Impact of COVID-19 Guidelines on Families: Ecological Systems Analysis of Kisii County, Kenya

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Abstract: COVID-19 has claimed many lives since its emergency in late 2019. The World Health Organisation made recommendations to contain the pandemic such as closure of schools to social distance, working from home, and wearing a mask in crowded areas. The purpose of this paper is to apply the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to determine how the COVID-19 containment measures have impacted Kenyan families. The study utilized a qualitative design. The sample consisted of twenty-two (22) participants chosen through convenience sampling strategy. Half the sample were male and females each representing the eleven 11 constituencies of the county. This study is important for policy interventions especially for cushioning families in any future pandemics. Study results indicate that COVID-19 impacted families in various ways. For example, the prolonged stay at home disrupted schooling, increased family expenditures and teenage pregnancies. The study concludes that school closure due to COVID-19 is the single most disruptive aspect of the COVID-19 prevention guidelines. While economic and social implications of the preventive policies, the study underscores the importance of considering family stability as equally important in policy.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Family, loss of boundaries, conflict, values, theory, Kisii, Kenya, Africa*

Introduction

Among the initial response to COVID-19 pandemic was a guideline developed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) which recommended that the public should adopt preventive behaviours such as wearing a mask, physical distancing, ensuring proper ventilation, avoiding crowds, cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Individual nations adapted these protocols. With warnings from the same organization that if left unchecked, COVID-19 would lead to high levels of morbidity and mortality (Cabore, Karamagi, Kipruto, Asamani, Droti, Seydi…et al., 2020). Kenya took steps to put in place policies that targeted both private and public institutions. They included closure of schools, working from home, lockdowns, and curfews. The consequences of these policies were felt in the economic and social sectors. One space where these impacts were felt is in the family as they became consistently crowded than ever before. At the onset of the pandemic, some sources predicted enhanced family closeness, however, others warned that the lockdowns and long-term home isolation measures among other restrictions could lead to a variety of social problems, including family violence (Zhang, 2020).

While the government meant well in all these efforts, implementation seems to have not been well thought out, thereby occasioning serious implications for Kenyan families. Enforcement of these policy guidelines has been somewhat controversial, leading to heightened police brutality. Human Rights Watch (2020) for instance, reported rampant police brutality, including deaths and disappearances across the nation, especially in enforcing the dusk to dawn curfew and wearing of masks. One incidence that stands out is the detention and beating of workers waiting for the ferry in Mombasa on 27 March, 2020 during the first day of the dusk to dawn curfew implementation. This paper seeks to analyze the unintended negative consequences of the implementation of COVID-19 public safety guidelines imposed by the government at the

onset of the pandemic in 2020.

Literature Review

In 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic and two months later, on March 13th, the first case was diagnosed in Kenya. Following recommendations from the WHO, the government of Kenya embarked on implementing measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. The measures are hallmarked by medical preparedness response, economic stimuli, and social requirements intended to limit interaction and increase personal hygiene. Response to COVID-19 was shared between the national government and other actors, including county governments, the private sector, and individuals. The government of Kenya undertook to enforce newly enacted public health policy guidelines with the aim of reducing person-to-person spread of the virus. The regulations require each individual to not only protect themselves but also protect others around them by the washing of hands, wearing of face masks, and social distancing. Institutional measures included closing of schools, banning of international flights, banning of public gatherings be they for religious, social, political, and entertainment purposes, cessation of movement from hotspot areas, encouraging working from home, and doing cashless transactions. In addition, the government imposed a dusk to dawn curfew that is still in force as of December (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 preventive guidelines in Kenya were felt in the economic and social sectors as people lost their means of livelihood, changed modes of work, quickly adjusted to restricted movement, and acquiring and wearing masks. The family became the nexus for individuals dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 preventive guidelines. Newspapers and government reports across the world report that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased levels of family violence worldwide (Taub, 2020) describing it as a "double pandemic". The author in the New York Times reported that movement restrictions aimed to stop the spread of the corona virus may be promoting violence in homes making it more frequent, more severe and more dangerous than ever before.

The importance of families has been underscored by their functions, much less by structures. According to Blessings (2020), family structures vary from one family to another. While they may be formed in relatively different ways, most families undertake tasks of similar nature. These may include childbearing, providing emotional support, socializing members, providing for members' basic needs, and establishing family traditions. Given this similarity, families influence the way individuals and society function even when there is a crisis.

The WHO continues to note that kids learn from watching their parents, their teachers, and other adults that they look up to, and they are interested in how the adults respond and discuss these events with each other. They observe and model the degree of calmness shown by adults. Parents need therefore to try and avoid allowing their children to watch too much television or media with disturbing or frightening images across digital spaces. Children in some families who are preoccupied with perturbing questions or concerns about the corona virus outbreak and are experiencing significant distress. It is also important to watch for other signs that include the persistence of COVID-19 related fears after the pandemic has been resolved. These signs may manifest themselves in consistent sleep disturbances, difficulty in controlling fears about illness or death, and being unable to be away from parents even when children are adolescents (WHO, 2020).

According to Defrain and Asay (2007), strong families have the following characteristics: 1) positive communication, 2) show appreciation and affection, 3) spend enjoyable time together, 4) manage stress and crisis effectively, 5) have a sense of spiritual wellbeing, and 6) have a strong commitment to each other. While having any of these characteristics would be ideal for families, the reality is that achieving any of these characteristics is faced with challenges. The authors posit that strong families are often those who have faced challenges. Just like the strength, some families have adopted dynamics that show weakness. For example, families who are enmeshed usually have unclear and permeable personal boundaries. When families fail to clearly define boundaries, it becomes difficult for

each family member to develop independence and autonomy of a healthy level (Adcox, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The fundamentals of human development as posited by Bronfenbrenner (1979) resumes a nature/nurture match where the innate characteristics of the individual determine the kind of environment required to thrive. For example, age would determine the type of care a child would need. The theory also accounts for the changes that occur overtime. When applied to families, the theory accounts for the wellbeing of the whole unit as part of a complex process that involves interactions within and between individuals and the environmental contexts of which they are a part of. The theory categorizes four interrelated types of environmental systems namely, the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems.

The microsystem constitutes individuals, spaces, and institutions with whom the family has frequent interactions as they form the basis for day-to-day sustenance of the family. A family with a school age child would have school, where to access food, and healthcare as part of the family's microsystem. If extended family members assist with caring for the child, they become part of the family's microsystem. Mesosystem is formed through the interactions between the microsystems. For example, children would be able to attend school if the timing fits in the activities of families. The school holidays coincided with farming so that the children would be able to participate. The exosystem constitute policies generated in institutions outside the family but the said policies have direct influence on families.

COVID-19 preventive policies are examples of the exosystem. Macrosystem includes cultural and physical man-made structures. Cultural norms such as the beliefs and values bestowed upon groups of people are collectively created, and they become guiding principles of ways of life. Often, the various levels within the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) are represented as a series of four systems nested around a focal individual like a set of concentric circles. Evidence suggests that applying the EST to phenomena helps increase understanding around interactions

between family and public preventive policies. For example, Ambrose and Matusitz (2018) applied the EST to understand how the spread of Ebola in West Africa was prevented. They identified the role of different stakeholders and how they worked together and quickly halt the disease from spreading.

Bubolz and Sontag (1993) explain that the family ecosystem can be conceived in terms of a relationship that exists amongst humans, the environment, and their interactions. Humans depend on the environment for survival which is executed through interactions. In this context, the environment consists of both natural and manmade, physical as well as socio-cultural and political elements. The latter include socially constructed norms, laws, values, and language. In sum therefore, the environment ideally offers support that enables the family to adapt and persist. In the context of this study, the COVID-19 public health regulations and the response by the government of Kenya is considered part of the socio-cultural and political environments for the families. They include policies aimed at regulating private and public behaviour to reduce and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Based on this backdrop, this paper applies the EST to examine how these public health policy guidelines requiring specific behavioural expectations have impacted Kenyan families. In addition, the authors have endeavoured to identify areas for improvement that can enable Kenyan families to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and continue practicing social life as well.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the Urie Bronfenbrenner theory on fundamentals of human development support the study of the effect of COVID-19 on families?
2. How did the COVID-19 and its restrictions affect families and their dynamics in Kenya?
3. What interventions did parents employ to mitigate the family challenges caused by COVID-19?

Methodology

This section describes the research design to include the methods of selecting research participants, data collection, analysis and results. The design followed the protocol of qualitative research where focus group discussion was used to collect data.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative design to capture the experiences of families. Covid-19 being a global pandemic has drawn interests in collecting large scale quantitative data to account for impacts in macro aspects such as the economy, public health, gender and etc. In order to collect thoughts and opinions pertaining to deeper problems, qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. Corbetta (2003) observed that realities are socially constructed by humans and can be understood subjectively. Focus group discussion was used because it allows for in depth understanding of a social problems Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee (2018). Although Covid-19 is a public health crisis, the impacts are manifested in social units such as families.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in Kisii County which is in southwestern Kenya. The area is largely homogeneous and partly cosmopolitan with its people being socially knit and patriarchal in nature. The patriarchal nature of these families greatly disintegrates the family dynamics (e.g., fathers are seen as 'super' while mothers and children as 'second class' family members). The general parent-child relationship in the area is poor because children spend most of their time in school, and parents spend their time trying to earn a living which leaves very little time for engagement.

Sampling

Twenty-two (22) participants were chosen using the convenience sampling strategy—a male and a female each representing the 11 constituencies of the county (Kisii County Government, 2018). Participants were assigned into one of the two focus groups based on their gender.

Data Collection

Each group discussed and examined how the COVID-19 containment measures such as school closure, curfew, working from home, social distance or avoiding large gatherings, wearing masks, and washing hands have impacted parental roles, family relationships among couples, and the day-to-day family life. The participants took turns to respond on each of the preventive measures so as to make the discussions thematic. For example, the impact of school closure was discussed distinctly from working from home to avoid conflating and creating intersections. As a wrap up the participants were asked to make any other observations on what else the government has done in relation to covid-19 that has impacted their family. In addition, they were asked to include other way(s) the familied were impacted from other sources besides the government.

Data Analysis

Discussions were recorded and transcribed before attempting any analysis. Narratives were subsequently consolidated under each of the policy guidelines. Principles of the EST were applied to explain how public health policy guidelines relating to the prevention of COVID-19 have impacted specific family functioning around interactions and roles. The responses reflected how the COVID-19 containment measures have led to disruptions in family functioning in four key areas: increased interactions, loss of boundaries, family strengths, and impacts on values.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study was qualitative in nature, consent was sought from each of the participants before being placed in a cohort. The participants introduced themselves, then the rule of anonymity and confidentiality where names were not used except codes was explained.

Researcher's Reflexivity

The purpose of the study was to identify the unintended negative consequences of preventive measures against COVID-19 on the family. The researchers thought that the results of the study would reveal negative effects only but to the contrary the study revealed many positive results

of the consequences of COVID-19 preventive guidelines on families.

Results

The results presented focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the families of Kisii County in regard to the public health guidelines imposed by the government.

Table 1
Participants Demographics

	No.	Age		No. of Children		Education	Marital status
		Range	Average	F	M	Degree and above	
Men	11	45-61	51 Yrs	24	19	8	11
Women	11	35-61	46 yrs	24	18	9	09

Table 1 represents the demographic of the participants who participated in the research. As indicated, the study sample included 11 males and 11 female participants. The males were aged between 45-61 years old, while the females were much younger, aged between 35-61 years old. The participants have fewer male children (37) compared to female children (48). In terms of education, more than half had attained a degree and above which made it easy to communicate. All participants were married except two, one was divorced but lives with her children and the other a widowed lady living with her children. Based on the aims of the study, all the respondents met the inclusion criteria.

Participants observed that the prolonged school closure has had several outcomes including increased interaction and conflicts between parents and their children because the pandemic provided children with a large amount of unscheduled or unmanaged (free) time, and there was also an increase in teenage pregnancies.

Another outcome is the increased family expenditure against the backdrop of job losses and layoffs. There was a higher demand for parental time following school closures to monitor activities such as preparing food, solving conflicts, and addressing pushback against doing chores, and this was overwhelming. In majority of the cases, children lack adequate spaces to carry out assigned schoolwork, especially for families living in slums and peri-urban areas. These those who are likely to afford only a single room which is inadequate to house family members, entertain visitors, and have somewhere to spare for meal preparation. Therefore, space use is dictated by whatever activity is prioritized by parents. Due to scarcity, siblings are forced to share the available resources and therefore, experience increased conflict.

In an effort to mediate against these sudden changes, parents have been forced to suddenly turn homes into schools and transform in their roles, thereby becoming teachers to ensure that children are meaningfully engaged. They needed to make more time for their children, direct activities, solve conflict, and provide extra resources for maintaining the family unit. Adolescents found themselves faced with unending 'holidays' which provided a perfect opportunity to experiment on sexual behaviours through their exposure to some TV programs. Some children went as far as engaging in incest. This presents a challenge to an already troubled family system, despite churches offering valuable lessons and programs for children as well.

Another core aspect of the community is the church. Since the closure of churches, families have been worshipping at home. While some actively participated in online services, others planned elaborate neighbourhood services. Religious institutions continued to host online services and urged participants to pay their tithes and offerings. Pastors were reaching out to the individual members to seek assistance when members missed out on participating in church activities. However, in some families, the lack of

church services instigated a "go-slow" reopening for religious activities. Churches were opened again for service in July 2020 and were required to comply with a raft of measures, whose compliance has been reported on the National Response to the Corona Pandemic to be at 90% (InterFaith Council, 2020).

Participants also reported that most commercial business where family members go to buy provisions have provided facilities for hand washing or sanitizers for their customers, although majority of the people are unlikely to comply. However, compliance to social distancing is poor, partly due to a misunderstanding among the public as to the role this requirement plays in preventing the spread of COVID-19 to members of the family. For example, majority of the participants reported that people keep wondering how virus transmission is possible given that it cannot be airborne. In addition, the public has interpreted social distancing to imply less visiting of neighbours, no sharing of beds or food, not visiting elderly relatives, and less intimacy among married couples. Given that the first COVID-19 case in Kenya was diagnosed in Nairobi, and that Nairobi and Mombasa eventually went on to become the epicentres of the disease, it follows that majority of the people mistakenly believed that people from these two cities are all infected. Therefore, they should be avoided, and they were unwelcomed to the rural areas.

Additionally, distancing oneself from family members is a tall order, especially for large families living in small spaces or from community responsibilities. Further, participants noted that the country lacks role models on social distancing because government officials and politicians adhere less to this particular guideline. Participants also reported that masks feel uncomfortable when worn for a prolonged period, causing irritation, and are easily forgotten, misplaced or lost. Even then, families are unlikely to afford a regular supply of clean masks. Most people wear these masks not for protection but rather to avoid getting arrested. Men questioned the appropriateness and safety of masks alleging that they might cause suffocation if worn for a long time. Likewise, the number of attendees allowed for funeral, wedding, eateries, and entertainment joints is being disregarded.

With regard to the curfew and working from home policies, these have provided families with increased time for interactions. However, this comes at a cost if not employed well. For instance, parents have now real opportunities to learn and discover the true character of their children, their personalities, and temperaments. In addition, parents have a chance to to instil family values, discipline, and morality in relation to culture and godliness. Besides, working parents have time to closely monitor their children. Surprisingly, majority of the parents have come to the realization that their children were able to explore and discover talents in business and play various leadership roles in society. Plus, family members have more time to keep checking on each other and finding and correcting mistakes.

Participants likewise observed that there are challenges brought about by curfew and working from home. For example, when a family member is arrested for contravening the curfew times, they are often detained at quarantine centres at their own cost or beaten or subjected to extortion. Therefore, heads of families must always track members not at home on or before curfew time. This is both worrying and stressful causing conflicts due to increased potential for spending family resources. On their part, male participants argued that the social contract between the government and the public is lopsided and unfair. Whereas everybody is required to adhere to curfew hours, it is government officials who flout the order. Also, the government has not made a provision to ease movement of people.

The direct economic impact on the family brought about by COVID-19 policy guidelines include loss of jobs and lay-offs except for government employees who earn salaries despite not working. Many self-employed Kenyans have also been forced to close shop because of the changed business environment. This has increased interdependency given that the government does not provide welfare support to vulnerable groups such as orphans and the poor. Working members of the family have had to take on the responsibility of supporting their economically vulnerable relatives. COVID-19 has limited economic activities, resulting in families having less income but increased demands.

Discussion

The abruptness of the implementation of the COVID-19 prevention guidelines initiated equally abrupt changes to the known dynamics of life by increasing time for interactions that create system challenges in relationships due to an imbalance in interdependency, changed roles, demand for resources, and a reduction in community engagements. These policies have underscored the role of schools, social institutions like churches, and private sector employment as crucial in helping people sustain families socially and economically. Closure of learning institutions seems to have impacted the family the most compared to all other initiatives. The effect of the impacts include stress due to conflict, unprecedented number of teenage pregnancies, and increased family budget against a backdrop of job loss and lay-offs. These findings concur with literature that reported an increase of 35.8% in cases relating to sexual and gender-based violence (Odhiambo, 2020), increased teenage pregnancies up to 40% increase (Patridge, 2020), and increased family budget (Kholia, 2020).

COVID-19 has underscored the role of schools and religious institutions in the life of children and their families. Schools allow children to grow, while churches offer them lessons of how to develop and live well within the community. However, a shift to online learning to accommodate closure of learning institutions yielded the opposite result. This increased the risk of exposure to inappropriate content and online predators (United Nations, 2020). In addition, it increased the drop-out rate for children who are unable to continue learning remotely due to lack of resources or connectivity.

In addition, effort to imitate school structures for learning are driven by parental motivation to engage their children to prevent unwanted behaviour as well as for them to do well in national exams. However, homes will always be homes. While some subjects simply do not lend themselves to online instruction, the home environment is also not conducive for all types of learning. For example, children coming from rural areas are not likely to participate in e-learning because of lack of internet connectivity while others might fail to adapt because they learn best with facial contact. Furthermore, online class attendance can be irregular due to external disruptions from family, friends, and neighbours. The exam culture is a paradox, given that the majority of students perform fairly well, especially in rural areas (Kiramba, 2016a). Nevertheless, parents and their children have bought into the idea that passing national exams provides a pathway to successful life especially as it pertains to securing employment (Bunyi, 2005, 2008; Kiramba, 2016b).

These results indicate that schools and churches are important environmental systems for most families because they allow structured interdependence between parents and children. For instance, schools take care of children most part of the year, while parents can peacefully work to get resources for the family. Whereas schools can be seen as microsystems, while churches can be viewed as meso-systems.

Kenyans express collectivism in communal responsibility by visiting the sick, mourning the dead by attending funerals, and celebrating renewed life by attending weddings. The halting or diminishing of these community-building activities due to COVID-19 is a serious threat to societal life because birth, death, sickness, and marriage represent such fundamental parts of human life and sociability. To decrease or eliminate these activities has deep, painful impacts on the social fabric of life itself. With the lockdown decree imposed, citizens experienced all forms of violence especially those living in disputed settings and unhygienic and crowded conditions, such as refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), and orphanages. For example, Kenya has 830 children's homes which are mostly private. As such, they are not open to public scrutiny, and they are currently housing almost 40,000 children who are there due to poverty and family breakdown (Sloth-Nielsen, 2019).

Often, culturally valued activities, including rites around births, marriages, and funerals call for a congregating of sorts. Therefore, there must be flexibility in restrictions to avoid congregating as in weddings, where restrictions had been placed, though there was no consensus as regards to funerals. Those rooting for a small congregation advanced the reason that it would save costs, while those in opposition argued that family members would be very unforgiving for

one to miss such an event because of COVID-19 policies. This may be why compliance for this particular guideline is very low at less than 10% (InterFaith Council, 2020).

When a breadwinner loses income due to COVID-19 related layoffs or business shutdowns, family dynamics change due to the disruption of family homoeostasis. If the role gave one status, job loss may be accompanied with low self-esteem, disappointment, associated feelings of failure, or increased xenophobia. It might force other family members to step up and play the role of breadwinner. The struggles families are undergoing due to COVID-19 are shared through social media platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp. Families contemplating selling property to pay bills while others are depicted as struggling over similar decisions are commonly shared through online social groups. Even though some of these are enacted (rather than actual), the message resonates with what is conceivable (or no longer conceivable) in real life.

On the other hand, the study findings need to be seen in the light of limitations because focus groups of just 22 participants are not representative of the population, thus results cannot be generalized. Further, since the pandemic is evolving, insights from this study may be time-delimited, either overemphasizing certain factors or missing out on emergent (or yet-to emerge) issues. In addition, the research was centred on the family which does not have a common lens applied to policy in Kenya. Nonetheless, it expands the scope of responsiveness to the pandemic. Assessment of diverse families' responses to COVID-19 and focusing on the interaction of family and environment during a global pandemic may help bring to light hidden elements of the pandemic. It may also shed light on a tendency to take on an illusion of invincibility or a denial of the reality that hampers more than advance efforts to ultimately flatten the curve.

Conclusion

Collectively, policies have led to specific outcomes. Together, they have all tended to confine families under one roof for extended periods of time, thereby affecting relationships especially at family level. The impact of COVID-19 has taught us to understand families from a theoretical perspective rather than from an individualized perspective. We conclude that COVID-19 has disrupted existing functions of family systems prior to the pandemic. Parents have found themselves on the centre of the storm and therefore need to work extra hard to make provisions for their out of school children. They need to transform their roles quickly to double up as teachers and supervisors. Working from home may not be acceptable for a majority of families since there is no existing infrastructure. COVID-19 increased vices such as incest, sibling rivalry, and domestic violence while families are struggling to maintain continued education, obedience to parents and community. The COVID-19 prevention policies and the families are playing out and no one can predict how it will turn out. However, there seems to be a building dilemma for poor families on how to mitigate the COVID-19 impact. This has placed such families between a hard place and a rock.

The study recommends that policies can be better crafted to support the interaction of family and environment. One step would be adopting the practice of applying theory to understand a phenomenon. That is, just as public health theory helped to guide the government in formulating preventive policies, application of the EST can highlight the interactions between families and the preventive policies and their outcomes, especially on practice weaknesses. The government briefings on the state of the virus should include the same on families.

Secondly, existing institutional weaknesses such as corruption, poor modelling by leadership, incidents of police brutality, costly quarantining, and extortion need to be addressed because such lawlessness by authorities (whether perceived or actual) is copied by families as well. Some of the challenges that families have experienced in relation to COVID-19 have exacerbated social cultural weaknesses that existed prior to COVID-19. The increase of teen pregnancy indicates a lack of comprehensive educational programmes and socialization on sexuality which has been exacerbated by mental wellbeing. These issues need to be addressed.

Fundamentally, the uncertainty about becoming sick and dying is what creates stress. So long as people are assured that the disease can

be contained, there will be peace. Testing and monitoring would better serve this goal, but it also creates other problems. As such, there still remains a need to clarify the mode of transmission of COVID-19 to the public to shut down myths and misconceptions as well as stigmatization. With a robust means of testing and monitoring the disease, then the role of masks, social distancing, and other ways of reducing human interactions as means to prevent the spread of the virus becomes more actionable, certain, and effective.

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