ABSTRACT  Popular notions of womanhood among most Ghanaian societies highlight the role of motherhood, particularly biological motherhood. It has been generally acknowledged, however, that family planning programs have not worked as well as they might have because they failed to acknowledge men’s fertility desires by focusing almost exclusively on women’s “unmet need.” The current study investigates the meanings and significance of biological fatherhood and their relationship to constructions of masculinity among a sample of urban Ghanaian men. Data are derived from interviews on reproductive preferences and decision making among 11 men in 11 monogamous husband-wife dyads, held following a questionnaire survey among some 265 junior and senior staff/spouses of the University of Ghana in 1997 and 1998. It particularly addresses the associations men make among adulthood, marriage, manhood, and biological fatherhood. Results suggest that men’s associations between biological fatherhood and manhood, as indicated by notions of phallic competence, have important implications for marital stability, remarriage and extra-marital relationships.

KEYWORDS  MASCULINITY, MANHOOD, FATHERHOOD, MARRIAGE, CHILDBEARING, GHANA

Among sociologists masculinity studies gained ground in the 1980s, particularly in the area of gender studies where feminist researchers pointed to the importance of understanding the ways in which men experience and enact gender. Since the 1990s, this area of enquiry has grown in Africa and the importance of recognizing masculinities, rather than masculinity, has been underscored to reflect the diverse and complex contexts in which masculinity is performed. This emergent body of work has been influenced by discourses in the global north, particularly Connell’s (1987) notion of “hegemonic” masculinities which implies that at any given moment a dominant—or hegemonic—form of masculinity exists in relation to other forms resulting in a complex array of interactions and performances at various levels. The appreciation of these complexities led to a meeting on “Boys and Masculinity” that took place at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa in January.
2005 and culminated in the book *Fom Boys to Men* (Schefer et al., 2007) that acknowledges the multiple versions of masculinity in southern Africa, as well as resistances and challenges to “hegemonic” forms.

Few men fully conform to “hegemonic” forms. Messner (2007) notes that it is “nearly impossible for an individual man to consistently achieve and display the dominant conception of masculinity” and adds that, “this is an important part of the psychological instability at the center of individual men’s sense of their own masculinity” (p. 463). Ratele (2008) argues that intervention work with males intended to make them more sensitive to gender issues has failed to produce the desired impacts “because analyses of boys and men’s lives have tended to be blind to the imbrication of the experience of maleness with the experience of other significant social categorisations” (p. 515). In this paper we observe, with Messner, that so-called hegemonic masculinities are symbolically displayed as an “exemplar of manhood” around which power coalesces, not just over women, but in relation to other men (p. 463). We argue that an especially important anchor of the experience of maleness is that of biological fatherhood—not only because of the authority and control fatherhood portends, but also because of the symbolic significance of a competent, heterosexual, performative phallus. The absence of evidence for the competence of the phallus, in cases of infertility, can lead to a questioning, or anticipatory questioning, of a man’s masculinity.

While family studies in Africa generally, and in Ghana particularly, have highlighted the importance of the family, and the value of children, the emphasis has been on their practical and economic value and it has been argued that as our societies “modernized” and these instrumental reasons for childbearing declined, people would prefer smaller families. Today, popular notions of womanhood among most Ghanaian societies continue to center on the mother role, usually read in terms of biological motherhood (Anarfi & Fay-orsey, 1995). There is an understanding that women will be engrossed with thoughts of childbearing, and that no normal woman would give up motherhood voluntarily, except, perhaps, for religious (whether permanent or temporary) reasons. For instance, there are Ghanaian women who, since the introduction of Christianity have become religious nuns in the Roman Catholic Church, giving up motherhood voluntarily and permanently. In Ghanaian traditional religion, we find some women in the service of the deity who observe chastity temporarily, at least for the period of their training or in following the rota of religious service. An individual who is dedicated to a deity is normally chaste and allowed sexual union only after first seeking the deity’s consent.

However, outside of the foregoing examples, Ghanaian society generally looks down on childless women, and barrenness is held to be a curse (Sarpong, 1977). Such are the pressures on women to achieve biological motherhood that, unlike what has been the development in the global North, “modern” professional women who want to advance in their chosen careers, even if unmarried, do not consider giving up motherhood for a career (Adomako Ampofo, 2004).
Further, where a married couple remains childless, it is typically the woman who bears the brunt of pressure, taunts, and even abuse, both from her husband’s family as well as, sometimes, her own. It may therefore seem unsurprising that contemporary literature on childbearing and parenthood (especially sociology and demography/population studies) has centered primarily on female fertility, particularly women’s contraceptive practices, and has paid less attention to men’s needs and their desires around fertility and fatherhood. Both scholarly and activist feminist critiques of the ways in which women’s gendered social roles confine or limit them have also assumed that since it is women who suffer the most from social stigma in cases of childlessness, fertility studies should focus on them (Afonjo, 1990). However, this limited focus seems inadequate given that population research in Africa since the 1980s has shown a discrepancy between women’s fertility desires and their contraceptive practices, as well as high levels of couple discordance when it comes to fertility choices (Dodoo, 1995). It is now commonly understood that family planning programs have not worked as well as they might have because they failed to acknowledge men’s fertility desires by focusing almost exclusively on women’s “unmet need” (Adomako Ampofo, 2004).

Demographic and Health Survey data from Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 1994, p. 73; 1999, p. 75; 2004, p. 115) show that over the 1999-2003 period there has been a relative increase in the number of men who want to have no more children irrespective of demographic characteristics. Urban residence, higher education and belonging to a higher wealth quintile generally increase the likelihood of men wanting no more children. However, when these data are analyzed for husband-wife dyads, men generally continue to either want more children than their wives do, or have greater say in the couple’s reproductive career plans (Dodoo, 1995, 1998; Ezeh, 1993). Where some attention has been paid to men’s fertility practices it has been argued that because men bear fewer of the costs of childbearing they experience less of a need to invest in limiting family size than their wives (Blanc & Lloyd, 1994). While this is true, we argue that an important reason why men have children is that this enables them to be viewed as real men, by proving their phallic competence to father offspring. Hence a failure to acknowledge and understand the link between men’s identities and the pressures women face to bear children will minimize the value of any discussion of gender, power, fertility, sexualities, and even HIV/AIDS. Indeed, work carried out by Sarpong (1977) and Nukunya (1969, 1992) among the Asantes and Ewes, respectively (two of the three most populous ethnic groups in Ghana) provides evidence that barrenness among both women and men was abhorred. The fact that barrenness was, and generally still is, easier to ascertain among women meant that women bore the brunt of

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1 Clearly there is a history to this perspective given that in reality many women were having children at the behest of their partners, their family and society at large.
society’s displeasure. However, this did not free men from the pressures to produce offspring, a pressure compelling men to divorce and re-marry, marry an additional wife, or have children outside marriage (Adomako Ampofo, 2004).

The current study seeks to investigate the meanings and significance of fatherhood and its relationship to constructions of masculinity in a sample of urban Ghanaian men. Specifically we examine what biological fatherhood means to these men, and the lengths they would be willing to go to in order to ensure that they achieve it. We are also interested in the associations men draw between biological fatherhood and marital stability, as well as questions of remarriage and extra-marital relationships. Below we review pertinent anthropological and sociological factors, followed by observations from the current study.

BECAUSE OF CHILDREN THE FAMILY TREE IS NOT CUT²:
PATERNITY AND MASCULINITY IN GHANA

KINSHIP STRUCTURES

The Ghanaian population is made up of a number of distinct ethnic groups, which are usually made up of clans; therefore, a great deal of variety exists in the way family systems are organized. Yet many of the underlying principles in corporate descent groups are similar among the different ethnic groups. Members of a lineage “trace common descent from a known ancestor” (Nukunya, 1969, p. 25), either imagined or putative, and who can be a person or an animal, the latter constituting the clan’s totem, or protector. The descent system determines succession, property inheritance, control over resources, and residence patterns, to name but a few rubrics. Lineage members have both rights and obligations. Their rights include a place to live, care of others when in difficulty and access to land for cultivation. The lineage is, therefore, “almost always a corporate group ... it has a leader ... owns property ... and members meet regularly to discuss matters of common interest” (Nukunya, 1992, p. 16). Obligations of lineage members include helping needy members, upholding the lineage’s good name, promoting its unity, deferring to ancestral wishes, and obedience to the lineage head and other elders (Gyekye, 1997; Nukunya, 1969; Sarpong, 1977).

Above all, it behooves members to ensure the very survival of the lineage through marriage and procreation. Thus, childbearing is central to both matrilineal and patrilineal ethnic groups in Ghana. However, marriage and childbearing have different implications for matrilineal and patrilineal peoples.³

² Akan proverb.
³ Even though intermarriage will mean that these data are not precise, we can glean from the 2000 census that about 49.1% of Ghanaians are matrilineal while 50.9% are patrilineal (Ghana Statistical Services, 2001). Among these the largest cluster of groups belong to the Akan (matrilineal) and the Ewe and Ga-Adangbe groups (patrilineal).
Among the Akan, it is the woman who is obligated to produce descendants for her lineage, however, her family will publicly acknowledge her husband for giving them children since he makes the fulfillment of this obligation possible. If there is a suspicion, for whatever reasons, that the husband is incapable of having children (say, it is known or rumored that he is impotent) a woman’s (maternal) family is likely to suggest that she divorce him. Among patrilineal groups this obligation to beget offspring for the lineage rests on the man and a husband will bestow special public honor on his wife at the time of the “out-dooring” of a baby. Generally, prolific childbearing was honored among all groups, and mothers of twins, triplets, and a tenth child were held in special esteem (Sarpong, 1977). Fertility is so important that most ethnic groups had special ceremonies to commemorate a girl’s “entry into womanhood” and a good portion of the female initiation period was taken up with instructions regarding the secrets of sexuality, how to be a good wife, and elementary aspects of mothering. Nonetheless it is noteworthy that although initiation rites are common across much of Africa for both females and males (frequently including circumcision), comparable rituals for boys are limited to a few smaller ethnic groups in Northern Ghana.

Thus, the need for children to continue the family pedigree implies that procreation is one of the most important reasons for marriage. Kyei (1989), for example, asserts that among Ghanaian Asante, “a man and his wife owe it as a duty to themselves and to their lineage to have children” (p. 49). Further, since in traditional Ghanaian metaphysics procreation is meant to perpetuate the lineage, and the “lineage is made up of the dead ancestors, the living members of the community, and even those yet unborn” (Okyerefo, 2001, p. 107), men and women who refuse to marry and procreate are perceived as self-centered and greedy. And since it is a man who generally asks for the hand of a woman, among patrilineal people a man who refuses to marry and procreate calls forth the extinction of the lineage and, therefore, of the clan or ethnic group. However, even where such scorn is reserved for the woman among the matrilineal Akan, a man who refuses to marry and/or have children is viewed with suspicion. Among the prerequisites of ancestorship is adulthood, which one generally reaches only when one marries and assumes responsibility for a family. This means that bachelors are equally disqualified given an implied refusal to help increase the number of his relatives. Such a person is useless, “his name should be blotted out of memory” (Okyerefo, 2001, p. 110; Sarpong, 1974). Sarpong (1977) documents the practice of sticking thorns into the soles of new babies, “outdoorsed,” that is, presented to their parents’ lineage members, a week after they are born. Although the outdoing of babies is virtually a universal custom, such ceremonies are particularly festive among patrilineal people.

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4 New babies are “outdoorsed,” that is, presented to their parents’ lineage members, a week after they are born. Although the outdoing of babies is virtually a universal custom, such ceremonies are particularly festive among patrilineal people.

5 The performance of female initiation rites has declined markedly over the last few decades.

6 The majority of ethnic groups in Ghana do not “circumcise” females.
of the feet of the corpses of the childless so that they could not return to the land of the living as ancestor spirits.

FATHERHOOD, SENIORITY AND MASCULINITY

Ghana today generally remains a “patriarchal” society in which the father wields, or is expected to wield, ultimate authority over the household, which includes his wife (or wives), children, and other relations or tenants. Indeed, not too long ago the fathers, the older males, determined not only who could marry but also when marriage was to take place (Akyeampong, 1997). The father could thus augment his social, political and economic influence through the biological daughters and sons he could marry off. Since the man usually had economic control over his entire household, including his wife, he also exercised social control over his family.

It must be acknowledged that fatherhood is but one aspect of Ghanaian masculinity. Apart from fatherhood, seniority is another important aspect of masculinity. Based on his study of the paradigmatic concept of ɔpanyin (literally: elder) among the Akan, Miescher (2007) observes that in “many African societies, gender has a close relation to seniority” (p. 253). Two groups of meaning of the term ɔpanyin should be understood. First, ɔpanyin denotes “an old person” or “an adult,” as opposed to “a child.” In this instance ɔpanyin also refers to “status and achievements” marking one as “a gentleman, respectable man” or “person of rank.” The second meaning relates to ɔpanyin as “a figure of authority” such as “a chief or one who belongs to a chief’s council of elders.” The position of ɔpanyin demands maturity and honor. It is not a permanent position; one has to prove worthy of it through good conduct, generosity, sound reputation, and rhetorical proficiency. A misbehaving elder can lose people’s respect to the same extent that a chief who misbehaves can be “destooled” for bringing dishonor to his office. As a generic term, ɔpanyin above all subsumes gender. Miescher argues that “seniority has been crucial to the construction of identity as gender” in Akan societies in Ghana where both men and women have “a different understanding of how they wield power” (p. 254) and that for males wealth, generosity, and wisdom are critical in defining masculinity. However, Miescher also contends that fatherhood “is important in

7 Not everyone who dies and maintains some contact with the living is an “ancestor.” Ancestor spirits are venerable, and welcomed, and people name new members of the lineage after them. For a spirit who was not an ancestor to return was seen as a bad omen.

8 Kings in Akan and Eweland, as in most of Southern Ghana, sit on stools that are imbued with the spirits of the state/kingdom. Among the Akan when a man becomes king he is literally assisted to sit on the throne three times, supported on each arm by an elder. His regalia include a staff, sandals and so forth. Destoolment involved the literal removal of the chief’s sandals from beneath him to reflect that he would now go “barefoot” like a commoner.
reaching both adult masculinity and senior masculinity” (p. 255). Thus, a man without children could not aspire to become a respectable elder, that is, the ultimate man in many ways.

Men in Ghanaian society today continue to assume enormous control over their families, particularly because they are “the main controllers of money” (Oppong, 1981, p. 109), whether in matrilineal or patrilineal societies. But even more, biological fatherhood augments a man’s status as he can lay claim, not only to the labor of, and authority over, his wife or wives, but also with respect to the children of his own loins. While these rights extend to kin beyond biological children, including nieces and nephews among the Akan, the preference for biological fatherhood extends beyond obligations to the lineage and status prescriptions.

**PHALIC AND REPRODUCTIVE PERFORMANCE**

Biological fatherhood is encoded by lineage expectations but lineage and power do not exhaust its cultural semantics. Fatherhood is also about identity because it contributes to the package that makes up the individual man’s completeness as a man. One sure sign of manhood is the ability of the male organ, which in Ghanaian social discourse is often referred to as “manhood,” to perform. And since not everyone can enter a couple’s private space to see what goes on there, children become the direct manifestation of such performance abilities. To “be a man” in Egypt, comparably, means to be “a virile patriarch who begets children, particularly sons” (Inhorn, 2002, p. 344) and men will go to great lengths to mask, rather than address, eventual impotence.

Widespread reports in 1997 in Ghana of the vanishing sexual organ (that is, penis) reputed to have been caused by some spiritually powerful men and the fear this episode aroused, underscores the importance of potency for manhood. Yamba (2001) describes the anxieties surrounding this emphasis on performance in his discussion of “shrinking penises” in which a mere rumor that some people were going around causing the penises of other men to shrink led to pandemonium and the lynching of some alleged perpetrators. Reportedly, evil persons were able to curse a victim’s penis and make it shrink merely by coming into contact with him. Yamba observes, through research he conducted in Ghana, the Sudan and Zambia (with reference to HIV/AIDS prevention) that “African men’s perceptions of their sexual identity affect and shape their sexual behaviour” (p. 2). He asserts that the preoccupation with the phallus, epitomized by fears regarding “penis shrinking,” reflects that the phallus is “the quintessential symbol of manhood” (p. 2).

This preoccupation with the phallus is, however, closely linked to men’s reproductive concerns, Yamba observed among West African pilgrims in the Sudan on their way to Mecca. Among this group sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were prevalent because of frequent visits to prostitutes as a means of sharpening their virility. Keeping the phallus agile, for these men, in spite of
dreaded consequences, “has to do with men’s sexuality and sexual identity, which is connected to men’s potency and therefore their ability to reproduce.” Thus, the real fear that would stop them from going to prostitutes and seek treatment was that they might be unable to reproduce if that potential was devastated by STDs. When “that ability is taken away … some men might feel they have stopped being men” (p. 3). So while “being virile and potent” is cherished as “the very symbol of maleness,” Yamba asserts that “the risk of not being able to get children seems socially a more terrible prospect” (p. 5).

Sackey (2006) concurs that “the male sexual organ … is a most important component of the Ghanaian man, which he would do anything to protect and vitalize” (p. 293). Consequently, the vanishing sexual organ episode epitomizes “the masculinized self-construction of sexual and gender superiority and domination” making any idea “that impinges on this powerful ideology” a humiliation of “masculinity” (p. 300).

**MALE INFERTILITY**

While the concepts father and fatherhood are often used interchangeably it is important to distinguish between a man who is a biological father and one who undertakes the “fatherhood role” (Morrell, 2005, p. 86). Formalized forms of fostering have always existed, and been encouraged, to allow families to train and care for the children of kin. Indeed much has been made of the value of the extended family in Ghana through which individuals who might otherwise have not had a leg up in life are brought up by maternal or paternal relations. Among the matrilineal Akan, the fact that maternal nephews and nieces belong to a man’s family while his own children do not, meant that many young people could count on prosperous uncles to look after them and guarantee their education. Nonetheless formal adoption has not formed an important part of discourses of parenthood in Ghana and even today is frequently discouraged if it is perceived by others that one is considering this as an alternative to biological parenting. For example, according to Nukunya the Anlo Ewe “insist on biological paternity” (Nukunya, 1992, p. 39) and Giwa-Osagie (2001) relates the obsession to be a biological father and the unacceptability of strictly alternative forms of achieving fatherhood among many societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. He describes the practice of making social arrangements through male relatives to allow an infertile man to father surrogate children as

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9 A popular Highlife song, “Wɔfa (uncle) wɔ hɔ,” literally, “Uncle is there” was composed to reflect the tendency by some young people to sail idly through life knowing someone was obligated to care, and provide, for them.

10 A number of unmarried women in their 30s and 40s known to the first author narrated how their families discouraged them from adopting children and suggested that if finding a suitable husband was proving to be a challenge, they might consider having a child with a suitable married man.
though they were his biological children. For many Ghanaian men today adoption is still not likely to be accepted as replacing biological fatherhood; thus fecundity, paternity and biological fatherhood seem almost inseparable, and form a core feature in the construction of manhood.

Further, the sex of the child is also important in men’s identity constructions. In patrilineal societies male children are particularly preferred because they ensure the continued existence of the lineage, and no matter how many children one has, failure or inability to produce sons suggests a certain inadequacy even among matrilineages (Kyei, 1989). So, while it is women who must get pregnant and give birth to the children that will continue the lineage, it is the men who provide the “seed.” In Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood (1979) she describes the joy and gratitude that the central figure Nnu Ego eventually feels toward her second husband, Nnaife, after he enables her to bear a son. Nnu Ego had initially looked down on the short, unmanly, pot-bellied man with the pale skin and puffy cheeks. However, when proven able to give her a son, something her more handsome and muscular first husband, Amatokwu, had not been able to do, she reorients her assessment of his masculinity. Ama Ata Aidoo, the renowned Ghanaian writer, paints a similar picture in her novel Changes (1991). The back cover of the Feminist Press edition of the book notes that “Changes portrays the conflicts between professional women whose lives have changed drastically and men whose lives and cultural assumptions remain unchanged.” In the story we meet Esi, whose husband Oko is under pressure from his family to allow them to get him a “proper wife … to get him to make more children” (p. 39). Although Oko sincerely loves Esi, he is concerned that maybe he has shown his love too openly and allowed Esi too much control. Oko and Esi have one daughter and he would like more children, particularly a son. He ponders his mother’s and sisters’ suggestions that he produce some other children “outside” and feels that maybe he needs to take charge of his wife and his marriage. One morning he says to Esi, “My friends are laughing at me,” to which her response is silence. He continues, “They think I’m not behaving like a man” (p. 8). An argument ensues. Then Oko rapes Esi. It would appear that for men notions of authority, control, virility, potency, and the ability to father children are so inextricably linked that if a man is unable to show that he can make his wife pregnant this becomes an indictment on his “manhood.”

As already alluded to, male infertility (and by extension male impotence) could be treated through surrogate fatherhood and, within the family, by natural insemination (Giwa-Osagie, 2001). When the family was convinced that their son was infertile, his brother or another very close relation could be called on to have intercourse with the wife and so enable her to bear children for the infertile brother/relation. Before such a relationship starts, the wife would have been counseled by her husband and/or a close relative such as an elderly uncle/father or mother-in-law. The matter would never be openly discussed outside the family and the progenitor of the children could never claim patr-
nity (Giwa-Osagie, p. 51). Obviously society’s expectations that individuals procreate “naturally” is so strong that they accede to such surrogate fatherhood so that men can be seen to have biological children. The child is valued first, perhaps, in so far as it embodies and perpetuates the genes of the family. If a man has a duty to impregnate the wife of his infertile brother, it is to save the face of the family. That way at least the genes come from the same family.

Ideally, however, a man should beget children of his own seed. Biological fatherhood is a mark of manhood; impotence detracts from manhood. “The desire to have children in any Asante home is so strong that a husband, to be worth his salt, would go to any length in order to have an issue in every union” (Kyei, 1989, p. 49). The two main driving forces in an Asante man’s urge for biological fatherhood, then, are “to prove his manhood and also to discharge a very important obligation: that of passing on the names of his forebears from one generation to the other” (p. 53).

Chinua Achebe (1994) makes a similar assertion in his novel *Arrow of God*: “Unless the penis dies young it will surely eat the bearded meat” (p. 143). This assertion, an Igbo proverb, “paints a very vivid picture of a patriarchal society with its social arrangements guided by unwritten rules which are, however, internalized and observed by the individual members of the community” (Okyerefo, 2001, p. 116). The novel depicts marriage as an important social institution which an individual enters into as an alliance between families and whole clans, thereby promoting peace among neighbors. The proverb, thus, portrays adequate sexual intercourse as a natural sequence in the service of the marriage institution (Achebe, 1994, p. 117).

In the light of the notion of masculinity as command over women, fatherhood can thus also be understood as a “central part of unequal and oppressive patriarchal relations, an estate opposed to motherhood” (Morrell, 2005, p. 86). We agree with Morrell, however, that fatherhood can be “woven as a desirable feature into the fabric of masculinity” (p. 86). The purpose of this paper, then, is to further explore how men view fatherhood in Ghana, and how biological fatherhood encodes masculine identity and practices of husbandhood. The definition of fatherhood we use in this paper, then, refers to “the traditional biological father ... with his own children,” that is biological fatherhood (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001, p. 384).

**Methods and Data**

The data for the current paper come from interviews on reproductive preferences and decision making among 11 men in 11 monogamous husband-wife dyads, held following a questionnaire survey among some 265 junior and senior staff/spouses of the University of Ghana in 1997 and 1998. The University of Ghana, located in the capital city and the Greater Accra Region, has three cat-

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11 The survey was interviewer-administered, conducted in the respondents’ homes, separately for men and women, and on average lasted between 30 and 40 minutes (see Adomako Ampofo, 2004, for a fuller discussion of methods and data).
Categories of staff: junior staff, senior staff (mainly technical and support staff), and senior members (teaching faculty and administrators). The categories of junior and senior staff were selected by default because the study was based on a census among staff who lived in a particular “staff village,” which did not include senior members. After the survey, 30 couples representative of the range of attitudes and behaviors (that is, including typical and infrequently occurring perspectives) were short-listed for re-interviewing from among respondents who had previously agreed to be re-interviewed, out of which 11 couples were re-interviewed.

Topics covered in the interviews included reasons why people get married; the significance of bride wealth; attitudes to polygyny; unacceptable spousal behaviors that would lead to divorce; remarriage; gender and division of family responsibilities and decision-making; conflict resolution; family planning, contraception and decision making; perceptions about the strength of childless marriages; and adoption. Each respondent was interviewed (by the first author) separately from her or his spouse; interviews generally lasted 1-1.5 hours.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the eleven husbands in the sample. They were between the ages of 30 and 59 and had levels of education ranging from primary to tertiary, with two (a lawyer and a research assistant) holding a university degree. Only one of the husbands had no children at the time of the interview, and the average number of children for the other men was four with one man having eleven children. Four of the men had one or more children with women other than their current wives; in two cases these children were born during a previous marriage/relationship, and in the other two cases the children were born during the course of the current marriage.

In the next section we examine the following issues: 1) what biological fatherhood meant to the interviewed men; 2) men’s attitudes toward adoption; and 3) the associations the men made between biological fatherhood and the stability of marriage, including questions of remarriage and extra-marital relationships.

**Biological Fatherhood**

**Biological Fatherhood and Being a Man**

All eleven men acknowledged the importance of biological fatherhood in Ghanaian society, linking this to notions of adulthood, responsibility and phal-
lic competence, efficiency or power. Based on several research findings, the interviewer asked the men why they thought that men seem to want to have more children than their wives, especially since all of the men felt that children were generally closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Most of the men intimated that the mere fact of having children is a sign of manhood, both social and physiological. As 47-year-old Kwame stated, men actually boast about their manhood by holding up their children as evidence thereof, “Ei! I have got five children and you have only three and you say I am your co-equal (laughs); that sort of pride!” Akwasi also referred to the appearance of masculinity by the image of several children when he said,

In Ghanaian culture ... men used to boast by the number of children they are able to produce; fifteen, eighteen. So at times when somebody dies, they will say he has 59 grandchildren and so on and so forth ... [to be proud] that they have produced and are powerful. (italics indicate authors’ emphasis)

Indeed, when one reads through the obituary announcements in the newspapers it becomes obvious from the roll call of children and grandchildren how important this legacy of descendants is. Thus marriage as a social institution is firmly associated with childbearing, as noted by Kwame who makes an implicit connection between the two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number of Children (total/with wife)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nortey</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Principal admin. asst.</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akwasi</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Lab. technician</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Hall porter</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cudjoe</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Draughtsman</td>
<td>3/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Assistant librarian</td>
<td>0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwame</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Administrative asst.</td>
<td>3/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Works superintendent</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayittey</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Research assistant</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobla</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Post-Secondary</td>
<td>Accounts clerk</td>
<td>3/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kodzo</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>3/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wireko</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Driver</td>
<td>11/7</td>
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a All names have been changed.

b “Total” refers to all the children the individual man has; “with wife” refers to children born to the couple.
Well, in Africa if you are a man or a woman and if you get to some age and you don’t marry, they don’t regard you in a society, especially in the family which you are from. Because if you grow without children, you may get sick, you may get weak, you can’t call someone’s child to help you in doing anything. And, eh, I think it’s a pride for an African to marry and get children so that if you grow, they can take care of you.

According to Kwame everyone will need help in their old age, and that help should come from one’s children, and these children one can expect from marriage. Thus the idea that anyone would get married and decide a priori not to have children was generally considered to be strange, if not outright irresponsible and selfish, by the men. Hence, a childless marriage was seen as no marriage. Nortey reflects this, arguing,

They [couple] need to raise a family, which is the most important thing because one definitely expects that at some point in time you have to marry ... one of the things that is expected of being African.

He goes on to explain some of these “African notions”:

You want to have a child [because of] the respect that goes with somebody who has a dependant. You see, if you are there and you don’t have any responsibilities, people do not respect you. And if you take a wife, and you happen to have children too, a lot of respect comes with that.

Here Nortey seems to engage with Miescher’s perspectives on becoming an ɔpanyin—the ability to marry, have children and have these be dependent on you as a sign of your power and authority. It is not just marriage and authority over a wife that makes for being an elder, but the children and dependents that become a mark of wisdom, ability to provide, generosity, and hence earn respect.

**THE QUESTION OF ADOPTION**

Only four of the men considered adoption a valid route to fatherhood; however, two of these stressed that adoption was not an alternative to biological fatherhood, but merely a means to augment it, or to provide support for a needy child. Two men indicated that while adoption was, perhaps, a good practice for other societies, they would not have chosen this route to fatherhood themselves. The remaining five ruled adoption out unequivocally. Adoption is “difficult” in African societies, noted 53-year-old Ayittey, because you will be “given a name”—and this naming seeks to suggest that one is irresponsible or incapable of having children, both signs that one is not a real man. Particularly problematic are the many busy bodies who will whisper to the child that “this is not your mother/father,” says 47-year-old Kwame who would only consider
adoption if it could be totally secret. And Nortey, who had his second child outside marriage argues, “I can accept adoption where you feel that you want to help somebody, so even if you have your own children you can adopt a child as a charitable decision. But as a replacement of your own children, that one I don’t accept that that should be.” Tony, who after eight years of marriage had no children at the time of the interview but whose wife had a daughter prior to their marriage, said, “Actually, I would find it [adoption] very difficult and I think it will tell on me very much.” He goes on to link his feelings to fears of having his phallic competence questioned:

I wouldn’t want the situation where maybe people will be saying that I have no child of my own, and you know in our society that is what they say, maybe I am not able to produce children, so I am bent on having my own.... It will take a man with a strong heart to cope with that situation for a long time. (italics indicate authors’ emphasis)

Akwasi, whose wife had two children prior to their marriage, and who encountered a lot of pressure from his mother and ridicule from his colleagues, also draws on similar associations with phallic potency when he says that adoption would allow people to suggest that he has “used his something [penis] to make money.” This he said with reference to the belief in, and corresponding idiom of, people spiritually “selling” something that is really precious to them, such as a child, a wife, a parent, and not infrequently one’s phallic potency, in exchange for riches. Indeed, Akwasi disclosed that since he was doing relatively well financially during the years before he had children with his wife, and especially before she bore a son, such rumors had been spread about him—“at times they tease me that I don’t know how to do the job [perform sexually] because [I] don’t have a boy.” His mother’s psychological pressure, constantly asking him if he would not “bring forth a child” before she died did not help matters either as he tried to deflect such direct and indirect questioning of the integrity of his phallus onto his wife by insisting she try harder to get pregnant.

Some men also pointed to other reasons that make adoption difficult to accept. They explained that the child will not give the “proper” respect to the parent when s/he discovers that s/he is adopted, citing examples in which adopted children who were disciplined would yell at their parents, “you are not my mother/father.”

Only two men, Kodzo and Kobla, stated they would have considered adoption, had they and their wives not had any children together. Kobla and Kodzo both had initial fertility desires that were less acute than those of their wives. Kodzo wanted two children but his wife wanted three (they eventually had three), and Kobla, who himself had eighteen siblings, would have been content without children while his wife wanted four (they eventually had three). Clearly these two men differ from the others in that they do not seem to measure their sense of being men by whether they father children or not, nor
did their children’s sex seem to matter to them. Kodzo is a successful lawyer who appeared to draw a lot of his sense of self-worth from his profession. Kobla’s ability to define a counter-cultural construction of manhood, according to him, derives from his drawing on Christian beliefs to define what marriage and parenting mean. For him, according to biblical scriptures, marriage is the union of a man and a woman and should be seen as complete even without children.

**Can a Marriage without Children Survive?**

The interviewed men were unanimous in their opinion that the probability of marital survival in the case of childlessness was slim in Ghana, and reflected on the pressures that a childless couple would experience from friends, family, in-laws and even people they had no relationships with. Indeed, all but one of the men indicated that they and/or their wives had experienced unwanted pressure around issues of childbearing at some point in their marriage. When the interviewer posed the question, “Some people say that a marriage, if there are no children, in our African culture, cannot work, cannot survive, would you agree?” Kwame’s unequivocal and impassioned response was, “Hundred percent!” and Tony’s reference to such a marriage as “empty” pinpointed the feelings of most of the men. Ayittey explained that since he was the only child of his mother (though one of twenty of his father) he felt a lot of pressure from her and her family to have children.

Five men were certain that had their own marriages been childless they would not have survived, three of them indicating that they would have divorced their wives and/or had children with other women in order to become fathers. Akwasi, whose wife came to the marriage with a son and a daughter was emphatic that had she not borne him children she would have had to go. In fact, in the separate interview with her she complained about Akwasi’s insensitivity to her difficult pregnancies and his pressuring her to have children, particularly a son, resulting in her going through four additional pregnancies (her sixth child—the fourth with Akwasi—was a boy) even though after her fourth child (second with Akwasi) the doctor had advised her not to have any more children.

Yaw, who believed his marriage could have survived childlessness, conceded the family pressures that would have occurred and the possibility that they could have been injurious to his marriage. He acknowledged that the indirect pressures that come from a wife, via her family, could affect the marriage because a woman too needs children and a “real” man should be able to help her achieve these—especially since women, unlike men, do not have the option of having multiple partners.

**AA:** [T]he family will come and say, Yaw, go and marry another woman?
**Yaw:** I know the pressure will be there but it depends on you.
AA: You think you can withstand the pressure? Maybe when you were younger?

Yaw: I may or may not, because maybe the pressure from my wife’s side may be too much and that will make me not to withstand [sic] it. Because not only the men are in need of children but the women too. I may not bother too much but my wife can bother because of the pressure from her relations and friends.

AA: So that can make the marriage break up?

Yaw: Yes.

Although five of the men were certain that their own marriages would have survived childlessness, three of these, Wireko, Kwame, and Nortey, indicated that they would probably have had children outside marriage or married an additional wife in order to achieve fatherhood. Both Wireko and Nortey in fact have children with women other than their wives although these children were born after the birth of children with their wives. Kwame, who has three children, all of them with his wife, noted that “people will talk, but if I love my wife so dearly and see that this is the situation, I will like to get another woman.” Tony, whose marriage had remained childless after eight years, and whose wife had a daughter prior to their marriage, lamented bitterly, and seemed to concede defeat against the battle of becoming a father with his wife when saying:

They [his family] want me to take another woman [sardonic laugh] whom I should make pregnant. I should start playing around with another woman and if she gets pregnant no one will ask this one (his wife) to go away.

Although he seemed to love his attractive young wife, he said he had given himself “two years” and then he would indeed pursue another woman. The bitterness, anxiety and helplessness he felt were evident as he tried to make sense of their childlessness. Medical tests did not provide any clues as to why they should not have children, and his wife’s ability to conceive was evident given her daughter, leaving him to contemplate his masculinity and consider a partner change (or addition) as an option to rectify this serious deficit.

The interviewer had the sense from her separate interviews with husbands and wives that the two men, Kobla and Kodzo, who said they would have considered adoption if they had not had children, had relatively close relationships with their wives. This was reflected in several observations: the fact that both spouses in these interviews spoke fondly, often smiling, about their partners; they gave similar responses on questions about their marriages; the couples did many things together and discussed issues relating to their families and personal lives. In Kobla’s case, he was very involved in the daily child care and domestic work (Kodzo lived out of town during the week but indicated that when he came home on the weekends he was not interested in domestic
chores hence they had hired domestic help). Both men also had a strong sense of their marriage being their own business (“it’s our marriage and nobody interferes”), and they both had more positive attitudes toward gender-equitable relations as expressed with reference to notions about shared decision making and women’s roles. Kodzo was somewhat derisive of people whom he considered to have several children simply to make a statement about their own identities. He narrated the story of his father, who had 19 children, and the pride he took when they all visited at weekends or on holidays, their cars lined up in the village for all to see. Sixty-year-old Wireko who has 11 children, 7 with his wife, was another man who seemed to have a very warm, close relationship with his wife saying, “I would never have left her, no matter what. I will never leave my wife, for better or for worse ... but would rather get some children outside the marriage. In fact I would not have so many, maybe two, for anyone to see that I have children. I would never leave her.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our study confirms previous research suggesting that becoming a father is important to Ghanaian men, particularly for symbolic reasons: it would prove that they are responsible adults and husbands who can “take care” of a family, as well as that they can “perform” sexually as men. Men can avoid the taunts of other men able to pride themselves on pristine signifiers of masculinity (children, sons) by doing the same. While the sense of responsibility to the lineage and looking forward to becoming a respected elder can be seen to be important, anxieties about sexual performance may seem to trump lineage fidelity.

The importance of phallic performance as a signifier of masculinity is not limited to Ghanaian men. North American studies have shown that although some men are becoming more caring and involved as fathers, in order to retain their male identities they must also be seen to fit the more traditional masculine image such as in being physically muscular or athletic (Wall & Arnold, 2007). It may be that the specter of a sensitive and caring man is gaining acceptability; however, notions of a real man who has *ownership of his phallus* (Messner, 2007) persist. Such may be suggested by the Gallup polls ratings of then president Bill Clinton sky-rocketing after his sexual alliances with Monica Lewinsky (Messner, p. 472). Clinton would have morphed from “emasculated house-husband to stud muffin ... from pussy to walking erection” (Ducat, 2004, cited in Messner, p. 472).

However, the importance of the “performance” of the penis beyond the sexual to include childbearing would appear to be particularly salient for African societies where children are widely valued as an end in themselves. Considering the plethora of African work that identifies the importance of “the family,” it is important that we begin to pay more attention to the importance of children from a less functional or instrumental perspective. Needed are studies that seek to understand the “value” of children and the culture of parent-
ing in its variable guises—functionally, as sources of labor for example; culturally, as markers of identities; and socially, in terms of parent-child relationships. An appreciation of the complex connections between family responsibilities, social expectations, identity constructions and policy is needed to impact social change so that fatherhood can indeed be “woven as a desirable feature into the fabric of masculinity” (Morrell, 2005, p. 86). This has a potentially extensive impact of policy implications. For example, in 2008 the government of Ghana instituted a policy of free maternal health care including maternal insurance and access to antenatal and delivery services. While this has greatly burdened health care administration (staff employment has not increased nor have facilities been improved), there has been no discussion of the relationship of this implicit pro-natalism with the reproductive work of mothering, let alone parenting or fathering. Might men have greater opportunities to sow their seeds of phallic competence and proudly display the results thereof without fear of the immediate costs? To better appreciate the stagnation in the transformation in gender relations we must, as Ratele (2008) suggests, understand the ways in which a diverse array of social categories are implicated in constructions of masculinities. As has been argued elsewhere (Adomako Ampofo, 2004), it is only when men have available to them a larger range of acceptable scripts of manhood, including being childless, that they may become less oppressive to women and other (childless) men. These alternative “masculinities” would have to accommodate voluntary and involuntary childlessness, and the options to be a father through other than biological routes such as fostering and formal adoption.

REFERENCES


13 Preliminary observations in Tema General Hospital, a large district hospital, indicate that since the implementation of this policy there has been an upsurge in the number of husbands who stride into the hospital to take their wives home. Hitherto husbands were often difficult to find since if bills were unpaid they risked losing face when accosted by health personnel (Kwame Ampofo, personal communication, June 2008).


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