Apostolic faith church organization contexts for health and wellbeing in women and children

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Abstract

Objective—The study explored contexts for health and wellbeing for women and children influenced by the structural behavior of an Apostolic faith church organization in Zimbabwe.

Methods—Twenty-three purposively selected members of an African indigenous Apostolic church (males =12; females =11; age range 22 to 95 years) were informants to a focus group discussion session. They provided data on the institutional behaviors that were culturally-historically embedded in the organization's activities. Data were analyzed thematically and using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to foreground essential themes.

Results—The church organization provided social capital to support health and wellbeing in members. However, the culturally embedded practices to minimize decision making by women and child members potentially compromised their health and wellbeing.

Conclusion—The findings suggest that the structural activities of the church for health and wellbeing could also have the paradoxical effect of exposing women and children to health risks from obligatory roles.

Keywords

Apostolic faith; structural behavior; health and wellbeing; women and children

Introduction

The evidence for the influence of religiosity on health is accumulating. For instance, research suggests that religion and religiosity is a protective factor for adolescent sexual behavior (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, and Thoreson, 2000; Wallace and Williams, 1997, Willis, Murry, Brody, Gibbons, and Gerrards, 2003). Clergy and congregation reported positive mental health and wellbeing through the influence of religion (Pargament, Ensing, Falgout, Olsen, Reilly, Van Haitsma, and Warren, 1990; Pargament, Koening, Tarakeshwar, and Hahn, 2004; Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison and Wulff, 2001). Faith-based organizations purportedly achieve positive effects on health and wellbeing by the social capital they construct and consume within the organization -- which also reduces

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vulnerability to health compromising conditions (Smith, 2003). However, religious organizations in their diversity cannot uniformly claim these benefits for all congregates (Agadjanian, 2005). The structural behavior of each religious organization, its ideology and the cultural-historical context, influences the ways in which it would enhance or impede health and wellbeing among its members.

Theoretical underpinnings

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987; Engeström,1999; Vygotsky, 1978) posits that an organization's social structural behavior influences the health and wellbeing of the membership through its social influence programs. This proposition has not been previously examined in the context of practices in a faith-based organization; however, it is particularly useful for our study. CHAT is a social influence theory originally proposed by the historical philosopher Alexei Leont'ev (1978) and subsequently elaborated on by several others, notably cultural psychologists researching the structure and evolution of cognition (e.g., Cole and Engeström 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). CHAT considers organizations and their constituents (members) as active learners in a socio-cultural process foregrounded by historical learning experiences.

Organizational learning is mediated by social actors (in this case clergy, congregates) committed to translating the organization's value system through enacting activities that serve the purposes of the organization. CHAT makes a distinction between activity and actions. Activities are the ends which justify an organization's existence. Actions are what the members do to achieve an activity. For instance, if a faith-based organization believes social roles for men and women are preordained by a higher authority, then gendered actions are likely to be practiced. The membership would share a need to satisfy the motive for an activity (e.g., righteous living) through actions (e.g., separate worship roles for men and women) believed to achieve the purpose or object of an activity (holiness).

From a CHAT perspective, actions on their own (e.g., separate worship roles for men and women, personal hygiene for women) cannot be explained outside the motives for which they are enacted (e.g., righteous living). Activities are sustained through a cultural-historical transmission process and served through invisible (or taken for granted) action rules for everyday living. However, in the enactment of an action or actions (e.g. observing a religious event) to achieve an activity (lived holiness), a contradiction may arise (e.g., woman spiritual leader in a male dominated church). In resolving the contradiction, organization developmental growth may result (e.g., ordination of women pastors).

In conservative religious organizations such as the Apostolic faith church (hereafter Apostolic church), males have a greater say on defining activities (biblical living) and the views of women and children may be unrecognized or discounted (Agadjanian, 2005; Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010;). For instance, within the faith-based organization, the enactment of an activity by the male leadership may be unquestioned, generating "undiscussable" contradictions (Engeström, 1999), which may be experienced by the women congregates to be "dis-enabling" and anxiety causing. Occasionally, developmental anomalies to the structural behavior of the organization can occur when invisible or undiscussable contradictions are questioned through member actions that apparently would achieve a valued activity differently than the historical way.

The advantage of CHAT competing systems oriented theories is that it is a practical theory of organizational behavior that recognizes the capacity of organizations to self-transform through learning from negotiating contradictions that may emerge in efforts to achieve its mission (Cronen, 1995). Our qualitative study sought to apply CHAT to explore structural

influences on the health and wellbeing of women and children members of a rural Zimbabwe Apostolic church.

Case example of the Apostolic church community

In our study of the influence of church on the school enrolment and retention of orphan girl children in Manicaland (Zimbabwe) (Hallfors, et al., in press), we contacted an Apostolic church community to acquire in-depth knowledge of the cultural-historical activities of one of the church's many sects and to explore the consequences for health and wellbeing of children and women in the church. We were drawn to the activities of the Apostolic church because we had found that large church meetings required the withdrawal of children from school to attend religious observations and in some instances, minor girl children had been given in marriage to older male members. Moreover, 25% of the orphan girls in our study reported affiliation with an Apostolic church. Although we realized that there was considerable diversity among Apostolic sects, this initial case study provided an excellent opportunity to explore cultural historical structures which might influence health and well-being.

The church is an African-founded Christian organization under the general umbrella of Apostolic churches, believed to have been initiated by a spiritual leader with a mission charge from the Holy spirit that combined Christian and African traditional cultural-religious practices (Daneel, 1987). The practice of polygamy is one such practice, guided by biblical practices from the Old Testament. The number of wives for a male church member is a reliable proxy measure of his seniority or status in the church leadership, and women and children are spiritual minors to males (Daneel, 1987; Louw, in press).

Goals of the study

Our specific line of inquiry focused on the following aspects in relation to their potential consequences on the health and wellbeing of women and children:

1. *Structural behavior of the church community from a CHAT perspective*. We sought to discern purposes served by the cultural-historical activities of the church organization, including precepts for holy living, with potential consequences for health and wellbeing of women and children.

2. *Reproduction of the church's cultural historical behavior through marriage, and child rearing*. We explored the ways the church endorsed actions regarding the institutions of marriage and child education recreate the values that underpin its structural behavior and to reflect on the probable effects on the health and wellbeing of women and child congregates.

3. *Developmental transformative learning of the church organization*. We sought to determine ways in which the church organization provided the impetus for organization growth through self-learning. Our specific interest was to explicate the prospects for positive learning for health and wellbeing for women and child members from the structural behavior of the faith organization.

In summary, we applied CHAT to explain influences on church activity roles and to reflect on the implications for health and wellbeing of the behavior of the church as an organization. In addition, we examined how the church reproduces its structural behavior through the institutions of marriage parenting and child rearing, and also how the church organization is capable of self-learning for health and wellbeing among the membership.

Method

Research design

We utilized an exploratory interpretive qualitative research approach for this study. Interpretive qualitative inquiry is appropriate to study "an activity …not immediately accessible consciously" and investigators "must interpret actions and opinions… [with] careful reflection" (Christiansen, 1996, p.178). Data for interpretive qualitative inquiry are collected mostly though participant observation, interviews, and discussion in naturalistic settings (Christiansen, 1996; Cronen, 1995). Interpretive qualitative inquiry approaches are particularly appropriate for exploratory studies such as the present one, whose goal is to derive preliminary evidence on institutional influences likely to impact upon health and wellbeing in the membership of a faith-based organization.

Participants and setting

Participants were 12 male and 11 female members of one Apostolic church sect (referred to henceforth as the church) (aged 22-95 years) identified using both purposive sampling and snowballing techniques. Table 1 presents the participants demographic characteristics. All participants were farmers and part-time vendors.

The church national general membership is estimated to exceed five-thousand adults, and a national leadership of approximately 50 elders. The church membership numerical size is typical of Apostolic church sects in Zimbabwe.

The purposive sampling was appropriate to the goal of this study which was to provide exploratory evidence on aspects of the behavior of the organization important to health and wellbeing in women and children. The participating senior church leadership was well versed with the church culture, history and core values. The snowball technique enabled us to identify and include others known by the church membership to be credible informants on the church faith and affairs. The participants included the direct son of the founding father, and senior pastors with more than three decades of membership. Younger adult members of the church were also included. We are confident that we captured the institutional memory of the church organization from our interviews as well as contemporary views represented by the younger study participants with high school education. None of the church members declined to participate.

Data collection

Data for the study were collected in September 2008. We used open-ended questions with focus group discussions on core cultural historical and contemporary activities of the church in four broad areas: 1) the church as a religious organization, and specifically its structural behavior; and 2) how the church organization influenced and perpetuated itself though the institutions of marriage, and child rearing. Data were collected in the native, or first, language of the participant informants to enable richness of data from the ease of speech and to reliably capture embedded cultural nuances important for contextual interpretation of the data.

Credibility and trustworthiness of the data were established by allowing participant informants to lead discussion to their inter-subjectively determined consensus point for the specific questions. Participants were also informed at the beginning of the discussions that they could revisit any part of the interview with additional commentary as needed and to their satisfaction. We were also able to triangulate data from observing consistencies in participant member responses across overlapping questions.

Author positionality

We declare the historical-cultural membership of the lead and third listed authors of Apostolic church sects similar in faith teachings and practices to the one we studied, and also from the same district as the participants. The lead author was baptized in the Apostolic church, but currently attends a Protestant church organization. The third listed member is an active member of a respected Apostolic church in the same district as the subject church. The second listed author is a member of the Methodist church, and others are members of the Anglican church. Because the lead and third listed investigators on the research team have historical membership of the Apostolic church, we were trusted with information that otherwise would scarcely be shared with relative outsiders or strangers.

We also attended a national conference of the church organization as part of our partnership building and the third listed author addressed the congregation demonstrating his credentials in Apostolic church praxis and ideology. Attendance at the national conference also allowed us informal interactions with both the church leadership and ordinary members, equipping us to better interpret the focus group discussions to follow.

We resolved to bracket our preconceived understanding of the indigenous Apostolic churches in the study area to allow an honest qualitative inquiry with the subject church community. Having Apostolic church members on our research team strengthened our reflective learning with the informant participants from the church.

Procedure

The study protocol was approved by human research ethics committees at the U.S. Pacific Institute of Research and Evaluation, The University of Zimbabwe, and the University of Sydney. Participants provided written consent to take part in the study. Data were collected in the early evening hours at one of the church leader's homes. The church leader's home served many functions, including prayer center, health consultation clinic, advisory agricultural services, and general church administration. Male and female members of our research team separately interviewed male and female participant informant groups. The conduct of the group discussions by gender was appropriate to the gendered functions of membership in this faith community.

Data were collected by two transcribers verbatim and with ascription only to the group identity by gender. Back translations were provided by other bilingual persons from the same linguistic cultural background to check the credibility and reliability of translations. In addition, similarity of translations of a comparable native language word by several participants provided a reliability check for the translations.

Data Analysis

The participants' responses were analyzed thematically using panning approaches (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, 2007; Tesch, 1990; van Manen, 1997) to reveal major themes. With the use of panning, preliminary themes are identified and tentative frameworks for thematic clusters are created. Themes are clarified and revised as new ones emerge. In other words, the generation of themes and analysis of the data occurs concurrently. Credibility of themes was established by the consensus of the research team, by member checks, and by other data triangulation techniques. Because of the gendered nature of membership of the church, responses were analyzed for each theme by gender to the extent possible, while allowing for gender nuanced themes. We overlaid constructs from CHAT for an interpretive framework of the study findings combining responses from both the male and female participant informants.

Results and Discussion

Findings address the structural behavioral qualities of this Apostolic church sect, and particularly how the faith-based organization's cultural-historical activities influence the context in which health and wellbeing are realized by women and child congregates. To the extent possible, we reflect on likely paradoxical effects on health and wellbeing of the church's obligatory actions for the membership.

Structural Behavior Influences

Following CHAT, we pay special attention to how the church organization's behavior potentially could influence for health and wellbeing for women and child members. Next, we consider the actions it enacts to achieve its purpose, and how these actions have health and wellbeing consequences.

Activity behavior—A primary activity of the church organization is enabling holy living by the congregates. To serve this purpose, church members in their focus group discussions shared the belief that everything that happens in the church is either caused by the Holy Spirit or in direct connection to it. For instance, a male interview participant observed:

> The difference between the Apostolic church and other secular[1] denominations (i.e., traditional churches) is that its policies, directives and community involvement are driven by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides the agricultural system that is to be adopted; the direction that the community should be following, the administrative and directional approach of the community in general and the church in particular are governed by the Holy Spirit. For example, if the Holy Spirit directs that the church members remain in the church facility for three days; members are expected to comply with this direction without any reservation (male focus group).

As the Holy Spirit is the Apostolic church's main explanation for things that happen in life, the church does not appear to acknowledge the concept of human agency (e.g., Ryan and Deci, 2002) in direct connection to an individual's level of accountability or responsibility. The followership is co-opted into prescriptive actions regarding church teachings. Primarily decisions and achievements made in the church are not perceived as the doing of individuals but is the Holy Spirit being channelled through church elders and leaders. Substantive leadership functions are attributed to a higher spiritual authority. For instance, a participant was of the view that:

> Congregational leaders are well respected individuals, whose net worth is measured by the ability to organize large numbers of people since this in turn translates into a large number of converted individuals into the sector membership. The ability to excel in this arena is also thought to be influenced by the Holy Spirit (male focus group).

The dominant position of the male leadership in the church organization, which is perceived as spiritually legitimate, allows males a lot of flexibility in how they interpret and enact faith-oriented moral injunctions (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010). Senior women of the church are ascribed leadership qualities in terms of how well they are perceived to discharge selfless service roles for holy living by self and others. They are believed to be selected for this role by a higher spiritual authority. For example, the woman elder was characterized thus:

[1] The Apostolic sect members consider churches that presumably underemphasize leadership by the Holy Spirit to have a predominantly secular orientation; hence the reference to such churches as secular churches or churches of the flesh.

> She repented in 1980 and got the Holy Spirit…She started this role (prophet) in 1992 and she has never asked for payment from the people she helps/heals. The church regulation does not allow her to ask for payments. When she does not have food in the house she has to pray so that God will send some people with food (female spiritual leader).

The woman elder also has teaching roles believed to exemplify the best spiritual qualities within a church organization in which women are spiritual minors. For example, the woman spiritual leaders must lead other women, teaching them to uphold the biblical teachings of selfless service to their husbands. Female focus group members observed of the senior woman spiritual leader that:

> She loves her work and (she is) happy with her leadership skills. She always reserves time to go and talk to and make her husband happy. She does not work throughout the whole day without making sure that all is going on well (female focus group).

It is likely that the high esteem in which the woman spiritual leader is held may have positive health effects. Nonetheless, the obligatory actions expected of women congregates inclusive of spiritual, home care and church commune welfare functions place them at elevated risk from role overload (Agadjanian and Menjivar, 2008; Kay et al, 2009; Mumby, 2006). Future studies should investigate the coping strategies women congregates use to positively resolve contradictions to achieve best outcomes for themselves and their families.

Consistent with the belief in the ultimate goal of the church organization of leading members to spiritual health, followers believed in spiritual healing. For instance, they considered the church an alternative health care system in its provision of respite from chronic and debilitating health conditions. For instance, in regard to church membership, informants were of the views that:

> The church is open to any new members; it is unlikely for new people to seek membership, unless they are going through various problems in their lives (male focus group).

> Usually people who join the church are those who come to seek healing when they are sick and when they are healed they decide to join the church. Some will join the church after the evil spirits following then are exorcised. A few come because they like the singing and the drums. (female focus group).

> People become new Christians mostly when evil spirits haunting them are cast out (female spiritual leader).

Church members held mostly metaphysical explanations for health and wellbeing which emphasize spiritual rather than material sources of health and wellbeing (see also Mpofu, Bojuwoye, and Peltzer, in press). Church prophets are believed to have the gift to intercede between the living and the spirit world, and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to drive out demons that may be causing illness in prospective or current church members. The predominant belief in metaphysical explanations for their health conditions adds to the church's control and regulation of health aspects of members' lives.

Behavioral Actions—Our focus group interviews considered the extent to which obligatory actions on the membership by the church may be both health compromising and sustaining. Observance of the Sabbath is a case in point. Focus group interviews with both males and females revealed that the church observed an obligatory weekly holy day (Sabbath day). On this day several activities are prohibited so as not to distract the church's congregational members from spiritual observation. Sabbath Day restrictions include life

directives for church members believed to achieve a meaningful connection with the Holy Spirit through their earthly actions (i.e. forgiveness, doing unto others as one would like done to them, prayer and confession). However, the Sabbath restrictions on women are quite steep. For instance, the female focus group observed that:

> On the Sabbath Day women are not allowed to… make love (for married couples) … pleat their hair and to relax it. Women are not allowed to breast feed in the church.

The restrictions of women to express their sexuality on the Sabbath take away choices they could make in their private or personal lives. The reasons for the restrictions on breast feeding in the church are not clear. Breastfeeding during church service may be proscribed from implicit association with sexuality and nakedness. It may also be to avoid distracting other worshippers or to encourage women to breastfeed in more comfortable circumstances. Future studies could consider the intent behind specific church behavioral prescriptions on women in the context of health costs and/or benefits.

Prospective female church members are subject to controlling institutional actions. For instance:

> Women can only be admitted as members of the church with consent from their husbands. …church can avoid law suits accusing them of organizing membership for wives without their husbands consent …in …traditional communities women are still considered minors, requiring husbands consent to take up any contractual agreements (male focus group).

> If the one joining a church is a married woman, the church will request for a letter from the husband that states that the women have been allowed to join the church and if it is an unmarried person a letter from the parents is required. The person is baptized and the elders of the church will teach her/him the rules of the church (female focus group).

Membership is monitored to stop congregates from engaging in settings or relationships which may present parishioners with differing and possibly competing principles and values. In traditional churches in Zimbabwe (e.g., Protestant, Roman Catholic), women followers do not need the husband's (written) permission to join a congregation. In fact, many Zimbabwean men do not attend church to avoid repeat exposure to admonitions by the church leadership not to drink or smoke. The social control through the Apostolic church's gate-keeping on membership enables it to maintain and sustain a close knit social network for the membership, which accords them social capital important for their health and wellbeing (Agdajanian & Menjiver, 2008). At the same time, being part of a close knit and relatively insular faith-based organization could result in a disjunction from public health and social welfare services in the event that such services were needed (Maunganidze, 2008). For example, many Apostolic churches refuse to have their children immunized or treated for potentially life threatening illnesses, such as malaria (personal communication, Provincial Medical Director, May 2010).

The church provides for sanctions across a range of practices. For example, sanctions apply for infringements of the rules regarding garment wearing. The church takes great pride in the garment uniforms that members wear to be identified with the organization. The uniforms present in a variety of colors with each believed to be revealed to congregation members by the Holy Spirit in a dream. Adorning of church colors is considered a spiritual privilege and defrocking sanctions follow for offending core church values. For instance, the male focus group expressed that not being able to wear Apostolic garments was a form of punishment

for impure, deceptive and sinful behavior. Offenses that typically would lead to loss of uniform privileges include:

> failing to abstain from marital activities, stealing, participating in political activities, drinking alcoholic beverages, and eating meat at a funeral… (male focus group).

Restitution is possible by subjection to a disciplinary process by the church leadership.

> The disciplinary process can include discontinuation of member's ability to participate in prayers, not being allowed to wear the apostolic garments (male focus group).

The complete termination of membership is a relatively rare sanction, and most infringements are handled through counseling or a disciplinary procedure. The ready availability for counseling allows for health support to congregates who may be sanctioned, without the loss of membership privileges.

Organization Continuity

CHAT postulates that an organization will maintain and sustain processes to reproduce itself, and to ensure continuation into the future (Cole and Engeström, 1993). Organizations typically achieve this purpose through the reproduction of their cultural-historical structural behavior, and also learning from developmental contradictions in actions to achieve the objects of the organization.

Reproduction of the Church's Cultural Historical Structural Behavior

The institutions of marriage and child rearing are strictly regulated for compliance by the church membership. That way, the church is able to reproduce and sustain its core structural behaviors.

Marriage—Marriage is subject to partner restrictions:

> Young people are prohibited from marrying outside the sect membership (male focus group).

> Couples who marry within the church are supposed to set the example of good citizens … respected members of the Apostolic church who can set themselves apart from other couples who have no spiritual guidance and might have met at the nearest beer hall (male focus group).

> Marriage [for woman] is considered a union of two members of the Apostolic church who are guided by the Holy Spirit (male focus group).

The women seemed to imply voluntarism in marriage that is atypical of the Apostolic faith churches in the district, which tend to be dictated more by the wishes of senior male leadership than expressed love between two mutually consenting members of the church.

> When people fall in love they will inform the church elders. An announcement will be made in the church that the two are in love. (female focus group).

The church instructs that within-church marriages are for the spiritual good of the church members and their well-being. According to the participant informants:

> This process is to avoid young people from marrying non-believers who might resort to consulting witch doctors in order to resolve family emotional problems; a process strictly prohibited by the Apostolic church (male focus group).

To maintain the Apostolic church's influence on their younger congregates, the church encourages that young people marry as soon as possible after high school.

> Marriages are encouraged soon after the girl completes her high school. There are some cases where a minor girl is married after finishing her Grade seven. The church has no problems with that as long as the two families have agreed (female focus group).

The younger men informants, however, were more circumspect about the timing of marriage.

> Other regulations which are expected to be followed in terms of marriage include marriage only after the completion of a stated educational level, as well as above the government minimum age of marriage (male focus group).

This view was in apparent contradiction to acknowledgement by the older male church informants that an unborn female child could be pre-selected by the higher spiritual influence to be married to a church leader, and those early marriages for girl children occurred more often than by chance. This study foregrounded a likely undiscussable contradiction, laying the basis for further inter-organizational discussions to resolve the contradiction and transform church practices in regard to marriage for minor children.

The church teaches that marriage is obligatory. As noted before, the institution of marriage is important for the reproduction of its structural behavior. According to the participant informants:

> Young men and women are prohibited from remaining single, in other words have to marry, to avoid the possibility of living in sin, such as prostitution (male focus group).

> Those that fail to marry are expected to spend most of their time occupied in physical work; lazy people are not welcome in the church (male focus group).

In order to keep apostolic members together and away from those outside of the church, rules are enforced against intimate bonds created with people who are not church members. For those who do marry, the Apostolic church sets out guidelines for how marriages should be. Although these rules are general and apply to both men and women, monogamy was discussed as mainly a woman's responsibility. The following excerpts are illustrative:

> Divorces are not allowed in the church. If you have some problems with your wife you go for counseling. A woman can be divorced after she is caught with another man (female focus group).

> The only accepted reason for divorce [for woman] is extra marital activities (male focus group).

Divorces are allowed only for men on women and not vice-versa. For instance, while the consequences for adultery on women are quite steep, the Apostolic church permits men to engage in polyamory/polygamy with obligatory endorsement of their first partner (Mavunganidze, 2008).

> Men are allowed to marry several wives but it should be after the first wife has agreed that the husband should do so. At times the husbands are marrying second wives even if the first one refuses (female focus group).

As women are often viewed as minors in their community and within the Apostolic church (Agdjanian, 2003; Maxwell, 1995), if a husband dies, his wife does not necessarily choose her new partner. The women participant informants shared these views:

> When your husband dies you are allowed to remarry your husband's brother if the family accepts that (female focus group).

> Women within the church are supposed to be the cornerstone of their families. For example, if the community from which the member comes from believes in the passing of a wife to the nearest relative (i.e., wife inheritance) after the husband's death, the church upholds their decision in an effort to maintain the cohesiveness of the family relationships (male focus group).

Wife inheritance poses serious health risks for women congregates in a country with one of the highest HIV prevalence in the world.

Child rearing—Child rearing practices also seek to reproduce core church values and principles. This is achieved in various ways, but especially by regulating their faith and social networks--allowing only for those within the church network. For instance:

> Children are not allowed to join other churches. They will bring problems to their family (female focus group).

> Most new members, young and old continue to be members of the church for their entire life. Occasionally younger members do get astray depending on the friends they associate with who are outside the church (male focus group).

To avoid children fraternizing with people outside the church, the congregation is instructed that non-member children are different in important social and sexual ways. For example, more conservative social etiquette is expected for church children.

> Kids from the church have manners and respect. They do not wear mini dresses and trousers [girls] (female focus group).

> Children born within the church membership are considered holy and different from the rest of the public and are expected to voluntarily observe the family night curfew (male focus group).

Possibilities for Transformative Growth

There is evidence from this study to suggest that even as the Apostolic church seeks to reproduce itself over time, it also achieves transformative growth. For instance, the inevitability of developmental learning is acknowledged in the following excerpts from focus group discussion with the male church members:

> Before St. X (notation for church founder member's name) died, he told his Apostolic organization that there would be a third Apostolic center…After St. X's death, the Holy Spirit showed signs of dissatisfaction and destabilization for a considerable length of time within the Apostolic sect. In the end the leaders within the church organized a huge conference which brought members from across Africa to deliberate on the unsettled spiritual conditions that existed after St. X's death and to try and exert a unified consented effort in trying to establish where the third center's location as indicated by St. X might be. This historic congregation was organized at Z (notation for a locale in the wider district in which the church is predominant), and the culmination of the spiritual atmosphere that descended on this congregation was so powerful that all the elders concluded that this indication was signifying that was the third center (male focus group).

The fact that the church has a history of anticipating and negotiating contradictions from maintaining church cohesiveness with fewer centers of worship and growing the church by adding new centers of worship in other locations speaks to its adaptability to changing circumstances -- including leadership changes. In a previous section, we made reference to

emerging women leadership at the level of prophet. Success at that activity level bodes well for continued organization learning to allow for greater gender equity, which would have positive health benefits for women congregates.

The church also perceives public education for children important for their individual health and wellbeing in a modernizing national economy. Informant members were of the view that:

> The Apostolic church greatly values education; as a result all church members are encouraged to send their children to school. In fact, depending on financial abilities, parents are encouraged to provide as much education for their children as possible up to and including sending them to overseas institutions for higher education. The only set back, in the educational process of the Apostolic members is the three day abstention from school for Passover. According to the Apostolic church, this three day abstention from school is crucial because the Holy Spirit expects every member to abstain from eating, particularly eating prohibited products, a prerequisite which cannot be guaranteed if the children are in school for those three days (male focus group).

> Children are encouraged to go to school. There are no special schools where the children can go. They are allowed to attend any school depending on the affordability of the parents. When attending important church conferences children are expected to absent themselves from school and attend the church conferences (female focus group).

Input from church teachers is also available:

> When in church services there are some teachers who look after the kids and teach them (female focus group).

The school is the major institution from which church members learn developmentally appropriate social behavior for the wider community, of which their church is a relatively disconnected part. Prospects exist for some of the children from the church community to attain bicultural social competencies from participating in the diverse value systems represented by church and school (Mpofu and Watkins, 1997). However, the children from the church community could also experience estrangement from the competing value systems of the church and school, and this would carry significant risk for well being. Follow-up studies on the developmental trajectories of children from the church organization could help shed light on likely effects of transacting contrasting value systems from church and school. Findings would be important for school-church partnerships for child health.

Participation by children in public education provides a prospective growth opportunity for the church. The participation in formal public education for children is an atypical quality of the church compared to other Apostolic faith organizations from the same district that restrict children from accessing formal education. Although the church allows children to attend any school their parents can afford, parents and their children are reminded that the church/Holy Spirit is the ultimate teacher. More research is needed on the overall influence of formal education on the developmental transformations that occur in the church.

Limitations of the study

This was an exploratory study on church organization's likely structural behavioral influences on health and wellbeing of women and child congregates. Participants comprised a small convenience sample of church followers, purposively selected. The sampling constraints allow for only tentative conclusions from this study. Although the participants

were purposively selected from among those accessible to the senior pastor's home, we have reason to believe there was sufficient diversity of views as to reflect that participants were not just speaking to standard church ideology. Leaders and members were interviewed in the same gender based groups, which may also have influenced the extent to which ordinary members could express alternative perspectives without fear of censure. However, within gender groupings, relative differences of *emphasis* were apparent among leaders, followers, and between leaders and followers. Future studies could survey church leadership and followers separately. In addition, studies should supplement interview data with participant observation on the day-to-day activities members engaged for a more complete picture of church influences on health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The Apostolic church's structural behavior creates a strong sphere of influence on the congregation's perceptions of self and others; and conceivably, their prospects for health and wellbeing. Positive effects on health and wellbeing in women and children are likely from the social capital accorded with membership. Women and children, however, are vulnerable to poorer health outcomes given the asymmetries on power, dominance and obligation to conform with restrictions on access of public health services. Nonetheless, the social stability through participation in the church activity systems potentially would be protective of health and wellbeing in women and children through the ready access to social capital resources for the membership.

The origins of rules that derive the specific church actions are cultural-historically embedded in the church's founding father's mission, temporal-spatially removed from the church's current congregational leaders or members and perpetuated as deriving from something bigger and more powerful than the church itself – the Holy Spirit. The church, its leaders, prophets, evangelists and healers are perceived as channels for the Holy Spirit to deliver its message. As such, the minimization of human agency creates risk potential to the health and well being of women and child members who have little decision making authority compared to adult males.

The church is a learning organization and capable of developing stronger health and wellbeing supports for women and children over time. The openness of the church to public education for its child congregates represents a window of opportunity to transform cultural-historical ideologies that disenfranchise women and children in their choices for health and wellbeing.

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Table 1

Participants Characteristics

Characteristics	Males	Females
Age range (years)	22-95	23-53
22-26	4	4
32-35	4	6
52-72	3	1
96	1	0
Marital Status		
Married	8 (75%)	11 (100%)
Highest Level of Education		
Primary/Elementary school	1 (8%)	-
High school	11 (92%)	11 (100%)
Occupation		
Church pastor	4 (25%)	-
Women ministry	-	1 (9%)