As a Human Rights Fellow I conducted my dissertation research on the topic of the conceptions of the right to literacy of children from schools in remote rural Zulu villages in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. I am a graduate student in the Graduate School of Education at Berkeley in the area of Human Development and Education, or developmental psychology. My specialism is the field of social and moral development, and my focus is on understanding the development of conceptions of rights and notions of social justice. My aim for this study is to explore how children and adolescents in a developing world setting view their right to literacy. As the decision to educate a child or not is ultimately made in the context of the family, this study provided a child's-eye view of the family, their role in it, and how decisions are made that concern them deeply.

By using a methodology first developed by Piaget, I employed open-ended, semi-structured interviews in order to elicit and probe children's own thinking about problems. Compared with a survey, the semi-structured interview offers the participant more opportunities to develop and express their own perspective. Participants express underlying judgments that often qualify and give depth to results one might draw from the decisions alone, as from the results of a survey. As awareness builds of the importance of listening to the voices of the very poor, especially women and children, the development of methodologies that elicit what they think, instead of what we guess they ought to think, become ever more valuable. In this case, this approach afforded an intimate perspective on a troubling global problem, as I shall now illustrate.

The New York Times recently featured the story of a young Afghani woman who was the victim of an anonymous attack on her way to school. "Are you going to school?"

asked the man before spraying her face with acid (January 14, 2009, Afghan Girls, Scarred by Acid, Defy Terror, Embracing School, Dexter Filkins). This girl and over a dozen others were, almost certainly, targets of extremists fighting in the rural areas of Afghanistan to restore Taliban policies forbidding education for girls. “They want us to remain stupid,” she said.

But a month previously, Mary Jordan of the Washington Post documented the account of a 15-year-old girl in India, Jyotsa Patadia, whose struggling parents chose to take her out of school to help support the family, deciding to enroll her two brothers in full-time education while they and their daughter work refining salt in a desolate hut on the salt pans. Mary Jordan compared Jyotsa’s fate to the Afghan attacks, commenting: ‘Usually, a quieter discrimination steals a girl's chance to learn. Every day, parents decide, for instance, to buy a bicycle so their son can get to school but refuse to spend money on a book for their daughter.’ ('This Is the Destiny of Girls', Mary Jordan, Washington Post, December 13, 2008.).

These journalists’ accounts vividly capture the impact of a human rights violation that is repeated in millions of villages and homes in developing world countries, in which the right to literacy and education is denied to children, rather more often to girls than to boys. Through this intimate, non-violent, and lethal form of discrimination, the aggregate sum of these parental choices produces a staggering worldwide disparity between literacy provision for boys and girls. The United Nations Human Development Report (2004) found 8 million fewer girls enrolled in primary school than boys in India alone.

Worldwide in 2004 the gap between boys and girls enrolled in primary school was estimated at 19 million.

Nor, evidence suggests, is the use of the word ‘lethal’ hyperbolic. Amartya Sen, development economist and literacy advocate, documented global disparities in the numbers of men and women, and, finding disproportionate numbers of men in some developing counries, made calculations that demonstrate convincingly that over *one hundred million* women, worldwide, are not alive because of basic gender inequities (More Than 100 Million Women are Missing, Amartya Sen, *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 37, Number 20, December 20, 1990). He argues, with supporting evidence, that illiterate people are less employable, more vulnerable to economic exploitation, and are seen as more expendable in the family unit. When food is limited or medical care cannot be extended to the entire family, it is the girls and women in the family who are more likely to be required to go short and to die young. Literacy is essential to provide women with the same life chances as men, as it supports their social status by enabling them to obtain work outside the home, articulate and assert welfare needs for themselves and their daughters within the family, and inform themselves about ways to improve their lives. However, their enhanced independence in their families and communities is a powerful challenge to traditional roles. A reason against sending girls to school for some parents is the fear that these enlightened children may then demand the reform of a social order, based on inequitable distributions of power, that was once meekly accepted.

Often, although not always, a family would greatly prefer to send all the children to school. To not do so is a choice that is forced upon the family due to poverty, and it is a painful choice. In favored households, through begging, obtaining loans, and the daily household magic of juggling not enough, parents somehow manage to do the right thing and send them all to school. Sometimes, the family is so poor that no real choice is involved; the family must eat rather than buy books and school uniforms; but sometimes there *is* a choice. In these many instances, in households all over the developing world but particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, in India, and in South Asia, each head of household makes a judgment as to who is able to learn to read: the eldest, the 'best bet', the boys. Literacy may be viewed as a meal ticket by parents, as security for their old age, or as a threat to the family status quo. However, it is a skill that enables an individual to survive and thrive in broad and fundamental ways; and this defines literacy as a right that ought to be provided to all children. This judgment, the one that each head of household makes on behalf of the children in their care is a critical *moral* judgment about something that is a right, and not a luxury or privilege. Further, as it has been demonstrated that adult learners rarely attain fluent reading skills, this decision is, to a large degree, irrevocable.

Research from the perspective of social and moral development supports the notion that these moral judgments are the result of a complex synthesis. Briefly, judgments about our social world, such as the decision about whether a given child will or will not be able to learn to read, are achieved by the coordination of multiple concepts, including prudential notions of securing safety, well-being, and other benefits; the social

concepts, i.e., norms that are customary or conventional, vary from culture to culture, and allow us to coordinate our social lives; and the moral conceptions concerned with prescriptions of justice, welfare, and rights. The kind of judgment involved in deciding whether a child does or does not go to school involves pragmatic elements about what is necessary, or what is best, for the family in the short- and long-term; considering social roles, including those about gender and family, but also historical change and local settings; and moral concerns about the right of a child to develop essential skills and about gender equality.

This psychological approach may seem incongruent to the analysis of a problem that can be construed as largely sociopolitical. I argue that a methodology that investigates social and moral reasoning processes on an individual basis, in other words, a psychological approach rather than a sociological or political perspective, is not only relevant to the problem, but also necessary. It is my conviction that psychological research has an ethical responsibility to investigate these processes of choice at the level of mental phenomena. A long tradition of moral philosophy, beginning with Aristotle, sees autonomy, the ability to choose our purposes in life and to make rational choices that enable these choices, as central to human nature. This value is imbedded in the methodology outlined above that seeks to elucidate the multiple sources of social and moral reasoning that underlie a particular judgment.

If these scholarly values are important in the investigation of problems native to our own circumstances, they are indispensable in any investigations of people who come from other settings and traditions, and whose solutions to problems strike us as less than

ideal. Particularly because human rights problems elicit strong emotional responses, it is of the utmost importance to see beyond the 'otherness' of members of the developing world and not to fall foul of methodological processes that lead to generalizations formed at the level of societal analyses. We must investigate these individual choices so that we understand the particular problems that concern them, in what ways we are alike, and where we differ, rather than judging only results.

There is a further, overarching theoretical consideration that is currently the subject of debate in some political arenas. Conceptions of rights are often thought to be contingent on individualistic Western values. This belief, in line with theories of moral development contrasting to my own, is founded on the larger premise that moral values are largely inculcated through social learning processes. These theories hold that morality is transmitted through values taught by the family or religious or educational authorities. If this is indeed the case, the implication is that there is no universal basis for morality and that attempts to promote human rights in developing countries are an imposition of Western philosophical values from outside. This argument leads to the conclusion that every country must determine its own human rights agenda without external interference. Presumably certain human rights would not be ratified that did not have endorsement by some political, historical or religious traditions.

The premise for this study is that conceptions of rights are derived through individual evaluations of needs to protect certain capacities for human agency. As these needs and capacities are based on universal human attributes, one hypothesis for the study was that conceptions of rights found in this setting would share common rationales

and comparable developmental patterns with those found in Western settings. The empirical evidence for these conceptions was obtained by probing for understanding about the right to literacy in the abstract, including questions about certain key attributes of rights: whether they are universal, and whether they must be respected.

So far, I have provided a general background to my study that I hope will be of interest to the human rights community, and to some extent, satisfy the curiosity of readers for whom the relevance of developmental psychology to human rights is not obvious. I will now turn to specifics about the study and its results.

When I began to look for a representative population for this study, I decided to look for a community which was in flux, in which strong traditional values still held but there was also a significant input of more progressive political values. This wide exposure would be likely to help children articulate their own choices out of a range of values. Also, this kind of social environment represents a large number of children who live in a kind of no-man's-land between their traditional parents and the realities of a globalized economy. These children may not live in the developing world; they may be immigrants in any European or North American country.

The communities that I eventually located, a group of rural Zulu villages in post-apartheid South Africa, represent a traditional population in historical transition from illiteracy to literacy. I am careful here to use the word 'represent' as I think it is important to emphasize the limitless heterogeneity of developing world populations: the economic, political, religious and historical elements that factor into decisions about the future of children make it inadvisable to generalize these results to 'the developing world'.

The description *traditional* is not intended to imply that these villages were entirely isolated; rather, their social organizations retain traditional Zulu values such as strong extended family ties and gendered divisions of labor.

In these villages, I found, girls and women are solely responsible for most household tasks. In poor African villages with no running water, limited electricity, and travel mostly on foot, these tasks include time-consuming and strenuous chores such as carrying wood and water as well as all the work of maintaining the household and caring for the very young and elderly. Further, as is often the case, the Zulu tradition has been for girls to be taken into their husband's household when they marry. Any investment in a child is viewed in the light of this custom, so that choosing education for a girl would rarely be seen as prudent in the context of family economics. Ironically, the considerable benefits of literate women to their households that are of such importance to Western theorists, such as a proven reduction in infant mortality for children with literate mothers, may not figure in these household calculations.

The mother tongue of these villages is isiZulu, which is both a spoken and written language. Many adults speak only limited English. In 2004, a survey of the area of KwaZulu Natal including these villages revealed that the ratio of literate to illiterate adults was 1:7, where a 'literate' adult was defined as having 7 years or more of formal education[i]. A black African without a matriculation certificate, representing basic literacy and mathematics skills, may find work on a farm, as a gardener, as a maid, or in forestry. Many illiterate adults in the villages are unemployed and depend upon subsistence farming and government aid. The participants in the study represent the first largely

literate generation of the community following the construction of village schools around 1994.

1994 was a watershed year for the right to literacy in South Africa, as it was the beginning of the post-apartheid era. In this year, human rights, including the right to universal education, were ratified in the new Constitution and Bill of Rights. Predictably, much of black African education in South Africa today remains in great need of improvement. Nonetheless, the economic opportunities afforded by literacy represent a radical shift towards increased earning power for both genders and parity for women as well as enhanced access to a range of information, enabling adaptability to a changing world.

The psychological implications of the post-apartheid shift towards universal literacy are that people holding traditional values must accommodate a new range of possible social and moral judgments concerning the relative values of the autonomy of children, the nature of family interdependencies, and the status of women. How people come to think about the 'new South Africa', in the remote mountain communities such as those I visited in KwaZulu Natal, and how those families come to make their decisions about their children is of far more importance, given the difficulties of enforcing school attendance, than the word of the law.

To capture the range of thinking of the people in this historical setting, I created a series of hypothetical situations to present to participants about conflicts between the right to literacy and values including cultural preservation, family welfare, parental authority, and traditional age- and gender-dependent roles. In several instances, poverty

was the factor that made certain choices, such as choosing whether to send boys or girls to school, unavoidable. For example, one of the questions asks which children, out of a family of two boys and two girls, ought to go to school if parents can only afford to send two children. Involved in this decision are prudential concerns for the family, gender equality, and the right to literacy. This ‘forced-choice’ question required participants to state their reasoning for their choice as well as the choice itself.

The participants of the study were Zulu students from schools serving mountain villages and farming communities: seventy-two participants in three age groups, 10-11, 15-16, and 18-20 years, divided equally by gender.

I arrived in Durban on the 2nd of July, linked up with my sponsoring agency, the Family Literacy Project directed by Lynn Stefano, and met my translators, who were adult literacy trainers in the village of Stepmore and the farming community of Lotheni. I trained the translators to make literal translations, and not to elaborate or improve upon the children’s responses; and this was something of a struggle at times, as the translators, once they learnt the interview, were apt to try to argue with the students in Zulu, to persuade them that reading was more important than culture, and so forth. I enjoyed the hospitality of my translators and the school teachers, eating bread baked made of mealie meal (coarse corn meal) and baked on a woodstove, and drinking tea made of river water. I carried out the interviews, usually in the primary and high schools in the villages, but sometimes in people’s rondavels, or thatched huts. Having aimed to do seventy-two interviews, I wound up doing ninety-eight to make sure there was enough material.

For many of the children, their interview was the first time they had spoken to a non-Zulu person. Only one burst into tears and had to be consoled and excused. But I was very aware that this event was a novelty to them, and often intimidating, so that I aimed to err on the side of kindness rather than pushing them for responses. I was also very aware of the vulnerability of the students as psychological subjects, because their parents and teachers were themselves naïve, and it was entirely on me to ensure that their rights as participants were protected. The signatures of the parents on the release forms, even though the forms were translated into Zulu, did not necessarily express the kind of contextualized understanding that would be implied had they been more sophisticated.

The results of the study, although it is not nearly completed, are very rich. Initial results suggest that, despite the differences in the setting, the development of Zulu children's conceptions of rights is very similar to that of American children, based on previous research. The ability to construct an understanding of rights is achieved at about ten years of age in both groups. The majority of participants favorably valued the right to literacy and justified their reasoning through reference to its vital contributions to autonomy: most prominently, the abilities to work, to enter into social contracts, and to acquire knowledge.

Their evaluations of the conflict situations described above, in which questions pose hypothetical conflicts of the right to literacy with cultural preservation, gender roles, or family authority, largely favored this right. Competing values included the importance of maintaining certain religious practices and beliefs, family obligations, and obedience and respect for parents. Often decisions favoring one gender over the other were based on

predictions that boys or girls would more likely support their family when they were adults, or for other attributions of the superiority of one gender over the other, rather than social roles. Participants often presented a heterogeneous mixture of values, rather than adhering to traditional or progressive positions.

On the whole, most families in this area support the right to literacy; the economics of the situation have perhaps helped to ensure that learning for girls is seen as valuable. Indeed, some adults reported to me that there is now a social problem created by the fact that educated girls are now often more successful than the boys, so that the tradition of the marriage dowry can cause problems if the young men do not find employment. Although the right to literacy was generally seen to be of value, there persisted certain ambiguities about the role of children in the family and their value as 'ends in themselves'. Many families now view having literate children as an economic asset; but that is not the same as regarding literacy as a right for every child regardless of whether it benefits the family or not. This can be attributed to a great extent to poverty, but that is an assumption that will need to be tested through another study.