Support for Children and the African Family Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing crisis in many parts of Africa, fueled by population pressure, land and food scarcity, and public health concerns regarding mortality and HIV. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest under-five child mortality rate of any world region, about two hundred per one thousand live births in 1990. The per capita rate of increase of gross national product between 1970 and 1980 was 2 percent, the lowest in the world—by comparison, the rate for India was 1.4 percent and for the rest of Asia 2.7 percent. The number of calories consumed per day per capita is the lowest in the world. Public investment in social welfare on a per capita basis is declining in Africa, while military expenditures increase. African nations have been experiencing a net transfer of assets to the developed world since around 1983 (Barnett & Bleikie, 1992; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988; Ocholla-Ayayo, this volume; UNICEF, 1992; Weisner, 1994). Although elites and some middle-class families are improving, African families overall are getting poorer compared to the rest of the world and relative to their own previous experiences over the past two generations.

In previous generations, the poor and exploited in Africa were primarily the socially isolated and abandoned. Family membership, and the access to labor and security that family membership provided, were at least a partial guarantee of social support, although certainly not the guarantee of an easy or safe life or a life free from the possibility of famine, war, family exploitation, and suffering. Participation in large family and homestead groups in the past provided security from predators, both human and nonhuman, and sufficient labor to obtain food, raise livestock, and perhaps even expand one’s territory. Not to have access to labor and sociality in the family group was to risk poverty. Lack of social participation in one’s community and family was considered morally inappropriate and socially threatening. Since labor came from family and kin, loss of kin led to poverty. In a land-rich African ecology, loss of labor and the social ties necessary to obtain labor was both economically hazardous and morally inappropriate (Frank & McNicol, 1987; Iliffe, 1987).

The world around many African families is expanding from the one in which poverty and threats to individual survival usually came to the socially isolated. Today there are increasing threats to those who are participating in family and community life. Participation in rapidly changing family situations and in communities that are overpopulated or lacking land for the first time has meant that even those in families are now at greater risk.

This crisis is one of survival and resource control in times of scarcity, rooted in national and international politics, economics, and public health. But there is also a crisis in how the cultures of the region are redefining intergenerational relationships and social support. Some elderly worry that they no longer can expect to receive assistance and security from their children, and indeed they are having to care for grandchildren and the lands of their own children while parents are gone, for instance (Cattell, this volume; Sangree, this volume). Women are having more children outside of the patrilineal descent system and without formal marriages (Håkansson & LeVine, this volume; Kilbride & Kilbride, this volume; Ssenyonjo, this volume). Women are struggling to better control their own fertility decisions in the midst of conflicting pressures from their mates and families (Bradley, this volume; Frank & McNicol, 1987). Brothers are said to be less likely to assist each other in marriage arrangements than they have been in the past. They may also not be monitoring as carefully the circumstances of their sisters who have married into other lineage groups. Abuse and neglect of children and the elderly is apparent growing in Kenya, at least in some kinds of family situations ( Bradley, 1995; Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990, this volume). Malnutrition among children is a continuing problem facing mothers expected to provide for children without adequate resources or family supports (Whyte & Kariuki, this volume). A certain cultural control and conservatism regarding sexuality and childbirth that characterized East African communities in prior generations is being transformed today into increased promiscuity (Ocholla-Ayayo, this volume; Kilbride & Kilbride, this volume; Whyte & Kariuki, this volume). In the midst of rapid changes like these and a growing concern regarding the future of families and children in Africa, the role of the African family system in providing support, nurturance, and care for family and community members is as essential as it has ever been.

The loss of family and community support systems is a matter of powerful concern in Africa, because sociality and “socially distributed nurturance” within the family unit are at the heart of important cultural values throughout the continent (Serpell, 1992). Family solidarity may be crucial in helping African communities to survive the current crises. If the “true secret” of any society lies in part in how it manages to survive (Goubert, quoted in Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988, p. 44), understanding the nature of shared social support in African families and communities is critical to the future of Kenya and Africa. African communities flourished
and survived in the past in considerable part because of their successful elaboration of shared social allegiance and support in corporate groups. This long tradition of African "communal solidarity" and shared social support indeed can assist in meeting some of the problems facing the continent today (Lesthaeghe, 1989, p. 11-12; Serpell, n.d.).

Shared support and the hierarchical, communal family authority and resource control that go with it are learned early in childhood and in emotionally salient contexts. Their significance lasts, therefore, throughout life and becomes a part of the cultural careers and life plans of adults (Goldschmidt, 1990). In this way, life goals regarding family support and obligations enter the public national debates concerning what is wrong and what is of value in Kenyan society, including debates about how to correct these wrongs, and how to sustain the strengths of Kenyan families and communities. The sharing of caretaking and support therefore has a significance in addition to its social organizational and functional importance. It helps in the psychological task of defending the predictability of life, as Peter Marris has put it (Marris, 1975, p. 3). It provides a prototypical cultural and psychological model for creating and sustaining personal meaning and for defining the life goals central to Kenyans' cultural careers.

The men and women I talked with, in Kisa Location and Nairobi alike, wanted to achieve as part of their life goals what families everywhere hope for: a sustainable, congruent, and meaningful routine of everyday life. A sustainable routine is one that can be maintained in the cultural and ecological circumstances of the world around that family. Sustainability has to do with subsistence, mortality, migration, and survival in local ecologies. A congruent routine is one that takes appropriate account of the people available in the family—their talents, temperaments, gender, and numbers. It takes account of who is available for assistance, for example. A meaningful routine is one that provides cultural coherence and intrapsychic satisfaction, peace of mind, and a sense of moral and emotional appropriateness. A meaningful routine is one that is seen as morally and emotionally appropriate for the family and community.

Families are proactive agents in their adaptive struggles to achieve such a meaningful routine and cultural career, not just hapless victims of economic and political circumstances, powerful as these circumstances surely are. The culture complex of shared social support, held in the mind as a part of life goals and cultural careers, is a tool Kenyan families use to sustain a routine, to make it congruent with available people in their worlds, and to make this routine culturally and personally meaningful (Weisner, 1993a). It also becomes a part of what parents and children alike psychologically defend as a valued life goal.

The contemporary circumstances of many families in Kisa (and others described in this volume) do not meet an important test: Many families in Kenya are unable to sustain the kind of family routines they desire. In the contemporary era, efforts to construct such a daily routine leads to nonsurvival and nonsustainability, a lack of congruence, and nonmeaningfulness. Millions of Kenyan families and children today neither have their basic needs met nor possess a sense of basic predictability in life. Shared social support is not possible for them, but they hope for it. They continue to defend its possibility, if not predictability, in their lives. This is how the African family crisis is experienced.

Any support system for children, whether based on shared caretaking or not, has certain features recognizable around the world. These universal features include affection, physical comfort, assistance, shared solving of problems, provision of food and other resources, protection against harm and aggression, and a coherent moral and cultural understanding of who can provide support and the appropriate ways to do so (Weisner, 1993b). The African cultural complex of socially distributed social support attempts to meet these needs for children and families while responding to other cultural, economic and institutional constraints and opportunities in the region.

This chapter summarizes and reviews the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of this system of shared family management and support, particularly during childhood. Its antecedents and correlates lie in African demography, ecology, and sociohistorical traditions. Its consequences are, I will argue, important for childhood attachment, emotional expression, social behaviors such as aggression, nurturance, and responsibility, school achievement, gender roles, the domestic economy, and cognitive style. It is still widespread in its practice and of profound meaning and importance in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa. This system of shared family caretaking of children and socially distributed nurturance of children is not without its social and psychological costs for families and children, and these costs are also considered in the contemporary context. Although declining in importance in some ways, it remains a pattern of support that is still culturally, morally, and economically powerful. Even as current public culture and the world economy seem to conspire against its practice, shared family support for children remains a deep influence in Kenyan society.

**SHARED MANAGEMENT, CARETAKING, AND SOCIALLY DISTRIBUTED SUPPORT**

Among the varied forms of shared domestic management and family social support is sibling caretaking—older children doing child care, usually in the context of other domestic chores and tasks, under the overall management of adults in the home. In this kind of system children are expected to turn to parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, grandparents, and socially recognized others for help. In turn, they are often expected to assist others in their family. Parents may manage and direct their family caretaking system without directly providing care themselves. Children may spend time living with other kin and participating in the care of others away from their natal home (Bledsoe, 1980).

A number of features of socially distributed support in shared management family systems often co-occur and can be found in many places around the world (Weisner, 1987, 1989a; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977). The following list of features is based on studies of shared caretaking and social support from Kisa Loca-
tion in western Kenya, as well as reviews of other studies done throughout the region and elsewhere in Africa and the world.

1. Child caretaking often occurs as a part of indirect chains of support in which one child (under a mother’s or other adult’s management) assists another, who assists a third, who in turn assists another child.
2. Children look to other children for assistance and support as much or more than to adults; 
3. Girls are much more likely to do caretaking and domestic tasks than boys. Boys clearly provide support, caretaking, and nurturance to other children as well, although more infrequently as they reach late middle childhood.
4. Mothers provide support and nurturance for children as much by ensuring that others will consistently participate in doing so as by doing so directly themselves.
5. Care often occurs in the context of other domestic work done by children.
6. Aggression, teasing, and dominance accompany nurturance and support and come from the same people; dominance of these kinds increases with age.
7. Support is often indirect and delayed, not necessarily organized around exclusive dyadic relationships between child and caregiver.
8. Food is a powerful cultural concern, used to threaten, control, soothe, and nurture.
9. Verbal exchange and elaborated question-framed discourse rarely accompanies support and nurturance for children; negotiations regarding rights and privileges between children and dominant caretakers are infrequent.
10. Social and intellectual competence in children is judged in part by a child’s competence in doing domestic tasks, acting socially appropriately, doing childcare, and nurturing and supporting others.
11. Children are socialized within this system both through apprenticeship learning of their family roles and responsibilities and through self-ascribed cultural standards and beliefs about their appropriate role behavior according to age and gender. Girls, for instance, tend to over-report to others that they are responsible for caring for others, while boys tend to under-report.

THE ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL COMPLEX SUSTAINING SHARED MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Socially distributed support for children within a shared-management family caretaking system occurs in Kisumu, Kenya, and elsewhere as part of a culture complex. This culture complex includes demographic, familial, subsistence, and psychological/emotional elements.

Demographic

High fertility and declining mortality are characteristic, although a population can be at any stage of the demographic transition and still practice shared caretaking (Bradley, this volume; Caldwell, 1982; Hewlett, 1991; LeVine and White, 1986). This is because child caretakers can be drawn from other families; each domestic group and family unit is not solely responsible for providing all its own caretakers for itself. Indeed, the culture complex serves to redistribute children and adults across households and families to assist in support.

Support for Children

Family and Household

Large households and joint families characteristically practice shared caretaking; polygyny, particularly where it accompanies large homesteads and many coresident children, might encourage shared care where cowives are on good terms and encourage it. Polygyny rates vary widely in Western Kenya and are generally declining rapidly among most communities in Kenya (see Häkanson & LeVine, this volume, for such declines and reasons for it among the Gisu), but can be very high, as in Ssenyonga’s 1987 report (this volume) that 56 percent of women on Rusinga Island are in polygynous unions. Families with members living in more than one household often utilize shared caretaking in the current wage migration economic system in many areas. Rural-urban and other kinds of migration in which there is a pattern of commuting and sharing of family personnel and resources also often accompanies shared support systems (Weisner, 1976a). Shared support bolsters chain and commuting migration patterns. High variability in family composition, size, and fertility within communities is characteristic (Hewlett, 1991); since kin-related households are at all stages in their developmental cycles, children are often moving among families. High fertility and high migration often are accompanied by such variability.

Child lending, fosterage, and adoption practices are common. These practices often include the use of child nurses “loaned” from one family to another; in stratified communities, higher-status households are more likely to receive such child nurses from lower status households (Bledsoe, 1980; Bledsoe & Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989; E. Goody, 1982; J. Goody, 1969; Schildkrout, 1973; Weisner, 1982). Sibling caretaking is a common cultural practice as well, along with the use of cousins, hired nurses, and other relatives also available for caretaking, depending on the kinship system and residence norms in the community (Leiderman & Leiderman, 1974b; 1977; Munroe & Munroe, this volume; Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977).

Clear gender-role differences are present in domestic and caretaking tasks during this juvenile period, with girls more involved in these tasks (Bradley, 1993; Munroe & Munroe, this volume; Shibadu, 1978). Whiting and Edwards (1988:125) report that mothers direct task commands to girls far more than to boys and that girls do far more chores and child care; “to state the situation in the baldest terms, girls work while boys play.” Munroe and Munroe (1971) found that siblings in Vihiga cared for infants about half the time, with girls caring for infants of either sex and boys caring almost exclusively for male babies. (However, by 1978, no sex differentiation in preference for male or female babies was observed, and sibling care of infants declined for girls as their school attendance rose from 69% to 96%.)

There is no presumption of equality between parents and children within the household and family. As age generally confers authority, children are expected to invest in the family estate with their labor and social attention and emotional ties (Bradley, this volume; Caldwell, 1982). Hierarchy and deference in family authority and management patterns often are culturally elaborated; expectations of
obedience are high, punishment is often swift for mistakes, and overt verbal praise or positive recognition from adults is very infrequent. Recognition and support for children comes from inclusion in family activities and recognition in schools, sports, churches, and peer situations (S. LeVine, 1979; Weisner, 1989a).

**Subsistence and Work**

The use of children as joint managers and caretakers is related to heavy maternal domestic workloads that require women to work away from their homes (Minturn & Lambert, 1964; Whiting & Whiting, 1975) or require heavy work in the domestic domain. Caretaking is only one among many tasks assigned a child caretaker/domestic manager (Burton, Brudner, & White, 1977; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Children apprentice for and assume tasks including caretaking and domestic tasks during and following the five to seven year age-period transition. This juvenile period in child development is one in which children are ready cognitively and socially for assuming such tasks (Rogoff, Sellers, Pirrotta, Fox, & White, 1975; Rogoff, Newcombe, Fox, & Ellis, 1980; Weisner, 1996).

**Psychological and Emotional**

Children become closely attached to their child caretakers as well as to their mothers. Children and caregivers retain close bonds with mothers but also show a pattern of diffused attachment and ties to particular siblings or other caretakers (Reed & Leiderman, 1981; Leiderman & Leiderman, 1974a). Social competence and “intellectual” intelligence in children are inextricably tied together, with judgments regarding both made in part on the basis of children’s social and task-sharing skills in providing caretaking and support for others. Being “smart” includes being competent in social support (Nerlove, Roberts, Klein, Yarbrough, & Habicht, 1974; Nerlove, Roberts, & Klein, 1975; Serpell, n.d.; Super, 1983). Also, there is high moral value placed on family social support. That is, shared caretaking and support is not seen only as a convenient, available way to keep one’s household going (although it does assist in that goal); shared support is also viewed as a morally valuable, appropriate way to respond to meeting this goal (Edwards, this volume; Nsameng, 1992).

These features are very likely to be associated with shared caretaking and support among children in much of Africa. Their tendency to co-occur makes them part of a culture complex. At the same time, these features all have varied in African history and are changing dramatically today. They do not inevitably co-occur, nor is shared care precluded even when only some of these circumstances are present. Thus this pattern for support and caretaking by children is an ideal—typical culture complex, not a template followed in every family in just one way. It is a recognizable, available option for parents in a cultural community, perhaps among other options, rather than a monolithic practice. Since this pattern of support assists in family adaptation to varying, changeable conditions, shared support will vary in profile in each particular cultural community. It is also predictable that families within any community will vary in their practice of shared caretaking; in fact, such expectable variation is a part of the complex itself.

Any culture complex looks somewhat different in each of its local adaptations, in each cultural community and, for that matter, in each family within a community. The developmental cycle of the family ensures that there will be such diversity within a community. Several papers in this volume are devoted to the analysis of important local cultural variations in Western Kenyan communities that affect the local practice of sibling caretaking and socially distributed care of children (de Wolf, M. Whyte, Edwards, and Super & Harkness). Furthermore, children within a family will vary in the extent to which they were involved in these practices; birth order, gender, temperament, school experiences, and a host of other factors will predictably produce variation. I emphasize this because no community or family or individual will see their own experience somewhat exactly mirrored in the ideal—typical portrait of shared support. What should be seen, however, are practices and beliefs that many will have experienced in part or have seen clearly in other families.

**RURAL-URBAN PATTERNS OF SHARED MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN KISA LOCATION**

I studied the practice of shared caretaking and support in Kisa Location and Kariobangi Estate, Nairobi, between 1968 and 1983 (Weisner, 1976b). The unit for analysis is shown in Figure 2.1 (Weisner, 1973a). This is a characteristic social unit in systems of chain and commuting migration. Family members commute between residences during the year, and related families try to find inexpensive urban housing near one another. For this reason, many families from certain subclans and lineages in Kisa Location lived near one another in Kariobangi Estate, sharing knowledge of housing and services and jobs. I located twenty-four...
men from a few sublocations in Kisa who were living in Kariobangi. I then matched each man with a brother or close patrilineal kinsman resident in Kisa location. These twenty-four matched pairs of men, along with their families and coresident kin, constituted the rural–urban comparative sample.

Most Kisa families then (and now) had duolocal or multilocal residence, with frequent commuting and high income remittance from urban wage earners to rural homes. Household surveys were done in both communities (Kisa and Kariobangi), and intensive research was done in the forty-eight matched-pair households, twenty-four in each place. Sixty-eight children between the ages of two and eight were observed between 1969 and 1972. Data from ethnographic fieldwork, school grades and exam scores, and child cognitive tests were collected during four field studies: 1968–1970, 1972, 1978, and 1983 (Weisner, 1976d).

**Figure 2.2**
**Percentage of Individuals Connected for Different Numbers of Steps, Men and Women, Knowing and Visiting Relationships**

The rural–urban social unit used for these studies has sociometric relational closeness as well as cultural significance. Figure 2.2 presents a network connectedness measure for men and women in forty-eight households, showing how closely men are in fact in contact. “Contact” is measured by asking whether the men and women in the rural–urban network sample know one another directly or indirectly or visit each other’s homes. For example, 55 percent of the men in the total rural–urban network knew each other directly, and 99 percent knew each other through only one intermediary. By one intermediary I mean that they knew an-

other man in the network who in turn knew the person they did not know directly. Similarly, 37 percent of the men visited one another directly, 75 percent visited another man who in turn visited another person in the network, and 90 percent were within two links of one another in terms of family visiting connections. Women in the forty-eight households were somewhat less directly connected to one another by patterns of visiting or knowing one another. All the women, of course, had married into these subclans from outside their husband’s natal communities because of norms of clan exogamy and viri-patrilocial residence. Thus their overall connectedness measures would expectedly be lower than their husbands’ (Weisner, 1976a). Nonetheless, the wives of the men matched in the rural–urban sample were highly likely to know and visit one another.

This rural–urban sample reflects a social unit that contemporary Kisa families recognize, that they used for social support, and that has sociometric significance. It exists because of the economic and sociocultural integration of Kisa into the national and international world, and it shows the proactive, creative adaptations Kisa families have made in response to that dislocation.

**CORRELATES AND CONSEQUENCES OF SHARED MANAGEMENT FOR CHILDREN IN RURAL–URBAN NETWORKS**

Studies using this rural–urban network matched sample showed a shared management system of social support in active use and its influence on children’s social behavior, cognitive development, and school performance.

The observational studies, for instance, showed how frequent multiple caretaking was and how common it was for family members other than parents to provide direct assistance and nurturance under the overall supervision of parents. For example, siblings provided as much nurturance for children as did mothers, with girls over twice as likely as boys to do so (Figure 2.3). Multiple caretaking is not

**Figure 2.3**
**Nurturant Interactions (Direct Care and Emotional Support), by Dyad and Residence**
a rural practice alone; such caretaking and support was about as common in Nairobi as it was in Kisa in the 1970s and 1980s.2

Children were sociably interacting with other children (both boys and girls) nearly half the time (48%) and with mothers about 10 percent to 15 percent of the time they were observed (Figure 2.4). Sociability declined somewhat in family situations in Nairobi (urban) compared to those in Kisa (rural). The general pattern, in which children experienced the benefits of support as well as the costs and pain of hierarchy and control by others in the extended family, held for both urban and rural settings. Sibling care seems to be an experience in which children simulta-

Figure 2.4
Sociable Interaction (Affection, Physical Contact, Seeks Proximity, Sitting Together) by Dyad and Residence

![Graph showing sociable interaction by dyad and residence.]

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neously experience both protection and nurturance on the one hand, and dominance, teasing, and even exploitation by their caretakers on the other.

Thus caretaking relationships are far from all positive, nurturant, and sociable. Figure 2.5 shows the percentage of interactions in which children were observed to be assaulting, insulting, annoying, or in various ways dominating and teasing other, mostly younger children. There is considerably more such dominance between children than between mothers and children. In addition, boys appear to be somewhat more dominant and aggressive in the rural areas, where they are less supervised and monitored by adults. Gender differences present in rural data disappear in urban situations among these children ages three to eleven.

Figure 2.5
Dominance (Physical Assaults, Insulting, Annoying Others, Seeking Submission) by Dyad and Residence

![Graph showing dominance by dyad and residence.]

Families living in Nairobi usually left some of their children in Kisa, and the nature of tasks and shared management changed dramatically as the result of this breakup of the sibling group. Older children were more likely to be needed for farm work, and so they often remained behind in the rural areas. There were a number of other reasons for this. Parents believed that older children were more likely to succumb to the dangers of city influence they perceived—violence,
“roaming about,” drinking, wasting money. Older children customarily sleep in separate houses from their parents, and urban housing is far too costly to provide easily. Many parents also preferred that children use Luluia as well as Kiswahili and English in school, and only local Kisa schools would ensure this. Older children could more easily and safely be left in Kisa.

The absence of older children from Nairobi households was a contributing factor in some of the differences between urban and rural children in their social behavior. Urban resident children showed more disruptive and aggressive behaviors, less sociability, and less shared task performance than did rural resident children, and sought out their mothers for interaction (and disturbed them) more (Figures 2.3–2.6). Normally older children (and perhaps other adults) would be caring for younger children and assisting in the management of the family domestic routine (Weisner, 1979b). Older children normally, in rural areas, buffer such negative interactions between parents and children and engage in more sociable and shared task interactions.

**Figure 2.6**

**Dominance in Children’s Interactions by Age, Gender, and Residence**

![Graph showing dominance in children's interactions by age, gender, and residence](image)

Other factors that might plausibly have influenced differences in social behavior were unrelated in our study. For example, education levels of parents (in a range from none to Form II, with a median of four years in the Kisa–Nairobi sample) were unrelated to the decision by parents to use shared caretaking, their beliefs about the practices, or their commitment to it as a cultural pattern in their community. Levels of modernity or reported maternal stress also were unrelated to the overall educational levels of parents. Indeed, our studies showed that moth-

ers in families with a resource base in the city (from husbands’ wages or trade) and a functioning rural farm or shop reported feeling somewhat less psychophysiological stress than women exclusively dependent on the city (e.g., living full time in the city without a rural homestead residence available to them) or the rural farm economy (with no source of urban wage income and remittances, or rural wage income such as from teaching) (Weisner & Abbott, 1977; Abbott & Weisner, 1979). Such women seemed to have more alternative sources of wealth, influence, and social capital, although some complained of their husbands taking urban wives or girlfriends and not supporting their rural families.

Cognitive assessments of children ages five to eleven in both Kisa and Nairobi showed only small or no differences in the children’s overall tested ability due to urban or rural residence. There were large differences, though, in the style with which children approached the kinds of cognitive tasks we presented to them. Urban resident children were bolder with the testers and tried out more solutions to the problems presented to them. However, the proportion of correct responses did not differ between urban resident and country resident children. Urban resident and predominantly rural-schooled children did give more partially correct answers to most of the cognitive tasks administered, however, and had better facility in English and Kiswahili because of their greater exposure to both languages in Nairobi (Weisner, 1976c). Their greater number of attempts at answering questions gave them more partially correct answers.

Children who participated more often in shared caretaking did not suffer in their school performance because of their tasks as caretakers. Those children observed to participate more actively in sibling caretaking and “distributed nurturance” of other children in fact did slightly better in primary school (as assessed by final exams administered at the school or the national Kenya Primary Examination), as I established when I returned to Kisa in 1983 and assembled data on the school achievements of the children. Children often “played school” with their siblings and cousins while caretaking and managing the domestic work, and literacy and numeracy skills seemed to be woven into everyday routines. Classroom activities often depended on group recitation and sharing of scarce books and other materials. It is possible (although I did not specifically test this) that children with the social and managerial skills garnered through shared support and caretaking systems at home might (other influences being equal) do better in the kinds of classroom circumstances common in Kisa location (Weisner, 1996).

**NURTURANCE, SUPPORT, AND LIFE PLANS: DEFENDING THE PREDICTABILITY OF LIFE**

These studies in Kisa and among Nairobi commuting migrants from Kisa clearly show the importance of child caretaking during the 1960s and 1970s and its strong influence on the following aspects of child development: gender roles, attachment, and trust; nurturance and dominance; school achievement; cognitive styles; and task competence, among others. Nonetheless, is a culture complex like child caretaking, with its shared social support and nurturance, merely a slowly
declining victim of modernization and delocalization, soon to disappear? It is
certainly changing in many ways, but nonetheless child caretaking is not disappar-
ing and continues to be a strong and continuing influence on families and on all
age groups. This continuing influence also appears in regard to gender roles (Mun-
roe & Munroe, this volume), moral judgments (Edwards), attitudes towards mod-
ernization (Super & Harkness), support for the elderly (Sangree, Cattell) and other
domains as well.

But whatever its significance for children, what does shared support represent
for adults struggling to survive in the contemporary world? If shared caretaking is
a practice more salient in childhood and under pressure in the contemporary
world, how or why would it matter later in life—that is, what would make it an
important influence in Kenya's contemporary cultural and personal circum-
stances?

The culture complex of shared support remains salient perhaps because it was
(and continues to be) learned and reinforced in emotionally powerful situations
within the family. Akong'a (this volume) describes the defenses established by or
brought to the forefront during change. The processes of defense, denial, sublima-
tion, and projection, in some cultural form, may all be visible in processes of
change and adaptation. However, there is also another quite powerful representa-
tion of the way in which social change is experienced and internalized by individu-
als. This psychological process is what Peter Marris has called "the impulse to
defend the predictability of life... a fundamental and universal principle of hu-
man psychology" (1975, p. 3).

This psychological process involves the human experience of matching a prior
schema of the world of relationships or resources with the experience of the mo-
ment and accommodating the new experience to the prior schema. Defending the
predictability of life in this sense is a cultural process as well as a psychological
one. Men and women carry with them cultural models of support, and these mod-
els are what we defend in the face of change. Their expectations regarding nur-
turance, shared support, and hierarchy are embedded in such prior schemas and so
influence behavior throughout life. My argument here is that Kenyans' life goals
and their cultural careers—that is, the cultural models that help organize their lives
and give them meaning—include the goals of continually recreating shared sup-
port and nurturance for themselves and their families. Kenyans are defending the
predictability of life today by using their formative experiences with shared sup-
port when they were children.

The cultural models that we defend drive our life goals. Organized within a cul-
tural community, these goals are a part of "life plans," defined by Robert LeVine
as "a people's collective representation of the life course viewed as an organized
system of shared ideals about how life should be lived and shared expectancies
about how lives are lived" (R. LeVine, 1980, p. 82).

Goldschmidt (1990) has developed a related concept of the "cultural career,"
one that includes the culturally motivating representations regarding the life
course and adds the satisfaction of physical needs and what he calls the universal

"hunger for affect," worth, and self-esteem. "By career, I mean that trajectory
through life which each person undergoes, the activities he or she engages in to
satisfy physical needs and wants and the even more important social needs and
wants. The career, then, is activated in the service of both the physical being and
the symbolic self (Goldschmidt, 1990, p. 107)."

R. LeVine described the life plan for Gusii men as being divided into reproduc-
tive, economic, and spiritual careers. He described the Gusii homestead as a social
and moral "prototype" of the constraints and opportunities and moral imperatives
of these life careers. Similarly, children's and parents' experiences with socially
shared support within the homestead is a "prototype experience" in this sense.
Gusii men, for example, strive for "ever-expanding cycles of exchange," and com-
pete for roles as both investor and supervisor of resources and kin. LeVine also
describes a sense of "potency" as a goal, where potency is judged by the size of
one's family and the extent of one's economic holdings and networks (1980, p.
97). This notion of the homestead and its support network as a moral and psycho-
logical prototype suggests immediately how formative experiences in shared care-
taking in childhood would be used by Kenyans as prototypes that would be
defended long after childhood.

Sarah LeVine (1979) has done a parallel study of Gusii women at various stag-
es of married life prior to reaching elderhood. Although their circumstances and
individual lives varied, she describes women as having heavy domestic and child-
care obligations, with few relationships of trust, living in a community in which
fears are constant in the midst of a hostile environment, in which men dominate
and control women. As her children grow to maturity, however, a Gusii woman
can look forward to increasing ritual involvement and responsibility, increasing
assistance, respect, and authority in her homestead, and, ideally, support from her
sons and grandchildren. Håkansson and R. LeVine (this volume) in fact show the
effects of such economic and marital changes on Gusii life careers.

The culture complex of socially distributed support, with the kin dominance
and hierarchical relationships that go with it, drives the life plans and goals of
Kenyans. Its prototypical forms are used to defend the predictability of life. Sib-
ling caretaking, nested within this culture complex, is one such prototypical form
and experience for children. The rural-urban network sample described in this
chapter for Kisa certainly reflects changing life circumstances, but shared caretak-

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predictability” could describe a “stubborn” individual, clinging to false beliefs, that is, someone who would be called “in denial.” Defending the predictability of life also can appear as a justification for oppression of one person or group over another or for the intrusion of a state-imposed “predictability” into the lives of those opposing that other group, or the state. Whatever the usefulness of these other conceptions, defending the predictability of life, seen as a cultural matching process, is free from clinical or invidious implications and is a very common process in everyday life experience.

The Ideal Life Career in Kisa

Experiences in the system of socially shared support clearly influenced the ideal life careers of men in Kisa and Kariobangi. I asked many men and smaller group of women in their forties to sixties, what they wanted out of life—that is, what did they see as their imagined good or ideal life career? I asked them to imagine their lives as a whole. When they “retired” as elders, for instance, what would their goals for life look like in practice? What activities would be going on? What life goals are they striving for now that would be represented successfully in the final periods of life?

These men all had had urban wage-labor migration experience, were living either in Kisa or Nairobi, were in midlife, and had between no education and Form II (about ninth or tenth grade). None were among the educated or financial elite, but they represented the range of variation in life experience of most Kisa men of their era. There was considerable variation in what different individuals said. Each conversation, each person’s image of his or her life goals, was in some ways unique, in some ways characteristic of most Luyia, and in some ways what men and women everywhere might want. Each man’s cultural career was still in process. But here is a summary script, a synthesis, a prototypic snapshot:

I am sitting comfortably outside my house within my homestead. Children and grandchildren, many of them, live here or come to visit, particularly my sons. Smoke curls out of the cooking huts, chickens and animals are abundant, and the many people who come to visit pay their respects and defer to my opinions. My wife and daughters-in-law are cooking for me, take me to the clinic when I have needed to go, and make sure I have money to travel to markets, to funerals of our kin, and occasionally to town for visits. My lands are sufficient, and my wife (or wives) has ample to feed everyone and to entertain. I have sons and daughters employed by the government or major industries like the breweries or railroads, with good salaries, who send me and my wife money. My wife and daughters-in-law are able to provide for the children and grandchildren, and I see the children out doing well in school and working here as well. My daughters are married to successful men, have had many children, and can send them to school. They often are here visiting me. I can assist my brothers and their children at times, and I have done well compared to my siblings and age mates in our clan. I frequently walk to and from the market or church or chief’s compound or local court—and everyone knows my name. I have helped to build our church or the nursery school addition or to add roofing to the primary school, and my work was praised at the gatherings to organize and fund-raise.

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Five Themes in Kisa Men’s Life Stories: Hierarchy, Alliances, Sociality, Property, and Potency

Socially distributed support and affiliation appear as central issues in these life stories. Five themes appeared over and over as goals in these men’s pasts, presents, and futures: enjoying the deference and respect of others; being a part of a rich network of all kinds of alliances; sociality within the clan and lineage; accumulation of wealth and property, including entrepreneurial; and a feeling of potency. Each of these themes is echoed in the culture complex and practice of socially distributed support. The concerns over hierarchy, alliances, sociality, and potency are clearly a part of shared social support.

Hierarchy. These are men who imagined themselves in the ideal Abaluyia role of hierarchy and respect. They delegate a great deal, are delegated to very little. The absence of this kind of deference is a major source of the “complaint discourse” described by Cattell (this volume). Sangree’s Tiriki elders (this volume) wanted this too, but complain bitterly that along with their status as elders, they have to work caring for their grandchildren and doing farm work. The Samia grandparents of Kilbride and Kilbride (this volume) report feeling stigmatized to some extent because their responsibilities for childcare do not permit them this status.

These men’s cohorts—especially their full and classificatory siblings—are now their only age peers who can influence them, and ideally men want to be first among these peers. Kisa men would mention this comparative frame of reference with their age mates, siblings, and cousins. These discussions of close kin and affines were cautious, clouded, sometimes filled with jealousy and anger from lifelong enmities over things done and not done, given and not given. Levine mentions in his discussion of the Gusii that “The most common motive one can be certain of for Gusii men and women is wanting to move with one’s age-mates; the most common anxiety one can attribute to them is that of being left behind. . . . The reference group of age peers sets the standards by which individuals evaluate themselves and react with a sense of satisfaction or jealousy (R. Levine, 1980, pp. 93–94).”

A social network of alliances. Family support and survival depend on implicit and explicit alliances with other families. Men described their cultural careers as culminating in successful alliances—for marriage, trade, wealth, protection from threats, and honor—and their life’s end as a time when such alliances were recognized in the forms of visits from many others, with one’s name and lineage known far and wide. Funerals at the end of such a cultural career, with hundreds in attendance, represent the fulfillment and projection of such a life into the community’s future social alliances.

Sociality. These men imagined themselves to be at the top of a system of socially distributed support for others. Their name and home would be known widely, and they were surrounded by their lineage kin, wife or wives, children, grandchildren, and visiting affines. Kisa men hoped that they had made a lasting, to-be-remembered impression on their lineage. They make this impression phys-
ically on the land, in their name and memory of themselves, and economically and materially through wealth, trade networks, and social networks.

Accumulation and property. Sons often complain about the delays fathers make in allocating their lands and other property to them and their wives. The Kisa men I talked with retained their entrepreneurial ideals, including their goal to control property even as the wider economy militated against these efforts. Entrepreneurship means more than having a shop or trading with others, although those are certainly widespread occupational roles and ideals. Rather, the men meant owning an expanding network of resources. The ideal of traveling widely and, through contacts and strategic trading, earning money, is a long-standing feature of the Kisa economy and of East African economies generally. This type of trade economy long antedates British or Arab colonial penetration.

Kisa men and women take remarkable risks just in trying to find employment through wage labor migration, raising subsistence and cash crops, finding enough cash to send their children to schools, and enduring the harsh conditions of travel and living circumstances in cities in accomplishing these goals. There is no insurance to repay them if their wealth is stolen and no ready police assistance if their lives or their family’s lives are in danger. But there is little overt commentary about the memory of excitement of risk taking. There is an implicit understanding that all transactions and subsistence activities entail substantial risk. To have survived these risks is to have led a successful life career, and a network of kin is essential to having survived. Outlasting the envy, jealousy, and witchcraft that go with such success represents a risk overcome.

Potency. LeVine defines potency as numbers of children and power and invulnerability in one’s economic, reproductive, and spiritual cultural careers (1980, p. 97). Having many children, perhaps having several wives, having control over others, receiving deference from others, overcoming social and physical risks, and moving in a wide social field are all signs of social potency, and Kisa men hope and strive for all these. Ancestors who had this kind of social potency are better remembered and continue to have an impact on the living. Shared support systems are involved in all these kinds of cultural signs of potency and could not have been achieved at all without participation in shared support.

In this regard, Kisa men appear to think of their life goals in terms of both “lineal” and “lateral” life course strategies (cf. Håkansson & LeVine, this volume). Lineal ties can provide services and resources from one’s own children and from one’s brothers’ children; lateral ties through a man’s marriage(s) can provide resources from spouses and married daughters.

CONCLUSION

There are many local variations on these common themes in life goals. De Wolf, Super and Harkness, and many of the other papers in this volume richly illustrate these in different communities throughout Western Kenya. Bradley, Nasimiyu, and many others show women’s life courses and their cultural careers. Younger men, those more educated, and Protestants are more likely to favor inde-

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pendence among sons and in one’s own life (Edwards, this volume). Variations in marriage patterns, residence rules, incidence of polygyny, allocation of domestic resources, land, cattle, cash crops, and remittances, the control of corporate linkages as opposed to cooperatives or domestic groups or individual entrepreneurs—all these local variations matter as to how parents and children strategize in seeking their life goals and the social support for a valorized, culturally meaningful life.

Men and women complained bitterly at times that they were not going to be able to achieve many of these life goals. In spite of all the dislocations and disappointments in their lives, these men hoped to be able to maintain a daily routine of life that is predictable enough and that they could defend. Although often not successfully achieved as a goal, shared family management and socially distributed care and nurturance are likely to continue in Kenya both as a powerful cultural model and as a practical means to provide support for children and other kin. Edwards’ findings on moral judgments among Abaluyia and Kipsigis showed, for instance, that “all the men—young and old, married and unmarried—shared a common vocabulary for talking about the underlying issues and moral conflicts raised. . . . The core values of respect, harmony, interdependence, and unity were not only alive and well, they were stressed over and over as the central virtues of family living” (p. 82). The Luuya were particularly likely to invoke the ideal of “reasonableness” in deciding difficult dilemmas, compared to the Kipsigis emphasis on more “respectful” relationships and loyalty.

Although the application of moral rules may differ, there appeared to continue to be an overlapping set of moral terms, arguments, and conceptions shared by most informants through the 1970s. What would a restudy in the 1990s of the moral discourse around socially shared support show? One clue comes from Cattell’s survey of the elderly in Samia (this volume), which shows the persistence of a family morality based on principles of intergenerational contracts of reciprocity and change. Yet Kilbride and Kilbride, Ocholla-Ayayo, Nasimiyu, and others show a darker side of serious troubles in families, including neglect.

Shared support and many of its specific practices seem to be compatible with rising levels of education, rural–urban migration, and different patterns of residence, as the data from Kisa and many of the other communities studied in our volume indicate. The practice of shared caretaking and support is also compatible, in my view, with a steadily lowering total fertility rate (say, a rate in Kenya that came down to about 4 percent or so—if not as low as the current European/North American level of 2 percent). Many features of the culture complex remain in place: the high variability in fertility across families, variability in residence patterns, age and sex-specific fostering, continued high maternal and family workloads, and others.

Since shared, socially distributed caretaking is a part of a culture complex with deep (if, therefore, no doubt also ambivalent and conflicted) emotional and moral significance, held as a cultural model, containing goals that are part of the cultural career, it is unlikely that changes in some parts of that complex (such as declining fertility, or increasing parental participation in care, or increasing family invest-
ment in education) would eliminate it. The propensity to defend the predictability and meaningfulness of life would be at stake. Indeed, changes in one part of such a culture complex will call for changes in other parts of it that assist in ongoing adaptation.

Given the ubiquity of the rural-urban familial group as a part of this complex, it is perplexing to see study after study in which the unit of analysis for social research continues to be a geographically localized place such as a village, an urban housing estate, or a location or district-defined sample. Although such geographically localized sampling frames may have their uses for particular purposes, it is quite apparent that these geographically based units no longer represent the social fields of action for families in Kenya today. They do not reflect the core cultural model of the social and economic "landscape" held by Kenyans (Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 1989). Given the obvious social significance in Kenya today of dispersed family groups occupying several different subsistence niches, it is surprising that individualistic, survey sample based sampling strategies are used so often, rather than sampling units that have greater social and cultural meaning (Ross & Weisner, 1977; Super & Harkness, this volume; Weisner, 1973b, 1981). We can miss seeing the family and social community as a support if only such individualistic units are used.

It would be extremely valuable for the next waves of social research studies in East Africa to be designed in the future to consider the value of sampling frames and definitions of "communities" and "families" that will reflect today's meaningful social worlds. This is not to criticize the many outstanding studies in this volume and elsewhere that use other kinds of samples. The valuable findings and insights of these studies show how useful they still can be. Yet these studies often reflect the local community consequences of actions taken by others (husbands, lovers, natal kin, children, wage earners, traders, Nairobi investors and politicians, and so forth) who live and work elsewhere and so are not themselves in the sample.

Under current conditions of rapid change, resource scarcity, and high but declining total fertility rates, it would be a cause of concern if adaptive strategies in addition to shared management and socially distributed nurturance were not being actively explored. However, it would be of even greater concern if the tradition of socially distributed family nurturance were to be lost as an important cultural model and set of social practices available to Kenyans and others for the social support and nurturance of future generations of children. It would be a loss for this tradition to be replaced by alternatives such as the socially isolated conjugal family, mother-headed single-parent household, or state-provided caretaking in schools, to mention only three. Shared support is increasingly complementary to these alternatives, but it is unlikely to be replaced. The persistence of the traditions of shared social support as seen in the cultural careers and life plans of Kenyans and their continued defense of the predictability of these traditions is a sign of resilience. Shared family support will be important for confronting the formidable adaptive tasks facing Kenyan families in the next generations.

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NOTES

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1. Although girls have far more specifically household and domestic chores than boys, boys do have chores—herding, ploughing, or transport, for instance—that keep them occupied and often away from home.

2. However, the sheer amount of such care is greater in the rural areas, particularly in the absence of the mother or other kin and in the context of many other household chores.

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