BECOMING AN ADULT;
THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN IN GHANA

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Abstract

The paper explores socialisation practices of parents (and other significant adults) of pre-teens to suggest some of the ways in which gender identities might be reproduced from one generation to the next and might contribute to the reproduction of gendered patterns of privilege and subordination. Specifically we explore three socialisation practices: rewards, punishments and consciously-modeled behaviours or instructions, looking also at whether parents distinguish between sons and daughters in their application. The study used data from interviews with adults living in two towns in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Parents indicated that the most common training method used was the issuing of verbal instructions. Punishments were also an important form of training and included physical chastisement, particularly to instil compliance in young children and boys. Parents were generally inclined to believe that girls are more obedient and hence need less punishing. Although parents believed that giving rewards is effective in ensuring that children practiced or pursued certain household chores, gender related roles and adopted family life values, it appeared not to be practised widely or consistently. Our results seem to indicate that intergenerational transmission of (gendered) identities occurs through gendered training that goes beyond the issuing of instructions.

Résumé

L’article explore les constantes de la socialisation genrée des préadolescents par des parents (et d’autres adultes) afin d’envisager les moyens propres à reproduire les identités sexospécifiques d’une génération à l’autre et aussi à reproduire des modèles de privilège et de subordination. Nous nous appesantirons, en particulier, sur trois pratiques de socialisation : la récompense, le châtiment aussi bien que les habitudes et les directives consciemment modelées, et ceci en déterminant si les parents distinguent entre fils et filles dans leur application de ces pratiques. Dans cette investigation, nous avons utilisé des données recueillies par des entrevues avec les adultes qui habitent dans deux villes de la Région de l’Est du Ghana. D’après les parents, la méthode de formation communément utilisée consistait à donner des
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consignes verbales aux enfants. La punition représentait aussi un élément important de la formation et n’écartait point le châtiment corporel administré pour inculquer aux jeunes enfants, notamment aux garçons, l’impératif de soumission. En règle générale, les parents sont disposés à croire que les filles, par rapport aux garçons, sont plus obéissantes, et ainsi ont besoin de moins de correction. Si quelques parents croient que le fait d’offrir des récompenses aux enfants oblige ces derniers à faire certaines tâches ménagères, à remplir d’autres fonctions sexospécifiques ou à adopter des valeurs familiales, il paraît que cette pratique n’est pas généralement ou constamment suivie. Nos résultats laissent penser que la transmission intergénérationnelle des identités (genrées) se réalise par le biais d’une formation sexospécifique qui dépasse le simple recours aux instructions.

Introduction

During the early years of independence in the 1960s and 1970s when the Pan African spirit burned strong across the continent, young people in Africa were not constructed as posing a social problem the way they are today. This young continent (in demographic terms) was filled with hope that the youth would constitute the vital force for the continent’s future well-being and prosperity. The protracted and deep-rooted economic crisis that has affected nearly every country in sub-Saharan Africa has had a profoundly negative impact on the well-being of the entire population in the region, and young people growing up in the midst of the crisis have been particularly affected. Too many do not have an education, or if they have one it is too inadequate to be of any real value to them. Many roam the streets trying to eke out a living selling an odd assortment of wares; many sell their own bodies. In the highly competitive and deeply hierarchical urban spaces, survival is tenuous and identity politics mark a person’s right to exist in a particular space, right to speak and be heard, right to do or not do.

One of the most fundamental ways in which identity politics is manifest is in terms of sex identities – being female or male. The issue of male and female identities, and the constructions of masculinities and femininities are embedded in the practices, institutions, and ideologies that frame and govern social relations, and that also work to reproduce male privilege. Elsewhere we have examined how boys construct their masculinities in relation to gendered roles and expectations (Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2008). In this exploratory research note, we examine particular socialisation practices of the parents of pre-teens to suggest some of the ways in which gender identities might be reproduced from one generation to the next and might contribute to the reproduction of gendered patterns of privilege and subordination.

Specifically we explore three socialisation practices: rewards, punishments and consciously-modelled behaviours or instructions. Our data consist of in-depth
interviews among parents and guardians of youths aged 12-15 years living in two towns in the Akuapem North district of the Eastern region of Ghana. In the next section of the chapter we review pertinent literature on the relationship between socialisation and gendered identity formation, and the socialisation of children in Ghana. We then go on to describe our methods and the data in more detail. The final section of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the parents’ stated practices and their own beliefs about the training of their children.

Socialisation and Gender Identities

Documenting and describing the differences between the sexes has been the preoccupation of social and physical scientists ever since the study of science has been itself documented (Bank, Delamont, and Marshall 2007; Gilmartin and Patton 1984; Reaume 2005; Opoku-Agyemang 1999). Often, these documents have extended beyond a description of differences, and have sought to explain these differences, frequently relying on biological (natural) explanations. Ortner’s (1974) seminal text, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” sought to explain how women, being perceived as closer to nature by virtue of their biological roles of childbearing and rearing, were understood to have certain intrinsic mothering, child-rearing and domestic skills. Every society has prescriptions for appropriate characteristics, behaviours, and forms of social intercourse of its members – the young and the old, nobles and commoners, black and white, married and unmarried, females and males, and all of these are under-girded by gendered expectations. These prescriptions and expectations are embedded in the societies’ institutions ranging from the family, through schools, to religious and political institutions and systems.

Lorber explains:

To explain why gendering is done from birth, constantly and by everyone, we have to look not only at the way individuals experience gender but at gender as a social institution. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. Human society depends on a predictable division of labor, a designated allocation of scarce goods, assigned responsibility for children and others who cannot care for themselves, common values and their systematic transmission to new members, legitimate leadership, music, art, stories, games, and other symbolic productions (Lorber 1994: 2).

Although we recognise that our genes (nature) play a role in forming our identities as gendered beings, because there is such a complex interplay between biology and culture (Gould 1981), and it is impossible to determine exactly when social learning begins to modify nature (for example some studies suggest in vitro), our study takes a feminist sociological approach to socialisation. We argue that fe/maleness has to do
with much more than biological sex. Biology (sex) can be seen as the building block on which our social categories (gender) are built. In other words, we view the way that humans learn to construct their masculine and feminine identities as essentially (though not only) socially constructed rather than merely biologically determined. Hence we argue that social (and cultural) norms and expectations are transmitted, learned and reproduced in ways that result in their becoming fundamental components of our identities. A feminist sociological approach sees gender constructions and identities as a fundamental category in social science enquiries because of the assumption that gender relations are fundamental for the understanding of all other social relations. Therefore, a gendered approach to socialisation would provide us some insights into the reasons why, and how, women and men encounter, experience, and respond to social “reality” differently.

There are three theoretical perspectives that have generally been used to explain how girls learn that they are girls and boys learn that they are boys, and that certain traits and behaviours are accepted as appropriate for the one and not the other (Renzetti and Curan 2004). Sigmund Freud popularised the psychoanalytical theory of gender identity development known as identification theory, in which female and male children identify with the same and the other sex parent at different stages of their development, though not in the same ways. Briefly, during the so-called phallic stage of development children become aware of their own genitalia (typically by age four) and begin to identify with their same-sex parents. Freud’s work valorised childhood experiences, but he has been criticised for constructing an immutable process that leaves little room for later environmental influences. Feminists have also criticised Freud’s identification theory as being anti-female; females are defined as jealous, passive and masochistic, “an inferior departure from the male standard” (Bern 1993) and femininity itself as a pathology (Brennan 1992).

Cognitive Development theories come from the work of two psychologists who studied the mental processes children use to make sense of their observations and experiences (Renzetti and Curan 2004). According to Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kholberg children learn gender through these efforts to make sense of their world. They organise the traits and behaviours of others into male and female, at the same time attaching value to what they observe as gender appropriate (good) or inappropriate (bad) (as cited in Renzetti and Curan 2004). A critique of these theories is that they downplay the role of culture in children’s constructions of their gender identities by portraying gender learning as something children do independently of environmental influence.

Then there are social learning theories that focus on direct associations between observable events and outcomes in children’s gender identity development (Bandura 1986). The socialisation process transmits cultural values by teaching children to conform to the norms, values and practices of the society. Socialisation can occur
through formal or informal education. The type and direction of the socialisation process, however, depends on the philosophy, political structures and the culture of the society. Socialisation, that process by which a society’s values are transmitted and learned, is a life long process, and there are many important socialising agents including schools and training institutions, religious organisations, peers, and the media.

However, families, and in contemporary Ghana particularly parents, are the most important socialising agents in a child’s early years. Parents do this socialising through a variety of forms including direct teaching, the issuing of instructions, and a system of overt and covert rewards and punishments. Rewards and punishments for gender appropriate and inappropriate traits and behaviour thereby reinforce or discourage those traits and behaviours. Children also learn about appropriate and accepted gender traits and behaviours by watching their parents and other significant adults in their social interactions. The responses these others receive further reinforce their gendered learning, and they then model their own behaviours according to these role models. Nonetheless, the current education system does not valorise parental contributions and privileges school-based (classroom) learning and the role of the teacher.

Socialisation in Ghana

Much of the work on gender socialisation has come from a Global North where Western society's values have legitimated gendering by claiming that it all comes from physiology – female and male biological and procreative differences. But gender and sex are not equivalent, and gender as is generally accepted today is a social construction that does not flow automatically from genitalia and reproductive organs. Further, since Mead carried out her research in New Guinea revealing that gender roles in non-western societies were not necessarily the same as those in western ones (Mead 1935), social scientists have come to acknowledge the cross-cultural dimensions of gender.

In Ghana the moral and ethical instruction of children was and remains the responsibility of the extended family, including lineage members of both parents. The traditional socialisation mechanisms by which young people are taught the norms and values of their societies are set in motion by the lineage soon after birth when a child is “outdoored” (Abochie 1997). These mechanisms are constructed on a succession of ritualised modes of behaviour from rites marking the birth of the new born, puberty rites (mainly for females), marriage rites and a series of rites for the departed. Each rite of passage introduces the individual concerned to her or his new social status and roles.

In addition to rites and their attendant rituals, proverbs, stories, music and songs, sculpting and other forms of crafts such as blacksmithing were important pedagogic techniques. Valuable information packaged as proverbs was conveyed orally or as visual expressions through designs moulded in relief on door frames and posts leading
into important compounds. Verbal conveyance of proverbs was used as a vehicle of communication, transmitting community values and vital historical knowledge to succeeding generations. Enveloped in the African child’s upbringing are repeated stories on the ideals of wo/manhood, the firm drawing of boundaries between the sexes, and harsh words or even physically imposed pain for nonconformists (Mamphele 1997). Concepts of masculinity and femininity, and appropriate behaviours for these, are channelled through a variety of mechanisms including, in most cases, verbal instruction, punishments, rewards, or by parents themselves setting examples. Folk tales, proverbs, songs and rites of passage are just some of the ways that these occur. Proverbs and folk tales are used to romanticise or underscore elements of both masculinity and femininity (Amoah 1991, Odowyeye 1995, Rattray 1927) which the growing child can then internalise if s/he hears them often enough and if they are used by significant adults. Such proverbs seek to establish the notion that men are superior and leaders while women are subordinates (examples of proverbs include popular ones such as, “If the gun lets out its bullets, it is the man who receives them on his chest”, “Even if a woman buys a gun or a drum it leans against a man’s hut”, and “The hen also knows that it is dawn, but it allows the cock to announce it”.)

Formalised training such as through vocational apprenticeships was traditionally non-certificated in terms of competencies and relied a great deal on memorisation and the strict imitation of adult behaviour. Even though today vocational apprenticeships do offer certification, questioning of the logic, meaning or analysis of knowledge was and is generally discouraged. Adults are assumed to know what is best for the young, and proverbs are frequently used to instil the supremacy of the elderly and employ implicit respect from the young. In the past much of this knowledge was also shrouded in mythology and mysticism.

In most parts of Ghana children are expected to start behaving differently according to sex by as early as age three or four, and by age six have begun to play and work in groups composed of members of their own sex. Boys and girls begin to eat in separate same sex groups. Those who prefer the company of the opposite sex are shown disapproval, and, according to Kaye, among the Ga of Dome he found evidence that those who behave in the manner of the opposite sex may even have red pepper smeared in their genitals to discourage this (Kaye 1962). Boys are expected to choose more valiant and energetic games, girls more rhythmic ones. Kaye reports that a girl found playing with boys is rebuked, “Ekua, you are a woman, you must stop jumping with men.” (1962: 131).

In almost all parts of Ghana the general practice is for mothers and their female relatives to be responsible for the early care, training and discipline of children. However, between the ages of 6 and 10, and certainly by the time of puberty, boys are generally expected to be brought up by their fathers (often outside the home) and girls
by their mothers (in the kitchen and domestic space). Indeed among duolocal groups such as most of the matrilineal Akan as well as the patrilineal Ga, boys moved to live with their fathers in their compounds while girls remained with their mothers. However, even daughters will be reported to fathers to be disciplined and punished for severe infractions. By the time young people approach puberty marked differences between the upbringing of boys and of girls have been institutionalised.

The little girl is the darling of her mother who treats her with profound affection. From her mother, a girl learns how to be serviceable and submissive to her father, brothers, and any other older person, and to respect everyone, even (in the old days) a slave. The growing girl is taught all the skills necessary to be a good wife and mother, including being diligent and productive. She remains a child alongside even her younger brothers until her maturity is attested through marriage, which may suggest possible reasons for the relative elaboration of girls’ nubility rites and relative infrequency of similar ceremonies for boys. In view of a girl’s upbringing, and the indispensable role she plays, particularly in a matrilineage, as source of labour, it is perhaps understandable that her entry into womanhood should be marked by complex ceremonies entailing much preparation and ritual (Sarpong 1977). A young girl’s initiation ceremony, normally conducted as part of a group of initiates, includes complex beautification rites, training in domestic responsibilities, and rituals to symbolise the fact that she is now fertile and ready to assume the roles of mother and wife. She will receive gifts from her parents and relatives and eat a special meal that typically includes a mashed staple and some eggs (the latter to symbolise fertility).

As the boy approaches puberty he drifts slowly towards his father (and/or uncle among the matrilineal), who typically treats him sternly, for he regards it as his duty to prepare his son to shoulder the responsibility of looking after his mother, sisters and future wife/wives and children. The father forbids him to engage in what he considers to be womanly activities. So except when it is absolutely necessary, he would be forbidden to cook, sweep the house or eat with a group of women. The father (uncle) would take the boy to social functions such as funerals, where the boy would sit next to him, observing how to comport himself on those occasions. Sometimes a boy would be so hard-working that his mother, sisters and sometimes even his father would come to be dependent upon him for their means of livelihood. Boys’ and girls’ gradual introduction into wo/manly status therefore begins before puberty.

In Ghana only a small section of ethnic groups have initiation rites for boys, typically among groups from the Savannah North. Where these occur, they are done in secrecy and not given as much prominence as those for girls. Male initiation into adulthood revolves around a concept similar to that of girls – that is, preparing initiates to become responsible adults (father/husband) and fulfil their obligations to family and society. Boys generally undergo initiation between the ages of ten and fourteen. In
some societies they are taken outside of the town, where they undergo physical tests for endurance and participate in competitive games (Sarpong 1977). Boys are also taught occupational skills during their initiation so that they will be better able to support themselves and a family during their adult life. Sections of the Ga, Ewe, and a few other ethnic groups circumcise their sons during this time, because circumcision represents cleanliness and it is believed that enduring the pain will make the boys physically and mentally stronger. Carved figures and masks are used to ask the spirits of ancestors for blessings during that transition. The Ga people in southern Ghana formerly had a coming of age ceremony for a first-born boy known as, kromotsunwoo, and another for boys called butrumwoo, but these are no longer observed. Akan and Ga fathers or uncles may present young men who are considered to be entering manhood with a gun, as a symbol of their readiness to take on adult life.

**Methods and Data**

Our data come from interviews among adults living in two towns, Akropong and Mampong in the Eastern region of Ghana. The study design involved the collection of three sets of data. The first included (six) separate focus group discussions with young females, males and adults in both towns. This was followed by a survey of 524 first year Junior Secondary School (JSS) students aged 12-15 years. Finally, we carried out in-depth interviews among 54 of the students and 32 of their parents and caregivers. Parents were sampled using their children as a reference point, and in selecting these we sought to have as equal a representation as possible of males and females, those who reflected “egalitarian” or “male dominant” gender ideologies, as well as individuals from both towns. We interviewed the same-sex parent (significant adult caregiver/guardian) of each selected child, in their homes, and each interview took between one and two hours.

The first author interviewed all women respondents while the male co-researcher at the time, Francis Dodoo, interviewed all the men. Interview questions focused on the parents’ perceptions about gender roles and training of young people. Although we asked about rewards and punishments, as well as adult modeling, we did not privilege these forms of teaching and learning.

**Results and Discussions**

**Transmitting Gender**

Earlier analysis of the focus group discussions indicated that young adolescents have been socialised to define appropriate fe/male roles as opposite and polarised. Girls are taught to assume domestic roles and a position of deference in relation to males, and
boys express a sense of entitlement for a dominant role in male-female relationships (Adomako Ampofo 2001). Deviation from these positions is not encouraged and is reinforced by direct instruction, punishments, and, importantly, by observation.

What emerges is an implication that a sense of entitlement among (most) boys, and acquiescence among (many) girls is the primary force shaping the construction of relative roles and identities. The interviews with parents thus allow us to explore some of the factors that might be shaping these differences and in this section of the paper we present a sample of parents’ descriptions of their socialising of their children, focusing on general (verbal) instructions and admonishments, the issuing of rewards and punishments, and some comments on teaching by example. While exploratory in character, the findings permit some tentative theorizing on the intergenerational transmission of gendered identities.

**Verbal Instructions**

Without exception, all parents indicated that the most common form of training children was done through the issuing of verbal instructions, and belief in the efficacy of religious instruction was not uncommon. Comments such as the following were typical:

The children should be given a good foundation and moral training… and parents should also inculcate good habits into their children… If children are given religious instruction it goes a long way to shaping them. (Mother).

I use the bible to train them, I teach them the word of God, and I teach them … about the need to respect elders and then how to pray… if we forget to teach them the word of God it will not benefit us as parents. In this world, when we produce something, we normally add a manual… children are a gift from God and we are just caretakers and in addition to the gift He’s given us a manual which is the bible and we would have to use the bible to train up the children in a godly way. (Father).

Anecdotal evidence and our own experiences and observations suggest that yelling at children, either to issue instructions, to convey displeasure at a misdemeanour, or simply to hurry a dawdling child along is common in our societies. However, some parents were insistent that although many parents shouted at their children this was not helpful. Explained one mother:

You don’t shout at the children. You should entertain them and know how to talk to them when they request things from you when you cannot meet their needs. If you are nice to them, they would not hide things from you. Also you should avoid insulting the children but when they go...
wrong call them…Akos what you’ve done is wrong don’t do that next time….We live as sisters in this house.

The gendered division of labour in Ghana means that most household tasks are performed by women, and even if not the ‘mothers’ then by other females (Adomako Ampofo 2001). The following dialogue shows that women do not necessarily appreciate the sexual division of labour that places the responsibility of domestic work on their shoulders, as has been argued by some. Many recognise the importance of sharing tasks and consciously training children to appreciate this:

_Interviewer:_ Do you think we as parents should train our children, especially the boys to know that household chores are necessary for everybody to learn, or should they be made to know that it’s a woman’s work but the boys can choose to help?

_Mother:_ Well I think we should train them all to be able to do it.

_Interviewer:_ You think so?

_Mother:_ Yes.

_Interviewer:_ Don’t you think when we practice this the girls will take advantage of it and lord it over their husbands (in future), what do you think?

_Mother:_ Well…I don’t think so, I think that if the men know how to do household chores, they will be able to help their wives better.

Thus, such parents believe it is important to instruct children on the importance of sharing tasks and responsibilities.

**Rewards**

Parents believed in giving rewards even though this would appear not to be practised widely or consistently. Rewards are used to show approval for good behaviour and thus ensure that the behaviour is repeated.

I tell them I would buy them chocolate or popcorn when I travel. When I return I tell them I was very pleased with what you did the other time and so here is some biscuit or popcorn for you. The other girl did well the other time so I promised her some malt which I bought three bottles for her. I saw that she was very excited and so I saw that if I did that for her she would be happy. (Mother)

It would also appear that parents are more likely to use praise and positive affirmation for daughters than for sons, as reflected by this mother’s narration in which sons are only mentioned when she was explicitly asked by the interviewer.
Mother: I also think that parents who love their children and even go to the extent of praising them makes them have self confidence and in that case they are not deceived by other people. If you praise your daughter and sometimes tell her how beautiful she is, she is likely not to fall into the hands of men who will want to lure her into going to bed with them with their praises because it will be no news to her. ... Seriously I think parents should show love (verbal affirmation) to their children.

Interviewer: Can parents also praise their sons?

Mother: Oh why not?

We can thus speculate that if girls receive more positive affirmation, praise and tangible rewards this may reinforce compliance with expected normative behaviour while boys may feel less inclined to obey. This notion gains more credence when we examine the gendered practice of punishments, especially physical chastisement.

Punishments

Punishments, particularly physical chastisement, are a common form of instilling good behaviour and compliance in children and, when they are young, boys and girls are both beaten, but as they get older girls less so. There is a sense that girls are more obedient and thus require physical chastisement less than boys do. At the same time one father acknowledged that this difference in obedience trends might in itself be the result of differential training; “I think it’s because of the way we train them” he noted. This would suggest a circular pattern in practice and results: boys and girls are trained differently, thus girls turn out more obedient, and as a result boys are caned more frequently than girls. Typically girls are expected to stay at home or come home earlier, and boys are given more licence to explore, thus boys are probably more likely to develop a sense of entitlement about what they can do, and thus are more likely to overstep their bounds and be punished with a beating. One mother explained further as follows:

Mother: The girls must get home in time to learn something. Sometimes you say, ‘Akos come and give me the pepper or salt. When you send Kwame, ... that Kwame get me the pepper, Kwame would not be as smart as the girl.

Interviewer: Why, is his leg different? (both laugh)

Mother: Most of the time the boys do not stay close to their mothers in the kitchen but the girls do. It is the girls who would marry in future and do something.
Thus girls are trained early in life to be associated with the domestic space, and that this is a requirement for a successful marriage. Boys, on the other hand, learn that they are not required to stay at home.

When parents were asked what other kinds of infractions incurred a beating these are the kinds of things they had to say:

Mother: Any child who does not listen it is the cane that will make him/her listen.
Interviewer: So it means those who misbehave are the ones who receive the caning?
Mother: Eh [yes!]…you will receive canes for your body to pain you so that the next day you wouldn’t repeat the same thing.

Father: Well there are many things that warrant caning… Let’s say for example say that you have a child and when the child wakes up in the morning and instead of washing the face, s/he does not do it but always expects you to repeat it before going to do it, then I think you might have to use the cane. Personally, I will not beat the child but rather sit the child down and let him or her understand the importance of what I have asked him or her to do… if the child does it again, I will tell him or her that the next time s/he does that, s/he will attract some punishment. I will also make him or her aware of the number of lashes I will be giving… By so doing, the child keeps it in mind that if I repeat this thing, I might get a punishment and so will try not to do it. I am of the view that at some level, caning is not good for the children”

Interviewer: Which level are you talking about?
Father: From the ages of sixteen upwards, canes must not be used on them… they are grown and so they need to be talked to instead.

When a father who insisted that caning was not a good thing was asked, “Don’t you think if you send them and they refuse to go., you will have to cane them?” his response was, “Well not always; it’s necessary but if you use it as the sole disciplinary measure, I don’t think it’s right, and the child will rather become stubborn.” Thus, while physical punishment, i.e caning, is common, there was almost universal agreement that this was not the ideal for older teens.

Our findings also support the general belief that fathers are more likely to be the ones to use the cane than mothers. While mothers would slap a child, or knock its head, fathers were more likely to use a cane to implement a punishment for more severe offences. Mothers also often use the threat of punishment by fathers to encourage conformity. Explained one mother, “If my child is doing something and I say the father is coming he fears and stops what he is doing but if you say his mother is coming he
would not mind because he is always with the mother and has become close to her.” Punishment structures according to severity of offences (caning for the most severe) and the punisher (fathers for severe offences) is likely to reinforce the notions of gender identity differentials, according men more power and authority.

**Leading by Example and Role Modelling**

Any popular treatise on leadership will stress the importance of the notion of “leadership by example”. A few adults spontaneously underscored the importance of adult modelling and stressed that children learn from what they see. This is especially important where gender norms are being transgressed and instructions alone cannot be expected to be effective. Explained one mother:

> For my sons, yes, I have taught them how to pound fufu so that they can help their wives when they are pounding fufu, I am aware that there are some men who wish to help their wives but the truth is they do not know how to do most of the household chores. I have asked them (sons) to be around when I am cooking, so they can learn how to do it. We all wash together too.

**Interviewer**: But you said earlier on that it was the girls who wash the boys’ clothes.

**Mother**: Yes but that is what I have been telling them, when we wash, I tell them (boys) to go and hang it and this is to make them know that the girls will not always be around to wash their clothes for them.

Similarly, a father explained that he does not see anything wrong with letting his son see him perform non-traditional roles:

> Oh,… well you see the idea has always been that when you marry, the woman would have to do everything such as wash, cook etc. That is what we came to meet but I personally do not see anything wrong is washing your wife’s clothes when they are dirty.

Adult examples were also reported as being important for teaching children about spousal relationships. A father explained, simply, “As parents your children copy from you and they also learn from the way you talk. If you the parent you do not lead a good life the child will also pick it.” One grandfather who was taking care of his grandchildren, including a grandson from our larger study, noted at length:

> It depends on the behaviour you put up and the way you talk at home. Children learn from all these things. Also when they are growing, you can advise them on what to do and what not to do. You can advise your
daughter to take very good care of herself and diligently study her books and ignore men who will end her up pregnant and consequently destroy her life. I believe one's way of life begins at home. My wife and I have been married since 1961 and we live in the same house with them (children) but they have never heard us yelling at each other and in that way I think they copy such character. If we even have to quarrel, we go out, not in the children’s presence. We have not even fought in 41 years of marriage for our children to learn that. Always we give suggestions to each other and they learn from us.

Leading by example is complemented with verbal instructions and explanations. Some mothers had the following to say about training children and reinforcing personal examples with exhortations:

I taught them that we have to work together. We weed together and when we get tired we stop. If I ask them to do so individually or by themselves, they would all complain of tiredness after a short while. If we weed together, if I get tired, you are also tired; if I am not tired, you are also not tired. (Mother)

Oh for example if Akos wants school fees and goes to the father but he is unable to provide he would tell her that mama would pay if she has the money…I make them see at all times that I have some money and can provide for them but if I don’t have I also let them know. (Mother)

Just as in the case of a differential punishment scale between parents, gendered identities can be modelled through parents' behaviour – such as when a wife shows deference to her husband, or privileges his authority and accompanies this with verbal prescriptions, or when a husband underlines his headship and superior strength through gendered task allocations.

They [children] would know from your actions and speech whether there is peace at home or not. The children observe how you respond to their father's demands and how you relate to him…you should always let them see that you respect their father and the father also respects you. (Mother; emphasis added by authors)

I think especially when they get to the adolescent stage, they begin to notice such things [that is the nature of parents’ relationship], sometimes even the way you talk to their mother will let them know that the man is the head of the house. These days’ things are changing so I think that the children must also see these changes so that by the time they grow up and marry they will exhibit such characteristics… No matter how equal men and women are, there are certain
jobs that women can never do… like weeding, you see it’s a very hard job so I don’t think it’s a woman’s work. A woman can go to the farm but her role will be to pick things as well as cook for the men to eat. Anytime we have to go for foodstuffs from the farm, I take the girls but if there is any hard work to be done, I take the boy. (Father, emphasis added by authors)

Here the adult modelling accompanied by instructions indicates that there are gendered differentials in expectations not only for boys’ and girls’ chores, but also expectations about abilities and the resulting production of a hierarchy of the sexes. However, not all parents modelled dominant roles for men. One father explained, “Let’s say I am here with my wife away in our store. I can say I’m going home to prepare ampese [boiled plantain or yam]. After eating mine in the house, I put some of the food in a bowl and bring it to her to eat [at the store]… I do that so that all these children will be learning” [emphasis added by authors]. Not only is this father modelling an alternative male role by cooking and publicly expressing a “female” role by carrying food to his wife, he is also doing so consciously with the intent that his children will learn to subvert constricted gender practices. A mother also commented thus: “I think parents should try and insist on what they think is good for the children. Boys for instance should be forced to learn how to cook.” (emphasis authors’) Her comment further underscores the importance of conscious modelling, reinforced with instructions, to subvert fixed gender notions.

Nonetheless a few parents recognise that gendered norms are deeply entrenched in our societies and that parental modelling alone coupled with instructions or exhortations even will not be enough to change practices and attitudes. Such parents advocate holding conversations with children in order to give them the opportunity to express their views and feelings (something not commonly practised). For example one mother shared what she and her husband do; “Sometimes my husband and I and all the children sit together and discuss issues, this gives the children a chance to tell us what they want and all that…” Prompted further to explain how children learn through such conversations, she said, “You see, we get to know their likes and dislikes. We don’t have much money but at least the understanding between us is enough.” Another father had this contribution to make:

You know everyone has his or her own way of imparting knowledge. I mean his or her own way of training children. Sometimes, there are some conversations that you’ll allow your children to be around to listen to and there are some that you will not allow them [children] to listen to. I normally chat with my children in such a way that when you come to meet us, you might think we are equals. We normally talk about life in general. I remember I once told them that whiles I was a young boy, I played with my education. I stopped school at form two and because of
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that I got myself into this position. I told them to study hard and never play with their studies. Sometimes I tell my son some of my experiences and give him reasons why he should take his studies seriously... So whatever you tell him is what he will abide by. Some parents would not even communicate with their children to know exactly what’s on their mind and the child would not also come and tell you. At times too they may want to discuss certain things with their mother and you will have to allow them.

And yet another parent (mother) had this to say:

While chatting at home, you can tell Akos or Ama that she should be serious at school so that in future when she marries whilst her husband is driving his car she would also be driving her car and that even if the husband does not give her ‘chop’ money she would be able to provide for herself. She would also be able to buy her own underwear. “When your father does not give money I am able to provide money for cooking and so you should do well so that in future you would be able to provide for yourself and your children when your husband travels. You don’t have to depend on your husband alone”. I believe if you tell her something like this, it would help.

Conclusions

In this research note we have sought to explore the intergenerational transmission of (gender) practices, family life values and identities, through instruction, punishment and role modelling by parents. While this paper has not sought to establish a direct relationship between what children learn about person Identities and the accepted norms for their societies, our observations of parents’ reports suggest that parental socialisation is still very important and influential. Our results suggest that a parent’s views and practices are very much associated with the ways in which they train their children and the content of that training. Further, the transmission of gender role attitudes can be expected to contribute to the persistence of value status across generations such that our societies continue to accord men higher status and value. Our preliminary analyses of parent-child dyads (on-going research not discussed in this paper) suggest that indeed parents’ attitudes and practices do have a significant effect on their children’s views on gender, and for that matter family life and how they imagine they will relate with their own partners in future. Further detailed analyses of our own data in which we will couple parents with children should expand the current findings to assess the relationship between parents’ gender role ideologies, their parenting, sex differences, and children’s’ gender identities and practices. This way we can provide evidence to suggest whether, and the extent to which, intergenerational transmission of identities
actually occurs and the extent to which this plays a role in the transmission of specific behaviours and gender/identity politics from parents to children. It would be particularly interesting to examine differences between father-son and mother-daughter dyads. In recent years, these trajectories have altered remarkably, particularly as a result of the delay in major life activities like marriage, childbearing and of the increase in the occurrence of activities that used to be less common in the past, such as cohabitation before marriage. If children observe whatever their parents or guardians do, are rewarded for doing what their parents consider to be laudable and penalised for the reverse, the important question would be whether intergenerational transmission of gender and family life values trajectories between parents and children would, in a context of global change, continue to reinforce male privilege and female acquiescence, or whether global occurrences will trump intergenerational modelling. In any case, to the extent that parental training remains significant, this has important implications for the way curricular, programs and teaching materials should be planned and delivered in schools – that is, they should not be constructed from the assumption that teacher knows best but rather form part of a collaborative engagement. This model would valorise parent-teacher partnerships in curriculum development and pedagogical methods and provide an opportunity for teachers and parents to influence each other and work together to strengthen positive gender practices while possibly dismantling more unfriendly ones.

References


