

Macalester College

From the Selected Works of Dianna Shandy

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“Uncertainty and Intentional Action in Contemporary Cameroon.”

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in explaining women's "failure" to plan their futures. Women's life courses are often characterized by a high frequency of divorce and a sequence of formal and informal marriages. Selecting and entering into different relationships simultaneously and successively in different stages of life, women attempt to pursue their best opportunities. Moving between the households of formal husbands, informal husbands, mothers, and brothers, women live like nomads in a wide network of kin relationships. This posture of openness of possibility engenders different attitudes to child numbers at different moments of life.

Comparing ethnographic studies on women's reproductive lives in Cameroon can help us understand women's lives and interpret their different and often surprising attitudes towards life. I would like to continue the dialogue with Johnson-Hanks, but we'll see "what the future decides."

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Johnson-Hanks is to be congratulated for this elegant combination of ideas emerging from philosophy, ethnography, and statistics to investigate a subject that has been the backbone of much demographic research in recent years and the foundation for much policy and action but has caused unease amongst many demographers, particularly those who combine qualitative with quantitative approaches. For those of us unfamiliar with philosophical thought this paper clarifies where our unease may lie. Although the many demographic surveys on fertility intentions and ideal family size come up with plausible numerical outcomes, such numbers may not adequately reflect the responses obtained with other research methodologies in which uncertainty, non-numerical responses, and evasion are much more frequent. Johnson-Hanks's plausible discussions of the reasons Cameroonian women respond in such ways will ring true to many others who work in this field and should make demographers challenge many international demographic and health survey findings. However, I would have liked to see this aspect taken farther. Her comment that most of her sample (of well-educated Cameroonian women) provided "non-numeric" responses to her questions on reproductive intentions raises the question why most surveys produce so few such responses, especially for such categories of women. How do the enumerators move from the initial non-numerical responses to the recorded numerical ones? Were such movements evident in the interviews with these respondents?

Johnson-Hanks honestly articulates some her own preconceptions before undertaking the research and the consequences of these preconceptions in generating "some extremely inelegant interviews." Her subsequent understanding and reformulation of women's responses is very convincing but still depends substantially on accepting

the articulated responses from such interviews (whether inelegant or elegant) as representing women's experiences and their judicious opportunism. While not denying the plausibility of her interpretation, it would be useful to have more discussion of the forces influencing "how they elect to present their thoughts in an interview" and thus the conclusions that can be drawn. To a degree this is confronted through contrasting the Cameroonian practice of referring to future trajectories using potential titles with Castle's work in Mali, which suggested that invoking future events may incur witchcraft or sorcery penalties. The stakes are very different, however: referring to others' futures through titles poses low risks to the individual respondent compared with those invoked by intimating plans for one's own (and one's children's) future. Difficulties in accepting statements about future reproductive plans at face value are compounded elsewhere in Muslim Africa (Senegal and Mali, for example) by strong social sanctions against challenging divine will with respect to giving children. Fear of crossing such boundaries can inhibit people from expressing any ideas which suggest such forward planning: in interview contexts it can be extremely difficult to interpret silence—to differentiate ideas which have never been thought from those which should not be expressed. There is certainly evidence elsewhere in the paper that similar associations between divine will and childbearing operate in Cameroon, and therefore it is essential to consider the evasive answers to fertility-planning questions not just in terms of uncertainty but also in terms of the respondent-interviewer relationship and the acceptability of publicly stating private intentions.

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This paper advances the notion of "judicious opportunism" to explain social action under conditions of uncertainty in contemporary Africa. It is significant in providing a means of theorizing social action in African settings in ways that avoid what Mudimbe (1988) identifies as the ideological construction of Africa and Africans as prone to decisions based on emotion or reaction rather than on rationality, objectivity, or long-term planning.

Taking the mismatch between a standardized demographic survey question and Cameroonian women's responses as a point of departure, Johnson-Hanks mounts an effective challenge to a dominant model in reproductive-policy circles and exposes the futility of international aid agencies' quest to elicit "the reproductive intentions of women in poor countries." She makes a compelling case that the limited and limiting question of how many children a woman plans to have falls short of apprehending the complex social, political, and economic realities that inform reproductive outcomes.

The paper is ambitious in its attempt to chart questions of aspirations and attitudes as ethnographic terrain. I recall being told in graduate school that “anthropologists don’t do attitudes”—that ethnographers were better positioned to observe what people do than to speculate about their futures. And, indeed, there is truth in this. Yet, in the field, ethnographers encounter the full temporal range of informants’ pasts, presents, and hopes for the future. Particularly for those in applied or policy settings, attention to plans for the future is vital. By coupling ethnographic and demographic data with social theory pertaining to intention, action, and outcome, Johnson-Hanks carves out stimulating analytical space for wide-ranging comparative inquiry that provides a model for understanding present action as it relates to future intentions.

That said, it is worthwhile to question the choice of reproductive action as “a particularly appropriate locus” for the study of intentionality and its limits. When I did a mental survey of how the Western, educated women in their thirties of my own social network who have experienced the gamut of challenges to reproductive aspirations (e.g., miscarriages, stillbirths, lack of a partner and a ticking biological clock) would respond to a question about intended family size, I concluded that Johnson-Hanks’s notion of allowing the future to decide is, perhaps, not unique to the contemporary Cameroon. At least of equal weight, it seems, is what appears in the article as a subsidiary supporting example about similar dynamics of uncertainty regarding post-secondary-school aspirations.

While the author states that gendered action is not an explicit aim of this paper, it seems to be the elephant in the room when she is discussing parallel (but in her cases not intersecting) examples of fertility and education in Africa. This seems particularly important in the case of such a select sample (where one in six persons finishes school). Johnson-Hanks points out that educational achievement is predicated on two variables, mobilizing financial resources and learning under challenging circumstances. She fails to note the importance of managing fertility in the pursuit of educational achievement in African settings. The reader is left to wonder how and when gender becomes explanatory in such an exploration of social action.

Ultimately, the argument seems to hinge on the notion that it is the unpredictability of the structural conditions in which these young women live that informs their response to questions about their futures, including family size. Johnson-Hanks makes an intriguing point about the relative degree of uncertainty in the lives of young Cameroonian women, in which “common things elude standardization.” While she is at pains to avoid a dichotomy between here and there, I pondered what impact interviews with Beti women living in the West would have on the analysis. Would we expect the higher degree of certainty about quotidian life to translate into more decisive plans for the future? Or is there a cultural element to articulating a future trajectory that Johnson-Hanks’s argument does not consider? For instance, at

several points “God” and “the Holy Spirit” emerge as pivotal entities in these women’s views of their unfolding futures. We do not have enough ethnographic contextualization to evaluate the significance of these references, but they do raise questions about the extent to which these women’s perception of the future can be explained strictly in terms of the environment in which they currently live.

This is a very stimulating article that showcases a model for anthropological inquiry to make specific contributions when directed survey questions dead-end. The model for theorizing social action that it advances will prove valuable in myriad settings.

Reply

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I am grateful to the commentators for their generous and astute responses, criticisms, and suggestions for further work. In particular, I appreciate the proposals—present in nearly all the comments—for specific extensions of my theoretical framework to other cases.

Both Caldwell and Shandy ask whether judicious opportunism does not also describe social action in the rich West, that is, to what degree the analysis here is specific to Cameroon in crisis. The fact that they come to opposite conclusions is evidence that the question is both fundamental and very difficult. My position, argued here and elsewhere (2002, 2004, n.d.), is that action under the principle of judicious opportunism occurs everywhere and among people of all kinds of backgrounds—in other words, that the model of rational, strategic, intentional action is inadequate even for explaining action here. At the same time, judicious opportunism is more common in southern Cameroon than in the West for three related reasons. First, the West has more numerous and more effective institutions that serve to reduce uncertainty: the money supply is stable, public transit mostly works, mortality and morbidity are low and concentrated at the end of life, the courts enforce legal contracts, and so on. Judicious opportunism is thus simply less necessary. Second, people in the West are habituated to this relatively certain state of affairs: through recurrent experience we have been inculcated with the expectation that our actions will be efficacious and with the disposition to act with intention. Although in specific contexts people in the West certainly do engage in judicious opportunism, waiting to see what possibilities will develop and then quickly grasping the ones that seem promising, we have learned to be inclined to act otherwise. Third, explicit intentions and intentional action are represented and culturally elaborated differently in southern Cameroon than in the West. As both Randall and Shandy perceptively suggest, in some contexts Beti would consider firm intentions at least morally ambivalent, if not outright