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At the Cross Roads: Family, Youth Deviance and Crime Control in Botswana

K. T. O. Balogi
Department of Sociology
University of Botswana
Email: balogi@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract

Since the 1980s, some major villages in Botswana have experienced an increase in deviance and crime among youth. This deviance is often manifested in an escalation of criminal gangs that are mostly male in composition. The intense search for the causes of this problem by traditional and modern custodians of law often blame parents' inability to control and guide their children. This paper explores some of the difficulties of regarding the family as either the cause or the potential solution to the problem of youth deviance and crime. Blaming families fails to take into account the effects of societal changes that undermine the effectiveness of the family as an agent of social control. Drawing on existing literature, this paper concludes that it is no longer useful to assume the centrality of the family in combating youth crime. Poverty, unemployment, changes in marriage patterns and divorce must also be taken into account, as all of these have serious implications on the structure and agency of the family. This calls for a baseline study on the family to put the fundamental issues of its structure and agency into proper socio-economic and cultural perspective.

Introduction

The concept of the family is plastic and therefore changes meaning in different cultures and historical periods. Even in the same society the passage of time changes the meaning of the family. In precolonial Botswana, for example, families were predominantly units of production, but with colonialism there was a marked shift from a subsistence agricultural economy to a cash-propelled one. This considerably transformed the structures and role relationships within families, changing families into units more of consumption than of production. One of the long-term effects of these economic changes was a gradual transformation of the family unit from a large structure with close kinship ties to a smaller structure with more varied forms (Molokomme, 1991; WLSA, 1997). Unfortunately changes in the structures of the family have not been accompanied by a similar shift in the expectation of its role as an agent of social control. The structural functionalist perspective on the family holds that most if not all social relationships are initiated in the family, making it the basic unit of social organisation. Thus the family is closely associated with social order (Shorter, 1979). It is seen as transmitting values, norms and attitudes to the younger generation, and providing social identity for its constituent members.

Since the family has almost exclusive contact with the child during the period of greatest dependency and greatest plasticity, and continued intimate contact over a subsequent period of several years, it plays an exceptionally important role in determining the behaviour patterns which the child will exhibit. No child is so constituted at birth that it must inevitably be law abiding, and the family is the first agency to affect the direction which a particular child will take (Sutherland and

Cressey, 1960: 171).

From this perspective the study of the family situation constitutes a cornerstone in the explanation of criminality, especially among youth who are still believed to be under parental control and guidance. The role of the family is viewed in the context of the community within which the family exists, the assumption being that if the community is intact and strong, it provides a fallback position when the family fails to perform its functions.

In this article the structure and roles of the family are examined in the context of the broader societal enabling or dis-enabling factors of unemployment, poverty, divorce and changing family forms. The article starts off by interrogating whether or not the family does exist, and the forms it takes if it does. Bearing in mind that crime encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviour that cannot be explained entirely by socio-economic factors, the effectiveness of the family as an agent of social control is then discussed in the context of socio-economic and cultural factors such as poverty, unemployment, inequality and divorce which prevent the family from fully executing its functions.

Is There a Family Out There? Defining the Family in Botswana

In order to address the question whether the family can constitute an effective mechanism in the control of criminality among young people, it is essential to establish if the family does in fact exist and, if so, in what form? It is also essential to establish whether the factors or conditions that enhance its control function are present in contemporary Botswana and the extent to which they provide an enabling environment for the family.

References to 'the family' in Botswana are often accompanied by such terms as 'breakdown', 'disappearance', 'dissolution', 'disarray' and so on. This begs the question of what is actually meant by 'family' in the context of Botswana? The family in Botswana is often conceptualised as having moved from the extended to the idealised nuclear form. This assumes that the 'western-style' nuclear family is universal and therefore applicable to Botswana, but this assumption overlooks the dynamic, complex nature of the modern family. According to Gittins (1985) the family constitutes an integral part of any social system, but no single phenomenon adequately represents the "highly complex and often confusingly fluid social groupings" that make up actual families (Gittins, 1985: 4). Thus it is more useful to begin by referring to 'families' rather than 'the family'. Conceptualising family as a single phenomenon also obscures gender and age inequalities that determine power relationships within families. Such relationships are crucial for understanding the discipline and therefore control of young people in the society. Within this context the need to clarify family boundaries cannot be overemphasised. When family boundaries are clear, the vital function of nurturing children is made easier, as insiders can be distinguished from outsiders and the question settled as to "which adults are responsible for the care of which children" (Collier et al, 1993: 10).

There is little doubt that families in Botswana have undergone a number of notable changes since colonial times, and that the process has been in no way linear (WLSA, 1997). The changes mainly result from the shift from a predominantly subsistence agricultural production to a cash economy and have affected not only families' gender and age compositions but also the role

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relationships within families. The structures of families in Botswana have been particularly affected by changes in kinship settlement patterns, evident especially in urban and semi-urban areas where younger members of families have chosen to settle away from their kinsmen and home villages (Molokomme, 1991). The most recent study on changing family forms in Botswana indicates that the definition of the family is now so fluid and flexible that it varies according to the purpose it is meant to serve in a given situation (WLSA, 1997: 2):

> There is a plurality of family forms in Botswana, whose boundaries have the tendency to shift, contract and expand depending on the purposes for which a particular form was defined at a particular point in time.

The varied forms of the family include the nuclear family, the traditional Tswana family (extended family), the child-headed family, the single parent family and the polygamous family.

Should Youth Crime Control Rely on Families or Households?

Historically the marriage institution has been a springboard for most familial ties and obligations. However the centrality of this institution is being undermined by the emergence of other forms of relationships in which an increasing number of sexual and family relationships are built and determined. Individuals no longer have to be married to start a family, nor do family members have to share a common residence. Thus, as indicated by the WLSA study, *it is impossible to talk about a single type of family*. Instead the family has now assumed the character of diverse households in which people live (Saraga, 1996; WLSA, 2001). Indeed most of the government of Botswana censuses and policy documents acknowledge this diversity by using the term 'household' instead of 'family'. However when community collaboration and accountability are sought in crime prevention strategies, the concept of household is not convenient or practical. This is because, unlike the family, a household is solely a socio-economic rather than a socio-cultural unit. As a socio-cultural unit the family derives the rights and obligations for the discipline of constituent members that the household does not possess. The control of youth crime therefore requires reference to families rather than households.

The Family and the Community as Agents of Social Control

According to Wilson (1983: 28), whatever form a family takes, it exists within a community. The community has standards of right and wrong that support the values and lifestyles of constituent individuals and families. It is a public space that provides a sense of security for the individuals and families within. As a social space within which people live, the fabric of the community is a complex system of formal and informal friendship, kinship and acquaintanceship networks. These networks are rooted in family life and ongoing socialisation processes. A strong community enforces high levels of social control, thereby preventing crime as well as providing a fallback position when a family fails in its function of socialising children. However if the community is weak, children are more likely to become criminals. The family and the community are therefore highly interdependent (Muncie, 1996).

A community is strong as long as its constituent individuals and families observe community

standards and exercise a sense of responsibility and obligation towards them. These responsibilities and obligations include the application of informal sanctions as well as collective supervision of children in the neighbourhood (Wilson, 1983). In his anthropological study of some Tswana tribes during the colonial period, Schapera (1970) indicates that an application of informal social control and collective supervision of young people was the cornerstone of social control in most traditional Tswana communities. It is perhaps on this understanding that the community policing principle and the current expectations and obligations placed on families in Botswana are predicated. Unfortunately this is based on bygone experiences rather than present realities, a nostalgia that was evident in the address to the 2001 National Community Policing Conference by Assistant Commissioner of Police Kapinga:

> The assumption is that through better understanding of all the facets of any anti-social behaviour, the community, including the police, should be able to produce constructive, cooperative ventures to prevent or reduce the phenomenon of crime, so avoiding costly reactive policing (Kapinga, 2001: 37).

Mr Kapinga indicated that the goal was to bring the level of crime in urban areas on a par with rural areas. The present disparity, he asserted, has been brought about by a breakdown of the extended family (a term he does not define), especially in urban areas, which in turn has contributed to a deterioration of morality in society.

Like the police, members of parliament and traditional leaders continually echo the importance of the family for controlling criminal behaviour by young people. There have been repeated calls by these leaders for parents and communities to do a better job of moulding and controlling the behaviour of their children. Where they seem to disagree, however, is on whether this social control should be accomplished through traditional means such as *mophato* (age regiments) or through the police and Crime Prevention Committees. The unrelenting media debate between the former Regent of the Bakwena, Kgosikwena Sebele, and the Member of Parliament for Molepolole, Daniel Kwelagobe, clearly indicates the dilemma (Mmegi, 2001a, 2001b). It is possible that this dilemma results from a failure to acknowledge the changes that have occurred in families and therefore the shift in what we can expect of families as agents of social control. To bring these expectations into perspective, the next section of the paper explores the common sociological functions of families.

Sociological Functions of Families

Theoretically the idea that families and communities should be effective agents of social control derives mainly from the functionalist concept of social institutions. Functionalists assume that any behaviour that deviates from legal and social norms is either invented or learned. The invention paradigm suggests that children learn social control at home. The family is therefore responsible for the inculcation of correct values through a delicate balance between prohibition and permissiveness. Failure to strike this delicate balance culminates in youth deviance. The learning paradigm on the other hand perceives the family as a force positively producing crime. Individuals commit crimes because of forces in the social structure of the society. These forces are beyond the control of individuals, so exposure to criminal influences, both within and outside the family,

determines an individual's propensity to engage in criminal acts. This explanation assumes that children have copycat tendencies. Where parents portray deviant values, young people learn to interpret these as normal and acceptable:

> Criminal behaviour is learned in interaction with other people, especially in intimate personal settings, in a process of communication. Learning is held to embrace the techniques of committing the crime and the direction of drives, motives and attitudes, and definitions of the law. A person will become criminal if he/she is exposed to an excess of definitions favourable to the violation of law, over definitions unfavourable to the violation of the law. Such differential association will be affected by variations in frequency, duration and priority and intensity (Downes and Rock, 1998: 79-80).

Both the family and the community, therefore, play an important role in crime causation and crime control.

A functional prerequisite for the family as an institution of social control is an intact structure and clearly defined role relationships. Members of different families have an obligation to provide an environment conducive to the absorption of frustrations and the stabilisation of adult personalities. A breakdown in the structure of the family interferes with members' ability to play their roles effectively and therefore weakens the family's role as a watchdog of deviant behaviour (Haralambos and Holborn, 1990). Therefore one must be cautious in making any strategy of crime prevention rely on the family. It is essential to establish whether community crime prevention, as suggested by traditional leaders and legislators, is only constrained by issues such as the legality of the methods. What other issues are at stake that our leaders are overlooking in coming up with solutions to youth-related problems?

Single Parenthood and Youth Crime Control

Between 1981 and 1991 the proportion of female-headed households in Botswana rose from 45.2 percent to 47.1 percent (BIDPA, 1997). Single parenthood is often identified as a profound indicator of changing family structures in any society. Some criminologists associate single parenthood with delinquency, arguing that it interferes with the emotional development of the child and is an almost certain antecedent of delinquency and subsequent adult criminality. A family with a single parent, who is almost always female, is highly vulnerable to poverty. This poverty tends to go from generation to generation, creating a cycle of disadvantaged individuals living in such a state of desperation that crime becomes the only way of life (Bourgois, 1995; Young, 1999). These conclusions should however be interpreted with caution because not all children who grow up in poor single parent families end up committing crime. Some children are resilient and able to succeed in the face of adversity.

Female-headed households in Botswana have to contend with multiple disadvantages such as low income, low earning capacity and a greater burden of dependants. Fifty percent of female-headed households are poor or very poor, compared with 44 percent of male-headed households (BIDPA, 1997). The aspirations of these parents to raise their children into law-abiding citizens could well be thwarted by the realities of their daily experiences. They are torn between providing materially for their out-of-school, unemployed and desperate children, and transmitting

values of conformity to the same children. Poverty becomes an overpowering force, directing the possible criminal intentions of the disillusioned youth and inhibiting the good intentions of the impoverished parent. The task of childrearing is therefore made extremely difficult for single parents as a result of abject poverty and the multiple roles they have to play as parents. It may therefore not come as a surprise that teenage pregnancy, itself a form of social deviance, is more prevalent among single parent and poor families (Botswana Government, 1989). The HIV/AIDS scourge is also bringing in the relatively new phenomenon of child-headed families, further aggravating problems of control and discipline in families affected in this way.

Single Parenthood and the Decline in Marriage

The proliferation of female-headed households in Botswana is partly explained by changing attitudes towards the institution of marriage. This institution, from which the family is presumed to derive, has undergone a number of marked changes. Changes in the age at first marriage, a decline in the number of marriages and a high number of marriage dissolutions have created family forms different from the original kinship-based and almost invariably extended family form. The proportion of ever-married women declined from 61 percent in 1971 to 50 percent in 1991 (MFDP, 1997). A study on women and the administration of justice conducted by WLSA found an alarming rate of divorce and separation of spouses for marriages contracted under either common or customary law. There is also a high number of divorces that are hidden because spouses fear social stigmatisation (Maundeni, 2000). The high divorce rate is exacerbated by the limited economic opportunities for women, which force many wives to remain in unhappy or abusive relationships for years on end (Maundeni, 2001).

Divorce is often preceded by violence, which sometimes continues even after the divorce. Children who live in disrupted homes where violence is rife have been found to be prone to anti-social behaviour, especially if they continue to witness the violence even after the parents are divorced. One possible explanation for this is that divorce severely compromises the custodial parent's ability to control, guide and support children. This is because of the emotional and psychological trauma that children and parents undergo following divorce. Marital breakdown usually also results in a decline in living standards, which has debilitating effects on parenting abilities. Thus the high rate of divorce and separation in Botswana has profound implications for criminal and deviant behaviour among youth. In such cases the family can certainly be seen as one of the forces that produce crime.

Too Many to Control? Population, Unemployment and Youth Crime

Besides changes that have occurred in the family, there are a number of socio-structural variables that might prevent families from effectively executing their traditional function of social control of children. The factors outlined in the preceding sections are further aggravated by the predominantly youthful structure of the population of Botswana. Evidence indicates a significant relationship between the age and sex structure of the population and levels of youth crime. A predominantly youthful population is often associated with high levels of youth crime and deviance (Downs and Rock, 1998; Mays, 1963; Sutherland and Cressy, 1960). The 1991 census shows that 43.6 percent of

the population was below the age of fifteen, while a staggering half of the entire population was under seventeen (MFDP, 1997). This type of age structure has profound implications for both the country and young people themselves. There are resource implications relating to the provision of education and absorption of out-of-school youth into an already saturated job market. A profile of youth in 1989 indicated only 36 percent of all 17-year-olds and only 11 percent of 19-year-olds were in school (Botswana Government, 1989). The increasing emphasis on skills and specialised knowledge as requirements for employment means that each year a high number of young people join the growing pool of the unemployed and unemployable. These youngsters spend the rest of their youth and a good part of their early adulthood neither in school nor in paid employment.

Rejected by the two institutions that could share the responsibilities of socialisation with parents, the idle status of these youths poses a huge challenge to their families. Unemployment compounds weakened familial control and cultivates a culture of idleness and purposelessness. Having so much time in their hands, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, violence and other forms of anti-social behaviour become the principal means of distraction. Using and selling stolen property becomes an alternative to formal employment. For those who have resorted to alcohol and drug abuse as an escape route, the need for income to pay for drink and drugs quickly becomes greater than the moral obligation to conform. Furthermore, moral values and standards often decline in the face of unemployment and poverty. Where parents and guardians are poor, there is a tendency to tolerate a certain amount of property crime and anti-social behaviour. Sometimes such conduct is even supported. Illegal practices such as possession and sale of stolen property flourish (Bourgois, 1995; Ntsabane and Campbell, 1995). In their study of street children in Gaborone, Ntsabane and Campbell (1995) found that most parents of these children were unemployed or in very low-paying jobs. Some of them actually felt that their children were better off on the streets than living in poverty at home..

Such is the predicament facing many modern families in Botswana. They are faced with multiple tasks of policing, guiding and controlling disillusioned and disparate youth, while contending with problems of poverty and unemployment themselves. This task is not made any easier by the generation gap between parents and children. With the speed of social change, the old and the young now live in different worlds, undermining the capacity of the parents to adequately prepare their children for the modern world. Deprived of necessary guidance and facing bleak prospects, it is not surprising that an increasing number of young people turn to crime The BIDPA study on poverty and poverty alleviation summarised the predicament of young people as follows:

> An increasing number of them have gone to school with expectation (from themselves as well as their parents) of a cash earning future away from subsistence agriculture. Now, forms two and five leavers are idling and disillusioned. But they see their future mainly in terms of education and employment, with crime and delinquency as the only other alternatives (BIDPA, 1997: 73).

Economic Inequities and Youth Crime

Modern Botswana society is afflicted with deeply entrenched inequalities and social polarisations. It is a society in which extreme affluence co-exists with abject poverty. The 1993/94 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) showed that the top 20 percent of households earned 59

percent of income, and the situation has certainly not improved since then (UNDP, 2002). The free market economy in Botswana encourages high levels of consumerism but fails to enable equitable access to the desired goods. The culture is becoming increasingly materialistic and unashamed of conspicuous displays of wealth and consumption. These values are not conducive to solidarity and cooperation, the pillars of a strong community. Wherever extreme poverty coexists with unconcerned affluence, the poor and deprived are more likely to resort to unconventional and criminal means of closing the income gap. The affluent section of society naturally, but unwittingly, provides the poor with opportunities and goods to steal. To the poor, resorting to unconventional means of earning a living becomes simply their way of retaliating against society for their exclusion from the mainstream. The urge to fulfil their frustrated expectations overrides the authority of tradition and the moral norms of the community (Bourgois, 1995; Young, 1999). In this state of affairs the effectiveness of the family as an agent of social control is greatly jeopardised. The compounding factor is that most of these forces prevail at the macro level of society and are beyond the remit of families and communities.

Youth Crime and Poverty
The abject poverty in which so many families in Botswana live should be seen as a more powerful force in directing the behaviour of individuals than any cultural patterns. A study on poverty and poverty alleviation on Botswana showed that in 1994, 47 percent of Batswana were living in poverty (BIDPA, 1997). A higher proportion of these households are found in rural areas, the same areas that have seen a proliferation of youth gangs. Any family facing abject and persistent poverty has a limited capacity to serve as a safety valve for absorbing frustration. Instead the family becomes a source of frustration as parents fail to provide material support to their children. Families contending with extreme levels of poverty and marginalisation are in any case very unlikely to internalise the moral norms defined by mainstream society, let alone transmit them to their children (Haralambos and Holborn, 1990).

The forces of unemployment and poverty are too overwhelming for individuals and are often the determinant factors that push people into criminality regardless of any amount of social control (Moore, 1996; Saraga, 1996). Idleness resulting from persistent unemployment almost invariably leads to the formation of criminal gangs. Compounded by acute financial deprivation, these gangs are transformed from groups terrorising residents to business cliques driven by the desire to obtain money through unconventional means. Property crime becomes the order of the day as young people steal goods and sell them to adults. An increase in property crime by groups of young men around the area of Ramotswa village has been specifically attributed to this chain of supply and demand (Botswana Police, 2002).

Is the Family Itself Free of Crime?
From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the family and the community are struggling under an avalanche of pressures from the broader society which seriously reduce their capacity to foster positive behaviour and discourage criminality. However the very family that is expected to be a watchdog is not itself free of crime. The idea of the family as an orderly, harmonious unit has

become obsolete. The family is no longer a place of safety and solidarity. Indeed the evidence increasingly shows that of all civilian institutions the family is the most violent. It is within the family unit that children and older people are more likely to be abused or attacked. Thus most children's first experience of physical violence comes from their parents. This is when they learn to see violence as a means of solving problems. Wives are at a higher risk of violent victimisation within their family units than they are in the street. These findings contradict the popular belief that violent crime is a phenomenon of the public sphere. It also appears that violence pervades families in all social classes and is not confined to the poor as is popularly believed (Mooney, 2000; Saraga, 1996; Strauss, 1978). Compounded by lack of legal protections, and by some cultural practices, more and more women and children are being abused in the places where they are supposed to feel safest (Botswana Police, 2001; WLSA, 1999). Thus families are producing more violent individuals as children learn that violence is a viable means of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Family units are expected to guide their children towards conformity, but the forces that abound in mainstream society dictate the real methods of doing so. Such forces have placed families in a continual struggle for survival. The reality of people's daily lives means that more and more individuals are pushed towards deviance rather than towards conformity. The manner in which the social and economic life of society is organised has strong criminogenic components. These overwhelm families and other institutions of social control. Thus the capacity of families and communities to mitigate crime should be measured against the ability of such institutions to withstand pressures from structural factors such as unemployment, poverty and rapid social change. Families are undergoing a process of change and redefinition, and communities are fractured. As a result, it may be unrealistic to expect these traditional sites of crime control to be operable in our highly malleable modern society. Indeed the 'breakdown of the family' seems to be the very factor that contributes to the increase in youth crime. The growing complexity of the crime problem calls for looking again at all those institutions whose partnership would be crucial in crime prevention and reduction. If families are to continue to play a pivotal role in community policing, then their capacity to withstand the enormous challenges emanating from the social structure of the parent society needs to be strengthened. As a first step in this project, a baseline study of families in Botswana is essential to establish more precisely the relationship between modern families and social control. This study should address the situation of the family in the broader socio-structural and cultural context and in particular incorporate the issues of poverty and unemployment, and their effects on both parents and children. In addition the increasingly severe impacts of HIV/AIDS on family structures, functions and expectations cannot be ignored.

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