Research Notes / Notes de recherche

Families, Intergenerational Bonds, and Aging in Sub-Saharan Africa*

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette note de recherche propose une justification, et offre un ensemble de paramètres initiaux, pour un effort explicite de forger une politique et une gérontologie de famille scientifiquement pertinentes à l'Afrique. Il se fonde sur une évaluation critique des discours politiques dominants dans la région et les efforts de recherche existants concernant les familles et le vieillissement, en particulier en Afrique sub-saharienne (ASS).

ABSTRACT

This Research Note proposes a rationale, and offers a set of initial parameters, for an explicit effort to forge a policy and scientifically relevant family gerontology for Africa. It builds on a critical appraisal of dominant policy discourses in the region and existing research efforts on families and aging, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa.

The world looks to families as the key social group in which older people are embedded and supported (Keating, 2011). Nowhere, arguably, is this truer than in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) where in the broad absence of comprehensive formal welfare systems, families are pivotal for understanding challenges and opportunities of aging (Therborn, 2006). Indeed, the very emergence of a gerontological endeavour in SSA just over three decades ago was driven largely by modernization theory, based on conjectures about an erosion of customary family care systems and an imminent "crisis" of old-age support which required responses (Aboderin, 2010; Ferreira, 1999).

An early corpus of mostly atheoretical, descriptive research found both a broad continuity of family support norms and arrangements, as well as signs of inadequacies in the protection offered by these systems,

within the context of broad social and economic change, including urbanization and growing economic strain in the era of structural adjustment programmes in SSA (Aboderin, 2006, 2010). Since then, a substantial body of empirical evidence on the circumstances of older people in SSA has accumulated. It points to a considerable vulnerability and incapacity in much of SSA's older population due to poverty, ill-health, functional impairment, and lack of care. At the same time, it shows a significant engagement and contribution of older adults in the provision of family support – most prominently in their role as primary carers of orphans and vulnerable children in the contexts of HIV/AIDS (Abebe & Aase, 2007; Cassim, Rauff, McIntyre, Van der Pas, & Deeg, 2012; Chazan, 2008; Ferreira, 2006; Hosegood, Preston-Whyte, Busza, Moitse, & Timæus, 2007; Kohler, Watkins, Behrman, Anglewicz, & Kohler, 2013; Merli & Palloni, 2006).

Spurred by such insights, political awareness, debate, and action on aging in SSA have intensified over the past decade (Aboderin, 2011; Aboderin & Hoffman, 2013; HelpAge/UNFPA, 2012). Some states, in their constitutions or in their poverty reduction strategies, now explicitly recognize older citizens as a vulnerable group. A growing number of countries are formulating policy frameworks aimed at safeguarding older citizens' welfare (Aboderin, 2011; HelpAge/UNFPA, 2012).

A key influence on the emergent policy directions are pan-African perspectives that reflect Africa's strong regional identity (Grant & Söderbaum, 2003) and locate challenges of, and required responses to, aging within broader prescriptions for development in the continent. Prime examples of such framing are found in regional policy instruments forged by the African Union. Within such texts, the "African family" again takes centre stage.

On one level, in a continuation of modernization theory–inspired concerns, assumptions about a progressive breakdown of the African family and its customary support functions for older members form a key raison d'etre for the quest to develop policies on aging in the region. Thus, the African Union (AU) Plan of Action on Ageing (AU/HelpAge, 2003) states:

> In addition to the usual physical, mental and physiological changes associated with ageing, old people in Africa are particularly disadvantaged due to lack of social security for their everyday social and economic needs. The care and support by the family and community that was taken for granted in the past is no more because of changes in society associated with urbanisation and "development" in general …. Africa, therefore, needs to intensify efforts to put in place effective mechanisms to cater for the needs of its old people. (p. 5)

On a second level, "African renaissance"– imbued perspectives uphold the African family as a key, though now threatened, source of the continent's strength, which must be buttressed as a cornerstone for Africa's homegrown development (Okumu, 2002; African Union [AU], 2004). The AU Plan of Action on the Family in Africa (AU, 2004) thus holds that:

> In Africa … the centrality, uniqueness and indispensability of the family in society is unquestionable … Traditionally, Africa's development has been a result of the strength of the family … [however] … the rapidly changing social, political and economic circumstances in the last decades have had adverse effects on the family. Building the capacity and resilience of the African family to avoid breakage will be an important contribution in the development of Africa. (p. 3)

Importantly, such perspectives construe the potency and role of families in Africa not only in their own right but also as a distinctive trait and advantage vis-a-vis the industrialized West. This relative strength, moreover, is seen as epitomized in the recognition given to family elders:

> It must be clearly understood that an African Renaissance does not mean imitating or blindly copying everything European. In this context let us consider some of the most distinctive aspects of Africa's identity and cultural glory. In countries like Britain, France and the US, for example, there are certain aspects of behavior that are still repugnant to African people, such as neglect of, and lack of respect for, the elderly, parents in particular …. In Africa … age is given great respect, and so too are parents. (Okumu, 2002, p. 7)

Underpinned by such orientations, a central objective in SSA's responses to issues of aging is to build on and reinforce traditional African values and systems of family support, rather than embrace what are seen as western, "un-African" models that centre on formal service mechanisms (Apt, 2000). In this vein, the AU Plan of Action on Ageing urges efforts to:

> … enact legal provisions that promote and strengthen the role of the family and the community in the care of its older members
>
> … ensure that legal instruments exist to protect the rights of older people within the family and community
>
> … develop and strengthen strategies that empower older people to contribute to their families

and

> … implement policies and programmes that strengthen families and are inclusive of older people. (AU/HelpAge, 2003, pp. 15–16)

Informed by such regional policy perspectives, the "centrality of the family" approach typically emerges as a key element in the increasing number of national legal and policy frameworks that set parameters for country-level action on issues of aging and older people, as well as the to-be-adopted AU Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa (Aboderin, 2011; Aboderin & Hoffman, 2013; Aboderin, Mbaka, Egesa, & Owii, in press; AU, 2014a). Despite its far-reaching implications, however, the paradigm remains virtually uncontested or queried – as does the very concept of the African family and the broader narrative of its traditional strength and progressive breakup, and its revitalization as a basis for future development.

To be sure, a considerable corpus of research on the social, economic, and health circumstances of older adults in SSA has emerged over the past decade and has illuminated multiple aspects of their families and intergenerational bonds (e.g., Aboderin, 2006; Kohler et al., 2013; Lloyd-Sherlock, Barrientos, Møller, & Saboia, 2012; Lloyd-Sherlock, Ebrahim, & Grosskurth, 2014; Møller & Sotshongaye, 2002; Nxusani, 2004; Ogunmefun & Schatz, 2006; Posel, Fairburn, & Lund, 2006; Whyte, Alber, & Van der Geest, 2008). However, in keeping with a common lack of reflexivity and critical perspectives in African gerontology to date (Aboderin, 2011), there has been no systematic attempt to interrogate how the dominant discourses on families and aging relate to present-day realities.

There is a critical need and opportunity for such an endeavour. At a policy level, the necessity of more focused and critical research on aging families in SSA is evident in view of both African countries' growing readiness to act on issues of older persons and their re-assertion of an emphasis on families as a bedrock for social and economic progress in the region (AU, 2014b). At a scientific level, the time is ripe for the forging of a grounded African family gerontology that not only deepens regional understandings but also actively engages with, and advances, the burgeoning international debate on global family contexts of aging (Bedford & Blieszner, 2012; Roberto, 2013; Silverstein, Lendon, & Giarrusso, 2012).

It is within this context that we propose a set of parameters to guide the development of a research effort on older people's families in SSA that advances both policy and scientific debates. We demarcate central lines of inquiry as well as cross-cutting approaches that we have distilled from a narrative review of relevant African and international research literature as well as in-depth expert discussions on the elements of a basic research agenda on family and intergenerational bonds in old age that was formulated in an expert workshop convened by the Global Social Initiative on Ageing (GSIA) in South Africa in July 2013 (GSIA, 2013).

Cross-Cutting Perspectives

We discern four basic cross-cutting perspectives that ought to inform inquiry into the realities of aging families in SSA. First, there is a decidedly interpretive approach (Connidis, 2012) that actively sets aside the current normative, even ideological, thinking on African families and older people's kin bonds, to discover these anew. This endeavour must be grounded in an understanding of individuals' emic perspectives and their recursive relationship to the institutional and macrostructural, and cultural, contexts within which they unfold (Connidis, 2012; Giddens, 1991; Walker, 2009).

Second is a critical engagement with salient theoretical or conceptual ideas in the global gerontological literature about family ties in later life. Typically, such notions are forged on the basis of observations in Western societies. As such, they should constitute sensitising concepts for SSA research, with a view to appraising the extent to which they are able to adequately capture African realities and to identifying required refinements, adaptations, or elaborations.

Third is a focus of inquiry on the heterogeneity of experiences and inequalities in relation to well-being, that exist between aging families located at different intersections in the social structure, with a particular focus on socioeconomic and geographical (rural-urban) position, gender, and age.

Fourth is an explicit global perspective on aging families and their experiences. Such a view seeks to discern and understand impacts of major trends such as international and domestic migration, diffusion of information technology, and widening inter- and intra-country inequality. It also addresses differences and similarities between SSA and other regions.

Critical Areas for Investigation

Informed by the preceding approaches, we propose four critical substantive research areas. In each, we identify major unresolved empirical, theoretical, and methodological queries that we suggest should form the focus of investigations.

1. The Social Construction and Constellation of Aging Families

Despite its pervasive normative use, and in contrast to a deepening knowledge of aging family forms in the West (Cooney & Dykstra, 2013; Roberto, 2013), the very concept of the African family – and, specifically,

the family of older people – remains poorly defined and under-scrutinized (Chazan, 2008; Cole & Durham, 2007; Kayongo-Male & Onyango, 1984; Therborn, 2006). An elemental line of inquiry thus centres on how older adults' families are constituted. This requires an investigation both of older people's conceptions (or constructions) of their families and perspectives of their kin on family membership of the older persons.

Connected to the social construction of aging families, a second critical query concerns the geographical – specifically the residential – constellation of family members. A number of analyses of older adults' living arrangements in SSA, often based on existing national survey data, have highlighted the frequency of households in which an older person lives with one or more adult children, alone or with spouse only. Often such living arrangements are, in contexts of HIV/AIDS and labour-related migration, in a skipped generation formation (Bongaarts & Zimmer, 2002; Hosegood & Timæus, 2005; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2002; Madhavan, 2004; Madhavan & Schatz, 2007; Merli & Palloni, 2006; Posel et al., 2006; Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998; Zimmer, 2009). However, such research has not captured family constellations within and across households, leaving a gap in our knowledge of how social constructions and residential constellations of family members relate to one another. Important next steps are (a) to gather information on non-co-resident kin; (b) to develop and use grounded definitions and indicators of household membership (Chazan, 2008; De Vos & Schwartzman, 2008; Marais, 2005; Oppong, 2006); and (c) to engage with and address the limitations of the concepts of nuclear and extended family (Russell, 2002; Ziehl, 2002).

A final, critical query concerns the presently diverging perspectives on continuity and change in both social constructions and residential constellations of aging families. Research needs to explore how actual trends in SSA relate to salient theoretical notions on shifting family forms in non-Western and Western societies. A first such perspective posits a growing multiplicity or diversity in family structures in the industrialized and industrializing world, away from a narrow normative nuclear composition (Blieszner & Bedford, 2012; Bohman, Van Wyk, & Ekman, 2009; Roberto, 2013; Ziehl, 2006). The second, remarkably resilient modernization theory–inspired view suggests a trend towards nuclear family forms in SSA and other developing regions (Hashimoto, 1991; Ziehl, 2002).

2. The Quality of Older Adults' Family Relationships

A second major focal area of inquiry relates to the quality of older adults' relationships with individual family members and their ties to their families in general.

Extant SSA research, mainly small-scale and qualitative, has centred on exploring and documenting conflict and strain between old and young generations – typically, older parents, adult children, and/or grandchildren – across a spectrum of contexts (Aboderin, 2006; Alber, van der Geest, & Whyte, 2008; Cole & Durham, 2007; Makoni & Stroeken, 2002; Møller & Sotshongaye, 2002). While this work illuminates an important dimension of older adults' family bonds, other crucial domains remain largely unexamined. These include particularly (a) the impacts of discord between generations on the well-being of older adults and their younger kin (Blieszner & Bedford, 2012); (b) the positive aspects and impacts of intergenerational relations; (c) the relative importance and quality of intra-generational bonds; and (d) the negotiation of family relationships and their meaning for adults as they age.

As noted, it is important to determine to what extent current gerontological theorizing on older individuals' family ties is relevant and how it may need to be further developed or refined for illuminating these four areas. Examples of prominent perspectives to be examined in this regard include – but are not confined to – (a) the intergenerational ambivalence perspective (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004), (b) socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), (c) the social input model of socio-emotional aging (Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011), and (d) conceptualizations of individualistic and familialistic norms and orientations (Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Lowenstein & Daatland, 2006).

3. Care for Dependent Family Members

Care for dependent members is a core dimension of family life. As elsewhere, older people in SSA play roles both as (a) care providers to orphans and vulnerable children in contexts of HIV, poverty, and labour-related migration (Hosegood & Timæus, 2005; Merli & Palloni, 2006; Posel et al., 2006), and as (b) recipients of long-term care.

The past decade has seen a steadily growing volume of research on the scope and experiences of older people's care roles (Ardington et al., 2010; Monasch & Boerma, 2004; Ogunmefun & Schatz, 2006). More recently, issues of long-term care for older adults are beginning to emerge as a focus of inquiry, although empirical studies remain few. Most extant research, moreover, is small-scale and limited to descriptions of care arrangements, adequacy, and impacts on caregiver and recipient (Cassim et al, 2012; Evans, 2010; Kautz, Bendavid, Bhattacharya, & Miller, 2010; Obrist, 2012; Odiambo, 2012; Okoye, 2004; Van Eeuwijk, 2012; Aboderin & Hoffman, 2013). There is a need to build systematically

on the existing work to answer a set of critical queries about family care that is provided and received by older adults.

One set of such questions concerns the adequacy of care and its impacts on the well-being of both care recipients and providers. Another concerns the beliefs, values, and rationales that underpin and shape the negotiation of care relationships. A particular focus in this regard should be on how customary norms of family and filial obligation are negotiated in the still-rare, but increasing instances where formal care services are utilised. A third query, building on the first two, concerns the nature of, and possible shifts in, normative perspectives and expectations regarding the appropriate role or possible complementarity of family and formal care provision, as well as express demand for the latter.

Research is called for that addresses the preceding issues and, in so doing, examines the extent to which Western gerontological perspectives on family caregiving, dependencies, and intergenerational support (Fine & Glendinning, 2005; Rummery & Fine, 2012) are able to capture SSA realities.

4. Intergenerational Transmission of Human, Social, and Cultural Capital

A current research initiative on intergenerational links and demographic trends in low- and middle-income countries, the National Transfer Accounts, has brought into relief the importance of examining and understanding the "generational economy" which is the aggregate flow of material resources between generations (Lee & Mason, 2011; United Nations, 2013). Less attention, however, is being paid to another significant dimension: the intergenerational transfer of other critical resources – particularly human, social, and cultural capital – *within* families.

The importance of such intra-familial flows of non-material forms of capital is suggested by evidence of the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Bird, 2007; Behrman et al., 2013; Schindlmayr, 2006). Such literature also indicates, though does not explore empirically, the potential function of older adults in such transmission. That such a function may be particularly marked in SSA is implied by older people's frequent co-residence with and care of younger generation kin, as well as the widespread notion of their role as custodians of culture and traditional knowledge (Bongaarts & Zimmer, 2002; Hashimoto, Coppard, & Kendig, 1992).

A set of crucial questions thus arises about the actual extent, nature, and impacts of older adults' involvement in the transfer of human, social, and cultural capital to young kin and in receiving such resources through flows in the opposite direction.

Concluding Statement

In this research note, we posit the existence of a potential disconnect between normative and policy discourses on aging families in sub-Saharan Africa, and present realities of inter- and intra-generational relations and support in the region. We also propose an initial set of cross-cutting perspectives and focal areas to inform – and, in turn, to be revised or refined by – an urgently needed research effort to bridge the disconnect. This will require a careful review of extant policy frameworks and the findings of existing research on aging families in SSA, combined with fresh empirical data generation and analysis. Generated insights and understandings will not only fill an acute gap in our knowledge about the fabric and functioning of contemporary African societies, but it will also provide us with a basis for forging appropriate responses to family resources and needs in addressing aging in the region.

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