## What is Love? The Materiality of Care in Ghanaian Transnational Families

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Abstract
In the West, economics and intimacy are assumed to occupy separate — even antithetical — domains. In Ghanaian family life, however, affection is understood to be expressed through the distribution of material resources across generations and a person’s life cycle. Such an understanding of love means that migrant parents who leave their children behind in Ghana can continue to be good parents by sending remittances, and, in fact, may be considered better parents than caregivers who stay and are poorer. This construction of love also means that children tend to attach themselves to more financially secure caregivers over those with fewer economic opportunities — to men in favor of women, to those abroad over those in Ghana. It is precisely because love is signaled through material exchanges that children long to be with parental migrants far away who support them and feel abandoned by those parents who do not. The intertwining of economic and emotional ties in Ghanaian transnational families has significant implications for policy, as discussed in the conclusion.
What is Love?
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When my sister and I were children, my mother used to make us laugh by imitating the comedian Victor Borge, who had made her laugh when she herself was young. In one romantic story satirized by the humorous vocalization of punctuation marks, a man asked his girlfriend, “What is love?”¹. I found myself asking this question — seriously — of children and caregivers in a town in southern Ghana: What shows love? How do adults show love to children? How do children show love to adults when they are children? How about when they grow up? I will argue that the cultural construction of love in this context has a large impact on how children and adults parse the effect of transnational migration on their relationships with one another.

Studies of transnational families have argued that migration facilitates the commoditization of love in which migrant parents attempt to replace emotional intimacy with material goods and remittances. Thus, in her study of Honduran transnational families, Schmalzbauer describes a father who “tries to maintain a connection with his son by sending him toys. Yet, although his son has developed a new love of video games and motorcycles, he still does not understand where or who his father is” (2004: 1324-1325). A Mexican transnational mother commented, “‘You can’t give love through money’; rather love “required an emotional presence and communication with a child” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997: 563-564). A Filipino domestic worker in Rome commented on her childhood experience when her mother was a domestic worker in the United States, “If a child wants material goods, they also want maternal love” (Parreñas, 2001: 376). Yet, other Filipino children of transnational migrants accept commodities, rather than affection, as the most tangible reassurance of their parents’ love (Parreñas, 2002). Thus, many informants described in studies of transnational migration from
Central America and Southeast Asia understand love to be maintained through emotional intimacy, communication and living together, for which the flow of gifts and remittances serves as an imperfect replacement when parents migrate transnationally. Focusing on the emotional pain expressed by mothers and children who live far apart (Dreby, 2006), these studies critique the legal restrictions that separate children from their parents and the economic and social consequences of policies in home countries that spur migration.

These arguments about the transnational commoditization of love depend on a discursive and cognitive split of emotions and material resources that is particularly salient in the West. However, in practice, intimate and economic relations are deeply intertwined. For instance, Peter Stearns and Mark Knapp (1993) have argued that Victorian notions of familial love were bolstered by economic changes that allowed property owners to make the physical home a more pleasant place and central locale, as well as by competitive market relationships that made men turn to emotional support at home. As Laura Rebhun points out, “kinship, friendship, and partnership all combine economic and emotional aspects as people demonstrate love through sharing, and through sharing obtain the goods and services upon which their lives depend. Sharing may be accomplished fairly and equally, or it may be coerced, unfair, unequal, and exploitative” (1999: 210). A global market in love and caring has grown: home health aides, domestic workers and nannies come from poorer countries to fill the care deficit existing in richer countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). Love is therefore like gold, an unfairly distributed resource (Hochschild, 2002). Furthermore, as Rebhun (1999) points out, emotion — such as attachment, loyalty, compassion, anger, jealousy, and mistrust — can affect how material resources are distributed and shared between people. A family’s care of children has significant economic costs, requiring commitments that might be undercut by straightforward market
conceptions about investment and exchange (Folbre, 2008). Rather than putting economics and intimacy into separate domains or subsuming intimate relations to economic ones, Viviana Zelizer (2005) argues that we need to understand how intimate relations and economic transactions intertwine, in inheritance, divorce proceedings and paid care giving for example.

Cultural notions which compartmentalize love from material resources do not reflect the commonsense understandings of Ghanaian migrant parents and their children. Both children and adults understand feelings to be expressed through the distribution of material resources. The distribution of material resources is part of the long-term reciprocal relations and entrustments that occur between generations as families balance the relative financial and physical strength of individuals in different stages of their life (Shipton, 2007). Children understand that the material provisions for their schooling and daily life — as well as the gift of life itself — create expectations that they will reciprocate when they are working adults and their former caregivers are unemployed, sick or frail. Given that love can be expressed through material resources rather than physical presence, one might expect that Ghanaian children would experience less disruption with a parent’s migration than Honduran and Filipino children of transnational migrants. At the same time, the conditions of transnational migration do pose challenges to Ghanaian transnational families, and, in the conclusion, I will suggest some policy changes that could address these difficulties.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

This research was conducted in Akropong, a town and district capital of about 9,000 people located in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). Rapidly becoming a suburb of the capital city Accra, Akropong is now home to a small university
campus as well as a teacher training college and two secondary schools. The town is economically diverse; with its several educational institutions, there are many teachers living in the town, but there are also farmers, craftsmen, traders, and food and charcoal sellers. The town is heavily populated by women, children and the elderly, as men of working age have sought better employment opportunities in large cities. People from other areas of Ghana also come to live and work in the town, mainly due to its educational and religious institutions. Many people in the town have lived elsewhere in the past and have relatives in other urban and rural areas, as well as in other parts of West Africa (primarily Nigeria and Togo) and abroad.

I have done ethnographic research in this town since 1997 — two years of active work during six trips ranging from six weeks to one year in length. In order to understand the differences between transnational families and families less directly affected by transnational migration, my research assistant Kweku Aryeh and I talked to caregivers of children whose parents were abroad and in Ghana, recruiting them through a random household survey. Interviews with caregivers focused on the reasons and process by which the caregiver took on the care of the child, his or her relationship and communication with the child’s parents, their expectations and responsibilities for the child, and their own history of being cared for as children. In these same households, we interviewed the children between the ages of 8 and 22, asking them about how they came to live with the caregiver, their relationship to the caregiver and their parents, their experiences of schooling and domestic work, who they loved and how they anticipated showing that love in future. I then invited those same children to Saturday focus group discussions held at neighborhood schools, which I co-facilitated with two other members of the research team, Margaret Rose Tettey and Joe Banson. During the discussions, we discussed general rather than personal issues, asking students to compare different living
arrangements (with a parent, aunt or grandmother), life abroad and life in Ghana, and the
experience of having a parent abroad versus one elsewhere in Ghana. We also asked them what
love looked like: how they knew an adult loved them, how they, as children, showed love to their
caregivers, and how they would show love to these same people as future working adults.

The language of interviews and focus group discussions was Twi except for a few
interviews with non-Twi-speaking adults, which were in English. Interviews and focus group
discussions were conducted by me along with another member of my research team, all of who
were either from the town or had been raised and lived there. Ultimately, this resulted in eighty
children being interviewed individually or with a sibling, with forty-five of them also attending
neighborhood focus group discussions. Of the twenty-four children interviewed who had a parent
who migrated abroad, half of the children had a father abroad (n = 13; but including adoptive
fathers and stepfathers, 15); five had both parents abroad, not necessarily in the same place; and
four had a mother abroad. This distribution reflects larger trends in Ghana, where most migrants
are men (Twum-Baah, 2005; Twum-Baah et al., 1995). Although migration statistics in Ghana
show that more and more women are migrating alone, my data from this town shows that
women’s migration continues to be connected to a relationship with a migrant man, although not
necessarily the child’s father. Some of the children were living with their mother who remained
behind in Ghana, but others were living with a grandmother, grandfather, uncle or aunt on either
the paternal or maternal side. On my return to the United States, I interviewed the parents who
were living in the United States and Canada either by visiting them or through a phone
conversation. While international migrant parents in the interviewed group were most often
male, the caregivers interviewed were overwhelmingly female (only ten of the ninety-three
caregivers were male)².
While adults and children often have different perspectives and discourses, it is important to remember that children expect to be adults and that adults have once been children; they are thus able to switch their subjectivities and produce discourses associated with another age-related status (see Coe, 2007). Differences in perspectives between children and adults did not appear strongly in relation to discourses of the materiality of love, showing the strength and salience of this discourse within this Ghanaian town. Transnational families as well as those less directly affected by transnational families shared this discourse in evaluating their intimate ties.

THE MATERIALITY OF LOVE

Love is not a common topic for discussion in the town. Dɔ, the Twi word for “love”, is used interchangeably with pɛ n’asɛn, which is commonly translated as “liking”. Dɔ is most commonly used in the Bible, and thus people are likely to reply to the question of “Who do you love?” with religious responses, such as “I love Jesus”. Another way of asking this question is through the word tima, or “feeling”, again, a word that is used in the Bible. Tima, or feeling, is felt deep in one’s heart: someone really touches you. Love, particularly in its romantic form, does not seem to be a very elaborated concept locally, although its influence is growing through local and foreign video productions and soap operas. This does not mean that people do not feel deeply, although they work hard to control those feelings and their public and private expression. When asked about love, children responded with descriptions of how the people they loved had helped them, which implies financial and material support in the local idiom. Such provision of material support is understood to be dependent on a caregiver’s ability to give and his or her willingness to share available resources with intimates.
Care is understood to take place through the provision of the necessities of life — clothing, food and education — as well as in meeting demands or requests for certain items, like snacks or books. It is expressed through cash as well as gifts. In a focus group discussion, when asked how adults showed love to children, children aged 10 to 13 years old, all with fathers abroad, said in Twi:

**Kwadjo:** He or she buys things for the child.

**Kofi:** The child has a chance to play.

**Kwadjo:** He or she buys clothes for the child, everything that the child says he or she needs.

In remembering her own childhood, one 33-year-old mother mentioned that she loved her paternal grandfather best because if he was going out and a child said he or she wanted something, he would buy it and share it among all the children of the house on his return.

This construction of love has implications for poorer and wealthier caregivers in the town. In general, care of children shifts to those who are wealthier, whether within families or to outsiders, particularly when parents are desperately in need. Thus, a child of parents who are having difficulty getting work or of a mother abandoned by the father of the child may go to live with another relative who is in slightly better circumstances. In one situation, a grandmother who helped her son take care of a granddaughter found herself in desperate straits herself. One of her daughters who lived nearby took pity on her and took in the granddaughter, the daughter’s own niece. Generally, by taking in a child, an adult assumes all responsibility for that child’s daily expenses, such as food and pocket money for buying snacks at school; other expenses such as schooling and clothing are more negotiable, with parents sometimes contributing assistance in those areas if they can.
Children’s statements may strike adults as unrealistic: how can even the wealthiest caregiver provide *everything* that a child says he or she needs in a consumer culture where there is no limit to potential demands? However, providing what a child asks for is not solely based on the financial resources of the caregiver. It is also dependent on the child’s willingness and level of comfort in asking for things from a caregiver — in local parlance, they will ask more from those with whom they are “free”. The exchange of material resources is thus a sign of love on both sides: the willingness of the caregiver to provide freely and the comfort or lack of shyness of the child in asking. Furthermore, what is at stake here is a willingness to share one’s resources, rather than an absolute ability to provide. Ghanaians understand emotional closeness as motivation for people to share their material resources with others.

Children and adults have a cultural calculus that is finely tuned to discerning what a caregiver is able to provide. They understand that caregivers and parents who are poorer cannot meet many requests, and children will mute their requests to such caregivers as well, whereas demands on adults perceived to be richer are more numerous and less easily forgotten. One 16-year-old girl whose mother and grandfather were in South Africa was being raised by her 60-year-old grandmother who was ill much of the time, in part because of her anxiety over money. The girl explained:

[I also love] my grandmother. Even though she doesn’t have anything, she helps me. She struggles to get money to give me.

Later in the interview, she said further:

If my grandmother doesn’t have anything at all, she will go ask people for help so that we can eat. Because there is no money here, she feels sick and sleeps. She doesn’t have money. So I don’t bother her. I lack so many things, like I have no
more lotion [a crucial part of daily grooming]. I lack so many things, but if I ask, she says she doesn’t have money, so I don’t bother her with my requests. Because of her affection for her grandmother with whom she has lived all her life and her awareness of her grandmother’s struggle to do what she can, she tries not to be a burden. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one 11-year-old boy was particularly harsh in the condemnation of his father who was not taking care of him, in part because he perceived him to be a rich man who sold imported cars and had built a large house in the capital city. Material care required a conjunction of financial resources and emotional expansiveness, which opened one’s heart to want to share and distribute these resources to loved ones. Over and over again, children also expressed their desire to show love as future adults by building a house, providing the capital for a store, or paying for medical expenses and clothing for the caregivers who had most helped them. I will now explain the conjunction between love and material provision further by examining the position of mothers as caregivers. Unlike those able to provide but not willing to share their bounty, those willing to provide but who cannot — like many mothers — are not criticized or sanctioned.

MOTHERS AND FATHERS AS CAREGIVERS

In Mexico and the Philippines, mothering is associated with emotional intimacy and domestic housework while fathering is associated with economic provisions; in Ghana, however, the distribution of material resources is significant in the evaluation of mothers as well as fathers (Dreby, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005). Women in Ghana are expected to combine work with childcare, reproduction with production (Clark, 1994). In Ghana, people expect mothers to be generous in sharing their resources with their children, more so than
other relatives, but also anticipate that they will have less to re-distribute in comparison to fathers.

One 15-year-old girl lived with her aunt because her father died and her mother found herself in desperate straits. In a focus group discussion, she compared the merits of living with one’s mother versus someone else:

If you live with someone else, you won’t get everything you want. But as for your mother, if you need something, and she doesn’t have anything at all, what she will do, you will be pleased with it—

My co-facilitator, Margaret Rose Tettey, interjected: She will do it for you.

While my co-facilitator, an educational administrator from Akropong, suggested that mothers were willing to provide what children wanted in comparison to other caregivers, the girl was pointing to the other side of motherhood — its poverty — suggesting that mothers were often not in the best circumstances to provide for their children. Still, she suggested, because her mother would want to give, to give even more than she could, she, the daughter, would be pleased with the little her mother could provide, knowing that her mother loved her and cared for her wellbeing.

Why do mothers not have the means to look after their children? Many women in the town have been abandoned by the fathers of their children, due to divorce or separation, and find it difficult to make a living by selling fruit, hairdressing or sewing clothes. Men are generally more educated than women in this town and more easily attain stable and salaried work. Women with the support of men — whether a husband, a brother, an uncle or a father — do better than those without. Formal marriage helps ensure the father’s support for his children, but women
have difficulty persuading men to formally marry them. Because of women’s poverty, children are often distributed to relatives who are slightly better off financially.

Mothers, particularly those who are not educated, tend to informally lose custody of their children to their children’s fathers, the father’s relatives, or to their own relatives (often the woman’s mother, sister or brother). Fathers who are abroad and support their children but are separated from their children’s mother tend to ask their sisters or mothers to take care of their children, particularly if those children are male. One father in the United States had been living with his younger sister before he migrated abroad, a sister who he had helped raise and whose schooling he had supported. His two sons were living with their mother. After his migration, he asked his sister to take his eldest son away from the son’s mother because he was worried that the mother would not be concerned with the child’s education. Another father abroad, also in the United States, had his brother take his sons away from their mother living in Ghana. The mother had been upset that her husband was not providing her with adequate remittances and seemed to be taking her grievances towards her husband out on their children. Another boy had been living with his maternal grandparents, but when the maternal grandmother had a stroke, the father, abroad in the United States, arranged for his son to live with his sister in the capital city where he would also be able to go to a better school. However, caregivers who are better able to provide, may not be willing to share their material resources with children as much as their own mother or biological parents might be.

The sons of migrant fathers, in particular, can feel more emotionally attached to their fathers abroad, who they may not have seen in many years, than to their mothers in Ghana, who are not regularly employed and cannot financially support their children. One 19-year-old boy was living with his mother’s sister and her husband while his father and his new wife and
children were abroad in Germany. He felt more attached to his father and his wife in Germany, citing how they regularly sent him money and clothes and gave him encouragement, than to his aunt and her husband, despite their daily care of him and concern about his educational progress, or to his mother, living elsewhere in Ghana.

Mothers were considered the best caregivers because of their willingness to share their resources, but their poverty meant that they could not always raise their children or send them to school, and so children would be distributed to less poor households. Motherhood is therefore a care giving position fraught with the contradictions of the materiality of love. If the father has resources and is willing to share them with his children, the children tend to be attracted in his direction, whether going to live with him or, in his absence, with one of his relatives.

THE RECIPROCITY OF MATERIAL CARE

Material care that passes from caregiver to child is seen as an “entrustment”, to use the word of Parker Shipton (2007), in which being cared for creates a responsibility or debt for the child to reciprocate in future. “Entrustment implies an obligation, but not necessarily an obligation to repay like with like, as a loan might imply. Whether an entrustment or transfer is returnable in kind or in radically different form—be it economic, political, symbolic, or some mixture of these—is a matter of cultural context and strategy” (Shipton, 2007: 11). Material care is central to intergenerational webs of responsibility and is a form of social security. Caregivers who care for children — whether their own or other people’s children — hope that these children will grow up to both want to and be successful enough to be able to reciprocate in the future. Caregivers are therefore as concerned about a child’s character (humility, responsiveness to
discipline and respect for elders) as a child’s educational success in ensuring a child’s future ability to give and willingness to do so.

Caregivers stressed over and over to me that they did not expect anything from the child they were caring for nor would they demand anything from the child, but rather if the child felt like helping them, then such help would be welcome. One woman taking care of her sister’s son while the sister was in the UK quoted a proverb in response to my question about whether her nephew would remember her, “The head isn’t like a papaya: you can’t split a head and see what’s inside”. By this she meant that you do not know how someone will behave in future: perhaps the child’s character will be good and he or she will remember the caregiver, perhaps not. Others seem to assess the costs and benefits more explicitly. Another woman had taken pity on a girl whose mother was mentally ill; she thought that the girl — not a family member — would acknowledge and remember her contribution in future:

I brought her to live with me so that she would get a better place to grow up, so that in future if she is successful, she will acknowledge me.

and

In future, when she sees that I am old, she will remember me and she will give me something. If she doesn’t give me anything, I have done it for God. [pause] But I believe that, if she is successful, she will acknowledge that she stayed with me before she succeeded so [she will say], ‘Let me at least pay this woman a visit’ [referring to herself].

As expressed in these statements, caregivers understand the provision of material care to be reciprocal, such that when the child has grown and is earning money and the adult is old and
weak, the child will also help take care of the former caregiver. A Twi proverb reflects this reciprocity of relations, as expressed by one grandfather:

If your mother or father or someone looks after you while your teeth are coming in, when it comes to the time where his or her teeth are falling out, you look after him or her.

Through the reciprocity of care, childcare was intimately related to eldercare. Parents expect even more care than other caregivers, however. It is thought that biological children have a responsibility to take care of their parents when they are old and weak whether or not they helped raise them, whereas children a person has helped raise, but not given birth to, do not have such an obligation. Instead, these children help the caregiver only out of gratitude and the feelings in their own heart.

Children I interviewed understood this reciprocity of assistance, saying that they would also remember their caregivers in their old age. One 14-year-old boy with a father in the United States said that he and his younger brother prayed in the morning for both their father and their father’s brother, a 63-year-old man who is their primary caregiver, with whom they feel close:

We thank God, and pray for our father as well as the one who is here [their uncle], that God lets them live for a long time, so that we can become adults — and they can prosper. May they live long, so that we will have a chance to take care of them.

Children were often cared for and helped by numerous people as part of extended family networks; consequently, these children said they would remember them all. However, when children said they would remember people in their old age, they talked only about the financial aspects: they would help by providing money for care, rather than providing the daily care of
feeding, washing clothes, and going to the market themselves. Indeed, in this town, eldercare is more and more often being provided by hired help rather than actual relatives; grown children only provide the financial backing for such hired labour.

Children thought about how they would help their caregivers, for instance, by erecting a house for them to live in or opening a shop for them. One 15-year-old boy who was being taken care of by his aunt while his mother was abroad in the UK said:

I will remember everyone, because I remember all those who have helped me, even in a little way. If I get money, I will remember them, I will look after them.

Cati: Who has helped you?

Kwesi: My aunt here has helped me, and many people have helped me in many ways, too many to say.

Another 15-year-old boy taken care of by his great-grandmother responded similarly to the question about whom he would remember in future:

They all participated in my success. They all looked after me, because since I came to live here [with his grandmother], everyone, if they cook food, they give me some, or they give me money to buy food. They all helped to look after me, so that is why I say that I will remember them all.

Remembering someone was explicitly tied to the level of help the person had provided in helping a child to succeed in future. Although it was not socially appropriate to say that one would not help someone, some children did say this. One mother whose 11-year-old son was abandoned by his father before the father traveled abroad said that he had told her that even if he built a house in future, he would not let his father live in it because his father did not look after him. This was
the same boy discussed above who was angry at his father for not supporting him despite his father’s seeming ability to do so given his house and business in the capital city.

While reciprocal relations of care are understood to be composed of material help and are important to this affective economy of relationships, I would argue that they are not primarily commoditized as part of the market economy. While there is a sense of reciprocity, the contractual agreement of direct exchange, of repayment of care given, is muted. An understanding of direct payment for services or direct exchanges would destroy the feelings and commitments that enable reciprocal exchanges within families, such as the shared well-being of the family or the sense of trust that one can turn to relations in times of trouble (Folbre, 2008).

As in conflicts in the United States, people in Ghana decide on the basis of the type of relationship what is a fair and legitimate claim on one another’s resources (Zelizer, 2009).

**HOW DOES THE MATERIALITY OF LOVE AFFECT TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES?**

The logic of care outlined above means that children in Akropong are less concerned about the absence of a migrant parent than whether or not such a parent is taking good care of them through remittances and gifts. One 15-year-old boy whose mother was abroad said that, although day-to-day care was provided by his mother’s elder sister, he was happy his mother was in the UK because:

She is able to bring me and my aunt things. Life there is better than life here, so if she gets some money, she can bring it to us.

He told us that she brought clothes, shoes and money, and that he was not at all unhappy that she was far away.
When presented with hypothetical examples, children in focus groups made a sharp distinction between fathers who sent money for the child’s care and fathers who were not heard from or seen again, a relatively common phenomenon in the town. A 15-year-old girl summed up the sentiments of one group regarding the former situation in which the father called and remitted money, even though he was abroad, “There is no problem at all”. On the other hand, children thought the situation of being neglected financially — whether by a father abroad or one in Ghana — would worry them, making them cry in their rooms when they thought about the situation. Such financial neglect would hinder future success and was a sign of the father’s emotional neglect.

There was one family who was quite angry and upset about the migration of a husband and father five years earlier. The mother was aggrieved that her husband had left, and her children, for the most part, took their emotional cue from her, their primary caregiver. What made them so upset was not his emotional absence; in fact, the mother stated baldly that she did not miss her husband. The husband had been largely absent from the daily life of the household even when he lived in Ghana because of his long commute to a nearby city; thus, his children only saw him on weekends. Rather, the issue for the mother and children was that he used to provide for the family more substantially when he was in Ghana than when he had traveled to the United States. They felt that he could be providing even more if he had remained in Ghana. This was despite the fact that he was remaining in touch and sending money home: he was paying his children’s school fees and sending cartons of clothing to them at Christmas. However, his wife had a small kiosk that she was desperate to expand, and she was upset that her husband was not sending her the capital to make a large store. While she had been able to press him to help her open the store before he left, his migration had rendered him less susceptible to her requests for
working capital. His material support was an issue in itself, but was also used as an indicator of the level of his seriousness, commitment and affection for his family, as there were suspicions that he had remarried abroad. As in other transnational families (Dreby, 2009; Menjívar and Agadjanian, 2007), gossip was significant in generating suspicion and lack of trust between marital partners.

Of the ten mothers interviewed whose husbands were abroad, four were not receiving support from the father of their children. While most had not received support from the father before he left either, the father’s distance increased his ability to ward off requests for assistance because the mother and other relatives could not visit him in times of crisis, medical or educational, in the way that they could if the father was in another area of Ghana. Furthermore, some fathers begin to support their children only as they grow and become successful. Seeing the child pass on the street, the father may tell his friends, “That’s my child”. These opportunities to remember and reconnect with the child as he or she grows are also thwarted by international migration. But for those families who remain connected through remittances, gifts, and phone calls, the children appreciate that the parent migrated for the ability to provide school fees, clothes, and shoes as well as for the allure of going abroad. Ernestina Tetteh (2008) had similar findings from her study of 17 children who had both parents abroad and were attending school in the capital city of Accra.

There were only two children who expressed pain at a parent’s migration, despite the parent’s continued connection and support. Both boys had mothers, rather than fathers, who were migrants. This fact might seem to support studies of transnational families that have focused on the additional pain caused by mothers who migrate transnationally, and in which migrant fathers are less disruptive to children’s emotional health. Gender ideologies in the Philippines, for
instance, mean children expect mothers to provide more emotional intimacy and communication than fathers (Parreñas, 2004). However, I also met children with migrant mothers who were not upset about their absence. I would therefore argue that sadness about the migration of a mother in these cases in Ghana has less to do with the gendered expectations of migrant mothers than with the quality of the relationship with the particular caregiver. In these two situations, the caregiver was not as emotionally close to the child as the mother was and did not appear to be as generous with their resources as the child’s mother. Children of migrant parents also have difficulty calculating a caregiver’s generosity in relation to their actual resources and adjusting their expectations accordingly. Caregivers, not children, are the recipients of migrant parents’ remittances for the child’s expenses. Children may think that their parents are providing generous remittances for their care, which the caregiver is not passing on. In fact, caregivers tended to tell me that remittances were not sufficient for all the children’s expenses, and, therefore, they would supplement remittances from their own pockets. In particular, because remittances came irregularly and were often delayed until the migrant was able to gather together the money, caregivers in Ghana would use their own money to pay school fees or other expenses until the remittances arrived.

One young person who was upset with his mother’s migration was a 19-year-old boy who attributed his lack of academic success in secondary school to his mother leaving for the United States:

She had all the time for all of us, especially our studies. I was very good. There were things she used to do to help me, waking me up at dawn and sitting by me . . . Since she left, everything turned upside down, especially my studies. I wasn’t
getting any help from anyone, so my academic performance in [secondary school] was good though, but not what I expected.

Bitterly disappointed with his results on the exam at the end of secondary school, he was studying to re-write the exams that he failed. He also spoke about the emotional loss, “There was a vacuum when she left; I felt alone even though my sisters were there [here in Ghana]. I was feeling like I am half, or incomplete”. While he was able to joke with his fellow students when he did not get visitors at his boarding secondary school, he felt sad about it when he was alone. But for him too, material provision mattered a great deal, in terms of both his studies and his emotional isolation. At secondary school, he was worried about the late payment of his fees which might mean he would not be allowed to take the exams, as well as the fact that he was sent to school without care packages or money, for which he blamed his father in Ghana and his primary caregiver, his paternal great-uncle. “These things really get me bothered,” he said.

The other boy’s mother had been in Germany for the past six years and his father had been in the United States for the past five. First his mother left and then his father, he subsequently lives with his maternal grandmother, a pastor. Because of her profession, his grandmother often is not at home, but instead is busy with church activities, including prayer meetings and crusades on the evenings and weekends. His mother recently brought back his two younger stepsiblings from Germany to live with the grandmother, to enable the mother to return to work. The 11-year-old reported:

Because I live here, I say I am an adopted child. Because of the way that my father and mother left me, when I call them, I am not comfortable with them, and I told them that I am an adopted child.
It would be very disrespectful of him to say he is an adopted child to his parents, and members of the research team believe that he probably just felt like saying it. Because of his unhappiness in Ghana and his mother’s unwillingness to bring him to Germany, he has a great longing to join his father. His father had recently tried to bring him to the United States, but was denied by US immigration authorities.

Knowing or suspecting that the migrant parent is underwriting their living expenses and school fees, some children feel closer to the migrant parent than to the caregiver with whom they live. The greater the material connection with the migrant parent, the greater the longing on the part of the child to join a migrant parent abroad, even when the child is satisfied with life in Ghana. Furthermore, these children do not experience the ordinary frustrations and tensions of daily life and household chores with the migrant parent; thus, caregivers are often blamed for these tensions, and the migrant parent is idealised. Other children are as appreciative of the caregiver as of the migrant parent, acknowledging that the caregiver has also contributed to their care, whether financially or through their labor. Much of the difference seems attributable to the age at which the child came to live with the caregiver, with younger children having more affection for the caregiver than for the migrant parent.

To the extent that a parent’s migration leads to better support for a child, a migrant parent can be a better parent than one who lives in Ghana. However, it is important to highlight that the evaluation of good care is dependent upon the child’s expectation of what a parent can provide. In this aspect, there are certain advantages and disadvantages to migration. The allure of migration abroad means that migrant parents are expected to be able to provide more than parents who are living in Ghana. Migrant parents deal with this disadvantage of migration by dampening these expectations through the constant refrain (as reported by caregivers and
children) that life abroad is difficult, reporting when they cannot find work or when they are sick. Migrants work to change their relatives’ expectations about what is perceived to be a land of milk and honey, trying to reconcile the distance between their relatives’ imagine of life abroad and its reality. The advantage of international migration is that these statements cannot be easily verified independently; unlike a parent living in Ghana, one cannot see the wealth or poverty of migrants by visiting them at home or by knowing exactly what work they are doing.

CONCLUSIONS

While the literature on transnational children from Latin America and the Philippines tends to emphasize the yearning children have for the migrant parent and the problems that result from their separation, my research supports Karen Fog Olwig’s conclusions that the cultural construction of parenting is highly significant in influencing children’s responses to a parent’s migration (Olwig, 1999; see also Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). In the case of Ghana, for children in this town, the materiality of care is important in and of itself as well as its signal of emotional depth and closeness. In such circumstances, children find a parent’s migration less emotionally significant than whether or not the parent is in communication and supportive materially. To the extent that a parent’s migration leads to greater financial support in the child’s life, a child can feel more loved by a migrant parent than one who remains in Ghana. While the distribution and sharing of material resources is central to all intimate relations, because the economic underpinnings of emotional relationships tend to get downplayed in the West and in other countries, children in Mexico or the Philippines are more likely to express their sadness about a migrant parent’s absence through emotional discourses. In Ghana, to the contrary, children understand material care as a sign of love and tend to praise or criticize a relationship on the
basis of economic exchanges. This discourse does not result from the commoditization of
intimacy within transnational families, as other work suggests, but rather from a different
understanding of how love and care is expressed in families.

This logic of care clearly illuminates the gendered power relationships of this southern
Ghanaian town, as children and adults perceive those who are more materially secure as being
more beneficial to children’s growth and future success than those who are less able to provide
children with the necessities of life, expenses which have grown considerably in the last fifty
years. This logic of care favors men and migrants. Through their financial support and status,
migrant parents maintain a strong presence in children’s lives and thoughts. It is important to
note, however, that the dominance of those who are better off financially as caregivers is muted
by children’s careful calibrations of their expectations based on what they think the caregiver is
able to provide. Under this rubric, children tend to appreciate the efforts of female caregivers
over male caregivers, precisely because male caregivers may be better off.

The economic differences between other countries and Ghana — foreign exchange rates,
costs of living and wages — therefore have an impact on children’s emotional experience of care
and attachment to caregivers. Transnational migrants, through their remittances, draw their
children to them emotionally. They can be good parents to their children by providing for them.
In fact, to the extent that they are both moderately successful in their lives abroad and responsive
to demands back home, they can be considered more important than the caregivers engaged in
day-to-day care work in Ghana. Yet it is difficult — because of challenges getting a visa or
funding international travel — for their children to live with them or visit them on school
holidays, as they might do if such a wealthy and loving parent lived in Ghana. Wages at the
lower end of the economic structure in the United States and Europe mean that some Ghanaians
cannot afford to raise their children in the places where they are living while regulatory
frameworks mean that other migrants cannot bring their children over to live with or visit them.

Because the material support of transnational parents is so important to children back
home, the strength of the connections between children and parents would be improved by
policies that would improve migrants’ wages, their ability to send money and gifts, and the ease
of traveling to visit their children left behind. Such policies would include the enforcement of
labour laws so both documented and undocumented workers would be less likely to be exploited
(Kwong, 1997). Opening up pathways to legalization would also be helpful in allowing migrants
to visit their families regularly or bring family members over to visit, as well as gaining access to
a wider and better-compensated array of employment opportunities. Finally, for women who
have been abandoned by the father of their children, international law regarding child support
would be helpful. The Hague Conference on Private International Law has been working on a
Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and other Forms of Family
Maintenance, a process that concluded on 23 November 2007, which the United States has
signed, but not ratified thus far (The Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2007).
This effort holds promise for the children of Ghanaian migrants, in the few cases where their
parents have legally married.

The West’s wealth fuels Ghanaians’ migration. They migrate in the hopes of supporting
their loved ones, whether sending their child to a good school or building their mother a house.
Economic exchanges and global inequality are tightly intertwined with love and care within all
families directly affected by migration, even among families who consider economic exchanges
to contaminate or defile intimate relations. The feelings of Ghanaian children about the centrality
of material exchanges to intergenerational security should give us a more nuanced understanding
of the concerns of children in transnational families worldwide and the ways that state and
international policies might support such families.
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**Endnotes**

1 A video of his performance is available on “Youtube”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lF4qii8S3gw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lF4qii8S3gw).

2 Male caregivers are preferred for boys, particularly during their adolescence.