Children’s Social Networks and Social Supports

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CHAPTER 3
Cultural and Universal Aspects of Social Support for Children: Evidence from the Abaluyia of Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding social support for children requires a sense of the cultural context of support, and the cultural meaning of behaviors defined as help or support. Consider the following two vignettes, taken from naturalistic observations of children among the Abaluyia, a Bantu-speaking group from western Kenya. In the first, note how offers of support, help, and nurturance are accompanied by teasing, aggression, and responsible work. The mother in this household is away for the day visiting, and the children are responsible for the home:

A 2½-year-old boy, his two older sisters, their infant brother, and a neighborhood girl are huddled around a small charcoal fire inside their house. The boy's sister, age 6, covers the boy with a towel because he appears cold. The older sister, age 9, then entertains the boy by talking and giving him objects to hold, while at the same time playing with her 6-year-old sister. The boy laughs with his older sisters, but they begin to play by themselves, ignoring him. The 9-year-old girl then takes a glowing stick from the fire and pretends to burn the boy, and he starts to cry. The two sisters laugh and play together, as the boy continues to cry. The 6-year-old then comforts the boy by putting him on her lap and offering him some food. She carries the
boy over to the door and helps dress him to go outside; she talks affectionately to him while doing this. The 9-year-old sister has gone outside, and calls out to the boy to come outside, and he proceeds to run around the two sisters and neighbor girl, laughing. He picks up his infant brother and physically entertains the infant by juggling it up and down and laughing at it. This continues for several minutes. The boy cleans the baby's running nose, and talks to it.

In this second example, the mother is “teaching” aggression, and a teasing style of helpfulness, to her infant; to the participants, this is a common pattern for offering support to children.

Three sisters (a 4-year-old, a 3-year-old, and an infant under a year old and still crawling) are home together in their rural homestead with their mother. The mother wants to nurse the baby, who is several meters away crawling around on the earthen floor. So the mother tells the 3-year-old to come over to her and suck on her breasts in order to get the baby to come over to the mother and nurse. The 3-year-old comes over and nurses; the baby sees this going on—and does indeed start to crawl over to the mother in order to nurse.

(later in the observation) The 3- and 4-year-old sisters enter the house laughing together while the mother is in the house with the baby. The mother jokingly tells the baby to beat the sisters with a stick for teasing her so much. The girls hear this remark, but make no comment.

African observers of, and participants in, these interactions found the mixture of nurturance, help, support, and aggression in these young children to be unremarkable. They did not consider it unusual that the children in the first example were home alone caring for other children, cooking, and tending a fire inside their house, nor did they see in either example anything remarkable in the combination of threats, domestic tasks, and support given to and offered by children. Such behaviors frequently go together during interactions in Abaluyia families.

Social support and assistance for children in Euro-American families, and as defined in Western psychology, differs from the Abaluyia data. Support and assistance are associated with overt empathy and affection for the person assisted; and by gratitude or some kind of acknowledgment on the part of the person assisted. The provision of comfort and warmth for children is an expectable part of offers of help and assistance. Help is usually accompanied by efforts by parents or others to verbally frame the problem with the child, along with offering support: “What is the matter?” “Oh, are you feeling scared?” “I’m sorry. . . .” This negotiation over the nature of the problem and inquiries regarding the internal state and feelings of the person needing support, should include the person being assisted. The mutual questions regarding a problem and support

needed for that problem or trouble are themselves a kind of giving and receipt of sensitive and appropriate assistance to others, as well as signalling support to come.

Most assistance and support of Alaluyia children did not have this verbally negotiated and framed, solicitously affectionate character. Rather, social support for these children is more sociocentric, requiring the children to seek and offer assistance in the context of a large, hierarchical network of siblings and adults, who are doing joint tasks. Much more assistance is provided by other children than by mothers and fathers, even when adults are present and available for support. Assistance is often indirect and delayed rather than immediate and focused on the individual child. This paper describes such patterns of support and assistance among Abaluyia children, and the shared management family system which provides the context for support.

CULTURAL AND UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF SUPPORT

Although this paper focuses on cultural differences in provisions of help and support, there are universally recognized behaviors that signal that help and support are needed, or that they are going on. Here for example is another brief vignette.

A 3-year-old girl trips and falls down on a dirt path outside her homestead and starts to cry. Her older sister comes over and brushes her off and hands her some maize to eat. The 3-year-old stops crying and starts to eat the maize, while the older sister stands next to her.

Both African and American observers agreed that this was an instance of supportive behavior. The immediate circumstances—the child's crying after being hurt—and the subsequent helpful behavior of the sister are both clear. Some ways to comfort young children seem to be universal. The provision of help and support has a recognizable character around the world, particularly regarding children. It includes “affection, physical comforting, . . . assistance in problem solving” (Belle, Burr, & Cooney, in press; Sandler & Barrera, 1984), offering food or other material resources, and protective interventions to prevent aggression or harm. That these similarities exist may be due to a shared human capacity for recognizing signals of distress in others, and for responding to offers of help (cf. Edwards's [1985, p. 320] comments in discussing ethical discourse). Younger, smaller, cute-appearing children elicit similar kinds of protective and nurturant responses (B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988) everywhere.

Shared features in providing support may come not only from biosocial evolution but from common social and functional requirements as well.
Cultural and Universal Aspects of Support

Cohen and McKay (1984) cite four support functions likely to be found everywhere in the world: tangible help, positive appraisal, self-esteem enhancement, and a sense of belonging. Lin, Dean, and Ensel (1986) review definitions of social support from sociology, social psychology, and psychiatry and propose a synthetic definition:

\[ \ldots \text{the perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners. (p. 18)} \ldots \text{social support can be operationally defined as access to and use of strong and homophilous ties. (p. 30)} \] [Homophilous ties are those between people similar in nature—in social characteristics, attitudes, and life-styles.]

Other useful distinctions include the idea that provisions of support include actual as well as perceived ("subjective") benefits of interactions with others; that there are at least three levels of supportive relationships (community, network, and intimate); and that emotional, informational, and tangible (material) kinds of support frequently differ in their meaning and effects.

The existence of some cross-cultural similarity regarding the nature of support is not necessarily evidence for noncultural causes of such similarity. Common cultural problems facing people everywhere can produce similarity, just as can biological inheritance, or functional requirements. Shwed and Bourne (1981), for example, presents a list of 10 themes about social existence that they propose as cultural dilemmas that need to be resolved everywhere.

1. The problem of personal boundaries—what's me versus what's not me.
3. The problem of maturity—what's grown-up versus what's childlike.
4. The problem of cosubstantiality—who is of my kind and thus shares food or blood or both with me versus who is not of my kind.
5. The problem of ethnicity—what's our way versus what's not our way.
6. The problem of hierarchy—why people share unequally in the burdens and benefits of life.
8. The problem of autonomy—am I independent, dependent, or interdependent?
9. The problem of the state—what I want to do versus what the group wants me to do.
10. The problem of personal protection—how can I avoid the war of all against all?

Parents face the common problem of training children in the culturally given answers to these dilemmas. Offering support to children, and training children to give support to others, crosscuts several of the culturally universal problems on Shwed and Bourne's proposed list. For example, having other children offer support through sharing resources like food or shelter simultaneously provides knowledge to the child regarding cosubstantiality. Decisions regarding which persons to help and which not to help involve cultural rules regarding the problem of hierarchy, the state, and personal protection. Although social support varies in form and substance around the world, common issues regarding how and when to provide support are being resolved by every community.

The form of cultural solutions to these universal questions of development varies, but cultural variation is not unconstrained. All societies have to protect the young and helpless, and both cultural and biological evolution have established some patterns for how this occurs. These patterns include both evolved signalling and response systems such as crying and comforting, as well as common cultural problems such as the meaning and resolution of inequality, and the dominance of some over others.

One implication of this view of universals in social support is that each new culture is not unique, and does not require an entirely new analysis of every aspect of social support in childhood. Behaviors an observer in another culture thinks are indicators of social support quite probably will not have to be given an entirely new, local cultural interpretation in every new culture. But this presumption is only an initial hypothesis, which always will require modification. It is the task of the analyst to identify which instances of social support or help or nurturance are more or less cross-culturally recognizable, and what it is about each culture that makes some of these patterns of support appear more or less often, in an unexpected form, or with unexpected associated meanings and feelings.

Cultural Patterns of Support

Understanding both the universal and local meanings of social support for children is a complex task. Data reduction and analysis of field notes and behavior observation protocols among the Abaluiya illustrate the complexity.

The data for studying social support in the present study come from field observations of Abaluiya children's social behavior. These observations were written by trained African students during naturally occurring interactions in and around the children's homes. The raw field observations were in episodic, short-sentence form, focused on a particular target child. (An example is reproduced in Edgerton & Langness, 1974, pp. 39–43.) Each observation lasted 30 minutes, and African student
field-workers completed 323 of these visits. Due to the time involved in the transcription of these protocols onto computer, I sampled 30%, or 97, for the present study. This gave a total of 48½ (97 half-hour protocols divided by 2) hours of children's activities.

American researchers and the African students who did the original observations jointly coded each protocol, using a version of the observational scheme developed by John and Beatrice Whiting and colleagues (B. Whiting & J. Whiting, 1975; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). This coding scheme judges each interaction between a child and others according to the intentions and goals of the actors and the resources given or received. Social behaviors coded in this system include nurturance, prosocial behavior, commands and other attempts to change others' behavior, aggression, seeking and offering help, sociability, and others. Coding reliability was assessed using a minimum criterion of 70% or higher agreement between coders.

I began by rereading each of the 30-minute observation protocols, and pulling out every event that had already been identified by this coding scheme as involving supportive, nurturant, or helpful behaviors. Other events were added, particularly events in which delayed or deferred help occurred as part of a longer sequence of interactions. This screening produced 574 events that were then used in further qualitative study of social support.

These continuous running records of children's behavior offer a rich sample of events and contexts in everyday life within which social support and help occur for Abaluya children. They were observed and judged by native speakers of the language who are members of the culture. But they were not collected in such a way as simultaneously to assess the folk meanings of support, inquire about the subjective interpretations of the supportive events occurring or immediately following their occurrence, or capture in the Luluyia language the discourse, motivations, and meanings of each supportive interaction. However, the method which was used is strongest in the breadth of the data, its careful sampling, the sheer number of instances of support captured, and the joint interpretation of the events by culture members and researchers.

In one sense, every one of these events, social support or not, occurring as they did in the midst of an African horticultural society speaking a Bantu language, has a cultural meaning different from what the same event would mean in North American middle-class families. But every socially supportive event is not equally different or distinctive, and some of these events fit with wider Abaluya cultural themes more than others.

For instance, some events did not fit with western schemata of what help and support should "look like" for young children. Yet they were identified as supportive by the African participants and researchers. An example would be a child being given a job to do in response to distress, without any dialogue regarding the child's needs or feeling states or the causes of the distress. (Being given such a job subsequently resulting in evident calming and satisfaction for the child and others.) Another example would be situations in which support occurs with little empathic questioning and dialogue between children and adults. This is characteristic of adult-child interaction patterns in a variety of contexts other than support networks, and is connected with the gerontocratic, age-graded structure of Abaluya society, and the importance placed on training children to monitor and respond to their environment, rather than attempting to change the environment around the child (cf. Ochs, 1982).

Other kinds of support were unusually frequent or rare. Thus offering food to placate a child occurs everywhere in the world, but seems to be unusually common in the Abaluya observations. Similarly, dominance and teasing combined with support appear frequently. By contrast, empathic dialogue involving questions regarding the inner states and feelings of the child is virtually absent.

In most cultures, there are special names or terms used for certain kinds of support, which code for culturally special features which would also indicate possibly important cultural patterns. Although there are Luluyia terms for help, support, or assistance (obukhony; obubeera), doing things for the sake of others (khuwa), or giving to others (beesiesia) (Donohew, 1962), these in fact are not routinely used by Abaluya in soliciting help and support, and so could not be used to mark special kinds of help.

Any one or a combination of these conditions would qualify a given socially supportive event as a possible instance of a wider cultural pattern of social support, or as indicating a cultural theme in how support and help are offered to children. But then to provide that cultural interpretation requires an understanding of the cultural context, and its important features for social support for children.

**Ecocultural Contexts of Social Support**

Ecocultural features that influence the provision of support everywhere include children's, mothers', and other caretakers' work loads; the physical health and safety of the family within the local community; the availability of family and nonfamily personnel to assist in help and support; the personnel likely to be with children throughout their day; the sex and age composition of children's play and neighborhood groups; cultural beliefs regarding appropriate parental roles; and beliefs and values regarding the proper developmental course for children (Super & Harkness, 1980, 1982, 1986; Wiesner, 1984; B. Whiting, 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

These ecocultural conditions in turn produce differences in the everyday
activity settings around children. Activity settings are defined as the personnel, goals, motives, tasks, and culturally appropriate scripts for conduct that constitute children's daily routines (Cole, 1981; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985; Wertsch, 1985; B. Whiting, 1980). These activity settings are both the instantiation of ecocultural pressures on the family and child, and the framework within which meaningful behavior occurs and is constituted by culture members. Using the activity setting as the unit of analysis for studying social support is a basic assumption of the ecocultural model. It is essential for understanding cultural differences. Support happens in the midst of the ordinary, mundane cultural routines of everyday life. The ecocultural-activity setting model presumes this, and assumes that this everyday context is crucial in interpreting social support for children.

THE ABALUYIA OF KENYA

The Abaluyia are an interlacustrine Bantu-speaking group living north of Lake Victoria. They are, in fact, a collection of historically independent subtribes, and include groups such as the Kisa (Abashia), the Maragoli (Munroe & Munroe, 1980; Wagner, 1948), Wanga (Were, 1967), and the Tiriki (Sangree, 1966). The Abaluyia numbered over 2.2 million by 1979 and the Kisa, the group I studied, some 50,000. They are patrilineal and patrilocal, living in dispersed lineage and clan groupings. Inheritance is fixed (e.g., clan-held land) rather than in the form of liquid or easily movable assets. The Kisa subsist today by growing maize, millet, manioc, cassava, beans, potatoes, plantains, and bananas. They also raise some cash crops (sugarcane, maize) and livestock for sale, engage in extensive trading activities, and work for wages in the region and in the major cities throughout Kenya. In cases where men are away from their rural homes working for wages, wives and children often will visit the cities and live there for varying periods.

Shared-Management Contexts for Support

The Abaluyia, like many other societies around the world (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974; Weisner, 1986, 1987), incorporate children as active coparticipants in managing the daily routine of the family. Children receive and provide support by doing chores and tasks for the family, caring for younger siblings, participating in a large and complex hierarchy of authority and direction, and sharing resources between related kin. Very early on, Abaluyia parents are preparing their children to share and exploit jointly held resources such as livestock, land, a business or trade.

Shared-management families emphasize interdependence more than autonomy, affiliation rather than individual cooperation, and child-managed rather than adult-managed activity. Children are learning through “enterprise-engagement” (Jordan & Tharp, 1979) by gradually performing tasks that they observe going on around them, more than through verbal directions regarding tasks given by adults.

Social support, including nurturance and helping behaviors toward children within large networks of kin, is a rather common occurrence in Kisa. Between 12 and 16% (depending on children's age and sex, and the family's urban or rural residence) of mothers' interactions with their children involve either direct care or some form of nurturant support (Weisner, 1979, 1986). Girls' percentages of nurturance and care toward other children were as high as for mothers: 9 to 17%. Boys' percentages ranged between 1 and 7. Offers of comfort provide roughly half of all the support: Mothers' proportions range from 5.5 to more than 9%, girls' from 0.5 to 9.5%, and boys' from 0.5 to 7%. Nurturant or supportive behaviors by children toward others rank between fourth and ninth out of the 15 most common behaviors in rural and urban Abaluyia households, within the Whiting's coding scheme.

The qualitative character of these supportive behaviors often differs from these expectations. (In my corpus a third clearly did, and others did in part.) These characteristics can be grouped into five cultural themes or patterns of support: (1) Work and support for children constantly co-occur. Giving a child work to do often seems to “mean” providing support to that child. (2) Aggression, teasing, and dominance often occur along with support, even when the same individuals are involved in both aggressive and supportive behaviors. (3) There are chains of indirect support among children's networks: Child A responds to help from child B by soon thereafter assisting child C; but there are no immediate thanks or direct acknowledgments between A, B, and C. (4) Children quietly scan their social environments for other persons to give assistance and be assisted by: they are as or more likely to receive such assistance from other children as from their mothers or other adults. (5) Food is a constant concern and a medium by which adults and children soothe one another.

The next section discusses further each of these themes or patterns of support in more detail. The vignettes have been fleshed out in full sentences for readability, but are otherwise what was recorded in the field protocols. They give a glimpse of the normal, everyday social activities of Abaluyia children in which various kinds of social support occur. Sometimes, data on context have been used, from additional ethnographic information available on these families. These data include information on the activity setting in which the event is occurring (the personnel present, motivations, goals, tasks, and scripts for appropriate conduct).
FIVE CULTURAL THEMES IN ABALUYIA SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

1. Co-participation in work signals social support.

Assigning a task, asking for help from rather than offering help to a child, and having a child participate in work all seem comforting and supportive for Abaluyia children. Work seems to signal not only task pressure or obligation, but also integration into the family network. Six percent of the 574 events in the sampled pool of supportive interactions involved work (including "mock work" in some cases for the younger children).

Children's work activity networks are a major context for offering or receiving assistance. The following example shows a very characteristic Abaluyia social network context for offering and receiving support and security. Older and younger siblings and other kin are present; maternal or other adult availability is intermittent; and work and play are going on simultaneously. The older children in this homestead are doing tasks and work, while younger children are caring for an infant, helping out with some planting, collecting food, and playing.

Outside a large Kisa homestead, a 1-year-old boy PLAYFULLY hits his 3-year-old sister (the focal child in the observation) with a stick. The girl then walks over to her older sister, age 10, and tells her to sit down. She starts eating a guava and her mother asks how they taste—are they sweet? Mother then leaves the homestead to carry sheaves of grass to thatch the roof of another house located several hundred meters away, leaving her 13-year-old daughter to care for the 1-year-old and manage the home.

The 3-year-old girl and her 4-year-old brother invite their younger sister (age 7) to come home, and both run down the path to lead her home. (The 13-year-old earlier had told the 7-year-old to come home.) The 3-year-old girl and the 4-year-old then take the baby and walk around carrying her, laughing and bouncing the baby in their arms. The 3-year-old talks to the baby (content unrecorded) along with her brother. She then tells her brother (age 3) to take his turn carrying the baby around and he does so. They laugh at the baby and talk to it and to each other while carrying it around. Girl then takes baby back, but baby does not want to climb onto her back and then into a sling arrangement. They ultimately succeed at putting the baby into the sling. The three young children then walk down a path into the garden, where the 13-year-old girl is planting sugarcane stalks in the prepared soil. The girl then starts helping her teenage sister by handing her each stalk as she is bending down to plant them. After awhile, the 4- and 3-year-olds go off into the bush alongside the field and urinate; they continue talking to each other regarding planting, where their mother is, and about the observer recording their behavior. [later on] They see some termites coming out of holes in the ground in the garden. (These are delicacies to eat live.) The children (all of them have collected together in the garden at this point) are helping to collect these termites (for their mother to cook later on).

The next vignette might be interpreted as a "pretend task request" episode, combined with teasing of a 2-year-old. But the child's crying, in the Abaluyia interpretations, was due to the boy not being able to do the chore being requested of him. Abaluyia students doing these observations saw the mother's request as a request for chore performance; they saw this as responsive, nurturant support for the crying child. The older sister's role is viewed the same way.

A boy 2 years and 9 months old is standing outside of his grandmother's (father's mother's) house, crying. Present are his grandmother, his mother, an 11-year-old sister, 8-year-old brother, and 3-year-old neighbor boy. Grandmother talks to the 2-year-old boy about getting ready to eat. Mother calls out to the 2-year-old boy to take some maize from his grandmother's house to hers, which is just down a small path about 40 meters away. The boy continues crying. The grandmother tells him to be quiet and not to cry. Mother then comes over and offers the boy some maize to eat. He takes the food, quiets down, and starts to eat. Neighbor boy, age 3, starts talking with the boy about the maize he is eating, and follows the younger boy around as he eats, asking if he can have some of the maize.

2. Support often co-occurs with teasing and aggression, yet still is seen as support.

Support and nurturance often are provided to children in the context of cultural messages regarding dominance and the importance of the family social hierarchy. Although the words aggression and support, or teasing and help, or dominance and nurturance may not go together, these behaviors co-occur in Abaluyia observations. The first vignette presented earlier in this chapter is an example of this pattern. Eight percent of all supportive events co-occurred with aggression or teasing. A child will often be involved in sequences involving harm and support, or dominance-conflict and support, either simultaneously or in quick succession. The support network for African children is in this respect like the adult support network they are preparing for: It is filled with conflict; it requires an understanding of hierarchy and deference; it is likely both to need help from children and to provide help to them.

The affective tone accompanying support or help is subdued, with mixed positive, negative and neutral emotional feelings. Expressions of warmth or empathy do not necessarily accompany support. Teasing and support have a
closely connected cultural and emotional meaning for Abaluyia children. African mothers and children know how to use each one to get what they want or to assist others. As the breastfeeding example presented at the beginning of the chapter shows, mothers will openly train children to combine nurturance and teasing, and the training starts early.

Sometimes the intermixing of teasing, work, help, and nurturant support can get dangerous, as in the next example from an Abaluyia family living in Nairobi. A 5-year-old girl (the focal child), a sister, 8, and a 2-year-old sister are all playing outside the home while the mother cooks inside. Note in this sequence how the older sister takes on playful and caretaking roles with both the 5-year-old and the 2-year-old, but modulates her help for each one. Note also the indirect role of the mother: The mother monitors family activities, but without active interaction or direct involvement.

The focal child in this observation (a 5-year-old girl) is helping and playing in the home along with her older sister. The sister (age 8) has several nails and is hammering them into the ground with a stick. The 5-year-old girl gives her 8-year-old sister a stick, and then takes the stick back and hammers a nail with it. The 8-year-old agrees to this (at first). The 5-year-old looks over at her mother, who is stirring porridge inside the house. She tells her mother that earlier that day she went to a neighbor’s room and was jumping over some thick ropes that were there. Her 2-year-old sister now comes over, and the 5-year-old shows the sister how to hammer a nail with the stick, and then lets younger girl do it. The 2-year-old ignores her sister at first, but then takes a stick and hits the nail. The 5-year-old and her older sister praise the 2-year-old, and smile. The 2-year-old then takes one of the nails and hits the 5-year-old with it. The 5-year-old starts crying, and calls out that the sister has "knifed" her. The 8-year-old sister then picks up the 2-year-old and carries her away, as 5-year-old continues to cry. (Mother does not respond to the situation.) The 8-year-old sister tells the 5-year-old she is okay and not to cry, while at the same time getting the younger child to stop fussing.

3. Response to support from others is often indirect, in the form of helping still another child.

Offering help or support to an Abaluyia child is often followed by that child's offering help to yet another child—fairly soon thereafter. Requesting assistance from an older child is not infrequently followed by the child who was assisted giving help to a younger one; helping another child is often followed by receiving help from a yet older child. In perhaps a third of the field observations, this pattern of indirect or delayed chains of support seemed to occur. It is difficult to arrive at a precise estimate, however, since adequate information is not always available from observations of this type. Since use of please or thank you is rare as are any other forms of direct acknowledgment of assistance, the beginnings or endings of episodes are not easy to mark, nor are they supposed to be, in Abaluyia interactions. But the future availability of help seems to be an understood substitute for such acknowledgment. Support seems to "flow through" the network around children, and through the child being helped on to others.

The next example gives at least a partial glimpse of these chains of support. The ultimate recipient of nurturance and social support in this vignette (the 2-year-old boy) sees others making varied attempts to talk with, assist or help, using various styles. Other children offer support as an indirect response to an adult's comment or question to a younger child about what is wrong, before any adult becomes involved.

A boy, 2 years and 9 months old, is standing in the path outside his homestead, crying. A 15-year-old male cousin and his 8-year-old brother alternately tell him to come into the compound and/or to stop standing along the main path outside. Nothing happens. . . . His 13-year-old sister then comes over and gives the 2-year-old boy some maize, and this stops the crying. (Later in this observation) The boy is crying again, and his mother calls him into her hut and asks him what he has to say about his crying. He just stands there and scratches himself. An 11-year-old half-sister, the boy's 4-year-old sister, and the mother's sister, age 40, are in the home during this conversation. The boy just looks at them. His 4-year-old sister (a frequent companion of the younger boy) smiles at the 2-year-old, and he laughs back in return, and they walk outside.

In a second example, a 5-year-old girl (the focal child in this observation) is with her 10-year-old sister and infant sister in and around their one-room Nairobi home; their mother is away from the house at the market. As in earlier vignettes, the children are mixing chores, teasing, and nurturance. There is also a sense here of the rhythm of alternating help and support in a large child network.

A 5-year-old girl is wandering around "in search of food or toys or anything that would interest her" (in the words of the field observer). She is eating a slice of bread, and asks her older sister for more. The sister gives her some of her bread. The girl notices that there is something in it, and the sister tells her that it is a sandwich—there is meat in it. The baby sister, a girl age 1, toddles up and asks for bread, and the 5-year-old gives her some of hers. The girl then gives the baby some bottle caps to play with. The girl takes her baby sister's nursing bottle and plays with it. The toddler then demands to have the bottle, and so the 5-year-old takes it and opens the top, but the baby ultimately refuses it. The 5-year-old girl then takes a tin of margarine and starts playing with it; the toddler starts to take the tin away; the 5-year-old girl refuses, and the toddler starts to cry. The older sister, age 10, says that the 5-year-old had better leave the margarine tin alone, or the toddler will beat her up and take it from her. The 5-year-old then asks for more bread from older sister, who gives her some more, and helps her.
4. Children look to other children for support as much or more than to the mother. Indeed, children actively scan the environment for help and for others needing help.

Mothers were the exclusive providers of social support in only 23% of all supportive acts in the sample. The remainder of the support either included other children or occurred in the absence of the mother.

In the next vignette, many elements of the shared-management family system are in action. Work and assistance occur at the same time; and many children play a pivotal role between being a supporter of others and being helped by others. In addition, the attractiveness of entertainment and mutual play of infant and toddler care for these children is apparent. The children are orienting to one another and to their child-care tasks or play, and offer assistance and help to each other as needed.

A 6-year-old boy is in a fallow, recently harvested maize field surrounding his rural homestead, with his brother, 4, his older brother, 10, and his sister, 19. He is attempting to cut some sticks from the bushes and hedges for use as firewood. The children are all helping to do this, although the 4-year-old is not really contributing too much to the pile. His assistance is tolerated and encouraged. The 10-year-old runs down the path and the 6-year-old hides in the grass next to him. The older boy spots the younger and hits him. The 6-year-old runs away from the older brother again, and the episode is repeated. The younger child starts to cry. The older sister says that she is going to beat the 10-year-old. The children then carry the wood back to their homestead and start to spread it out to dry in the sun. The 6-year-old and the 4-year-old help in this task and also watch the older boys working. Some of the children begin preparing maize for cooking out in the yard. Their baby sister is lying on a mat outside the homestead, and the 4-year-old goes over and smiles at the baby, and then laughs and licks the baby's hand. The children sit outside for a few minutes; the 4-year-old plays with the baby's hair. After a few minutes, a 16-year-old sister, a neighbor boy, 9, and a girl, 15, come in to the compound from the main path about 50 meters away. At first they say nothing, and then the 9-year-old comes over and touches the 6-year-old on the back in greeting.

5. African children and families cook and share food, and use food to comfort children, a great deal of the time.

Nineteen percent of the 574 supportive exchanges directly involved the exchange of food. Many more had cooking or subsistence-related tasks that involve food (such as imaginary cooking, children playing with food, or work being done to prepare food, etc.) going on in the background. The high percentage of instances in which food was used to comfort children may be related to its perceived scarcity and uncertainty about future availability. When mothers and fathers were asked to describe the most important social problems in their community, two-thirds of the parents mentioned famine, insufficient food supplies, or lack of security of their food supply as their number one concern.

Providing and sharing food is both a sign of hospitality and a form of assistance to kin. Support and sociability amongst Abaluyia children routinely includes exchanging and sharing food, as the next two very typical examples illustrate.

A 4-year-old girl, her 3-year-old sister, an infant under a year old, and their mother are sitting on the veranda outside the door of their rural house. They occasionally tend to food cooking inside. The 4-year-old entertains the baby by jiggling it, talking, and smiling. The girl then takes a candy that the baby was sucking on. The baby tries to grab it back, fails, and starts to cry. The girl gives it back to the baby, and then takes it again. The baby crawls toward the girl to try and get the sweet, and starts to cry. The girl then gives the sweet and plays with the baby, alone with her younger sister. Her mother calls to her to go and feed the hens in the yard, and she goes to do this and then returns with an empty plate, which she gives back to the mother. She then squats in the doorway singing to the baby, who starts to eat dirt, which the girl stops baby from doing while continuing to sing with her. She moves the baby around the room and outside the home, while laughing and talking to her and talking to her sister. The girls go and get their maize meal and vegetables from the fire and start eating. The 4-year-old asks if the 3-year-old is being burned by cooked maize and the younger sister says no. She then goes and gets more maize meal for her younger sister, and some for the baby to nibble on. She then gets some water and drinks it, and then gives water from her cup to her sister and to the baby—and between them they manage to spill the remaining water in the dirt.

A 4-year-old girl gets a cloth and spreads it on the ground so that she and four other girls (ages 2 through 6) can sit together under the veranda of their house in Nairobi. The girls start pretending to cook food together, and they simultaneously entertain the 2-year-old boy by clapping his hands and clapping his hands. The 4-year-old girl then shows all of them various imaginary cooking objects, such as pots, leaves, and spoons, and they all look at these. The girl then gets some water and starts to pour it out into a (real) pan. The older girl tells her to be careful. The girls talk together about food; the 4-year-old pushes an older girl who told her to be careful with the water, and the older girl does nothing in return.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN: THE ECOCULTURAL CONTEXT

What in the ecocultural context around Abaluyia families leads to these kinds of social support and social networks? Some important features are
consequences of demography, such as high fertility and a declining child mortality rate among the Abaluyia, which results in children close in age to one another living together. Other ecological features result from the rules of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence, which ensure that kin will be nearby and available for assistance in child care.

In addition, subsistence horticulture, supplemented among the Abaluyia by pastoralism and wage labor, influences the contexts for support, since it drives the tasks and work loads of these families. The division of labor, for instance, expects that children contribute by doing daily chores, such as obtaining water, fuel, and fodder; cooking and cleaning; and hoeing and preparing food crops. Social support later in life will require similar kinds of shared work activity, something children see around them every day.

In fact, Abaluyia children generally see and experience the full adult world of work and adult networks of support around them, including roles of adult sibs of parents; clan elders; churches; local political struggles; and women's support groups. The understanding that support and support networks in adulthood are closely linked to those of adulthood is very vivid for these children.

Many Abaluyia male siblings are preparing to inherit fixed resources (farms, animals, shops) in a permanent residence that at least some of them will share together all their lives. Their sisters are preparing to become managers of their future husbands' lands and other resources in other communities; this is a task they will have to do jointly with their new affinal kin. This pattern of future shared resource allocation is reflected in the ways support is tied to joint work, or the placing of children in a work group network as a form of support.

Social support among Abaluyia children often is provided in the context of learning through actual performance of a task with others. The social context within which support occurs in the Abaluyia observations often involves such activity. Support for young children was often instrumental in form (e.g., giving food or objects, giving work to do, accompanying others while involved in work), and seldom associated solely with play or fantasy activities, or combined with empathic adult attention directed to an individual child. This use of work roles for socialization of culturally valued beliefs and behaviors has been recognized as important for sex-role training (e.g., Ember, 1981; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1973) or for responsibility and compliance training (e.g., B. Whiting & J. Whiting, 1975), but not for social support.

Family routines involving shared management diffuse support and responsibility for children across many people. This happens for several reasons: task efficiency in situations of high family workload, insurance in the event that the parent dies, a need for the child's help in the home of another relative, or wage labor migration by family members. Twenty-three percent of the homesteads in the Kisa community, for instance, had one or more children living in them who were not full siblings to the other children in

that home. Most of these "visitor" children were there to assist their uncles, cousins with work or child care, to attend school, or to do wage work.

Abaluyia parents' developmental goals for their children include giving and receiving social support. Abaluyia mothers use evidence that a child had the ability to give and receive social support, and assist others, as markers of a child's more general developmental level, much as an American parent might use literacy skills such as knowing the alphabet, or verbal facility, to show how grown-up or precocious his or her child is. Mothers include helpfulness and task competence as evidence that their children are maturing successfully. I asked 54 Abaluyia mothers about such goals, and they emphasized skills such as greeting visitors, knowing kinship relationships and terminology, being able to run errands, being able to manage the daily domestic routine, cooking (for girls), caring for infants and toddlers, and good school comportment (a more recent addition to this list). The use of literacy skills as developmental markers in our own ecocultural setting is equivalent to the use of domestic chores, skills in child care, interpersonal competence, and being supportive of others for the Abaluyia setting.

The mothers also emphasized a family hierarchy of control and support. These mothers certainly do expect joint, enterprise-engaged help from younger children, but also are quite aware that exclusive responsibilities do not begin until children reach 7 or 8 or older. Mothers also emphasized that even children between 7 or 8 and 16 or so still require overseeing and the mother's direction. Hence there are many instances in the field observations in which children under 7 are providing help and support, and receiving it, yet older children are also around in responsible roles, while mothers or other adults remain in indirect control.

Such experiences reflect what these children will probably experience later when they themselves become parents. These parents are training their children early in life for future parental roles. A girl is likely to marry by age 16 to 18, and to move to her husband's family's home. But the new couple is not likely immediately to have any significant degree of economic independence or autonomy in the rural economy, or to have their own homestead compound to manage at that point in the life cycle. Resource control normally will take many more years for young Abaluyia parents to acquire. Receiving support within indirect hierarchies of family authority, monitoring others needing assistance, and being involved in chains of direct and indirect assistance all will be familiar circumstances for them when they become parents themselves.

Marta Wenger (this volume) describes the basis of Girama children's support as rooted in companionship. Feelings of fear, loss, or loneliness accompany separation from the Girama child's extended kin network, or companionship group. Girama complain of feelings of separation and lack of social support when their companionship group is lost to them even when alternative kinds of support might be available (from nonkin, for instance).
The Abaluyia have the same cultural theme (that the essence of what is felt or experienced as supportive is family and community companionship), although they do not have the same intensity of extra-homestead companionship groupings that the Giriama appear to have. The cultural origins of such feelings are apparent in the contexts in which support is given and offered, as revealed by the naturalistic observations.

Abaluyia do not have to provide reasons to one another explaining how or why these kinds of interactions and responses are signs of help and support—such an interpretation goes without saying in their everyday world. The low incidence of empathic, conversational dialogues regarding support, the absence of please, thank you, and other overt forms for acceptance of help, and the scanning or monitoring of the surroundings by children for help are other indications that these themes are culturally understood and shared.

But this pattern of less verbally mediated social support among the Abaluyia is more than a sign of culturally shared understanding about support. The Abaluyia supportive events often contain no sign of a verbal response in circumstances when American middle-class families would expect one. For instance, the 48.5 hours of observations in this sample do not contain any episodes of discourse between parents and children in which children were presumptive coequal interlocutors to adults, or in which scaffolded, empathic questioning occurred in the context of supportive acts. Parents are rarely heard asking for their children's views regarding what they want or what should be done. Children are seldom heard in conversations in which their parents ask about their needs, why they need help, and so on. Nonverbal, socially mediated means often (but not always, as some examples show) have been substituted for dyadic, verbal means of assistance.

These Abaluyia families have been in the midst of major social changes lasting for many decades. Western schooling and Christian mission activity are in their fourth generation in this community, for instance. The rural horticultural economy of the Abaluyia has been partially incorporated into the larger world economy since the 1920s (Kitching, 1980; Leys, 1974). Ninety-three percent of the homesteads in a complete survey of the rural Kisa community had at least one member working away from the homestead, or had had one within the previous 5 years. The Kisa social support and network system is, therefore, already adapted to these larger forces. These observations of social support, and mother interviews, reflect current behavior and modes of thought already adapted to such changes, not the remnants of a "traditional" cultural system that is fading away.

These patterns continue to change rapidly. One clear effect of urban migration, for instance, is that it divides the sibling group into urban and rural part-time residents (Ross & Weisner, 1977). School-age children, from 7 to about 18 or so, are likely to live in Nairobi only for relatively brief periods due to several factors: Children's labor is needed on their rural homesteads; adults prefer that their children attend rural schools; one-room urban accommodations violate cosleeping prohibitions; and food and travel costs of maintaining residence in the city are very high. Young men are increasingly likely to leave the city to be less dependent on shared family resources as adults, and to work in a Kenya wage economy that does not require cooperative support among kin (although obtaining such work and living arrangements continues to depend heavily on kin networks). This dispersal of the family group across multiple locations, along with land scarcity and marginal wage income dependency, is steadily changing many of the features that have sustained the Abaluyia peer socialization system and shared-management model of social support.

Cultures around the world face some common dilemmas regarding support: how to protect the small, young, and relatively helpless; how to balance the power some members of society have over others, with the inclusion of all in the common group; and how to provide assistance to children, while also showing them the limits of help. Indeed, a cultural dilemma everywhere is to support children in such a way that children later in their lives will become supporters of others in ways that culture finds appropriate.

REFERENCES


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