



DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 41, ARTICLE 44, PAGES 1269–1276

PUBLISHED 20 NOVEMBER 2019

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol41/44/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.44

Summary

Introduction to the Special Collection on ‘Children and family dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa’

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This publication is part of the Special Collection on “Domestic Division of Labour and Fertility Choice in East Asia,” organized by Guest Editors Ekaterina Hertog and Man-Yee Kan.

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Introduction to the Special Collection on ‘Children and family dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa’

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

This submission for a Special Collection is based on a selection of contributions to the International Seminar ‘Children and family dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa’, held in Paris in October 2016 (<http://slam.site.ined.fr/en/DyPE/seminar/>).

OBJECTIVE

The special issue focuses on family environment and child socialization in sub-Saharan Africa. A main challenge is to go beyond the traditional family-network approach, centred on the household and the biological parents, and to consider the diversity of contexts and players involved in a child’s upbringing.

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1. Introduction

Why focus research on children and families in Africa?

Changes in attitudes towards children are a dimension of the demographic transition that has been extensively covered in the West but is under-researched in Africa. Yet current local and international circumstances are reasons to examine this topic and produce new hypotheses and interpretative frameworks for demographic and family dynamics in Africa.

International development programmes for countries in the Global South accord great importance to improving the status of children, and there has been indisputable progress in their favour (e.g., in health and in school attendance). But there have also been setbacks and, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, slower progress than expected, with occasional unintended negative effects where progress has been accompanied by greater inequality or lower-quality services (educational, health-related, etc.) (UN 2017).

Analysis of obstacles to the improvement of children's situations has been dominated by a supply-and-demand approach, stressing the resources to be deployed, with less emphasis on factors that affect the demand for services (schools, health facilities, etc.). The idea of a simple decision-making framework in which stakeholders are clearly identified and act according to their personal rationales has also underestimated the complexity of social dynamics. Parents and their behaviour towards their children have thus appeared to be central to these issues and have been the focus of action programmes to promote children. However, this approach focusing on parent-child relationships is insufficient to identify and convert into operational concepts the inhibitions and obstacles that action programmes face. It only covers a part of the interactions that surround a child, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where relations with the child are often constructed in such a way as to hinder their being privatized within an exclusive parent-child relationship.

First, marriage practices in many sub-Saharan African countries act as major hindrances to a close couple relationship (Hertrich and Locoh 1999; Meillassoux 1975; Antoine 2002; Barbieri and Hertrich 2005): Family-arranged marriage, polygamy, early marriage for girls, wide age gaps between spouses, levirate marriage, frequent divorce, and rapid remarriage are all factors that inhibit the formation of a community of interest in a child's autonomous life-purpose. The same phenomenon can be found in the systems of economics, housing, filiation, and inheritance: Everything 'conspires' to reduce the couple to a biological reproduction unit, while in fact the denial of the couple as a decision-making unit is a clear societal preference (Caldwell 1982; Lesthaeghe 1980, 1989; Ryder 1983).

Consequently, it is this model of union with a weak autonomy that underlies the forms of organization that surround a child. Children are moved around for varying periods of time between adults other than their parents (Lallemand 1993; Jonckers 1997; Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1994; Isiugo-Abanihe 1994); couples belong to economic units formed by the extended family. All this reduces the potential for any personalized investment in a given child. These arrangements not only demonstrate in daily life that socializing children is not simply the parents' task but they also impair parents' perception of what their children cost, and thus their ability to make trade-offs concerning the number of children they have. This extended childcare can be seen as a collective way of managing demographic and economic risks, making it possible for a society to cope with the material and psychological consequences of high mortality rates and poor living conditions for both children and adults.

These factors shape complex socialization structures and together 'dilute' responsibility for a child within a shifting network of close and distant relationships. Consequently, a child's upbringing, decisions about children, and issues concerning children are likely to involve a variety of stakeholders and rationales.

Understanding this social complexity is a basic requirement for research; it is also necessary in devising effective public policies on health, schooling, and child labour. From this perspective, new instruments are essential to bring to light, notably in quantitative terms, children's network of relationships and the role this network plays in their development.

The four articles of the special collection explore the complexity and dynamics of children's family environment. They address methodological challenges and present innovative approaches to analysing children's family environment beyond the perimeter of close relatives and their influence on children's well-being and care.

The paper by Aurélien Dasré, Olivia Samuel, and Véronique Hertrich, "Children's family network and dynamics: A longitudinal study in rural Mali", uses data collected over a 20-year period in Malian villages to measure children's kinship networks within their domestic group and their exposure to changes in networks over time. Describing dynamic kin networks from the perspective of the child, they make clear that we lose much by focusing only on households, the relationship with the household head, and a cross-sectional approach. Through the matching of longitudinal demographic and genealogical data, the authors statistically measure the complexity of the family structures in which children live, showing the large number and variety of kinship relationships within domestic groups and their permanent changes.

In many African contexts, where kinship ties play a major role in individual life trajectories, it is crucial to collect relevant data on both coresiding and nonresidential kin. Lack of information on close nonresident relatives leads to neglect of their role in the child's socialization and support. In their paper, "Measuring extended families over

time in informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya: Retention and data consistency in a two-round survey”, Sangeetha Madhavan, Donatien Beguy, and Shelley Clark describe the implementation of an innovative experiment, the Kinship Support Tree (KST). They analyse the consistency of data collected from single mothers about nonresident close kin of their young children. The authors show that collecting such data in a Nairobi slum context is possible, although certain biases cannot be completely avoided, particularly those related to selectivity of attrition and registration of paternal kinship.

The child’s well-being depends in part on kin support, and certain people, such as grandparents or, more broadly, elders, can play a particular role. Conversely, children can play a role in the well-being of elderly people. This issue is addressed in the paper by Enid Schatz, Janet Seeley, and Flavia Zalwango, “Intergenerational care for and by children: Examining reciprocity through focus group interviews with older adults in rural Uganda”. Based on focus groups, the authors analyse the relationship between the generations by focusing on reciprocal exchanges regarding care or material support between children and elderly people when coresiding. The authors are interested in going beyond both the traditional one-way approach (elders to children) and a relationship limited to parents–children. They propose new lines of research to improve knowledge on this important question.

In some African countries, polygamy is an integral part of family arrangements. Polygamy is likely to affect children, but this is a matter of debate and not all research results are convergent. The paper by David W. Lawson and Mhairi A. Gibson, “Polygynous marriage and child health in sub-Saharan Africa. What is the evidence for harm?” provides an in-depth discussion of contextual and methodological issues regarding the measurement of links between polygamy and child health, based on a review of the results of a large number of studies. The authors find that the harmful effect of polygamy on children’s health documented in numerous studies in some cases can be attributed to the bias of cross-sectional and large-scale approaches. To understand better the mechanism linking polygamy and child health, they encourage researchers to carry out longitudinal surveys in a well-described cultural context.

2. Obituary

Sadly, this special issue appears only a few months after the death of Véronique Hertrich (1963–2019), its guest editor. Many Africanists are aware of Véronique’s substantial contribution to African demography in such varied fields as nuptiality, family arrangements, and migration, and her methodological work on data collection and quality. Her last major project on childhood and family in Mali, dealing with people she lived among for nearly 30 years during her regular field research, has resulted in

this special issue and an article which is part of it, both of which she continued to work on despite her ill-health. We pay tribute to all she did.

There is an obituary on IUSSP's website: <https://iussp.org/fr/v%C3%A9ronique-hertrich-1963-2019>

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