regard it as essential to avoid the trap of conceding that resisters are Western dupes and, as cultural outsiders, have no right to press for change, whereas accommodationists are more authentically representative of their culture of origin and, as female insiders, confirm the legitimacy of the practice. To overcome this dilemma, one must resist the temptation to explain greater autonomy as a function of the reduced influence of cultures that mandate female genital cutting. Culture cannot be cast as the villain that paralyzes some women's autonomy, nor can it be cast as the hero that frees women into autonomous lives. Still, in acknowledging that some social contexts are more conducive to autonomy than others, students of female genital cutting spotlight the ambiguous role of culture with respect to women's autonomy.

My project is to explore the implications for autonomy theory of these understandings of the relations among culture, female genital cutting, and women's agency. I begin by surveying the reasons different cultures give for female genital cutting and the different types of female genital cutting.



My purpose in exhibiting the enormous variation in this practice and in women's responses to it is to undercut simplistic dismissals of women's autonomy with respect to female genital cutting that rely on attention-grabbing horror stories and generalized theories of patriarchal domination. I then examine two kinds of autonomy theory—latitudinarian, value-neutral accounts and restrictive, value-saturated accounts—and I argue that neither approach adequately addresses the phenomena of women's autonomy regarding female genital cutting. To bring these phenomena into focus, it is useful to review a number of strategies for augmenting women's autonomy regarding female genital cutting. I urge that although culturally anchored educational programs may not be the most effective way to eradicate female genital cutting, they have proved to be the most effective way to promote women's autonomous control over their sexuality and health. In the concluding section, I consider how the cultural imperative of self-perpetuation entails both support for and limitation of autonomy. If cultures are to meet the need for change in response to historical contingencies, they must ensure that cultural initiates have autonomy skills that enable them to adjust their traditions. Yet if cultures are to survive, they must channel exercise of these autonomy skills into constructive critique framed by cultural allegiance, and they must discourage the development of autonomy skills that heighten discontent and precipitate defection. I argue that autonomy-augmenting educational programs succeed by developing autonomy skills that cultures have systematically, but needlessly, suppressed. Conceived as the exercise of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills, autonomy-within-culture is not only intelligible; it is a morally defensible and politically viable conception of autonomy for an era of global feminism.

## CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

Among Euro-Arnericans, misapprehensions about culture and female genital cutting abound. For example, many people associate female genital cutting with a single region, usually sub-Saharan Africa. But the practice is also found indigenously in North America, Asia, and the Middle East, and immigrants have spread their practices far and wide (Toubia 1995, 21; Obiora 1997, 298). A related misconception is that female genital cutting is rooted in a single culture, but this is far from the case. A highly diverse array of cultures furnish a variety of rationales for female genital cutting.

Many people are astonished to learn that among middle-class white Americans in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century clitoridectomy was a popular and medically certified

"cure" for hysteria, nymphomania, lesbianism, and "excessive" masturbation (Gifford 1994, 334, 361; James 1998, 1037). Curiously, though, there are cultural groups that practice female genital cutting today for the opposite reason—they believe that female genital cutting enhances women's sexual desire (Ogbu 1997, 414). More typical, though, are rationales similar to those formerly current in the United States—many cultural groups maintain that female genital cutting reduces women's sexual appetite, enforces norms of chastity, and thereby protects family honor (Obiora 1997, 298; Kouba and Muasher 1985, 104; Ogbu 1997, 414).

Repressing women's sexuality is by no means the only, nor even the most frequent, reason given for female genital cutting. Gender regimentation is a prevalent rationale as well. From this perspective, the purpose of female genital cutting is to ensure that the individuals assigned to dichotomous gender categories have anatomically suitable genitals.

In the United States today, female genital cutting is a routine, though increasingly contested, medical intervention when a condition called "ambiguous genitalia" is diagnosed (Diamond and Kipnis 1998; Fausto-Sterling 2000, chs. 3–4). Physicians and parents generally presume that left "untreated," an elongated clitoris will have deleterious effects on a girl's psychological development and will prove socially disabling (for documentation and critique of these attitudes, see Diamond and Kipnis 1998). To the extent that this negative prognosis is warranted, it is because contemporary U.S. culture insists that there are only two kinds of people—males and females—and because this particular culture prescribes genitalia conforming to restrictive norms for each category.[1] Without "corrective" demasculinizing surgery, it is thought that a genetic female endowed with "ambiguous" genitalia will be unable to attain a feminine identity. The theme of demasculinization is also found in some non-Westem cultures. Anticipating Freud, those cultures view the clitoris as a masculine organ and therefore regard excision as necessary to achieving a feminine gender identity (Kouba and Muasher 1985, 103; Obiora 1997, 297). Worldwide, it seems, people believe that babies can be born with "unnatural," though not sexually or reproductively dysfunctional, genitalia.

Whereas American culture currently mandates female genital cutting as a corrective for what it deems "abnormal" genitalia, members of many other cultural groups regard female genital cutting as an indispensable rite of passage through which all girls must pass in order to attain the identity and the status of women. Some see female genital cutting as a test of courage and endurance that prepares the individual for labor pains and birthing (Obiora 1997, 296). Others contend that female genital cutting physically purifies the individual and enhances her fertility, for they believe that the clitoris can kill a man if it touches his penis or that it will kill



the baby during childbirth (Ogbu 1997, 415; Kouba and Muasher 1985, 103). Female genital cutting may be thought necessary to morally appropriate fertility, and morally sanctioned fertility may be thought necessary to producing socially and morally viable children (Boddy 1989, 57, 60). In one Sudanese community, "son of an uncircumcised mother" is among the most derogatory epithets one can utter (Sussman 1998). Gender norms are associated with aesthetic standards as well as moral standards, and aesthetic considerations sometimes dictate female genital cutting. A woman who belongs to a culture that considers gaping orifices, including the mouth, distasteful asks, "Which is better, an ugly opening or a dignified closure?" (Boddy 1989, 52). In some cases, religious doctrine is pivotal. Some cultural groups believe that Islam mandates female genital cutting and that Allah will not hear a woman's prayers if she has not been cut (Kouba and Muasher 1985, 104).

Another cluster of reasons concerns intercultural political relations. Within a local framework, cultural identification is sometimes cited: Whether women's genitals are cut or not and, if they are cut, how they are cut may be an important way in which cultural groups inhabiting the same geographical region are differentiated (Obiora 1997, 297; Ogbu 1997, 415; James 1998, 1041–43). From a global perspective, loyalty to one's cultural roots and repudiation of Western influence are sometimes cited: Female genital cutting was often seen as testifying to opposition to colonialism and more recently as affirming indigenous tradition in the face of Western contempt for non-Western cultures and Western economic and cultural penetration (Toubia 1995, 37).

Although cultural rationales for female genital cutting can be classified according to the broad themes of sexual repression, gender identity, and group cohesion, there is no uniformity whatsoever in the specifics. This heterogeneity is echoed in the variety of forms that female genital cutting takes.

Many Euro-Americans believe that female genital cutting is a single procedure, but this is not true. In addition to Western cosmetic procedures designed to "feminize" ostensibly male genitalia, practices range from *sunna*—that is, removing the clitoral prepuce—to infibulation—that is, excising the clitoris, the labia minora, and the labia majora and suturing the remaining tissue together to create a minuscule orifice (Obiora 1997, 288–89; Kouba and Muasher 1985, 96). Correlated with this spectrum of outcomes is a spectrum of health risks in the immediate aftermath of the procedure and a spectrum of long-term consequences for women's sexuality, physical health, and psychological well-being. Moreover, different groups perform the cutting procedure at different ages—some on infants or very young girls, some on adolescents. Adult women participate in this practice not only by authorizing and/or carrying out the procedure but

also, in groups where infibulation is the rule, by agreeing to reinfibulation after childbirth. It is a mistake, then, to suppose that female genital cutting has the same impact on all affected women's lives.

Finally, it is necessary to dispel some prevalent misconceptions about culture. The misconception that most incenses non-Western women is the "othering" of the very idea of culture—that is, the supposition that culture itself is a non-Western phenomenon and that Westerners are not themselves enculturated. Alternatively, Westerners may acknowledge that everyone is enculturated yet assume that, unlike Western cultures in which dissent is tolerated and cultural change is ongoing, non-Western cultures are homogeneous and static (Narayan 1997, 14–17; Walley 1997, 408, 420). Nothing could be farther from the case. Members of a cultural group do not think and live in lockstep. Within cultural groups, interpretations of cultural beliefs vary, and so do interpretations of cultural practices. Drawing on the countless beliefs and practices that constitute a culture—beliefs and practices that are in some respects in tension with one another—and accenting and linking some of these beliefs and practices while deemphasizing or isolating others, people individualize their cultural heritage. As a result, traditionalists often coexist, albeit uneasily, with nonconformists. Moreover, the survival of cultures depends on their capacity to modify their beliefs and practices to meet new contingencies, and their capacity to adjust depends in part on the internal variegation I have described (Meyers 1993, 16–19; Moody-Adams 1994, 305–7). A seamless, timeless culture is a dead culture.

This brief survey of the anthropological background of female genital cutting is sufficient to demonstrate the daunting complexity of analyzing women's agentic position with respect to this practice. Evidently, judgments about women's autonomy vis-à-vis female genital cutting cannot rest on generalizations about the severity of the outcome, for the medical and psychosexual consequences vary substantially. Women's autonomy with respect to female genital cutting cannot be ruled out on the grounds that no one could freely choose the endangerment and impairment resulting from these procedures, for the consequences are not always grave. Nor can one assume that the reasons women have for either accommodating or resisting female genital cutting are consistent across cultural groups. Therefore, a theory of women's autonomy that is applicable to societies in which female genital cutting is practiced cannot rely on ascriptions of particular reasons to the women who are subject to this practice. The content of women's deliberations cannot settle the question of their autonomy, for the reasons they invoke are not uniform.

It is clear that some cultural groups preempt girls' autonomy by cutting their genitals when they are young and helpless. However, female genital cutting is part of an adolescent initiation rite in many cultural groups. Although it is troubling that these girls may have little experience of their own genital eroticism and presumably have no experience of the interpersonal intimacies that this sexual responsiveness makes possible, it is doubtful that girls of this age altogether lack autonomy.[2] Likewise, adult women participate in this practice as midwife practitioners, as mothers who arrange female genital cutting for their daughters, and as postpartum mothers who request reinfibulation. It is important to bear in mind, as well, that during the nineteenth century many adult Euro-American women anxiously sought relief from psychopathology or sexual deviance and willingly underwent clitoridectomy. Whatever one may think of juvenile agency, these women's agency must be analyzed on its own merits.



It is wrong, moreover, to assume that all female members of cultural groups that practice female genital cutting collaborate with this practice. Women are not in the grip of totalizing, internalized cultures which drive them to comply with a female genital cutting imperative. There are many instances of individual women persuading their families not to uphold the practice, and instances of women organizing against female genital cutting are on the rise. Although data about the prevalence of female genital cutting is disputable, it is quite possible that adherence to the practice is waning. Accordingly, to declare women who belong to cultural groups that practice female genital cutting devoid of autonomy would be to deny existing opportunities for choice and to erase the real, sometimes courageous, choices women have actually made.

Women exercise agency, then, both by complying with and by resisting female genital cutting. A theory of women's autonomy must take these realities into account, but it must also ask whether women have as much autonomy as they should have with respect to female genital cutting.

## FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING'S CHALLENGE TO AUTONOMY THEORY

The phenomenon of female genital cutting presents two opposed temptations for autonomy theory. On the one hand, latitudinarian, value-neutral accounts of autonomy—whether rational choice models or hierarchical identification models—are attractive because they do not withhold respect from women who accommodate female genital cutting by impugning these women's ability to make their own judgments and choices. On the other hand, restrictive, value-saturated accounts of autonomy that deny that people can be both oppressed and autonomous are attractive because, in claiming that false consciousness blocks the self-determination of women in cultures that mandate female genital cutting, they highlight the harsh personal cost of living under such oppressive social regimes. Neither of these approaches is ultimately convincing, however.

Preliminary to characterizing the weaknesses of these approaches, it is useful to review what an account of autonomy should accomplish. An account of autonomy aims principally to explicate an especially valuable mode of living. That mode of living is captured in a number of familiar expressions: "She lives by her own lights," "He is his own man," "She's always been true to herself," and the like. Autonomous individuals are not mere conformists. They need not be eccentric, but they do rely on their own judgment. They know who they are—what really matters to them, whom they deeply care about, what their capacities and limitations actually are, and so forth—and they enact this introspective understanding of their "true" selves in their lives. There is a good fit between their identity, their attitudes toward themselves, and their conduct. Colloquial expressions, such as "I feel at one with myself" and "I feel right in my skin," voice this sense of integration. As these idioms suggest, living autonomously is satisfying, sometimes exhilarating. Subjectively, then, the value of autonomy stems from the fascination of self-discovery and the gratification of self-determination. Objectively, it rests on the dignity of the distinctive individual and the wondrous diversity of the lives individuals may fashion for themselves.

A second aim an account of autonomy should fulfill is to explicate the nature of the personal and social costs of suppressing autonomy. Individuals experience lack of autonomy as a sense of being out of control or being under the control of others—whether other identifiable individuals or anonymous societal powers. At odds with themselves, at odds with their behavior, or both, nonautonomous individuals often feel anxious about their choices, contemptuous of themselves, and disappointed with their lives. Alternatively, they may simply feel hollow, for they may feel they have been made into vehicles for projects that they do not disavow but that are not their own. In one way or another, nonautonomous individuals suffer from alienation from self. I would add, moreover, that societies that are not conducive to autonomy incur a moral loss since they thwart (or try to thwart) insightful social critique. When a society discourages self-exploration and self-expression, it discourages attention to symptoms of discontent and shields social ideologies and institutions from probing examination and oppositional activism. Autonomy exposes the need for social change and equips people to pursue it.

I shall not linger long over latitudinarian, value-neutral views, for their weaknesses have been diagnosed and elaborated elsewhere. Briefly, rational choice views take people's desires, values, and goals for granted and identify autonomy with devising plans that maximize satisfaction (for critique, see Meyers 1989, 77–78; Babbitt 1993). Hierarchical identification views subject first-order desires to scrutiny in light of second-order volitions and link autonomy to reconciling the two levels to achieve a harmonious whole (for critique, see Meyers 1989, 33–41 and 2000, 169–72; Benson 1991, 391–94). Both types of theory neglect the possibility that an oppressive social context could subvert people's autonomy by imparting detrimental desires, values, and goals or warping people's second-order volitions. Such theories make no adequate provision for "authenticating" the concepts and commitments that structure one's interpretations and propel one's deliberations and choices. In contrast, restrictive, value-saturated accounts of autonomy, such as Susan Babbitt's and Paul Benson's, insist on the need to distinguish real from apparent desires and authentic values from spurious ones, and they draw these distinctions by placing constraints on what people can autonomously choose.



According to Susan Babbitt, ideological oppression instills preferences and desires that do not adequately reflect an interest in one's own flourishing and that prevent one from pursuing one's "objective interests" even when one is aware that one has an option to pursue them (Babbitt 1993, 246–47). The problem, claims Babbitt, is the individual's "not possessing a sense of self that would support a full sense of flourishing"—that is, one has been deprived of a precondition for wanting to pursue one's objective interests (Babbitt 1993, 248). Although the oppressed have nonpropositional knowledge—that is, knowledge in the form of intuitions, attitudes, ways of behaving, etc.—that adumbrates their objective interests, this knowledge is inexpressible within the existing ideological regime and is not translatable into autonomous action (Babbitt 1993, 252–54). Mute and subjugated, these individuals' agency can only be salvaged through "transformative experiences" that, as it were, upgrade their selfhood (Babbitt 1993, 252–53).

I doubt that oppression renders people's nonpropositional knowledge inexpressible. In fact, I think one of Babbitt's examples amply demonstrates my point. Commenting on Alice Walker's novel about domestic violence, *The Color Purple*, Babbitt claims that Celie's knowledge that she is a morally worthy person is nonpropositional and inexpressible. I would argue that Celie's knowledge indeed stems from nonpropositional sources, her feelings, attitudes, and perhaps her intuitions. But, as Babbitt reports, when taunted by Mister—"[Y]ou nothing at all"—Celie trenchantly replies, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook . . . but *I'm here*" (Babbitt 1993, 253; emphasis added). Babbitt is correct to say that the categories of Mister's ideology provide no direct, authoritative way for Celie to assert her moral status, but it is evident that Celie is able to give her knowledge a propositional form and to encode her knowledge in intelligible speech.

Oppression deprives Celie of conventions—readily available, generally accepted discursive formulae—through which she can articulate her convictions, protests, and aspirations (Walker 1998, 125–28). To articulate

their self-knowledge, oppressed people must resort to circumlocution, devise figures of speech, and work to redefine the terms that frame intrapersonal understanding, interpersonal relations, and moral reflection. Thus, they must summon extraordinary imaginative and linguistic powers if they are to gain a rich understanding of who they are and why their needs and desires deserve respect. Nevertheless, in light of her defiant self-recognition and her poignant self-assertion, it seems doubtful that Celie lacks an "adequate" sense of self. I see no reason, then, not to trust her to sort out her own values and goals and conduct her own life.

Still, it is undeniable that Celie's social context is doing everything possible to stifle her autonomy and to defeat her. Likewise, women who demand reinfibulation because it is beautiful, because it is a precondition for womanly virtue, because it is "our way," or because the World Health Organization is trying to force them to stop doing it hardly enjoy cultural environments that encourage them to do what they think is best for themselves. For this reason, I expect, Paul Benson would argue that attributing autonomy to these women betokens a Pollyannaish confidence in their agentic capabilities.

According to Benson, "Certain forms of socialization are oppressive and clearly lessen autonomy" (1991, 385). There are two forms that oppressive socialization takes: (1) coercive socialization that inflicts penalties for noncompliance with unjustifiable norms, and (2) socialization that instills false beliefs that prevent people from discerning genuine reasons for acting (388–89). Autonomous people are "competent criticizer[s]" who can "detect and appreciate the reasons there are to act in various ways" (396, 397). But oppressive socialization systematically obviates and obfuscates victims' reasons for acting. As Benson puts it, oppressive socialization limits in "well-organized ways what sorts of reasons to act people are able to recognize" (396). Moreover, bidirectional integration—that is, mutual adjustment and reconciliation of first-order desires and second-order volitions about first-order desires—is no guarantee of autonomy, for oppressive socialization could implant such deficient values that a person could have degraded first-order desires that would nonetheless be endorsed by second-order volitions (395). Internalized oppressive socialization, it seems, can shanghai a person's entire life.

Presumably, Benson would conclude that, because of their socialization, the many women who do not repudiate female genital cutting have defective reason-detection faculties—defective at least insofar as they are oblivious to the "decisive" force of the reasons against this practice—and thus that they have been deprived of autonomy at least with respect to this choice.[3] But I would urge that Benson's grim assessment of the sinister potency of oppressive socialization exaggerates the impact of socialization generally. It just isn't true that oppressive socialization always decreases autonomy. Some people become oppositional activists, and some of them flourish in that role. In cases of firebrand, adventure-loving resisters, one suspects they would have had a hard time fitting in and living autonomously if they had been born into a just society during peacetime. Other people carve out lives that enact "inappropriate" values in the interstices of the constraints that society imposes. They find pockets of lapsed surveillance or permissiveness within oppressive regimes and devise ways to express their unorthodox values and commitments in those spaces. Still others endorse at least some of the values upon which oppressive constraints are based and on balance accept the constraints and conform their lives to them. We find all of these possibilities represented in connection with female genital cutting—women fleeing their homeland and seeking asylum to avoid having their genitals cut or to protect their daughters from cutting, women organizing locally and nationally to modify or eradicate female genital cutting, women concluding that cultural tradition and cohesion or getting married and bearing children are more important than bodily integrity. I would venture that there are women in each of these groups who have experienced comparably oppressive socialization. Undeniably, they have more to overcome in order to attain autonomy than some other women, for they must mobilize extraordinary introspective and volitional powers to figure out what they really want and to act on their own desires. But it is hard to believe that none of them chooses autonomously.



The fact is that we are all immersed in a culture at a historical moment. How do we know that some of us have attained adequate selfhood and thus have the epistemic perspective needed to grasp what full flourishing is like? How do we know that some of us have highly developed, acutely sensitive reason-detection faculties and thus have the epistemic skills needed to determine what cannot be a good reason to act or what is a dispositive reason to act? It seems to me that we would need far more consensus than we presently have (or are likely to get) about human nature and social justice before we could conclude that women who opt for compliance with female genital cutting norms never do so autonomously. We would have to be persuaded, in other words, that all women's interests are such that this decision could not accord with any woman's authentic values and desires under any circumstances. If we are prepared to acknowledge that a woman who has undergone oppressive socialization but who rebels against its dictates may be accessing her authentic values and desires and acting autonomously, it seems to me that we cannot rule out a priori the possibility that a similarly socialized woman who chooses otherwise may be autonomous too.

In sum, restrictive, value-saturated accounts of autonomy are troubling because they homogenize authentic selves and autonomous lives. The

paradoxical effect of ahistorically, acontextually foreordaining what individuals can and cannot autonomously choose is to *deindividualize* autonomy. Yet latitudinarian, value-neutral accounts of autonomy are troubling, too. On this view, failures of autonomy are failures to obtain and take into account relevant information, or they are failures to integrate one's values, desires, and the like into a coherent outlook and a feasible course of action. The paradoxical effect of neglecting the possibility that a well-integrated, smoothly functioning self could be in need of rigorous scrutiny and drastic overhaul is to *abandon* the individual to the influence of a culture's prevailing beliefs and practices. Such a view oversimplifies self-alienation and blunts autonomy's potential to spur social critique. Neither of these approaches offers a compelling theory of individualized autonomous living.

## AUTONOMY-AUGMENTING PROGRAMS AND FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

Feminist students of female genital cutting have analyzed a number of programs that have enhanced women's autonomy in regard to this practice. Moreover, they have proposed legal reforms, and they have documented the effects of social trends on female genital cutting. I shall briefly survey this literature with the aim of using it as a springboard for developing an account of women's autonomy-within-culture.

My reading of this literature suggests that education is the least controversial and most effective approach to augmenting women's autonomy regarding female genital cutting, but the success of this approach depends on the nature of the educational program. Again and again, scholars stress the need for grassroots participation in conceiving the aims of educational initiatives, in formulating educational agendas, and in devising educational presentations and materials. Phrases like "education for critical consciousness" and "emancipatory education" imply the need for institutionalizing self-determination at the founding and throughout the implementation of educational programs (Kouba and Muasher 1985, 108; Obiora 1997, 361; Mugo 1997, 467). This imperative has been put in practice through dialogic program planning and dialogic "classrooms" and also by adopting culturally familiar media for "instruction" (Mugo 1997, 467).[4] Songs, plays, and puppet shows followed by exploratory discussion sessions often replace lectures and rote learning.

Experience shows that many women are receptive to information about the health risks associated with female genital cutting (Obiora 1997, 361). Successful educational programs often capitalize on women's dissonant experiences vis-à-vis female genital cutting. For example, health education can



juxtapose women's commitment to female genital cutting with their awareness of traumatic outcomes (sometimes deaths) and their awareness of their own sexual impairment. Likewise, health education can kindle cognitive dissonance by highlighting potential conflicts between women's desire to bear children and their commitment to female genital cutting, which can reduce fertility (Obiora 1997, 362). Programs designed to elicit inquiry into the symbolic meanings that one's culture attaches to female genital cutting have also proved effective (Obiora 1997, 361). An international organization called Women Living under Muslim Laws has developed educational strategies that encourage women to analyze and reconstruct their own identities within their cultures. Through education, this organization seeks to debunk the myth of one universal Muslim identity and to offer women the opportunity to read and interpret Islam's sacred texts for themselves (Shaheed 1994, 1009, 1011; 1995, 80, 86). In discovering how differently women live under different Islamic regimes and how weak the tie between Islamic scripture and current religious doctrines requiring female genital cutting actually is, many women realize that they could modify their beliefs regarding female genital cutting without sacrificing their religious beliefs. Intellectual and emotional space hospitable to envisaging a different conception of the ethics and aesthetics of womanhood is thus opened.

Sometimes women become convinced that they can flourish as women with their genitals intact. Kenyan women and their families have created "circumcision through words" rituals in which cultural teachings about womanhood are transmitted and girls' entrance into womanhood is celebrated, but the traditional cutting is eliminated (James 1998, 1046).[5] Sometimes women remain convinced that female genital cutting is necessary, but they alter the practice either by reducing it to a symbolic pricking or by medicalizing it (Obiora 1997, 368, 371–73; Gunning 1997, 455–56). Sometimes they insist on upholding tradition. Hofriyati women whose husbands have returned from working in Saudi Arabia convinced that infibulation is contrary to Islam and that *sunna* is the religiously sanctioned form of female genital cutting have resisted the ensuing pressure to adopt the less extreme practice (Boddy 1989, 52, 319). In some cultural groups, the ritual surrounding female genital cutting not only confers the status of womanhood on the initiate but also creates lifelong social bonds among the girls who undergo the ritual together. Thus, another important task of educational programs has been to create substitutes for the "age groups" established by female genital cutting. In central Kenya, the social benefits formerly delivered by age groups—solidarity among women and consolidation of women's social authority—are now secured by women's self-help economic organizations (Robertson 1996, 616, 631).

In addition to such culturally attuned, participatory education, we also find more coercive legal and social forces at work. Female genital cutting

is prohibited in a number of countries where the practice has been common. However, the history of criminalizing female genital cutting and disseminating information about women's legal rights does not inspire confidence in this approach. Either these measures have had little impact, or they have intensified reactionary traditionalism (Obiora 1997, 357; Kouba and Muasher 1985, 104–5). But legal sanctions could take a different form. One scholar proposes that laws be passed giving adult women the right to sue the practitioners who cut their genitals when they were children (A'Haleem 1992, 155). As a precedent for her proposal, she points to the passage of parallel laws protecting women from compulsory marriage. Women who were adequately informed of these laws frequently went to court and sued to enforce their rights (A'Haleem 1992, 155). Perhaps women would also avail themselves of rights to seek compensation from female-genital-cutting practitioners, which would discourage women from entering this trade and encourage practitioners to find other sources of income. It seems clear, however, that whereas legal measures produce mixed results, urbanization and industrialization predictably curtail female genital cutting. In Nigeria, for example, one report shows how the rise of Western-style education has led to a marked decline in female genital cutting. Busy with book learning and preoccupied by extracurricular activities, girls have no time at puberty for lengthy seclusion periods and ceremonies (Ogbu 1997, 420). As education, employment and marriage increasingly take place away from girls' communities of origin, the power of cultural tradition wanes, and the incidence of female genital cutting plummets (Ogbu 1997, 420–21).

I do not object to social and economic mobility provided that individuals welcome it and benefit from it, nor do I object to using law to bring about ameliorative social change. Still, it is important to point out that these two strategies are not necessarily compatible with cultural perpetuation, and they do not necessarily ensure increased autonomy for women. Endowing women with the right to penalize female-genital-cutting practitioners pits women from the same cultural group against one another and preempts the possibility of their working together to transform cultural norms and obtain economically viable employment. Some women may gain autonomy. But their gains may be made at the expense of other women's autonomy, and relying on the national judiciary to make these gains may short-circuit cultural processes through which womanhood might be redefined without shattering all continuity with traditional conceptions of womanhood. While some women's autonomy may be enhanced, their autonomy may be dissociated from their culture of origin.

More obviously, social and economic mobility gained through geographic mobility often dissolves networks of mutual recognition and shared beliefs and practices that are necessary to sustain cultures. Migration often leads to assimilating prevalent norms in one's new place of residence and work. Assimilation weakens, if it does not sever, one's ties to one's culture of origin. Some women who move to urban areas and marry into families with different cultural backgrounds gain greater autonomy by abandoning their own culture and becoming integrated into a more congenial cultural milieu. Others suffer a loss of autonomy. They find their cherished beliefs denigrated or derided; they experience a sense of dislocation and disorientation; and they are blocked from enacting values they consider authentically their own.



What these observations show, I would urge, is how important it is to bear in mind the difference between eradicating the practice of female genital cutting and augmenting women's autonomy with respect to female genital cutting.[6] Ceasing to be subject to a cultural imperative mandating female genital cutting does not in itself constitute increased autonomy. The educational programs I described may well try the patience of feminists who are (in my opinion, justifiably) appalled at the harm inflicted by female genital cutting. Yet these programs have a distinct advantage from the standpoint of autonomy, for they are designed to engage women's autonomy skills without exposing them to autonomy-disabling cultural alienation. In short, these programs promote autonomy-within-culture.

## AUTONOMY-WITHIN-CULTURE

Michele Moody-Adams points out that successful cultures must preserve people's capacities for the exercise of judgment and discretion (1994, 307). "Any culture that worked to impair these capacities," she adds, "would be creating the conditions for its own demise." I agree that a viable culture cannot turn its adherents into indoctrinated automatons who cannot question cultural beliefs and practices and who cannot instigate cultural change (Meyers 1993, 17). Still, I find Moody-Adams's view of autonomy-within-culture overly sanguine.

A thriving culture must evolve, but it must persist as well. If cultures are self-perpetuating systems, they must have built-in mechanisms that shield their beliefs and practices from criticism so zealous and damning that it triggers cultural decline or foments mass defection. The slightest acquaintance with human history confirms that cultures need not depend on the justice of their beliefs and practices to secure the loyalty of their adherents. Indeed, cultures, including the most unjust ones, may have a willing coconspirator in human psychology. People commonly exhibit a conservative bent—preferring the known over the unknown, even preferring the security of having more or less mastered coping with a known evil over the risk of being thrown off balance by whatever might succeed it. Still, this conservative disposition is to a significant degree culturally abetted. Cultures ward off the perils of internal dissension and disruption

by circumscribing adherents' exercise of autonomy skills. Adroitly channeling exercise of these skills where they are needed while limiting the scope of their application enables cultures to evolve and endure.

Moody-Adams might reply that what I have described is not impairment of capacities for judgment and discretion. On the contrary, she might say, cultures guide and modulate exercise of autonomy skills, and rightly so. To some extent, I would not take exception to this rejoinder. No doubt cultures exist because people cannot lead fulfilling lives without stable systems of shared beliefs and practices. Thus, serviceable cultures nurture those autonomy skills that people need to get along within their existing cultural framework and those that they need to improvise adjustments when circumstances render long-standing cultural beliefs and practices untenable. However, insofar as cultures perpetuate injustice by selectively suppressing autonomy skills, I would insist that they are not merely regulating people's capacity for judgment and discretion, but rather they are impairing it.

It seems to me that cultures do this in two main ways. First, cultures furnish repertories of concepts and interpretive schemas that focus perception and shape reflection. Thus, cultures lead people to notice some phenomena and overlook others, and they lead people to ascribe certain meanings to their experience and to disregard other possible meanings. Second, cultures valorize some autonomy skills over others. Hence they commend childrearing practices that nurture these skills and establish social structures that reward individuals who have them, and they let other autonomy skills languish. The favored autonomy skills enable people to function well in their cultural context, and the repertories of concepts and interpretive schemas provide input for these deliberation skills that is preselected and preprocessed in culturally congenial ways. The disfavored autonomy skills are skills that might lead people to question the adequacy of the culturally approved repertory of concepts and interpretive schemas and, perhaps, to condemn their cultural heritage.

For example, middle-class Euro-American culture prizes means/ends rationality and vigorously cultivates the skills needed to pick goals with high satisfaction yields and to plot successful goal-directed campaigns. In this culture, however, valorized autonomy skills are gendered. Although childrearing practices and reward structures do not extinguish means/ends rationality in middle-class Euro-American girls, their interpersonal skills are accentuated. I confess I do not know which autonomy skills are valorized in the innumerable cultures that practice genital cutting. But I believe it is possible to infer which autonomy skills they devalue in women by examining the educational programs that augment women's autonomy.

Successful educational programs mobilize women's introspection, empathy, and imagination skills. One program invited women to explore their feelings about their sexuality—their sufferings, their frustrations,



and their disappointments, as well as their pleasures—and to sift through the possible meanings of these stirrings (for discussion of the need to pay attention to subjectivity, see Gifford 1994, 338; also see Meyers 1989, 79–89; for related discussion of "outlaw emotions," see Jaggar 1997). In effect, this program encourages women to acknowledge the complexity of their emotional lives and to take their own subjectivity seriously. Another program capitalized on situations in which local girls and women had become infected or died and invited women to empathize with the suffering of the infected individuals and the grief of the families of girls and women who died. Instead of rationalizing the pain and dismissing the sorrow as passing, women were freed to regard such suffering as significant and avoidable (for related discussion of empowerment, see Okin 1998, 47; for related discussion of empathy, see Bartky 1997; Meyers 1994).[7] Some programs invite women to imagine the lives of women whose cultures are different but whose religion is the same as their own (Shaheed 1994, 1009–10). Sharing a religion builds a bridge to empathy with these cultural strangers and provides a link that legitimates using emphatic understanding of these other women's lives to reflect critically on one's own experience and culture.

I suspect that these educational programs owe their success to synergy among introspection, empathy, and imagination. Empathy with others can embolden one to confront and enrich one's interpretation of one's own experience, and insightful introspection can facilitate empathy with other people's experience and equip one to interpret their experience sympathetically and respectfully. As evidence, let me offer a sequence I have observed.

Most middle-class Euro-Americans initially find it virtually impossible to empathize with an African mother who consents to and actively participates in the infibulation of her daughter. Yet these individuals typically find it easy to empathize with an American mother who consents to reconstructive surgery on a daughter whose genitals are considered ambiguous. Not only does one assume that surgery in the United States will be performed under sterile conditions and that anesthesia will be used, but also one is oneself imbued with the same image of an appropriately gendered female body that is guiding the American mother's decision. Thus, one can readily and vividly apprehend the American mother's distress about her daughter's purportedly unnatural condition and her worries about the problems she expects her daughter will encounter if her "pathological" genitals are left untreated. It is easy, then, to understand her decision to authorize surgery. Indeed, many middle-class Euro-Americans might find withholding permission to operate incomprehensible or irresponsible.

Sometimes when I start a conversation with a middle-class Euro-American acquaintance by eliciting empathy along the lines I have just sketched and by eliciting reflection on the reasons for the ease of this empathy, it

proves possible for my acquaintance to transfer this understanding to the larger issue of female genital cutting. Sensitized to the role that Western gender norms are playing in one's empathy for the American mother, one now appreciates how potent culturally specific feminine bodily norms are, and one can sympathetically reconstruct how a vastly different set of norms could figure in an African mother's feelings and decision about infibulation. Thus, empathy with a fellow cultural initiate and introspective reflection on how culture facilitates one's empathy for this individual make it possible to empathize with a woman from a different culture and to interpret her subjectivity and choices charitably.

Narrow categories and prejudicial values often distort or block introspection and empathy. Yet opportunities to examine one's subjective experience with supportive associates, to discover hidden similarities between others' experience and one's own, and to talk about unorthodox ideas in a safe environment can correct and deepen both self-knowledge and insight into others. Introspection and empathy can expand one's repertoire of concepts and interpretive schemas beyond the culturally furnished stock. The educational programs I have described suggest that this struggle for introspective and empathic access and for language that adequately expresses one's newfound knowledge is best undertaken as an open-ended, collective endeavor (for relevant discussion, see Scheman 1993, chapter 3; Brison 1997; Meyers 1997). Not only does interaction with others expose individuals to novel viewpoints that may never have occurred to each of them separately, but also the sharing of conclusions and of the process of reaching them infuses these dissident views with an authority they might otherwise lack. It seems, in sum, that women who participate in these educational programs gain intellectual tools and self-confidence, and that they license themselves to recirculate their discoveries and use them to refurbish or jettison traditional beliefs and practices. Introspection and empathy thus emancipate their imaginations. Beliefs and practices that once seemed degraded and abhorrent can now be pictured as constituting an honorable and fulfilling way of life.

The capacity for imagination is complex, for it recruits subsidiary skills and orchestrates them. Introspection and empathy can spark imagination, as can dialogic and consensus-building skills. Moreover, imagination depends on the concepts one has at one's disposal and the meanings one associates with phenomena. Prescriptive norms shape imagination. Thus, cultures can limit imagination by furnishing an impoverished repertoire of concepts and interpretive schemas, by stunting the development of skills that contribute to imagination, or by devaluing imagination itself. My hypothesis, then, is that cultures that mandate female genital cutting either altogether devalue imagination in women or else value imagination in women only when it is serving specific approved purposes. In the latter case, cultures may foster the subsidiary skills that imagination enlists only



insofar as these skills promote the condoned forms of imaginative activity.

A culture's ultimate defensive weapon is to make alternative ways of life unimaginable or imaginable only as bizarre or loathsome specimens. There is no more effective way to galvanize cultural allegiance than to suppress people's ability to imagine a profoundly different life as a life they might gladly lead. There is no better evidence, I would add, that cultures typically perpetuate themselves by impairing empathy with cultural outsiders and thwarting imagination of cultural alternatives than the fact that ethnocentricity and xenophobia are as rampant and virulent as they are.

Whereas I am convinced that Moody-Adams overestimates the autonomy proficiency that viable cultures must secure, I am convinced that the two restrictive, value-saturated theories of autonomy I discussed above underestimate the damage to autonomy that alienation from one's culture and isolation from other members of one's cultural group can inflict. Still, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that Babbitt and Benson bring out important dimensions of women's autonomy with respect to female genital cutting, and these insights into women's autonomy lend support to a skills-based, processual account of autonomy.

Benson's chief contribution to a theory of women's autonomy over female genital cutting rests on his observation that oppressive socialization compartmentalizes critical skills and receptivity to reasons (1991, 397). His example is a woman who exercises critical competence with respect to her education but not with respect to her appearance. Similarly, we have seen that cultures place female genital cutting beyond the purview of women's introspection, empathy, and imagination skills, yet they rely on women to exercise these very skills in other areas of life, such as childrearing. Although the importance of introspection, empathy, and imagination for gaining autonomy over female genital cutting suggests that it would be a mistake to confine autonomy skills to critical reasoning, and although the need for cultures to deflect exercise of autonomy skills away from culturally destructive uses suggests that it would also be a mistake to suppose that only oppressive enculturation compartmentalizes autonomy skills, it is nonetheless true that cultures' self-protective devices include compartmentalization and that these devices can have deleterious effects on autonomy. Indeed, it seems to me that the success of the educational programs I discussed is due in part to their effectiveness in decompartmentalizing and redirecting autonomy skills that women already have.

Babbitt claims that altered settings can prompt transformative experiences that enhance autonomy, and this view is borne out to some extent by the line of thought I have presented. I would take issue with her, though, when she allows that foisting a new set of opportunities on people is an ethical and efficacious way to increase their autonomy (Babbitt 1993, 256–57). That legal reforms and social or economic upheaval produce mixed results for women's autonomy over female genital cutting

raises doubts about the defensibility of manipulating the context of women's choices. Since autonomy-augmenting educational programs are typically developed by cultural initiates who rely on traditional modes of expression and appeal to traditional values, it is reasonable to surmise that autonomy is best extended by avoiding cultural alienation and by building on women's existing autonomy skills.[8] Still, I agree with Babbitt that women's participation in these educational programs can be transformative, for breaking through the barriers erected by a culturally transmitted cognitive system can radically reconfigure perception and open previously unthinkable vistas of reflection and choice.

Successful educational programs embody four assumptions about autonomy:

1. Autonomy is best understood as socially situated—that is, asautonomy-within-culture.
2. Autonomy couples self-discovery and avowal with choice and self-*re*definition.
3. Gaining autonomy consists of exercising a complex set of skills.
4. One's authentic values and real desires are those that emerge as one exercises autonomy skills.

From their inception, autonomy-augmenting programs regard women in cultures that practice female genital cutting as self-determining individuals. Since it is obvious that these women have some degree of proficiency with respect to autonomy skills, such as introspection and empathy, before these programs ever become available, it is clear that they have some understanding of what matters to them and how best to proceed in light of their values and commitments before they participate in such programs. Understanding autonomy as I have proposed, then, makes sense of the claim that women who are subject to female genital cutting are not without autonomy. But this understanding of autonomy entails neither endorsement of female genital cutting nor resignation to its persistence. Since cultures that practice female genital cutting may have selectively nurtured and stifled women's autonomy skills, and since these cultures may shield the issue of female genital cutting from exercise of autonomy skills, developing and coordinating women's autonomy skills and extending the range of application of these skills are key to augmenting their autonomy. Individuals may identify points of self-estrangement—doubts about values or tensions between private feelings and conduct—and decide to revise their convictions and openly oppose tradition. They may find themselves unconflicted about their cultural heritage and renew their traditionalist convictions from a broader perspective. Or they may pursue some nuanced, intermediate path, embarking upon a process of



renegotiating and revitalizing cultural traditions. Although no uniform outcome is guaranteed, the trend when the scope of women's autonomy is expanded has been toward erosion of the practice of female genital cutting. This skills-based, processual view of autonomy insists on respecting people as self-determining agents and refuses to prejudge what values and practices autonomous people can endorse. Nevertheless, this view does not collapse into indifference to values or cynicism about social reform.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Ken Kipnis for a prepublication copy of the Diamond and Kipnis paper I have cited and for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to Berel Lang and Sara Ruddick for their suggestions.

1. In the United States today, we find gender parity where ambiguous genitalia are concerned. Cosmetic surgery is also routinely performed on genetically male infants whose penises are considered too small or who lack testicles. It is worth noting, though, that gender symmetry is not necessarily the rule. Just as some cultures practice female genital cutting but not male genital cutting, others cut boys' genitals to bring about a masculine identity (sometimes the cutting is as radical as infibulation) but do not cut girls' genitals (James 1998, 1041–43).
2. An interesting complication concerns the potential for dramatic development of the individual's erotic responsiveness over time. In this connection, it is worth noting that throughout our lives we are obliged to make choices that, for better or worse, cut off other possibilities. Alas, we cannot always foresee what options we are eliminating, nor can we always appreciate just how desirable foreseeable, forgone options really are. Rational choice theory's requirement that choosers have full knowledge of the consequences of their choices is an ideal that usually cannot be approximated very well. Thus, a realistic theory of autonomy must work within the limits of human prescience.
3. I want to acknowledge that Benson realizes that oppressive socialization does not necessarily rule out autonomy in all aspects of the victim's life. He discusses the possibility that a person's critical competence can be compartmentalized—that is, one can exercise critical capabilities in one arena but be unable to exercise these capabilities in another (Benson 1991, 397).
4. Conventional educational methods do not seem particularly fruitful. In her role as English teacher, for example, Christine Walley gave her pupils the option of writing an essay about female genital cutting. Many students defended it as "our custom" and as keeping girls' sexuality under control until marriage, but they also asserted that it was "bad" because it was illegal and un-Christian (1997, 411). One student who had "enthusiastically invited" Walley to her sister's female genital cutting declared that it is another way of "destroying" women's bodies. As Walley observes, the students' arguments in favor of female genital cutting parrot local authorities' pronouncements on cultural propriety, while their critiques parrot doctrines taught in the official Social Education curriculum. I suspect that they

saw the writing assignment as an academic exercise which called upon them to recite what they had learned, rather than as an opportunity to reflect and reveal what they personally thought. If such exercises contribute to their autonomy, it is only in virtue of maintaining their consciousness of disparate views of female genital cutting. Perhaps they appropriate and individualize some of the ideas they have been exposed to in their private conversations and kvetching sessions.

5. This cultural change highlights the importance of bringing men into the educational and cultural reconstruction processes. When and how women choose to do this vary greatly from cultural group to cultural group.

6. It might be argued that eradicating female genital cutting is objectively in the best interests of the cultural groups that practice it, for repudiating the practice would decrease disease and increase fertility. Although this may be so, I believe that social change that is disconnected from individual autonomy is as often as not counterproductive. It often proves culturally destructive, for it alienates members of the group. But when it is culturally advantageous, it often sacrifices some members of the group and their interests to the interests of the larger social collectivity. Individual autonomy may not always be the most efficient way to promote cultural interests, but I am convinced that it is the most humane way to advance this goal.

7. In an intriguing aside, Walley wonders whether incidents in which girls reveal "cowardice"—in one cultural parlance, they "cry the knife"—could be enlisted to reconstruct values (Walley 1997, 418–19). Might this obstensible cowardice be reinterpreted as resistance?

8. More generally, I would urge that transformative experiences that do not engage autonomy skills are extremely hazardous. Cults specialize in transformative experiences, and some people who undergo transformative experiences get converted into neo-Nazis instead of feminists. Although there is no way to immunize people against such ill-fated transformations, autonomy skills are the best protection there is.