

**From family dynamics to structured action: attitudes toward children in Africa / Des dynamiques familiales aux actions structurées: les rapports à l'enfant en Afrique**

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Many scholars have noted that attitudes toward children are changing in much of sub-Saharan Africa today. However, the changes are occurring at very different rates – and sometimes even in different dimensions or directions – in different populations and sub-populations. How can we understand these changes? What are their causes, correlates, and consequences? This paper suggests that attitudes about children are closely tied to forms of material culture that structure interactions with- and about children. Individual action is highly structured by a dual system of schemas and materials. Understanding changes in attitudes therefore requires an analysis of material structure as well. The paper begins by describing a framework for thinking about the mutual constitution of shared mental representations (schemas) and material structures. The paper then uses the case of Cameroon to illustrate how this framework applies to attitudes toward children. In the third part, the paper uses comparative DHS and archival (mostly newspaper) data from across the continent to trace out large-scale changes in schemas and materials. This section shows patterns of convergence and divergence in schemas and materials across the continent. Finally, the paper argues that these changes imply that older differences between groups based on ethnicity are beginning to be replaced by newer differences based on social class. Whereas schemas and materials were once shared locally, they are now shared translocally by an emergent educated elite.

*Je suis très reconnaissant d'être incluse dans cette journée scientifique importante. Merci, Véronique et DAUTRES, d'avoir m'invité. C'est un honneur d'être ici, et j'attends avec impatience les conversations qu'on aura aujourd'hui. Ceci dit, je vais présenter en Anglais, et je vais même lire mon texte – il est une heure de matin moins 20 chez moi, et je crains ne rien dire si je ne lis pas...*

## Introduction

Our topic today brings together two of the most important issues in contemporary sociology and demography. (with one hand) What is the relationship between social structure and individual action? (and on the other hand) And the family. The family is perhaps the most important social institution in history. Not only is it nearly universal, structuring social life in all human societies, but it is also the proximal context for most demographic events. Most of us are born, move, and die as members of families, with siblings, parents, children, spouses, cousins, aunts, and others in our hearts and at our sides. Family is fundamental.

And the relationship between family structures and individual actions is perhaps particularly critical in Africa. Many of us are accustomed to hearing that Africa offers an exception to standard theories of family, society, or demographic change. We are accustomed to graphs like this one (PP 2) that shows the median age at first marriage for women in the world as a whole here in pink from United Nations data, and for the four geographic regions of sub-Saharan Africa, clustered here below. Or the similar figure for fertility, showing both the wide difference between Africa and the rest of the world, and the so-called “stall” in African fertility decline since 2000, in the words of John Bongaarts. If you work in Africa, you are accustomed to hearing that your field site is an outlier, an anomaly, or a problem.

And so it was very wise of the conveners of today's *journée scientifique* to fix our attention specifically on the puzzle of understanding attitudes and practices toward

CHILDREN as a path into the large theoretical terrain of family structure and individual action. Here is an area where there are fewer loud and anxious voices, and therefore more space for understanding.

Childhood is also an area where we can see the difficult theoretical problems of thinking between social structure and individual action in a very clear way, because we can turn to a broad social science literature about socialization and its effects. How we rear our children may not directly determine what our social structures will be a generation from now, but it certainly does influence those structures. So when we think through and with children, it is easier to see individual action and social structure as mutually constitutive, structure influencing action more strongly in the short run, and action making and remaking structure in the longer run.

The importance of this topic assures that we are not the first to consider it. Starting already in the 1930s, American anthropologists trained by Franz Boas, including Cora DuBois, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, argued that childhood experiences are structured by society and produce a common/modal/typical adult personality or personality configuration, which produces adults with particular inclinations, needs, and habits, which in turn leads to the reproduction of the social structures themselves. At the same time, Durkheim's student Marcel Mauss developed a framework for thinking about the mutual construction of persons and contexts through the body. On both sides of the Atlantic during the Interwar and into WWII, you have a flourishing literature that

puts socialization – the process of producing certain kinds of persons – at the center of social science.

Now we skip ahead 30 years. Our Anglophone representatives will now be Jack Goody and William Goode. Goode, an American sociologist, argued that family structure around the world would converge on the western European conjugal model, as a result of modernization, implying fewer children, more highly valued by their independent parents. “Everywhere the ideology of the conjugal family is spreading.” He writes. “It appeals to the disadvantaged, to the young, to women and to the educated. It promises freedom and new alternatives as against the rigidities and controls of traditional systems.” Jack Goody, a British Social Anthropologist, argued that family structures follow modes of subsistence; where horticulture gives way to plow agriculture or commerce, kinship too will change. Neither Goode nor Goody pays much attention to the relationship between the social structures, the kinds of persons that it produces, and the actions that they pose.

In France, however, that circle remained more salient, at least in the work of historian Phillipe Aries, whose Centuries of Childhood is well known. In a wonderful essay on fertility transition published in XXXX, Aries argued that the demographic transition in Europe looked like a single process, but was indeed two very different ones when viewed from the perspective of the culture of children. In the first transition, he argued, children went from being slaves in the family to its masters. In the second transition, children went from being masters of the family to modes of parental self-

fulfillment, and therefore optional, alongside other ways of fulfilling yourself. Now, of course our topic here is not the European fertility decline, and these European schemas of children as parental self-fulfillers, or masters, or slaves are not necessarily the right ones to use. But what is very applicable from Aries' charming essay is the point that the schemas regarding children are related both to the changing structure of the family and to changes in individual actions. Here schemas take the place of dispositions, and at least one of the causal arrows is inverted, but the circle is unbroken.

It is important here to remember that French and American scholarship on the role of the individual in society diverged by the 1960s. In the United States, demography has been in the grip of Rational Choice Theory. The conveners of today's workshop have done a wonderful job of bringing only those Americans who are interested the mutual constitution of persons and contexts – but we are in the notable minority at home. In France, it might not be necessary to argue that we should approach the question of how family structures matter for individual actions regarding children in Africa through the tradition of Benedict, Mauss, and Aries. But in American demography, that argument is necessary. And to that end I have worked with Chris Bachrach and Phil Morgan to develop an approach to family change and variation that builds on these classical insights.

I will turn now to describing the framework for thinking about the mutual constitution of shared mental representations (schemas) and material structures. Next I will use the case of Cameroon to illustrate how this framework applies to attitudes

toward children, focusing particularly immunization. I will then expand out from the Cameroonian case using some comparative data from across the continent, showing some potentially interesting patterns of convergence and divergence. Finally, I will suggest that these changes imply that older differences between groups based on ethnicity are beginning to be replaced by newer differences based on social class. Whereas schemas and materials were once shared locally, they are now shared translocally by an emergent educated elite.

### **Theory of Conjunctural Action**

In developing a theory of conjunctural action my co-authors and I sought to provide a framework for approaching the relationship between individual actions and social contexts that could be used by demographers, and that built both on the classical traditions in social theory back to Mauss, and also on new research in cognitive and brain science. It turns out that these two—Mauss and the neuroscientists—are actually very highly concordant, which made our task much easier. I am going to skip the cognitive, brain, and linguistic parts of our approach for now, but am glad to talk about them in the questions. Most of our terms come from the American historian Bill Sewell, but—as you will see—the ideas are very general across social theory. Bourdieu's theory of practice, for example, has many of the same components, although parsed rather differently. I am glad to talk about the relationship between this approach and his if you are interested.

The theory of conjunctural action begins with the fact that human action occurs in very specific conjunctures – that is, short-term configurations of social structure. To understand who is doing what, we need to know the horizons of possibility within which they are acting. Those horizons are set by the conjuncture. That is to say, we do not start with the characteristics of the individual or her indifference curve or anything abstract, as does most contemporary American social demography. We start with the situation.

Now, to understand the conjuncture, we need to understand the social structures that it conjoins and out of which it emerges. We take society to consist of “multiple, interlocking and overlapping structures” (Sewell 2005:209), from the very small to the very large – the Metro system, the judiciary, the baccalauréat, the Collège de France. The family is a particularly complex structure, but a critically important one. Childhood, too, is a social structure in the sense that we use the term. Structures are “overlapping and interlocking” not only with respect to the domains to which they refer, but also in relation to the individuals and groups that populate societies. Some structures permeate an entire society while others are constrained to a limited domain of action or a local social group. Frequently, multiple – even contradictory – structures pertain to the same domain. This is particularly true of culturally dense domains such as family and kinship, where legal, religious, emotive, and economic logics overlay one another.

Structures in turn comprise two parts: schemas and materials. Schemas are the largely underdetermined, and often taken-for-granted, ways of perceiving and acting

through which we make sense of the world and motivate our actions. They are underspecified; they are generally learned by induction through recurrent exposure rather than through direct instruction; and they carry with them expectations or evaluations pertaining to the object or situation not available to direct perception. Schemas are stored as mental phenomena in the brains of individuals, but also exist “in the world”, as shared understandings and representations that emerge from and facilitate social action. Social actors invoke and share schemas all the time. Explicit cultural production—such as films, television shows, paintings, fairy-tales, or urban legends—draws on cultural schemas to make the stories and characters recognizable to their audience. Monstrous villains and reluctant heroes, innocent schoolgirls and charismatic Casanovas: cultural representations draw on a largely familiar cast of characters and a limited number of scripts. But schemas are also deployed in immediate contexts of social action: social actors employ schemas to determine how to act, to justify their actions, and to evaluate the actions of others

So we make sense of the world through schemas. But schemas alone are insubstantial. Social structures consist of schemas conjoined to materials. By materials, we mean the objects, performances, and organizations that instantiate schemas in the perceptible world; they instill and reinforce schemas on the minds and bodies of social actors. They include not only things like a piece of land or a stock certificate, but also legislation, news stories, or a musical performance; not only schools, but also curricula and graduation ceremonies; not only a wedding ring, but also the spoken vow to remain faithful to one’s spouse.



The schematic and material components of structure each serve as the condition of possibility of the other, both synchronically and diachronically. At any moment, materials can only be mobilized in relation to some schema, and their value follows from the schema that they embody. At the same time, however, schemas cannot float free of materials, or at least not for long. Social institutions, the distribution of material resources, and the structure of social networks all maintain and diffuse particular cultural representations while inhibiting the development and flow of others. (see Urban 2001).

So materials and schemas are interdependent, but they are not perfectly mutually determined. The partial misfits occur in part because the mapping between materials and schemas is many-to-many. For example, rural family planning clinics are materials that instantiate a range of partial incongruent schemas, and the schema equating witchcraft with eating has many material manifestations in Cameroonian society, and also in west Africa more broadly. This overlap means not only that changes in one social domain can more readily move into another, but more importantly that in the normal course of affairs, many schemas remain ambivalent or unsettled. The everyday lack of fixity becomes dramatically more consequential when circumstances change, and minor or secondary schemas suddenly take on central importance. Because we necessarily make sense of the world through schemas, new phenomena require us either to stretch and transform available schemas or to develop new ones. In turn, schematic transpositions or extensions inspire new materials.

So as people confront conjunctures, and resolve them using the schemas and materials to which they have access, they either reinforce or alter the structure, and usually some of both. Structures are therefore the residues of the history of their uses and effects. Making new use of schemas and materials contributes to that history, by for example expanding or contracting the domains over which a schema may effectively apply, or expanding or contracting the domains in which a particular material may be circulated. Structure in TCA is not like a blueprint for action that remains unaltered by how it is deployed; but rather like a creek bed, which channels the flow of water but is, over time, deepened or altered by the flowing water, social structure shapes behavior in the short-term and is shaped by it in the long term.

Access to schemas and materials is unevenly distributed across social and geographic space. An individual's location within society – both geographic and social – influences his or her exposure to and identification with specific structures and the material and schematic components of which they are made. As a result, people in different social positions are likely to face different distributions of conjunctures, and to respond differently to the conjunctures that they do face. This suggests a kind of conjunctural decomposition, in which we model demographic events as function of the distribution of conjunctures and their resolution.

In addition to being unequal, the distribution of materials across social space is “lumpy,” by which we mean that certain materials tend to cluster and the variation between individuals is not continuous. Many kinds of material clump together and

reinforce one-another. Education is a powerful resource in part because of how it is mobilized in the labor market; religious communities are powerful in part because of how they can be mobilized in electoral politics. Kinship is powerful because it can be mobilized for everything. This mutual reinforcement between different kinds of materials makes social organization much more complicated, because more densely interconnected. Social systems resemble ecosystems, where small interventions at the margin may have enormous consequences as they are magnified and multiplied through mutually reinforcing relations. Like ecosystems, social systems are highly structured, even if the limits of the system are ill defined. Like ecosystems, social systems are not the sum of their parts, but rather the product of their relationships.

### **TCA as applied to kids in Cameroon**

Our task today is to make progress understanding the changing place of children in African families. How does a theory of conjunctural action advance that task? Let us think about some specific domains in which the attitudes of parents and others toward children could be consequential. One, most certainly, pertains to children's schooling and work.

Jack Caldwell famously argued that fertility would inevitably fall with the onset of mass primary education. Echoing Aries closely, he claimed that intergenerational wealth flows reverse when the expectation that children will attend school becomes normalized, as children go from being the servants of their parents to their masters. This

reversal in wealth flows led, in his model, to the end of high fertility. Of course there is now a considerable literature demonstrating that his wealth flows premise is wrong – high fertility populations do not necessarily have upward wealth flows, and low fertility populations do not necessarily have downward ones when state-mediated transfers are included (Lee’s NTA work). But for our purposes this morning, what matters about Caldwell’s approach is the link he makes between a set of schemas about children with a new set of materials, that is, school. He proposes that the new schemas regarding children would not have emerged except in concert with school, but also that the school would not have important effects for family life or fertility if schemas did not simultaneously change. Even if school suddenly became available the only means to social mobility, parents would not necessarily need to bear fewer children and send them all to school – they could, for example, continue having many children but only send one or a few to school. In Caldwell’s model, social structure changes through the coordinated change of materials and schemas, when parents begin to construe schooling as a right of the child – and therefore begin construing children as beings with rights that are independent of their parents. So both schemas and materials are stretched and changed as people confront conjunctures that don’t quite fit the old structures, and their actions in these new conjunctures alter the schemas and materials bit by bit.

My interview tapes and fieldnotes from southern Cameroon in the late 1990s are full of people making sense of girls’ schooling. They are thinking hard about what school does, what it means, and what kinds of new people it produces. Educated women and girls overwhelmingly described school as the means of self-transformation, as 15-year

old Prudence, who answered my question concerning “what does it mean to become educated, according to you?”

“It is to better understand life. Because my cousins, those with whom I don’t get along so well, they are girls who have not attended school a lot, who stopped at primary school. And now they have at least one child. And when they see me, still going to school, and I don't yet have children, they detest me. But me, I love them, because I don't know why I would detest them. So they have a mentality... tsk. I don’t understand. They are brutal! You sense that they haven’t been transformed. You sense that they have not been to school [because of] their manner of reacting, of dressing, everything.”

For Prudence, schooling transforms people from “brutal” beings who detest educated people and start bearing children young into beings who love those who hate them and have refined manners of reacting and dressing. That is, schooling civilizes people – and, note, also makes them Christian. The connection between schooling and morality is a common theme, although not everyone agrees that schooling civilizes, or that schooling leads people toward, rather than away, from Christian practice. For example, another teenager who I call Faith said that “our mothers and grandmothers” were better wives and mothers than young women today. I asked why she thought that had changed, to which she answered:

“Its education (in the sense of socialization) and then customs that have changed a lot. There is no more respect for the human person. Especially the “yoyette” girls, and those who attend school until-until [for a long time] – they only think about money,

clothes, I don't know what. There is already that respect that is gone... I think that if we base ourselves on what the Lord asks there will be more respect. It's that manner of wanting to do everything that leads us into debauchery. We want to do every along and in our own way. Of course we can only encounter piles of scourges."

Both Prudence and Faith see school as deeply consequential for Cameroonian women, and particularly for their moral standing. They are both using religious schemas – indeed, some of very the same ones – to make sense of this still contested material. Both draw attention to clothing as a marker of difference, and in both cases, the relationship between staying in school and mothering are central (stated for Prudence, the background of the question for Faith). So here the same schemas are deployed in opposite ways. These are what Ann Swidler has called "unsettled times."

These unsettled times are common, and matter a lot because it is in unsettled times that social structures shift. If Caldwell is right at all about the importance of primary education for transforming reproductive practices, then it will have to occur because schemas regarding schooling and morality are settled in favor of school. No matter how financially advantageous school might appear to be, if it leads to debauchery and piles of scourges, it will not be the path of the future. Many of you will remember Casterline's conclusion to the IUSSP Values and Fertility Change volume, in which he argues "all fertility behaviour is value-driven, but fertility *change* is not necessarily driven by value *change*" (Casterline 1999:362, italics in the original), because, for example, fertility change may emerge as people continue to try to practice old values

under new circumstances. That is, individual action is the product of schemas and materials as they are mobilized in particular conjunctures. In the long run, schemas and materials will become more aligned, although never perfectly so, but in the short run, either can move, pushing people into unsettled times when they must work to realign schemas and materials through solving concrete problems such as whether to send a daughter to secondary school, or how to carry out her moral training.

Education has long been a grounds of social difference, and it certainly is a critical line of difference in much – or perhaps all – of contemporary Africa. Whatever ambivalence parents feel about the moral implications of schooling, most parents want to send their children to school; but many cannot, whether for financial reasons, or the distance to school, or needs for the children to work. As a result, children who have been to school or stayed in school to more advanced grades differ in all kinds of ways from those who have not. They come already from different kinds of families in different kinds of communities, and they are in some cases selected among their siblings. School is thus a mark of distinction, even if it is sometimes a tainted one. Here we see data that won't surprise anyone – these are histograms of the SMAFM by educational status in the 103 DHSs conducted in Africa since 1986. The point to observe here is that the more educated are just in a different distribution. Rachel Robinson has argued in a paper in the journal Demography that in the US we now have a bimodal distribution for marriage probabilities, driven by massive differences by education – this graph suggests that we may find the same thing in sub-Saharan Africa. And we would see the same thing if we looked at TFR or a half-dozen other measures. Take-away? School matters massively,

both as a mark of distinction and probably also as a mechanism for producing difference.

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Schooling is one critical area for understanding attitudes towards children. It is also one about which much has been written, and we will have the pleasure of hearing Marc Pilon speak more about it later today. So I want to turn now to a different area, that of child health, and specifically child immunizations. I do this for three reasons. First, immunization is one of the most important health interventions for children, preventing some 3 deaths annually (8 million if you count the irradiation of smallpox, data from UNICEF at <http://www.unicef.org/pon96/hevaccin.htm>). Second, unlike many of the behavioral frames posited by social- and developmental psychologists to matter for child wellbeing, immunization provides a relatively simple quantifiable measure of parental action for which we have excellent comparative data in the Demographic and Health Surveys. And third, immunization – like many, many other domains – provides a nice way of looking at the mutual interplay of schemas and resources in specific conjunctures, as parents must act to vaccinate their children, but the conditions of action are highly variable across social space.

We will not leave education completely – rather, we will now use education of the mother as a measure of social class, as a marker of social difference.

**Broadening beyond Cameroon**



Childhood vaccination is a critical pillar of population health; from a scientific perspective, there is no dispute of the importance of timely and universal vaccination. Popular schemas regarding vaccines, by contrast, are widely varying. Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg and others have written about how easily rumors of sterilizing vaccines, HIV-tainted vaccines, and otherwise terrifying vaccines circulate, suggesting that many people suspect vaccines already and are easily persuaded that they are harmful. Several states in Northern Nigeria have been practicing a vaccine boycott since the 1996, in response to Pfizer's lack of informed consent in clinical trials during a major health emergency there. Still, even in northern Nigeria, the children of the most educated women are far more likely to be vaccinated than are the children of less educated women. Thus: schemas about vaccines vary considerably, and that variation is linked to social background.

Of course, vaccines are also a particular sort of material, which requires special handling and complex distribution chains. Despite some recent evidence that non-refrigerated vaccines may still be efficacious, until now medical personnel have had to arrange generators and refrigeration units for nearly all of them—DTAP, MMR, Polio, Hep A and Hep B.... Because of their importance & expense, vaccines receive strong support, financial and otherwise from the UN, national governments, NGOs, and foundations like Gates; they are widely, although certainly not universally, available. But vaccination rates vary a lot across and within countries, and also between boys and girls. In the DHSs conducted since 2005, proportions of children completely vaccinated (that is, having received all age-appropriate immunizations) varies from 22 percent in Nigeria

(remember the boycott!) to just over 90 percent in Rwanda. The average difference between vaccination rates for the children the most and least educated women is about 25 percentage points, but that varies from a high of 60 percentage points (Mozambique 1997) to a 6 point advantage for the least educated in Lesotho in 2009. What matters for us here is that the vaccination is a complex structure, with considerable variability across social space in both schemas and materials.

What I want to look at now is how that variability is organized. In particular, I want to look here at variation across countries compared to variation across educational statuses. Here we have data from the 103 DHS surveys that have been conducted in Africa since 1986. In pale blue circles, we see the proportion of children born to women with at least a secondary education who have received all their required vaccines. These figures are adjusted for sampling weights, but not for differential population size – so, Togo 1998 is one data point and Nigeria 1999 is another. The yellowish squares show the same, but for moms with no education. The lines are loess. We see two things that I want to dwell on – one we see clearly, the other not so clearly. We clearly see that the more educated women’s children are vaccinated at much higher rates. We see it here for all the countries together, but it also holds within countries, with very few exceptions (like Lesotho mentioned above). What is harder to see here is how different is the variability in the two series. The blue dots are just much more concentrated than are the yellow squares, especially as we move later in time. The next slide shows this more clearly. Here I have divided the data into 5-year tranches, and this is showing the mean (in solid on the left axis) and the standard deviation divided by the mean (dotted, and on the right

access) for the most and least educated women, again using blue and yellow. There is nothing new in the means, which look basically parallel – they rise very quickly in the first five years, then decline, then rise again more slowly for the rest of the period. The story here is in the variability: since 1990, the trajectories of this measure of variability have diverged for the most and least educated. Across countries, the most educated are becoming more similar – once you know that a woman is educated, knowing what country she comes from gives you less new information than it did in the past. While for the uneducated, variability is not declining, and may even be trending up a little bit. The most educated are coming to resemble each other across national lines, but no parallel process is occurring among those with no education.

### **Tribu gives way to class?**

In her 1991 monograph Provinces into Nations, Susan Cotts Watkins shows that from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, European fertility not only fell, but also became far less variable, particularly within national boundaries. In 1800, reproductive communities of practice were overwhelmingly local – the scale that could be walked in a day. But the end of the second World War, reproductive practices were organized on a larger scale. Watkins argues that fertility behavior is always influenced by SCHEMAS about how many children to have and when to have them, schemas shared through social communication. However, Watkins argues, the mechanisms through which this social communication occurs, that is, the MATERIALS that make ot

possible, have changed: in 1870, local gossip was the primary mechanism, whereas by 1960, newspapers and other national media dominated; as a result, the homogenizing effects of social communication on fertility schemas are larger, and often correspond with the borders of nations.

To reiterate, new materials altered the communities of practice over which schemas were shared.

I would like to argue that we are presently seeing a similar shift, but differentiated importantly by class. Educated elites are reading the same international journals, watching the same cable channels, and friending each other on Facebook. This is not the Habermassian public sphere that Watkins describes, but a new public sphere in which schemas and materials are shared by a transnational, cosmopolitan elite. Accordingly, we see their behavior converge. The most disadvantaged in this system, those with no education, are by contrast not part of a single, emerging, telecom-based international conversation. Their communities of practice, therefore, continue to be local, and variability in behavior across countries persists.

At the IUSSP in Busan, I suggested that we might see in coming years a bifurcation of African family forms between urban elites and others, with the former group converging on two-income, conjugal families with strong, extended bilateral ties, and others converging toward what has been called the Caribbean model, with large proportions of female headed households, and men largely withdrawn from childrearing obligations. I suggested that perhaps we will see different elements of the

“traditional” African families maintained and extended in different subsections of the population, so that CLASS, rather than ethnicity, would become the key determinant of family structure.

What I have suggested here is that this process of bifurcation is already going on in certain domains concerning attitudes toward children, at least insofar as we can perceive these through behaviors toward children, such as vaccination. New materials, new schemas, and new kinds of conjunctures mean changes in social structures. Those changes leave quantifiable consequences. As demographers, it is our task to find them.

Thank you very much for your attention.