American, Nepalese children disagree on social obligations with age

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Credit: Cornell University

Preschoolers universally recognize that one's choices are not always free – that our decisions may be constrained by social obligations to be nice to others or follow rules set by parents or elders, even when wanting to do otherwise.

As they age, however, American kids are more prone to acknowledge one's freedom to act against such obligations compared to Nepalese [children](link), who are less willing to say that people can and will violate social codes, finds a cross-cultural study by Cornell University development psychologists published in the current issue of the journal *Cognitive Science*. The findings, researchers said, suggest that culture is a significant influence on children's concepts of choice regarding [social norms](link).

"We know that adult views on whether social obligations constrain [personal desires](link) differ by culture, so this study helps us to determine when those variations emerge," said first author Nadia Chernyak, a graduate student in the field of human development. "We can understand which ideas are universal and how culture influences individual ways of thinking."

Led by Chernyak and Tamar Kushnir, professor in the College of [Human Ecology](link), the research team interviewed children in the two nations to understand their beliefs on free choice and the physical, mental and [social factors](link) that limit choice.

Co-author Katie Sullivan, a human development major with a minor in global health, aided the project while studying abroad in 2009 through the Cornell Nepal Study Program – a joint venture with Nepal's Tribhuvan University. Sullivan took courses, learned the language and immersed herself in the culture before working with Chernyak and Kushnir to adapt their survey into a culturally appropriate version for Nepalese children. Partnering with Rabindra Parajuli, a Nepali research assistant, she worked with village and school leaders to arrange and conduct interviews with children.

Researchers read a series of nine vignettes to 45 Nepalese and 31 American children – hailing from urban and rural areas and ranging in

age from 4 to 11 – about characters who wanted to defy various physical, mental and social constraints, asking kids whether the characters are free to follow their wishes and to predict if they will do so.

Nearly all children, across ages and cultures, said the characters could freely choose when no constraints were evident – opting for juice or milk at a meal or whether to draw with a pen or pencil, for example. Kids also universally agreed that one is not free to choose to go beyond one's physical and mental abilities – opting to float in the air, or to surpass the limits of one's knowledge and skill.

Developmental and cultural differences emerged, however, in children's evaluation of choice in the face of social constraints. Younger children in both cultures said that various social and moral obligations limit both choice and action – that one cannot be mean to others, act selfishly or break rules and social conventions, for instance. But by age 10, American kids tended to view these obligations as choices – free to be followed or disregarded based on personal desires. Nepalese children continued to believe that such constraints override individual preference.

"As children become more exposed to their own culture and adult behaviors, they are more likely to adopt their culture's ways of thinking," Chernyak said. Chernyak said also that future research could try to define what contributes to these differing views.

Provided by Cornell University