The Structuring of Feeling in Ghanaian Transnational Families

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters. [https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/45812/story/]

This work is an ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT (AM)
This is the author's manuscript for a work that has been accepted for publication. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, final layout, and pagination, may not be reflected in this document. The publisher takes permanent responsibility for the work. Content and layout follow publisher's submission requirements.

Citation for this version and the definitive version are shown below.

**Citation to Publisher**

**Citation to this Version**

Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page
The Structuring of Feeling in Ghanaian Transnational Families

by Cati Coe

April 2008

Cati Coe
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice
Rutgers University
405-407 Cooper Street
Camden, NJ 08102-1521
(856) 225-6455
ccoe@camden.rutgers.edu
The Structuring of Feeling in Ghanaian Transnational Families

ABSTRACT

Studies exploring the emotional experiences of members of transnational families have often highlighted the emotional suffering of mothers and children separated from one another as a result of transnational migration. Taking Ghana as a case example, this paper complicates this picture by showing how parents and children in Ghanaian transnational families have different emotional responses to their separation, in which the parents express less suffering over the situation than their children. Their different discourses about the goals for parent-child relationships and their sense of agency in achieving these goals affect their expression of emotions. This paper argues that we need to pay attention to the ideologies and sense of agency of social actors in different social positions in order to understand the ways that transnational migration structures feelings.

[Keywords: transnationalism, emotion, family, socialization, Ghana]
The Structuring of Feeling in Ghanaian Transnational Families

In February 2007, I received a letter from a Ghanaian friend informing me of the death of a woman who had been raising her grandchildren while their mother---the woman’s daughter---was overseas. My friend, a government bureaucrat and a return migrant herself from Nigeria, commented on this sad occurrence, “One thing I have observed is that many Ghanaians who travel outside with the hope of a happier future, most often have their hopes shattered, especially when they realize that many of those they loved so dearly have passed away and they themselves have become strangers to their own children they left behind.” Her letter points to the emotional pain involved in migration as well as to a growing criticism in Ghana of transnational family arrangements for their impact on parent-child relations across the generations. The situation of parent-child separation is common not only among Ghanaian migrants: transnational families---characterized by living some or most of the time separated from each other, yet maintaining a sense of “familyhood” ---are a pronounced aspect of transnational migration worldwide (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002).

In the last decade, sociologists, social psychologists, and anthropologists have taken note of the emotions generated by transnational migration as relatives live apart from one another and when mothers and fathers take on new roles with the new work opportunities offered with migration. This literature has tended to emphasize the emotional suffering among informants and used this to highlight the everyday pain of globalization. For instance, in their work on Mexican domestic workers in the US, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo & Ernestine Avila (1997) make an argument about the “deep
costs” and “raw pain” of transnational migration (549, 554). For these domestic workers, transnational motherhood “means forsaking deeply felt beliefs that biological mothers should raise their own children, and replacing that belief with new definitions of motherhood” that include the ability to fulfill “traditional caregiving responsibilities through income earning in the United States” (557, 562). Recognizing that emotions are a significant facet of cultural and social life (Ahearn 2001; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), much of the scholarship on the emotional life of transnational families claims that the feelings are new, a response to the new family relations and ideologies formed through transnational migration (Parreñas 2005; Schmalzbauer 2004).

William Reddy (2001) and Raymond Williams (1977) illuminate the relationship between emotions and ideology. Drawing on the literature in cognitive psychology, Reddy argues that emotions are connected to thought because they are “closely associated with the dense networks of goals that give coherence to the self,” and they “aid the individual in managing the conflicting tugs and contradictions that the pursuit of multiple goals must give rise to” (55). Emotional suffering arises from the conflict between high-priority, culturally-significant goals, as when one wishes to be close to someone who does not love one or when one is being tortured during interrogation and wishes to preserve both one’s health and dignity.

Raymond Williams used the term “structures of feelings” to refer to emergent feelings and thoughts, born of lived experience, that do not fit a received worldview or hegemony. Because of the patterned ways that experience does not match that worldview, the resulting feelings are also patterned. While Williams did not speak about this at length, hegemony itself is felt, and so hegemonies also structure feelings in
patterned ways. This is the direction Reddy takes in his work on the changes in emotional expression during the French Revolution, arguing that political regimes are associated with normative emotional regimes which provide people with model strategies for pursuing emotional learning and the appropriate end point or ideal of emotional equilibrium. Reddy’s analysis of changes in emotional regimes was of a nation-state (France) with very clear changes in political regimes. The current system of global capitalism encourages the separation of parents and children when adults from developing countries work in developed countries while their non-productive family members (the elderly and children) stay at home, where the lower cost of living helps subsidize the low wages of migrant adults. Such demands for migrant labor would suppose normative emotional regimes that enable parents and children to live for long periods of time away from each other, at the same time as they have sufficient feeling for one another—an imagined community of obligations and reciprocities—that adult migrants continue to support both their parents and children back home.

I would argue that it does not make sense to think about transnational migration as a political regime that generates a particular emotional regime. Rather, what I see is that transnational migrants make sense of the conditions, constraints and opportunities generated by transnational migration through existing emotional regimes—the normative emotions and emotional socialization—drawn on from their communities of origin, social networks of migrants, and the communities to which they migrate. This results in transnational families from different regions, communities, and class backgrounds expressing different emotions about separation. In this paper, I will focus on differences
in social positions within families, in which children of migrants expressed greater sadness about family separation than their parents did.

More nuanced research on transnational families shows how emotional pain—for instance, among children with absent parents—is contingent on factors besides a migrant parent’s physical absence, such as the meaning that the child makes of the separation (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie 2002). Based on interviews with children of migrant mothers in the Caribbean, Karen Fog Olwig argued that it is not the absence of the mother in the household that causes pain for children but the mother’s absence in the form of lack of remittances and visits, because the household is itself conceived as a transnational and geographically dispersed unit. “None of the life stories [with children] gives the impression that the parents’ physical absence in and of itself had been experienced as traumatic or problematic. It is apparent, however, that this absence was only acceptable so long as the parents maintained a strong economic and social presence in the home through regular remittances and periodic visits” (1999, 279). Traditions of family life among transnational families may differ in the extent to which geographic proximity or motherly presence is significant. As a result, the extent to which transnational migration is in tension with those ideologies, and result in emotional pain, will also differ. It is also important to note that though change can lead to emotional pain, emotional pain does not in itself signal social change.\(^1\) Social change may create new benefits for some, and costs for others. Someone may also experience emotional pain in a situation that is relatively stable.

Furthermore, while scholars may sometimes discuss “family ideology” in general, as if all family members shared a similar family ideology, different people in the family,
having different roles and lived experiences, may have different understandings of the family unit that is at stake. Margery Wolf (1972) showed how men and women have different concepts of the family in Taiwan, in which the meaningful unit for women is the uterine family, whereas for men it is the patrilineal family. Similarly, in my conversations with parents and children in Ghanaian transnational families, parents and children had different notions of an idealized parent-child relationship. Parents focused on a dyadic bond with each child. Some talked about children as an investment who would support them when they are old, goals for which a dyadic relationship with each child make sense. Young people, on the other hand, included siblings within their definition of a family that could be scattered by migration, signaling the important role older siblings have played in raising younger ones in Ghana. Furthermore, parents focused on a goal-oriented process of “correction,” requiring their active engagement in the process of socializing their children. The character of a child was taken as an indication of the quality of the parent’s strategy and reflected on the parent’s reputation within his or her community. Children, on the other hand, tended to focus their desires on a set of practices oriented around an ongoing process of “care,” which encompassed emotional components like love, communication, and closeness as well as the material provision of clothing, food, and school fees. These differences in family ideology affected how parents and children expressed emotional suffering in their conversations with me.

A sense of agency based on social position also played a role. Depicting themselves as agents with responsibility and goals for their children, parents found themselves torn and uncertain because none of the options they faced seemed without
risk. The children, on the other hand, expressed more straightforward pain than emotional conflict, because their ideals were more clearly in disjuncture with the reality of their lives. They did not express action-oriented goals like their parents, but rather longings for a situation that others could bring into being. Thus, while emotional suffering can arise from goal conflict, as Reddy argues, it can also arise from structural constraints on one’s desires and goals. Because Reddy’s model is dependent on a liberal view of the self in which a person has will and agency, Reddy downplays structural constraints on agency or the way that people are located differently in social systems, influencing their ability to embody social ideals.

Finally, although I have far less data on this, the expression of emotion by parents and children seemed to be influenced by the normative emotional regimes for people in those respective positions. The parents seemed more stoic, successfully managing their emotions, whereas the children launched into a discourse of complaint with little encouragement from me or their peers.

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of the impact of migration on transnational families, by illustrating the different responses of family members in different structural and social positions—-in this case of migrant parents and the children of migrant parents. Their position affected their view of the ideal family and their expression of their own ability to reach that ideal.
TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND CONCEPTIONS OF FAMILY LIFE IN GHANA

In the literature on transnational migration, what makes Ghana interesting as a case example is that, like the Caribbean but unlike the Philippines and Central America, it is characterized by a historical movement of people and flexible family arrangements that may or may not have developed in relationship to patterns of travel or migration, but which in any case seem well suited to geographic movement. For instance, fosterage, in which a child lives with someone other than his or her birth parents, is a well-documented and widespread phenomenon in West Africa, used well beyond crisis situations such as the death of a parent (Alber 2003; Bledsoe 1990; Moran 1992). Fosterage enables children to acquire new skills from and relationships with the fostering household; it allows parents to cement alliances with foster parents and birth mothers to combine productive and reproductive activities. In many areas of Ghana, the experience of children living with someone other than their mother or father is common. The latest Ghana Demographic & Health Survey shows that 17.9% of urban children and 15.0% of rural children were living with neither their mother nor father (Ghana Statistical Service 1998). This figure increased as children got older, from a low of 2.6% of children below the age of two years to a high of 23.6% of children between the ages of ten and fourteen years. Older brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents often serve as kin foster parents. Because a couple may have many children, the oldest child may be significantly older than the youngest, and older siblings have sometimes played a major role in bringing up their younger siblings, by paying for their school fees or fostering their younger siblings. Non-kin foster parents usually are in a position of greater wealth and
social status than the child’s parents. The fluidity and openness of these familial arrangements reveal the logic of “wealth-in-people,” in which people are valued as a route to wealth and power (Bledsoe 1980; Guyer and Belinga 1995).

Migration has long characterized West African social life, and migrants and refugees have historically been valued as sources of new knowledge, skills, and resources. Transnational migration has been a known and valued phenomenon in Ghana since the colonial era, both for work elsewhere in West Africa and education in the metropole, processes that continued after independence. Ghanaian students in Britain left behind their children in the care of relatives and friends for the few years it took them to complete their studies (Goody and Groothius 1982). Transnational migration to other areas in the subregion increased as a result of the economically difficult and politically unstable period of the 1970s and 1980s and structural adjustment programs by The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s. Structural adjustment programs weakened those governments’ ability to provide needed services, enhanced the export-oriented segments of the economy which did not necessarily create many options for economic mobility, and resulted in a decline in living standards for middle-class professionals and civil servants, thus generating desires among the educated and skilled middle-class to migrate (see Parreñas 2005 and Sassen 1998). International and regional migration increased as Ghanaians traveled to Nigeria and Libya (Twum-Baah, Nabila, & Aryee 1995), but now every country in the world that is economically better off is a potential destination—from the United Kingdom and Europe to Australia, South Africa, Israel, Japan, the Caribbean, and the United States. Statistician K. A. Twum-Baah (2005) estimates that with a population of 21 million Ghanaians resident in Ghana, another 1.5
million are outside the country, although the European Union’s estimate is closer to three million.

Transnational migration was once a sign of elite status, particularly when it accompanied a high-status education in Europe. Transnational migration has become increasingly available to a broader swathe of the population, including students, teachers, lower-level civil servants, and skilled blue-collar workers like mechanics and electricians. Still, it is primarily available to those in urban areas in southern Ghana who are able to raise the capital to migrate. Many migrants hope to return to Ghana once they have earned enough money to build a house, start a business, or pay for their children’s education, although some are making the decision to remain abroad until retirement, deciding that it is too difficult to earn a decent living that would sustain a middle-class life in Ghana. Many leave their children behind in Ghana but expect that their children will join them abroad later, once the extended legal process to bring them over has been finalized or after the children have completed secondary school in Ghana.

The literature on families in Ghana has tended to emphasize the significance of the lineage structure and the relatively weak marital bond, features that would facilitate migration (Bartle 1981; Bleek 1977; Clark 1994). However, the salience of the extended family has been reduced in both urban and rural areas. While not in the upper strata of the government like those interviewed by Christine Oppong (1974) in the 1960s, my informants, like those in that elite, tended to envision the ideal household as comprising a nuclear family, a man and woman linked by marriage and their children. Churches, particularly the Pentecostal churches which are popular in Ghana, have encouraged family members to contribute more to their nuclear family, rather than to extended family
kin (Meyer 1999; van Dijk 2002). However, the nuclear family in Ghanaian ideology has far more permeable boundaries than it does in the West, with extended family members continuing to have rights and obligations—although far less than those due to one’s children and parents. One form those permeable boundaries take is that wealthier members of a lineage are expected to support more needy members (Ardayfio-Schandorf 1996). Thus, elite urban families will accept poorer and younger relatives in their households as house servants, pay for younger relatives’ schooling, and send remittances back to the villages to help with relatives’ funerals, support aunts and uncles, and contribute to family housing. 2 My interviewees’ ideal of nuclear family life are somewhat explained by the parents’ class position in Ghana prior to their migration as members of an urban bourgeoisie or petit-bourgeoisie of civil servants, teachers, pastors, and health professionals who strived to attain a middle-class lifestyle in Ghana by migrating.

Given the history of migration within Ghana and West Africa, and the flexibility and permeability of nuclear family life, how might transnational migration structure family life differently? Like other African migrants (D’Alisera 2004, 1998; Holtzman 2000; Manuh 1998), Ghanaians in the US have concerns about conflicts between spouses as a result of changing gender roles and norms, as well as about raising children to be African in the US. Because of immigration issues, work requirements, or a desire to save money, parents may be separated from one another and from their children for long periods of time. While internal migrants may similarly not take their children with them when they migrate to farms or the city, their children may spend school holidays with them and parents may visit them on weekends. Transnational migrants, on the other
hand, have a much more difficult time seeing their children, because of the expense of travel and the difficulty in obtaining short-term visas for their children to visit them. Parents who are illegal migrants do not travel back and forth, because they would not be able to re-enter the country of migration. Furthermore, because the main impetus for Ghanaians to migrate is for work and because of the difficulties of raising children overseas, to be detailed below, overseas migrants have more reasons than internal migrants to leave their young children and teenagers behind in Ghana. Thus, the family endures longer separations under the conditions of transnational migration than in urban or internal migration. At the same time, technologies such as cellphones, Western Union, and shipping allow parents overseas to remain in touch with their children and families through telephone conversations, money, and gifts. Transnational migration therefore involves some changes in family life in Ghana, despite the historical flexibility of Ghanaian family arrangements which seemed well suited to migration. Because of the social positions of my informants and the impact of Christianity on family ideology, the arrangements necessitated by transnational migration do deviate from the ideal of my informants, although to a lesser extent than for migrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Philippines cited in the literature on transnational families.

METHODOLOGY

I made contact with Ghanaian parents and children in transnational migrant families in several different ways. I conducted participant observation in a Ghanaian church in Philadelphia for twenty-four months (2004-2006), and through contacts through the church, I interviewed parents and young people who came to the US as
teenagers. Another set of interviews came through a visit to Ghana in the summer of 2005, when I visited the children and families of four parents I had interviewed in Philadelphia. I also conducted focus group interviews with a total of forty-two students in three secondary schools and one private school in a town of approximately 9,000 people (Akropong) with strong ties to much larger cities (Koforidua and Accra) and a city of just more a million (Kumasi) (Ghana Statistical Service 2002). I visited twenty-nine of those students’ guardians, with whom I had relatively short (half-hour), informal, untaped conversations, which are not drawn on in this paper. I then interviewed those children’s parents who were living in the US (one was in Canada) in fall 2005. This paper is based on thirty-five private interviews with parents (either singly or as a couple) and focus-group discussions and interviews with fifty-two children. Focus group discussions with children of migrant parents in school classrooms or meeting rooms (without the presence of the teacher or another adult) were followed up with private interviews with children who had a migrant parent in the US.

The period of parents’ residence in the US ranged from one to thirty-five years, with an average stay of ten years. Fourteen (or forty percent) were raising their children in Ghana; another fourteen were raising their children in the US; and the remainder had children in both places. The most common occupations of parents in Ghana had been teachers, government workers, and traders; in the US, they tended to work in the health care field, whether as nurses, home health aides, or health technicians. The majority (sixty-three percent) had resided in a major city prior to migration, but only a minority was highly educated (only twenty percent had received a university degree in Ghana, similar to the one in four reported by Anarfi, Kwankye and Ahiadeke [2005] in their
study of Ghanaian migration). The majority of my respondents were Akan; there were four Ewe respondents, two of whom had family in neighboring Togo as well as in Ghana. All my respondents were from southern Ghana, primarily from the Ashanti Region and the Eastern Region, reflecting patterns of transnational migration in Ghana in which southerners predominate.

“Children” in this paper are not children in the sense of being under the age of eighteen. Rather, they are children in the sense of their unmarried and childless status and their relation to a migrant parent. The ages of my “child” informants range from nine to twenty-five, corresponding to the local understanding of childhood or youth in Ghana. Of the fifty-two children interviewed, twenty-two were boys and thirty were girls, with an average age of fifteen years. Thirty of them had only one parent abroad (in two-thirds of those cases, this parent was the father); twenty-two of these thirty children were living with the non-migrant parent. Along with non-migrant parents, grandmothers and aunts were common caregivers. For fourteen of the children, their parents were among those I interviewed.

Because the data is based on interviews and focus group discussions, people were presenting themselves to me, themselves, and—in the case of the focus group discussions in schools—to one another. I found that while they tended to speak generally about a situation, the more they talked, the more it became clear that what they said abstractly or generally was a description of their specific situation, part of the Ghanaian aesthetic of indirection, particularly around emotional situations. The interviews and focus group discussions certainly opened up an opportunity for children to share their pain in a situation that did not hurt anyone present, as it might if they were to share if caretakers or
other family members were present. It also was clear to me that the secondary-school students talked about these issues amongst themselves, and that one person’s expression of pain about his or her family arrangements encouraged another in the focus group to similarly share, although some students opened up more in the individual interviews that followed. Most interviews tended to be about an hour long and were usually conducted in interviewees’ homes. Some were tape-recorded and others were not. I let my interviewee decide on whether the interview would be in English or Twi, and the choice of language did not seem to be related to comfort with discussing feelings. Even the interviews in Twi were heavily interspersed with English words, as is common in multilingual environments such as urban areas and boarding secondary schools.

PARENTS: RISKS IN RAISING THEIR CHILDREN

At the end of a long interview, Irene told this story about the time she took her three-month baby back to Ghana to live with her parents:

One time, I went to take my shower, and I came in. I put him on bed—I took him for his prep—I put him on bed. I was looking into his eyes. I’m like, you know what—it was just a quiet time for me, nobody was there, it was just me and the baby. And I was just looking. You know, I was sad at that short time. I’m like, you know what, I brought this life into this earth, and now all his responsibilities are on me. If I make bad decisions, guess what. I’m going to ruin his life. It was just my private moment. And I was crying, you know—not that I have a plan to hurt him, but he’s a big responsibility. He doesn’t need anybody but you. He didn’t ask to
be here, but he’s here. . . . And this came into my mind like, this little thing, his life depends on me. Whatever I do, it’s either going to make him good or make him bad. So it’s up to me to make good decisions to give him the best I can. Since then I was just crying. I said, “God, please give me the strength and give me the wisdom to be able, you know, to raise my kids the best way I know how.” It became very emotional. . . .

At times, it’s good you question yourself. Like, am I doing—even at times even when I’m here and I miss my kids so much, I question myself.

Am I making the right decision? Is what I’m doing right for the kids?

Am I going to regret one day?

Her narrative of this poignant moment shows how responsible Irene felt for her small baby, her third child. Seeing his helplessness, she felt that he was completely dependent on her for his life and his future. The sense of responsibility was a little overwhelming, particularly since Irene was not quite sure of the right path to take to accomplish her goals of caring for her children and “making [them] good.” The emotion was a dyadic one, between her and her baby; “my private moment,” she said.

This expression of uncertainty surprised me, because in many previous conversations with Irene, she had portrayed her situation without emotion and provided justifications for what she was doing—working in the US while her three children lived with her parents in Ghana—to demonstrate it was the best option for all involved. In their interviews with me, generally, parents did not talk in depth about their feelings of missing their children, but instead talked about how those feelings were subsumed to other concerns. Florence went to Britain for many years, when her son was two years
old, and she left her young son with his grandmother. For the first few years, she used to “groan” all the time, and then she consciously decided not to think about him until she would see him again, although she maintained communication with him through the telephone. In her conversations with me also, Irene very quickly made the transition from talking about missing her children to thinking about their character. She said about her three children, aged thirteen, six, and nine months, back in Ghana:

I miss them in person. I can call them three times a week. . . . You are there in a way. That helps me cope with them being over there. I have to take them home [to Ghana], because of the nature of my this thing [work as a live-in health aide]. . . . So far so good. They are well-mannered.

It was very important for Irene not to be affected too much by the separation, as she wanted to be able to go on with her work in the US. Thus, parents managed their emotions of missing their children and maintaining some connection through the telephone, in order to do what they felt was best for their children in the long run.

The parents I talked with shared goals for their children and had similar terms by which they evaluated those goals. Their goal was to produce a hard-working and obedient child who was respectful toward his or her elders. In order to accomplish these goals, adults felt responsible for “straightening” their children and correcting their mistakes. This is an active, engaged process on the part of the parent, and the child’s character reflects on the reputation of the parent. One couple raising their two-year-old daughter in the US gave a particularly full answer to my questions about parenting. Kwasi said, “If the child becomes a problem in future, people will look at you as a bad parent; you couldn’t bring up your child in a good way. So it is your responsibility. You
didn’t do your duties well. So you will pass through all possible means to straighten out your kid before he gets out of hand.” When I asked what he and his wife Doris hoped for their daughter, she answered,

Every parent wish their kids don’t go wayward from what they expect them to be. So I hope that she [their daughter] will be respectful, I hope that she will listen to what we tell her—advice—and I hope that she will not go follow friends, instead of being closer to family members. ‘Cause I hope she will grow up to be serious with her studies, her God, that she will be serious with her lifestyle, you know, not going the American lifestyle, having boyfriends, having babies without mar—I don’t want that to happen to her.

While these goals of transnational migrants seem similar to those expressed by Ghanaian parents who do not migrate, transnational migrants face a set of contradictory choices which make accomplishing these goals for their children more difficult in the context of migration than do non-migrant parents. They seem to agree that Ghana is a better place to raise a child of good character, an interpretation that supported raising their children in Ghana during key periods of child development or when a child began going “wayward.” However, many felt ambivalence about having someone other than a parent raise a child, because of the fear that a grandmother or relative in Ghana would pamper the child or lose control over the process. Those who expressed the sentiment that another caregiver would strengthen a child’s character expressed this about their own childhoods, rather than about their own children.
Parents generally felt that it was easier to raise children in Ghana. As Kwadwo said, “As for Ghana, we are poor and don’t have money. Ghana is a poor Third World country, but we can raise children. It’s good.” One of the key reasons Ghanaian parents cited among the difficulties of raising children in the US was that one was restrained from physically punishing one’s child here. This issue was mentioned in every interview I conducted and was generally among the first things people said when I asked about raising children in the US. Akosua said,

I said [to my daughter, who just arrived from Ghana], “That cane [the lack of it in the US], that doesn’t mean that in this place you have to misbehave. This place, it is their culture that they don’t beat kids. But Africa, because we want you to know more, that is why we use cane” . . . . Everything you have to do it right. If you don’t do it right, the cane will give you the thing [motivation] to do. But this place, because there is no cane, people will behave anything [any which way].

Parents said quite explicitly that the reason they held back from punishing their children physically was because they were afraid of getting arrested by the police for child abuse and having their children taken away from them to be put into the foster care system. They said that their children were well aware of their rights and would not hesitate to contact the police in such a situation. In this context, several parents talked about America as the land of freedom, by which they meant that children have greater freedom than they do in Ghana. Adwoa said, “Here [in the US], children are free, but it is not good. We are used to disciplining them, but you can’t do that here, because it is called ‘abuse’ and you can call the police.”
As I discussed this issue with parents, it did seem to me that while physical punishment is used in Ghana, it is used in coordination with more subtle means, like peer pressure and shaming, that are not available in the US because of different standards of behavior within the larger society. Thus, parents felt a greater need to physically punish their children in the US—in the absence of other motivating forces—than they would in Ghana, even as American norms of parenting made that practice more difficult. At the same time, parents idealized Ghana’s harshness, drawing on their own childhoods, and were not necessarily aware of how child-rearing and disciplinary norms have changed in contemporary Ghana.

Ghanaians, like Sierra Leonean parents (Bledsoe 1990), value hardship as an important component of building a child’s character. Thus, if a parent were to send a child back to Ghana to be straightened out, because he or she had been misbehaving in the US, as some parents resort to doing, Kwabena believed that one should “send them to places where conditions are hard,” such as to a village near Tamale in northern Ghana, associated in the minds of southern Ghanaians with a lack of development and amenities, that will result in children working hard.

However, this feeling that Ghana generates more hardship than the US was usually articulated in relation to schooling. School in Ghana was conceived of as a greater struggle—because of its highly competitive nature, its lack of resources, and the exams which require memorization of material learned over several years—than were schools in the US, with grades dependent on assignments as well as tests, rather than a terminal exam; resources like computers and textbooks; and easy access to high school and college to those who can afford it. Parents perceived that the struggle of schooling in
Ghana inculcated in their children a sense of educational discipline that translated into school success wherever they might go thereafter. Akua, a student in a prestigious secondary school in Kumasi, said that her father sent her back to Ghana from Canada because “he wanted me to come here to learn how to study. He says, there [in Canada] they don’t know how to study, and here [in Ghana] they know how to study and learn more. If I finish school here and go to university there, it will be for my own benefit.” Yaa, at the same school, who had not been outside the country, said that in Ghana one had to “struggle” in one’s schooling and so one becomes disciplined, and “excels” wherever one goes. Twenty-five-year-old Afua, studying in the US but raised in Ghana, said that she was glad that her younger sister, Ama, followed her father back to Ghana: “Things are too free over here [in the US]. Kids have too much freedom, too much rights. It [being in Ghana] makes you strong, in a way. That is my opinion. It makes you strong because you know how secondary schools in Ghana are. You don’t get what you want all the time. . . . It makes you strong in a way that you can handle every situation you find yourself in.”

Yet it seems that it is partly an understanding of life in the US that has affected Ghanaian migrant parents’ view of the importance of education. While higher education is certainly important in Ghana as well in providing access to civil-service jobs, education (or credentials), even only a high-school diploma, are important in the US for even the most low-status and low-paying jobs, and so the importance of getting a college degree grows. Kwaku, a social worker educated in Ghana to the diploma level, who received his BA and MSW in the US, said, “If you don’t go to school and don’t get an education, you won’t be able to live a good life at all.” This sentiment is shared by Akosua, who went to
commercial school in Ghana to train as a secretary, who told me, “Because in this country, if you don’t have a good education, to get a good job is hard.” Her own qualifications, she lamented, do not count for much in the US.

Ghanaian migrant parents talked a great deal about losing their children, a phrase that is associated with raising children in the US. Yao told me that what he saw as he met other Ghanaians around the US was that “people are losing their children. Parents are really, really breaking down emotionally, and some parents have adopted the system of returning their children back home these days because they have no option.” “Losing your child” referred to the losing of the child’s character, not a physical loss. When I asked one parent whose four children (aged 13-23) were back in Ghana what he meant by losing your children, Kofi replied,

Lose the child, like, the training you give to your child may be lost. If you say, “Don’t do it,” they might talk back. The kids here talk back to you. Back home, you have to listen, you have to listen to what you are told to do. Because the parents know what is right for you to do, that’s why he’s telling you to do that. When you bring your child here and you don’t take full control over him or her, that’s what I mean by losing your child.

Once character is lost, so is everything else. While appreciating the system of education in the US, Yao told me that he would prefer to raise his children in Ghana because “I know that I—or we—can easily lose the children to anything else and once we lose them, the tendency to focus on education would even be killed. . . . They could have the best resources, education-wise, that my wife and I never got, but it wouldn’t matter because if the value system is not there to hold them, they would not even look at this,” a book he
taps on the table. The sadness of the phrase “losing one’s child” is that there is little hope of recovering that child. As a result, Ghanaian parents focus on inculcating values within the child and strengthening the child’s character.

However, despite the benefits of raising children in Ghana for issues of character building and struggle, many parents had concerns about other people raising their children, because they might not discipline them in the way that a parent would. The opposite of “correction,” in the minds of these parents, was “pampering,” which would “spoil” the child’s character. One reason that caregivers might not train a child well was precisely because of financial assistance from the parent. If a child complained as a result of the hardship, the parent might cut off those remittances. Kwabena said, There are “problems when people raise” your children. They might “pamper the child because of remittances.” Ama thought that only 20% of her friends would raise her child properly. Because they want the money, they will spoil and pamper the child. She felt that only her mother or sister cared enough about her to discipline her child.

Grandmothers are both the ones to whom parents most easily turn as caregivers and the most suspect as pamperers. Americans too tend to think of grandparents as more tender and less strict toward their grandchildren than they were to their own children, and Ghanaians share this sentiment about tenderness. Winifred, whose daughters were being raised by her mother in Ghana, said, “One other thing too is if we were there, we would spank them more, like we would discipline them more than their grandmothers would discipline them. Because usually the grandmothers are happy having their grandchildren around, so there are certain things they will overlook.” Irene complained about how her parents do not discipline her son, although she felt that they did well with her and her
siblings. Joanna, a young woman raised in Ghana, commented, thinking about her own future as a mother, “My mom will probably spoil him or her, but I hope, you know, my brothers or someone who is in a good position [will be able to take care of my child back home]. Grandparents are good but they just spoil kids.” The neglect by a caregiver can lead to pampering and the child going astray, being on the street late at night and neglecting his or her studies.

However, when caregivers were not neglectful, parents felt that their care—associated with less food, less sympathy, and more household labor—encouraged children to be more hard-working, disciplined, and respectful. Some parents looking back at their own childhoods believed that being raised by one’s own parents results in pampering, and staying with a relative can build one’s character, precisely because it is so difficult. Doris said about her own childhood, “So staying with my father’s brother put some struggle in me. It made me work harder, I would say. Even though my siblings work harder [hard], it made me who I am now. I was doing more than I would have done if I had stayed with my parents.” Her husband Kwasi added,

The other thing is that people also think that, there is that belief, that if you stay with your parents, parents sometimes they can spoil their children, especially last-borns; she [his wife] happens to be a last-born [as is he]. . . . What we normally say in the [Twi] language, if someone just knock you in the head, what they are just trying to tell you is that you have to strengthen your neck to receive that knock. So when somebody is pushing through that hard stuff like training, she may be thinking she’s oppressing you or something. But it’s for your own good. You grow up to
be a different person. But that kind of treatment, your parents cannot give you that.

Victoria felt similarly about her grandmother, who raised her and her sisters. Interestingly, this sentiment did not correlate with a child-raising strategy of having other people raise one’s child, probably because parents were reflecting on their own childhoods rather than the present. Doris and Kwasi were raising their daughter in the US with them, with some trepidation, while Victoria’s adolescent son was in a boarding school in Ghana. Victoria complained that her siblings were neglectful in their care for her son, never visiting him in the school, despite the fact that she sent them money regularly.

Because of the difficulties with raising their children in both Ghana and the US, parents’ discussion of their choices projects uncertainty about the best course of action, expressing that no option is clearly the better one. They are aiming for a goal of raising respectful and obedient children, but they experience “conflicting tugs and contradictions” as they navigate through waters that make all child-raising situations fraught or uncertain in some way (Reddy 2001:55). They are engaged in the management of emotions, trying to downplay missing their children and anxiety about the best course of action. Their anxiety is heightened by their sense of agency, in which they feel the responsibility of raising their children and that their actions will have enormous consequences on their children’s future. Like Ghanaian migrants in Toronto, Canada, they “maintain a deliberate ambiguity and open-endedness in their lives, and constantly explore multiple possibilities” because of the uncertainties of life (Manuh 1998: 73). Ghanaian migrant parents live in “a risk society” (Beck 1992), which “means
living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative” (Giddens 1991:28). Their children, however, have a very different view of themselves and of the situation.

CHILDREN: SORROW ABOUT “THE SCATTERED FAMILY”

Children of migrant parents were more likely than migrant parents to openly express sadness, lamenting a family unity that was now scattered. Afua’s younger sister, Emma, complained that migration “brings about separation of the family.” One girl in a private junior-secondary school in Kumasi said that she would like it if “our family would be one and live together. . . . We are all one family and we could live together.” A secondary school student, aged fifteen, whose parents and another sibling are in Italy while he and a sister are in Ghana said, “The family is, is like scattered, because I hardly see them.” Many of the children seemed to hold up as an ideal a nuclear family ideology in which parents and siblings lived together. It is significant that in the quote above in Twi, the girl used the English word “family,” for which there would be no equivalent in Twi (the word abusua, sometimes used as a translation of “family,” refers to lineage, and the term fie refers to household). Children seem to be as concerned about their siblings’ presence and absence as about their parents’. In a set of siblings, parents may bring over a few children at a time because of visa issues, or, because of the different ages of their children, decide that one is ready to come to the US but another should finish school in Ghana, or that the youngest should be with her parents and the older siblings should continue their education in Ghana. Or siblings may have different citizenship status, because if a man migrates and his wife then follows, as is the common
pattern, they may then bear children who have citizenship in the country of migration, while the older children, born before the parents’ migration, do not. For instance, Kingsley is currently in secondary school and living with his grandparents in Ghana, while his parents went to Germany. In Germany, his parents gave birth to a daughter, who is currently about six or seven years old. She came to live with the grandparents for about two years when she was small so that the mother could work, but then the mother said that the German government needed her to come back (this may have been either an immigration regulation or an excuse the parents gave to the grandparents), and the daughter went back to Germany to live with her parents. When I asked his caregivers why Kingsley was in Ghana and not in Germany, they gave two reasons: one is his lack of papers, since he was born in Ghana; and the other is that it is important for him to finish his schooling here because the language and the schooling system are different in Germany, just as his sister should finish schooling in Germany. Many children of migrant parents are separated from one or more of their siblings as well as from their parents.

Addo, at the same secondary school as Kingsley, is in a similar situation. His brothers and sisters are with his mother in Germany, and he lives with his aunt and cousins. He complained, “Sometimes I feel lonely.” Later he said that his cousins, with whom he is living, receive things that he does not get. The different living arrangements for siblings may result in their having different experiences and different relationships with their parents. Akua lived in Ghana for four years while her parents waited for her paperwork to clear in Canada. At the age of five, she joined her parents and younger brother there, before returning to boarding secondary school in Ghana when her mother
perceived her lack of industry in her schoolwork in Canada. Akua commented on how
the separation affected family dynamics: “It’s also not good for the parents to be abroad
with some of the kids,” because the parents will grow closer to some children.

   My dad used to like my brother better than me, but when I got to live with
   them and got to know them—Still, my mom likes my brother better than
   me, because my mom has been living with my brother through his whole
   life. He’s never been away from my mom. But then I’ve been away from
   my mom for four years when they left me.

Akua highlighted the effects that not living together had on affection, with a scattered
family generating differences in closeness for a set of siblings.

   Children also talked about missing migrant parents, using the term “love” with the
   modifier of “maternal,” “paternal,” or “parental,” to indicate that this kind of love was
   special and unique, something only such a person—mother, father, parent—could give.
   It is significant that this term also was in the English language. There seemed to be no
distinguishing between parental gender in these statements, with fathers being missed as
much as mothers. Thus, unlike some other studies (Parreñas 2005, 2000; Schmaultzbauer
2004; Hondagneu-Sotela and Avila 1997), transnational motherhood did not seem to be
the issue as much as transnational parenting. At a focus group discussion at one
secondary school, two girls talked about missing intensely the migrant parent, even
though one parent stayed behind. Bertha said that she stayed with her father but missed
her mother who was abroad. Even though she talked regularly to her mother on the
phone, “still I even cry. I wish she was here. I miss her.” Mercy said, “When my dad
was here, I was very close to my dad. I was always with my dad. Now since he’s left,
I’ve lost that kind of paternal love. So whenever my dad calls, when I call him and I talk to my dad on the phone, I fall sick—I don’t know—because, like, I miss him.” A year later, in a private interview she told me again that she felt sick after her father left. He used a certain cologne and if she happened to smell it, she would feel sick again. But gradually she became used to his absence.

Whether or not parental love could be conveyed through phone calls, shipments of presents such as clothing and cellphones, and cash was in dispute by children of migrant parents. Kwame, the son of Victoria, thought not. “The only way I interact with her is talking to her on the phone. I need mother love.” His mother had complained to me that her siblings did not visit him at the school; he complained that on visiting day, he sat alone while friends were receiving family members. “If my mum were to be around [in Ghana], she also would visit me.” Because she was unable to visit, he complained that his mother falsely accused him of smoking and following girls. “I think if she really loves me, she would be visiting me here, to know my whereabouts and what I have been doing. . . . If she’s there [in the US], she doesn’t know what is going on here.” For some, emotional affection was associated with physical presence, while others felt it could be sustained through phone calls and gifts.

An importance feature of missing one’s parent was feeling isolated and alone, not being able to express one’s needs and desires, and not having connection to anyone. Many children, after expressing their feelings of missing their parents, reported how caregivers were not able to provide the love, affection, and provision of resources that parents would. Afua is the oldest of four siblings. When her mother and father went to
the US, they left behind Afua and her two brothers in the care of the mother’s younger sister, taking the youngest daughter with them. She commented,

Living with my aunt is not like living with your parents, you know. I would say that it really had much effect on my brothers. . . . They lacked that parental love. Before, my mom really loved us. That was almost the only thing she could do, like, call us and talk. Almost every Sunday, she would call. We’ve been so attached to her than to my dad. My dad and [Emma, her youngest sister] are really pretty close, but with the rest of us, it’s like, [Emma] left when she was like four and a half years, and lucky for her, she came with both of them [their mother and father], so she got all the love from both parents. . . . My aunt wasn’t so, so nice to us. We didn’t really get all the love from her. It was more like each one for himself. You do whatever you have to do to survive. That was really hard.

For her, the key damage for her and her brothers was that rather than thinking about the family as a unit—close, together, thinking and caring about each other—they became more individual, thinking only about themselves. As an example, she said that she would finish up the food, not leaving any for her brothers, because she had difficulty getting enough food in her aunt’s house. While the mother called regularly and visited once, it was not enough to protect them from the lack of affection from their caregiver, the mother’s sister.

Like Afua, many of the children of migrant parents articulated a discourse that was focused on an ongoing process of care, based on both the provision of material...
resources and love. While one might expect material resources to be provided more
effectively by an absent, migrant parent, the lack of material resources was one of the
idioms of complaint that children used. The key indicators of material care were food,
clothing, and money, and the term they tended to use was “cater,” meaning providing for,
rather than pampering. Dinah said, “As for me, I don’t have any problem with them
staying in the US, but most people [children of migrant parents] complain, because as for
their parents, they don’t cater [provide for] them. They go there and that’s all. They
never hear from them again.” Some explained this lack of material care by complaining
that their caregivers were diverting the remittances for purposes other than their care.
Akua echoed this thought, “One of my friends, her mom went and her dad went; they left
her with the mom’s sister, and [she] always maltreats the girl. When they bring her
clothes or money, instead of using it to cater for her, they use it for their children. Oh—it
was bad.” While parents did not want their children to be neglected—badly fed or
clothed—they expected their remittances to provide for the caregiver’s needs as
compensation and to ensure that their child is well cared for. Whereas parents thought
that caregivers would pamper children, in order to maintain a situation that benefitted
them materially, the children’s discourse claimed the reverse. However, the children are
less likely to use the word “pamper” than the term “comfortable,” to refer to both
financial and emotional comfort. Beatrice said that she wanted to live together with her
father and mother (both in the US). When I asked her why, she replied, “Maybe if I live
with my mother, I will be more comfortable than living with someone else. Because if I
live with my mother, my mother will do what I like for me.” Many of the students in the
focus group at the same school complained about not getting all the money that their parents sent back and said that they felt sad and materially deprived.

American family ideology places importance on the nurturance of children (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1997); while this does not hold true for Ghanaian migrant parents, it does seem to be a feature of their children’s discourse about family, to the extent that nurturance is about both the provision of emotional and material care. While Americans attribute more emotional aspects of nurturance to the mother, the children of migrant parents had only a slight tendency in this regard. While American family ideology tends to separate kinship from economics (Strathern 1985; Taylor 2004), West Africans make clear the ways that relationships are dependent on flows of material goods. Thus, while other studies of transnational families have discussed how migration facilitates the commodification of love, in which the emotional intimacy with a present parent is replaced by the material goods of an absent parent (Parreñas 2005), such a schema does not make sense in this context. Rather, here, emotional intimacy and material comfort are conjoined, with most child informants stressing that parents provide both better than other caregivers.

As the children described it, the lack of emotional connection was related to material care: one was shy to tell one’s caregiver about one’s material needs in a way that one would not hesitate to tell a parent. Akua said that one of the negatives of her situation was “Being without my parents. My siblings are out there. Sometimes I feel lonely; I won’t lie. At times, you can’t get what you want, because my parents are not here and it’s just my grandmother. I can’t always be worrying her.” Daniel said that the difficulties of staying with relatives “make you miss your parents too much.” When I
asked about the nature of those difficulties, he responded that while parents will provide for you, you will not get even “petty, petty things” (such as pocket money for snacks at school) you ask for from your relatives. Others in the focus group agreed with his assessment.

Some children did discuss their experiences through the discourse of correction, using the term “pamper” as the parents might. In a focus group discussion, Paul felt, “When they [parents] leave you, you will be able to reason enough and able to do things on your own. And even if you get something wrong, someone sitting outside there will be able to correct you. But when you do something wrong, because your parents are there, they will always try to pamper you and you might not be able to know your left and right.” In the same discussion, Edward agreed with this point: “Being raised by your parents sometimes, like, they will pamper you. They see you higher than other children so they pamper you a lot. They always do things. But here’s the case, me living with my aunt. I know when to ask for something and I know when not to ask, when to say something and when not to say something, when to do something and when not to do it.”

For these secondary-school boys, pampering was associated with emotional intimacy and material provision, and as such, was detrimental to correction, or being able to act appropriately. As a result, it was better to be raised by someone other than one’s parents. Eric, aged twelve, used the discourse of correction to argue that he should be raised by his father, rather than his father’s sister, when I asked him why he wanted to go to the US: “The reason I want to go [to live with him in the US] is sometimes I miss my father. My father, if you do something, he will correct you, but now because I don’t live with my father, I can do anything I want. I want my father to be very strict with me.” Here, like
the other secondary school boys quoted above, he reflected the parental discourse of
correction, but used it to support his expression of missing his father, something that
appears in much more muted and ambivalent form in parental discourses.

As the eldest sister and now in her early twenties, Afua was taking on a more
parental position in thinking about her younger brothers’ growing up, linking their
correction or character to their care. In talking about her brothers’ sporadic commitment
to their education, she commented, “I feel sorry, but I don’t blame them that much,
because they really never had my mom because we were separated all these years.” They
lacked “parental control.” With this phrase, like some of the parents and like Eric, she
suggests that only parents can raise their children properly.

For some children, the financial aspect has improved with their parents’
migration. Paul said that he was better off financially after his father migrated, because
prior to his migration he could only afford government schools but after he left, he could
afford private schools. There certainly are young people who do not “miss” their parents
in the way those quoted above do. Like youngsters from Nevis in the Caribbean (Olwig
1999), they appreciated the remittances that their parents send and which provide them
with material goods and reported receiving “maternal love” or “paternal love” from a
grandmother or aunt. For instance, Edward lives primarily with his aunt and her
husband, who take him as their son. They get money from his mother, “so I’m not
lacking anything. Apart from wanting to be with my mother, there’s nothing I lack.”

Another secondary-school student, Agnes, said that it was okay for her father to have
left, because he calls and writes to her. At the same school, Ernestina said that she
understood her father’s migration because of the working conditions in Ghana. “I don’t
have any problem with them going there to pay school fees and those things. But I think
that when they go there, they will work a lot and very hard to get the money over there.
If parents are educated and have jobs, I don’t think that anybody will wish to go there and
work.” Thus, some of the children I interviewed did not report suffering as a result of
parental migration, explaining their reaction through the provision of material care. One
secondary-school student developed a relationship of emotional intimacy with her
caregiver which meant that her migrant parents’ return to Ghana required an emotional
adjustment.

However, many children expressed a discourse of longing, in which their desires
for a nuclear family to be living together—associated with emotional and material care—
were not met by the conditions of transnational family life. Their emotional suffering
was based on a discourse of unmet needs, and they focused on care rather than correction.
Like migrant parents, they were uncertain whether parents can best provide correction,
but they were clear that parents can best provide care and love. Thus, rather than
experiencing uncertainty as their parents did, they expressed certainty about the definition
of the situation, but in ways that highlighted their pain. Within this discourse, they did
not present themselves as agents able to change the situation effectively, but rather
granted parents and other adults full responsibility.

A PARENTAL DISCOURSE OF CARE

While parents and children had different discourses by which they evaluate family
relationships, one about the goal of character and one about the process of care, it is
important to note that subjectivities are fluid, so that a few parents, when recalling their
own childhoods, made use of the discourse of care, and, as noted above, some children
draw on the discourse of correction. Two parents, both in their forties, expressed
dissatisfaction with their own experiences of being fostered as a child, using the same
language as the children above of care and love. Precisely because of the long history of
migration in Ghana and the traditions of child fosterage, some transnational migrant
parents have experiences that they can look back on of being cared for by someone other
than their mother or father. In the cases described here, they use the discourse of care
and correction to criticize these arrangements and evaluate their own parenting options.

Leticia, age forty, was raised by her mother’s junior sister and grandmother until
she finished secondary school, although she spent vacations with her mother. She said
that she was not close to her parents.

So what I have noticed is that that has an effect on you as a person. It’s
like you’re crying out for love. You want to be loved. But you didn’t
have that love from the very people that should love you, that should teach
you how to love. I have noticed that. It has an adverse effect on your
growth. Psychologically there is a void that you want to fill all the time,
because you didn’t get it. That is a problem with our upbringing.

She also felt that her situation meant that she did not experience “parental control” as
other Ghanaian girls did. She stated emphatically that she was not going to send her two
young children back to Ghana or even get a sitter so that she could work. “I want to
enjoy motherhood. I want to do it by myself for some time, because of the problem I
went through as a child. I want that closeness to be there between me and my kids.” She
was fortunate that she did not have to work; her husband worked for an airline company.
Critical of Ghanaian styles of parenting, Leticia, of all the migrant parents I interviewed, seemed to have embraced motherhood, using a combination of psychological language and justifications familiar to Ghanaians such as a proverb about mothers and the language of correction.

Kofi, on the other hand, age forty-nine, was raised by a much older brother from the age of thirteen onward when his father died. He described his brother as having “an iron hand, very cruel. And he made my childhood very miserable.” He felt ambivalent about being beaten and “the brutal training” he had: it had taken away his motivation to continue in school but overall, he said, “One way or the other, it was good. Even though, I can say it is good for me. It’s not bad for me. I learned a lot; I learned a lot.” He was similar in age to his brother’s children and resembled his brother more than some of his brother’s own children, so people thought that his brother was his father, but he himself saw the difference: “When I see his kids, how they feel, how they are happy with his [their] father, you know, and I don’t have that parental feeling, I feel isolated.” His wife experienced those “same problems when she was also very young,” so they were in agreement that “we don’t want that trouble to come to our children.” He migrated to the US, while his wife stays in Ghana with his four children, aged thirteen to twenty-three years. Unlike Leticia, he used the language of correction in relation to his own children, explaining that his wife, a teacher, was well versed in disciplining young people.

CONCLUSION

The discourses of care and correction have implications for what we might call family ideology: the sense of what is right or normative in terms of living arrangements,
particularly who should be living together. The parents and children I interviewed held as a social norm a nuclear family, in which parents live with all their children in one place. This social norm, however, can be altered appropriately in different circumstances, according to the logic of these discourses. The discourse of care generated by children supports a notion of living with one’s parents and siblings, with some room for negotiation left open for different arrangements because material care may in fact improve with a parent’s migration, so long as the parent sends money, siblings remain together, and the caregiver has an emotional bond with the child and uses the money for the child’s welfare. The discourse of correction creates more ambivalence for parents about the best living arrangement. Parents feel that while they may be the best ones at training their children, raising their children overseas is difficult because of the lack of support in the US for meeting the parents’ goals of socialization, including constraints around physical punishment, different norms for young people’s behavior, and the need for parents to work long hours, leaving children unsupervised. This was not just felt by those who sent their children back to Ghana, although it was perhaps expressed more strongly by them; rather, parents with children with them in the US (such as Kwasi and Doris) hoped that they would be able to instill their values in their children despite their environment.

These discourses have implications for feeling-states and the way that different family members navigate the complex emotional terrain generated by the disconnect between the conditions caused by transnational migration—the scattered family—and the ideals of family life of those who migrate. Because of the differing ideals that parents and children have for family relationships, the children described in this paper were more
expressive of emotional pain and complaint, in which their reality does not match their
desire, while parents highlighted the management of their emotions, particularly around
missing their children, and switched rapidly from the expression of emotion to goals like
good character, which they hoped could be accomplished in this transnational situation.
The children expressed much more certainty about the definition of the situation and their
emotions. Parents, on the other hand, narrated the riskiness of their strategies, uncertain
which parenting strategy would work best in producing a respectful child, relying on their
own and stories of others’ experiences to navigate these difficult waters.

Both parents and children experienced structural constraints in achieving their
ideals, and this resulted in the expression of different kinds of emotional pain. The
parents, who saw themselves as agents with much responsibility, experienced the
riskiness and uncertainty of multiple choices across different contexts—each of which
had its pros and cons and none of which was clearly the right path—as they strove to
attain the ideal of the successful migrant by Ghanaian standards. Children openly
expressed sadness using the language of complaint and lament, in which they were
powerless and their situation was in the hands of others, whether parents or caregivers.
Transnational migration thus creates different structures of feelings in actors in different
positions and we should take these into account as we seek to understand the effects of
these processes and arrangements on persons and families.

ENDNOTES

Acknowledgments. The research was funded by the Institute for Research on Women, the
Childhood Studies Center, and the Research Council, all at Rutgers University. My
thanks to Deborah Augsburger, Kathleen Howard, Emmanuel Koku, Rachel Reynolds, Diane Sicotte, the participants of the “Diasporas and Migration” seminar at the Institute for Research on Women, and the four anonymous reviewers for *City and Society* for their excellent comments on drafts of this paper. All errors in interpretation are, of course, my own.

1. I am indebted to Deborah Augsburger for this insight.

2. Much of the anthropological literature in West Africa has focused on the relationship between child fosterage and urban migration, documenting how rural children are sent to live with urban relatives to acquire schooling or training and to help connect urban migrants to their rural kinfolk (Etienne 1979; Moran 1990). However, the demographic data on child fosterage shows that the flows of children do not mirror that of rural-to-urban migrants: urban women also send their children back to villages while they work or go to school (Vimard & Guillaume 1991) or send their children to live with other urban residents to maintain relations of fictive kinship with fellow townspeople (Schildkrout 1973). Furthermore, U. C. Isiugo-Abanihe (1983), working with 1970 census data in Ghana, found that 62.4% of all foster children have moved within rural areas, 23.5% within urban areas, while 5% moved from rural to urban areas and 8.1% from urban to rural.

3. Secondary-school students are generally fifteen to eighteen years old.

4. Van Dijk (2002) argues that the commodification of social relations occurred at an earlier period of colonialism in Ghana, and there is evidence to support this contention.

5. The proverb she quoted was: “Wo nsa kyi yɛ wo dɛ a, kyeɛ n se wo nsa yim” meaning literally, “However sweet the back of your hand is, it can’t be sweeter than the inside of
your hand.” She explained that in this context, this meant that however good somebody else might be as a caregiver, that person couldn’t be as good as a mother. I heard this proverb in another similar context, with the explanation that when your mother dies, your family has died.
WORKS CITED

Ahearn, Laura M.


Alber, Erdmute


Anarfi, John K., Stephen O. Kwankye and Clement Ahiadeke


Ardayfio-Schandorf, Elizabeth, ed.


Bartle, Philip F. W.


Beck, Ulrich


Bledsoe, Caroline
1990  “No Success without Struggle”: Social Mobility and Hardship for Foster


Bleek, Wolf


Bryceson, Deborah and Ulla Vourela

2002  Transnational Families in the Twenty-first Century.” In The Transnational
       Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks. Bryceson and
       Vuorela, ed. (pp. 3-30). Oxford: Berg.

Collier, Jane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, & Sylvia Yanagisako

       Reader. Roger Lancaster & Micaela di Leonardo, ed. (pp. 71-81). New York:
       Routledge.

D’Alisera, JoAnn

2004  An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leonean Muslims in America.

1998  Born in the USA: Naming Ceremonies of Infants Among Sierra Leoneans

Etienne, Mona

1979  Maternité Sociale, Rapports d’Adoption et Pouvoir des Femmes chez les
Ghana Statistical Service


Giddens, Anthony

1991  Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.

Goody, Esther & Christine Muir Groothius

1982  The Quest for Education. In Parenthood and Social Reproduction. Esther

Guyer, Jane and Samuel M. Eno Belinga

1995  Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and

Holtzman, Jon D.

      Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette & Ernestine Avila

1997  “I’m Here, but I’m There”: The Meanings of Latina Transnational
      Motherhood. Gender & Society 11: 548-571.

Isiugo-Abanihe, Uche C.

1983  Child Fostering in West Africa: Prevalence, Determinants, and
Lutz, Catherine A. and Lila Abu-Lughod, ed.


Manuh, Takyiwaa


Meyer, Birgit


Moran, Mary


Olwig, Karen Fog


Oppong, Christine


Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar

2000  Mothering From a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational

Reddy, William M.

       Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sassen, Saskia


Schildkrout, Enid


Schmaltzbauer, Leah

2004  Searching for Wages and Mothering from Afar: The Case of Honduran

Strathern, Marilyn

1985  Kinship and Economy: Constitutive Orders of a Provisional Kind.

Suarez-Orozco, Carola, Irina L. G. Todorova and Josephine Louie

2002  Making Up For Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and

Taylor, Janelle S

2004  Introduction. In Consuming Motherhood. Taylor, Linda L. Layne, and
       Danielle F. Wozniak, ed (pp. ). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Twum-Baah, K. A.

Twum-Baah, K. A., J. S. Nabila, & A. F. Aryee


Van Dijk, Rijk


Vimard, Patrice & Agnès Guillaume


Williams, Raymond


Wolf, Margery