



**Abstract** The present article applies the theoretical framework of mutual constitution (MC)—the dialectical process by which ‘culture and psyche make each other up’—to analyze an occurrence of genital-shrinking panic (GSP). Although media reports promote interpretation of this event in terms of ignorance and superstition, the MC framework affords a less pathologizing analysis. The first part of this analysis, one that resonates with classic ethnographic perspectives, emphasizes the cultural grounding of psychological experience: how episodes of GSP make sense given local constructions of reality. However, an adequate analysis requires attention not only to cultural realities in which incidents of GSP make sense, but also to the role of psychological activity in reproducing, maintaining and extending those realities. Accordingly, the second part of this analysis emphasizes the less articulated, dynamic-construction side of the MC framework: the role of psychological activity in the reproduction of cultural worlds.

**Key Words** construction of reality, genital shrinking, mutual constitution, panic, West Africa

Glenn Adams

University of Kansas, USA

Vivian Afi Dzokoto

Fayetteville State University, USA

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## Genital-Shrinking Panic in Ghana: A Cultural Psychological Analysis

*Courtesy some jujumen who have migrated from Nigeria and are reported to be behind this, people especially males are living in fear for the simple reason that they might lose their manhood. Reports reaching P&P [People and Places] indicate that these so-called jujumen who are operating under cover, ‘infect’ innocent people with this mysterious ‘disease’ through body contact especially by shaking hands with their victims. Soon after this, the victims allegedly experience a burning sensation and realise that their manhood have [sic] disappeared. According to the reports, whilst these innocent victims are going through this nightmarish experience, a member of the syndicate quickly approaches them claiming to know someone who could restore the manhood at an exorbitant fee. . . .*

*The irony of this is that, a victim’s manhood is restored after the alleged jujumen have received instant justice from an angry mob. There are however instances where*

*the victims complain that their genital organs do not go back to the original size. In almost all the cases so far received at our desk, no scientific proof has been made by doctors as to the source of the 'ailment.' In fact, a hospital source is alleged to have dismissed the whole canker and noted that the victims might have gone into shock, hence the diminishing of their genital organs. ('Fear Grips Accra', 1997)*

This passage from a Ghanaian newspaper refers to an occurrence of 'genital-shrinking' panic (GSP) that spread throughout communities in the West Africa region during early 1997. Although similar outbreaks have occurred periodically throughout this region in recent years (Dzokoto & Adams, 2005; Mather, 2005), this particular outbreak of GSP is noteworthy because it received coverage in Western media<sup>1</sup> and was the topic of heated discussion at the 1997 conference of the African Studies Association. Scholars at the conference expressed concern that, by devoting attention to phenomena like GSP, researchers would help perpetuate constructions of African experience in terms of ignorance, superstition (cf. Hesse, 1997) and exotic otherness (cf. Appiah, 1992; Jackson, 1998; Jahoda, 1999; Meyer, 1998; Mudimbe, 1988; Said, 1978). Given this concern, a discussant at the conference proposed a moratorium on the study of GSP and related phenomena like witchcraft, sorcery and magic (on this topic, see also Ciekawy & Geschiere, 1998).

Although concerns related to exotification and construction of otherness are important, the present study represents a different response to these concerns. Rather than ignore cases of GSP, the challenge we take up in this paper is to provide a normalizing analysis of the phenomenon. From this perspective, outbreaks of GSP are not evidence of abnormality or backwardness, but instead reflect normal, psychological processes associated with the collective construction of everyday realities.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Mutual Constitution of Cultural and Psychological**

A useful framework from which to consider episodes of GSP is the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology (Shweder, 1990), especially the notion of mutual constitution (MC): the dialectical process by which cultural realities and psychological experience 'make each other up' (Shweder, 1990, p. 24; cf. Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). The first side of the MC dialectic emphasizes the cultural grounding of psychological experience. Applied to episodes of GSP, this side of the MC dialectic directs attention to the social representations (Moscovici, 1984), cultural models (e.g. Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996) and other constructions of reality that underlie GSP.

The classic example of this perspective is Evans-Pritchard's (1937/1976) discussion of witchcraft among the Azande. Evans-Pritchard observed that apparently irrational beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery and magic were used in a way that made sense given Azande worlds.

I found it strange, at first, to live among Azande and listen to naïve explanations of misfortunes which, to our minds, have apparent causes, but after a while I learnt the idiom of their thought and applied notions of witchcraft as spontaneously as themselves in situations where the concept was relevant. (p. 19).

The important contribution of this perspective is to permit a less pathologizing account of phenomena like witchcraft or GSP than one encounters in Western media or mainstream social science. Rather than being the products of somehow deficient minds that are unable to comprehend reality, episodes of GSP are rooted in cultural models or social representations that render the experience sensible. However, this perspective retains an apologist tone. It helps to explain how rational people might come to believe in witchcraft or penis theft, but it still treats the beliefs themselves as untrue or unreal (Good, 1994).

Is it possible to articulate an even less pathologizing account of phenomena like witchcraft or GSP, one that takes seriously their 'truth'? Although Evans-Pritchard (1937/1976) was emphatic in his early work that 'Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist' (p. 18), comments later in his career suggest a different perspective.

I have often been asked whether, when I was among the Azande, I got to accept their ideas about witchcraft. This is a difficult question to answer. I suppose you can say I accepted them: I had no choice. . . . Azande were talking about witchcraft daily, both among themselves and to me; any communication was well-nigh impossible unless one took witchcraft for granted. You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion. . . . If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (p. 244)

This quote suggests a productive relationship between endorsement and truth, where beliefs acquire reality, in part, because people make them real.

This notion of 'belief creates reality' is a common theme in social psychology (Snyder, 1984) and a key component of the second, dynamic construction side of the MC framework (Adams & Markus, 2004; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). If the first side of the MC dialectic emphasizes the importance of cultural grounding for

psychological experience, the second side emphasizes the importance of psychological activity for the reproduction of cultural worlds. Cultural worlds do not exist apart from psychological activity, but instead require everyday contributions of thought and action for their construction, maintenance and sometimes change (Adams & Markus, 2004). From this perspective, a complete account of GSP requires attention not only to the cultural realities that underlie genital shrinking experience, but also to the role of psychological activity in reproducing those cultural realities.

The goal of this paper is to apply the MC framework to an occurrence of GSP. However, an equally important goal is to take the occurrence of GSP as a case in which to explore the MC framework. Although explicitly defined as a dialectical process, discussions of the MC framework typically emphasize its cultural-grounding side (culture creates psyche) and neglect its dynamic-construction side (psyche creates culture). This lopsided emphasis not only promotes a conception of cultural influence as a monolithic force, but also neglects the role of the psychological subject in actively appropriating cultural patterns and reproducing cultural realities (cf. Kashima, 2000). A more balanced approach to the relationship between culture and psychology—and a more complete analysis of GSP—requires greater attention to processes of reality construction.

## Materials

Materials for the analysis come from two sources. The first is a series of reports that appeared in local newspapers during an occurrence of GSP that occurred in Southern Ghana during January 1997. The second is a series of semi-structured interviews that we conducted during an outbreak of GSP that occurred one month later in Tamale, the largest city in Northern Ghana,.

### Newspaper Reports

Our analysis of news media considers only reports that appeared during January 1997, in the two most prominent Ghanaian daily newspapers: the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*.<sup>2</sup> We conducted independent analyses of these reports, making note of the number of cases reported, characteristics of persons accused of genital shrinking, characteristics of accusers and any special features about the cases. We resolved discrepancies by discussing them until we reached consensus.

A total of thirteen different articles mentioned episodes of GSP. Within these articles, it was possible to identify between twenty-four

and twenty-eight separate incidents that occurred over a span of four days in locations throughout Southern Ghana (including Accra, Korforidua, Kumasi, Nsawam, Obuasi, Sunyani, Swedru, Takoradi and Tema).<sup>3</sup> Although news reports did not contain sufficient information to permit firm conclusions about the relationship of demographic indicators to involvement in genital-shrinking incidents, they do reveal some rough patterns. Contrary to the impression conveyed by the editorial quoted earlier, most people accused of genital shrinking were not 'jujumen who have migrated from Nigeria', but instead appeared (based on surname) to be of Ghanaian nationality. Most of the alleged perpetrators were men, but at least one woman was accused of causing genital shrinking. Alleged perpetrators of shrinking included people not only from low-status occupations like shoeshine provider, but also from relatively high-status occupations like businesswoman. Alleged victims of shrinking also came from a range of occupations, from schoolboys and taxi drivers to a pastor and local government official. Most of the alleged victims were men, but news reports also mentioned cases of women who complained that their genital organs or breasts were shrinking (see Dzokoto & Adams, 2005).

### **Interviews**

In February 1997, we were conducting an interview study of self-experience in Tamale, the largest city in Northern Ghana. As we began this study, episodes of GSP and associated crowd violence occurred on two consecutive days.<sup>4</sup> We added items to the end of the interview protocol to explore local experience of these episodes (see Appendix).

Two research assistants approached prospective respondents in public settings and invited them to participate in a study of 'how you think about yourself and other people'. In the end, twenty-two people accepted the invitation to participate. In one condition, research assistants conducted interviews with adult participants who had no formal education. They conducted these interviews in Dagbani, the language of the dominant ethnic group in the Tamale area (Dagomba) and a common lingua franca in the town. In the two other conditions, research assistants randomly assigned educated adults to participate in either Dagbani or English, the official language of Ghana and a medium of instruction in schools throughout the country. Although the number of participants is too small to make strong conclusions, responses to genital-shrinking items did not vary as a function of language or education status. The same two research assistant translated the interview items (from English to Dagbani) and the

subsequent, tape-recorded responses (from Dagbani to English). Any translation conflicts were immediately resolved by consensus.

Of the twenty-two people who agreed to participate, twenty indicated that they had heard something about alleged genital-shrinking incidents (although seven of these were apparently unaware that such incidents had occurred in Tamale). Only one of the twenty participants reported that he witnessed an incident personally. Those who knew of the general phenomenon typically heard it from others, although some had seen or heard a report in local news media. Of these participants, seven spontaneously noted that they had read newspaper reports of the phenomenon, including three participants who specifically mentioned (without prompting) the passage quoted at the beginning of this article.

Nearly half of the participants (ten of twenty-two, or 45 percent) indicated explicitly that they 'believed' allegations of shrinking. Educated people were no less likely to express belief than were uneducated people (see Jahoda, 1969, 1970). Another 23 percent of the participants (five of twenty-two) explicitly denied belief. The remaining participants (seven of twenty-two, or 32 percent) either required more information before making a judgment or were skeptical about the particular Tamale incidents but believed the general phenomenon.

### **Making Sense of Genital-Shrinking Panic: Prevailing Interpretations**

News reports and interviews suggested two varieties of interpretation for episodes of GSP. One interpretation was that malicious criminals did, in fact, tamper with genital organs. Another interpretation portrayed genital-shrinking allegations as deliberately false accusations.

#### **Criminal Tampering**

Media reports indicate that some unknown proportion of residents were sufficiently convinced by these explanations that they lynched as many as eight people accused of genital shrinking, clashed with police who tried to intervene in lynching incidents, and attacked police stations where alleged shrinkers were given refuge. However, media reports also make clear that people did not accept allegations of genital shrinking uncritically, but instead subjected them to various tests. Indeed, interview participants were nearly unanimous in suggesting that, rather than 'instant justice' ('Fear Grips Accra', 1997), the best practice to determine the truth of genital-shrinking accusations would be for officials to convey accusers to hospitals or police

stations for a systematic examination. News media reported many cases that apparently followed this procedure, and in all reported cases, official examinations invariably revealed that the accuser possessed an intact penis. However, observers did not necessarily accept this revelation as unequivocal evidence against allegations of genital shrinking. Instead, alleged victims of shrinking often claimed that their penis had been restored through the practice of beating the alleged thief, had suffered a reduction in size, or had lost its potency. In these cases, observers responded with additional techniques to establish the validity of claims. In response to alleged victims' claims that their penises were smaller, news media reported cases in which investigators summoned witnesses—the father of one alleged victim and a girlfriend of another—to examine the alleged victim's penis and testify about its relative size. Similarly, in response to a case in which a man 'insisted [his] organ had lost its power', the *Daily Graphic* reported that 'a woman was invited to fondle him, [and] he had an erection' (Nyinah, 1997, p. 8), casting doubt on his claim that his penis had lost its potency (see Mather, 2005, for an extended study of a specific case).

In general, sources were vague when explaining how genital tampering occurred. However, they were more articulate when explaining why people might engage in the practice. One explanation, spontaneously mentioned by three of twenty-two interview participants, was the form of penis-napping implied in the opening passage. According to this explanation, people stole penises and held them for ransom (see Mather, 2005). In the words of one participant,

I heard that those who go about doing such things are two in number: one will stand somewhere and one will go about touching people. At the time that he shakes [hands], the victim's genitals will vanish. When it vanishes . . . the other one will come and tell [the victim] what has happened so [that the victim] will give him money and he will let that thing come back.

Another explanation, mentioned spontaneously by an additional four of twenty-two interview participants, invoked the notion of money juju. According to this explanation, culprits were stealing penises without any intention of returning them to their owners in order to make a magical form of 'medicine' that bestows wealth on the user (cf. Ilechukwu, 1992). Although this explanation may seem outlandish to many readers, it is rendered plausible in many West African worlds by documented reports of ritual murder to procure powerful or productive body parts like hearts or genitalia (see Igwe, 2004).

### **False Accusation**

Another prominent explanation portrayed genital-shrinking allegations as deliberately false accusations. Here again, sources cited two motivations for false accusation. The explanation favored by law enforcement and government officials was that allegations of genital shrinking were 'a ploy by confident tricksters to create a crowd so that they can rob them' (Nyinah & Aboagye, 1997). Consistent with this explanation, news media reported an incident in which a taxi driver accused a female passenger of stealing his penis. He began to beat the woman, and when a crowd gathered, he allegedly grabbed her wristwatch and fled (Nyinah & Aboagye, 1997; Owusu & Cooper, 1997).

A second motivation for false accusation, spontaneously noted by five of twenty-two interview participants, was enmity: personal relationship of hatred, malice and sabotage from close, ingroup spaces (Adams, 2005). As one participant remarked,

It can happen that such a thing [genital shrinking] has not happened to anyone, but someone who is already my enemy and I want his bad name or to kill him, I can just say that he did this or that and because of that they will kill him.

Similarly, another participant explained that he was reluctant to go to town because he feared being the target of an enemy's false accusations:

These days, if somebody hates you, he can just decide to raise an alarm that you have just touched his body and that his genital organ has disappeared. . . . They can raise such alarms, and you will be beaten to death.

It is not clear from remarks like these whether participants believed that all allegations were false accusations motivated by personal hatred or thought that some allegations may be true.

Although the construction of genital-shrinking allegations as false accusation may seem more plausible to modern sensibilities than explanations that emphasize magical powers, available evidence casts doubt on these explanations, too. Many sufferers from GSP reported to hospitals and clinics for medical examination. Likewise, accusers often dragged alleged perpetrators of genital shrinking to police stations, only to find themselves arrested for making false accusations (e.g. Ablekpe & Opoku, 1997). Rather than deliberate acts of false accusation, these behaviors suggest that many people believed their own accusations.

## **Analysis: The Mutual Constitution Framework and Genital-Shrinking Panic**

### **The Cultural Grounding of Genital-Shrinking Episodes**

The first half of the MC dialectic holds that, to comprehend episodes of GSP, one must understand the particular constructions of reality that underlie local experience. In part, the reference here is to specific concepts or institutions that render genital-shrinking experience sensible. For example, a prevailing construction of reality that underlies both the experience of genital shrinking and the prominent experience of enemyship is the set of concepts referred to in English as witchcraft, sorcery or juju.<sup>5</sup> Although the specifics vary across communities, the ideas associated with these concepts propose not only magical means through which genital shrinking might occur, but also the existence of malicious enemies who might also seek to do harm through non-magical means like false accusation. Likewise, another feature of West African worlds that underlies experience of genital shrinking is an emphasis on kinship, parenthood and reproductive potential. This emphasis renders penis loss a particularly anxiety-provoking prospect.

In addition, the reference here is to more general habits of being or psychological tendencies that actively promote experience of GSP. Important in this regard is the concept of selfways (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997): local constructions of reality that shape both explicit experience of self and more implicit habits of being. Africanist writers have used phrases like 'relational' or 'interdependent' to describe the implicit selfways that prevail across diverse West African worlds (Adams & Dzokoto, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Piot, 1999; Shaw, 2000). These constructions of reality locate self-experience in pre-existing fields of relational force. They afford an experience of inherent connection not only to other people (living and dead), but also to place, land and spiritual entities (Fiske, 1991; Geschiere & Gugler, 1998; Gyekye, 1992; Jackson, 1982; Kirby, 1986; Riesman, 1986; Tengan, 1991).<sup>6</sup> The implicit contrast is with the more atomistic or independent selfways that are prominent in the settings associated with most psychological research (Baumeister, 1987; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Fiske et al., 1998; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). These constructions of reality locate the self in the internal properties of inherently separate subjects. They frame interpersonal connection as a discretionary and often tenuous arrangement of more basic, unconnected selves.

Research has associated interdependent selfways with several habits of being that afford or promote GSP (Dzokoto & Adams, 2005). First,

the sense of pervasive connection associated with interdependent selfways is in turn associated with a sense of openness to interpersonal forces like enemyship or genital tampering (Adams, 2005; Jackson, 1990; Riesman, 1986). Second, interdependent selfways are associated with 'holistic' perceptual habits that direct attention to contextual sources of experience (see Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). By increasing attention to the interpersonal context, these habits of mind render people more open to the sorts of interpersonal influence alleged in genital-shrinking episodes (Mesquita, 2001). Third, interdependent selfways are associated with somatization: the tendency to experience negative affect in bodily rather than psychological forms (e.g. Ryder, Yang, & Heine, 2002). In line with this tendency, anxious arousal is likely to be experienced in terms of physical symptoms, such as a vanishing penis, rather than psychological symptoms, like anxiety (cf. McGrath, 1982).

An extended discussion of the constructions of reality that promote GSP is beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, we have included these examples to briefly illustrate the more general process. Although these examples are compatible with classic ethnographic perspectives that emphasize how people apply local beliefs to help make sense of strange sensations, the more important emphasis in the cultural grounding side of the MC framework is how local constructions of reality are *constitutive* of genital-shrinking panic (Good, 1994). Beyond rendering belief in genital shrinking sensible, these constructions of reality are associated with psychological tendencies that actively foster genital-shrinking experience. Tendencies of somatization, holistic perception and beliefs about magic, interpersonal influence, or the importance of parenthood are integral components of GSP, such that epidemic outbreaks of the phenomenon would not occur in their absence.

### **The Dynamic Construction of Genital-Shrinking Realities**

An adequate account of GSP must do more than analyze the constructions of reality that promote genital-shrinking experience. In addition, it must direct greater attention to the processes by which beliefs about GSP create their own reality. In other words, an adequate account requires attention to the dynamic-construction side of the MC framework.

#### *Language Activity*

To the extent that psychological approaches have considered the dynamic construction of cultural reality, it has typically been in the

context of language activity like discourse and narrative (e.g., Bruner, 1992; Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999; Potter, 1996). Regardless of individual belief or endorsement, the act of invoking concepts contributes to the reality at the level of social representation. This is not a simple matter of perpetuating concepts within their original domains of relevance. Instead, each act of invoking a concept reproduces and extends it to new domains, as when 'traditional' concepts like sorcery or witchcraft get applied to 'modern' activities like school examinations (Field, 1960), table-tennis competitions (Stevens, 1988) and international soccer matches (Geschiere, 1997, p. 4).

An informal poll of 'people on the street' that was published in a weekly newspaper (i.e. neither source of materials upon which the preceding analyses were based) illustrates the reverse process: how discursive reproduction extends 'global' patterns like Christianity to 'local' phenomena like GSP. In the words of one respondent,

My belief in the shrinking of peoples [*sic*] genital organs is based on the Scripture. . . . However, I don't believe it can happen to everybody because those who believe in Jesus Christ are more than conquerors. The blood of Jesus Christ that was shed is not for the atoning of our sins only but to sanctify, purify, and to protect us against this kind of onslaught. ('The Genital-Shrinking Scare', 1997)

In the words of a second respondent in the same article,

I do believe that people have the power to cause the shrinking and disappearance of other people's genital organs but I don't think it can happen to me. It is only those who don't believe in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who can fall victim to these supernatural things. Such people believe the power of the juju man is mightier than the love of God.

What gets perpetuated and extended in these cases are not just individual concepts, but a larger network of associated ideas. When people combine patterns related to juju and Christianity, they extend the idea of amulet-like protection to the blood of Jesus (Adams & Dzokoto, 2003). Likewise, when people invoke science to explain episodes of GSP, they help propagate its associated, modernist assumptions (including the primacy of reason/mind over sensation/body or the role of evidence versus faith as the basis for knowledge).

Although true in general, the reality-construction force of language activity increases when the actor occupies institutional roles like journalist (see Cohen & Nisbett, 1997). For example, interview participants tended to talk about GSP in ways that revealed the influence of the *People and Places* editorial. They not only explained GSP as the work

of Nigerians who were stealing penises for money juju, but also (in two cases) cited the editorial as evidence for their explanation.

Expanding on the role of journalists, the two newspapers that provide materials for the present analysis tended to construct different realities in their reports of events. The first story to appear in the *Ghanaian Times* reported that, 'The Accra Central Police yesterday arrested four men accused of causing other people's male organs to diminish in size under mysterious circumstances' (Owusu & Cooper, 1997, p. 1). Subsequent reports continued to construct events as cases of theft, portraying people accused of genital shrinking as criminals and their accusers as victims (Asante, 1997). In contrast, initial reports in the *Daily Graphic* were ambiguous. Although they did not explicitly label claims of genital shrinking as false, they were careful to refer to these cases as 'alleged' genital shrinking (Nyinah & Aboagye, 1997). By the second day, reports were less ambiguous and tended to construct events as false accusation.

#### *Behavioral Artifacts*

Although the dynamic construction of reality is most evident as a topic in contemporary social psychology in studies of discourse and narrative, one can extend a similar analysis to other forms of activity. For example, psychologists have long emphasized how action serves as informational social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). When people act on their construal of an ambiguous event, they influence the manner in which observers construe the event and contribute to emergent norms for interpreting subsequent experience (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Stahl, 1982). Some observers of GSP construed ambiguous allegations in terms of genital theft, participated in the apprehension and beating of accused persons, and thereby helped to construct emergent norms for the experience of genital-shrinking allegations as cases of theft and instant justice. Other observers construed ambiguous allegations as false accusation, heroically intervened to rescue the accused person from harm, and thereby contributed to an emergent norm that defined events as cases of unjustified mob violence.

#### *Self-fulfilling Prophecy*

So far, discussion has considered relatively indirect processes of reality construction: that is, the role of everyday activity in reproducing the background constructions of reality that provide fertile ground for experience of genital shrinking in the first place. However, beliefs about genital shrinking can also serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy that contributes more directly to cases of shrinking genitals.

How might accusations of genital shrinking become a self-fulfilling prophecy? One possibility is implicit in the remarks both of the medical source who 'noted that the victims might have gone into shock, hence the diminishing of their genital organs' ('Fear Grips Accra', 1997) and of the 'person on the street' who suggested that susceptibility to genital-shrinking attack was limited to those who 'believe the power of the juju man' ('The Genital-Shrinking Scare', 1997). Both remarks imply an intrapersonal form of self-fulfilling prophecy that resembles phenomena like so-called 'voodoo death' (Cannon, 1943). A story circulates about the existence of juju practitioners who make penises disappear. This story fosters increased sensitivity regarding incidental contact in public spaces such that otherwise innocuous events, like shaking hands with a stranger, begin to take on sinister meaning. Something in this charged atmosphere triggers a person's concern that he or she is the target of a genital-shrinking attack. This concern produces intense anxiety and physiological reactions—especially in relatively plastic organs like genitalia—that people interpret as confirmation of their anxious beliefs ('Someone stole my penis!') rather than a consequence of their anxious beliefs ('I am afraid, so my penis has shrunk'). This interpretation creates more anxiety, which sets the stage for further shrinking, which creates more anxiety, and so on in a self-fulfilling spiral (see Oyeboode, Jamieson, Mullaney, & Davison, 1986).

In this form of self-fulfilling prophecy, the cycle of reinforcement between mental and material operates in relatively intrapersonal fashion. That is, it is the man's own belief that he has been attacked that causes his penis to shrink. (However, even this apparently intrapersonal process has a collective component. That is, the power of a belief to produce reality is likely to be stronger when the individual inhabits settings where the belief is a prominent social representation.) In contrast, most references to self-fulfilling prophecy in the field of social psychology refer to an interpersonal process that was most apparent in an atmosphere of suspicion described by an interview participant:

It has scared me so much that, when you go to town and you are about to hit yourself against someone you don't know, it is something that is difficult for me. Like the other day, I went to town and because of that it disturbed me so much, I could not greet people . . . the way that I should have greeted someone I know. So for the day I did not enjoy because of that problem.

Whether people fear genital-shrinking jujumen or the danger of being falsely accused, the behavioral manifestations of their fear and

suspicion have important, self-fulfilling consequences.<sup>7</sup> If a man meets a woman in town and appears reluctant to return her greeting, she may infer that he dislikes her. Based on this inference, the woman may respond in a suspicion-laden manner that the man may interpret as confirmation of his suspicions, without recognizing his role in eliciting the woman's suspicion-laden response. This interpretation may lead to further expressions of suspicion, which trigger more suspicion-laden responses, and so on in a self-fulfilling spiral.

Resonating with social psychological research (e.g. Snyder, 1984), this example illustrates how one kind of belief—suspicion of malice—can produce its own reality. However, to fully appreciate the importance of this interpersonal process for the production of shrinking penises, it is necessary to extend the analysis in two ways.

First, it is necessary to extend the analysis beyond the level of dyadic interaction to consider consequences for society at large. Suspicious belief does more than create an isolated dyad of dislike; in addition, it reproduces an everyday world in which dislike exists as an observable reality. That is, the dyad of dislike becomes a cultural artefact that observers can cite as grounds to conclude that suspicion of dislike is warranted in their own interactions.

Second, it is necessary to extend the analysis beyond a single cycle to consider the more dialectical perspective of the MC framework. That is, one must appreciate how each cycle of the process replenishes the constructions of reality that foster initial interpretations. By interpreting genital-shrinking allegations as evidence of penis theft, people reconstitute associated patterns—like relational models of self, the existence of juju and an atmosphere of anxiety and suspicion—that promote subsequent experience of penis theft. Alternatively, by interpreting genital-shrinking allegations as evidence of false accusation, people reconstitute associated patterns—like belief in prevalence of enemyship (Adams, 2005)—that promote further explanations of false accusation.

To summarize, occurrences of GSP draw attention to an important process: the role of psychological activity in the reproduction of cultural reality. Beyond the classic ethnographic perspective that seeks to explain how episodes of genital-shrinking panic make sense given local beliefs, a cultural psychological analysis explores how beliefs in genital shrinking might be or become true. The focus of the analysis is not the invention of culture at the level of macrolevel structures, but instead the microlevel reproduction of cultural worlds through ordinary psychological activity.

## Conclusion

The goal of this analysis has been to investigate the potential of the MC framework to provide a non-pathologizing account of GSP. The point of this analysis is not to deny that outbreaks of GSP result in pathological outcomes, including serious injury and death for people accused of genital tampering. Instead, the point is to consider the various realities of GSP as the outcome of normal psychological processes. Rather than being disturbed or feeble-minded individuals who lack contact with reality, the MC analysis suggests that sufferers from GSP are normal individuals whose experience is firmly grounded—indeed, perhaps too much so—in local constructions of reality.

One can usefully contrast the present perspective with an account of GSP as collective delusion (Bartholomew, 1998, 2001). One version of the collective delusion framing would portray GSP as the product of widespread, mistaken beliefs that predispose many people to individually misperceive reality. Resonating more clearly with the MC framework, another version of collective delusion would portray GSP as the result of a collective construction processes by which people in a community collaborate to produce social realities that are somehow mistaken. In either case, the collective delusion framing retains a pathologizing tone to the extent that the portrayal of GSP as delusion emphasizes deviation from a truth criterion.

In contrast, the present analysis follows the lead of two participants who, in independent interviews, spontaneously repeated the saying ‘where there is smoke, there is fire’. Although neither of these participants believed accounts of genital tampering in every detail, they expressed reluctance to dismiss the phenomenon entirely because ‘sometimes rumours have little pieces of truth’. What a MC analysis adds to this idea is that these pieces have truth status, in part, because people make them true.

The article’s strategy for responding to pathologizing accounts of GSP has been to argue against claims of pathology. An alternative strategy is to admit that outbreaks of GSP do have ‘pathological’ elements, but argue that these are no more pathological than phenomena in North American settings. From this perspective, beliefs associated with GSP are no less rational than beliefs—for example, the sense that one has interacted with beings from outer space (Clancy, 2005), is impervious to social influence (Kim & Markus, 1999), or is free from negative interpersonal attachments (Adams, 2005)—that are prominent in present-day, North American worlds. Likewise, the consequences of GSP outbreaks may be no more pathological than the potentially pathological

consequences—for example, the unsustainable consumption that accompanies the experience of unconstrained agency, imperviousness to social influence and freedom from interpersonal attachment—of the constructions of reality that are prominent in North American worlds.

### **Appendix: Interview Items**

1. Have you heard about this incident that occurred in town concerning genital shrinking?
2. What is your version of what happened?
3. Do you believe the allegations?
4. Who is to blame for these disturbances?
5. In your opinion, why do the police become involved and carry these people to the station?
6. What is the motive of people who are doing these things? What are they trying to accomplish?
7. If you were walking along and came upon such an incident, what evidence would you need before joining the crowd?

### **Notes**

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1. One example is a story that appeared in the online version of the Cable News Network ('[Seven] 7 Killed in Ghana over "Penis-Snatching" Episodes', 1997).
2. These articles constitute a subset of those that we analyzed in a more general review of GSP outbreaks in West African settings from 1997 to 2003 (see Dzokoto & Adams, 2005). Despite some overlap in these materials, our earlier review considers how to locate GSP within prevailing conceptions of psychopathology. The present analysis not only adds a different set of materials (interviews with Tamale residents) but also focuses on a different topic: the collective construction of reality.
3. This is almost certainly an underestimate of overall incidence. Not only were we personally familiar with cases that went unreported by local news media, but also news reports themselves provided evidence that the phenomenon was more widespread. For example, the *Ghanaian Times* printed the headline 'Seven Lynched in Accra', but the associated story did not report the incidents associated with this headline (Allotey, 1997). A list of the thirteen articles is available from the authors.
4. Details about these cases were difficult to confirm because there were no reports of these incidents in local media. Like most participants, members

- of the research team obtained their information about these incidents through informal networks.
5. Although these beliefs may seem incredibly far-fetched to readers who are firmly grounded in worlds of academia and science, they are rendered plausible in many West African worlds both by documented reports of ritual killings to procure productive body parts like genitalia (Igwe, 2004) and by confessions of apparently undisturbed individuals who claim to have caused impotence, infertility or other misfortunes via sorcery and witchcraft (e.g. Jackson, 1975). The distribution of these beliefs is not limited to rural villages or other 'traditional' settings, but instead remains prominent in urban settings, university campuses and other 'modern' spaces (see Assimeng, 1989; Geschiere, 1997; and Meyer, 1998 regarding witchcraft belief in present-day, West African settings).
  6. In keeping with the attempt to avoid exoticification and construction of otherness, it is important to distinguish between the notion of interdependent selfways and pathologizing characterizations of African experience in terms of 'collectivist self', 'primitive mentality' or similar notions (see Piot, 1999; Shaw, 2000). These characterizations fail to recognize the individual humanity of African selves; submerge personal identity in an undifferentiated collective; and deny agency, subjectivity and rationality to African persons (Appiah, 1992). In contrast, the notion of interdependent selfways refers to constructions of reality that highlight connection to social and physical contexts. These selfways and associated constructions of reality are no more pathological (and no less true) than psychological tendencies—associated with independent selfways and mainstream North American worlds—to imagine oneself independent of contextual constraint or free from unwanted connection (see Adams, 2005, for a discussion of this point with respect to the sense of freedom from enemies).
  7. Besides its importance in 'local traditions', an interview participant referred to a passage from the Qur'an to emphasize the meaning of greetings in Islam: 'And when you are greeted with a greeting, greet with one better than it or return it. Surely Allah ever takes account of all things' (Ali, 1917/1963, sura 4, verse 86).

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## Biographies

GLENN ADAMS is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Kansas. He served for three years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Sierra Leone before enrolling in the social psychology Ph.D. program at Stanford University. The foundation for his dissertation (on the topic of enemyship) was a two-year period of field research in Ghana, during which he recorded the observations described in this article. He continues to build upon this foundation in his current research, applying qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate the cultural grounding of personal relationships. His other interests include a sociocultural analysis of racism and oppression inspired by the theoretical perspective of liberation psychology. ADDRESS: Glenn Adams, Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045, USA. [email: adamsg@ku.edu]

VIVIAN AFI DZOKOTO is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Fayetteville State University. Originally from Ghana, she is a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign's Ph.D. program in clinical/community psychology. The foundation of her dissertation (on the topic of emotion and embodiment) was influenced by the events described in this article. She continues to build upon this foundation in her current

research, applying qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate the cultural grounding and somatization of emotion. Her other areas of interest include anxiety disorders and multicultural competencies in psychology.  
ADDRESS: Vivian Afi Dzikoto, Department of Psychology, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC 28301, USA.  
[email: [vdzikoto@uncfsu.edu](mailto:vdzikoto@uncfsu.edu)]