

**Perceptions and Planning:  
Extended Family Obligations and Family Formation in Malawi**

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**Abstract**

Marriage and childbearing are widely recognized as key transitions to adulthood. We suggest an additional critical marker of adulthood in sub-Saharan Africa: responsibility for kin peers. Although the literature on family transfers has provided some support for assertions that kin networks are important social and economic resources, empirical studies of how transfers are related to lifecourse events are limited. Focus has traditionally been on intergenerational ties, with less attention paid to ties between siblings. We use wave one of the Tsogolo La Thanzi Malawi-based survey dataset to examine intragenerational monetary transfers among close siblings. We then model the relationship between transfer obligations and transitions to adulthood. Preliminary analyses focus on linear and multinomial logistic regression; further analyses will apply increment-decrement lifetables to model transitions to adulthood. Preliminary results show that monetary obligations are concomitant with other key markers of adulthood, including transitions to marriage and childbearing.

## **Extended Abstract**

### *Introduction*

In the sociological and demographic literature, marriage and childbearing are widely recognized as important markers of the transition to adulthood. While these markers are unarguably critical steps in the transition to adulthood for young adults in sub-Saharan Africa, the unique structure of the African family suggests that broader family obligations may also play a role in shaping what it means to be an adult and how one establishes adulthood in this context. Following Conger and Little (2010), we suggest that sibling relationships may be an important factor in shaping transitions to adulthood. We extend this assertion and contend that, in addition to marriage and childbearing, responsibility for the extended family, and, in particular, kin peers, is an important marker of adulthood in sub-Saharan Africa.

From the earliest studies on the African family, emphasis has been placed on the importance of the extended family network for caretaking and social and financial support (Weinreb 2002). Though patterns of kin support vary by country, region, lines of descent (matrilineal vs. patrilineal), and ethnicity, the family system in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has generally been characterized as one of predominantly vertical intergenerational exchange—that is, a system in which grandparents, parents, and children are involved in a series of transfers of both monetary and non-material goods and services. More recently, increasing attention has been paid to lateral transfers, such as exchanges between aunts and uncles and their nieces and nephews (see, for example, Weinreb 2002); however, the role of sibling transfers remains largely unexplored (see Mtika 2003 for a notable exception).

Moreover, the form of the African family has been in flux, leading to a contentious debate in which some scholars conclude that extended kin networks are eroding, causing a nucleation of the African family, while others contend that the importance of extended family ties remains undiminished (Weinreb 2002). In the absence of a strong welfare state, the potential erosion of extended kin networks in which members provide support for one another may have disastrous results, particularly for the most dependent social groups—namely children and the elderly (Mtika 2003). The role of HIV/AIDS in shaping these changes in the family is particularly unclear. Evidence from studies aiming to address the impact of HIV/AIDS on the African family is mixed at best (Yeatman 2009b); the focus has been predominantly on the role of one's own serostatus in shaping family formation preferences and behaviors. While some research has suggested that external factors, such as anticipated caregiving for ill adults or orphans, may influence family decisions, this line of investigation remains underexplored.

The current study seeks to examine empirically the current state of extended family obligations in SSA, with focus on Malawi. Malawi's high levels of HIV prevalence, early marriage patterns, and high fertility rates make it an ideal environment for examining the relationship between AIDS-related social change and family formation. We consider the predictors of intragenerational transfers, such as socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, sibling demographics, and anticipated caretaking obligations. In addition, we explore the role of current extended family obligations on family formation preferences and behaviors in a context of high rates of HIV infection. Specifically, we ask the following questions: do current familial obligations vary by socio-demographic characteristics? Are these extended family obligations a significant factor in shaping the timing and nature of family formation milestones?

### *Data and Methods*

Data for this study are taken from Wave 1 of the Malawi-based Tsogolo la Thanzi (TLT) study. The first wave of data collection took place between May and August 2009. Fifteen hundred female and six hundred male respondents were randomly selected from a sampling frame of 15 to 24 year olds living in census enumeration areas within 7 kilometers of Balaka, Malawi. The catchment area includes a mix of rural and urban communities around Balaka, a growing town one and a half hours from the southern city of Blantyre. In addition to the core random sample, TLT used respondent driven sampling (RDS) to enroll

the romantic partners of female survey respondents into the study and successfully enrolled approximately 450 such partners. The resulting sample size includes 2,500 male and female respondents.

In addition to collecting detailed data on the respondents, the Wave 1 instrument includes a sibling roster, which collected basic socio-demographic data on all siblings ever born, including those who have died. Respondents then answered more detailed questions about their three closest siblings, including year of death (when applicable). Due to differences in family size, however, some respondents did not provide data for three siblings (N=6,571). Our inquiry into this dimension of extended family relationships draws upon these data in three distinct forms: we summarize the relevant respondent characteristics, the relevant sibling characteristics (as reported by the respondent), and sibling and respondent characteristics jointly, which serve to characterize the relationship. In dealing with the relationships data, the respondent-to-sibling relationship is a three-to-one match (with differences by family size as noted above), and we use survey estimation techniques to account for this design.

The focus of our preliminary analysis is the nature of sibling-respondent relationships, using relationships as the units of analysis. We examine current and anticipated family transfers that correspond to two realms: economic exchanges and caregiving. We categorize the relationship in terms of economic transfers using a four category measure: (1) no economic transfer, (2) respondent gives to but does not receive from the sibling, (3) respondent receives from but does not give to the sibling, and (4) mutual economic support.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions relating to the likelihood of various lifecourse events. Using the number of beans remaining on a plate as their indicator of likelihood, respondents rated how likely they believed each of a series of events was. We begin with the stated likelihood of getting married during the next year (unmarried respondents only), and of having a(nother) child in the same timeframe. We also plan to model the likelihood of giving to and receiving from family during the next year, as well as the likelihood of remaining in school for those who are currently enrolled.

Independent variables include measures related to sibling characteristics, the sibling-respondent relationship, and compositional controls. Health status and likelihood of HIV infection are the key sibling predictors. Relationship variables include relative financial situation, closeness (is sibling not a friend, a close friend, or the respondent's best friend), and geographic proximity; compositional variables include whether the respondent has any sick siblings or any infected siblings, whether the respondent is a net donor or recipient across sibling relationships, the respondents' number of nieces and nephews, and the number of these who may be considered to be at high risk of orphanhood.

We used multinomial logistic regression to model the relationship respondents have to their siblings in terms of economic and caregiving transfers. Because relationships are the units of analysis and these are nested within respondents (typically 3 per respondent) we use Stata's svy option to correct the estimated variance in these models. A second part of our analyses focuses on the associations between sibling obligations and family formation. Here, the units of analysis are individuals – the respondents – and the sibling obligations are operationalized as compositional characteristics of the respondent. For this stage of our analysis, we rely on linear regression.

In addition to these preliminary regression analyses, we also plan to utilize detailed marriage and pregnancy history information from the respondents to examine transitions to adulthood via an increment-decrement lifetable approach. We will consider the time to marriage and time to first birth controlling for demographic characteristics, sibling-based contextual characteristics, and transfer behavior. Specifically, sibling-based contextual characteristics will include the total number of ill and potentially HIV-infected close siblings, number of nieces and nephews belonging to sick or infected siblings, relative financial standing, and geographic proximity of close siblings. Transfer behavior will be determined by the four category measure outlined above.

## *Preliminary Results*

We began with descriptive statistics for respondent, relationship, and sibling-related contextual characteristics. Just under sixty percent of the sample is female, with a mean age of 20.44 years. The majority of the respondents are never married (53%), while a large minority of the sample is married (42%). Average parity among respondents is low, with a mean of less than one child per person. Our measure of transfers suggests that the majority of respondents (56%) are involved in neither giving nor receiving economic assistance; however, in a sample of young adults, this leaves just under half involved in transfers. Respondents are slightly more likely to unilaterally give than to unilaterally receive (20% vs. 16%), while a small minority are involved in bilateral transfers. Across unilateral and bilateral transfers, just under 50% of siblings give to one or more siblings, and a similar number receive from their close siblings.

Respondents are slightly more likely to identify a same-sex sibling as a close sibling, with 55% of close siblings matching the respondent's own gender. The age difference tends to be very small, with an average age difference of 2.23 years between respondent and siblings. However, there is considerable variation in this figure, with siblings being as much as 30 years older to 26 years younger than the respondent. In terms of finances, only about 20% of the sample said they were equally well-off when compared to their close siblings; the remaining respondents were equally split between being better or worse-off financially than their close siblings. Although the number of children siblings have ranges from 0 to 8, the average number of children per sibling is just under three. Only 2% of siblings are currently sick, though 26% are worried about becoming infected with HIV/AIDS.

Only 6% of respondents have any siblings in fair or poor general health; however, 12% of respondents suspect at least one sibling has HIV, and 2% know their sibling(s) to have HIV. In spite of relatively low levels of known HIV infection among siblings, well over one third (40%) of respondents have at least one sibling who is worried about HIV; on average, the number of siblings worried about HIV is just under 1.

Results of exploratory regression analyses show gender, marital status, relative financial standing, and closeness are significant predictors of transfer behavior. In general, it appears that females are more likely to receive than give monetary support, while males are more likely to be involved in giving, consistent with what might be expected given gender scripts in Malawi. Marital status is also significant, with never-married individuals being less likely to give, while married respondents are more likely to give. Greater wealth also appears to be salient, with those who are better-off giving and those who are less well-off receiving. Finally, closeness is a significant factor; while close siblings do not differ significantly from siblings who are not the respondent's friend, respondents are less likely to receive from best friends.

Exploratory regressions were also run for respondents' rating of the likelihood getting married and having a baby in the next year. Women are significantly more likely to anticipate getting married and having a baby, as are older respondents. Perhaps most substantively significant is the finding that those who give more are also more likely to anticipate getting married and having a baby.

Overall then, preliminary findings suggest that, though responsibilities are gendered in nature, traditional markers of transitions to adulthood and intragenerational family obligations are closely interrelated. However, these preliminary findings also suggest the need for a lifetable approach to understanding these transitions. Using our preliminary findings as a starting point, we will next examine the relationship between family obligations and transitions to adulthood using increment-decrement lifetables. Focus will be on modeling first marriage and, separately, first birth controlling for a variety of demographic and sibling-relationship characteristics.

### *Preliminary Conclusions*

In general, our exploratory analyses suggest that gender, relative economic standing, geographic proximity, and closeness are the most consistently and strongly significant predictors of participating in transfers. Across all models, females are less likely than males to participate in either unilateral or bilateral monetary exchanges. Relative financial situation operates in the expected direction generally, with those who are able to give giving, and those who need resources receiving. Siblings in closer geographic proximity are also more likely to participate in exchanges, while respondents appear to receive more from their closest siblings than they tend to give.

Preliminary findings also show that family obligations are closely tied to transitions to adulthood. Both giving to siblings and anticipating caregiving greatly increase the likelihood of anticipating marriage and childbearing. This provides early evidence that responsibility for extended family members—siblings in particular—is a marker of adulthood, closely related to more traditionally identified markers such as marriage and childbearing.

While the preliminary results herein suggest that transfers can, in part, be predicted by sociodemographic characteristics and that these transfers are important for anticipated lifecourse events, there are some caveats to bear in mind. Our measures of transfers are unlikely to capture important informal economic exchanges; results for caregiving and fostering, for example, might be different than economic transfers. In particular, one might expect very different gender results if we considered current caregiving and fostering obligations. Moreover, because these are lifecourse processes being examined at a very early age, a longitudinal approach will allow us to see how the effect of these sociodemographic and family obligation factors varies over the lifecourse. Future work will focus on expanding our understanding of these transitions through the use of an increment-decrement lifetable approach.

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