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“AYITI CHERI”: CULTURAL ORIENTATION OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS IN RURAL HAITI

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Abstract

Adolescents are an emerging population in Haiti, particularly after the deadly 2010 earthquake. The steady penetration of U.S. culture into this poor, disaster-prone country begs the question: Do today's adolescents possess a similar fondness for their home country, culture, and traditional family values as did Haitians of old? Or are they more oriented towards U.S. culture? Early adolescents ($n = 105$, $M = 12.87$ yrs, $SD = .86$) in rural Haiti reported their cultural orientation towards Haitian culture and U.S. culture as well as their family obligations beliefs. Findings revealed high Haitian orientation, very high family obligations (boys especially), and very low U.S. orientation, although adolescents who interacted more frequently with U.S. tourists and those who consumed more U.S. fast food had higher U.S. culture orientation. Despite severe challenges, rural Haitian early adolescents demonstrate remarkable allegiance to their home country, culture, and traditional family values.

Keywords

family obligations; remote acculturation; globalization; cultural maintenance; Caribbean

“Why the Haitians? Us again, always us? As if we were in the world to measure human limitations in the face of poverty and pain, to hold on to our salutary creativity through an extraordinary ability to resist, and to create vital energy from our many trials.”

– *post-earthquake survivor reflection*, Lahens (2010)

Haiti has had more than its fair share of problems (Lahens, 2010; World Health Organization/Pan American Health Organization [WHO/PAHO], 2010). What is more, many of Haiti's youth cannot help but know their position near the bottom of the world's

economic ladder in this era of unprecedented access to information about the lifestyles of those in more prosperous countries (CARICOM Commission on Youth Development [CCYD], 2010). And that was *before* the disastrous earthquake on January 12, 2010, which killed approximately one-quarter of a million people and left more wounded and homeless in this small Caribbean country (WHO/PAHO, 2010). Against this backdrop of poverty and natural disasters, what feelings do young adolescents living in Haiti today have about their country and their culture? Do they share the strong Haitian pride of their grandparents and great grandparents, embodied in the sentimental Haitian phrase “Ayiti Cheri”, meaning *My Dear/Beloved Haiti*? Or are they more oriented towards foreign countries and cultures, particularly those of North America, given the significant northward migration trends and prominent U.S. influence in the country? The purpose of this brief report is to present the findings of a descriptive study exploring cultural orientation and traditional family values in a sample of early adolescents in rural Haiti. Adolescents are an emerging yet understudied population in the Caribbean (10–19 year olds comprise 19% of the population), particularly in Haiti (23%: UNICEF, 2012). Although rural Haitian youth have more socioeconomic challenges than urban youth, they are often overlooked in research and programs.

Haiti as a Context for Human Development

Haiti is located some 600 miles south of Florida and shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with its larger neighbor, the Dominican Republic. Haiti became the first independent Black republic in the world in 1804 (WHO/PAHO, 2010), and Haitians’ fierce pride was celebrated in the 1920 folk song “Ayiti Cheri” and its subsequent English rendition by Harry Belafonte (Burgie & Belafonte, 1957). Unfortunately, early international opposition and later political and economic challenges progressively undermined Haiti’s development throughout the 20th century (WHO/PAHO, 2010). Haiti and its approximately 10 million residents are currently classified by the United Nations as having ‘low human development’ based on life expectancy, mean and expected years of schooling, and national income (2011 HDI score = .45 on a 0–1 scale, rank = 158th/187 countries: UNDP, 2012). In other words, Haiti’s infrastructure and development are more similar to countries in sub-Saharan Africa (HDI region score = .46) than to the rest of the Caribbean (HDI region score = .73), and they stand worlds apart from prosperous Western nations such as the United States (HDI = .91: UNDP, 2012).

In many ways, the national (macro)trauma caused by the devastating 2010 earthquake only exacerbated poverty-inflicted (micro)traumas most Haitians experience daily (R. Benjamin, personal communication, May 21, 2011). These microtraumas include inadequacies in housing, sanitation, physical and mental healthcare, education, and protections from abuses (Nicolas, Jean-Jacques, & Wheatley, 2012). Although urban Haitians were more acutely affected by the earthquake, rural Haitians are more chronically impacted by poverty and deprivation (WHO/PAHO, 2010). One notable exception to Haitian poverty is the small, affluent, urban Haitian elite who generally speak French, are from more educated families with higher status occupations, and have more European phenotypic features including lighter skin (Largey, 1994).

Against these odds, the World Bank's 2003 report on Haitian and other Caribbean youth across the region concluded that they are "generally happy and healthy...they attend school, participate in social and cultural events, enjoy the loving support of a family and peers, and plan for the future" (p. xiii). More recent data show similar findings. An extensive exploratory study of the aspirations and well-being of 6000+ youth across Caribbean countries (including Haiti) revealed that early adolescents (10–14 years) are generally nationalistic, feel positively about life in the Caribbean, and imagine a good future for themselves in the region even if they migrate temporarily to study or achieve personal goals (CCYD, 2010). Early adolescents in majority Black developing countries outside of the Caribbean also report strong national identification despite societal inequalities (e.g., South Africa: Norris et al., 2008). The nationalism of early adolescents may be partly attributed to a developmental increase in idealism accompanying their newfound abstract thinking abilities (Bornstein, Jager, & Steinberg, 2012). Idealism is gradually transformed into realism throughout the course of adolescence into young adulthood as youth begin to reconcile their ideals with their contextual realities. Indeed, older Caribbean youth (15–29 years) are, by contrast, more cynical and pessimistic about their countries and the Caribbean region (CCYD, 2010).

The 21st Century as a Context for Adolescent Development

Adolescents in the 21st Century are no longer immersed solely in their local culture, but also in global culture (Jensen, 2011) and specific foreign cultures (Ferguson, & Bornstein, 2012). As a result, adolescents now have choices regarding the cultures with which to affiliate, be they near or far, and choices regarding the relative strength of those cultural affiliations. Globalization has brought external cultural influences into many Caribbean countries post-independence, and the culture(s) of the United States has been particularly prominent via migration, trade, and technology (CCYD, 2010; Thomas-Hope, 2002). "Americanization" is a type of acculturation across distance – remote acculturation – occurring amongst urban Jamaican adolescents via exposure to U.S. tourists and consumer products on the island. In two studies on remote acculturation, Ferguson and Bornstein (2012; under review) found that one-third of urban Jamaican adolescents were bicultural (labeled "Americanized" Jamaicans) in that they had added a European American component (in identity, behavioral style, and family values/interactions) to their Jamaican identity. In addition, all Jamaican youth – "Americanized" or not – were more oriented towards African American than European American culture, although orientation towards both U.S. cultures was positively associated with adolescent age.

The United States and its culture(s) have an even more prominent place in modern day Haiti after a near two decade U.S. occupation in the early 20th century. The United States is currently the primary destination for Haitian emigrants (WHO/PAHO, 2010). In addition, tourists from the United States comprised 69% of visitors to Haiti in a recent report (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2007), and the volume of U.S. visitors increased significantly post-earthquake as aid workers/volunteers and NGO employees arrived in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. U.S. media represents another potential avenue of Americanization of Haitian island youth, as does communication with the 500,000+ Haitian Diaspora individuals resident in the United States (Thomas-Hope, 2002; WHO/PAHO,

2010). Like rural youth in other places, rural youth in Haiti are partially shielded from exposure to U.S. presence due to more limited access to electricity, media, internet, and fewer U.S. visitors overall (Jensen, 2011). However, prior cross-national Caribbean research in Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Vincent demonstrates that compared to urbanites, rural Caribbean dwellers are more oriented towards foreign countries and have stronger wishes to emigrate despite having lower actual rates of migration (Thomas-Hope, 2002).

Family Obligations and other Sources of Resilience among Haitian Adolescents

Many contextual sources of resilience within Haitian culture help to keep youth buoyant amidst the flood of challenges they face (Nicolas, Jean-Jacques, & Wheatley, 2012). Close family and community bonds are thought to be one such protective factor, especially in rural areas where villagers all know and watch out for each other (WHO/PAHO, 2010). In particular, prior research in other Caribbean countries shows that adolescents have a strong sense of respect and obligation to assist parents – family obligations (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012; Richardson, 1999). Although family obligations have not been directly studied in Haiti, a large cross-national study shows that adolescents whose parents have low occupational status tend to have stronger family obligations beliefs (Berry et al., 2006). Family obligations are protective of psychological well-being, academic values and performance, behavior, and parent-adolescent closeness among Jamaican adolescents and rural adolescents in other Majority World countries including China (Ferguson, 2006; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004).

There are some mixed findings regarding gender differences in family obligations. Despite the fact that Caribbean girls are socialized to assist inside the home (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity, & Stuart, 1998; WHO/PAHO, 2010), Jamaican boys place greater importance on family in their identity compared to girls (Ferguson, 2006). On the other hand, studies among rural Chinese adolescents, and among immigrant adolescents from numerous Majority World nations settled in industrialized countries, show no gender differences in family obligations (Berry et al., 2006; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004).

Involvement of Haitian youth in the arts is also protective; it provides a channel for emotions, desires, and needs which have few other outlets (<http://www.artforhaitianchildren.org/>). In addition, religion and music often work in tandem to facilitate coping and meaning-making, such as in the days following the earthquake when Haitians held impromptu open air Christian and Voodoo services in Port-au-Prince (McAlister, 2010).

Current Study

Adolescents represent an emerging population in Haiti: a struggling Caribbean country which recently lost a quarter million residents in the 2010 earthquake (Lunde, 2012). This descriptive study of cultural orientation and family obligations among early adolescents in rural Haiti furthers our understanding of the impact of globalization on adolescent cultural identity and traditional family values, and contributes to the sparse body of knowledge

regarding Haitian youth. It is particularly important to investigate these questions among early adolescents because Caribbean youths' foreign orientation and wishes to migrate are much higher in mid-adolescence and young adulthood than in early adolescence (CCYD, 2010). Rural Haitian adolescents are of particular interest because their isolated settings limit access to basic services and also to foreign cultures compared to urban youth. Moreover, prior remote acculturation studies have been conducted in the urban Caribbean but the extent to which "Americanization" occurs in a rural Caribbean setting is not yet known.

Our hypotheses were three-fold. First, similar to findings among early adolescents in Jamaica and South Africa, we expected early adolescents in Haiti to report a strong orientation toward their ethnic Haitian culture, which would exceed their orientation to U.S. culture(s). Second, similar to findings in Jamaica, we expected that orientation to U.S. culture(s) (whether moderate or low) would be positively associated with adolescent age and exposure to U.S. tourists and cultural products. Third, we expected that adolescents would report strong family obligations (possibly higher among boys) as has been reported in other Caribbean countries and among adolescents whose parents have low occupational prestige.

Method

Participants

IRB approval, parental/guardian consent, and adolescent assent were obtained before data collection. A total of 105 early adolescents aged 12–15 years ($M = 12.87$ years, $SD = .86$, 52% girls, 100% Black, 100% participation rate) were recruited from an Academic Youth Center (AYC) located in a rural community in northern Haiti. The primary occupation in this community is farming/agriculture and adults generally have little formal education. There is one public high school staffed by local teachers, and although the annual costs for attendance are minimal (approximately USD \$100 including fees, books, and uniforms), it is still beyond the means of many rural families. The modal education of the primary household earners of adolescents in this study, mostly parents, was 2 ("Less than 7th grade", $SD = 1.87$) a 7-point scale ranging from "No Schooling" to "Attended more than 4 years of University, e.g., Doctorate, Medical Doctor". Some adolescents might have visited the nearest city, Cap Haitian (2.5 hours by car) in the past, but few, if any, would have visited the capital city of Port-au-Prince (6–7 hours away). None of the adolescents had ever visited the United States, and they reported negligible internet access in their rural community.

Procedure and Measures

Questionnaires were translated and back-translated into Kreyòl (i.e., Haitian Creole) and administered in group format by the second author and a co-director of the AYC, both of whom are Haitian and fluent in English and Creole. Items were read aloud to ensure comprehension. Researchers remained in the administration room during questionnaire completion to answer students' questions, after which each participant received a token worth USD \$5 (i.e., enough to purchase a book-bag or a pair of used shoes).

Cultural orientation—Adolescents completed the Acculturation Rating Scale for Haitian Americans (ARSHA, see Appendix A), adapted from the 34-item Acculturation Rating Scale for Jamaican Americans (ARSJA, Ferguson, Bornstein, & Pottinger, 2012). The ARSHA is a tridimensional acculturation measure containing a 16-item Haitian Orientation Scale (HOS; Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$), a 9-item African American Orientation Scale (AAOS; $\alpha = .74$), and a 9-item European American Orientation Scale (EAOS; $\alpha = .66$). The Haitian Orientation Scale primarily asks about the degrees to which adolescents enjoy Haitian entertainment (e.g., TV/Movies, books), speak Kreyól, associate with other Haitians (e.g., current and childhood friends), and self-identify as Haitian. The AAOS and EAOS ask similar questions regarding African American and European American cultures, respectively, except that they do not include items pertaining to language and parental ethnic heritage. One item from the EAOS was excluded from the scale mean to optimize scale reliability (i.e., “*Lontan, zanmi mwen yo se te Blan*”, translated “*My friends, while I was growing up, were of White American/European American origin*”). Adolescents responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale, and scale means were calculated with higher scores indicating stronger orientation towards each culture.

Intercultural interaction and consumption of cultural products—On a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *1 time per month*, 3 = *1 time per week*, 4 = *1–2 times per week*, 5 = *1–2 times per day*) adolescents reported how often they interact with U.S. tourists in their everyday lives. In addition, adolescents indicated how often they consume U.S. and local cultural products including fast food (U.S. examples: “*Burger King, KFC, Pizza Hut*”), food and drinks at school (Local “*manje toupare*”), TV shows (U.S. examples: “*American Idol, CSI*”), and sports (local Haitian example: “*football*”, i.e., soccer).

Adolescent family obligations—Adolescents completed the 10-item family obligations subscale of the Family Values Scale (Berry et al., 2006) using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Due to a low initial internal reliability coefficient, a factor analysis with a varimax rotation was computed to identify empirical factors. Results revealed a meaningful 3-item factor with an Eigen value > 2 centering around girls' and boys' duty to assist parents when they need help, and to do so without payment ($\alpha = .71$). A mean score was calculated.

Social desirability—Adolescents completed the 11-item true/false Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale Short-Form A (Reynolds, 1982). After reverse-scoring, a scale score was created by summing the number of items reported true (possible range = 0–11).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Missing data points were missing completely at random (i.e., <12% missing overall, $\chi^2(8314) = 7206$, $p = 1.00$; MCAR tests were all non-significant). Therefore, imputation was performed using the Expectation-Maximization algorithm (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977).

Cultural orientation—To assess the degree of Haitian orientation relative to U.S. orientation, a 3 (cultural orientation: HOS, AAOS, EAOS) \times 2 (gender: male, female) repeated-measures ANCOVA was computed controlling for parental education (i.e., proxy for relative socioeconomic status) and social desirability (to correct for the self-report format). An effect of cultural orientation emerged with significant differences among all three ARSHA dimensions: $F(2, 202) = 138.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .57$. Adolescents' Haitian Orientation mean score was substantially above the mid-point of the 5-point scale ($M = 3.9, SD = .40$), more than twice as high as the mean African American Orientation score ($M = 1.52, SD = .54$), and nearly three times as high as the mean European American Orientation ($M = 1.39, SD = .44$), $p_s < .01$. There were no gender effects.

U.S. culture orientation, age, and exposure to U.S. tourists/products—Partial correlations were computed among AAOS, EAOS, age, and modes of exposure to U.S. cultures for girls and boys separately controlling for parental education and social desirability. For boys only, both AAOS ($r = .32, p < .05$) and EAOS ($r = .41, p < .05$) scores were positively correlated with tourist interaction, EAOS scores were positively correlated with age ($r = .28, p < .05$), and AAOS scores were positively correlated with consumption of American-style food school lunch ($r = .29, p < .05$). For girls only, AAOS scores were marginally positively correlated with frequency of phone communication with individuals in the United States ($r = .37, p < .10$). In addition, for both genders, AAOS or EAOS scores were positively correlated with purchasing American fast food ($r = .36 - .44, p < .05$) and viewing live or televised sports ($r = .29 - .44, p < .05$), whether American or local.

Family obligations—Adolescents' mean Family Obligations score was examined relative to the upper anchor of the 5-point scale, revealing very strong traditional beliefs about their responsibility to assist parents in the home without payment ($M = 4.81; SD = .59$). Boys ($M = 4.91; SD = .41$) had marginally higher Family Obligations than did girls ($M = 4.72; SD = .72$), $F(1, 101) = 3.39, p = .07$, Cohen's $d = .32$. Family obligations were not significantly correlated with cultural orientation scales.

Discussion

Similar to early adolescents in Jamaica and South Africa, early adolescents in Haiti reported a strong orientation towards their national culture (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012; Ferguson & Bornstein, under review; Norris et al., 2008). This result also supports the findings of the CARICOM multi-national study that most Caribbean youth are nationalistic (CCYD, 2006). In addition to developmentally normative idealism (Bornstein et al., 2012), Haitian adolescents may be energized about their country because of the new President Martelly, who was a popular musician before his presidency and expressed a desire to include youth in his agenda for the country's reconstruction (Lunde, 2012). Indeed, other countries have witnessed the ability of a new youthful president to re-invigorate youth engagement and nationalism – consider President Obama's victorious campaign in the 2008 U.S. election. A future study can directly explore the possible association between Haitian adolescents' affinity for current political leaders and their Haitian orientation or nationalism.

Unlike for urban adolescents in Jamaica (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012; Ferguson & Bornstein, under review), orientation towards U.S. cultures was very low for rural Haitian youth, especially European American orientation. Low U.S. orientation among rural Haitian adolescents may be partially due to low U.S. cultural exposure because those who were more oriented towards European American culture had more frequent interactions with U.S. tourists (boys), communication with individuals in the U.S (girls), and consumption of U.S. fast food (both genders). European American orientation was also positively correlated with boys' age, which indicates that having more years of exposure to U.S. cultural influences is associated with greater orientation towards U.S. mainstream culture.

An alternative explanation for the low U.S. culture orientation of rural early adolescents is that poor rural Haitian youth may be more oriented toward the culture of modernizing urban Haiti than towards U.S. cultures. In her mixed-methods study of rural and urban communities in three other Caribbean nations, Thomas-Hope (2002) found that:

“As the urban societies in the Caribbean tried to keep up with the metropolises of the North Atlantic, so the rural populations measured their prestige and level of advancement against their own urban centres...Lower-income groups expected to improve their conditions by relating more closely to the middle-class and adopting not only their institutions, but also their material culture and lifestyle” (p. 121).

Rural adolescents may be particularly attracted to the culture and lifestyles of teenage children of the wealthy, worldly Haitian elites in Port-au-Prince. In fact, a new hit comedic soap opera in Haiti called “Regards Croisés” presents caricatures of Haitian elites, including a ‘zuzu’ character, the urbanite daughter of an affluent Haitian elite family (Stanley, 2012). A follow-up study could investigate whether rural youth do indeed gravitate more towards the local Haitian elite culture than towards U.S. cultures.

Like adolescents in other parts of the Caribbean and Majority World, rural Haitians hold very strong beliefs regarding obligations to assist parents in the home without payment (Ferguson, 2006; Richardson, 1999), which may be particularly adaptive in rural and poor contexts (Kagitcibasi, 2007). The very high mean score on family obligation appear to be a valid finding rather an artifact of a response bias given that the distributions of other variables (e.g., HOS, AAOS) were not constricted in this manner. Given that most adolescents' parents were farmers, high family obligations in this study are consistent with prior cross-national findings that adolescents whose parents have low occupational status report higher family obligations (Berry et al., 2006). Haitian boys held somewhat stronger family obligations beliefs than did girls, which supports prior findings in Jamaica (Ferguson, 2006), although the scores of both genders were very high in this study. The slight gender difference may be due to traditional patriarchal Caribbean family values regarding a male “head of household”. Early adolescent Haitian boys may already be assuming this role due partly to high father absence in Haiti and the Caribbean (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity, & Stuart, 1998; WHO/PAHO, 2010). In addition, as Ferguson (2006) pointed out, just because girls are required to provide more assistance to parents in the home than are boys, this does not mean that girls are more intrinsically or voluntarily invested in family. Given the uniformly low orientation to U.S. cultures and high family obligations, there was no

evidence of remote acculturation in rural Haiti as was found in urban Jamaica (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012).

That Haitian youth are nationalistic and have strong family obligations despite their deprived circumstances may also speak to an underlying resilience fostered by their family and community bonds, art, religion, and music engagement (Nicolas et al., 2012). (The ceiling effect of family obligations is likely to have masked an otherwise positive association with Haitian culture orientation). Prior research demonstrates the protective effect of family obligations for Caribbean youth: adolescents who place a higher value on family have higher grades and life satisfaction, and lower depressive symptoms and conduct problems (Ferguson, 2006). Family obligations are also protective in rural China: they are positively associated with close parent-adolescent relationships and academic motivation (Fulgini & Zhang, 2004).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Exposure to U.S. tourists and consumer products were measured using single-item questions. In addition, the Family Obligations subscale was not as internally reliable in this rural Haitian sample as it has been in prior cross-cultural studies (Berry et al., 2006); thus, a shortened version was used. For these reasons, replication of the present findings will be important. An urban/rural comparison would be an interesting next step to explore whether urban Haitian adolescents share the strong Haitian orientation of their rural peers, and whether they are on the whole more oriented towards U.S. cultures given greater exposure to tourists and products and the fact that North America tends to be a reference point for the urban Caribbean (Thomas-Hope, 2002).

Implications and Conclusion

The current study of cultural orientation among early adolescents in Haiti contributes to the sparse body of knowledge regarding Haitian adolescents, and adds to the growing literature on youth culture in the modern day Caribbean. Young adolescents in Haiti do, in fact, share their ancestor's Haitian pride, which birthed the classic folk song "Ayiti Cheri" nearly a century ago. Findings of this study also have broader implications for adolescents of African heritage in other Majority World regions including Africa, particularly those in contexts marked by poverty and natural disasters. Despite chronically challenging life circumstances in many local communities, and despite the steady penetration of foreign cultures even into rural communities via tourists and consumer products, young adolescents often demonstrate remarkable allegiance to their home country and national culture. It is still true that rural youth in the developing world are more shielded from direct cultural globalization, but there is little evidence to suggest that increased globalization will mean decreased national loyalty or ethnic identity. Given that early adolescence is a unique developmental window in which Caribbean youth have the strongest desire to stay and build a life in their country (CCYD, 2010), Haiti's rural early adolescents may be an underappreciated asset.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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