Chapter 5

The Differences in Emotion among Parents and Children in Ghanaian Transnational Families

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Transnational migration can generate strong emotions on the part of migrants and their families. These emotions are not only about desire for a new life and longing for one’s homeland, but also about love and longing when families are separated by the migration process. While much of the literature has emphasized the emotional pain among migrants and their families to highlight the costs of globalization (e.g., Parrenas, 2004, 1997; Schmalzbauer, 2004), this paper develops the claim that the emotional pain expressed by children and parents in transnational families differs because of their varied positionality and sense of agency. In doing so, it draws on research which shows how emotional pain—for instance, among children with absent parents—is contingent on factors besides a migrant parent’s physical absence, such as the meaning that the child makes of the separation (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2002). Families are constructed differently in different communities, such that the physical presence of a parent in a child’s life may be more or less significant or a marker of good parenting. Based on interviews with children of migrant mothers in the Caribbean, Karen Fog Olwig argued that it is not the absence of the mother in the household that causes pain for children but the mother’s absence in the form of lack of remittances and visits, because the household is itself conceived of as a transnational and geographically dispersed unit. "None of the life stories [with children] gives the impression that the parents’ physical absence in and of itself had been experienced as traumatic or problematic. It is apparent, however, that this absence was only acceptable so long as the parents maintained a strong economic and social presence in

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the home through regular remittances and periodic visits” (1999: 279). Traditions of family life among transnational families may differ in the extent to which geographic proximity or motherly presence is significant. As a result, the extent to which transnational migration is in tension with those ideologies, and results in emotional pain, will also differ. It is also important to note that though change can lead to emotional pain, emotional pain does not in itself signal social change. Social change may create new benefits for some, and costs for others. Someone may also experience emotional pain in a situation that is relatively stable.

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

A sense of agency based on social position also played a role. Depicting themselves as agents with responsibility and goals for their children, parents found themselves torn and uncertain because none of the options they faced seemed without risk. Despite the ways that immigration regimes constrained their own migrations and separated them from their families, Ghanaian parents depicted themselves as strongly agentive, faced with a series of choices and potential strategies. The children, on the other hand, expressed more straightforward pain than emotional conflict, because their ideals were more clearly in disjuncture with the reality of their lives. They did not express action-oriented goals like their parents, but rather longings for a situation that others could bring into being.

I have been conducting participant observation in a Ghanaian church in a major East Coast city since 2004, and through contacts through the church, I interviewed parents and young people who came to the U.S. as teenagers. Another set of interviews came through a visit to Ghana in the summer of 2005, when I visited the children and families of four parents I had interviewed in the U.S.. I also conducted focus group interviews with a total of forty-two students in three secondary schools and one private school in a town of approximately 9,000 people and a city of just more than a million. I also visited twenty-nine of those students’ guardians, with whom I had relatively short (half-hour), informal, untaped conversations. I then interviewed those children’s parents who were living in the U.S. (one was in Canada) in fall 2005. Most interviews were in Twi. Material directly reflected in this paper includes quotations and stories from interviews with thirty-five parents and conversations with fifty-two children, whether in focus group discussions or interviews. The period of parents’ residence in the U.S. ranged from one to thirty-five years, with an average stay of ten years. Fourteen (or forty percent) were raising their children in Ghana; another fourteen were raising their
children in the U.S.; and the remainder had children in both places. The most common occupations of parents in Ghana were teachers, government workers, and traders; in the U.S., they tended to work in the health care field. The majority (sixty-three percent) had resided in a major city prior to migration, but only a minority was highly educated (only twenty percent had received a university degree in Ghana).

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

It is important to note that migration has long been a facet of West African life. The fluidity and openness of West African familial and political arrangements reveal the logic of “wealth-in-people,” a very different model than is normative in the U.S. People, rather than property, are valued as a route to wealth and power. Furthermore, traditions of fostering, in which children are taken care of by a person other than their mother, are widespread in West Africa, including in the areas of Ghana I studied, and are not simply resorted to in crisis situations, such as the neglect or death of a parent. International migration, while long a route to status and wealth among Ghanaians, increased rapidly since the mid-1990s. Statistician K. A. Twum-Baah (2005) estimates that with a population of 21 million Ghanaians resident in Ghana, another 1.5 million are outside the country, although the European Union’s estimate is twice that figure at three million.

In my conversations with Ghanaian transnational migrants and their children, I found that parents and children expressed different kinds of emotions. The parents felt more goal conflict and uncertainty than did children. Depicting themselves as agents with responsibility and goals for their children, they found themselves torn and uncertain because none of the options they faced seemed without risk. As an example, Vida told this story about the time she was taking her baby back to Ghana to live with her parents:

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

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

This expression of uncertainty surprised me, because in my many conversations with Vida, she had portrayed her situation without emotion and provided justifications for what she was doing—working in the U.S. while her three children lived with her parents in Ghana—to demonstrate it was the best option for all involved. In their interviews with me, generally, parents did not talk in depth about their feelings of missing their children, but instead talked about how those feelings were subsumed to other concerns. For instance, in her conversations with me also, Vida very quickly made the transition from
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1. She used her children’s character as the marker of whether the path she took to raise them was working or not. The parents I talked with shared goals for their children and had similar terms by which they evaluated those goals. Their goal was to produce a hard-working and obedient child who was respectful toward his or her elders. In order to accomplish these goals, adults felt responsible for training their children. This is an active, engaged process on the part of the parent, in which the child’s character reflects on the parent’s reputation. While these goals of transnational migrants are similar to those expressed by Ghanaian parents who do not migrate, transnational migrants face a set of contradictory choices which make accomplishing these goals for their children more difficult than for non-migrant parents. They seemed to agree that Ghana is a better place to raise a child of good character, an interpretation that supported raising their children in Ghana during key periods of child development or when a child began “wayward.” However, many felt ambivalence about having someone other than a parent raise a child, because of the fear that a grandmother or other relative in Ghana would “pamper” the child, perhaps influenced by the flow of remittances, and thus ruin the child’s character. This was a fraught process, in which parents felt the uncertainty and risk of accomplishing these goals. My data supports the literature on transnational migration which suggests that transnational migrant mothers are more affected in their parenting role than transnational migrant fathers; in the case of Ghanaian transnational migrants, mothers seemed more full of doubts and ambivalence than fathers, although there were certainly some fathers who expressed as much concern as the typical mother did.

2. The children were more likely than their migrant parents to express straightforward sadness or longing, presenting an image of a family unity and togetherness that had been scattered or separated. Furthermore, children seem to be as concerned about their siblings’ presence and absence as about their parents’. In a set of siblings, parents may bring over a few children at a time because of visa issues or decide that one is ready to come to the U.S. but that another should finish school in Ghana, or that the youngest should be with her parents and the older siblings can stay with other relatives. Or siblings may have different citizenship status, because if a man migrates and his wife then follows, as is a common pattern, they may then bear children who have citizenship in the receiving country, while the older children, born before the parents’ migration, do not. Seventeen-year-old Addo’s brothers and sisters are with his mother in Germany, and he lives with his aunt and cousins. He complained, “Sometimes I feel lonely.”

3. Many of the children of migrant parents articulated a discourse that was focused on an ongoing process of care, based on both the provision of material resources and love. I have explored age-related differences among children in their expectations regarding transnational migration in other work (Coe, 2012); here, I highlight the intergenerational differences. While one might expect material resources to be provided more effectively by an absent migrant parent who was sending home remittances and gifts, the lack of material resources was an idiom of complaint that children could use. The key indicators of material care were food, clothing, and money, and the term they tended to use was “cater,” meaning providing for. Sixteen-year-old Dinah said, “As for me, I don’t have any problem with them staying in the U.S., but most people complain, because as for their parents, they don’t cater them. They go there and that’s all. They never hear from them again.” Some explained this lack of material care by complaining that their caregivers were diverting the remittances for purposes other than their care. Fifteen-year-old Akua echoed this thought, “One of my friends, her mom went and her dad went; they left her with the...
mom's sister, and [she] always maltreats the girl. When they bring her clothes or money, instead of using it to cater for her, they use it for their children. Oh—it was bad.” Whereas parents worried that caregivers would pamper children, often the children’s discourse claimed caregivers neglected children. Thirteen-year-old Beatrice said that she wanted to live together with her father and mother (both in the U.S.). When I asked her why, she replied, “Maybe if I live with my mother, I will be more comfortable than living with someone else. Because if I live with my mother, my mother will do what I like for me.” Many of the students in the focus group at the same school complained about not getting all the money that their parents sent back and said that they felt sad and materially deprived.

The children’s discourse of care and the parental discourse of character and correction have implications for what we might call family ideology: the sense of what is right or normative in terms of family living arrangements. The parents and children I interviewed seemed to hold as a social norm a nuclear family living arrangement, in which parents live with all their children in one place. This social norm, however, can be altered appropriately in different circumstances, according to the logic of these discourses. The discourse of care generated by children much more strongly supports a notion of living with one’s parents and siblings, whereas the discourse of correction and character creates more ambivalence for parents. Parents feel that while they may be the best ones at correcting their children, they need to travel overseas to materially provide for them. Raising their children in the U.S. is difficult because of the lack of support in meeting the parents’ goals of socialization, including perceived constraints around physical punishment, different norms for young people’s behavior, and the need for parents to work long hours, leaving children unsupervised. This was not just felt by those who sent their children back to Ghana, although it was perhaps expressed more strongly by them; rather, parents with children with them in the U.S. hoped that they would be able to instill their values in their children despite their environment.

These discourses have implications for feeling-states and the ways that different family members navigate the complex emotional terrain generated by the disconnect between the conditions caused by transnational migration—the scattered family—and the ideals of family life of those who migrate. Because of the somewhat differing ideals that parents and children have for family relationships, the children described in this paper were more expressive of emotional pain, in which their reality clearly did not match their desire, while parents highlighted the management of their emotions, particularly around missing their children, and switched rapidly from the expression of emotion to goals like character training, which they hoped could be accomplished in this transnational situation. The children thus expressed much more certainty about the definition of the situation. Parents, on the other hand, narrated the riskiness of their strategies, uncertain which parenting strategy would work best in producing a respectful child, and their emotional expressions around living in a risk society were generally stronger than about missing their children.

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

Although Ghanaian parents and children express different kinds of pain, they seem to be closer to Caribbean families in the normalization of separation and migration, in comparison to transnational
families from Latin and Central America and South-east Asia. The variations are less explained by differences in migration trajectories and immigration regimes than in differences in family ideology. In Ghana, family ideologies about how care can be expressed through the reciprocal exchange of material goods have been forged through a long history of internal and regional migration and mobility (Coe, 2011; Tetteh, 2008).

WORKS CITED