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# Attributions and Attitudes of Mothers and Fathers in Kenya

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## SYNOPSIS

**Objective.** The present study examined differences and similarities between Kenyan mothers and fathers in attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes. **Design.** Interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers in 100 2-parent families in Kenya. **Results.** Mothers were more likely to make attributions regarding adult-controlled failure in caregiving situations than were fathers, but mothers and fathers did not differ on attributions regarding uncontrollable success, child-controlled failure, or authoritarian or progressive attitudes. Moderate to large correlations between mothers and fathers were found in terms of attributions regarding uncontrollable success, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes. **Conclusions.** Kenyan mothers and fathers hold similar attributions for success and failures in caregiving situations as well as parenting attitudes.

## INTRODUCTION

### Kenyan Culture

Studies that have compared childrearing patterns and socialization processes across many cultures or assessed the links between culturally determined belief systems have consistently reported that outcomes of child development can partly be ascribed to attribution processes consisting of personality attributes of the parent, ability, effort, and the operation of externally determined cultural influences (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1996; LeVine, 1988). These studies, although confirming the important roles played by parents in socializing their children, have also reported that parents who perceived greater control over their own lives and destiny were more likely to link parenting outcomes to their own efforts and ability. In such circumstances, success was more likely ascribed to internal attributes related to personality, ability, and effort than to other externally determined and impersonal forces (e.g., Zuckerman, 1979). Thus, when considering guiding principles that are likely to influence Kenyan parents' attribution possibilities, one must take into account internal factors likely to influence individual parents' attribution processes and complex, rich, varied, and continuously evolving cultures of the pluralistic and heterogeneous Kenyan people who are exposed to numerous changes related to urbanization, development, modernization, Western forms of education, and competing heritages (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997; Sobania, 2003).

The effect of globalization is not unique to the Kenyan experience, but it is a factor that has helped homogenize cultures, interests, and desires such that global

influences increase similarities among Kenyans. The most affected have been youth (Frederiksen, 2000; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). However, in addition to globalizing influences, local social factors within Kenya, such as the rapidly growing population, poverty, widespread effect of HIV/AIDS on family configurations, and institutionalized and gender-based discriminatory practices against women, may have implications for parenting attributions and attitudes.

The national census of 2009 estimated the total population of Kenya to be 38 million people, with a median age of 18 years, spread across eight provinces. Kenya's life expectancy (estimated to be 53 years) is declining as a result of widespread impoverishment and heavy concentration of HIV/AIDS-related mortalities among males, young adults, and the middle-aged population. The annual adult mortality rate is estimated to be 387 per 1,000 among persons aged 15 to 60 years, and the infant mortality rate is 34 children per 1,000 live births (Kenya Statistical Abstract, 2009). In terms of socioeconomic indicators, more than half of the Kenyan population (53.8%) lives on less than USD\$2 per day. The country's gross domestic product was estimated to be USD\$54.95 million in 2007. The gross domestic product growth was 7.1% in the same year but dropped to 1.7% because of the 2007–2008 post-election-related violence (Kenya Statistical Abstract, 2009). Adult literacy rates are estimated to be 73.6%, with a combined school enrolment for primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions calculated to be 60.1% (Kenya Statistical Abstract, 2009).

The high mortality rates especially among children and male adults are more likely to increase individual Kenyans' impoverishment and perceptions of vulnerability to external determiners of control and attributions. In addition, the widespread deaths of males, especially with the advent of HIV/AIDS deaths and comorbidity, have altered family structures and configurations resulting in transformations of gender roles and emergence of nontraditional role shifts and family structures characterized by absentee males and child- or woman-headed households. This circumstance suggests that increased levels of HIV/AIDS related mortalities have likely shifted the power balance in favor of once underprivileged women and children. The terminal nature of HIV/AIDS and vulnerability generated by the realization that the scourge has no known cure increased levels of nonnormative caregiving responsibilities that occur when women and children are forced to take on childrearing roles on their own after the deaths of once predominant males. It is likely that additional roles could differently affect women now forced by changed circumstances to take on child-caring duties at a time when they are exposed to widespread impoverishment and high mortalities generated by the HIV/AIDS related deaths. One likely consequence could be that difficulties related to caregiving burdens generate feelings of inadequacy in cases of apparent childrearing failures.

Previous research also suggested that impoverished contexts favor the development of collectivistic tendencies and self-concepts that are geared toward the satisfaction of communal rather than individual goals (e.g., Frederiksen, 2000; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). Additionally, the perceived vulnerability linked to by externally determined factors such as widespread politically motivated violence, impoverishment, and higher HIV/AIDS related mortalities are more likely to lead underprivileged individuals into externally attributing their failures to factors beyond their control (Altrocchi & Altrocchi, 1995). In Kenya's impoverished contexts, institutional and economic opportunities for the advancement of men and women are limited. Kenyan women, however, are more disadvantaged than men, even in situations where they possess similar levels of education, probably because of minimal advancement opportunities and entrenched

gender-based discriminatory practices against women (Frederiksen, 2000). Such circumstances and disadvantages are more likely to encourage external rather internal attributions of outcomes especially amongst women (Zuckerman, 1979).

Given the unique circumstances and also because of varied heritages of different groups within Kenya, it is erroneous to consider Kenya as a single cultural entity. Yet, it is a country similarly exposed to varying levels of acculturation and homogenization forces that are also affecting the rest of the world (Sobania, 2003). Kenyans are, however, in a unique position in that they are daily influenced by loyalty to traditional norms, but also exposed to and influenced by complexities associated with modernity, Islam, Christianity, politics, science, and technology. These influences have either altered or superimposed foreign lifestyles onto traditional mores and practices such that contemporary Kenyans profess ways of thinking not wholly grounded in Africa's traditional religions and philosophies (Nsamenang & Lo-oh, 2009) but on colonial and neocolonial legacies derived either from their association with Western educational experiences and European American cultural imperialism that they are daily exposed to by Western mass media (Mazrui & Lewin, 1986; Mbiti, 1992).

Although each ethnic group in Kenya has distinctive sociocultural traditions, mores, language, self-identity, nostalgic memories of a fast disappearing past, and shared group ideals for the future that broadly distinguishes it from out groups, there are also common ties that bind the diverse Kenyan communities. For example, interethnic marriages, formal employment, education, and trade are some of the forces that have helped spread commonalities across ethnic groups within Kenya. The centuries old international trade between the Bantus living along the East African coast and merchants from Europe, the Far East, and interior of Africa has led to the emergence of Kiswahili as a national language and the spread of Islam, Christianity, and urbanization along the coastal city-states and trade routes across many parts of East and Central Africa. These varying levels of acculturation related to trade, urbanization, and Western influenced education systems have been reported to reduce collectivist tendencies by increasing many Kenyans' access to factors of wealth production and also opening up avenues for disadvantaged groups to climb social ladders and be exposed to external experiences. Modernizing factors could also attenuate presumed interethnic differences by increasing the evolution of subcultures with shared commonalities rather than differences. The increased interaction possibilities and widening of social space is also likely to increase individuals' perceived control over their own destiny, boost self-esteem, and enhance internal attributions especially amongst traditionally disadvantaged groups (Altrocchi & Altrocchi, 1995; Frederiksen, 2000).

To fully understand factors influencing parenting attributions and attitudes in Kenya, it may be necessary to focus on within-group differences in particular Kenyan ethnic groups. The Luo are the ethnic group within Kenya that constitutes the focus of the present study. The Luo are the third largest ethnic community in Kenya; other Luo groups are also found in Uganda, Ethiopia, Southern Sudan, Eastern Congo, and Tanzania. The Luo make up 13% of the total Kenyan population. Traditional Luos are principally fishermen given their proximity to Lake Victoria. The need to focus on a specific Kenyan ethnic group becomes more evident when one considers that, although distinctive differences in childrearing practices have been reported across cultures (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1996; LeVine, 1988), not much is known about parenting attributions and attitudes of specific, non-Western, non-industrialized, tribal, non-literate, collectivist societies (Javo, Ronning, & Heyerdahl, 2004).

The choice of the Luo as a focus for the present study was also based on their perceived representativeness of Kenyan ethnic groups especially in regard to experiences with acculturation. Just like other Kenyan groups, the Luos are presumably at a cultural crossroad due to Westernization to which they are exposed daily. A distinctive characteristic of the ethnic group is their "love for modernity," while at the same time making full compliance with traditional norms, and respect for the elderly and also for one another (Oburu, 2004; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976, 1997). Traditionally, among the Kenyan Luos, children and married women belonged to the father's side of the family. Divorce and separation were not encouraged. Another unique aspect of Luo customs and traditions was that even when widowed, remarriage for women (also known as wife inheritance or *ter*) was expected to occur within families between close relatives because of brothers' and close relatives' affinity to social norms and perceived responsibility for taking care of the interests of vulnerable widows and children. The custom is no longer widely practiced as a result of modernization, Christianization, and the perceived links of *tero* (act of inheriting) to HIV/AIDS related mortalities that have transformed traditional Luo ways of life and thinking. Because of its contagion effect and terminal nature, HIV/AIDS was initially perceived as a death sentence "disease for the morally irresponsible." This suggested that the infected likely attribute causation to internal attributes such as inability to take full control over their own sexuality (Zuckerman, 1979).

Through the proximal location of the "Luo County" at the terminus of the Kenya-Uganda railway line, some Luo had a head start over other ethnic groups in regard to access to formal employment and earlier exposure to Western modes of production, education, and acculturation processes that followed the construction of the railway line by the Imperial British East Africa between 1896 and 1901. Amongst contemporary Luos, practices associated with traditional or rural life are intertwined with "modern" ways of living or western lifestyles. To be a traditional Luo is thus perceived by many as a status symbol that also connotes identification with Luo nationhood that extends from Ethiopia to northern parts of Tanzania and also subscribing to "collective responsibility" aimed at advancing the communal goals of living and rearing children. Some of the common culturally determined childrearing sayings among the Luo include "A tree is shaped while young, or when it is grown up it breaks" and "Iron is forged while hot; otherwise you would need extra force to forge it, or it breaks" (Oburu, 2004; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976). These sayings suggest that among the Luo, the child and final adult product are a function of parental input into the child's socialization process. Possibilities of parenting failure are also alluded to as a function of inability of an individual parent to take timely corrective actions.

Traditional Luo societies were highly structured and hierarchical. There were distinctive transitional phases to adulthood for men and women. Amongst the Luo, alternate groups such as grandparents and grandchildren were presumed to be "equals" with shared similarities, unlike the relationships that existed between adjacent generations of parents and their own biological offspring. Consequently, the relationships between alternate groups were expected to be collegial, and relationships between adjacent generations were between "unequals" and characterized by secrecy and restraints (Geissler, 2000). In comparison to biological parents, children occupied relatively lower status in the social hierarchy (Oburu & Palmerus, 2003). In traditional contexts, childrearing was perceived as a communal rather than an exclusive nuclear family activity. Children were expected to conform to parental expectations and to respect age and societal status in their daily interactions with adults. Power and authority revolved around fathers

given the patrilineal nature of descent and fathers' control over wealth and resources. However, actual childrearing and overall day-to-day survival of children was the mothers' main responsibility, even though mothers were somewhat marginalized in terms of livelihoods and methods of resource accumulation (Frederiksen, 2000). Fathers' caregiving roles primarily involved adjudicating family disagreements, passing on skills to their sons aged over 7 years, and providing guidance and advice to family members. Fathers traditionally left other parenting roles to their wives, daughters aged over 7 years, and grandmothers (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976).

It was hypothesized in the present study that these gender specific roles, economic disadvantages, and cultural biases against women could generate a sense of powerlessness and perceived dependency of women (and children) on men. In the long run, this would make women likely to form external attributions of parenting failure because of their powerlessness, lowered self-esteem, and limited control over means of production (Zuckerman, 1979). The imbalance in power control and caregiving responsibilities between men and women suggests that Luo fathers and mothers would differ in their levels of involvement in childrearing practices (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976). What is not clear is whether fathers' and mothers' differential involvement in childrearing, and the comparatively lower status of mothers and children in the social hierarchy are linked to differences in mothers' and fathers' attributions for success or failure in caregiving situations or to authoritarian versus progressive parenting attitudes. The present study focused on within group similarities and differences between Kenyan Luo mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding success and failure in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian parenting attitudes.

## METHOD

### Context

Participants were recruited from Kisumu, Kenya. Kisumu is the third largest city in Kenya and a principal lake port located on the shores of Lake Victoria. The city began in 1901 as an inland terminal for the Kenya-Uganda railway. Since then, it has developed to become the provincial headquarters of Nyanza and a leading commercial, trading, industrial, and communication hub for the southwestern part of the country. It is accessible via a network of roads, railway, waterway, and an international airport. The majority of the inhabitants of Kisumu belong to the Luo ethnic group. However, the city is also occupied by other ethnic communities including descendants of South East Asians brought in by the Imperial British East African Company to construct the Kenya-Uganda railway line.

### Participants

After obtaining institutional review board approval, the Kisumu Municipal Education office was contacted to request a list of schools within the city. The municipality's area of educational jurisdiction covered six zones. Some of these included schools found in the rural parts of the town. The obtained information was used to determine whether the schools located within the urban areas were public or private and to categorize the socioeconomic status of the school's neighborhood (slums, middle socioeconomic status, and high socioeconomic status). Four schools from each socioeconomic

status category were selected, for a total of 12 schools. The participants who were selected were representative of the two school categories and also the population of Kisumu city. After receiving permission from school principals, classroom teachers in Grades 2 and 3 distributed letters describing the project to 8-year-old students in their classes. Parents who were willing to participate returned consent forms to the classroom teacher. Letters were sent home with 250 children. Two hundred forms were returned giving permission for the research team to contact the family, and 100 two-parent families were contacted and interviewed. Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the participating families.

### Procedures

One-on-one interviews were conducted in places deemed by participants as convenient. These included the target children's schools, parents' work places, residences, and public places such as churches and community halls. The interviews were conducted orally, in writing, or both by three different interviews. Most participants were fluent and literate in more than two languages including English. The fully literate participants completed the measures in writing. They were, however, given the opportunity to seek clarification from the interviewers if needed. Oral administration was used with participants with limited grasp of the English language. In such instances, the interviewer read aloud items translated into the local Dholuo language and recorded the participants' responses. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, a measure of social desirability bias (Reynolds, 1982), and two parenting measures.

The analyses in this paper focus on constructs from two measures of attributions and attitudes (see Lansford & Bornstein, 2011). First, parents completed the short form of the Parent Attribution Test (Bugental & Shennum, 1984), which was developed to measure parents' perceptions of causes of success and failure in hypothetical caregiving situations. Parents are presented with a hypothetical scenario that involves either a positive

**TABLE 1**  
Demographic Characteristics of Children and Families

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)		
Child	8.46	.64
Mother	32.45	6.21
Father	39.28	6.87
Education (years)		
Mother	10.69	3.65
Father	12.29	3.61
Number in household		
Children	3.68	1.66
Adults	2.95	1.38
Child's gender (%)		
Female	61.0	
Male	39.0	
Parents' marital status (%)		
Married	98.0	
Unmarried	2.0	

or negative interaction with a child (e.g., "Suppose you took care of a neighbor's child one afternoon and the two of you had a really good time together."). Parents then are asked to respond to a series of questions regarding reasons that the interaction was positive or negative. Parents rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*) how important factors such as the child's disposition and the parent's behavior were in determining the quality of the interaction. The amount of power or control attributed to oneself versus children is the key dimension of interest. This measure yielded four variables: (1) attributions regarding uncontrollable success (six items; e.g., "how lucky you were in just having everything work out well"); (2) attributions regarding adult-controlled failure (six items; e.g., "whether you used the wrong approach for this child"); (3) attributions regarding child-controlled failure (six items; e.g., "the extent to which the child was stubborn and resisted your efforts"); and (4) perceived control over failure (the difference between attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and attributions regarding child-controlled failure).

Second, parents completed the Parental Modernity Inventory (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), which assesses parents' attitudes about childrearing and education. Each of 30 statements is rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). This instrument yielded three variables: (1) progressive attitudes (8 items; e.g., "Children have a right to their own point of view and should be allowed to express it."); (2) authoritarian attitudes (22 items; e.g., "The most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to their parents."); and (3) modernity of attitudes (the difference between the progressive attitudes score and the authoritarian attitudes score). Alphas for each variable are shown in Table 2.

## RESULTS

Overall, Kenyan mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding uncontrollable success were above the scale midpoints, as were their attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure (although these were closer to the scale midpoint). Mothers' and fathers' attitudes were, on average, more authoritarian than progressive (see Table 2).

### Gender Similarities and Differences in Parents' Attributions and Attitudes

Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects fixed factor tested for differences between mothers and fathers in attributions for success and failure in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes. Test results are presented with and without controls for mothers' and fathers' ages, education, and possible social desirability bias. The results indicated that out of the seven attribution and attitude constructs of interest, gender had a significant main effect only on attributions regarding adult-controlled failure (see Table 2). Mothers reported comparatively higher levels of adult-controlled failure attributions than did fathers. The obtained differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions did not remain significant when parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias were controlled. Mothers and fathers similarly professed authoritarian attitudes and exhibited less modernity and progressive attitudes.



**TABLE 2**  
Parenting Attributions and Attitudes: Alphas, Tests of Gender Differences, and Correlations for Mothers and Fathers ( $n = 92-100$ )

	Mothers		Fathers		$F^a$	$F$	$d$	$d^a$	$r$	$r^a$	
	Mothers ( $\alpha$ )	Fathers ( $\alpha$ )	$M$	$SD$							$M$
<b>Attributions</b>											
Uncontrollable success	.62	.64	4.64	1.12	4.82	1.06	1.91	1.20	-.17	-.13	.23*
Adult-controlled failure	.69	.73	4.56	.72	4.35	.73	4.06*	2.55	.28	.22	.04
Child-controlled failure	.53	.51	4.16	.74	4.15	.79	.01	.33	.01	-.08	.12
Perceived control over failure	—	—	.40	1.05	.20	.91	2.10	2.35	.20	.21	.07
<b>Attitudes</b>											
Progressive attitudes	.33	.39	2.76	.39	2.78	.37	.16	1.48	-.05	.16	.24*
Authoritarian attitudes	.79	.82	3.02	.38	3.02	.38	.03	1.19	.02	-.12	.45***
Modernity of attitudes	—	—	-.26	.58	-.24	.56	.16	2.82	-.04	.20	.40***

*Note.* Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects factor. Cohen's  $d$  was computed using Equation 3 for paired samples in Dunlap, Cortina, Vaslow, and Burke (1996).

<sup>a</sup>Controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Within-Family Correlations Between Parents' Attributions and Attitudes

The final columns of Table 2 present bivariate correlations of mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes. As indicated in Table 2, analyses revealed significant correlations between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding uncontrollable success, progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes. With the exception of parents' progressive attitudes, these correlations remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined similarities and differences in Luo Kenyan mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian parenting attitudes. Except for differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of adult controlled failure, the obtained findings suggested the existence of commonalities rather than differences in parents' attributions and attitudes. For example, mothers and fathers professed similar authoritarian attitudes and less modernity and progressive attitudes. Older and comparatively more educated mothers and fathers were similar in their perceptions of adult-controlled failure attributions.

The obtained similarity in mothers' and fathers' attitudes, attributions about failure and equivalent ratings and moderate to large correlations between attributions regarding uncontrollable success were rather unexpected findings given differential power structures and levels of parental involvement in childrearing activities that have been reported for Luo Kenyan mothers and fathers (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976). One possible explanation for the obtained finding that mothers and fathers in this study differed only on one of the seven constructs examined, and also that this difference did not remain significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias, was that although mothers and fathers may have had different levels of experience with childrearing (Oburu, 2004; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976), they might share similar culturally shaped beliefs regarding children and parenting. Consequently, mothers and fathers could possibly have been influenced by the common childrearing ideology amongst the Kenyan Luos that perceives childrearing as a deliberate adult activity with the express aim of shaping children so that they show desirable outcomes. Furthermore, mothers and fathers appear to equally endorse authoritarian attitudes and were less inclined toward modernity and progressive attitudes because of entrenched cultural norms that favor child obedience to adult authority as well as respect for age and social status (Oburu, 2004; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976).

The similarities in mothers' and fathers' parenting attributions and attitudes after controlling for age, education, and possible social desirability bias could be attributable to these participants' exposure to Western forms of education that reduced loyalty to traditional structures and modes of thinking. The consequent exposure to global changes through their increased access to mass media, modes of thinking, science, and modern forms of technology has meant that changes occurring in the rest of the world equally affect indigenous societies (Mbiti, 1992). These kinds of experiences could have undermined and transformed traditional structures or preexisting classificatory factors, such as the family and ethnic identities, into less recognizable entities. Over time, this may

have led to a reduction in gender-related factors determining parenting attributions and attitudes.

#### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some methodological issues that need be considered when interpreting the study findings. In particular, attributions concerning child controlled failure and progressive attitudes scales had low alphas ( $<.60$ ). The generalizability of the study findings could also be limited because the study focused only on biologically related families selected from one of the 42 ethnic groups in Kenya. The two-parent family sample of biological parents used in the present study should not be assumed to be fully representative of all of the varied Kenyan cultures and the emergent family constellations found in Nyanza Province. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a disproportionate effect on males and young adults between the ages of 15 and 49 years in Kenya (UNICEF, 1999). Therefore, single-parent families and child-headed households are becoming the norm rather than exceptional family constellations. Because individuals' parenting attributions and attitudes could vary across different family constellations, religious affiliations, and ethnic categories, a direction for future research will be to examine how different family structures and ethnic groups within Kenya might be similar or different on parenting attributions and attitudes.

#### Conclusion

Luo Kenyan mothers and fathers were more similar than different in their attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes. The results were characterized by mean level agreement between mothers and fathers and by significant correlations between some attributions and attitudes of parents within the same family. These Kenyans' attributional processes and attitudes were likely shaped by a complex array of rich and varied cultural practices, exposure to modern influences, traditional beliefs, and religious practices that permeate almost all aspects of their lives.

#### AFFILIATION AND ADDRESS

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