

**‘CONDITIONALITY’ AND ‘LIMITS’ OF  
FILIAL OBLIGATION**

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**CONCEPTUAL LEVERS FOR DEVELOPING  
A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE  
MOTIVATIONAL BASIS AND SOCIETAL  
SHIFTS OR PATTERNS IN OLD  
AGE FAMILY SUPPORT**

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## Abstract

The question of what observed societal declines or patterns in family support for older people have meant in terms of change or continuity in underlying norms of filial obligation remains poorly understood. Academic and policy debates in developing and developed world countries thus still face unresolved queries of whether filial obligation norms are 'eroding' or persisting in rapidly changing societies and whether they are 'weaker' or 'stronger' in different populations.

This paper offers a conceptual focus and theoretical ideas that may contribute to the development of a better understanding of these questions. Building on the findings of an in-depth interpretive investigation into the recent declines in material family support for older people in urban Ghana and on prior conceptual work in the Western literature, the paper proposes that finding answers to the macro-level questions hinges on developing a better appreciation at the micro level of how filial obligation norms operate in practice - i.e. how such norms interact with personal and structural circumstances in shaping individuals' support motivations. The paper then develops specific conceptual ideas on the 'terms and conditions' that may govern this interaction, in particular on the apparent normative 'limits' and 'conditionality' of filial obligation. These two concepts are proposed as potentially useful levers for illuminating (a) how normative filial obligations interact with considerations of the personal child-parent relationship and families' socio-economic context in shaping the extent of support given and, thus, b) how support shifts or patterns across societies have related to underlying filial obligation norms.

**Key Words:** Filial Obligation, Family Support, Theory, Developing World, Intergenerational Solidarity, Micro-Macro Linkages

### **Filial obligation norms and support shifts or patterns across societies**

In most, if not all, societies of this world, the moral responsibility for the support of older people unable to sustain themselves or to receive sustenance from an *equivalent* source has lain with the younger generations in their families, especially their adult children. This responsibility has been encapsulated in norms of ‘filial obligation’, enshrined in societies’ moral or religious codes – be they Indigenous, Judaeo-Christian, Confucian, Islamic, Buddhist or otherwise.

Children’s filial obligation is typically conceived of as being based on a norm of *reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960) by which children have a responsibility to support their aged parents in return for, or ‘repayment’ of, the parental care and support they received from them in childhood (Daniels, 1988; Berman, 1987; Daniels, 1988; Finch and Mason, 1993; Choi, 2001). This reciprocal obligation, importantly, does not merely exist at a normative level: it is also applied and expressed in practice. Across societies, with the exception of some Scandinavian countries, families and especially adult children remain the main source of support and care for older people (Chen and Adamchak, 1999; Randel, Ewing and German, 1999; United Nations, 2002; Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Hermalin, 2003; Means, Richardson and Smith, 2003; Katz *et al.* 2003). However, at different times and in different ways, societies have experienced discernible shifts, especially declines, - and have observed clear population patterns in the extent to which families have provided support or care to their older members.

#### *Societal shifts in support*

Evident societal shifts or declines in support have occurred in both developing world and western societies, typically in periods of massive social and economic change. In contemporary African and Asian developing countries, for example, recent decades have seen palpable declines particularly in *material* family support for older people. These declines have exposed the aged to increasing poverty and deprivation and have raised grave concerns and policy debates about how to ensure economic security for older people at present and in future, in a context of rapid population ageing (Kwon, 1999; Randel, German and Ewing, 1999; Barrientos and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002; HelpAge International, 2002; United Nations, 2002; Eun, 2003; African Union/HelpAge International, 2003; Aboderin, 2004a,b).

Similar, and in a sense parallel declines in material family support for older people occurred historically in Western societies during the 19<sup>th</sup> century period of industrialisation. These declines, too, led to evident widespread poverty and neglect among the old – documented for example in surveys such as Booths (1892; 1894, 1899) in Britain – and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prompted the development of pension provisions (Aboderin, 2004c). In Britain, these began with the 1906 Non Contributory Pensions Act, the 1911 National Health Insurance Act, and the 1925 Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act, which marked the beginning of the welfare state. Pensions were made universal in 1948, in light of continuing need among sections of the older population (Beveridge, 1942; Means, Richards and Smith, 2003). In the United States, widespread public services for older people were introduced from the 1930s onwards (Shanas *et al.* 1968).

Today, in many Western societies, against a backdrop of rapid population ageing and changes in family structures and dynamics – including increasing divorce and remarriage, mobility, single person households, childless adults and female labour market participation – the focus has shifted to apparent or expected declines in family long-term care-giving for older people. Indications are that families have - or will, become less able or ready to provide such care to their aged kin, and that the demand or need for increased formal, societal old age care provision is rising (Clarke, 1995; Grundy, 1995; Naegele and Walker, 2002; Bengtson *et al.* 2003; Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Johansson, Sundström and Hassing, 2003; Katz *et al.* 2003).

#### *Population patterns of support*

In addition to temporal shifts in old age family support, many societies have observed clear differences between populations in the extent to which families provide support or care to older people. Such patterns involve, on the one hand, differences between countries or societies such as for example those observed between European nations (Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Means, Richardson and Smith, 2003) or the extreme lack of family support for older people found in small scale non-Western societies living at subsistence level (Glascock, 1982; 1990). On the other hand, they involve apparent differences in the extent of family support provision between population groups within countries. Examples include (a) clear ethnic group differences between African or Mexican Americans and the White majority observed in the United States,

with the former much less involved in family support than the latter (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990; Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg, 1993; Bengtson, Silverstein and Lawton, 1994); (b) apparent gender differences observed in the developing world with older women more likely to receive family support and care than men (Knodel and Ofstedal, 2003; Aboderin, 2004a,b); or (c) differences at individual family level according to the geographical distance to the older person (Eggebeen and Hogan 1990; Hallman and Joseph, 1999; Grundy and Shelton, 2001).

*Limited understanding of societal support shifts and patterns*

So far, the observed historical or contemporary declines and population patters in the extent of family support provided have remained poorly understood. In particular, we still face key unanswered questions about what these shifts and patterns have meant or signify in terms of continuity or change, or differences or consistency in the adherence to filial obligation norms? In other words, do filial obligation norms still persist and play a role or are they eroding in rapidly changing societies? Are such obligations are 'stronger' or 'weaker' among different societies or groups? (Apt, 1996; Quadagno, 1999; Yoon, Eun and Park, 2000; Choi, 2001; Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Katz *et al.* 2003; Aboderin, 2004a,c). These macro-level questions are central to academic and policy debates in both developing and developed societies. At the academic level, they lie at the heart of theoretical debates, such as those surrounding modernisation and ageing theory, about how social contexts or societal change impact on intergenerational support behaviours and norms (Cowgill, 1972, 1974, 1986; Aboderin, 2004c). At the policy level, the questions are of major importance to present debates about what policy approaches are required to secure the welfare of the growing older population in a context of limited public resources. In particular, they are vital to core questions, in Western as in developing countries, of what the appropriate or 'right' *balance* of state and family responsibility is for old age support; and how, if at all, family support systems and responsibility can be strengthened and built upon? (Choi, 2001; Naegele and Walker, 2002; Biggs and Powell, 2003; Eun, 2003; Gillearn and Higgs, 2003; Katz *et al.* 2003; Kemp and Denton, 2003; Means, Richardson and Smith, 2003; Aboderin, 2004b).

Despite the importance for advancing the above policy and academic debates, however, research has so far provided little evidence to illuminate how societal support shifts and patterns have related to change or consistency in underlying filial obligation norms. Most studies to date have focused on exploring the existence of filial obligation norms at a general normative level and - at this level, have shown their broad persistence and continued endorsement across societies (Togonu-Bickersteth and Akinnawo, 1990; DeLehr, 1992; Knodel and Debavalya, 1992; Bengtson and Harootyan, 1994; Burr and Mutchler, 1999; Daatland and Herlofson, 2003; Katz *et al.* 2003). However, we have gained little understanding of how this apparent broad persistence of general filial obligation norms has related to the clear societal differences or observed temporal declines in the extent of support provided.

### **Focus on the operation of filial obligations in practice**

How then can we develop such an understanding? To a large extent, I suggest, it will hinge on developing a fuller appreciation than so far exists of how at the micro level, filial obligation norms operate in practice, in given personal and structural circumstances, to shape adult children's support motivations and decisions.

Current comprehension of the motivational basis of filial support, which builds on a considerable body of evidence mainly from western societies, recognises that children's motives for supporting aged parents are driven by both normative obligations and personal relationship factors – and resulting motivational sentiments such as affection, reciprocity or possibly exchange; and that support motives are shaped by families' wider structural context and conditions (Thompson, 1989; Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Finch and Mason, 1993; Silverstein and Litwak, 1993; Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg, 1993; Silverstein, Parrott and Bengtson, 1995; Stein *et al.* 1998; Kohli and Künemund, 2003). However, there is as yet very little understanding of how filial obligation norms *interact* with considerations of the personal relationship and families' structural position in shaping the extent of old age support given. In other words, we still lack a solid appreciation of *why individual children give the support they do* (Abel, 1990; Silverstein and Litwak, 1993; Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg 1993).

It is possible, of course, as Abrams (1978) has speculated, that general answers to this question do not exist because we may be:

“dealing with relationships so entangled, ramified and minutely varied that they cannot be ordered at all or...only by an effort quite out of proportion to any conceivable results”(see Qureshi and Walker, 1989, p.113).

However it is equally possible, and I suggest likely, that certain commonalities *do* exist in the way normative filial obligations interact with given personal and structural circumstances. In particular, there are indications for the existence of shared normative principles or, perhaps more aptly *‘terms and conditions’*, which govern or shape these interactions.

*‘Terms and Conditions’ governing the operation of filial obligation norms*

The potential relevance of such *‘terms and conditions’* of filial obligation is thrown into relief by important conceptual work that was put forward by Finch and Mason (1990, 1993), in light of evidence emerging from their UK family obligations study. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative findings on the provision of practical support to aged parents, these authors showed that filial obligation norms are not to be seen as rules, but as *‘normative guidelines’*, which are commonly recognised and which guide children in *‘working out’* their responsibilities and commitments to aged parents (Finch and Mason, 1990; 1993). This notion of filial obligation norms as *‘guidelines’*, helps to bring into focus the critical question of what *criteria*, or *‘terms and conditions’*, are used to guide children in deciding on the amount, intensity or type of support to provide to their aged parents.

Much of Finch and Mason’s (1990) exploration concentrates on possible criteria that govern *what* – in terms of concrete activities and content – children should do for their parents and about *whom* of the children should provide it. The authors note that while there seem to be no clear rules about the former - the precise content of care depending on *‘circumstances’* - certain rather clear principles exist regarding the distribution of responsibilities between children. These include a notion that there should be a joint, collective response, and that the *‘burden’* should be shared equitably between children. Relating specifically to personal care, moreover, apparent gender criteria clearly stipulate daughters as care providers for aged mothers, but sons and daughters as equally suited for care to fathers. These criteria clearly assist in better

understanding observed allocation patterns of care tasks among siblings. However, they tell us less about the terms and conditions that may more directly govern the *extent* to which an individual adult child is obliged to provide support (financial, personal or practical) to an aged parent in need. It is these that are to be the focus here.

### *Limits and Conditionality in Filial obligation*

The existence of two particular such terms and conditions has been strongly indicated by the findings of a recent interpretive investigation into the nature and causes of the decline in old age material family support observed in urban Ghana, against a context of rapid social change and severe economic strain (see Aboderin, 2000; 2004a for details of study background, methodology and findings). The respondents in this three-generational study pointed clearly to two sets of criteria that govern their application of filial obligation norms in practice. These are, on the one hand, clear terms delineating the normative *limits* of children's filial obligation to provide support and, on the other hand, an evident *conditionality* in children's obligation stipulating certain conditions that need to be fulfilled for a filial obligation to prevail. The presence of such 'limits' and 'conditionality' in filial obligation, importantly, is indicated also by evidence, including Finch and Mason's (1990, 1993) in Western or other societies. So far, however, this evidence has been somewhat dispersed and little attempt has been made to pool and examine them.

The remainder of this paper aims to explore and discuss in detail the findings on 'limits' and 'conditionality' in filial obligation that have emerged from the Ghanaian study, and to outline the various indications for their existence from other societies. Each key point is illustrated with selected *verbatim* quotes from study participants, which represent views that were expressed by all respondents across generational, gender, socio-economic and ethnic groups.

### *'Limits' of Filial Obligation*

#### *Evidence from Ghana*

At the outset, and at the most general level, younger and older generation Ghanaian respondents clearly expressed that there are definite, perhaps obvious, normative limits to the extent of children's obligation to support aged parents: children are obliged to provide filial support only to the extent that *they are in a position to do so*'.

“It is only if you are in a position to do it, then you have to give to your parents.”  
(Mrs. Tettey)

The respondents further made clear where, in *concrete* terms, the normative limits of children’s filial obligation lie. They lie where supporting aged parents begins to infringe on adult children’s responsibilities to their conjugal family, that is, to self, their spouse and especially their children. These obligations, as all respondents expressed, are seen as *naturally* and inevitably taking precedence over those to older parents. In other words, there is a clear normative ‘*hierarchy of priorities*’ in family obligations.

“Younger people... and their children must come first...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.” (Mrs. Prah)

“People have to help themselves and their children first, and then if there is any money left they can help their old parents.” (Mrs. Tettey)

“You and especially your children, they have priority.... It is your father’s and your mother’s duty to look after you, and it is your first duty to look after your own – yourself and your children ... and if you can you have to try to also cater for your parents...but your children come first.” (Mr. Brew)

This ‘hierarchy of priorities’, importantly, as all respondents vividly described, does not only exist at an abstract, normative level. It has crystallised in the current Ghanaian context of scarcity and is applied in *practice*: adult children whose resources are severely constrained *reduce* their support to aged parents in order to meet the needs of the their conjugal family.

“[These days].. because the money you have is not enough...you feed the *immediate* family first, that means your wife and children, and then, if you have, next your parents.” (Mr. Prempeh)

“Many younger people today can’t look after their parents properly because of the economic situation. They have no means ... and when their means are small like that they will put their children first. Nowadays they...have to make the decisions.... And people make the choice for children.” (Mr. Hutton)

*Evidence of limits of filial obligation in other societies*

The very same normative and applied limits in filial obligation and hierarchy of priorities as the Ghanaian study has shown, are clearly also indicated in other societies. In Western societies, the presence of such normative limits is suggested by both empirical evidence and philosophical, theoretical thought.

At the theoretical level, it is specifically echoed in the notion of the 'transitive order' or 'processional nature' of the justice between generations, which has been raised in current western debates on the contract between generations (Laslett, 1992; Moody, 1993). This notion holds that:

"No matter what the older generation has done for the younger, each generation's primary obligation is transitive. That is, we 'repay' the generosity of the preceding generation by giving in turn to our successors. We return the benefits in turn to our children. Whatever claims older people may have are limited by this overriding transitive obligation across the chain of generations" (Moody, 1993:229)

This transitive order, as Moody has pointed out, is well illustrated in the following tale from European folklore:

"A mother bird [has a] little baby bird, who rides on her mother's back while the mother forages for food. One day the mother bird says to the baby bird: 'Baby bird, when you are a big bird and I am old and frail, will you take me on your back just as I am doing for you now?' And the baby bird replies, 'No, mother, but when I'm a big bird, I'll carry my little bird on my back just as you're doing for me now' (Moody, 1993, p.229).

At an empirical level, and perhaps more importantly, the existence of normative limits in filial obligation linked to prior obligations to the conjugal family has clearly been indicated by several Western studies exploring public perceptions of family obligation norms (Brody, Johnsen, and Fulcomer 1984; Storm, Storm and Strike-Schurman, 1985; Finch and Mason, 1990; Hamon and Bliezner, 1990). The findings from these studies suggest, as Finch and Mason (1990) for example note, that people perceive 'normative limits upon filial obligations...set by the need to fulfil other responsibilities which are seen as taking precedence' and that it is specifically

‘responsibilities to children [that] are seen as taking precedence over obligations to parents’ (p160, 171).

A number of studies on old age family support in the West have, moreover, highlighted the application of such limits of obligation in *practice*. Specifically, they have shown adult children who do *not* care for their old parent(s), to justify this either by prior obligations to spouse and children, or by the lack of necessary resources to provide care – their implicit rationale being that the few resources they have are required for themselves, their spouse or offspring (Isaacs, Neville, and Livingstone 1972; Qureshi and Walker, 1989; Aronson, 1990; Finch and Mason 1990). The very same application of limits in filial obligation in Western societies, interestingly, is implicitly indicated in existing legislation on family obligations, for example in European countries such as France or Germany. While these laws require adult children to provide certain assistance to older parents who lack sufficient means, they explicitly exempt children who are found, through means tests, to lack the resources to do so (Millar and Warman, 1996; Means, Richardson and Smith, 2003). Again, the implicit reasoning is that what small means such children have are needed for their conjugal families. Remarkably similar exemption procedures, and thus a normative hierarchy of priorities in family obligations are seemingly applied in filial obligation laws in East Asian countries, such as for example Korea or Singapore (Kwon, 1999; Choi, 2001; Eun, 2003).

#### *Elementary principles underlying the limits in filial obligation*

In addition to showing the existence and operation of normative limits in filial obligation – and thus augmenting the evidence of such limits from Western societies – the Ghanaian study findings have also, importantly, pointed to the fundamental principle that appears to underlie these limits. This principle holds that: *the needs of the young have clear priority over those of the old, because they represent the future*. The old, in other words, *have no ‘right’ to absorb the resources that the young need for their future life* – even if this means a detrimental outcome for their welfare. The study respondents, perhaps precisely because they related to a severe situation in which available resources were insufficient to meet the needs of old *and* young, were acutely aware of, and unequivocally expressed this:

“Your children and their children have a future themselves and you, you must not hinder them. You have had your time.”(Mr.Okine)

“You and especially your children, they have priority because they are the new generation, *they are now coming*. If you ignore them and you say I am giving instead to the old lady or the old man... then...you are not doing the right thing.” (Mr. Brew)

“If I had to choose between paying for the child’s treatment and that of my old parent...I would look after the child because the old lady has seen everything in the world, but the child is now coming. If you have no money, you have to save the young ones because they are the future, so you have to leave the old person to die.” (Mrs. Ofei)

This stark precept – that support to the old must not hinder the younger generations from securing their own future life – interestingly, clearly chimes with the ethic of ‘responsive ageing’, which, as Apt (1996) describes, has traditionally underpinned attitudes to older people in Ghana and holds that an older person who has nothing to offer to the young ‘forfeits the respect reserved for elders’ (p.24). It also, and importantly, resonates with theoretical thought in the West that has again emerged as part of the broad debate on justice between generations. This time it echoes in particular the notion of the *limits of morality* and the idea that these ‘limits’ may lie where long-term family care-giving to an older parent means having to ‘forfeit a life of one’s own choosing and directions’ and one’s ‘private hopes and plans’ (Callahan, 1991: 157/167).

*‘Limits’ as a lever for illuminating the interaction of filial obligation norms with structural contexts in shaping support motives and extent*

The above evidence suggests that the normative limits in filial obligation can, essentially, be defined as lying where ‘providing support to aged parents begins to exceed adult children’s *capacity* to do so without jeopardizing their conjugal family’s present needs or their ability to service their welfare in the future’. Seen this way, the concept of limits in filial obligation could serve as a useful lever for illuminating at least some of the ways in which such obligations interact with families’ structural context and conditions in shaping children’s motives and decisions on the extent of

support to give to parents. This is because it is the socio-economic, policy and cultural context, and families' position within it, that will largely set the three key parameters determining adult children's *capacity* to support their parents.

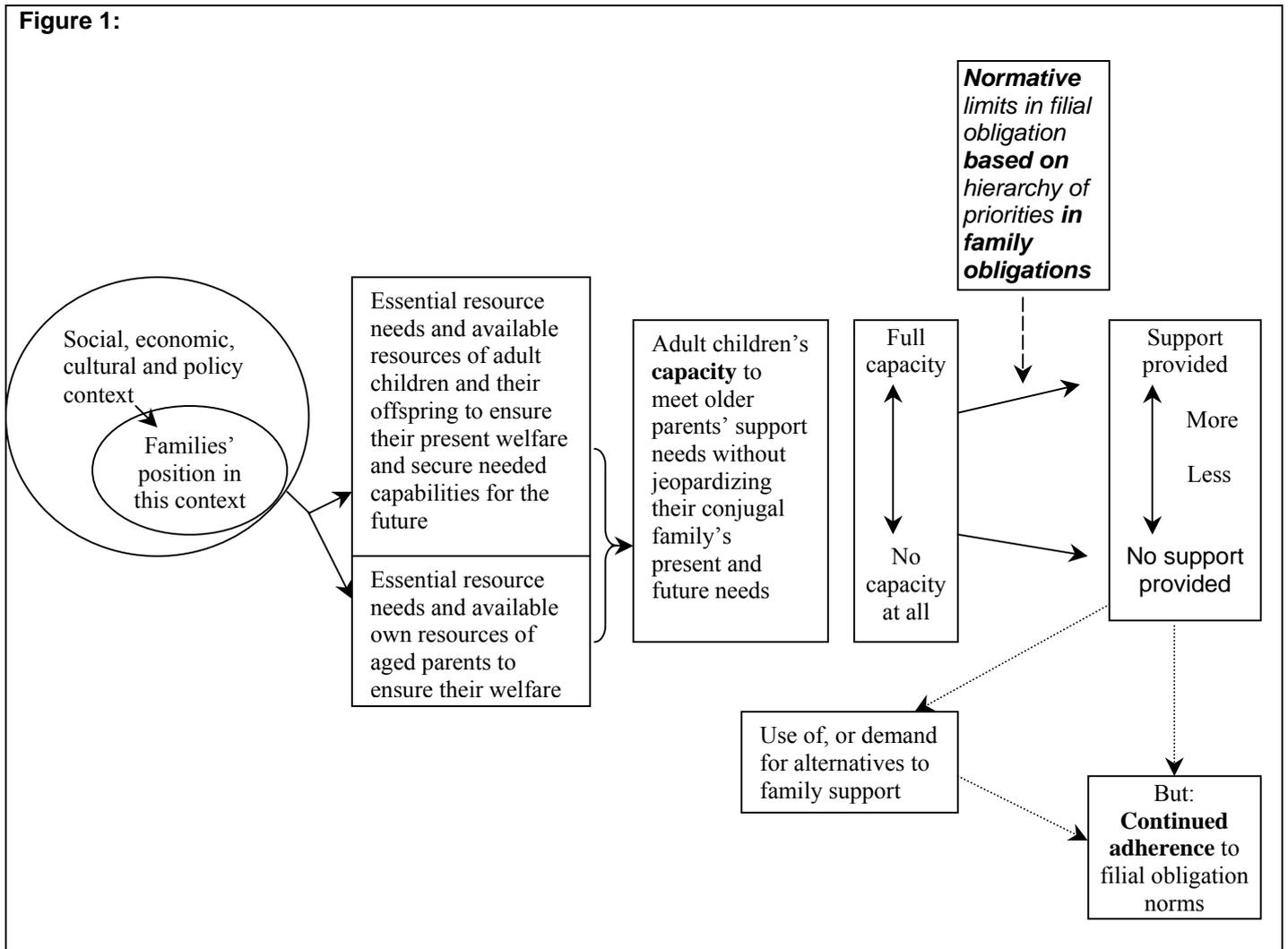
First, they will broadly shape what are considered the essential resource needs (financial, material, time, space, emotional) of adult children and their offspring to sustain their present welfare and to foster capabilities (Sen, 1997; 1999; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002) seen as vital for achieving well-being in the future. Indeed, families' wider structural and cultural context and position will ultimately mould what are considered the fundamental ingredients of present or future 'well-being' that individuals should, by right, be able to aspire to and expect. In many Western societies this may, for example, involve notions and definitions of rights to 'privacy' and 'individual fulfillment'.

Second, they will shape what are considered the resource needs to ensure the welfare of the older parents.

Third, families' socio-economic context and conditions will determine what *actual* resources are available to adult children and aged parents to service their needs.

Where, as illustrated in Figure 1, families' structural circumstances are such that the *capacity* of adult children to support their aged parents is restricted, their actual support to parents will likely be limited – and alternatives to filial support, be they societal level formal, informal or charitable, will likely be used, sought or demanded for. However, children's broad adherence to filial obligation norms will *not* have weakened.

Figure 1: Interaction of ‘limits’ of filial obligation with families’ structural context and position in shaping motives and extent of support to older parents



Such an application of limits in filial obligation may then help to explain how several of the observed macro-level declines or patterns in family support across societies have related to continuity or change, erosion or persistence in filial obligation norms. In the West, for example, it may help to better understand the significance of the earlier mentioned pattern that African-Americans, who typically face disproportionately high social and economic constraints, are much less involved in filial support than their white counterparts – even though their endorsement of filial obligation norms is equally strong (see Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg, 1993; Lawton, Silverstein and Bengtson 1994). Similarly, the operation of limits in filial obligation may contribute to explanations of the fact that geographical distance significantly

reduces the incidence of support to older parents (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990; Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Hogan, Eggebeen and Clogg, 1993; Silverstein and Litwak, 1993).

In terms of support shifts over time, an application of limits in filial obligation linked to a hierarchy of priorities may, on the one hand, help to explain the historical 19<sup>th</sup> century declines in financial family support for older people, which, for example in Britain, took place in a context of pervasive poverty especially among the labouring classes (Hammond, 1919; Anderson, 1977; Quadagno, 1982). More generally, it may assist in better understanding why throughout Western history, at least since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the provision of material family support to older people has always 'been conditional on a plentiful supply of food, adequate housing or secure work' and that where one or more of these was absent support to older people always became a 'low priority' (Fennell, Phillipson, and Evers, 1988:33).

On the other hand, an operation of limits in filial obligation in contemporary societies may contribute to illuminating what recent Western shifts in family long-term caregiving and growing demands for formal care provision have meant in terms of continuity or change in adherence to filial obligation norms, and the implications of this for policy intending to strengthen family support systems.

In developing world societies a consideration of the limits in filial obligation may similarly assist in generating a fuller appreciation of the significance and policy implications of the recent declines in material family support for older people (see Aboderin, 2004b); or of the extreme incidence of 'death hastening' of older people in small subsistence societies (Glascock, 1990).

Finally, and on a different, though related level, the apparent 'hierarchy of priorities' in family obligations, and the fundamental precedence of the needs of the young before those of the old, may help to explain emerging developing country evidence that poor older people extensively share, or are forced to share, their pension benefits with their younger generation kin, using them for example to pay for the education or health care of grandchildren (Lund, 2001; Vera-Sanso, 2001; Barrientos 2003; HelpAge International/Institute for Development Policy and Management, 2003).

## *'Conditionality' of Filial Obligation*

### *Evidence from Ghana*

Besides bringing into focus the limits of children's filial obligation, the evidence from the investigation in Ghana also points very clearly to the conditional nature of this responsibility: a *conditionality* that is inextricably linked with the principle of reciprocity underpinning it. In Ghana, as the literature and the study respondents described, the reciprocal nature of children's duty to parents is encapsulated and clearly expressed in a customary proverb "*If your parents look after you when you cut your teeth you must look after them when they are losing theirs*" (Nukunya, 1992; Apt, 1996; Gyekye, 1996).

"You see we have a proverb here that 'if your parents look after you when you are growing your teeth you must look after them when they are losing their teeth'. So everyone knows that in fact you should look after your parents when they are old." (Mr. Akpans's son)

"Definitely it is the duty of the children to support the older person, because they looked after them. You see, we have a proverb here that if your parents looked after you when your teeth were growing, you must also now look after them when your teeth are falling out." (Mr. Hutton)

In effect, as the above quotes express, children are seen to have a *filial* duty towards their parents because their parents fulfilled their *parental* duties to them in the past. This reciprocal duty of children, as all respondents strongly asserted, involves a clear normative principle of *conditionality*. This holds that if parents in the past willingly (rather than being unable to) neglected to provide necessary parental support to their children, the children, in turn, have no obligation towards their parents. In other words, if parents failed to fulfil all or essential parts of their parental duties, the children have no filial responsibilities towards them, nor do parents have any right to expect support:

"If you the parents failed to do your obligation the children too don't have an obligation to take care of you." (Mr. Hutton)

"Some fathers... neglect their children. So in this case, 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."(Mr. Thompson's daughter)

"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." (Mrs Achim)

Mr. Mills: "If the parents don't have the means then it is still the children's duty but if the parents had the means and they didn't help the child go to school, *then the children too don't have a duty.*"

Q: "They don't have a duty?"

Mr. Mills: "No. Because the parents could have helped but they didn't."

Q: "Even if the parents cared for them earlier, when they were very small?"

Mr. Mills: "Yes, even then. They had the means but they didn't help, so the children too don't have a duty."

This conditionality, as the respondents further explained, does not only exist at the normative level. It, too, is applied and operates in *practice*. Most vividly, it is utilised by the growing number of children who expressly *retaliate* against parents, usually fathers, who neglected to give them essential support during their childhood or adolescence, for example failed to provide for their education, and thus have robbed them of the chance of a decent life as adults. Such children often withhold all support from these parents, and feel justified in doing so.

"This is the situation we are facing right now. Many old people their children are not looking after them...because they are paying their parents back for what the parents did to them. Instead of seeing them up to a certain level they didn't, they neglected them, so now the children are paying them back." (Mr. Mills' son)

Q: "Why are you and your brother not giving to your father?"

Mr. Baddoo's daughter: "Because my father didn't try for me at all, and my brother too. He didn't even send us to

school. So because of him I am struggling now, I am just sitting here, going up and down selling petty things. If I had education I would be somewhere better...

Q: "Do you know why your father didn't try for you?"

Mr. Baddoo's daughter: "When he had money he used it to go and drink and chase women rather than taking care of us... If he had taken care of me at least now I would be somewhere. So these days...my brother too, he won't give him anything... I know that my father isn't satisfied but what can he say. He didn't try at all."

What the above quote already intimates, and the respondents' further suggested, is that in addition to being applied in practice, the conditionality of filial obligation also seems to manifest at the emotional and affective level. Children whose parents neglected to give them vital support in their youth also do not *feel* any sense of obligation or duty toward their parent. Nor do they feel much gratitude, appreciation or love, which could otherwise compel support.

"It depends on the way the parents have brought up their 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.*" (Mrs. Addo's daughter-in-law)

"If you don't love your children and treat them in a way that will make them also love you, they won't even think of trying hard to look after you." (Mr. Thompson's daughter)

#### *'Conditionality' of filial obligation in other societies*

Compared to the relatively extended findings from Western or other societies on the presence of 'limits' in filial obligation, there is as yet very little evidence for its conditionality. More likely than not, however, this is probably a function of the

relative lack of research that has attempted to explore it, as a few clear indications do exist.

At the level of a general normative principle, for example, the presence of a conditionality of children's filial obligation has been suggested by Storm, Storm and Strike-Schurman's (1985) study in Canada, which showed respondents to perceive *no* obligation on children to support parents, if the parents had neglected their parental duties in the past.

The operation of a conditionality in filial (or family) obligations in practice, moreover, has been implied by Douglas (1971), who, describing American social life, noted that when making decisions about long-term reciprocity, people take into account the old person's past conduct, i.e. the extent to which he or she 'deserves' support. In the same vein, some research on family support has found children to justify their lack of support to a parent with the fact that the parent had never supported or cared for them, not even in their childhood – implying that they in turn have no obligation to the old parent (e.g. Isaacs, Livingstone and Neville 1972; Qureshi and Walker 1989). Finch and Mason, (1993), drawing on their empirical evidence, similarly allude to such an applied conditionality noting that 'conditions conducive to developing commitments are set from childhood' (p169). They indirectly, moreover, underscore the particular importance of the childhood/adolescent – as opposed to later parent-child relationship phases in this regard by showing that merely a bad relationship between parent and child (but not one founded on earlier parental neglect) does *not* lead to any reduced sense of obligation towards the aged parents (Finch and Mason, 1990). An applied conditionality linked to parent's earlier actions, finally and interestingly, is expressed in certain East Asian filial obligation laws, such as the Singapore Maintenance of Parents Act (1995), which explicitly exempts children from a duty to support parents if they can prove earlier, neglect, abuse or abandonment by the parents. (Choi, 2001).

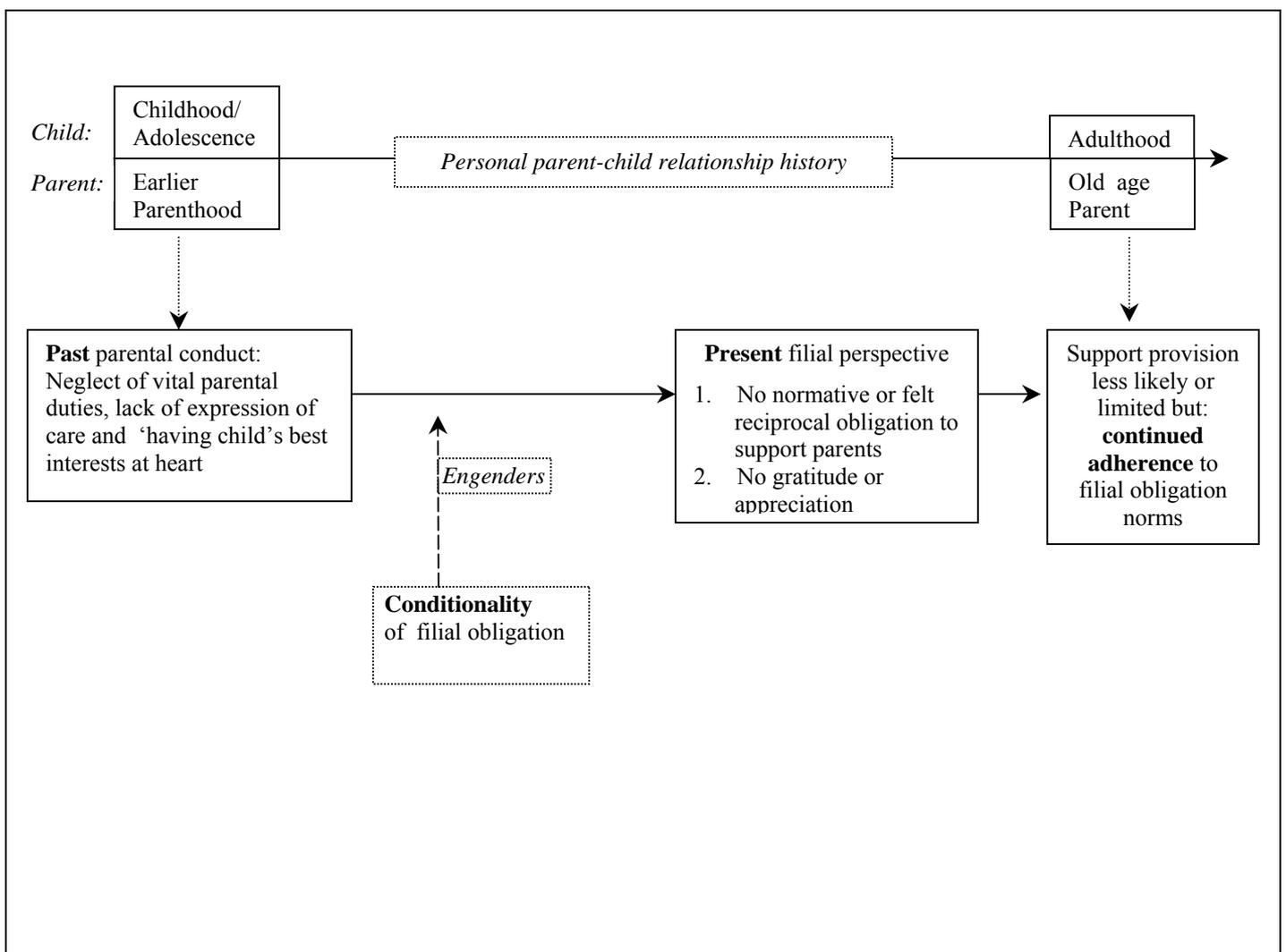
*'Conditionality' as a lever for illuminating the interaction of filial obligation norms with personal relationship considerations in shaping support motives and extent*

The above evidence implies that the conditionality of children's filial obligation can essentially be conceptualised as relating specifically to parents' 'parental' conduct during the child's childhood or adolescence when it was still the parents' charge. Seen

this way, the concept of conditionality could provide a valuable lever for illuminating at least one way in which the application or adherence to filial obligation norms may interact with considerations of the personal parent-child relationship history in shaping adult children’s support decisions and motives.

If, as illustrated in Figure 2, an adult child perceives a parent to have knowingly or willingly neglected vital aspects of his/her past parental duty to enable the young child or adolescent to thrive, the adult child will recognize no, nor feel any sense of reciprocal obligation to support the parent. The child, moreover, will likely feel little sense of affection or gratitude, and support given to the parent will likely be limited.

Figure 2: Interaction of ‘conditionality’ of filial obligation and personal relationship history in shaping motives and extent of support to older parents



Such an operation of the conditionality of filial obligation may again help to better understand the significance - in terms of consistency or change in underlying obligation norms - of some of the macro-level shifts or patterns in old age family support that have been observed across societies. For example, it has partly helped to explain the recent declines in material filial support in Ghana, which have specifically affected older men, as older fathers have been much more likely than mothers to have neglected their earlier parental duties (Aboderin, 2003, 2004a). By the same token, the conditionality of filial obligation might help to illuminate growing indications from across developing countries that older fathers are less likely to receive filial support and care than older mothers (Knodel and Ofstedal, 2003; Sobieszczyk, Knodel and Chavoyan, 2003; Nigeria National Population Commission 2004). In the West, finally, it might enable a fuller appreciation for example of findings that perceived early parental rejection reduces the propensity of children to provide instrumental support to their parents, by reducing feelings of filial responsibility (Whitbeck, Hoyt and Huck, 1994).

#### *Summary and concluding remarks*

The point of departure for the discussion in this paper has been the so far limited understanding of what observed macro-level shifts or patterns in old age family support across societies have meant in terms of continuity or erosion in adherence to underlying filial obligation norms, which ask children to support aged parents in return for care received from them in childhood.

Given the key importance of this question to academic and policy debates in both developed and developing countries, the paper has sought to offer a conceptual focus for developing a fuller understanding. It has argued that this requires a closer examination and deeper appreciation than hitherto exists, of how filial obligation norms operate in practice at the micro-level. That is, how they interact with individual families' personal and structural circumstances in shaping adult children's motives and decisions on the extent of filial support to give.

Building on the findings of an in-depth interpretive investigation into the recent declines in material old age family support in urban Ghana, as well as important prior conceptual work and evidence in the Western literature, the paper has then pointed to the existence and operation of two particular sets of 'terms and conditions' that

govern this interaction of filial obligation norms. These are, on the one hand, clear normative *limits* in the extent of children's filial obligation, linked to a seemingly fundamental hierarchy of priorities in family obligations, which puts the needs of the young (i.e. conjugal family members) before those of older parents. On the other hand, it is an apparent *conditionality* of filial obligation, which removes any obligation from adult children whose parents neglected their parental duties to them during childhood and adolescence, while they were still the parents' charge.

The paper has proposed the two concepts of 'limits' and 'conditionality' in filial obligation as potentially valuable levers for illuminating at least some of the ways in which filial obligation norms may interact with families' wider structural context and considerations of the individual parent-child relationship in shaping decisions on the amount of filial support to be provided. This in turn may help to better understand how observed macro-level support shifts or patterns in both developed and developing societies have related to change or continuity in underlying filial obligation norms.

Of course, it is not possible, nor does the paper aim, to make firm generalisations or propositions about a wider existence or operation of limits and conditionality in filial obligation. Rather, the intention has been to raise them as a point for further reflection and as an empirical question – and possibly a working or starting hypothesis for future research.

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