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'An elephant cannot fail to carry its own ivory': Transgenerational ambivalence, infrastructure and sibling support practices in urban Uganda

ABSTRACT: This article examines how urban Ugandans navigate family support systems through a focus on the under-researched area of sibling care practices. We conceptualise such systems as *transgenerational infrastructure* to capture the complex flows, negotiations and dilemmas of *both* inter- and intra-generational relationships, orderings and power, situating family support practices within their spatial, structural and social contexts. Drawing on grounded narratives of lived experience collected in Jinja, Uganda, the article offers an alternative interpretation to what is commonly portrayed as a weakening of family support systems in sub-Saharan Africa. We develop a *transgenerational ambivalence* perspective which allows for a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity and fluidity of family support as an ethical practice replete with complex emotions and dilemmas shaped in the junctures between social norms, agency, resources and material conditions. Through focusing on working-age Ugandans, we demonstrate the potential for a transgenerational ambivalence approach to make visible contradictions at structural and subjective levels and focus greater attention on the importance of sibling relationships and birth order than is evident in the existing intergenerational literature. This can help researchers in the task of linking family dynamics to the growing precarity and uncertainties of life in the marginal socio-economic contexts of urban sub-Saharan Africa.

KEY WORDS: Ambivalence; infrastructure; siblings; care; family support; Africa; Uganda.

Introduction

In Masese, an informal neighbourhood of Jinja Municipality in eastern Uganda, Anthony – a 49 year-old man – described how he had lost all nine of his siblings to AIDS[1]. Today his three-room house was bursting at the seams with all of his siblings' children, equalling a total of eighteen dependents including his own. 'I have nothing to do', Anthony explained:

> When you are faced with such a situation, you have nothing to do but to just embrace it […] It is very difficult but we have a saying in our culture that an elephant cannot fail to carry its own ivory.

In this article we examine the complex and affective field of material family support practices, highlighting the significant implications of sibling care relationships and birth order hierarchies for how residents cope with the challenges of life in an East African city, and their ability to improve their conditions and those of their immediate descendants. We develop and expand upon the concept of 'intergenerational ambivalence' (Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Albert, Abbey and Valsiner 2018) to foreground the fluidity, competing normative orders, tangled moral dilemmas, and complex emotional responses that characterize contemporary family material support systems and transgenerational relations in Jinja.

In this way, the article makes three main contributions to the wider study of intergenerationality and family support practices. Firstly, we conceptualise relationships between and within generations as constituting 'transgenerational infrastructure' in order to capture the complex 'flows, movements, congestions and internments of people and things' (McFarlane and Silver 2017:6) that comprise the diverse support practices through which familial relations (both within and between generations) are enacted. Secondly, we demonstrate the potential for a 'transgenerational ambivalence' perspective in developing deeper understanding of how inter- and intra-generational relations are perceived and managed, and the impact they have on those living in conditions of urban poverty. The sociological concept of 'ambivalence' – which aims to 'deal explicitly with contradiction and paradox in social relations' (Lüscher and Pillemer 1998:418) – is notably absent from the existing field of

intergenerational scholarship in Africa. Dominant paradigms in research on African families and support systems tend to focus on weakening and fragmented normative structures (such as filial responsibility and obligation to assisting kin, both of which are prevalent in Uganda) or intergenerational solidarities and conflicts. We suggest that a focus on ambivalence (understood in both structural and subjective terms) builds understanding of the complexities of family support dynamics and links them to the growing uncertainties of life in the marginal socio-economic contexts of urban sub-Saharan Africa. Thirdly we highlight the importance of looking more broadly at *trans*generational orders through considering care relations beyond consecutive generations (parents, children, grandchildren) to foreground caring responsibilities to siblings and children of siblings. A focus on sibling relationships can in this way provide insight not only into the dynamics of horizontal kin relations and birth order hierarchies, but also intergenerational relations, as the interaction between people and their siblings and siblings' children reflect and (re)model intergenerational caring practices (cf. Alber 2013).

In contexts of poverty and rapid socio-economic change, concern in sub-Saharan Africa has 'focused on the economic and social costs of care provided by older to younger generations' (Hoffman and Pype 2016:2; Ardington et al. 2010). Numerous studies highlight the increasing strain or 'crisis' in care for older people (Aboderin 2006; Day and Evans 2015; Hanrahan 2016; van der Geest 2016). However, little attention has been paid to those who care *for* older or younger generations. Despite growing empirical evidence on the profound inadequacies in family care provision and significant economic, mental and physical strain on care-givers, as Hoffman and Pype (2016:2) argue: 'these apparent realities of long-term care have, to date, received little if any consideration in current policy agendas addressing the issue [...] reflecting a broader, largely uncontested, policy and public discourse on 'traditional' African family values'. There is a need, Coe (2017:7) argues, to complicate the narrative that there has been 'a golden age' of family care that is now in decline and instead focus on 'how people in every era manage – or fail to manage – the difficult work of recruiting care for themselves and others and providing care to those in need, in the circumstances in which they find themselves'. This article heeds these calls by focusing on the sibling support practices of those often-neglected in intergenerational

scholarship – working-age adults[2] like Anthony – and how they negotiate multiple caring responsibilities to both younger *and* older generations, often placing them in positions of structural ambivalence that frequently engender complex emotional responses.

In the first section we discuss our methodological approach and introduce the informal neighbourhoods of Jinja where we conducted our research. We then examine contemporary transgenerational infrastructures in sub-Saharan Africa before critically considering the existing intergenerational ambivalence scholarship. In contrast to most contemporary work that aims to quantitatively or qualitatively measure or model intergenerational ambivalence[3], we instead explore transgenerational ambivalence by providing an 'evocative ethnography' (Stoller 2007) organized around three key examples. In so doing, we foreground the dynamic 'chaos' and diversity of forms and responses to family support and explore how sibling support is constituted, managed and perceived in particular contexts, revealing how transgenerational support plays out in multiple ways and engenders complex emotions.

Methodology and Research Context

The lead author conducted 18 months ethnographic fieldwork in Jinja between January 2015 and March 2018. The data on which this article draws were collected as part of a wider multi-sited project investigating intergenerational justice, consumption and sustainability across Uganda, China and the UK. To examine transgenerational relationships and compare experiences across the life course, our research employed a mixed-methods approach to facilitate a deep form of ethnographic engagement, including: narrative interviews (91) with a diverse sample of urban residents; key stakeholder interviews (32) with local government officials, technical officers working for the Municipality, CBOs and NGOs, and religious and community leaders; family-based interviews (16 families; 46 individuals) involving three generations from a single family (grandparent, parent, and child)[4]; community participatory arts engaging circa 60 participants from Walukuba/Masese division over a period of 10 months[5]; and generational dialogue groups (12) with pre-existing generational peer or community groups.

A deep form of ethnographic engagement generated through feminist research methods, adherence to ethical practice, sustained time in the field, familiarity with the socio-cultural context and establishing trust and rapport was essential to engaging with the ambivalences central to understanding sibling support practices. We created space for people to narratively explore their emotional experiences of sibling support through largely unstructured interviews alongside informal conversations, the opportunities for which arose as a result of the ethnographer's long-term relationship with – and visibility within – Jinja's informal settings. This enabled 'conversation and the re-telling of experiences and confidences that constitute the data and direct its interpretation, analysis and writing up' (Harding and Pribram 2004:878). If we understand emotions as relational and contextually informed then it is important to recognise not only the emotion-laden field of sibling support, but also how complex emotional responses can arise and/or are disciplined in the presence of the ethnographer.

In Jinja (with a population of approximately 80,000 residents), situated in eastern Uganda on the northern shore of Lake Victoria and eastern bank of the river Nile, a substantial proportion of the population live in poverty. Jinja's poorest residents live in the interstices of the urban landscape: in informal overcrowded housing with rapidly eroding urban services and infrastructure, clustered along the riverbanks, in the poorly maintained former workers' estates, and upon the lake's wetlands. Interviews were conducted in three different areas of the city: Jinja Central – the central business district, Walukuba – an area of former workers' estates now constituting a decaying slum belt, and Masese – an informal settlement on the lakeshore housing some of Jinja's newest (and poorest) residents who migrated in search of economic opportunity. An estimated 80 percent of inhabitants are engaged in the informal sector (Namisi and Kasiko 2009:4). The city bustles with people earning informal livelihoods including peri-urban agriculture, fishing, driving *boda boda* (motorcycle taxis) and hawking fruit and vegetables, charcoal, clothes or other household necessities. Historically, it was a centre of industrial production and whilst a modest industrial renaissance is taking place through the construction of new factories, this offers little to residents beyond poorly paid casual jobs lacking in security, benefits and health and safety protections. It is important to highlight, however, that Jinja's informal (and cash-based) economy offers economic opportunities unavailable to many living in rural villages, and thus

those who have achieved even modest economic success often find themselves active participants in family support systems.

The extended family and 'transgenerational infrastructures' in sub-Saharan Africa

The significant role of the extended family in sub-Saharan Africa has been well documented, where kinship ties provide the foundation for networks of reciprocal care-giving relations between younger and older generations often referred to as an 'intergenerational contract' (Hoffman 2003:173-4; Oduaran 2014:171; Khavul, Bruton and Wood 2009). Extended family systems allow child- and elder-care to be a collective and social responsibility shared across wider kin, providing important mechanisms for accessing education, medical treatment and economic opportunities. Families can be conceptualised as contingent 'open' household units (Randall and Coast 2015), linking kin members into normative and interdependent webs of expectation, obligation and responsibility through 'dense centers of exchange relationships' (Guyer 1979:5) that comprise people, labour, assets, money, affection, advice, and other material and nonmaterial benefits.

To examine these complex webs of people, practices and resources and situate them within their spatial and socio-economic contexts we develop the concept of 'transgenerational infrastructure'. 'Infrastructure' has become a dominant frame for conceptualising urban life (see Amin 2014; Larkin 2008; Simone 2004, 2008) and offers, we argue, a richer contextual understanding of *both* inter- and intra-generational relations, orderings and power, situating family support practices within their spatial, structural and social contexts. McFarlane and Silver's (2017:6) notion of 'social infrastructure' is particularly useful for understanding transgenerational relations through family support practices. They define social infrastructure as:

> a practice of connecting people and things in socio-material relations that sustain urban life. It is not just a context or a noun, but a verb: social infrastructure is made and held stable through work and changing ways of connecting.

A focus on transgenerational infrastructure therefore concerns '*both* practices and individuals, and *both* the material conditions that shape everyday practice and the ways in which practice exceeds those

conditions to open out ways of coping with poverty' (ibid.). This allows us to include sibling care relationships within the frame of analysis, offering an effective starting point for considering the agency of adults who accumulate *intra*generational dependents; how they negotiate, manage and reflect upon the normative orders that obligate them to provide material support to their families through structured sets of purportedly reciprocal relationships; and how these practices are shaped by age, gender, birth order, spatial context and social position.

In situations where personal resources and social welfare policies are lacking, service provision is basic or poor, and informality is growing, survival and resilience often rely on an individual's position within sufficiently wide and diverse transgenerational infrastructures. However, across sub-Saharan Africa 'traditional' caring relations are rapidly transforming with transgenerational infrastructures increasingly incomplete with missing links and even the strongest ties abruptly disappearing (Golaz et al. 2015:23). Golaz et al. (2015:20) observe how any decline in resources (especially money) can manifest in lower reactivity of support systems. Rising un- and under-employment, costs of living and more pervasive poverty mean adults increasingly struggle to provide adequately for their own, their children's and parents' needs, with adult children forced to prioritise their immediate family (particularly the self, spouse and children), as the flow of working adults' resources shift from older to younger generations (Aboderin 2004:40).

Studies draw attention to how the 'fabric of the extended African family/society' faces multiple increasing stressors, creating 'a more individualistic paradigm that necessitates a reconstruction of the communalism thesis' (Hoffman 2003:173-4). Considerable socio-economic and demographic changes are used to explain this trend, including: rising populations of, and poverty amongst, older persons (Falkingham et al. 2011); economic stagnation and decline, increased unemployment and underemployment and worsening living standards (Mokomane 2013); high levels of HIV/AIDS (Ssengonzi 2009); increased migration (Miller et al. 2006); and rapid urbanisation (Aboderin 2006) and industrialisation (Oduaran and Oduaran 2004). The impact on the so-called 'book-end' generations (young and old) has been well documented. Both Khavul, Bruton and Wood (2009) and Langevang et

al. (2012:451) highlight the increasing burden of responsibility upon young people migrating from rural to urban areas in search of employment opportunities to provide financial support for their families. At the other end of the spectrum, although it is a norm for aged parents to be cared for by their adult children, a range of circumstances (including death, ill-health and migration) can leave older Africans simultaneously without care while having to serve as carers for dependents (for instance, for orphaned grandchildren), often to the detriment of their socio-economic welfare and health (Nyanzi 2009). Furthermore, while getting good care in old age has traditionally been a matter of reciprocity, as van der Geest (2016:27) argues in the context of Ghana, 'reciprocity has only limited predictive power; people constantly deviate from the rules that they themselves formulate or they are unable to provide adequate care because of poverty'.

What is missing in many contemporary accounts is insight into how transgenerational infrastructures are shifting and playing out in multiple and diverse ways in communities responding to many of these trends. In Jinja we observed men and women embedded within complex and dynamic transgenerational infrastructures. These stretch across multiple living generations both vertically (grandparents, parents, children, siblings' children, and grandchildren), but also crucially horizontally (siblings and cousins[6]). It is relatively common for older siblings to support and look after their younger siblings in these contexts (Rabain-Jamin et al. 2003), and in Jinja siblings play a significant role in family support practices and care networks, shaping livelihood practices, the everyday use of resources and the ability to cope with urban precarities and marginalisation. The responsibilities of people within these infrastructures were shaped varyingly by age, birth order, gender, social position within the family, economic 'success', and other contextual factors.

The reciprocity of circular interdependencies traditionally characterising intergenerational relations and family support practices among consecutive generations of immediate kin, take on different forms when it comes to sibling support practices, as we explore below. Those highest in birth order often face an overwhelming responsibility to provide material support for both parents and younger siblings, especially when parents are either absent, deceased or struggling with poverty, structuring sibling

relations along intergenerational lines. In a time of increasing competition for resources and rise in female-headed households, the influence of filial norms on the gendered structure of transgenerational relations is also transforming. While daughters can still be excluded from inheritance within lineage systems, we observed women of all ages and socio-economic positions taking increasing responsibility for care-giving and providing material support for their (grand)parents, children and siblings.

Issues around the accumulation, distribution and utilisation of scarce material resources within extended families tend to be theorised through the lens of intergenerational conflict, for example how shifts in intergenerational caring practices give rise to moral discourses of complaint about the neglect of assumed rights and perceived obligations (e.g. Cattell 1997); or characterised in terms of increasing decline (Aboderin 2006; Miller et al. 2006; Mokomane 2013; Oduaran and Oduaran 2004). There is, however, need for alternative and situated understandings of how inter- and intra-generational relations and reciprocities of care are transforming, and how people accept, negotiate, manage and reflect on normative caring obligations in shifting transgenerational orders. To this end we explore how sibling support practices provide a precarious, uncertain, yet crucial social infrastructure which helps people cope with urban poverty and socio-economic marginalization and gain a sense of individual and collective belonging, wellbeing, protection and support (Fleischer 2007; McFarlane and Silver 2016), whilst manifesting in ambivalence for the care-giver.

Conceptualising transgenerational ambivalence in Uganda

The lived experiences of working-age adults who are actively engaged in materially supporting their siblings and/or siblings' children, demonstrates the continued importance of transgenerational infrastructures in Uganda. Working-age adults mobilise local 'assets' – including physical (infrastructure, resources), financial (savings, credit), human (education, health), social (norms, reciprocity) and natural (land, environmental conditions) capital (Moser 2009; cf. McFarlane and Silver 2017:6) to cope with and attempt to move themselves and family members out of poverty. This is shaped by and manifests in competing ethics, norms and decision-making at the subjective and structural level.

By conceptualising family support practices through the lens of ambivalence, we can, as Wegar (1992:95) suggests in her work on the sociological significance of ambivalence, 'bring the chaos back in' to how we understand the ambiguities and complexities of how intergenerational relations are practiced. Developed in response to frustrations with the limits of 'intergenerational solidarity' approaches which tend to present a binary of positive and negative intergenerational relations, an intergenerational ambivalence approach, introduced by Lüscher and Pillemer (1998:418), aims to 'deal explicitly with contradiction and paradox in social relations'. It thus avoids the 'vacillation between images of mistreatment and abandonment, on the one hand, and comforting images of solidarity, on the other'. Such an approach is rooted in postmodernist understandings of contemporary family relations as 'diverse, fluid, and unresolved' (Stacey 1990:17), and allows us to incorporate the subjective dimensions of how transgenerational relations are practiced, lived and perceived. As Kasearu, Raid and Kutsar (2018) argue, as communities experience rapid social change and transition, normative systems become less clearly defined, resulting in increased opportunities for ambivalences to occur.

At the subjective level the concept of ambivalence draws attention to oscillations between contradicting perceptions, psychological states and emotions (Park 2014:327; see also Lüscher et al. 2017:41). An empirical focus on ambivalence provides space for 'highlighting, examining, and privileging *feelings*' (Skoggard and Waterston 2015:112) that arise before, during and after sibling support practices. In her work on ambivalence amongst American adoptees, Wegar (1992:97-98) highlights how individuals evince opposing values emphasizing on the one hand 'a concern for the moral responsibility of individuals towards other individuals' and, on the other, 'the moral responsibility of the individual toward his or her own self'. Intergenerational ambivalence thus refers to 'observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults' that can be 'interpreted as the expression of ambivalences and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences' (Lüscher and Pillemer 1998:414). In this way, the approach draws attention to the political in the personal, revealing the significance of emotions to the formation, circulation and reproduction of (inter)generational relations, roles and responsibilities, and the power dynamics at the centre of social relations (see Skoggard and Waterston 2015:113).

At the structural level ambivalence refers to contradictions between available resources and social structures – normative obligations such as roles and responsibilities stemming from family relationships (Lüscher et al. 2017). An ambivalence approach thus engages with how social structure produces agency, and vice versa, acting as 'a bridging concept between social structure and individual action, made evident in social interaction' (Lüscher 2002:587). Connidis and McMullin (2002:559,565), for example, argue how 'managing ambivalence in daily life shapes the very social structures that produce ambivalence in the first place, through either reproduction of the existing order or its transformation'.

Given the significant role of extended families and caring obligations stretching throughout the life course in sub-Saharan Africa, conceptualising ambivalence in this context necessitates a push beyond boundaries in existing scholarship, which tends to focus upon 'contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring' (Luscher and Pillemer 1998:416). We thus expand current conceptualisations to more clearly recognize the central importance of sibling relations and *trans*generational orders, allowing us to explore the complex moral economy of sibling care relations across a backdrop of urban informality. We develop a *transgenerational ambivalence*[7] perspective, which offers significant potential in understanding how people manage their sibling care responsibilities through focusing on the complex relationships between normative practices (e.g. caring obligations between adults and younger family members) generated in structured sets of transgenerational relationships (which are mediated by birth order, socio-economic status and age hierarchies) and the variability of people's understandings of, and responses to, these roles and obligations (Bengtson and Putney 2000:281). In other words, transgenerational ambivalence helps to rethink the contested issue of reciprocity through focusing on the fluidity of negotiations, compromises, successes and failures of working-age adults in providing support to their siblings and siblings' children.

Sibling relations and age and birth order hierarchies require far greater attention in research on the ambivalence of family practices (see Punch 2017). Walker et al. (2005:172) highlight how '[u]nique features of the sibling tie, particularly its relatively voluntary nature, create unique bases for ambivalence'. Studies on ambivalence in sibling relations tend to characterise this as an intensely

conflictive and supportive experience (Dunn 2008; Edwards et al. 2006; Gillies and Lucey 2006; Sanders 2004), and focus primarily on issues of parental care. The ways in which sibling relations are experienced and understood (and the obligations they may entail) are highly variable between contexts. In sub-Saharan Africa studies have highlighted the cultural significance of sibling birth order, age and gender in caring for, socialising and providing 'informal training' for younger siblings (Evans 2014:560; Cicirelli 1994). At the same time sibling-headed households and sibling-to-sibling caring responsibilities are becoming more prevalent (Nyambedha et al. 2003; Van Blerk and Ansell 2007). However, as Evans (2011:385) argues, little is known about how people are managing their sibling care responsibilities (particularly following a parent's death, but also increasingly in response to a wider spectrum of 'shocks'), nor how these are relational and gendered, and manifest in, or subvert, life transitions from child to adult. In Zambia, Payne's (2012) research highlights how sibling support (financial, practical and emotional) can be influenced by household composition, material circumstances, shocks and evolving ambitions and household participation of siblings over time.

Empirical research is therefore needed to examine the diversity of ways people engage in, perceive and manage their sibling caring responsibilities and practices, and the economic, social and emotional costs of this care to both the individual and other kin. In the remainder of this article we examine three different cases of transgenerational ambivalence stemming from sibling relations among first-born children to illustrate the potential utility of this perspective. Often occupying key positions within transgenerational infrastructure, working-age adults higher in birth order must manage competing care obligations towards (grand)children, (grand)parents, siblings and wider kin. As we will demonstrate, this generates complex emotions and significant socio-economic costs in managing opposing forces between family caring needs against an individual's own aspirations, emotional and material needs. This manifests, we argue, in ambivalence. We use the concept of transgenerational ambivalence to foreground the paradoxes, contradictions and emotional responses to sibling support practices, and argue this is a complex and dynamic field in which people operate in the space between structure (obligations to support siblings embedded in transgenerational relations) and agency (choice and accumulation of dependents).

'As I am old I have to look for somewhere to work': Ambivalence, birth order and poverty

Joyce (age 22, Masese) had recently migrated alone to Jinja from a rural village. As the oldest child she had been expected to share maternal responsibility for her younger siblings from a young age. She worked on the family farm, fetched water, washed clothes, cleaned the house, and gave her 'brothers and sisters food' and told them 'good stories'. However, now she was older these caring responsibilities had assumed a monetary form. She was living with a friend of her mother, a tailor working in the local market, while she looked for casual factory work to help support her younger siblings. Living in an urban informal settlement with high rates of unemployment and few skills, this was difficult:

> I'm still searching [for a job] so that I can get money because we are many children. They also need to go to school, and I am the first-born, I'm the old. So, you know, [my mother] is also suffering with the other ones, so me, as I am old I have to look for somewhere to work as she is also digging[8] in the village to get some money to help my sisters and brothers.

She sought to raise enough money 'to send home' to cover her little sisters' fees and 'books, pens or pencils'. She emphasised both her responsibility and the necessity of providing economic support for her younger siblings over and above her own wellbeing, particularly given the material circumstances of their family:

> You know, life without Dad is also difficult but you have to be patient and to believe that God is there for you […] I don't want my sisters and brothers to be there to think 'I wish if my dad was there what, what'. I don't want them also to think a lot like that because he will not come back. I want them to also feel okay […] because you're the old[est sibling] you have also to think about your little sisters, and they have also to look at me because I told them that I am going to look for work.

The emotion work of struggling to fulfil the responsibilities located in her role as eldest child whilst simultaneously attempting to model paternal responsibilities to make up for the absence of their father and the constraints this had placed on her own transition into adulthood (she had dropped out of secondary school, thus relinquishing her hope of becoming a nurse, and said she couldn't consider marriage), were significant. Ambivalence was generated in her negotiation of a normative order that

was constructed by her position at the top of the birth order hierarchy, the pivotal event of her father's death, and a form of agency through which she expressed a notion of relational power through aiming to assist her 'young ones' and improve their social status. In her own words: 'it is [a choice], and it is not'.

This choice-less choice actively precipitated a decline in her own circumstances. Structural ambivalence arose in the marked and painful contradiction between her obligations and aspirations to support her siblings and the economic resources and networks available for her to secure a sustainable livelihood to fulfil these obligations. Joyce spoke of the hardship and loneliness of life in Jinja; sleeping on the floor of a mud-walled house, relying on her 'aunty' for food and water, only earning occasional small amounts of money by washing clothes for more prosperous households, the sacrifice of her own aspirations (including the desire to get married and have her own family), and the isolation of being as yet unable to fulfil her goals to improve the wellbeing of her siblings:

> When you don't have somewhere to work, so you can be in poverty, you have children, so you suffer a lot because you don't have money to take care of the children […] some children, for them they have both their mother and their father who take care of them, but for me I have to take care of myself because if I look back home my mother doesn't have anything to help me, she's also helping the little ones.

Joyce described feeling ashamed and anxious that she had not yet been able to secure any formal work, pausing to wipe away tears as she explained how she kept imagining the 'small ones' waiting for her to help them, unwilling to admit to them she was still 'searching'.

The complex assemblage of complex emotional responses, economic activity, rural-to-urban migration, normative obligations and expectations pursued in a context of urban poverty, often generates very difficult circumstances for the care-giver and, as the next example shows, often their children as well. This highlights the enduring irreconcilability and intractability (ambivalence) produced by normative orders that propagate ethics of sibling care that prioritise sibling wellbeing at cost to the self. Maintaining transgenerational infrastructure for younger siblings often eclipses individual aspirations and decreases care-givers' ability to cope with poverty. Joyce never spoke of reciprocity, and when

asked if she expected anything in return she dismissed this as both unimportant and something that could not be relied upon. The content of her obligations (taking the place of a missing parent and thus modelling their intergenerational responsibilities) thus proved more important than normative rules of reciprocity of care, offering a counter to more individualist interpretations of 'declining' or 'weakening' family support.

'The younger ones took all my money': Ambivalence, economic decline and temporality

As the first-born child, Jackson (age 45, Jinja Central), a market vendor, had supported his younger siblings and their children for over 15 years. After his father abandoned their family, Jackson sought to remake and hold stable a transgenerational infrastructure for his siblings through modelling a paternal responsibility similar to Joyce:

> I had to support my siblings and my mother. I began very early because I had no father and I needed to support the family and send the younger ones to school […] When you don't have a parent to support you, you have to look after your family. You can't let them starve if you can help [...] that is how it works.

Jackson was now married with one daughter who was meant to be in the final year of secondary school and a son in the penultimate year of primary. He had wanted a larger family; however, he was forced to keep his family small in response to the material constraints imposed by supporting his siblings:

> The younger ones [his siblings] took all my money. Because I help my young brother, I educated my siblings and hope they [will] support my children too. The problem is that my young brothers now have their own families and are concentrating a lot on their families. Another problem is that one of my siblings died, and left a young girl who was in Primary 2 and I have had to look after her, so I was paying for this and I wasn't able to save money. I was not able to have another child, as I couldn't afford to support.

A significant portion of the income generated in his 'active' years was absorbed by his siblings' and niece's education and living requirements. As he aged and his energy diminished his own situation worsened and he found himself unable to cope with the financial demands of urban life. He was forced to retreat to his father's land in a rural village, where he lived in an informal one-room dwelling with

his wife and children: 'the situation became expensive […] it was a situation which forced me to go, and it was cheaper in the village'. He quickly clarified that he had not returned to build a house – a common activity amongst his contemporaries who had achieved (even moderate) economic success: 'I was not constructing there, I was digging so I can get things'. Saving a little money over time from selling maize his family had now returned to Jinja where he worked in the Central Market selling an assortment of 'general merchandise' along a thoroughfare (he couldn't afford the rent of an official stall). Business, however, was 'not well', the income barely covering his rent and food, forcing his children to remain out of school. Yet he expressed great pride in the accomplishments of his dependents, drawing power from the successes stemming from his support, eager to boast how two were now teachers and his niece had just completed a degree in social work.

Jackson's case highlights a key dimension of transgenerational ambivalence: temporality. Support is often provided to siblings when they are young and dependent, providing them with opportunities, hope and cohesion. Over time however, they age and accumulate their own dependents, diminishing their ability to reciprocate. At the same time the older care-giving sibling also ages, gradually becoming less economically active. In urban settings where there is a growth of informality, this has significant implications. In Jackson's case, his active role in making and holding stable a transgenerational infrastructure for his siblings had in time generated substantial economic, physical and emotional strain for himself and his immediate kin. His (sibling) dependents were now grown, independent and supporting their own families, which for Jackson absolved them of any reciprocal obligations to either him or his own children. He, like many others, accepted they were now busy fulfilling normative obligations to their immediate kin: 'if you have your own family you first look after them. They can't remember me now, but if they come to see me, they may give me 10,000 [Shillings], very little'.

Ambivalence is generated in the contradictions between Jackson's limited resources (material and temporal) and his positive experience of fulfilling obligations which (as he acknowledges) have directly caused his diminished material circumstances. Whilst Jackson expressed sadness and frustration at the decline in his own living standards and wellbeing, and particularly the suffering of his children, he

expressed no negative feelings, blame or resentment towards those he had felt obliged to support, and who were now missing from his own transgenerational infrastructure.

'When someone dies on his side or my side we ever suffer': Ambivalence, economic success and crisis

We have explored how oldest siblings play significant roles in family care networks, especially when transgenerational infrastructures are disrupted and siblings take on the caring and protective practices of absent parents, attempting to push younger siblings out of acute poverty through access to a robust – and not necessarily reciprocal – transgenerational infrastructure. However, siblings can also play key support roles when both parents are present. As this final case illustrates, birth order intersects with other markers of identity to drive sibling support practices, particularly in cases where adult children's socio-economic status rises above those of their families.

Catherine (age 52, Jinja Central), a researcher, had been steadily saving her income to buy a plot of land on which to establish a tree plantation; assets she dreamed of harvesting in ten years to provide both a personal 'pension' as well as fund university tuition for her children. This plan was significantly set back when her younger brother contracted tetanus and suddenly passed away. As is common in Jinja, he had no savings. As both the first-born sibling and one earning the highest income, the responsibility for meeting first his emergency healthcare and later his burial expenses fell to Catherine. Burials are an expensive enterprise in Uganda, in this case including the cost of transporting the body back to his natal village and then purchasing cement for constructing the grave. As a popular schoolteacher, over five hundred attended his burial, all of whom required a meal and return transport.

Catherine had been actively making transgenerational infrastructure for her siblings for many years. To manage against potential economic 'shocks' generated by (un)expected crises among her extended family, Catherine had resisted her husband's expectation that all her assets would be relinquished to him as head of the household by instead joining a women's savings group (named *munno mu kabbi* – 'when you have problems'). Whilst this capital helped her to absorb some 'minor' expenses such as

medical assistance (usually malaria treatment) or school fees, the demands of her brother's treatment and burial were significant and her savings disappeared within a few days. It is customary for people attending a burial to give monetary contributions – *mabugo* – out of sympathy. Despite incurring all the burial's expenses, Catherine reported with irritation how: 'they give to the parent who is there. Even if you are the one who contributed you don't get the money!' When asked how she felt about this, she shrugged:

> But now we are first used [to it]. Even my husband is now used. When someone dies on his side or my side we ever suffer. We ever reserve money for that. When you try to be successful, they try to put you down [...] I'm telling you, we would have been rich!

Catherine's experiences reveal how people actively manage ambivalence in their daily lives, reproducing the normative orders that generate these ambivalences, whilst simultaneously transforming other normative (gendered) expectations. Catherine spoke proudly of a long history of defying gender norms to provide material support to her younger siblings, their children, as well as more distant family and clan members, regardless of (and indeed complicit in shaping) the rise and fall in her personal circumstances (and on occasion fuelling conflict with her husband). Financing and organising her brother's burial, along with longer-term material support through funding their educations, allowed her to actively maintain family relations through fulfilling her obligations as the first-born sibling and thus key provider in a dense web of (largely non-reciprocal) exchange relations. Relations she both actively upheld and characterised in destructive terms as 'trying to put her down', illustrating the emotional and structural ambivalence of sibling support. As she reported: 'through tooth and nail it is to save and to do some business I am telling you! Now you can see why Africans are poor!'

Despite this resentment and reported 'suffering', she expressed both pride and pleasure in being able to independently fund a robust burial for the brother she had funded through school, university and into his adult life. In contrast to existing models of intergenerational ambivalence, such as those of Silverstein et al. (2010) and Van Gaalen et al. (2010), the magnitude of investments made by Catherine and Jackson (and which Joyce hoped to make in the future) in their siblings together with the significant likelihood of their siblings' active 'exit' from any reciprocity as they became adults themselves and

turned to concentrate on their own immediate families in turn (or indeed were deceased), did not manifest in either conflict or solidarity. Instead sibling support practices generated a diverse range of emotional and structural ambivalences in the simultaneous co-existence of frustration and fatalism, high relationship satisfaction and resentment, family cohesion and isolation, fluctuations in material circumstances, pride and anxiety, and competing ethics of self and familial care.

Conclusion: Ambivalence, emotions and transgenerational infrastructure

Sibling composition and birth order have been neglected in geographical, anthropological and sociological studies of family relations, which focus overwhelmingly on parent-child relationships (Punch 2017). However, as we have argued, sibling support is an increasingly important facet of transgenerational infrastructure and source of survival in rapidly changing sub-Saharan African contexts. This article has developed a transgenerational ambivalence perspective as a tool for apprehending the diversity of grounded experience of sibling support practices in urban Uganda, and the contradictory responsibilities and responses of first-born individuals in multi-sibling families. Adopting an ambivalence approach highlights the 'chaos' of competing ethics of responsibility, responses and resources of sibling care-givers. Attending to this chaos allows us to consider the dynamism and fluidity of transgenerational infrastructures through time as siblings interweave normative obligations and social structures, agency in choosing to comply and modify (or not) given norms and ideals, competing ethics of personal and familial care, and contingencies of reciprocity in the midst of uncertain contemporary urban conditions, to provide material support. Urban Ugandans respond to normative obligations for caregiving, yet in practice these do not provide rigid borderlines nor restrict responsibilities to immediate kin. Instead we observe a mutable field varying across individual cases in which people claim agency in positioning themselves inside or outside of normative orders as they and their families strive to cope with urban poverty, generating multiple structural and emotional ambivalences.

Our ethnographic cases have sought to capture transgenerational ambivalence: 'lived experience, emotionality, and perception; small and large-scale interactivity; intimacy; and sociality, power,

politics, and ever-changing material conditions of social life without reducing one to the other—and portraying all of it in narrative form' (Skoggard and Waterston 2015:117). Attending to ambivalence is central to understanding contemporary family support practice and transgenerational relations. It allows us to privilege emotional geographies in our accounts of family support practices, exploring sibling support as a subjective ethical practice replete with moral dilemmas shaped in complex layers of competing responsibilities to care for the self, immediate family, siblings and extended kin (and sometimes 'strangers' such as orphans encountered outside their kin networks), as well as people's creative efforts to manage and negotiate structural ambivalences.

In this way we can further keep in sight broader structural relations. Many of Jinja's residents frame their efforts to make transgenerational infrastructure for their siblings and siblings' children as simultaneously structurally determined ('an elephant cannot fail to carry its ivory'), an agentive moral practice (choice), and something both produced by and in resistance to contemporary urban and socio-economic conditions. All three cases demonstrate the continuing acceptance and (re)production of norms of family support and transgenerational infrastructure as a key form of ethical practice. In Uganda where family support represents one of the only forms of welfare and social safety net, the action of 'investing' in sibling support can be a very salient part of transgenerational relations without being based on a structuring principle of reciprocity. Sibling support systems therefore operate simultaneously on (and between) structural and subjective levels. This is not to deny that transgenerational ambivalence is a site of struggle, quite the opposite. An ambivalence approach allows us to recognise the significance of ambivalence and contradiction in sibling support practices as urban African living becomes increasingly challenging and a rising number of people become more reliant on material support provided from within particular transgenerational infrastructures.

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Notes

[1] Acquired immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is caused by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

[2] We adopt a relational and socially determined understanding of adulthood. As for notions of 'youth', we consider how the relative position of a 'working-age adult' evokes a 'social landscape of power, rights, expectations and relationships' (Durham 2000:116).

[3] See Lettke and Klein (2004); Lüscher (2005); Lüscher and Hoff (2013); Park (2014); Peters, Hooker and Zvonkovic (2006); Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006).

[4] This was difficult to operationalize in Jinja as many working-age adults (and young people) had either migrated to, or out of, Jinja for work and/or marriage, with families dispersed across Uganda. This was especially the case with grandparents who had often (but not exclusively) moved away from Jinja to rural villages. 'Family' was interpreted flexibly to reflect the significant role of sibling relations in Uganda, and all those interviewed were above the age of 16 years.

[5] Participants with a variety of ages, ethnicities and educational backgrounds engaged in a creative process of dialogic circular action, reflection and knowledge exchange, drawing on participatory arts including drama, poetry, song and image theatre. Participants continued on to form a community-based organisation – 'We are Walukuba' – who continue to operate independently using arts to promote sustainable development.

[6] In Jinja 'cousins' are referred to as 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

[7] The term 'transgenerational ambivalence' was introduced recently by Pontes and Simão (2018:197).

[8] 'Digging' refers to farming.

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