Culture, Context and Behaviour: Anthropological perspectives on fertility in Southern Africa

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INTRODUCTION
Fertility has its foundations in biology but its manifestations are almost entirely cultural and social. A striking reminder of this situation occurred in 1987 with the birth of triplets to surrogate grandmother, Mrs Anthony. While at the macrolevel (i.e. among planners, politicians and environmentalists) there is almost universal concern about population growth, at the microlevel, and by this I mean at the level of the individual, there is pity for the woman (and possibly for the man) who cannot have her (or his) own child—pity for those humans who are unable to generate a child in the biological sense. The concern, however, is purely social; it exists only in the minds of the affected individuals and in the minds of their peers and medical advisers. As a result, however, even in the face of world overpopulation, considerable resources, both financial and medical, are directed towards promoting and achieving fertility in the relatively few humans for whom biology has proved wanting. Adding an additional twist to the paradox is the fact that many of the efforts to produce fertility result, not in single, but in multiple births.

With regard to issues such as the promotion of fertility, it would seem at first sight that culture and biology are today opposed to each other. It would be more correct to say that it is culture itself and its various and often conflicting constituent elements and manifestations which should be the centre of analysis and debate. As the case of Mrs Anthony illustrates, the facts of biology can now be changed. They are both filtered and (more importantly) transformed by the cultural world in which we live, by the beliefs we hold, the desires we develop and, most significantly, by the scientific techniques we have devised (in this case in the medical field), to alter biology and make it serve social and cultural ends. Orwell’s 1984 has been with us for some time in spirit and potential if not in detail.

We do not, of course, have to go to the dramas of surrogate mothers or cloning to recognise the predominant influence of culture on biology. It is obvious that throughout the world birth occurs largely within some form of stable and culturally sanctioned heterosexual relationship which corresponds generally to what Westerners understand as marriage. In contemporary white South African society, young girls who have a baby before marriage (or their older liberated sisters who decide to become single parents) upset this expected order and call down upon themselves a good deal of opprobrium although they are, at one level, simply fulfilling a biological potential. Different cultures and, even within a specific society, different classes or religious and linguistic groups follow different norms and preferences with respect to family size. This is yet another illustration of how culture mediates biology. The scorn often evinced by the members of one group or category for the habits of another, and expressed in derogatory phrases such as “they breed like rabbits . . .” is, moreover, merely the result of encountering a cultural preference which is not only different but potentially threatening to one’s own.

What the preceding argument amounts to is an amplification of my opening remark that although birth is fundamentally a biological process, it cannot be divorced from its cultural matrix. This position may not appear particularly novel to an audience of human scientists but the real question which needs to be asked, and which I will address in what follows, is this: do we as professionals concerned with human behaviour really understand how culture operates and are we equipped to appreciate, in particular, both the formative and the generative roles of culture in social life?

In addressing this question I believe that an anthropological perspective as opposed to a straight sociological approach can be useful. This is so because within the wider social field the anthropological perspective distinguishes a specific cultural realm and seeks to unpack and demystify that much used yet essentially vague and umbrella-like term “culture”. Contemporary American anthropologists (Geertz 1957; 1973; 1983; Keesing 1981) have attempted not only to analyse the constituent elements and the workings of culture, but have sought to reveal how these elements work, either together or against each other, to produce or inhibit change. In order to establish my point I need to expand on the way in which anthropologists use the concept of culture and then to describe how they consider that culture to operate within the wider social field. Following this expanded argument, in the second section of my presentation I shall illustrate the value of an anthropological approach by using it to analyse and, I hope, to highlight the reason why many black women living in and around Durban choose not to limit their fertility by using contraception.
ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Rules, symbols and meanings

For most modern anthropologists culture is an analytical abstraction. The layman often thinks of culture as an art, literature or classical music, possibly as the way people dress, the language they speak or the number of children they prefer. Anthropologists, by contrast, focus on the fact that these behavioral manifestations are controlled by sets of rules—controlled if you like by mental blueprints which give rise to action. It is these rules which they seek to map and comprehend, when they speak of culture it is these blueprints to which they are primarily referring. In seeking to understand how culture as defined in this way actually operates, they attempt to isolate both symbolic and cumulative that the rules or blueprints are passed on through language in the form of ideas and complex systems of meaning. Clifford Geertz, one of the major exponents of this view about culture, has written of people as beings “suspended in webs of significance” which they have themselves spun (Geertz 1973:5). He is emphasizing an important point. Culture consists of both rules for doing things (and this includes technical and scientific knowledge—as well as rules on how to behave) and habits of thought. Culture makes statements about values and how people ought to behave, even if they do not always do so in a prescribed way. Culture has thus a sanctity about it which is difficult to ignore and it is probably this aspect which makes the concept as defined here so powerful a force in the operation of social life. Above all, culture is about meaning, the way people interpret action and what they think they are doing when they choose to act in a particular way.

Cultural meaning is just as important for the anthropologist to fathom as is the purely technical type of cultural knowledge which provide recipes of how to do things—how, for instance, to survive in a difficult environment, how to make money in our modern Western world, or, more to the point in the context of this paper, how to keep the specter of overpopulation at bay through contraception. In fact, to the outsider, cultural meanings and the values and actions to which they give rise often appear to be in conflict with human survival and with cultural knowledge of the technical kind which might well promote survival. I shall return to this point in the conclusion to this paper.

An operational definition of culture such as that given above is essentially a cognitive or mentalist one and I must emphasize that it gives to culture a major role in controlling action or behavior. Its more sophisticated proponents stress that in most social situations individuals are presented with alternative blueprints, i.e. with a number of options, and this leaves the explanation of which course of action to follow, either open or available for another level of analysis. It is, as we shall see, particularly with respect to understanding a complex social system, which number of options is chosen that we must move to consider the influence of the wider social field in which culture operates, looking particularly at the dominating role of social relationships which humans have with others in deciding action. If we really want to understand all nuances of behavior we should, in anthropological parlance, move from the cultural to the social or from culture to social structure and ultimately even beyond social interaction to transaction and the influence of social exchange and reciprocity in social life. But this is to rush ahead before we have explored the influence of culture in sufficient depth and, particularly, before we have seen its relevance as a constraint on certain types of action and its paradoxical flexibility in other situations.

It should be clear that when anthropologists speak of the culture of a people—or of a subgroup such as a class or local community—they mean the full range or total spectrum of knowledge and ways of doing things which are available to the members of that group or category and which act as models for action. Culture is, if you wish, a cognitive map written in symbolic shorthand of all that is known, what is thought to be true, right and proper and of all possible and acceptable courses of action relative to these cultural realities. On some issues there are fewer options than on others and relatively little argument occurs about the form which action should take (or in most of such cases, should not take). For instance in most cultures there are rules of incest prohibiting sexual relations between close relatives. In Western society the forbidden persons are mainly parents and siblings, but the universe of prohibited people is much wider in other cultures. Zulu-speaking people may not marry or have sexual relations with anyone sharing the same clan (or surname) as themselves, or a clan of a grandparent (Preston-Whyte 1974:192). This taboo puts an extremely large number of people out of bounds for procreative purposes. Whatever their extent, incest rules are non-negotiable: there can be no argument about them and there is no alternative but to abide by them. The action (or non-action) which they imply is often thought of by the people concerned as “natural”—as part of human (biological) nature. Any transgressions are therefore not only antisocial in the ordinary sense but “unnatural” and consequently far more shocking.

Although not considered to be quite so fundamental as incest rules, the bearing of a child outside marriage and the definition of male and female roles fell until fairly recently into a similarly largely uncontested category in both Western and Zulu thought despite the fact that there were probably some exceptional people whose unusual actions, though heavily criticized, provided alternative models for the future. The belief found in both cultures that every woman should have the right to bear (or in the case of Mrs Anthony’s daughter, generate) her own child is similar. This value, interestingly enough, is strongly endorsed by today’s radical feminists and, as we will see, by many black professional women, for both of whom fertility is valued in itself and is by no means necessarily contained within marriage.

It often comes as a surprise to Westerners to learn that in many cultures the physical act of intercourse and the question of who fathers a child in the biological sense is not as important as the sociological pregnancy (or, if I may coin a term, “maternity”) of the child. This parentage is decided by social rules. In the case of Western man legal adoption is one of these social arrangements and supported in the realm about uncontested Hebrew custom of the levirate. Similarly we find that in many African cultures a widow is married by the brother of her deceased husband or a younger brother may marry on behalf of a man who dies before he has married. Any children of these unions are regarded as those of the dead man and the levir has to marry another wife in order to acquire his own children (Preston-Whyte 1974:189). The common practice in many African societies of a women “bearing seed” for a barren sister (Gluckman 1950:185; Preston-Whyte 1974:188-189) is similar and, since the case of Mrs Anthony, more understandable. This is referred to by anthropologists as the sororate and often involves the
woman marrying the husband of her barren sibling. Her first child, however, is placed in the house of her sister as family heir. In this way, just as in the case of the levirate, the failure of biology is compensated for by a near cultural arrangement.

What is unique about contemporary Western culture is that because we have developed the ability to alter biology, we do not need a cultural mechanism like the sororate to solve the problem of Mrs Anthony’s daughter. But medical science is itself part of culture and we would do well not to forget this important fact. It, indeed, brings me to one of the major themes of my paper: that culture is generative, that it creates new situations and necessitates cultural accommodations to meet these situations. Once again, the case of our surrogate grandmother is instructive. Now that it is possible to implant a fertilized egg in a surrogate, there is a need, if not to change the law, at least to reconsider its interpretation; hence the legal battles recently fought over this issue in America. Our cultural rules are having to catch up with reality! In fact all legal change could be regarded a contest between past and present cultural realities.

Be that as it may, the point remains that culture carries within it the potential for (and it seems, in the case of contemporary Western culture, almost the inevitability of) change. I would argue therefore that culture is not only generative but highly flexible. Taking these two characteristics together we have in a nutshell the reason why culture appears to present so many problems and why it is such a powerful force in social life. Within itself it encapsulates the contrary tendencies of conservatism and change so that the dynamics of social life are made up by the battle between these two forces.

Culture was not always viewed by anthropologists as flexible; at one time what was stressed was its conservative and inhibiting functions. This view has unfortunately been adopted by many laymen and is often called upon to explain why “other” people refuse to change or to adopt the recommendations of outside experts and, notably, of developers. We have all heard the words “they won’t do this or that because it is not in their culture . . .” Alternatively, people are said to do things “because their culture has broken down . . .” A good example of the former stereotype are comments on people’s refusal to limit the size of their families, and of the latter, strictures on the prevalence of black teenage pregnancies today. I suggest that in fact both big families and teenage pregnancy are logical and rational strategies for some people at particular times and under certain circumstances, and that neither phenomenon is evidence of dogged conservatism or sociocultural disintegration. Rather, both are examples of culture operating in its most flexible way. The case of large families will be pursued later in this paper and the issue of teenage pregnancies is dealt with in a second paper to be delivered at this conference.

If culture provides alternatives for action it also provides for a wide range of views and opinions on any topic. It is this flexibility at the ideational or cognitive level which allows the members of a culture, and more concretely an individual, to hold at one and the same time two apparently conflicting beliefs. It is this flexibility which explains the paradox referred to at the start of my paper which seems to be contained in our adherence, on the one hand, to the belief that population must be limited, and, on the other, to our support for the millions of rands spent on promoting fertility. Although it may not always be immediately obvious to those concerned, differences of opinion and of outlook may be salutary and are one of the mechanisms through which change takes place. It is likely that the major characteristic of a culture which is undergoing rapid change is, indeed, the many alternatives open and opening up to people. For some this may mean becoming first more tolerant of and then adapting new ways; for others, however, it often means retracting all flexibility and stressing the value of the “old ways” regardless of changed circumstances and, in the view of more adventurous colleagues, apparently in the face of all reason. The difference in response to the opening up of new options is, of course, epitomized in the labels “verkrampt” and “verlig”; those who fall into the former category often go so far as to validate their conservatism by reference to, as the case may be, “God’s will” or ancestral decree. In the field of birth control, people willing to use contraceptives often pride themselves on being “modern”, while those who refuse to do so explain their decision in terms of children being a gift “from God” and prevention of their birth as being therefore a sin.

An important point needs to be made about what on the face of it looks like conservatism in whatever guise it is encountered. A refusal to change may represent a rational and indeed wholly up-to-date and hardheaded assessment of the best course of action. Drawing on the past as a model for action need not necessarily be evidence of a pig-headed refusal to change. I have argued elsewhere that the continuation of so-called traditional rituals to cleanse a young unmarried girl after she has fallen pregnant (Preston-Whyte & Louw 1986; Preston-Whyte and Miller 1987) is just such an instance of a creative selection and reinterpretation of the past. As we shall see, setting limits to fertility may well appear counterproductive if viewed in the context of poverty and limited access to social security.

A fascinating duality is thus exposed in culture as defined here and that is its ability at one level to allow for new ideas and, what is more important, new technical solutions to what at least some people regard as problems, and at the same time to set up barriers to the acceptance of these “advances” in other sections of the community. This is why anthropologists point out that culture is contradictory; it is flexible and generative but also restrictive and conservative. No wonder it is difficult to gauge its measure and, even more so, why social predictions so often prove wrong. It is in addressing the question of whether people will or won’t accept them that we need to move our level of analysis from culture to the wider social realm and in particular to the direct influence of social relationships on the way that people finally choose to behave. We must move thus from blueprints to decision making. This is a field which anthropology has long shared with sociology, and some of the insights into human behaviour upon which I shall draw in what follows are by no means the preserve of anthropology. What is, I feel, unique and valuable is the combination of a cultural and a predominantly social action perspective in attempting to understand not only human action but change and, in the case of attitudes to fertility, the resistance to change.

As I have argued at some length, fertility is today a matter not of biology but of choice and the choices are not made alone. Individuals act as members of particular social groups and as partners in a marriage or some other relatively stable and enduring dyadic relationship. It is here that the influence of how other people think and behave becomes critical. As we already know, culture may well contain within it contradictory views on any important issue and it is very likely that not only
will individuals think differently, but so may specific categories such as men and women, the old and the young, those in power and the powerless. The permutations are often apparently endless and the question then becomes one of how consensus is achieved and action made possible. One answer lies in viewing social life as made up of give and take, or reciprocities and transactions, of negotiations between people who stand in particular relationships to each other by virtue of their roles in a relatively fixed and enduring social structure.

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND CULTURAL OPTIONS

Most social scientists would agree that humans are, above all else, social beings. They, and particularly their young, cannot exist alone. The child must be taught how to survive. This is achieved primarily through language which, while it is based on the human ability to symbolize, itself extends and exploits this capacity to make culture the complex and flexible survival tool which we have seen it to be.

Language can only be taught through an individual's (and particularly through a child's) involvement with other human beings, i.e. through involvement in social relationships. It is the demands and the rewards of the social relationships that surround us all through our lives which impinge upon and affect the choices we make about how to act. We are continuously assessing situations and deciding what to do in the light of what we consider to be right (in terms of cultural rules), but also in terms of how our actions will appear to others and particularly, to those in positions of power or authority and to those people whose opinions we value.

Some social scientists consider humans to be essentially self-seeking in the use which they make of social relationships. As a result they argue that social life is made up very largely of exchanges (Blau 1964) or, as an influential group of British anthropologists based at the University of Manchester in the 1960s argued, transactions between people in which both sides consciously or unconsciously seek to make use of each other for their own benefit.

Writers of the Manchester School introduced the model of the individual as the centre of what they termed a network of social relationships. In their research they showed by means of detailed case studies how individuals manipulated those around them by entering into transactions with them in order to achieve their own ends (Mitchell 1969; Kapferer 1972). Often, of course, the subjects of their attention were less than successful in their strategies and in these instances the Manchester anthropologists pointed to imbalances in power and access to resources, both human and otherwise, which, by setting the limits within which the transactions took place, affected the outcome of personal machinations. The founder of the Manchester School, Max Gluckman, had long before pointed out that people's choices and actions are also constrained by cross-burting ties and loyalties (1959). Any decision, in fact, is to some extent a compromise between the ideal and the possible and a vital component in deciding on a course of action is one's assessment of what the reactions of those upon whom one relies for support in other situations will be.

The type of analysis which focuses on the individual and on the leeway with his or her relations with others, and particularly with those who have power over him or her or upon whom he or she is dependent in some way, can be, as I shall show later, extremely useful in understanding why people embark on what appear to the outsider to be quite irrational or self-destructive courses of action. This method can also help to explain why some people and not others can afford, or may be even forced to adopt, particular courses of action, be they conservative or progressive. In this way transactionalism provides a setting for the analysis of culture at work and in transition.

There is however more to transactionalism than this. The custom of seeing people as existing within a complex nexus of both supportive and conflicting social relationships leaves the way open for a number of different and currently fashionable theoretical interpretations of society and of the dynamics of change. While the later transactionalists stressed the leeway people have to manipulate their "social networks" and so initiate change, the earlier proponents of this approach pointed to the controlling features of the network (Barnes 1954; Bott 1957; Mayer 1961). In much the same vein Marxists focus on the limitations placed upon people by their class position and by the historical moment in which they live. Although these scholars see the dynamic of change as lying outside individuals, it operates through them and the choices they make; thus conservatism becomes the result of false consciousness.

Culture, context and the problems of intervention

We have so far been looking at the very specific manner in which anthropologists use the term culture and how this usage, together with their notion of the network of social relations, provides a useful model for looking at the extremely complex field of social life. An anthropological perspective has one other important lesson for us and it is the classic formulation that we cannot understand any one aspect of life without placing it in its wider frame of reference. Thus, although we may be focusing attention specifically on fertility, and this may seem to be concerned with, on the one hand, medical issues and, on the other, with attitudes to family size, we cannot limit our investigation to these areas but must seek to place them within their wider social, economic and political context. We often hear the so-called "experts" in technical fields such as engineering or agriculture claiming enthusiastically that they have "the answer" to a particular development problem. Later they are both baffled and annoyed because their solution was not immediately and gratefully accepted. Faced with this situation an anthropologist would look for some good cultural reason (for instance conflict with some existing rule, action preference or belief) or the creation of an insurmountable conflict between the demands made on individual action and the fulfilment of existing social obligations by the acceptance of the suggested technical innovation.

It is often no more difficult to discover the root of a cultural problem than to listen to and take seriously the perspective and complaints of the people concerned. In short, it is necessary to take culture seriously. But this is, it seems, the most difficult thing for any human being to do. So all-pervasive is the effect of our own culture (and this includes any innovation or technical solution of which we may dream) that we find it extremely difficult to take the demands of other people's cultures seriously. Instead we brand the people who refuse to take our advice as either stupid or wilfully obstructionist. A more profitable approach would be to consider the full ramifications of the innovation by examining it in its widest context. Attempts to persuade black women to limit their fertility are a case in point. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to present-
ing an anthropological perspective on this issue by examining firstly, the notions of fertility prevalent among Zuluspeaking people and then by considering the way in which the social pressures operating on black women in and around Durban interact with these cultural blueprints to make the voluntary limitation of the birth rate less than universal.

It should be noted that at least some of the cultural preferences with respect to fertility and, more important, the reservations expressed by black women about contraception are shared by white women in the same region, even if not in the same urgent terms. Where the critical difference lies, I believe, is in the nature of the sociopolitical imperatives affecting black people. The discussion will serve to demonstrate that when we speak of “context” we may have to go beyond what appears at first sight to be the simple cultural answer. It may, indeed, be necessary to look at the wider social field—in this case at the full economic and sociopolitical reality of living as a black person in an apartheid society.

A note on methodology

The fieldwork upon which the following remarks are based began as an investigation of teenage pregnancy in the black residential areas of greater Durban. Working on a number of fronts, and together with research teams based in different areas of the city, I soon realized that what black parents and community leaders regard as the problem of teenage pregnancy could not be isolated from the wider issue of attitudes to fertility and the high value placed on children in all sections of the community. Together with a group of community nurses under the direction of Mrs M. Zondo of the Kwazulu School Nursing Programme, I began to probe the cultural meanings given to fertility by teenagers. Recently I have begun exploring the complementary views of adults. In this investigation I am working together with a small community research team drawn from the residents of Mpumalanga under the direction of Mrs H. Gumede and Mr L. Mbaso of the Mpumalanga Child Development Project. We are working in close collaboration with research undertaken by Mrs J. Smit of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Durban-Westville. In both studies the predominant fieldwork methods have been both individual and group interviews, together with observations at community meetings focused on the issue of teenage pregnancy. In what follows, verbatim quotations will often be given from our field notes in order to preserve and translate as far as possible the nuances and texture of the cultural meanings which emerged from discussions. The people interviewed were drawn from both working-class and professional backgrounds and these differences are indicated when certain quotations are made.

Fertility as a cultural value

The subject of limiting the size of families presented to a wide range of black women and particularly to those who have a fair number of children, usually produces readiness agreement that “too many” children create problems in a poor family. In a significant number of interviews, however, the point was made quite spontaneously by the interviewees that this is especially and possibly only the case in town. “If you live on the farms it is better . . . you can grow food. In town you have to buy it all and if your husband loses the job you are in trouble.” One might rejoin (as the interviewers did in some instances) that even in the rural areas, and perhaps particularly in many of the poorest, food is simply not so easily available today as it once might have been. Many of the women recognized this fact but it became clear that they were making a rather different and important point. This point was that in ideal circumstances (i.e. enough food) a “large family” and this means “at least five children”, is desirable.

In opposing the problems of an urban situation as they experience them with an ideal rural situation, the women were, I believe, making a clear statement of preference. Given a different dispensation, most saw no need to limit the number of children they had or might have in the future. Some women in fact challenged what they took (presumably because the discussion was about “family planning”) to be the implicit assumption of the interviewers that children should be limited. “Why do you want us to have small families? Children are a good thing if you can bring them up properly and educate them and everything”, one said. The same sentiments were voiced again and again during other interviews and group sessions and the overwhelming consensus of opinion after long discussion and argument was invariably that it is only where resources are strained or a particular type of lifestyle is either inevitable or preferred that a small family may have advantages.

The idea of wanting to have fewer children as a value in itself is neither widely appreciated nor accepted. For many black people the latter is a model introduced by medical personnel and by the proponents of population control, most of whom are representative of a cultural tradition in which fertility is today viewed as a potentially disruptive attribute and one which must be carefully controlled. This model is basically at variance with the value which most black people ascribe to fertility. There are of course exceptions; as we shall see, the professional people we interviewed tended to value smaller families, suggesting that as in other fields, class makes a significant difference in both attitude and action. On the other hand there are many white people of all classes who are antagonistic to birth control, suggesting that factors other than class alone may be operative in this sensitive field.

“Children are given by God and you should not deny this gift by preventing.” This sentiment epitomizes the reaction of many of the black women to whom we spoke and to whom the idea that they should use some form of birth control was unacceptable. In the white community it is largely members of the Catholic Church who hold this view, because in this case of black women it is expressed also by non-Catholics and appears to be a strongly felt value held even by women who have limited or who are limiting their own families. “Well, I have no choice now. I have six kids already and my daughter who lives with me has two. How can we cope with more? But I don’t really like it . . . ” What exactly is it that constitutes the very clear value placed on the bearing of children and, furthermore, on having many children? What indeed is the full cultural meaning of fertility for the people we were interviewing?

These questions are by no means easy to answer for, as suggested earlier, cultural meanings are usually complex, multi-faceted and, above all, highly symbolic. In their very nature they defy a simple or single exposition and their essence lies in the cues they give to and are given by a multitude of other conceptual categories and associations. Even for the “insider” (as for the most part the members of the research team were) it is difficult to capture in words, and especially in those of another language, the full nuances of emotional and intellectual
meaning that the ideas evoke. Since all the women interviewed were either Zulu-speaking or came from related Nguni-speaking groups, we may turn to the ethnographic literature on the topic of fertility and birth in order to begin clarifying our ideas.

Although much of the ethnographic material was written a fairly long time ago and was based largely on observations made in rural areas, recent work has indicated a strong conceptual continuity between the present and the past. This continuity is in keeping with the point made in the theoretical section of my paper, to the effect that while change is brought about by the opening up of new ideas and options for action, the older models are not necessarily expunged from memory. They remain as part of the cultural repertoire to be drawn on as needed, and in some cases as a deliberate strategy, not so much to oppose change for its own sake but because the beliefs or actions of the past seem to provide a rational approach to the present. It is important to note also that one of the major contemporary sources on Zulu conceptual categories, that of Ngubane (1977), is based on fieldwork carried out in the Nyuswa area of the Valley of a Thousand Hills which is situated not twenty minutes’ drive from the areas from which many of our informants were drawn. Nyuswa is the home of many Zulu traditionalists who work check by jowl and interact with the most sophisticated of townspeople who are increasingly less scathing in their assessment of so-called “Zulu ways” than they once were.

Eileen Krige has written that the two most important emphases in Zulu religion are health and fertility (Krige 1936; 1968; 1969), a view attested to by Berglund (1976) and Sundlén (1961; 1976) as well as by Ngubane. The two are, indeed, linked by the role of the umadlozi, the ancestors who control and oversee both, and in so doing bring good fortune and prosperity to their descendants. Berglund (1976:115), when discussing the relationship of men, women and the shades with an informant, was told that “when a man thinks of a woman it is the shade that cause him to remember the sweetness of the thing. They cause him to wish for the thing and make him strong in the place (i.e. cause erection)."

Although fertility is regarded as natural in the sense that it is inherent in humans (as in animals and in nature generally), it also lies in the power of the ancestors to withhold this virtue. This they may do if they are angry and principally if they deem themselves neglected by their descendants; hence the many offerings made to them throughout life and particularly when a woman is leaving her home to marry. It is clear from Ngubane’s work that failure to conceive on the part of a bride is placed first at the door of her father’s ancestors who may have neglected her nubility rites. As a woman gets older and bears more children, their illness and even her failure to conceive again may be blamed on her husband’s ancestors, but it will still be ancestral intervention which is considered a likely cause. Indeed, birth, and by association fertility, is the affair not only of the living but of the shades who guard its potential with jealousy. To interfere with this guardianship is to tempt their anger.

The next question to ask is why the ancestors should be thought to want children. The answer is so that their descendants may feed and remember them. Both men and women recognize this desire and this is why a man is said to want sons in particular. Girls marry and leave their parental home eventually becoming integrated into the home of their husbands. A woman is remembered by her sons with whom she has a strong tie as the one who came into their paternal group to make their birth possible. An older woman has as much of a vested interest in the bride her sons bring to the home as does her husband because it is these brides who will produce the next generation to remember them both. It is hardly surprising that a woman’s in-laws watch her carefully for signs of pregnancy and celebrate the arrival of each child as an affirmation of their good relations with the shades. Coincident with these attitudes is the conception of a marriage as unfulfilled until blessed with children and of a family being created by them. The ancestors regard themselves as the owners of the cattle of a home and these possessions are in some ways the equivalent of children because it is with cattle that a son acquires a wife and eventually children.

Although today money may take the place of bride wealth, the bovine idiom is often observed and variations of sayings like “cattle beget children” still abound. Fertility in cattle is thus as important as it is in humans and although people recognize that it is not appropriate to judge people who live in town in the same terms as they judge those in the country, the value remains and is expressed in statements such as the following: “In the old days a man was known by the size of his umuzi (household). He had to have many wives, many children and many cattle ... in town we can’t have all that but men still want the children.”

The continued importance today of fertility in all its guises and particularly of having children is clear. The remark also highlights another point which was often made and that is that even in cases where a limit is recognized as practical, it is set at least three and often four children. “... two boys and two girls ... TWO of the Whites’ pigeon pairs!” to quote the laughingly made comment of the wife of a successful businessman who continued, “I could do with just the two, but my husband, never!” In another interview a highly placed community nurse noted that it had been her husband who wanted a “small” family. “He said a car can only take five people, the husband and wife and three children, not three children in the back.” There had never been any suggestion of their not having children if they could, despite the fact that she had always envisioned a full-time professional career for herself. Indeed our research suggests that both those women with little education and those who have risen to the heights of professional achievement tend to agree that children are an accepted and valued part of their domestic lives.

Approaching the issue from another angle, it cannot be emphasized sufficiently that the birth of a child is the occasion for rejoicing whatever the circumstances. Numerous anthropologists have documented the fact that even where the mother is not married, black parents, and most significantly the grandmother of the child, although extremely angry about the pregnancy and apt to grumble a great deal before the birth, welcome and care for the child when it arrives as they would their own baby. As one woman in this position said, “He is mine. God gave him to this family and who am I to refuse?” A marriage which does not produce children is not regarded as fully consummated; a dyad consisting of husband and wife without children is not even thought to be a proper family. Similarly, a woman with no child is pitied. If she is married she has “shortchanged” her husband and interviewees mentioned cases of women whom they had known to be willing and eager to take into their homes the children born to their husbands by another woman. Many women pointed out that in what they referred to as “the old days” and some said “even today” the bearing of seed for a barren sister was accepted as normal. In fact,
in response to the controversy over the ethics of Mrs Anthony's surrogacy, one woman commented that she was amused "by all the fuss ... We blacks have accepted something like this for generations ... It is the baby that is important not the way you get it". She went on to explain how "many rural people believe that it is the amadlozi (ancestors) who send children to their family" and "to deny them is wrong and will just make the amadlozi angry ... They want their families to grow ..." Although she herself may not have followed these precepts the point is that she was aware of them not only as an example of an alternative way of looking at things, but as her next words suggest as resulting in a sensible approach to family size. "I don't know about the amadlozi but I do think they were happy days when we could have lots of children!"

If children are a gift from God, or in the case of traditionally oriented people, the ancestors (and it makes little difference in what guise the deity is conceptualized), it is the duty of women to bear them, and it is the pride and joy of men to generate them. Procreation is essential to the fulfilment of a man as a social being and as a person. "Men must have sons", explained my female informants. "Wont one or two do ... and are girls not enough?" we asked. "No", came the immediate and emphatic answer. "A man always wants you to have another son. They don't even think it might be a girl ... if they think you are preventing they will nearly kill you ... if you do it secretly they take you to the doctor because you haven't conceived ... it is no good, a woman has to be very strong to go to the clinic ... and then his family also begin to whisper ..." The ethnographic descriptions of the treatments for infertility attest to the importance placed on the bearing of children and Berglund gives evidence of techniques thought to be able to influence the gender of the unborn child.

Men take pride in the number of children they have fathered and with the exception of very strict Christians, are pleased and even boast about the children born to their girlfriends as well as to their wives. Fertility again knows not the bounds of marriage and is a value inalienable and sacred in and unto itself. This value is given expression in the regularity with which men talk about and apparently enter into extramarital affairs and is passed onto the next generation when fathers give tacit approval or even encouragement to sons to pursue girls. "A boy who doesn't go for girls is not a man," said one young male informant. "My friends and the older men ridiculed me so I have to find a girl ... Even my father was not so cross when she was pregnant ... He just said that is the way boys are and then he helped with the phone calls." When asked what he thought about using contraceptives he laughed. "Why should we? It is good to see you can have a child ... And also for the girl ... I would not marry one unless I was sure she would have children."

Not surprisingly, one of the greatest fears voiced by a wide range of women about using contraception is that it will lead to infertility. This in itself is something that strikes at the very heart of notions of womanhood and of the role women should play vis-à-vis men. "A wife must have children ... if she can't she is not a wife" but she is also not a woman. It is this feature of the cultural conception of female sex that has perhaps not been fully appreciated or considered by those who have blithely sought to promote contraception and programmes of population limitation. It came strongly to the fore when interviews were held with teenagers who were asked why they did not practise birth control. "But I wanted a baby ... you know if you have a boyfriend for a long time and do not become pregnant people begin to whisper and laugh ... They say you are inyumba (sterile)." This is perhaps the worst reputation which a young girl can earn because it means not only ridicule but also that a man will hesitate to marry her. Certainly one of the most important questions asked by a mother about her son's chosen wife concerns her capacity to bear children. In the light of what has already been said about the general value placed on fertility and the birth of children in forming a family, this is not a surprising reaction—even from very young women. Girls whose lovers had opened marriage negotiations admitted to having deliberately not taken contraceptive measures because they wished to show their ability to conceive and because they "naturally wanted a baby".

In the light of all that has been said, the apparent equanimity with which a child is welcomed, even if the young mother is not married, is clearly understandable. So is the very real reluctance on the part of many unmarried women who may not actually want a child at that point in their lives to use contraceptives. "I was afraid that the injection would make me never to have a baby ... An older lady to whom I spoke said that she had not had her periods for a year and now can't get a baby." Menstruation flows are seen as evidence that a woman is fertile and their cessation is associated with the menopause and the end of this stage in life (Berglund 1976: 121). In a young woman irregular flows are indicative of infertility. The very whisper of complete or even temporary irregularity is enough to keep women both from "preserving" themselves and certainly from advocating action for their daughters or any other young woman who come to them for guidance. Rather by far a child and the proof of fertility than the whisper or reality of infertility. In the light of what was said earlier about the influence thought to be held over the fertility of a woman by her father's ancestors, it is not surprising that many parents are antagonistic to any form of contraception which might be thought to impair the future fertility of their daughters.

The importance placed on fertility in a woman takes on another perspective. Unmarried women who have no child and who are unwilling or unlikely to wed often seek to conceive or are pleased that they have a child (Preston-Whyte 1978: 83 Footnote 1). Discussing this with a group of women from Mphumalanga during the early stages of the present research produced mixed reactions. At first some maintained that single women should not have babies because "it is a sin before marriage" but soon more general discussion produced the feeling that a woman would "stay lonely" without a child. The conflict between this and a strict Christian morality which confined fertility within marriage was clearly appreciated, but the value of a child predominated.

Listening to the testimonies of individual women who, although they were not married, had children and said that they could "never do without my baby", and also discussions with older married women about what their children meant to them, it became clear to our team that the women who had children looked to them for help and possible support. I was forcibly reminded of the sentiments of unmarried domestic servants who, in the course of earlier research, had often posed the following question: "Who will look after me in my old age if I don't have a child?" (Preston-Whyte 1981: 167-168). Herein lies yet another pointer to the value placed on children in contemporary black society and one
which deserves as much attention as the cultural value of fertility itself. This response may indeed turn out to be the reason why the cultural value placed on fertility does not lessen as it might otherwise do under the influence of both modernity and the spread of information by the wide range of health and medical services which are currently promoting population control and family planning.

The social context: Apartheid versus fertility control

In most societies the aged and ageing probably turn first to their children for the emotional and physical care they increasingly require. In some societies there are alternative support mechanisms and, as is the trend in the white South African community, the provision of old age clubs, pensions and homes eases what has come to be viewed as the burden of caring for the aged. The state now has come to provide many of these facilities and the relatively wealthy rely on private pension and medical aid schemes, thus lessening the direct financial reliance of old people on their children. What did not take long to surface in group interviews with the black women was that similar facilities are minimal in the black community. Many women made the point that both husband and wife grow old and need to think of their old age. To quote only one remark in this vein: "I have my mother living at home but if I did not know who would have her. I am just lucky my husband agrees. We did not have sons in our family who didn’t run away so she has nobody else... you see, we black people need many children as we can then we will have a hope not to be left stranded." One woman went so far as to argue that “it is not just children you need but grandchildren. My mother stays at schoer but Siphe (her grandson) is different. He studies hard and wants to be a lawyer. Do you know how much they earn? I will just sit at home and rest!"

Who indeed will provide a home and security for the many thousands of single or unattached domestics who have reared generations of white South Africans? Of the other old people, both men and women who at best receive a meagre state pension and at worst have not even been able to qualify for this benefit? It is undeniably true that the money which most black people make during their working lives is seldom sufficient to support them in old age, let alone make this the carefree period of retirement and well-earned leisure to which most whites look forward. The fact that many people are chronically poor and change employment so often also mitigates against their contributing to the few pension and medical schemes which are available to blacks. The sad reality is that they have no alternative but to rely on kin and particularly on children for financial support in their old age. In addition there are precious few old-age homes for black people and so most old people also live with relatives and once again, with their own children. Is it surprising that they want children and see them as the only sure way of securing their future? Although played out in different ways, the scenario is the same in other parts of the developing world (Cain 1980; Mathew 1973; Holm 1975; Kelly et al. 1976).

Even were the problems of old age to be catered for more adequately, black people in this country face the threat of loss of employment to a greater degree than do most whites. Unemployment benefits are meagre and many people do not qualify in any case. Here again a number of children who might have jobs seems a reasonable strategy (Derman & Poulney 1987; Caldwell & Caldwell 1988: 24-25). To cut off consciously this line of support seems to many simply foolish and viewed in this light who can argue against the logic of their assessment of the situation? To reply that there will not be enough jobs for everyone is no adequate answer.

As conservationists have found in many other areas of resource scarcity, most people make their decisions with their own case in mind rather than with a realistic assessment of long-term reality or even “the greater good of the whole” as a deciding principle. In relation to both population and the availability of employment the Tragedy of the Commons is the order of the day (Hardin 1988). In a country such as South Africa where the vast majority of citizens are already engaged on the basis of cultural definition on the margin of privilege if ever there was one—it is hardly surprising that most black people cannot afford those altruistic sentiments which might further endanger their very survival. There is a clear lesson to be learnt from the experience of other developing countries which is succinctly put in the following quotation from the official report on the proceedings of the last international conference on population held under the auspices of the United Nations (1984: 50):

“More generally, an environment of greater certainty about the future, which accompanies a decline in mortality, will increase parents’ motivation for fertility control as they realise the opportunity to chart their own futures and make greater commitments through education and other investments in their living children.”

It must be clear by now that this paper is moving into the area of practical politics. Fertility control has long been a political issue for black people in this country although many white South Africans have refused to recognize the reality or inevitability of this. We have seen that black resistance to family planning is as often as much a response to poverty and underdevelopment as it is to a cultural value for children and fertility. It is also often a response to political domination and exploitation. The bottom line is, of course, numbers and the power they bring. To deny this by saying that people refuse to limit the numbers of children they have simply because they attach a cultural value to them or is to hide behind the concept of an unchanging cultural model and to misstate wilfully the concept of culture which is espoused here. Indeed there may be an expressed cultural preference but it is not, I believe, held in the fact of rational self-interest. People manipulate culture and cultural models and it is in action that this process can be most clearly observed.

We have moved already from ideal models to what people consider to be the realities of life and the options open to them. In seeking to understand the final decisions which they make, i.e. in turning to look at behaviour itself, we move our focus of attention to consider the microdynamics of personal interaction—the intricate reciprocities and transactions between spouses and lovers and the influence of the opinion of those who make up what the Manchester anthropologists termed the network of social relations surrounding any and every individual.

RECIROCITIES AND TRANSACTIONS; CHANGE AND THE LIMITS OF CULTURE

Although the option to curtail or temporarily limit their fertility is readily open to black women, and particularly to those living in the areas where the research reported
on here is under way, it should be clear why some and probably the majority of teenagers, many relatively young married women and even unmarried women who have as yet no children, should hesitate to “prevent” as they call it. They themselves value fertility and children highly and the men with whom they are sharing a sexual relationship look to conception as a natural and valued consequence of their sexual activity (Oppong 1984). Peers, in-laws and casual acquaintances rate success as a woman and wife in these terms also. The woman who decides voluntarily to deny her potential fertility and not have a child must be secure in the belief that she is doing the right thing and that she will be able to have a child one day. She needs probably more than anything the support of her husband or lover, but she also needs the backing of her friends and close kin, or at least the absence of their disapproval.

Let us not take too negative a stance, but rather look at a few of the possible scenarios in which contraception and the limiting of family size are workable options for black women today. A single twenty-year-old readily admitted to being “on the pill”. She was working as a maid at an hotel and was hoping to do her matric the next year; however, my boyfriend is a policeman and he wants me to become a teacher. We discussed the whole thing and in fact it was him who sent me to the clinic.” In another case, a young girl remarked, “I don’t care if they call me inyumba—I know that I am taking pills, and so does my boyfriend. He has already spoken to my uncle and when we have R500 for illabala I will probably stop as the wedding will be soon. We are both Christians and want a “white wedding”. My father says he won’t pay for one if I cannot wear the veil (the symbol of virginity or at least not having had a child).”

Most of the girls to whom we spoke who have been positive about using contraception have stressed the importance of finishing their education, be it merely school or some form of training. “It becomes harder to get qualified if you have a baby, that is, it sets you back a year or two; it is better to ‘prevent’ and if you are at college people know why you don’t want a baby yet.” Interviews with some boys and young men produced a similar response when the early birth of a child was evaluated against achieving a good education, both for themselves and their prospective wives. Indeed, in reviewing the results of a wide range of individual and group interviews, the common denominator in responses positive to contraception and delayed pregnancy was the achievement of education and a professional “ticket”.

It is by no means only the young who set store by education. Older women may also see education as an alternative to the security of children’s support. A professional nurse in her late thirties who was studying for a higher diploma noted: “If I can just get this qualification I will be able to get a really good job with a proper pension. I will be ‘somebody’ in the community and I won’t have to rely on anyone when I become old.” In fact she added (no doubt because of the topic under discussion) that all that was needed was to “fix this business of having so many children is better education and more jobs with medical aids and pensions like whites have.” In this she was unconsciously repeating the predictions of generations of sociologists. Her remarks also draw attention to the fact that education and by implication the earning power that it brings, provide not only an alternative form of security but also a widening of the basis upon which women may be judged to have made a success of their lives. This of course in time may move the current emphasis on the bearing of children to a secondary position on the scale along which women are judged and judged themselves. It is clear that this change is underway amongst professional people and the close friends from whom and with whom they make and create their role models. Indeed, a small family is often regarded as the epitome of being up-to-date and modern.

The fact that some black women do attend clinics and do choose either not to have more children or to delay conception shows that it is possible to mediate the predominant value placed on fertility for its own sake. For some (and probably the majority of) women however there is precious little leeway. A bride or a woman who has only one or even two children is under the scrutiny of not only her husband but his family. Within this circle the bearing of children is not only expected at a public level but is part of the less tangible but critical emotional transactions between wife and husband, between a son and his parents, and is the very cement which binds the couple together and makes the marriage a success. It is only when a woman is menopausal as she is relieved of this obligation or when she sees clearly that the domestic unit can little afford more and more people think is about to make her decision then and she has to be willing and secure enough to face her husband’s complaints and even his recriminations. In addition she herself has to be very certain that she does not want another child “when I see my son growing up I am sad and say where is my baby?” In this, black women are of course no different to many of their white counterparts who pay lip service to the ideal of small families but when faced with the prospect of their children growing up, may themselves welcome another baby (Warwick 1988: 17).

If we look back at the material given above it will be clear that little of it is new. Most of you have heard it all before. What may be novel is the way in which it has been presented and the logic of the conclusions which I shall now proceed to draw from it. Above all it is the totality of the picture presented and the process of moving from and between cultural and social levels of discourse which illustrate how anthropologists might approach an understanding of any particular issue. They could, as I did, concentrate first on culture, i.e. when people think and belief operating the important blueprints for action. They could sketch, as it were, the universe of possible action, noting alternatives and contradictions, the different points of view and the weight they carry. They could look at the leeway which actual people have. Can women refuse to have children, do they wish to and if they can, under what circumstances? If they refuse can they survive? Here I would take into account both their long-term security in old age and their short-term security as a wife and woman who has fulfilled the expectations of her peers and relatives. The latter are the “significant others” upon whose approbation her self-esteem as a woman depends. Having done all this and, as it were, tried to get a view “from the inside” we must then try to move to the role of an “outsider” and draw conclusions which it would be difficult for the insider to see clearly.

**CONCLUSION**

Attempts to persuade black people in this country to limit the size of their families have often encountered resistance. The simple, and unfortunately the most acceptable explanation for whites, is the extremely high cultural value placed on fertility by most black people and by the men in particular. This is indeed the response one gets in reply to one’s initial questions to the people
concerned and it is certainly one of the places where any anthropologist with an understanding of culture and a commitment to exploring cultural meaning and their effect on behaviour would begin to look. So far so good, but the next and critical question we must ask in order to get to the root of the "problem" and, more important, to provide a basis for devising a solution is this: why should an emphasis on fertility continue when it is clear that many children strain already meagre resources?

The answer must be sought in the wider social, and in this case sociopolitical, realm and turns on the fact that most black people in South Africa do not have access to adequate non-family-based social security. Instead they very wisely hope to rely on children's earnings to support them in old age and in illness. The more children one has, furthermore, the more likely it is that at least one will have a job. One way of persuading people to keep their families small is to change the rules governing access to public social security (Entwisle 1983). Of course there is more to it than that; I see you all thinking of the resistance that contraception on the part of the wealthiest and white South Africans who are also recipients of state and private pensions. Here, it is true, we would have to return to a cultural explanation, perhaps to one in terms of religious objection and some religions have indeed proved singularly impervious to attempts to introduce contraception in the Western world. The determination of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue should convince anyone of the force of culture (Warwick 1988:7-8). It should not, however, discourage our attempts to come to grips with culture. In America, as in many other places, this kind of culture is clear that many cultural stumbling blocks can be negotiated. Alternative ways of accomplishing new things may be worked out and if the benefit is clear, at least to some of the people concerned, they are usually keen to lead the way in getting round such obstacles. Career-oriented professionals are a case in point as are people who no longer see their future as lying in the hands of their children.

FOOTNOTES
1. It is a fairly recent concept even in Western history that homosexual dyads are regarded by some to be equally appropriate arenas for child rearing.
2. Philip Mayer described how many Red migrants to Port Elizabeth were what he termed "encapsulated" within the close-knit amakheya (homeboy) groups in which they lived in the hostels. Not only did these men live together, they spent their free time together and helped and supported each other in times of crisis such as the loss of employment. The older men controlled the younger and any signs that an individual was losing interest in his own home or adopting town ways, i.e. taking up some of the new behavioural options presented to him in town, called forth strong opprobrium from all his fellows. Because he was to a large extent dependent upon his amakheya for a job and accommodation in town, the individual was usually persuaded to conform and to desist from trying anything new. As a consequence he might work in town for many years but yet remain essentially rural in outlook and practice.

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