Decline in Material Family Support for Older People in Urban Ghana, Africa: Understanding Processes and Causes of Change

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**Objectives.** Material family support for older people in Ghana, as in other African countries, has declined in recent decades, exposing increasing numbers especially of urban elderly to destitution and poverty. The nature and causes of this decline remain poorly understood, in particular the relative role of growing material constraints, as proposed by political economy perspectives, or weakening traditional values, as suggested by modernization perspectives. This article develops an interpretively grounded understanding of the processes underpinning the decline specifically in Accra, Ghana’s capital.

**Methods.** A qualitative investigation of the perspectives of a three-generational respondent sample, spanning major income, ethnic, and gender groups, was conducted.

**Results.** The decline has been underpinned by two major shifts: (a) a declining resource capacity of the young to provide support and (b) a shift in the basis of filial support toward an increasing dependence on parents’ past conduct and the principle of reciprocity. Normative expectations emphasizing self-reliance in old age are emerging as a result of the decline.

**Discussion.** The shifts have been caused by a complex interaction between growing resource constraints and changing values not captured by existing accounts. The dominant factor driving the change in support norms and patterns has been the change in families’ material circumstances.

Current debates on aging in sub-Saharan Africa center on a concern about the growing threat of poverty among older people and its impact on all other aspects of their well-being (Barrientos & Lloyd Sherlock, 2002; International Association of Gerontology, 2002). In most countries, this concern is inextricably linked with debates about a decline and “crisis” in the customary family support for older people (Apt, 1992). In the absence of formal welfare systems, such family support has been responsible for ensuring economic security for the old. Today, however, whereas the majority of older Africans continue to rely on material help from younger kin, indications are that the adequacy of such help has declined (HelpAge International, 2002). Though hard data on African trends in old age material family support are in short supply owing to a lack of longitudinal, individual-based data collection, general surveys have shown sizable proportions of older people to receive insufficient financial family support, and ethnographic studies have documented individual cases of such deficiency (Aboderin, 2000; Foner, 1993). Material deprivation and neglect of older people have emerged as an increasingly visible “social problem” in African cities (Apt, 1997). The urban context has come to be seen as being particularly unfavorable to the maintenance of traditional family bonds and support networks (United Nations, 2002). In light of this and of demographic trends that predict for future decades sharp rises in the numbers and proportion of older people, of whom almost half will live in urban areas (United Nations, 2003), African debates increasingly stress the urgent need for comprehensive old age economic security policies in African countries (see Aboderin, in press). Ghana is one of these countries. It typifies the socioeconomic and demographic context in which the concern over a crisis in family support and the questions of policy formulation have arisen in recent decades. A former British colony, which gained independence in 1957, Ghana today is a democratic nation-state that houses four main ethnic groups and is predominantly Christian (United Nations Development Programme, 2003). Early Ghanaian society was kinship based and dominated by small-scale subsistence agriculture. Establishment of colonial rule, formal education, Christianity, and a cash economy at the turn of the 19th century wrought profound changes on customary Ghanaian life (Nukunya, 1992). Interethnic trade and interaction grew. Individuals, able to sell their labor anywhere, were no longer wholly dependent on lineage patrimony or property. Traditional beliefs were undermined, though syncretism in the approach to Christianity always persisted (Assimeng, 1986). Kin group cohesion and lines of authority were affected, and massive employment-related migration ensued, including to urban centers. Today, almost 40% of Ghana’s population live in urban areas. The economy remains dependent on financial aid and the export of raw materials such as cocoa or timber (United Nations, 2003; United Nations Development Programme, 2003). The labor force is concentrated in the informal sector (over 80%). The formal salaried sector constitutes only a minority, even in cities (Ghana Statistical Service, 2000). The last two to three decades have been marked by economic stagnation due mainly to poor global terms of trade and fiscal policies. At the social level, Ghana has seen widespread un- and underemployment and rising costs of living, health care, and education. Hardship and poverty are the norm. Almost 80% of the population now live on under $2 a day (United Nations Development Programme, 2002). It is in this context that the
concern over declining family support for older people has arisen. Traditionally, the family has held the exclusive responsibility for the material support of the old in Ghana. The duty of the young, especially of adult children, to provide such support is enshrined in the customary moral code and encapsulated in the proverb “When your elders take care of you while you cut your teeth, you must in turn take care of them while they are losing theirs” (Apt, 1996, p. 22). Although a pension system has existed for some time, it so far covers only former public sector employees, leaving most older people dependent on their families or own work. Signs that for many such family support no longer suffices to meet their basic needs have emerged, especially in the capital, Accra. Though most continue to live with their families, destitution among the old has become increasingly evident, as has the “abandonment” of impoverished older people in hospitals by their families. Charitable organizations such as HelpAge Ghana have emerged as a result, trying to respond to some of these problems. The choice of relying on family, charity, or own work will likely also face the next generation of older people. Although a potentially universal, contributory pension scheme was introduced in 1991, its informal sector coverage remains minimal, and its ability to sufficiently protect those in the formal sector is doubtful. Unaffordability, low salary, and thus low contribution and benefit levels are among the major reasons, highlighting the limits of such individual saving schemes in contexts of poverty. Policy discussions in Ghana, and Africa more generally, have thus emphasized, among other issues, the need for old age security policies to strengthen and build, as much as possible, on traditional systems of family and filial support (see Aboderin, in press). This policy need raises crucial questions. How have “traditional” family systems and values of material old age support evolved, and how do they operate today? What have been the extent, nature, and causes of the declines in support in the urban context? Answers to these questions are not only vital for policy. They are also of profound importance to understanding the drivers of change in family norms and behaviors. No solid answers, however, yet exist. A major reason is the lack of interpretive retrospective and contemporary evidence necessary to provide a meaningful understanding of changes that have occurred in the patterns, contexts, and basis of support (Aboderin, 2004). Thus, to date, beyond being aware of the need for caution regarding idealizations of past family support (Laslett, 1965; Nydegger, 1983), it is not clear to what extent support has actually declined in urban Ghana and what processes have underpinned the decline. Current debates in Ghana, as in Africa and the developing world more generally, entail two main broad perspectives on the causes of declines in support (see Aboderin, 2004): on the one hand, modernization and aging theory perspectives; on the other hand, interpretations drawing on political economy concerns. Both are essentially macro perspectives, both implicate the major earlier developments of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of a cash and market economy, and both suggest, ultimately, that the decline in support to older kin is directly caused by an increased focus of the young on their nuclear family. Where the perspectives differ is in their interpretation of (a) how this shift relates to families’ economic well-being and (b) the role played by changes in traditional norms. The results are very different conclusions about the reasons and factors at individual and family levels that underlie the declines in support.

**Modernization Theory Perspectives**

Perspectives drawing on modernization and aging theory (Burgess, 1960; Cowgill, 1972, 1974) underpinned the emerging developing world aging debate in the early 1980s and see the weakening of traditional extended family and filial obligation values as the main cause of declines in support to older kin. On the one hand, customary filial obligation norms per se are weakened by the rising influence of Western values of individualism and secularism and an emphasis on the emotional bonds within the nuclear family. On the other hand, conformity with such obligations is weakened by the demise of the extended family and the concomitant loss of older people’s status and roles. This erodes their former powers to enforce children’s conformity with filial duties and their resources to offer to their children in exchange for support. As a result, support is no longer compelled by the force of custom but depends increasingly on young people’s discretion and sentiments toward their older kin. Ultimately, the decline in old age family support is thus seen as being underpinned by an increasing unwillingness of the young to provide for the old. This interpretation depends on classic structural–functionalist assumptions about the past and present basis of support, derived from a priori structuralist notions of social relationships in kin-based and “advanced” societies. Past support is assumed to have been adequate because (a) it was compelled by binding filial obligation norms and enforced by sanctions wielded by older people themselves and (b) it was additionally driven by an element of exchange, with aged parents providing domestic or other help in return for support from their children. In contrast, family support in “advanced” societies is assumed to be characterized by individual initiative and voluntary solidarity. Finally, modernization perspectives implicitly assume a linear, uniform mode of development. This equates contemporary third world “development” with the historical processes of industrialization in the West and assumes that it, too, will go hand in hand with economic progress and growing prosperity (see Aboderin, 2004).

**Political Economy Perspectives**

Political economy perspectives, in contrast, seek to highlight what the reality of economic development has been for many poor countries. Rather than extending prosperity, it has been marked by economic stagnation and growing hardship for the majority of the population—outcomes that are ultimately seen as resulting from such countries’ weak position in the global economy. Rather than weakening obligations, political economy perspectives thus emphasize the key role played by growing economic constraints in causing declines in old age family support (Goldstein, Schuler, & Ross, 1983; Treas & Logue, 1986). The middle generation, with insufficient means to cater adequately for themselves, their children, and their older kin, is increasingly faced with decisions on how to allocate their scarce resources. In making these decisions, they necessarily give priority to their nuclear family (i.e., self, spouse, and children) at the expense of the old. Declining family support is thus ultimately seen as being caused by a growing incapacity on the part of the young. Unlike modernization models, political economy perspectives are not necessarily predicated upon
specific notions about the past or present basis of family support. Their implied continuity of filial obligation norms, though, suggests that they, too, assume that support provision was “traditionally” compelled by such norms and remains so, where it is provided today (see Aboderin, 2004)

**Materialist and Idealist Interpretations of Drivers of Change**

Underlying the diverging interpretations of modernization and political economy perspectives are two fundamentally different views on what drives change in family norms and behaviors or cultural change in general. One comprises idealist views, often associated with Durkheim’s *Division of Labour* (1893-1964), which see change ultimately as driven by changing human ideas. Materialist perspectives, associated with Marxist views, in contrast, see changing material circumstances as the main drivers of change. Despite their fundamentally different interpretations and implications, modernization and political economy perspectives are typically put forward as parallel explanations in the literature. Little attempt has been made to reflect on and examine the relevance of each in understanding why declines in material old age family support have come about (Aboderin, 2004). This leaves open crucial questions. At the individual and family level, what roles have resource constraints (an “incapacity”) or weakened obligations (an “unwillingness”) played in eroding support to older kin? How has this related to material or normative changes at the wider societal level?

**Aim and Approach of the Study**

The aim of this study was to investigate these questions specifically for the urban Ghanaian context in the capital, Accra. Using an interpretive approach informed by a life course perspective and a generational sequential design (Bengtson & Allen, 1993), the study generated an account of the changes in old age material family support by comparing the life experiences and perspectives of three successive generations: the oldest (G1), the middle (G2), and the youngest (G3) generations. It specifically illuminated three areas: first, the past basis of old age support, that is, the older generation’s account of (a) their past motives, interests, and experiences in providing support to older parents and relatives, (b) the types and sources of support given to or received by aged kin, and (c) the prevailing social and material context at the time; second, the basis of material family support in the present, based on (a) the older generation’s current experiences of receiving such support, (b) the middle generation’s experiences, motives, and attitudes in providing it, and (c) the two younger generations’ expectations of support in the future; and third, a systematic comparison of “past” and “present,” drawing on the older generation’s own interpretations of the changes that have occurred. The analysis built inductively on the themes emerging from respondents’ accounts but used a framework of “sensitizing concepts,” derived from scrutiny of the developing world and Western literature, to facilitate it and provide “boundaries for comparison” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

**Methodology**

The study methodology was entirely qualitative. In-depth interviews were used to explore the three generations’ perspectives. Supplementary information was gathered through consultations with social welfare and nursing staff, HelpAge officials, and academics at Ghana University. The study sample comprised 51 respondents, purposively selected to include dyads of older persons and their adult child and, where possible, triads with a grandchild. To capture a spectrum of possible perspectives on material old age support, the sample was stratified to include a range of gender, broad income, and two main ethnic groups in Accra. With use of these selection strata and any other available information on potential candidates, the primary sample of older generation (G1) respondents was recruited (see Table 1) in three socioeconomically diverse areas of Accra with the help of HelpAge community workers. Each middle-generation (G2) respondent was then chosen from among the potentially available adult children named by their parent (the G1 respondent). The youngest-generation (G3) respondents were similarly identified through their parent (or, in some cases, through the researcher’s personal contacts). This selection process for G2 and G3 respondents clearly did not lead to a bias toward adult children on “good terms” with their parents. Moreover, given their little social mobility, virtually all G2 and G3 respondents remained in the broad socioeconomic grouping as their G1 counterparts. Interviews were conducted in respondents’ own homes or, for some older people, in a day center they regularly attended. Each interview followed a loose topic guide and lasted 1–2 hours. Care was taken to ensure that questioning remained as open as possible, rather than simply seeking confirmation of prior expectations. For example, rather than asking directly about filial duties, these were explored only if respondents raised them as part of their accounts. All interviews were conducted, tape recorded, and immediately transcribed by the author. The process of data analysis was performed without the use of software and did not follow a preexisting protocol. Rather, as typical for qualitative research, it was “custom built” and evolved hand in hand with data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). All respondents were interviewed at least twice, some up to seven times, depending on their availability and willingness and the wealth of experiences they offered. This allowed a continuous supplementation of issues or nuances to be explored and a progressive verification and refinement of interpretations. Interviews with G1 respondents were largely completed before moving on to the G2, and finally to the G3, respondents. Similarly, within each generation, the three socioeconomic groups were interviewed in “blocks.” This, and regular cross-checks with members of a previously interviewed block, enabled a steady comparison of perspectives across socioeconomic groups and generations. The main focus was on identifying broad patterns between the generations as a whole, rather than dynamics within individual family units. In the post hoc analysis phase after return from the

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*Note: Ga and Akan are the two major ethnic groups in Accra.*
field, generational and socioeconomic group perspectives were systematically compared through tabulation. Emerging themes were further grounded and then conceptually developed or substantiated by eclectically drawing on existing constructs or data in the sociological, anthropological, philosophical, gerontological, or development literature. The analysis ended with the development of three main accounts: of why and how old age support was provided (more adequately) in the past; of the extent, nature, and causes of the decline in support; and of the emerging expectations for the future. The analytical challenge was to illuminate how changes in individuals’ perspectives have related to changes in their wider material or cultural context. Thus, the accounts involve a “double hermeneutic,” that is, an interpretation of the “meaningful social world as constituted by lay actors” and a “meta-language” used by social scientists to explain social action (Giddens, 1984). Measures taken to ensure that the accounts reflected as much as possible respondents’ reality included prolonged field engagement, generation of evidence from different sources (triangulation), verification of emerging interpretations with respondents (“member checks”), and the cultivation of a reflexive stance (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The study findings, as with any such exploration of change, can claim to apply only to the respondents studied and the specific context and time frame experienced by them. In this case, the time frame spans a “past” of support roughly from the late 1930s to the1960s (the G1 respondents’ birth dates ranged from 1914 to 1932) compared with the “present” in the late 1990s, in an urban, Christian context. The accounts thus do not capture the impacts of major earlier societal changes such as urbanization or the introduction of a cash economy, which preceded and shaped the “past” from which this study starts off. The accounts, moreover, apply only to material old age support. Very different processes may be involved in shaping other support dimensions.

RESULTS

For each of the three generated accounts, only the key themes are discussed here, illustrated with one or two verbatim quotations. The full evidence and methods are shown in the report by Aboderin (2000). All quotations represent perspectives typical of a particular generation. No systematic differences in views were found between the ethnic or gender groups. The few disparities in experiences found between income groups are mentioned explicitly.

To What Extent, How, and Why Was Support Provided in the Past?

The oldest-generation (G1) respondents gave strikingly homogeneous accounts of their experiences and the picture of old age material family support in the past. Adult children typically provided the bulk of support, in form of provisions or money given or sent. More extended relatives such as nieces or nephews often provided supplementary gifts of food or other items. All respondents stressed that the support older parents received was, on the whole, adequate: It was sufficient to meet their basic requirements. This was clearly not simply a romantic idealization of the past on the part of the respondents. All noted that cases of nonsupport of older parents did exist, albeit very rarely. Typically, these were cases of older men who had reneged on their parental duties and whose children, in turn, “retaliated” by not supporting them, or they were older women who were accused of witchcraft and consequently were refused support. In both cases, however, and where older people were childless or children were unable to provide support, assistance from extended kin ensured that at least older people’s basic needs were met. The respondents described this shared extended family responsibility as a key feature, which ensured that support was adequate in the past.

Q: “What do you mean, [there was the “extended” family]?”
A: “Because of the extended family, there was always someone. So even if the old person had no children, it never happened that they were left alone with nobody... to help them” (G1).

A second crucial feature emerged in the older generation’s accounts of the costs they faced in providing support in the past. All stressed that it was “easy” and affordable for them to support their older kin: There was enough for all.

Q: “Was it difficult financially to support your parents?”
A: “Oh formerly it was easy to look after your parents, it was not difficult at all” (G1).

When asked about the reasons for this, the respondents pointed above all, to the low costs of living at the time, especially of food, housing, medical care, or basic education.

“In those days you could feed a whole house with 2 or 4 shillings, 10 shillings went a long way... so what people received was enough for them” (G1).

“People could afford to go to hospital, the drugs were of reasonable prices” (G1).

“Formerly it was cheap to give your children education” (G1).

Moreover, the shared responsibility within the extended family meant that the costs of more expensive kinds of support (to children or older kin) were limited for the individual.

“If one didn’t have enough means to send the children to secondary school, the others would help with paying the school fees” (G1).

A final key feature of past support emerged in the older generation’s accounts of their motives in supporting older kin. They highlighted the fundamental role that binding duties and self-interest played in ensuring that support was provided adequately. Asked why they assisted their parents in old age, all respondents referred exclusively to their duty to do so: They provided support because they had to. Sentiments such as love, affection, or gratitude were mentioned by none and seem to have played little role for them. Nor did they support parents in direct exchange (e.g., child care) with them. The G1 respondents made clear that their duty to provide support had other roots. Many described it as a duty to repay their parents for the care they had received in childhood, and many expressed this by quoting the customary proverb.

Q: “Why did you look after your mother?”
A: “My mother looked after me so I should also look after her... We have a proverb here in Ghana that if your parents look after you when you are growing your teeth, you must also look after them when they are losing their teeth” (G1).
Others, however, described a duty to support their parents simply because they were their parents—regardless of whether they had cared for them in childhood:

Q: “Why did you feel it was your duty to look after your father—you said he didn’t look after you when you were young?”
A: “Your father brought you into this world, so it is still your duty” (G1).

These different conceptions express two disparate moral roots that underlie the duty to support parents in the past. First, it was rooted in a norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), which asked children to repay their parents for having fulfilled their duty to them and was encapsulated in the traditional proverb. At the same time, it was rooted in a strict “status duty” (Gouldner, 1973), which required children to honor and support their parents by virtue of their parental status alone. This duty, of course, was embodied in the biblical Fifth Commandment: “Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Exodus 20:12). Already implicit in this God-given diktat was the threat of divine punishment that people believed would accrue to those who reneged on their filial duty. In addition, such children were threatened with withdrawal of family support.

Q: “What would have happened if you hadn’t looked after your father?”
A: “My family would blame me. They will call and ask, ‘Why are you not looking after him?’ And if you don’t mind them they will finish with you. So when something happens to you and you go to them ... they won’t help you” (G1).

What defined when children had failed in their filial duty, however, depended on the moral basis one considered. Inherent in the reciprocal obligation to repay parents, as all respondents described, was a clear “conditionality.” Thus, if parents had willingly (rather than being unable) neglected their parental duties—to provide food, clothing, and “set the child up” in life (education was not yet considered essential)—the child, in theory, had no obligation to support them.

Q: “What would happen if parents did not look after the child—would the child still have an obligation [to look after them]?”
A: “If the parents didn’t have the means to look after their children properly, then the children still have to care for them, but if the parents have the means and they don’t do it, then it is no obligation on the children” (G1).

In practice, however, this conditionality was mostly overruled by the God-given commandment to honor parents no matter what. The older generation described how, in this context, they supported their parents regardless of their past conduct, out of fear of the penalties that they believed would have otherwise befallen them.

Q: “What was your mind when you were looking after your mother?”
A: “I feared because of what I was taught in the bible. ... The Ten Commandments [say] that if you respect your parents you will be rewarded, but if not you will not have a long life” (G1).

What ultimately sustained their support, thus, was an underlying self-interest. Children knew—given the graveness of the consequences—that honoring their parents was vital for their own future welfare. And, as the respondents expressed and is also described in the literature (Sarpong, 1974), they saw such self-interest as natural and legitimate.

Q: “But what would people think if they knew you were looking after your parents just so that you will prosper?”
A: “Look, if you do bad, you do it for yourself, if you do a good thing you do it for yourself. ... Oh everyone knew this thing” (G1).

A similar self-interest, then, also underlay their support to other older relatives. Rather than fearing harsh punishment, however, they this time considered the rewards they stood to receive but would otherwise forfeit.

Q: “What would have happened if you hadn’t helped your aunties?”
A: “If I hadn’t helped them, I wouldn’t have got blessing” (G1).

This was because their felt sense of obligation to assist relatives was not based on a binding duty, but on sympathy or, most commonly, gratitude and affection for the older kin and a wish to reciprocate what they had done for them in the past.

Q: “What was your mind, what was your reason for helping your aunties?”
A: “My mind was that I was repaying them for what they had done for me. Others I just liked them because the way they spoke to me ... [and] would welcome me anytime” (G1).

The picture of the past that the older generation’s accounts speak to me is that adult children adequately provided material support to older kin because (a) it did not conflict with their or their children’s own material needs, that is, the “opportunity costs” were low, and (b) given the threat of family and metaphysical sanctions, it was in their own self-interest.

**Extent, Nature, and Causes of Decline**

What has changed in recent decades? And to what extent? Asked how the material support their aged parents or kin received compares with that which older people receive today, all G1 respondents stressed that though things have not completely broken down, they have clearly become worse.

“I am not saying that the whole system has broken down completely, but ... when you compare what used to take place, things have definitely gone worse” (G1).

The respondents pinpointed two ways in which support has declined. First, there has been an erosion of the help that they or other older people receive from extended kin, shifting the responsibility of support increasingly onto adult children.

Q: “How is the support that older people get from their families now different?”
A: “In the olden days older people were cared for not just by the children but also the relatives ... but now ... only the children look after the old person” (G1).

At the same time, the level of support from adult children, too, has declined. For all poor and some middle-income G1 respondents, this meant no longer receiving enough—some received nothing—to meet even their basic needs, and thus depending on charity.
Q: “The money that your daughter gives you, is it sufficient?”
A: “The money that my daughter is giving me . . . can’t reach anywhere. . . . So if I usually chop [eat] three times a day, some days I will chop only once . . . [and] if sickness attacks me there is no money to buy the drugs” (G1).

The erosion of extended family support, importantly, has also affected the younger generations. The middle-generation respondents described how they are now increasingly alone in carrying the responsibility for their own material welfare and that of their dependents:

Q: “Does your family not help you?”
A: “The family? Nobody! In this Ghana here, excuse me to say, nobody looks out for their relatives, they won’t help you. They only look out for their own children, but not their brother’s or sister’s children. So you must fight on your own” (G2).

What has caused this decline in support? The respondents pointed to two major factors. First, and above all, they pointed to the eroded resource capacity of the middle generation to provide adequately for older parents or relatives. Although it was affordable in the past, many adult children today have become unable to cater for themselves and their children as well as their older kin. The respondents described how, in this situation, they give priority to the needs of their immediate family (self, spouse, and children), before older parents, let alone older kin.

Q: “Why are you not helping your mother or relatives enough?”
A: “I can’t help my mother how I want to because I don’t . . . get the means. And now that I can’t even help my mother . . . how can I be giving to my aunties?” (G2).
Q: “What is the reason [why many old people receive too little from their children]?”
A: “Many younger people today can’t look after their parents properly because . . . they have no means. And when their means are small . . . they will put their children first. Formerly . . . there was enough . . . for everyone, but now you have to make decisions” (G1).

What shapes and underpins these decisions, it seems, is a “hierarchy of priorities,” which, in situations of scarcity, places the needs of the young (self, spouse, children) before those of older kin. Both young and old respondents saw this hierarchy as something “natural” and “right.”

Q: “What should younger people do if they don’t have enough money for all?”
A: “They and their children must come first. They are facing life. I am not saying they should ignore their parents, but they have to fend for themselves and their children first before they can think of others. That is the natural thing” (G1).

When asked about the causes of the middle generation’s eroded resource capacity, all respondents pointed, above all, to the economic strain and the rising costs of living in Ghana.

Q: “Why [do children not have enough means to look after their old?]”
A: “The costs of . . . living are so high that it eats deep into whatever you have. Even the basics are so costly: rent, food, . . . school fees, medicine, all the everyday things are getting more expensive and your salary can’t cover it. And if you have no proper job, it is hopeless” (G1).

However, the G1 respondents also maintained that, in part, the middle generation’s eroded capacity is also due to an escalation in their “needs.” They noted that compared with the past, the young now have new daily needs such as transport or schooling, but also new, modern “needs” such as TV, HiFi, or leisure activities, which were not common or present in the past.

Q: “Why else do younger people not have enough to give to the old?”
A: “Because the needs of the modern youth are getting more and more. . . . Now they think they need TVs [or] mobile phones or . . . have to go to bars. So . . . the money they have left to give to their parents is nothing. But the question is, where are they putting their priorities?” (G1).

The crux, as this quote suggests, is that the young feel they need these new consumer items. The middle-generation respondents noted that they see them as necessary to attain a basic standing in society, given the emphasis that is now being put on material possessions as measures of status.

Q: “What determines whether a person is now respected in society?”
A: “In Ghana here, right now, money talks. If you don’t have money, if you don’t have a car and certain things, who are you?” (G2).

The older generation, in contrast, still supports the “old” value criteria of decency, courtesy, and good conduct that they grew up with, and they view these consumer needs as “wants,” which the young—if they were willing—could forgo. Thus, within the middle generation’s reduced capacity to support older kin, there remains an element of choice: a choice as to how much they want, or feel obliged, to do all they theoretically could to support older kin. That many younger people evidently do not feel obliged to do “all they could” for extended (older) relatives was seen by the G1 respondents as an inevitable outcome of the current economic insecurity and a self-interest that has always motivated Ghanaians. Now increasingly solely responsible for their material welfare, people do not want, or feel they can afford, to give to extended kin.

Q: “If now people don’t give to their relatives because they are concerned about their own benefit, how was it the past?”
A: “People were selfish even in the olden days. . . . But you see it was very easy to give. If you went to your relatives, they would give you to eat, but in fact, they had plenty. . . . So the wickedness [selfishness] did not come out, do you get me? . . . But now, because the things are not plenty, now . . . the wickedness is coming out” (G1).

That the G1 respondents accepted this with little bitterness reflects the less binding nature of the traditional obligation to assist extended older kin. Their judgment of many adult children’s reluctance to do all they can to assist their parents was very different. They saw it as a breach of the binding filial duty that they had themselves adhered to in the past.

Q: “Why does your daughter not give sufficient to you?”
A: “When it comes to contributing . . . to me, she will say, ‘Oh, I don’t have money.’ . . . But the thing is that she buys expensive things . . . so she is always in debt . . . and . . . there is nothing left to give to me. . . . But if she had respect, she would keep the money and give to me” (G1).
What this points to, and the middle generation’s perspectives bear out, is that in addition to the eroded resource capacity, there has been a shift in the normative basis of filial support. In the past, adult children largely supported their parents in fulfillment of a strict duty to honor them no matter what. Today, adult children make support increasingly dependent on their judgment of the parents’ past conduct. They specifically consider to what extent their parents supported and tried their best for them in the past.

A: “Nowadays the children give you marks. If you don’t educate them . . . when you are old they won’t come and take care of you. . . . We didn’t think of giving our parents marks like that. Whatever they did, we just took it like that” (G1).

Q: “What do you think makes children give support to their older parents these days?”
A: “It depends on the way the parents have brought up the children. . . . We get . . . attached to a parent because . . . maybe you saw how much she sacrificed for you when you were in need of something. In that way you will do it back. But if you didn’t see anything like that, you don’t care much and if your money is little, you won’t be trying much” (G2).

Children who perceive their parents to have failed in their duties, in turn, feel little obligation to help them. In extreme cases, where parents (usually fathers) are seen to have wholly neglected them, children retaliate by withholding all support—and feel justified in doing so.

Q: “Why are you not giving anything to your father?”
A: “My father didn’t try for me at all. . . . He didn’t even send us to school. So because of him I am struggling now. . . . If I had education I would be somewhere better. . . . I know that my father isn’t satisfied but what can he say. He didn’t try at all” (G2).

Parents, it seems, are increasingly receiving support not according to fixed status rights but according to their “merits,” as judged by their children. The reason for this shift, as the respondents made clear, is not simply an erosion of traditional filial obligation norms among today’s adult children. All G1 respondents stressed that the traditional reciprocal duty to repay parents for fulfilling their past duties persists and remains recognized by the young. The G2 respondents, moreover, invoked this duty as the key reason for aiding their older parents today.

Q: “Why are you giving support to your mother?”
A: “It is my duty. I have to do it because she was looking after me when I was small so now I too have to do it” (G2).

Compared with the past, however, today’s adult children seem much more ready to apply the conditionality inherent in this reciprocal obligation. What seems to have weakened, thus, is the absolute duty that formerly overruled this conditionality and required children to support parents regardless of whether they had fulfilled their parental duties. In addition, the expectations of what parental duty entails seem to have risen, with prime emphasis now being placed on parents’ obligation to provide sound education for the child. The respondents described two main factors as being responsible for this. The first is the dire effect that the worsening labor market has had on younger people’s ability to find decent, gainful employment and “become someone.” Solid education or professional training has become absolutely vital to stand any chance, and the onus on parents to do all they can to provide it has thus increased. Adult children who feel their parents neglected to do so have become increasingly bitter.

Q: “Why is it that some children these days don’t look after their parents?”
A: “These days people . . . punish their parents. . . . They say ‘when the going was good, . . . he didn’t look after me and that is why I am now in this position.’ . . . They are so bitter now” (G1).

Such children have begun to reject a duty that asks them to part with meager resources to support parents who neglected their parental duties and so have destroyed their life chances. Such parents, in their view, have no right to expect support.

Q: “But was it that the father simply didn’t have the means to educate his son?”
A: “No! Some fathers . . . neglect their children. . . . So when the child grows up, the father shouldn’t expect anything from him or her. And if the child doesn’t do it, there is nothing you can say or do because you failed in your duties” (G2).

In so judging parents, it seems that especially younger adult children today are supported by an awareness of their rights vis-à-vis parents that children in the past did not have.

Q: “What is the difference to the past [concerning children’s rights]?”
A: “The children nowadays . . . are aware of what their rights are. We were not!” (G1).

Q: “What do you mean by ‘the young people now know their rights’?”
A: “I know a lot of people . . . when they reach the age where their parents should give them a room and the parents are not doing it, they report them. . . . I too could force my father to give me a room. . . . This is what is happening in the . . . world now. Children have power” (G2).

The emphasis on children’s rights has emerged particularly in wake of Ghana’s 1989 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention, with its onus on parents to focus on the child’s best interests, has seemingly helped to foster an emphasis on parental accountability and a readiness of children to judge parents’ conduct toward them. The second factor pinpointed by the respondents as having undermined the absolute duty to honor parents is a weakening of the threat of family or divine punishment that formerly enforced it. The older generation, time and again, noted the reduced fear of God and family they perceive among the young today.

Q: “What do you mean the young ones don’t fear?”
A: “Look, I can tell you that the younger ones now, they don’t fear God, they don’t fear him how we used to fear him” (G1).

Q: “The young people don’t fear the family as much as we did” (G1).

The middle-generation respondents expressed their lack of fear of the family directly:

Q: “You say most young people your age don’t mind the family? Why?”
A: “They won’t mind the family because if the family were in a state of helping you or being concerned about you, you would listen to them. . . . But if they are not helping you and what they say is not to your liking, you can reject it, you see. . . . Because so far as you don’t provide for me . . . I don’t care, I will carry on what I am doing” (G2).

As the accounts indicate, younger people’s diminished fear of family sanctions is, above all, a result of the eroded extended family support. As they are now alone responsible for their material welfare, the threat of withdrawal of family support has, in a sense, become an empty threat. The reduced fear of God, meanwhile, as the G1 and G2 respondents indicated, is due to a change in the way God is perceived. Whereas in the past, God was preached and seen as a harsh, punishing authority, younger generations today perceive a loving God who is on their side and on whose help in achieving their goals—economic or otherwise—they count.

Q: “How has the preaching changed?”
A: “Nowadays we have so many churches . . . here, but they don’t teach the fear of God. Instead they preach that God will help you to be rich and prosper” (G1).

Q: “How do they preach God in your church?”
A: “You see . . . the bible says God created good things for his children. God wants us to enjoy the riches of this earth, so once I am a child of God, I should enjoy everything good” (G2).

Ultimately, the shifts described by the respondents pinpoint two basic reasons why material support to older kin has declined: because it has begun to conflict with the younger generations’ own material needs and aspirations and because the young can now “afford” to withhold support even from parents without fearing the sanctions or consequences it might incur.

**Expectations for the Future**

How, in this context, do younger generations perceive the future of support? Have their expectations adapted to the changing patterns and basis of support? The views of almost all G2, G3, and G1 respondents suggest “yes.” They stressed that in the present economic context, it is no longer right or “good” or wise to expect support from one’s children in old age: first, and most importantly, because it would place too great a burden on children, and second, because their support would likely be inadequate.

Q: “Why is it not good to look to your children for support?”
A: “Our economy is getting more rotten each day. So if you . . . rely on your children, it is bad. It is not good because you know what they will be going through. Now it is up to the individual. . . . You have to start planning your . . . future” (G2).

Q: “Why should you not rely on your children?”
A: “You just can’t rely on your children. Some people still have that idea but it is wrong because they may not get to a position where they can look after you. So if you rely on them, you are going to suffer” (G3).

Most G2 and G3 respondents expressed this emphasis on self-reliance in their expectations for their own old age. Those with the least education and prospects, however—perhaps unable to envisage an alternative—continued to bank on their children’s support.

“’My son will look after me. That is why I am trying my best to put that boy on a good foundation. He knows I am trying my best” (G2).

**DISCUSSION**

This study’s point of departure was the limited understanding that currently exists of the extent, nature, and causes of the decline in material family support for older people in urban Ghana in the last three to four decades. Specifically, it was the key questions raised, but left unanswered, by the modernization and political economy perspectives so far put forward to explain the decline. The process directly underlying the decline, as both perspectives imply, has been, indeed, an increasing focus of the young on their nuclear family. The middle generation, in allocating their resources, has increasingly begun to focus on themselves, their spouses, and their children at the expense of their older parents or relatives. But what role have resource constraints or weakened obligations of the middle generation played in this? And how is this related to material or normative changes at the wider societal level? This study developed interpretively grounded answers to these questions for a three-generational sample of respondents in Accra, Ghana’s capital. The findings, which reveal the same processes for all ethnic and gender groups studied, show the decline to have been caused by a complex interplay between resource constraints and changing normative ideas that is not captured by either modernization or political economy accounts. The major cause, without doubt, and as political economy perspectives implicate, has been a reduced resource capacity of the middle generation and not, as modernization perspectives hold, a growing emphasis on individualism and conjugal family bonds. Many people today simply no longer have enough to cater adequately for all generations. The main reason, again as political economy accounts suggest, has been the growing hardship that has come with the stagnation and decline of Ghana’s economy. This alone, however, does not fully explain the decreased resource capacity or its impact on support for the old. Two other factors, which have not so far been discussed, have played an important role. The first is an apparent shift in status criteria that has taken place: away from past values of family honor and conduct to a present emphasis on possession of “new” material goods, technology, and lifestyles. This has raised younger people’s “need” for such goods and thus further narrowed their capacity to give to the old. The second is a seemingly fundamental hierarchy of priorities, which underpins the middle generation’s resource allocation decisions and gives clear priority to the needs of the young before those of the old. The underlying principle, it seems, is that the old have no “right” to absorb the resources that the young need for their life. This principle echoes the notion of a “transitive order” or “processional nature” of the justice between generations that has been raised in current Western debates on the contract between generations (Laslett, 1992; Moody, 1993). Were such a principle found also in other moral codes, it might help us to understand declines in material family support to older people in other time periods or societies: for example, historically in the West and the practice of death hastening described for small-scale societies living at subsistence level (GlascocK, 1982). Although a reduced economic capacity has been the main cause, elements of unwillingness and
choice of the middle generation have nevertheless contributed to the diminishing support. In the case of support to older relatives, this signifies a continuation of the voluntary nature that characterized help to them even in the past. In the case of support to older parents, however, it signifies a break from the past. Many adult children today are not willing to do much, if anything, to meet the needs of parents for whom they feel no particular indebtedness, gratitude, or appreciation. Filial support has thus become increasingly dependent on children’s judgment of and personal relationship with parents. This shift is not, as modernization views would hold, the result of weakening traditional filial obligation norms. On the contrary, it betokens a strengthened emphasis on the customary reciprocal obligation to repay parents for having fulfilled their parental duties and, importantly, on the conditionality inherent in this obligation. Children’s relationships with parents—the degree to which they feel gratitude, appreciation, or indebtedness—depend on their judgment of the extent to which their parents fulfilled their past duties. They are thus an expression of this conditionality. This increased emphasis on reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), which has also been noted in rural Ghana (van der Geest, 2002), comes at the expense of a formerly powerful, absolute status duty, enshrined in the biblical Fifth Commandment, which asked children to honor parents, regardless of their past conduct. That this duty has weakened is, again, not, as modernization views may suggest, a result of secularization. If anything, Christian faith and worship have become more marked with the continued economic strain in Ghana, as reflected, for example, in the phenomenal growth in charismatic and spiritual churches (Dovlo, 1992). Rather, it must primarily be seen as a result of the worsening economic and labor market situation. This has raised both the importance and the expectations of parental support particularly with regard to education and the resentment of adult children whose parents have failed to provide it. Blaming their parents for their hopeless situation, such children now reject a duty to honor and support parents who, they feel, do not deserve it. Economic hardship has also weakened the threat of family and divine punishment that formerly enforced this duty. In a context where individuals can no longer hope for economic backing from their extended family anyway and now see God as their loving protector, in a manner of “each for himself and God for us all,” these sanctions have lost their bite. Nonetheless, shifts in the basis of filial support are not solely caused by the growing economic strain. The increasing emphasis on parents’ duties and accountability has also been supported by a growing prominence of the notion of children’s rights, as established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ghana ratified in 1989.

Changing Material Circumstances or Changing Human Ideas?

Taken together, the identified processes of change clearly suggest that it is the alteration in families’ material circumstances that has been the dominant driver of the shifts in support norms and patterns. However, a wholly materialistic explanation is not enough: Changes in broader societal values and ideas have played a role. They have interacted with deteriorating material conditions and served to exacerbate their effect. The dominance of material processes in driving change is further reflected in the emergent expectations of material old age support in the future. The value that younger and older generations now place on self-reliance, away from support by children or kin, is, above all, a response to the worsening economic situation. The principle, it seems, is that if material conditions change to such an extent that fulfillment of a particular family norm becomes harmful to the younger generation, it is no longer tenable and must change.

Concluding Remarks

Despite their limited application to the sample studied, this study’s findings may point to processes that have occurred more widely in urban or rural Ghana and other African nations. As such, they may act as boundaries for comparison for future research in such contexts. If found more widely, the identified principles and shifts in the normative basis and expectations of family support would carry crucial implications for old age economic security policy development in Africa, especially given its aim to build on systems of family support (Aboderin, in press). If compared with evidence from other contexts, moreover, these findings may contribute to wider theoretical debates on the determinants of change in family and intergenerational norms.

Acknowledgment

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