

NO MUMS ALLOWED, EVER!!! GHANAIAN YOUNG ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR PARENTS

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Abstract

In most societies, mothers invest more time in being physically and emotionally available to their children than fathers. Therefore, for most children, the relationship with their mothers is the most important in their lives for many years. However, in adolescence and thus in the struggle for their own identity, young people have to reshape their family relations and thus their relations with their mothers to become autonomous subjects. In a study with children (aged 10-13 years) in Winneba, Ghana, they were asked to write an essay about their fantasies regarding an ideal childhood. Envisioning their ideal life as a child, they repeatedly addressed—among other issues—their relationship with their mothers and fathers with regard to availability (i.e., time together), financial or emotional support, responsibility, and (in)dependence. Using selected examples from the essays that were analysed using the documentary method, the study discussed the following issues and questions in this paper: What do children imagine to be an ideal relationship with their parents? What are the characteristics and differences in the children's conceptualization of a perfect mother, and an ideal father? How do they imagine ideal gender relations? In addition, the study examined what these ideals can tell individuals about their perceptions and experiences with family, cross-generational, and gender-specific relationships in their current life in Ghana. Among others, the findings showed that young adolescents define ideal parents, predominantly, with images of availability. Although egalitarianism is portrayed as the best family structure, with domestic chores, traditional gender roles are mostly favoured.

Keywords: fantasy, ideal childhood, adolescents' perception, parents, gender relations, availability

Introduction

In most societies, mothers (have to) invest more time in raising children and being physically and emotionally available to the children than fathers or other family members. Therefore, for most children and adolescents, the relationship with their mothers is the most important in their lives for many years. This is also the case in Ghana, where women still take on the main share when it comes to child care and raising (Del Boca et al, 2020; Waterhouse et al, 2017)

However, many adolescence family dynamics tend to change as the growing child is confronted with new developmental and social challenges, which in turn have an impact on family life and intergenerational relationships (Hall, 1904, Erikson, 1968).

Still, when studying young Ghanaian adolescents' (10-13 years) fantasies about an ideal life – which they outlined in narrative essays - we were initially surprised by the emphatic exclamation “No mums allowed, ever!!!” of a 13-year-old girl in the context of describing a perfect family situation. Furthermore, the researchers struggled with the fact that quite a number of the

participants included mothers as servants (who cook favourite foods or take over the participant's chores) in their perfect life. Being confronted in such a way with our own presumptions about the kind of relationships between children and mothers (e.g., close, positive attachments or some respect for mothers' investments) the study took this as starting point to investigate participants' ideas of relationships included in their fantasies. This investigation was led by research questions like: What do young adolescents imagine to be an ideal relationship with their parents? What are the characteristics and differences in the conceptualization of a perfect mother, and an ideal father by children? What is for them a perfect family?

Using an interpretative-reconstructive approach of analysis, Documentary Method as explicated by Bohnsack (2010), the study aimed at reconstructing the implicit knowledge and meanings underlying these (explicit) ideas i.e., exploring young people's perceptions and experiences of gender and cross-generational relations in their current, everyday life in Ghana.

In this paper, the researchers will first present the theoretical background followed by a description of the research design and the methodical approach. Afterward, the results are presented and discussed and conclusions are drawn.

Family and intergenerational relationships during adolescence: Theoretical and methodological framework

Children grow in families, be it biological or adopted, with both parents or with a single parent. Empirical evidence shows that the family, to a large extent, plays a key role in children's emotional, physical and social development. The family is also children's initial contact with society and thus influences the way children see the larger world. Hence, the family is an invaluable unit to the total development of children. For this reason, children depend on their families in so many ways and for almost everything they need to have a fulfilling childhood. It is also with the family that cross-generational relationships are learned, adjusted, and implemented. This makes the family's availability to children very crucial.

The subjects in this study fall within the developmental period of transition from childhood to adolescence or early adolescence. During this phase of life young people all over the world face fundamental and simultaneous changes in multiple areas of life, such as physical and biological changes as well as alterations in family relationships and in the social sphere (Backes & Bonnie, 2019; Erickson, 1968 1968). The often-resulting challenges in dealing with these changes might – depending on social support and individual resources – even cause psychological strains like anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem (Orth et al, 2008; Nguyen et al, 2019).

Furthermore, adolescence is characterized by specific points of friction, such as the contradiction between biological and social maturity or between the increasing demand and concession of social responsibility on the part of adolescents on the one hand and their legal and financial dependence on their parents on the other. Erikson (1968) described this situation as a moratorium granted by society in which adolescents can explore life paths in the course of their identity development within a protected framework. Parents play an important role here, still as significant attachment figures but also as representatives of the adult world from which young people try to distance themselves in order to form an autonomous identity, (Ruhl et al, 2015; Shomaker & Furman, 2009)

With regard to relationships with parents, the emphasis today is less on the necessity of detachment as a prerequisite for one's own autonomy than on the reorganization of family or intergenerational relationships in which adolescents acquire an increasingly equal status (Ingoglia, 2011; Bi et al,

2018; Pace & Zappulla (2013). At the same time, parents remain important reference and support persons during adolescence and beyond (Harter, 2015; Janssen et al 2021; Patrikakou, 2004; Lindstrom et al, 2019)

However, many of these considerations on adolescence and especially family relations at this time of life are based on theoretical models from the western world. Yet, research on growing up in West Africa and Ghana respectively also shows the immense significance of parent-child and family relationships (Nsamenang, 1992, 2008; Boakye-Boateng, 2010, Twum-Dansoh Imoh, 2013,) and recent changes Twum-Dansoh Imoh, 2012; Amoateng et al, 2017). According to the United Nations' Pop Facts, (2017/2), Ghana falls under the group of countries whose family structure falls between 3-4 people with either one or both parents present. A particular aspect of West African family life is the level of responsibility already given to children and adolescents when it comes to domestic chores such as caring for siblings, which is seen by adults as a key element in the child's development into a responsible and capable member of the community (ACRWC, 1990, Nsamenang, 2005; Nsamenang, 2008; Nsamenang, & Lamb, 1994; Boakye-Boaten, 2010). However, the paucity of research on how West-African adolescents perceive and evaluate their family relations such as Twum-Dansoh Imohs (2013), necessitates particular focus on such issues to bring research abreast with information on them.

For this obvious knowledge gap, the study analysed the conceptualization of parent-child relationships and family life that young participants elaborated in their essays on a perfect day in their life as a child. In our opinion, such idealized conceptions allow us to draw important conclusions about the perception of these very relationships in their everyday lives.

Accordingly, this requires most explicitly the use of research methods that will, first of all, give children the needed space to communicate their thoughts (Christensen & Prout, 2003, Swauger, et al, 2017) and secondly increase their influence on research outcomes while reducing adults' filters and control, (Nind, 2014; Kellett, 2005). Writing narrative essays on a relevant topic (here: a perfect childhood) can be one such way, which leaves room for the children to deal with childhood in general and with their own in their particular way (Sun & Nippold 2012; Acquaye, 2022)

However, for data analysis – in research in general but in childhood studies in particular - it is important to control one's own presumptions and prior knowledge to avoid its imposition on the data which in our case would also mean imposing an adult view on children's perspectives. For this, we decided on the documentary method, a qualitative-reconstructive approach that entails explicit procedures to control the researchers' influence on the data. Moreover, based in the reconstructive research paradigm, the documentary method follows the assumption that human behaviour is motivated by two levels of meaning: the explicit level, about which people can communicate, and the implicit (or atheoretical) meaning, which is mainly based in the unconscious, incorporated through everyday life experiences and cannot be communicated (Bohnsack, 2010; Mannheim 1952).

This meaning is not evident from the physique of the expression but is subtly superimposed on it, often, without the explicit intention of the subject (Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2010; Volkmann, 2018). Hence, the key issue with the documentary method is to make what is implicitly known explicit. In practice, the documentary method makes use of distinct levels of data analysis. It starts with the so-called formulating interpretation, i.e., the data is searched for themes and subthemes. This step focuses on "what" is actually said or written by the participant without referring to the implicit knowledge and explores the level of the explicit meaning. The next analytic step is the reflecting

interpretation, here the focus shifts from what is said or written to “how” this is done and thereby to the level of the implicit meaning. Through comparative analysis, e.g., the look at different cases, differences, and similarities can be elaborated to reveal patterns of meaning across and beyond the themes usually leading to the formation of types, especially, where huge data sets are involved.

Ethical consideration and Profile of the participants

Letters were sent to the basic schools in Winneba to ask permission to collect data from the young adolescents and contact was made to them after permission was granted by the school authorities.

The 42 young adolescents in the main study were within the age brackets where children are between primary 5 and form 2 in Junior High school. Also, the key social expectation from them is for them to be in school. The participants were selected from two basic schools (one private and one public) in the Winneba Municipality. The focus of the original study was to explore children’s fantasies of ideal childhood and findings showed that as they fantasized about an ideal childhood, they focus on particular issues (themes) that are of interest to them and their implicit knowledge as deduced from the data, is influenced mostly by their socioeconomic background. One such theme is relationships with their peers and other significant adults.

For this article we focused on only one of the themes – (relationships) and further on the subtheme of relationship with their parents as indicated in figure 1. Seventeen (17) out of the 42 essays mention relationships of some sort with their parents.

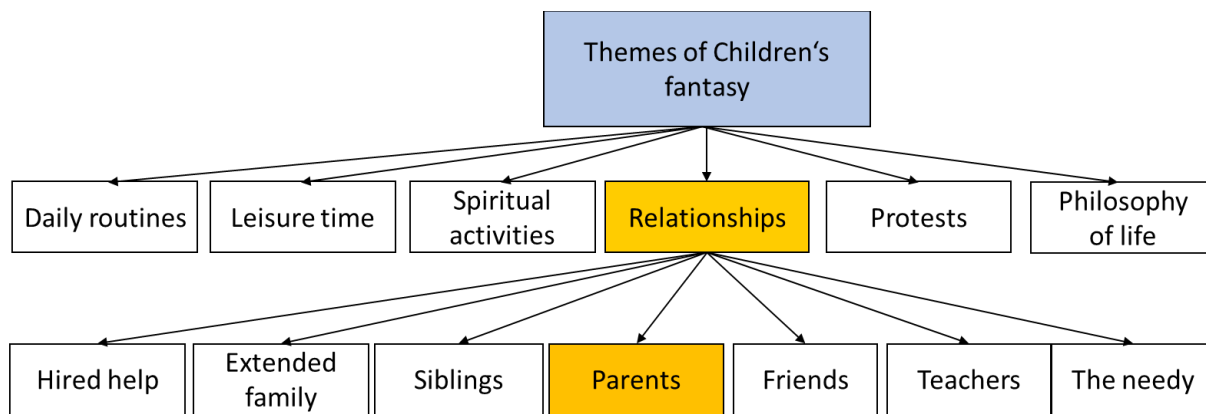


Figure 1: Themes as identified in formulating interpretation and subthemes on “relationships” (Authors’ resource)

The next session on our findings started with a description of the most salient topics when participants mentioned their parents (from differing perspectives of joint family activities, financial, and emotional support, responsibility, and (in)dependence, which were followed by an elaboration of the inherent meaning connecting these topics – the question of availability.

Findings I: What do Ghanaian children expect from their parents?

Joint family activities

Joint family activities here refer to the parent's inclusion in, especially activities outside the home such as shopping and recreational activities like going to the zoo and the beach. It is also acquainted with parents being outdoors (for one reason or another) with their children. In this case, the relationship with parents is defined by the parents' availing themselves for such activities. Therefore, an ideal parent should provide opportunities to be outdoors with their children.

At 9:30, my parent said we should go to West Hills Mall. When we got to West Hills Mall, we entered and we bought play station five, DSTV, Skate board, skating shoes, school bags, travelling bags, tablets, laptops, computers, pizzas and leather belts. After my father went to buy a very nice care name Hunda, spare runner. My siblings, my parent and I packed the things we bought at the boot of the car. We sat in the car and my father drove as to the house. When we got to the house the time was 3:30pm we removed all the things we bought from the boot of the car. We sent them inside the room and looked at all the things we bought. The time was 4:00pm my parent and my senior brother fixed the DSTV. After we connected our play station to the DSTV so I was left with four play stations.. (Essay 14: 11 years boy)

The above denotes how children would want a family time together to be like. Although it could be argued that this is more about spending and buying a lot of things, the emphasis is on the family doing it together. In other narratives, the young people wanted to go shopping all by themselves. However, in this case, the main idea is for the family to do it together. Children pick a lot of attitudes, desires, preferences, etc. from their daily experiences, however, having their parents around them, and doing things together tend to shape the way they see the world. It fosters love, care, and emotional support. This fantasy reinforces children's desire for role-model parents who they can be proud of and whom they can show off.

Also, in this relationship, young adolescents position themselves as being in control and thus getting their parents' attention as desired.

Then of Friday, I'll go and visit my mother and my caretaker, ... Then I will take my mother to the beach and we will have some fun, then I'll take her back. (Essay 3: girl 11 years)

In this case, the child takes the mother to the beach instead of the other way around, which is usually the case. The child's taking the adults to beach implies that the child is in the position of ¹power to "call the shots" in their relationship. In this scenario therefore, the young adolescents perceive themselves as powerfully influential in the parent-child relationship.

Financial support

Parents are expected to fund their children's basic needs as well as their wants. Although in fantasy children may wish to earn their own money purposely to spend it without adults' constraints, they understand their position as not able to earn money and thus settle in on their dependency on their parents. Hence, parents are positioned as financiers of childhood expenditure which also includes anything children fancy to acquire.

In my perfect life my parents will give allowance 50GHC every week. (Essay 1: 11 girl)

So when I was tired I came to my mother and take some money to buy some toffees and ice cream. (Essay 14: 11 boy)

¹ 50GHC is equivalent to €9.00 or \$10.90

In the above examples, the financial support that children require from their parents are not connected to basic needs of life like food, shelter or clothing. These are not part of childhood fantasy because the assumption is that those things will be automatically provided for. This way, children position their parents as being responsible for their fundamental human rights needs irrespective of their economic status. Things that children explicitly envisaged to be provided by their parents are things that they focus on as evidence of care, love, and availability. Thus, when parents give their children allowances, it is explained as a show of love and care for them.

As financiers, parents are expected to not only give allowances but be present or part of the spending escapades and give their consent to every demand. In situations where this adventure is not possible, financing and availability are intertwined, in parents, especially fathers coming home, as expected, with expensive gifts which are not accidental but actually anticipated.

My father comes home after 10:30 pm and I meet him. Yeah! He has bought me a new phone, a new laptop, ice-cream and loads of goodies (essay 35, 13, girl)

Fathers are mostly expected to bring home those things that children wish for, probably, just for the fun of possessing them. Mothers, on the other hand, are projected as less prone to giving expensive gifts. This may be so as mothers are more connected to the mundane activities and needs in the home. Thus, mothers are more likely to come home with groceries or daily provisions for the family than with laptops or digital gadgets. Alternatively, fathers may be seen as those who have the “big money” to be able to afford the expensive gifts. Thus, between the two parents, fathers are portrayed as “richer” than mothers.

In the typical Ghanaian culture, children are brought up with the understanding that, as their parents take care of them when they could not do so themselves, they are also expected to take care of their parents when they are old and cannot take care of themselves. This sense of reciprocity is exhibited in childhood fantasy as portrayed in;

Then on Wednesday, I will send money to my mother and I will buy six cars that are being sold in Korea. Then I would send two cars to my caretaker when my mother is not around. (Essay 3: 11 girl)

Here, children portray the situation when the tides have turned and they hold the financial strength to take care of their parents and they position themselves as reciprocating the show of love (in the form of receiving expensive gifts from their parents) they received in childhood. Interestingly, whereas in childhood, it is the father who brings in expensive gifts, it is the mother who is positioned as receiving expensive gifts from the children.

Responsibility

Responsibility here refers to what children expect their parents to do at home as a form of duty to them with most of them being household chores. Most of the activities indicated are routine in the home and they are mainly associated with mothers. The most expectation is with the preparation of food.

When school closes and I go home, I want my mother to prepare some delicious food and I eat it to my satisfaction. (Essay 44: 12-13 years)

Cooking is a key activity in children’s fantasy probably because they are aware of its importance to life. However, all the cooking activities are ascribed to mothers and they are positioned as not

only cooking but more importantly, preparing the food according to particular criteria dictated by children. Even in fantasy, mothers are projected as cooks and subject to children's expectations. This, at first, gives a view of mothers as servants/slaves and others (children) as masters. However, adjectives like "favourite" and "delicious" overturn that notion and rather project the mother as caring, knowledgeable, and available. As much as children are attracted to food, they are more attracted to what is delicious, and mothers can produce that. Also, children have preferences, and mothers, know when children want their favourite foods, and mothers are available to prepare them. In this light, mothers are projected, not as servants, but as masters. Children, in this sense, also position themselves as masters as they give orders as to what should be cooked.

In performing household chores, children position themselves as having responsibilities but look to mothers to perform or complete their tasks making mothers solely responsible for their inadequacies.

When I don't wake up early, I want my mother to sweep for me and also wash my bowls and everything. (Essay 37: 12-13 years)

In some situations, children view household chores as mothers' responsibility, and performing them is doing her a favour.

With this notion, children feel that being asked or made to perform household chores are constraints on their lives. In their fantasy (as in reality) household chores are not part of their plans and performing them makes life difficult. This is made worse by the fact that they have other things they would rather spend their time on.

They don't allow me to learn. Every small thing is me who has to do it which is really not good. I want my parent to allow me to learn the way I like to learn. What I even hate is that even if I am sleeping, they called me and send me which is not good. (Essay 29)

In the above, the young adolescents complained about being asked to run errands and perform chores in the home. The preferred activity is learning as they want to instead of performing chores which they deem as responsibilities for mothers especially. "They" in "*They don't allow me to learn*", refers mostly to mothers because most often, fathers are not even around during the day when such activities are demanded of children. Sometimes too, even when they are present, mothers are perceived to be in charge of getting chores done, hence, rarely will fathers get involved.

Thus, in general, the mother role is invested with a lot of ambivalences which makes it multidimensional and very complex. On the other hand, the father role is conceptualized as a single story that basically projects it as unavailable (rare) in childhood and it is this "rareness" that gives it a higher demand than the mother role.

(In)dependence

There is more engagement with independence among adolescents than dependence and this is dichotomized between the need for distance physically and emotionally for the sense of maturity and the need for closeness as a form of reassurance. In engaging with independence, children theorized parents' protection as a statement of their (children's) weakness or insufficiencies. In this sense, the state of being weak is seen as belonging to babies and parents' protection is likened to a cage.

In my perfect life, I wish my parents would stop keeping me cooped up like a bird in a cage, because they think am still a baby... so in my perfect life, my parents would give me freedom and treat me like an 11-year-old and not as a baby when it comes to benefits. (Essay 1: 11 years girl)

This independence is seen from different perceptions, one of which is to be allowed to be oneself physically; no longer be seen as an extension of parents' shadows. Hence, the adolescent's seeking for autonomy and self-identity is connected with weaning oneself from parents' physical influence. This is seen in babies' mobility being directly connected to that of their parents. The second reference is liberty towards "benefits" which means that at this age, children know what they want and they do not need their parents to make that choice, unlike babies. This is a direct statement indicating a maturity of a sort. On one hand, this could be a reference to the parents' "immaturity" in not knowing when to let go, and on the other hand children's maturity in knowing what they want.

My perfect life will be ruined if this happen; ... My parents always making choices for me which are just small (Essay 7: 10 years girl) In my perfect life, t would like to have my family in it, choose for myself when we go family shopping, (Essay 22: 12-13 years)

In this perception, the young person showed maturity in seeking to be independent of the parents and the parents show immaturity in being inhibition to that quest. This maturity and independence are evident in, adults protesting against children's choices but insisting on their choices and making adjustments. The case of choice and decision-making are very important to children as that step informs their independence from their parents. It is seen as a necessary step to ensuring the state of maturity.

Although children fantasized about being independent of their parents in several ways, it is observed that they are dependent on their parents' reassurance of their status. This is seen in children depending on their parents' attitude to feel emotionally fulfilled.

In my perfect life I would like my parents to treat me like they would on my birthday. (Essay 1)

My family is always after God so with them by my side everything wouldn't matter at all (Essay 32: 12-13 girl)

On birthdays, children are given special treatments like making choices and being in control. These made them feel loved, cared for, and important on those special days, however, children want such show of love and care to become the usual as they project such incidences as what makes them feel accepted and important. In this case, they are dependent on parents' attitudes, especially for emotional well-being. This dependence is also seen in family relationships with God which is envisaged to result in the whole family being blessed. In this case, even without a personal relationship with God, the family one is deemed enough to realize divine benefits.

In their imagination of ideal childhood, children project their relationships with their parents with images that are diverse, complex but intricately woven together with the different parts working together but not extinguishing each other. This is seen in children having more of their mothers to the extent of limiting their availability but espousing fathers who are barely available. In addition, mothers are described with images that denote both servitude and mastery. Children also position themselves as physically independent of parents but nurse some amount of emotional dependence on them.

Findings II: No mums allowed ever!!!

Looking at *what* children expect from their parents allows insights into their perceptions of a) parent-child-relationships, b) gender-relations within the family and beyond and c) their knowledge about the generational order in contemporary Ghana. These aspects are connected by the overarching theme of availability.

a) parent-child-relationships,

If childhood were a country and one needs permission from the natives to be there, the participants in this study would have considered parents “a necessary evil” whose presence is both a necessity and a nuisance. From one perspective, parents are needed as financiers as children acknowledge their dependency on them. By virtue of their age and inability to engage in any serious economic activities, parents should be those who bear the financial responsibilities. Also, they appreciate the fact that they cannot do everything for themselves and their parents become handy in such situations. By this stance, the participants demarcate the line between adulthood and childhood, hence, they emphasize the dichotomy between them and their parents.

On the other hand, parents are portrayed as being imposing and over protective. Such situations cause discomforts to children so much that they would rather exclude parents from their childhood. Their reaction to such occurrences is usually to demand to be recognized as “grown-up” and no longer babies.

There are situations where children make adjustments in their relationships with their parents.

My mother arrives at 10:00 but doesn't come to my room, asks me questions, talk or bug me whatsoever..... My father comes home after 10:30 pm and I meet him. Yeah! He has bought me a new phone, a new laptop, ice-cream and loads of goodies. He's not drunk, like he usually is or acting stupid or scary, shameful but good, free-minded, coolest DAD on earth. No mums allowed, ever!!! (Essay 35)

For children with this orientation, one parent is seen to be overly present and the other is virtually absent. It seems that the absence of the other parent irritates children and in the process of reacting to the absence, pushes the “faithful” parent away. The perception is not to totally alienate that parent but to create a balance between the two parents.

It is also perceived that the mother and activities associated with her have become so mundane that her effect is no longer felt, however, one cannot also imagine being without it. In this scenario, the mother is attentive, interested, a good companion, and doing all the right things, so that one has no more demands of her. She occupies all the spaces that can be given to her, therefore, “no mums allowed ever!!!” beyond that space.

Irritation and mood swings are typical of adolescents and “no mums allowed, ever!!!” could be a typical response to a time when a mum asks a lot of questions or wants to talk about something that the adolescent is not ready to talk about. An example is in the popular Christmas movie, “Home Alone”, in which the protagonist, in a tantrum, expresses the wish to have her family vanish but, in another development, asks Santa Claus to bring them back.

From the research subjects' perspective, in the parent-child relationship, there should clear demarcations where each does not infringe on the “privacy of the other”. Therefore, in spite of the familial relationship and closeness, each maintains a personal space where the other must be admitted into.

b) gender-relations within the family

The participants perceive gender relations between the parents from different perspectives. First of all, they apply traditional gender roles when it comes to household chores and money issues but focus on gender neutral to reciprocity and parent-availability.

When it comes to chores around the house, the young adolescents focus solely on their mothers and this confirms the traditional view that women are supposed to take care of the home and the children. Decades ago, the Ghanaian government had to embark on vigorous campaign to educate the girl-child because the traditional thought was that the girl or female gender is supposed to be relegated to the kitchen and the home environs. In their essays they assigned similar roles to their mothers.

In my perfect life, I would have wanted a cook but my mum can cook better than any cook I know. So in my perfect life, I want my mother to serve my favorite food for me. (Essay 1)

I will like to take my breakfast and the breakfast I will take; I will tell my mother to prepare it like I will say it (Essay 5)

When I don't wake up early, I want my mother to sweep for me and also wash my bowls and everything. (Essay 37)

The excerpts above indicate the positioning of the mother in the kitchen and the home environs to prepare foods and perform household chores.

However, as much as their position could be influenced by the pre-existing notions of the role of the female in the home, it may also be influenced by situations they find at home. For instance, in their essays, they position their mothers in the domestic environment more than their fathers because that is what they are used to and not necessarily what they want. Also, if they do not want to perform household chores as children, then they may become adults who would not want to engage in them. Therefore, in their fantasy of ideal childhood, they could have given their mothers the kind of future they want - motherhood devoid of the traditional burden of performing household chores, however, this is not the case. Hence, it is possible that what they know to be the norm is so ingrained in the home (they see their mothers doing more in the home than their fathers) that they could not imagine anything different.

With issues of money, they portray the male gender as possessing or performing responsibilities that demand more money than that of the female gender. For them, by default, "big" money is associated with the male.

So when I was tired I came to my mother and take some money to buy some toffees ice cream (Essay 14)

And my Dad will buy me a new bicycle and a new tablet and an iPod. Oh and a new laptop. (Essay 37)

After my father went to buy a very nice care name Hunda, spare runner. (Essay 13)

For instance, in their fantasy of ideal childhood, whereas mothers give them money to buy toffees and ice-cream, fathers buy laptops and cars. Here, the amount of money associated with each parent reveals the position of the children when it comes to relating money and gender; men have more money than women. A Ghanaian adage says that, "even when a woman buys a gun, it leans against the chest of a man", and this tends to portray the understanding that even when women acquire greatness, it goes to the advantage of a men; probably the men they are married to. Thus,

the young adolescents perceive affluence when it comes to money and wealth, to be more masculine than feminine.

Although the research subjects in this study displayed gender-disparity in roles in performance of chores in the home and in issues of money, the portrayed gender neutrality in the issues of parent-availability and reciprocity.

In their fantasy of ideal childhood, children display loathing for the absent parent irrespective of gender. The father who is absent is described with strong language that borders on contempt.

My father comes home after 10:30 pm and I meet him He's not drunk, like he usually is or acting stupid or scary, shameful ... (Essay 35: 13 girl years)

On the other hand, the mother who is absent was deprived of even the achievement of childbirth.

But only my mother will lack for leaving me just like that even I have made a mistake my father gave birth to me. (Essay 26: girl 12-13 years).

In this narrative, the mother left the child and the father had to take care of the child "all by himself". The child grows up to appreciate the father's presence but reacts strongly against the mother. These cases depict the fact that when it comes to being present for their children, the subjects in this study do not apply gendered preference.

c) knowledge about the generational order in contemporary Ghana

The African traditional/cultural practices put children at the base of the power structure in inter-generational relationships in the family. This is evident in the idea that in Africa, especially in the company of adults, children are to be seen but not heard. What it means is that adults have more power than children mostly because of their young age which is mostly synonymized to inexperience and lack of "wisdom". For this reason, adults make the most decisions to cover children.

In this study, the research participants displayed disagreement to the norm of children being relegated to the background of power relationship in the family. They allude to the idea that children also have important part to play just like adults.

I wish my parents would stop keeping me cooped up like a bird in a cage, because they think am still a baby (Essay 1)

my parents would give me freedom and treat me like an 11-year-old and not as a baby when it comes to benefits (Essay 1)

We do not want any adult to decide for us how to live comfortably. Neither do we want our friends to do that (Essay 28)

And in my perfect life I will like to make certain petty decisions myself (Essay 7)

Babies are usually helpless and need constant care and protection. Also, they cannot make decisions for themselves and therefore need others to do so. However, the young adolescents in this study indicated that their young age does not make them clueless about some issues, especially, concerning themselves. Their attitude to the inter-generational relationship in the family is that of recognition for their emerging abilities and demand for their participation rights.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to find Ghanaian children's perceptions about relationships in the family. This was instigated by the expression, "no mums allowed, ever!!!" in a narrative essay written by a young adolescent and which we identified as quite strong and absurd. The family, as the nucleus of the larger society, responsible for child upbringing, is a key factor in individual subjective well-being throughout one's life. This is especially so in childhood and in adolescence (Diener & Diener McGavran 2008). Empirical evidence showed that in early adolescence, high life satisfaction fostered by positive relationships with parents has a higher percentage than other variables (Ma & Huebner 2008; Schwarz et al. 2012). The family system, interactions, and relationships between family members are seen as reciprocal even as their attitudes impact each other (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Woolfolk-Hoy, 2010) and also have a serious impact on how children relate to their parents (Beck & Ledbetter, 2013; Delvecchio, et al 2020; Tavassolie,et al, 2016).

This current study so far has revealed that Ghanaian young adolescents define the ideal parents as the parent who is available as and when their children need them to be (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Turnbull et al, 2011) and who provides both emotional and financial support for their children. This is consistent with Epstein et al (1983), and Kelifa, et al (2020) who posit that warm and strong family bonds have a positive consequence on children's development and life in general.

This study also revealed differences in young adolescents' perception of an ideal relationship between their mothers and their fathers (Shek, 2000). With the perception of an ideal mother, the data suggested that young adolescents, do not expect mothers to be the overarching parent taking over parenting space even in cases of an unavailable father. In this case, children demarcate relationship spaces for their parents and even in situations where one parent is not available, the other is not allowed or expected to take the space for the absent parent. This is so even in situations where mothers who believe in extensive mothering (Christopher, 2012) want to be all there for their children and be fully in charge of child upbringing. On the other hand, children, mostly with both parents available, perceived autonomy as far more important, and in order to achieve that, dictates the availability of parents.

Although mothers, in particular, are expected to be more available, they are not to infringe on the independence of the children. The ideal mother, as constructed in this study, is one who knows when to withdraw and allow children, both the physical and emotional space they desire (Deković & Buist, 2005; Mastrotheodoros et al, 2020). In addition, she is expected to be mistress of her home, taking charge of chores in the home (Tereškinas, 2010) but should acknowledge children's position and need for independence. On the other hand, fathers are mostly expected to make time for their children (Strohschein & Matthew, 2015).

With gender relations in the family, it was observed that performing domestic chores is singularly assigned to the female gender whiles big money is associated, mostly, with the male. However, in issues of availability, there was no gender preference, meaning children expect both parents to be readily available for them.

The study findings also showed that Ghanaian young adolescents are aware of inter-generational relationships within the family. However, they are of the view that, they are equally capable of taking charge of issues concerning them and demand recognition of the emerging abilities (Nsamenang 2008; Punch, 2020; Payne, 2012; Punch, 2016b; Pells, 2012).

The ideal family, fantasized by the Ghanaian young adolescents is the one in which both parents are available, both physically and emotionally but gives respect to children's need for autonomy

and self-identity. Life in this family, thus, revolves around the needs of the child as required by the child. Finally, the inter-generational relationship is viewed from an egalitarian point of view but mainly with the young adolescent in control and receiving the most attention, and traditional gender roles are emphasized with the mother bearing the most responsibilities when it comes to domestic chores.

Further research

This study looked at adolescents in general but a focus on specific gender and social class perceptions could be very enlightening.

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