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Kin Care and Perceptions of Equity among Ugandan Youth
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Introduction: Hamilton’s Rule

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, due to current economic climate, political instability, violence, and HIV/AIDS, the traditional extended family safety net is overextended in providing care to orphaned children (Foster, 2000; Freeman & Nakomo, 2006; Grant & Palmieri, 2003; Heymann & Kidman, 2009). Caregivers who care for orphans are much more likely than other parents to experience deficiencies of basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, transportation, or fuel (Heymann, Earle, Rajaraman, Miller, & Bogen, 2007). As a result, children in non-parent caregiving arrangements have been found to be more likely to receive disparate treatment in comparison to the caregiver’s biological children, particularly in work requirements and food distribution (Oleke, Blystad, Reckdal, & Moland, 2007; Case et al, 2000; Bledsoe, Ewbank, & Bisigo-Abanthe, 1988). Research has produced consistent results dubbed as “Hamilton’s Rule”—the degree of blood relationship between the caregiver and the orphaned child is predictive of the quality of treatment; with the caregiver’s biological children receiving better care compared to kin children.

Experts have suggested that when these kin caregivers are provided with material assistance the disparate treatment may narrow or disappear. If this is true, the effect on the physical and psychological wellbeing of the millions of children in kin care could be significant. However, no study has been conducted to measure such impact.

In Uganda orphans comprise about 19% of all children (Wakhwya et al., 2002), and most are absorbed into the extended family network. Although it is suspected that Hamilton’s Rule is operational there, and anecdotal evidence has been documented (Oleke, et al.), no studies have been conducted to measure its presence or ways to decrease such disparity.

Hypothesis

Using data collected from 518 children ages 8-18 living in households providing kin care with all caregivers receiving assistance from the Action for Children program, we investigate the relationship between caregiver/child relatedness and child perception of equity in the distribution of food and work compared with other children in their households. We anticipate that due to the presence of this agency, rather than disparity being explained by familial relatedness, equitable distribution of food and work will be self-reported by the youth.

Data and Methods

Sample: 518 Ugandan children and youth ages 8 to 18 living in households providing kin care.

Data: 3 face-to-face surveys (child, caregiver about child, caregiver about self and household) conducted in 2005

Analysis: Descriptive, \[\chi^2\] Bivariate Comparisons, LOGIT performed using SPSS 19

Missing data: Observations missing included 14% for income and 1% for age were addressed with multiple imputations.

Demographic Characteristics:

- 51% female, 49% male
- Age (M=12.23, SD=2.8)
- Annual Income in USD equivalent (M = $463; SD = $810.4; Md = $208.00)

Results

Bivariate Analysis

- There was a significant difference between biological children, grandchildren and siblings and niece/nephew for perceived work equity \(\chi^2 = 10.48, df = 4, p = .033\), but not for food.

Multivariate LOGIT Analysis

- Nieces and nephews were 2.753 times as likely as caregiver’s offspring to say they do more work than other children in their households (F-test sig=0.004).
- For equity of food, only income was significant. Every 1 year increase in the natural log of income is associated with a 26% decrease in the odds of a child reporting that he or she receives more good food than other household children, \(p = .002\).

Implications and Limitations

This study had a high (92%) participation rate of those who were being assisted by the program, but there was no control group. Therefore, while it is encouraging that food inequities seem to level out with income, the impact of the program’s presence on this variable is not known. How these two components (material assistance and monitoring support) interact to reduce disparities among biological and kin children merits further study. Very often a community-based program can provide peer monitoring, while an external entity may collaborate to supply the material assistance. This type of further research will have wide implications as many developing countries are utilizing social and cash transfer interventions to increase the quantity and quality of food intake of family members, including kin children within the household.

Greater efforts to detect and reduce inequitable workloads of children in kin care should be implemented. Such disparity in workloads may not only produce a sense of intra-household discrimination but also impact a child’s educational outcomes if enough time is not allotted for homework, or the child’s sense of wellbeing if no recreational time is allowed.

Discussion

Analysis supports our hypothesis that children in kin care whose households receive oversight and supportive services would not report food distribution inequity among children in their home. Our finding that increased income is associated with increased perception of food equity demonstrates the fundamental concern about the ability of families with overextended resources to meet basic needs. Yet, no categories of relatedness are associated with perceived food inequity. This agency’s oversight and efforts at material and psychosocial supports may help reduce or eliminate the sense of disparate food distribution by caregiver relatedness. However, their resources may be insufficient to prevent a sense of inequality overall. Children living with grandparents or older siblings did not report significant disparity.

Our hypothesis that this population would also indicate equitable work requirements was not supported, however, it is possible that agency oversight may focus more on the obvious food inequities, rather than work disparities.

References