Framing reciprocal obligations within intergenerational relations in Ghana through the lens of the mutuality of duty and dependence

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Abstract
Reciprocity has long been recognised as a key feature in intragenerational relations amongst kin, affines and trading partners, but also in intergenerational relations, especially those between children and their caregivers in diverse societies. This paper seeks to explore reciprocity as the tie that binds relationships between caregivers and children while the latter are still ‘dependents’ and the consequences for both parties when this tie is broken. Data presented were collected from two mixed-method studies undertaken in Ghana. The findings indicate the importance of linking studies of childhoods within this context to indigenous moral and ethical frameworks about personhood and its associated features relating to the mutuality of both duty and dependence, reciprocity, relatedness, and collectivism. Failure to make these connections between children’s lives in this context and the broader belief systems and their attendant moral frameworks that continue to underpin conceptualisations of childhood and intergenerational relationships results in depictions of African childhoods that are partial, limited and out of context.

Keywords
Reciprocity, mutuality of duty, intergenerational relations, parental responsibilities, ‘good’ parental care, ‘good’ child, children’s duties, Ghana

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Introduction

Reciprocity, whether referred to as a norm, value, or principle, has been, and continues to be, a key feature of social and economic relations in diverse societies. This is due to the critical role it plays in ensuring stability within social systems (Gouldner, 1960; Malinowski, 1926; Sahlins, 1965). While the concept of reciprocity, and how it is applied, may differ from context to context (Izuhara, 2010), in its most basic form, it is used to describe exchanges of goods, services and in some cases, human beings (specifically, women as part of marriage arrangements or children as part of care and educational strategies) between individuals and groups who have a certain relationship - whether that be as members of the same kinship group, as trading partners, affines, or increasingly, as friends. The reciprocal nature of the exchange is evidenced by the fact that after receiving a particular object, service or goods, the recipient has an obligation to make a return in some way.

The term reciprocity has been defined and explained in various ways (Malinowski, 1926; Maclean, 2010, 2011; Sahlins, 1965). Sahlins (1965), for example, identified three forms of reciprocal exchanges - generalised, balanced, and negative. Of these three, balanced reciprocity, where partners engage in an exchange of equivalence, is the most commonly documented in anthropological studies (e.g., Malinowski, 1926). Within this typology of reciprocity, equivalence is key to the nature of the exchange relationship between peoples and groups. Thus, in this type of exchange any service or good offered needs to be paid by a similar offering of equivalent value. Central to the understanding of the concept of balanced reciprocity, in particular, is the idea that rights and duties are interlocked in reciprocal exchanges. Thus, both parties are bound in a reciprocal exchange in which they can not only claim rights against each other, but are also obliged to perform duties for each other (Gouldner, 1960). This indicates the extent to which mutual dependence and gratification are key to understanding the concept of reciprocity.

These reciprocal obligations are also key features of the intergenerational contract (Izuhara 2010; Reynolds Whyte et al, 2008). This important role that reciprocity plays in the caregiver - child relationship is reflected not only in the responsibilities both parties have towards each other, but also in the claims of rights they can make against each other (Gouldner, 1960). These rights and duties that both possess lead to a relationship based on mutual dependencies which provides key benefits as well as consequences to young people and their caregivers. Therefore, the key to the understanding of reciprocity within the generational contract is the mutual dependence and obligation that is embedded within the relationship which manifests itself in actions of give and take over time (Reynolds Whyte et al, 2008). Failure to fulfil one’s end of the bargain in a reciprocal intergenerational relationship leads to generational conflict (Reynolds Whyte et al, 2008) and the imposition of sanctions or penalties on the party that has failed in their part of the exchange.

It is this failure to uphold one’s end of the reciprocal bargain in the intergenerational relationship in contexts characterised by an emphasis on the mutuality of both duty and dependence that is the focus of this paper. While there is significant body of literature on the value of reciprocity within the intergenerational contract much of it focuses on its
implications for parents once they are elderly and dependent (e.g., Izuhara, 2010). Much less has been documented about the consequences for both children and caregivers while the former are still young and supposedly dependent on adult care and provision. Hence, this paper seeks to explore reciprocity as the tie that binds relationships between caregivers and children while the latter are still ‘dependents’, and the consequences for both parties when this tie is broken through the failings of one of the parties involved. A focus on the consequences of reciprocal relationships for both children and adults, and its benefits and adverse consequences for both caregivers and children while the latter can still be defined as dependents, or children, in a given context, provides us with insights that are important to consider in the study of childhoods. In particular, it illuminates the importance of linking studies of childhoods within this context (and indeed, any other) to indigenous moral and ethical frameworks about personhood, most notably those based on the mutuality of duty and dependence and the morality of a shared life, in developing a fuller understanding of constructions of childhoods and parent-child relationships within this context.

Situating the persisting visibility of reciprocal obligations in Sub-Saharan Africa within indigenous notions of personhood and relatedness

Similar to other parts of the world Sahlins’ (1965) categorisation of ‘balanced reciprocity’ is the most commonly documented in sub-Saharan Africa. This ‘balanced’ form of reciprocity is an inherent characteristic of broader social and cultural systems in this context which, while varied in organisation, have historically foregrounded communitarian or collectivist principles. As Gyekye (2013) puts it, such social systems, organised on a communitarian moral framework, typically illuminate the following key features: compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social wellbeing. These principles, which, according to Gyekye (2013: 232) represent the ‘morality of a shared life’ came to dominate the social, cultural, economic, and political organisation of societies in the region due to the recognition that the individual human being is both weak and limited and consequently, needs to be helped by others in order to not only survive, but to achieve his or her personal aspirations. It is within this context that values such as mutual obligation and support, reciprocity collective responsibility, duty, solidarity, sociality, sociability, and cooperation, especially between kinfolk, became perceived as central features of diverse African societies. In fact, these notions of mutual obligations and support were so intrinsic to the organisation of many societies in these contexts that expressions were formulated to articulate these values - the best known of which is, perhaps, Ubuntu, a Bantu philosophical and religious concept that recognises that the humanity of individuals is achieved through their social interaction with others, including those of different generations (Abebe and Biswas, 2021). Due to its underlying premise that humanity and personhood are achieved through relations with others, the Ubuntu concept also denotes an ethic of caring, respecting, and showing compassion to each other (Gathogo, 2008). These behaviours are expected to manifest themselves through actions of mutual aid and support.
This emphasis placed on interdependence between individuals led to a situation whereby mutual obligations were historically foregrounded within relationships within this context. What this morality of duty translated to in societies such as the Akan of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire was that individuals were expected ‘to demonstrate concern for the interests of others’ (Gyekye, 2013: 235). As a result, within this system individuals had duties towards each other as well as rights they could expect to claim from one another. This is well summed up by Cobbah (1987: 321) who asserts that ‘the right of one kinship member is the duty of the other and the duty of the other kinship member is the right of another’. It is within this context that the value of reciprocity emerged to become central to the organisation of societies within the region (Cobbah, 1987; Gyekye, 1996, 2013).

Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed rapid and enormous social and economic changes over the past 200 years as a result of colonisation, missionary education, urbanisation, modernisation, and globalisation, all of which have had an impact on bonds within kinship groupings (Oppong, 2006). Nevertheless, recent evidence indicates the persisting importance of the value of reciprocity within social relationships across the continent even if it has somewhat been modified in its application (e.g. Maclean, 2010, 2011; Tsai and Dzorgbo, 2012). While the continuing importance of reciprocity has often been attributed to its function as a social welfare mechanism amongst kinship groups in contexts characterised by hardship (Maclean, 2011), there is a need to also understand the value placed on this norm due to its function in fostering connections and trust amongst kin in particular (Tsai and Dzorgbo, 2012). Added to this is the need to understand the enduring significance of reciprocity as part of the mutuality of duty and dependence that persists in conceptualisations of personhood and social relations in contexts where the morality of a shared life continues to dominate social relations despite the ramifications of social change.

Situating reciprocal obligations within the intergenerational relationship in Ghana within the lens of the mutuality of duty and dependence

In Ghana balanced reciprocity is still seen as the ideal as it creates a situation whereby ‘all family members are simultaneously receivers and donors embedded in bonded relations’ (Tsai & Dzorgbo, 2012: 216). The desire for equivalence in exchanges in both intra - and inter-generational relationships has led to the development of a form of reciprocity which is very explicit in nature (Pellow,1977). Therefore, within this context the expectation that an initial offering will be met with a return of some kind is made explicit in relations between individuals and disapproval and sanctions are quick to follow for those who fail to uphold their end of the bargain (see also Gyekye, 2013; Maclean, 2010, 2011).

These exchange relationships underpinned by the norms of reciprocity, which are perhaps most evident in the intergenerational relationship, impute specific duties on each party in relation to the other. Therefore, the expectation of ‘good’ parenthood constitutes nurturing and caring for children which includes the provision of financial, material, and non-material resources when their offspring are young and dependent (see Sarpong, 1974; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013; Van der Geest, 2002).
This offering provided by a ‘good’ parent serves as a credit for this group to then receive care, and support from their children when they become elderly and hence, less able to care for themselves financially or otherwise. Therefore, as ‘good’ children of aged parents who have fulfilled their role as ‘good’ parents, middle-aged adults are then expected to provide accommodation, food, and healthcare for their elderly caregivers (see Oppong, 2006; Van der Geest, 2002). Additionally, this duty of care and support that children are expected to offer to parents in return for being looked after when they were young does not come to an end when a parent dies. By having a child, a parent is assured s/he would be buried in an appropriate manner and once in the afterlife, sacrifices and libation will be made to his or her spirit (Goody, 1973). Importantly, these reciprocal obligations both in life and death are also pertinent in relationships between young people and members of their wider lineage (Assimeng, 1981) due to the prevalence of social parenthood in this context both historically and in the present-day (see Goody, 1973).

The expectation that a ‘good’ child should provide a return in the reciprocal relationship between generations did not only come to fruition when they were adult children of elderly parents. This emerges clearly in the literature on reciprocity in intergenerational relationships in Ghana. By having, or looking after, a child - whether or not it is one’s biological child - a parent or caregiver is issuing a contract which a child is expected to begin fulfilling while they remain dependent on the care of that parent. For children the nature of this return is closely intertwined with the duties and behaviours they are expected to adopt as children. In this context this is not left to chance, but is firmly embedded into the socialization process to ensure that children are aware of what is expected of them from a young age. This reciprocal obligation of children while they are children emerges in several anthropological accounts of childhood and growing up within this context. Kaye (1962:149), for example, outlines in relation to a town in the Eastern region of Ghana that:

Almost all the parents in Tutu whose opinion was obtained expressed the view that the care of children, from babyhood to adolescence, entails a great deal of strenuous effort and constant vigilance, and in return for all the hardships undergone by the parents towards the welfare of their children they expect their children to be grateful; this gratitude should be shown by obedience.

Thus, as children in a reciprocal relationship with caregivers, children are expected to be obedient and respectful - values that have been well established as being key features of childhood within the Ghanaian context (Gyekye, 1996; Sarpong, 1974; Twum-Danso, 2009; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). Due to the critical importance placed on these values within the construction of childhood clear sanctions are put in place to address forms of misbehaviour and disrespect and are transmitted to children as part of the socialization process (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013).

In addition to the need to respect caregivers and adults part of the return expected of children in reciprocal intergenerational relationships includes undertaking duties that contribute to the sustenance of the family in some way. As Mensa-Bonsu and Dowuona-Hammond (1996: 15) note: ‘a child is obliged to render services to a parent which
obligation is then reciprocated by the parent by care and maintenance’. This service provided by children in exchange for care and the provision of needs that ensure their wellbeing comprises undertaking a range of household chores such as sweeping, cooking, cleaning, looking after younger siblings, helping parents in the running of their business, and in some cases, earning money independently to contribute to the maintenance of their family or provide for themselves and by so doing, ease the pressure that their caregivers are facing (see Twum-Danso, 2009; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2020).

What this indicates is that these reciprocal obligations within intergenerational relations are driven by an understanding that both parties not only have mutual duties towards each other, but are also mutually dependent on each other. This is not only apparent when children become adults. Even as young children the relationship developed with caregivers is characterised by an understanding of both the mutualities of duty and dependence. To this end then, undertaking chores and behaving in a certain way enables children to fulfil their end of a relationship premised on the mutuality of duty. This then positions them well to, in turn, make claims for their own needs and rights from relevant adults due to the recognition that as young individuals they need care, support and assistance. The implication of the mutuality of duty and dependence for intergenerational relations is that there is no guarantee that the socialization process will result in obedient and respectful children if adults are not also holding their end of the reciprocal exchange. Ofosu-Kusi, for example (forthcoming 2022), demonstrates how, street children who have left their homes in rural areas in order to migrate to Accra in order to earn a living, mainly as a result of parental inability to take care of their needs, exhibit behaviours which are seen as oppositional to the typical behaviours expected of a ‘good’ child in this context.

Thus, it is clear from this that the values of responsibility and respect and obedience, which are well recognised as fundamental characteristics of the construction of a ‘good’ child in Ghana, are held in place by the mutual obligations and dependencies that are part and parcel of a reciprocal intergenerational relationship. The question then becomes what happens when either party fails to fulfil their end of the bargain in a reciprocal intergenerational relationship when children are still, in effect, children – however that is defined in that context – and dependent? This paper seeks to contribute to existing literature by further demonstrating that key characteristics of childhood associated with socialization processes are not passively imbibed by children. Instead, as result of the value placed on reciprocity such expectations of a ‘good’ child can be ignored if adults, within a relationship premised on the mutuality of duty and dependence, fail to uphold their end of the bargain.

**Methodology**

Over a period of 17 years, I have undertaken fieldwork in Ghana on constructions of childhood, child rearing practices and the implementation of global children’s rights norms. A recurring theme in all these studies has been the vital role of reciprocity in the caregiver-child relationship as well as in broader family and social relations. For this paper I have returned to two of the studies I have undertaken and re-analysed the data to better understand how the value of reciprocity frames, and regulates, the intergenerational
relationship. The first study (Study 1), for which fieldwork was undertaken between May 2005 and March 2006, focused on two communities in central Accra – Nima and Ga Mashie. The second study (Study 2), which was undertaken in 2009, centred around four communities in Accra and the surrounding areas: Nima, Ga Mashie (specifically one neighbourhood, Bukom), Pokrom Nsaba and Dodowa.

In terms of the methods deployed for these two studies, these consisted of participant observation (both studies); the collection of data through participatory workshops and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 243 children and young people aged between 10 and 21 (Study 1); semi-structured interviews with 23 children aged between 10 and 16 (Study 2); 10 diaries completed by children in private schools outside of the participating communities (Study 2); and the administration of a survey to 133 children (Study 1) and 158 children (Study 2). In relation to adults, from whom data were also collected during both studies, the methods centred around FGDs which were conducted with 98 adults (Study 1), and 118 adults (Study 2). Informed consent or assent were negotiated in writing and verbally and recorded with both children and adults.

Supplementary analysis was adopted to enable me to undertake a more in-depth investigation of the data in relation to a new set of questions centred around the notion of reciprocity and its role in regulating caregiver-child relationships. As part of this, data from previous studies conducted in Ghana were reviewed against set criteria for inclusion in the analysis. From this analysis it was identified that out of the five studies I have conducted in Ghana over 17 years, two in particular had gathered sufficient data that effectively addressed the new questions I was now posing in relation to reciprocity. To address these questions, I read and re-read each transcript, and added new codes to each line. Codes were then grouped into broad categories to create themes.

Findings

Mutual obligations and dependency

The findings from the two studies demonstrate the extent to which the role of both parenthood and childhood are constructed around helping and providing support and care to each other. For both adults and children in my studies ‘good’ parental care or help consistently comprised of nurturing, caring, training, disciplining, and educating the young in their care so they would become responsible citizens. The expectation that parents should ensure that their children gained school-based education through the payment of school fees emerged strongly in data collected from both children and adults. For some this support expected of ‘good’ parents went beyond paying for school fees and ensuring they go to school; it also involved support with the homework children received: ‘Some parents take good care of their children. When they [children]come back from school, they help them with their homework’ (FGD with Nima Out of School Children 1, Tuesday 14th February 2006). This help children expected from parents in ensuring their access to schooling was very much linked to societal or familial expectations that in future, as wage-earning educated adults, they will help their parents who would be elderly
and hence, have a need for assistance (Twum-Danso 2009, Twum-Danso Imoh, 2020). As one child stated in a FGD (Study 1):

Parents must take their children to school and provide them with everything they need to stay in school. If a child is sent to school, he will grow up to become a responsible person and will take care of his parents (FGD with Nima Out of School Children I, Tuesday 14th February 2006).

Thus, it is clear that through, primarily the socialization process, children have come to have an understanding that this expectation that they should look after their parents in future is seen as a return for the care they themselves have received.

However, this support children were expected to provide to parents was not only required after they had completed their education and were earning money. Instead, while seen as children who were supposedly dependent on their parents for the bulk, if not all, of their needs, they were very conscious that they were expected to support and provide assistance to their caregivers. This emerged through the ways most child participants in Study 1 discussed their understanding of the meaning of childhood and the roles of children within the family or the community. When asked about the roles expected of children, two children, for example, in two different FGDs/workshops stated:

Children must work (FGD with Nima School Children IV Oct-Dec 2005).

Children must help their parents at home (FGD with Nima Girls, 4th Feb 2006).

Embedded within this understanding of childhood is that children provide help to adults even as dependents. This help children are required to undertake takes the form of duties that they are expected to perform from a young age which are often allocated on the basis of gendered norms. Errands, which both genders run for adults in their household as well as others within the community, formed a major part of the daily responsibility of most children who participated in both studies. The extent to which reciprocity as a value underpinned the running of errands was well expressed by one child participant in a FGD: ‘They treat us as children, so they send us and we go and they like us’ (FGD with Ga Mashie out of School children II, Friday 10th February 2006).

While much of this support is based on work within the house, for a number of children, this assistance children were expected to provide extended to whatever it is that their parents are engaged in, including outside of the home. This was expressed by one child (Study 1) as follows: ‘children have to help parents in everything they are doing’ (FGD with GA Mashie School Children V 1st February 2006). Data supported this and showed that in addition to household chores, children assisted their caregivers in whatever trade in which they were engaged.

Thus, what emerged from the data is that children have a clear understanding that the caregiver-child relationship is one based on mutual support and help, and that this expectation was embedded not just in the understanding of parenthood, but also in their conceptualisation of childhood. This mutuality of duty was captured by a female child
participant in Ga Mashie (Study 1) who stated that ‘you must help your mother and your mother must help you’. This brief statement captures the essence of the mutual duties that both parties have within a caregiver and child relationship. Therefore, while childhood was recognised as a period of dependency, this did not signify an inability of children to provide support, care, and assistance to parents/caregivers both in the house and in their business. Thus, in this context there was a clear understanding by children and adults that inherent within both the phase of childhood and the status of adulthood were duties as well as vulnerabilities that required an interdependence between the two status groups. The significant point here is, as Kassa (2017) puts it, that children and adults who are engaged in relationships underpinned by notions of mutuality of both dependence and duty recognise themselves as being both care-receivers and caregivers. This then raises questions about the extent to which it is appropriate to associate the word ‘caregiver’ with the status of parenthood as both young and older individuals in this context are capable, and, indeed, do provide care to each other.

**How mutuality of duty informs understandings and practices of reciprocity in intergenerational relations**

This understanding of the mutuality of duty and dependence, in turn, led to a belief in the reciprocal nature of the caregiver-child relationship. Therefore, children participating in the two studies were very much aware that through their provision of assistance to caregivers and indeed, other adults in their household, compound, and wider community, they were looked on favourably by adults which, in turn, could result in them getting help with their own needs. This can be noted in a statement made by one of the child participants who was at the time living on the streets and getting support from a NGO.

> Because children go on errands for people sometimes these people will take them to hospital when they are sick (FGD with Ga Mashie Out of School Children III, 20th Feb 2006. Study 1).

This demonstrates that while chores and errands are part of indigenous forms of education and key components of socialization processes in this context (Nsamenang, 2002), they are also critical elements of reciprocal obligations between children and their caregivers which enable children to fulfil their part of the bargain in a relationship based on the mutuality of duty and dependence.

Therefore, inherent within this relationship is the assistance and support that both children and caregivers are supposed to provide to each other as part of the mutual dependency that exists within their relationship as well as a recognition that both parties have duties that they must undertake towards each other. This understanding of the reciprocal nature of the caregiver-child relationship was not only evident in discussions around chores and other work children engaged in to support their family, but also in relation to the behaviours they exhibited in relation to adults in their everyday lives, especially their caregivers. In all the studies I have undertaken children in this context have demonstrated a conscious awareness – imbibed through the socialization process -
that as children, they were obliged to respect their parents and caregivers (and indeed, all adults). For some child participants (Study 1) this was seen as so important that in an activity which sought to determine how children defined their rights and entitlements themselves, they insisted on including the need to respect adults as a right, even after dominant understandings of rights had been explained to them (see Twum-Danso 2009). The notion of reciprocity is critical to understanding this insistence. These children believed that respecting adults was a right to which they were entitled as it enabled them to receive their needs from parents, caregivers and indeed, other adults in a position to help them. In particular, being respectful as a child led to the provision of ‘good’ parental care. Such ideas emerged in data gathered from children in the various participatory workshops and FGDs held:

Children must be respectful so parents will send them to school (FGD with Ga Mashie Out of School Children V 27th January 2006, Study 1).

Children must be respectful so that adults can like you (Ga Mashie Out of School Children I 18th October – 15th November 2005, Study 1).

Therefore, children were acutely aware of what was expected of them in their part of the reciprocal relationship and the ways they could benefit if they played the role expected of them. Hence, this engagement of children in ‘reciprocal interplay’ (Pellow, 1977:55), through their behaviours, is an indication that children act strategically in reciprocal relationships with caregivers to ensure that the needs that they value, particularly shelter and the payment of school fees, which are essential to ensuring their progression in their school journey, are met.

The Consequences for Failing to Uphold Your Side of the Reciprocal Bargain as a Child or Parent

Given the clear benefits that were associated with both parties upholding their end of the reciprocal relationship and thereby cementing bonds between generations, it is also important to examine the consequences of failure by either party to fulfil their duties. Over the years the consequences for children who fail to fulfil their role in intergenerational relationships has featured in much of the data I have collected. While physical punishment is a key sanction meted out to children who are supposedly misbehaving in the context of the family, other sanctions, including the withdrawal of care, were also evident (see Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). These sanctions children faced emerged in a FGD I organised with a group of street children in Accra (Study 1):

Children have the right to respect [elders] because if you do not respect your mother, she will take you out of school or kick you out of the house; if you are on the streets and you are respectful you could get someone to send you to school or help you in some way (Ga Mashie Out of School Children I 18th October – 15th November 2005, Study 1).
Other children in the same study were clear about the consequences of failure to respect caregivers and its implications for their care:

I am disrespectful and so for my parents to do what I want them to do I have to change so they will help me when I am in need (FGD with Ga Mashie Out of School Children III, 20th Feb 2006).

These assertions were supported by caregivers participating in Study 2:

This girl who stays at my place, when the mother sends her, she won’t go so her mother does not give her money for school, so the girl dropped out of school for one year. So now the mother has left the child’s life to her (1st Adult FGD, Dodowa 18th August 2009).

Some children are really stubborn. It is not just your child who can be stubborn. My own child is stubborn. If she is standing right there and you call her, she does not respond. It does not make me happy. But the other children who live with me they respect. So, I like other people’s children more than mine so sometimes my child asks why I give things to the other children, but not to her, and I say it is because of the way she behaves – so if she wants me to give her something then she has to change. But she [is] still like that. …It is embarrassing to me that the other children who live with me respect, but my own child does not (1st Adult FGD, Dodowa, 18th August 2009).

What emerges here is that for these children, being provided for by parents was not necessarily a guarantee. The provision of care by parents came with a demand for certain responsibilities and behaviours that children were supposed to adopt. The failure of children to take on these expected duties and reflect the behaviours of a ‘good’ child led to tensions in the relationship and in some cases, the withdrawal of care and support by adults, most notably caregivers (see also Ofosu-Kusi, forthcoming 2022). The consequence of such a withdrawal of support was the inability of children to realise their own personal aspirations such as attending school.

For parents and caregivers sanctions they could incur as a result of their failure to fulfil their obligations within the intergenerational contract emerged less frequently in the data and not in all the participating research sites. In Nima (Study 1 and 2), for example, adults repeatedly informed me that children still respected caregivers even when the latter were not able to provide their needs. The sanctions for adults were most notable in one particular community in both studies: Ga Mashie. In this research site the sanctions parents/caregivers could experience were not only evident when they became elderly; they were also evident now while they were individuals engaged in income generation activities and caring for so-called dependent children. For instance, several parents in this community raised this as a problem in the parent-child relationship (Study 2):

Financial difficulties are another problem in the parent-child relationship. If you do not have money to take care of your child and the child has to fend for himself or herself, they will not
respect you. That is because you do not give them anything proper (1st Adult FGD Bukom, Wednesday 12th August 2009).

Because there is no work in this community so parents can’t take care of children, so children have to look after themselves from a young age. So, if I talk to them, they do not listen because I am not able to raise them (2nd Adult FGD, Bukom, 12th August 2009).

The picture that emerges here, then, is that the inability of parents to fulfil the roles expected of them, especially in relation to providing for the needs of children, leads to a situation whereby many children in this context recognised that they need to care for themselves. Consequently, they no longer felt (Ofosu-Kusi and forthcoming, 2022) the need to listen to their parents, take their advice or obey their rules (see also Ofosu-Kusi and forthcoming, 2022).

Therefore, a lack of parental care, which has been described by Oppong (2006:50) as a parental retreat or caring deficit as a result of the adoption of ‘retreatist’ strategies by parents, is creating a situation whereby some children no longer feel the need to fulfil their end of the bargain which specifically involved being respectful and obedient and undertaking specific duties. Instead, children sought to form new reciprocal relationships with others prepared to care for them. In some cases, this led to the emergence of new reciprocal obligations between children and their new ‘carers’ which were not necessarily based on kinship relations or an intergenerational contract. As several female children in a FGD in Ga Mashie (Study 1) told me: ‘when you ask your mother and she does not give you, and you have a boyfriend who does give you, you will do what he says instead of your mother’ (FGD with Ga Mashie Out of School Children III, 20th Feb 2006). When such a parent then wants to provide guidance and advice, a right closely associated with parenthood, or make a request from their child, the latter may not feel obliged to listen or respond to the request. Instead, many children in this site preferred to listen, respect, and obey whoever was taking care of their needs at that time. The significance of this is that respect and obedience and fulfilment of duties were offered to those who upheld their caring responsibility towards these children.

As a result, in the same way children’s rights and needs are dependent on fulfilling their part of the bargain, the rights of parenthood, at least within the Ga Mashie community, are also dependent on parents assuming and effectively fulfilling the responsibilities that are associated with the role of a ‘good’ caregiver in this context. The implication of this is that the focus on children’s subordinate position in the intergenerational relationship is not always a given. Children in this neighbourhood submit themselves to control by caregivers as part of reciprocal obligations that are informed by principles of the mutuality of duty and dependence that frames the caregiver-child relationship. When caregivers do not fulfil their obligations associated with ‘good’ parenthood then the return expected of ‘good’ children within this exchange is no longer guaranteed – not just later when they are adults, but also now as so-called ‘dependent’ children.
Discussion

This data collected from studies conducted in Ghana over the last 17 years offer some insights for the multidisciplinary field of childhood studies in relation to indigenous knowledge. Firstly, it calls into question the notion of dependency as a status associated with childhood as it demonstrates the extent to which both adults and children are dependent on each other, not only for the realisation of their own personal objectives as parents or children, but also to ensure the effective running of a household. In effect embedded within both status roles is the need to receive care and the ability to provide care (Kassa, 2017). Given the interdependency that characterises this relationship and the reciprocal obligations that underpin it, it may be appropriate to discuss more equally the dependency associated with both phases of life instead of primarily associating childhood with dependency. The recognition of this interdependency between children and adults is not new (see Schildkrout, 1978; Abebe, 2019, 2013). However, the key point I am making here is that this interdependency cannot be fully comprehended or explained unless it is situated within broader discussions about the relatedness embedded within African belief systems, especially in relation to personhood (see also Durham, 2011). Such a framing of the mutual dependencies that exist in the caregiver and child relations allows a linkage to be made between the dynamics of intergenerational relations in this context and the moral and ethical framework that still regulates many aspects of social relations in African contexts. This moral framework is well summed up by Gyekye (2013: 232) who asserts that ‘the morality of a shared life, as in any community, thus demands mutuality or reciprocity as a moral mandate in a world in which human beings, weak and limited in many ways, are subject to vulnerable situations’.

That these communitarian principles are critical to understanding intergenerational relationships is evident from the way in which principles of mutual support are firmly embedded within the notion of childhood in particular. For instance, it is because of this moral and ethical framework that foregrounds the mutualities of duty and dependence that children in all my studies undertaken in Ghana associate the phase of childhood with notions of ‘responsibility’, ‘duty’ and ‘work’. What this signifies is that when studying and discussing issues such as children’s work and responsibilities within families in African contexts it is critical for researchers to draw a linkage between these experiences of children and the extensive theorizing that has been undertaken in this context which explains the ‘morality of a shared life’ and its implications for intergenerational relations as well as intragenerational relations, not just in pastimes, but in the contemporary period too. Specifically, this mutuality that exists in the intergenerational relation places an expectation on both parties to support and care for each other (see also Coe, 2016).

Such theories about African personhood are also pertinent to another observation that emerges from these findings. Specifically, arguments about the nature of African personhood have long been used as a basis to demonstrate the existence of a binary between the notion of collectivism that is seen to characterise African societies and the individualism that underpins the dominant concept of human and children’s rights. Such narratives are perhaps best reflected in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This binary has, in turn, repeatedly been used to explain the inapplicability of
dominant children’s rights norms in this context due to the prioritisation of the needs of the group over those of the individual. While the collective is central to understanding social systems and relationships in many contexts in the region both in the past and the present, this dismissal of the individual as an important unit of society in numerous analyses of African personhood has been critiqued (Asante, 2009; Oyowe, 2014). Scholars such as Oyowe and Asante encourage new readings of existing theorisation of African personhood as part of their aim to demonstrate that indigenous belief systems in the region have always attached importance to notions of both individuality and collectivity. This is evident in much of Gyekye’s (e.g., 2013) work. For instance, he notes that while communities are expected to transmit the moral principles of their society to its members, it is the individual that is ultimately responsible for the state of his or her character, not the community. Thus, in Akan contexts from which Gyekye draws much of his work, despite the highly communitarian principles that underpin this society, notions of individualism and in, particular, personal responsibility, exist. This is not only evident in the present-day as a result of colonialism, missionary activity, and globalisation, but within the very fabric of the society’s beliefs and institutions. Asante (2009:523) further shows the extent to which individualism is inherent in African spirituality by referring to a key tenet of the Akan belief system: ‘all persons are children of God; no one is a child of the earth’. This recognition that all human beings are children of God first and foremost, Asante argues, leads the Akan to place value on the intrinsic worth of the individual. The resulting outcome of the value placed on individuals is the expectation that the individual will be treated with dignity and respect by others. The over-emphasis on the group, then, is not due to a lack of belief in individualism, but rather as a result of an understanding of the limitations of the human individual, especially in relation to self-sufficiency. It is this limitation of the individual that historically led to an emphasis being placed on a shared existence or the morality of a shared life.

What this all means in relation to the focus of this paper is that although reciprocity tends to be presented as a fundamental characteristic of communitarian societies, key to understanding this value is its inherent focus on the needs and interests of the individual. As Gyekye (2013: 235) asserts, ‘people fulfil and ought to fulfil duties to others not because of the rights of these others, but because of their own needs and welfare’. Thus far from merely highlighting the importance of collectivity, the value of reciprocity demonstrates the way that both individualism and collectivism are implicit parts of African moral or ethical frameworks. This co-existence of individualism and collectivism that is embedded in the theorization of the notion of African personhood offers a lens through which childhood studies scholars can challenge enduring narratives that have become quite powerful about the individuality of dominant human rights norms and its inapplicability to the everyday lives of children in so-called collectivist or communitarian-oriented African societies.

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