

## GAPS BETWEEN LITERATURE PORTRAYING CHILD REARING PRACTICES AND YOUNG OFFENDERS' VIEWS OF THEIR GROWING UP EXPERIENCES

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper discusses growing up experiences of juvenile and young offenders and advances the argument that literature characterized by essentialist views seeks to predominantly establish that child rearing practices are homogenous. In contrast, the narratives of youngsters collected do not only depict varied growing up encounters outside the family, but also show that youngsters construct diverse meanings from their differentiated experiences. Whereas this is a small-scale study and cannot lend itself to generalisations or constitute a basis for refuting such literature accounts, the empirical data of the study nevertheless establishes that there is seldom familial contact for the children who engage the attention of this study. This paper also highlights aspects of youngsters' friendships feature prominently in the narratives of youngsters, yet remain underrepresented in Ghanaian scholarly work on children. Discussions draw on a sociological research conducted from 2009 to 2011 with children in correctional institutions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Juveniles, Gaps, Ghana.

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### INTRODUCTION

The discussions in this paper are based on research conducted in Ghana between 2008 and 2013 in two correctional centers, the Junior Correctional Centre (JCC) and the Senior Correctional Centre (SCC), both in Accra (Author 2013). The authors share views from various scholars on Ghanaian children and their growing up experiences within the family and discuss the discrepancy between the viewpoints and those of children in conflict with the law with these perspectives.

The term children in conflict with the law is employed broadly by Ghana's Juvenile Justice Act to embrace both young and juvenile offenders, we therefore employ the use of children and youngsters interchangeably as reference is made to inmates of both the JCC and the SCC. A juvenile offender is a child under the age of 18 who is in conflict with the law and has been convicted of an offence. A young offender is between 18 and 20 years of age and has been convicted of an offence. The Juvenile Justice Act does not set a lower level limit for a juvenile offender. This gap is however filled by Section 4 of the Criminal Code Amendment Act 554 of 1998 (GOG 1998) which sets the legal age of criminal accountability at 12 years.

The authors discuss two perspectives namely, viewpoints of scholars, mostly Ghanaian on child rearing practices in Ghana and narratives of children and young offenders in confinement about their growing up experiences. Whereas the literature mostly assume that children's growing up experiences are situated with the family context, perspectives of juvenile and young offenders show that this is not necessarily the case. The early life social and growing up experiences, according to youngsters' narratives, are actively situated outside the context of the family.

## VIEWS FROM LITERATURE

Ghanaian scholars such as Boakye Boateng (2009), Twum Danso (2009), Porter, Abane et al. (2011) situate the growing up experiences of children primarily within the family. There is a general expectation according to these scholars and other writers such as Oppong (1977), Chant and Jones (2005), Coe (2008), that children must demonstrate respect, obedience and submissiveness to their parents. Parents therefore command obedience and respect from children by insisting on these values right from the outset when children are very young and also by rewarding children who are obedient and respectful. Twum Danso (2009) in her sociological research in Ghana, discusses the impact of cultural values such as reciprocity, respect and responsibility on children's rights principles. She explains the kind of obedience and respect demanded of Ghanaian children. Children are not expected to challenge adults and certainly, not expected to question what they are told to do; children must not consider themselves as superior to elders but must submit themselves to parental control.

Ghanaian parents, according to Twum Danso, may therefore choose to send a child who is obedient to school in preference to one who is not, an action that evokes a sense of responsibility in children. By being obedient, children earn the blessings of parents or other adult family members and in future, are required to give back to their parents, or reciprocate as soon as they can by ensuring that family property and resources are well preserved. Conversely, parents are hesitant to assume responsibility for the welfare and upkeep of children who by their recalcitrance, might be irresponsible in future and not be able safeguard family property and inheritance. (Rattray 1929, Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi 2006, Assimeng 2007, Coe 2008, Twum Danso 2009).

From an early age, rewards and punishments are employed to motivate children in the performance of their duties (Kyei-Gyamfi 2011). Corporal punishment as a form of discipline and correction is commonplace in many Ghanaian homes and is usually employed by one's nuclear and extended family in forms such as caning, slapping and pulling one's ears, among other measures (idem). Refusal to respect older adults or parents or even an older sibling or to execute one's duties may attract severe punishment and even curses which can result in illnesses of such children (Twum Danso 2009). Children who dare to be assertive and express their views anyhow to adults or parents, besides standing the risk of being cursed, are also likely to be regarded as being in possession of some evil spiritual power that makes them behave the way they do (idem).

These authors also portray a family or community hierarchy between parents, and children, where parents occupy a more powerful position relative to children.

Child movements from one relative to the other, as part of shared parenting is also a common practice researched in Ghana (Nukunya 2003, Twum Danso 2009, Boakye Boateng 2010). A key process by which children leave home to reside elsewhere is fostering, a practice that is widespread in Ghana. Reasons for child fostering may include death, illness of parent or to receive formal education or skilled training from adult mentors. Child upbringing is a shared responsibility for all adults within the extended family. Parents may therefore give their children to relatives or even non-relatives as companions for elderly people, or for domestic or marketing assistants (Pilon 2003, Kielland and Maurizia 2006).

The writings of scholars like Anarfi and Kwankye (2005), Orme and Seipel (2007), Anarfi and Agyei (2009) depict other kinds of children's movements such as child labour and

migration activities as located outside the familial context, thereby reducing youngsters' mobility to an economic or criminal motivation. These scholars who attempt to advance discussions on non-familial settings, such as practices related to the street, child labour and migration, restrict the motivation for such practices of child mobility mostly to family-based economic reasons.

Other literature about child labour, street life, and migration also assumes that African children always have some family support network or that children or youngsters always keep some contact with the family (Aptekar 1994, Bourdillon 1994, Schimmel 2006, Orme and Seipel 2007). Bourdillon (1994) for instance, in his study of the street children of Harare recommends that attention should be directed at policies which seek to improve the lot of children along with their families rather than policies that move children out of their communities.

## **METHODS**

The research upon which this paper is based was the first ethnographic research in correctional centres in Ghana to require daily visits over a prolonged period. It was also the first to involve a practitioner assuming the status of a researcher in a confinement site. The many years of collaboration between researcher's employer, the national human rights institution in Ghana, namely, the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and these oversight institutions facilitated access to these institutions.

This research, employed a total of 185 interviews (90 at the JCC and 95 at the SCC), 116 participant observations (51 at the JCC and 65 at the SCC) at both institutions and 30 focus group discussions (15 at each institution). This paper however draws largely on narratives provided by eight youngsters, seven male (at the SCC) and one female (at the JCC).

These stories were narrated in a one-to-one interview setting with each session lasting for a minimum of one hour. On the basis of a gradually developed acquaintance and participant observations, youngsters were selected to share their narratives. Prior to the commencement of interviews, explanations were offered on the need to interview youngsters in private while acknowledging the fears of officers on security issues. No objections were expressed, possibly due to the acquaintance and trust established by the long periods of participant observation prior to the onset of the narratives and also as a result of the researcher's practitioner status, as an employee of the CHRAJ.

During the period of field work, it was observed that state officials and other professionals sought information about youngsters for administrative and other purposes. The central focus of such information often was the offence history and circumstances surrounding committal of offence, evidence of torture, types of punishment, conditions of detention or officer inmate relationships.

In contrast, this research focused on youngsters own views about their growing up experiences and therefore provided a different impetus. In fact, there was an initial expression of surprise on the faces of the young people when they realized that the interest and the direction of conversations did not emphasize their offence background or other areas that usually interest other professionals.

It was observed that youngsters freely talked about matters pertaining to educational and religious provisions, material provisions and general conditions during focus group discussions. This was not the case regarding their private family lives as these matters constituted sensitive issues. In fact, youngsters sometimes became emotional and shed tears while narrating these stories.

Thus, not much could be gotten from focus group discussions as youngsters were reluctant to discuss their private family lives in public. Besides the data gathered from the in-depth interviews, there was no other prior biographic information about them. Official documents were consulted only at the latter phase of the fieldwork. The motivation to present these stories stemmed partly from the fact that individual accounts from the perspective of young offenders had featured little in past encounters with them. The researcher had, in a previous capacity as a CHRAJ monitor interacted mostly with adult detainees and employed surveys as means of gathering information.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Youngsters' views: unpleasant beginnings and frequent movements**

Viewpoints of Ghanaian literature and those of youngsters interviewed tend to be situated in two different spheres. Narratives of children and youngsters are replete with diverse forms of rejection, neglect and abandonment that they suffer mostly at the hands of parents and family. Literature on the other hand presents idealized children who are obedient and subservient members of the family and community. According to these authors, parents and family tend to lay the blame of rejection and neglect at the doorstep of the children.

Children in conflict with the law share commonalities of backgrounds characterized by deprivation, divorce and maltreatment, though all of them grew up with a feeling of rejection from parents and relatives.

The research shows that young people that were interviewed seemed never to have had the opportunity to tell their story (Author 2013, Author 2014). Their stories were dotted with experiences of being unwanted, coupled with encounters of rampant mobility within diverse social settings. However, narratives also include pleasant phases characterized by peer associations, friendships and careers, but which at the same time portray cynicism and betrayal. Amidst their experiences of rejection, youngsters in their state of powerlessness, neglect and sometimes even abuse still exhibit critical useful capacities.

Kwesi's story is a distinct account of certain unpleasant experiences youngsters encounter as they grow up within their families (Author 2013, Author 2014). During an institutional church service at the correctional centre for young offenders (SCC), he along with other newly admitted boys were introduced to a kind of initiation ceremony. Kwesi shed tears during the service as he tried to tell his story, but which none of them ever got to tell in full because their audience was uninterested. This apparent lack of interest by staff and youngsters present at the church service, whipped up the interest to listen to these untold stories. It however took nearly six months of participant observation to gain acquaintance and trust of these youngsters before Kwesi and others shared their experiences. Like the majority of young boys and girls in conflict with the law, Kwesi recounted how his life had started a distasteful footing right at the onset of growing up in his family:

At the time I was born, my parents had already divorced and so I stayed with my paternal grandmother. I had a distasteful life before moving in to stay with my grandma. My father never liked me and anytime I came late from playing football, I was beaten severely. He never took care of me. He beat me often and I never wanted to set eyes on him. Anytime I see his face my heart beats. That was why I moved to stay with my grandma. My father after the divorce remarried and now resides in Accra; he is now a store keeper. My mother, I was informed, travelled somewhere after the divorce and she has never returned. (Author 2013:39-40)

Kwesi moved on to stay with his grandma but this period was not pleasant either:

My grandma said I was not smart enough and so she beat me often with her walking stick. I tried however to stay with her to attend school at least until primary two and when I could not bear it no longer I stopped school. I left to stay with the sister of my maternal grandma and started primary one again and continued till primary school grade 6. Upon completing P6, I was taken to stay with my paternal grandmother where I continued my education till Junior High School (JHS) form one.

In spite of these difficult situations, Kwesi managed to survive by engaging in some economic activity:

I started collecting pieces of metal scraps and from the purchases I earned a minimum of GHS2.50 (US\$0.6). Children like myself would go and collect these scraps and sell. One day, I went as usual to find some scraps, my grandma had gone to the farm and I was hungry and so I decided to make some money. The owner of the house caused my arrest when I collected some coal pot scraps in his compound. They asked about my family and as there was no one at the time, they thought I must have been a bad person and so I was taken to a police station.

Kwesi's situation was obviously a powerless one; he suffered beatings, neglect and rejection from his own family. Yet in spite of his powerlessness, Kwesi managed to acquire some formal education, initiate certain moves such as changing location and engaging in the collection of scraps to earn some additional income.

Nana Bonsu is a nineteen-year-old boy who was preparing for discharge from the institution and looking forward to advancing his skills in welding and draughting which he had acquired while in committal.

I would not go to my mother's so as not to be tempted to offend again but would rather go to my father, who knows

nothing about my offence or my committal. I was only three years when my parents divorced. My mother was most often in Accra to find work and had very little time for me. I stayed with my uncle who had four children. My uncle did not take good care of me and so I stole often from both my mum and uncle. (Author 2013:41)

Nana was concerned that he was not worthy of his mother's time; he was explicit about the fact that his maternal uncle deprived him of material needs. Nana therefore construed neglect as both material deprivation and rejection from core family members.

The next narrative is from a female youngster. Grace, eighteen years of age, was most often by herself and interacted very little with others. Almost all the teachers had labelled her the laziest. According to them, she could not acquire any skills nor learn any vocation. I had also observed her lack of interest during vocational lessons. Grace was preparing and looking forward to be discharged and so it was a good starting point. She soliloquized mostly as she narrated her story, in fact at a certain point it seemed as though she was not very conscious of our presence as she spoke mostly to herself though she intermittently provided some eye contact. Grace, whose parents had also divorced, strikes an initial contrast in her narrative of like and dislike between her grandmother and the officer at the JCC:

This place is a very difficult place. The woman sitting there always shouts at us and insults us. My grandma with whom I stayed never shouted at me, she liked me very much. My father and mother divorced when I was very small and so I stayed with my grandmother. (Author 2013:42-43)

In the course of her narrative, Grace however expressed dislike for her grandma:

My grandma, though she liked me very much, was also the one who spoilt me. [She paused for a while]. My grandmother possesses evil spiritual powers; she asked me to change my father into a cat so I would ride on it and I said I would never do that. No one really wanted me nor cared for me. My grandmother bewitched me- gave me her evil spiritual power... as for my grandma, she is the cause of all my bad behaviour... I started stealing when I was in the nursery and I would steal my father's coins. I also started going after boys at an early age because I was unhappy, felt unwanted and neglected and tried to find some happiness. I aborted only thrice and used cocaine for just a short while...as for me, (she sighs), no one knows my character; I am very bad and very wicked.

Grace's account, like the others, depicts experiences of neglect and rejection and she attributes her involvement in stealing and other activities to her search for happiness.

Kojo is a nineteen-year-old boy and due for discharge or release from the SCC, the boys' institution. He lamented about being locked up most of the time while the other inmates moved

about freely. The restraint imposed upon him angered him and he decided not to learn any trade any longer. He blurted out:

I am no longer interested in anything here; all I am waiting for is to serve my sentence and leave this place. My childhood was not pleasant either. My father died when I was very small. My father used to sell second hand items. After the death of my father, my mother abandoned me and I was not even breastfed. My mother was just in the house and did not do anything, she did not trade, and she did nothing. My mom had eight children with different men and my father also had three children elsewhere but I had only one full blood brother and I am the oldest. I spent most of my time with my grandma and my paternal aunt. I got on better with my grandma than with any other relative including my own mother. (Author 2013:44)

I asked him how he got to know about all this and he said that it was his grandma that narrated this to him.

My paternal aunt with whom I stayed was very quick tempered and beat us often. She overworked my brother and me on the farm, we farmed cocoa and food crops and hardly had time for school. She kept making comments that her obligation was to take care of her own children.

Yaw, eighteen years of age, and also due for discharge, was a recidivist or a repeat offender who experienced committal at the SCC twice. He dreaded going back to the family in the village from where he came:

I look forward very much to going back though I would not go to the village as my grandpa and grandma always cursed me and said I would never succeed in life and this makes me feel unhappy and worried. I have never known my mother as my aunt told me that my mother died after giving birth to me; I have never seen pictures of my mother... My father also died in a car accident - he was a taxi driver. I liked school but was mocked at school and accused of everything that got lost and went wrong even when I was not responsible. (Author 2013:45)

Yaw attributed his action to discontinue school partly to the rejection he suffered at school. John, nineteen years, had played leadership roles throughout his period of detention and seemed popular among staff and youngsters. Because he managed to write his Senior High School Certificate Examinations and had passed, he was held in high esteem by many. He seemed a quiet and gentle young man and resided in the last dorm, where youngsters enjoyed a good amount of freedom and were allowed to go on errands in town often. Though staff and warders were hesitant to vouch for youngsters' behaviour, a number of them said that John, in spite of his drinking habit, could be relied upon.

I grew up with my parents and siblings at Mampong, in the Eastern Region. We had a large family; ten siblings, three of whom were female. I liked school and enjoyed my lessons and also had a lot of friends who kept me happy. On completing Junior High School, I wanted to continue school outside Mampong for a change as I had lived in Mampong all along but my parents did not allow me. (Author 2013:45-46)

John attributed his involvement in certain activities such as hanging out with friends and eventually the offence that led to his arrest to curtailment of his freedom of choice and movement by his parents:

My parents said it would be difficult for them to know what was going on with me if I was not with them. I felt they wanted to monitor me and this angered me and so I decided to give myself some freedom and started hanging out with friends; I did that often and with time I realized my parents were no longer providing for me as they ought and this angered me further and kept me farther away from home.

Unlike other youngsters interviewed, John lived with both parents until arrest and his account did not depict neglect. The majority of youngsters however demonstrate through their narratives, as having suffered diverse degrees and forms of neglect and rejection which was manifested in both material and non-material deprivation.

The rejection that youngsters suffer from their families thus appears to contribute to the arrest of youngsters. In fact, at the point of arrest, most youngsters had virtually no contact with relatives. Prior to arrest, they had frequently moved from one setting to the other, and ended up being by themselves. Relatives in most cases must have been simply unaware of the arrest of youngsters. Kwesi, for instance, lamented that there was no relative present in court and that though he wished he was bailed, no one did. Others shared the same sentiments during focus group discussion.

Youngsters clearly indicated the unwillingness rather than inability of their parents and relatives, to provide for their needs. The unwillingness of parents to provide for youngsters was further established in focus group discussions where youngsters expressed feelings of vengeance and retaliation against their parents.

Whereas focus group discussion did not yield much in terms of youngsters' private family experiences prior to detention, discussions about youngsters past experiences could not miss out, during focus group discussions, on portrayals of a general feeling of anger against their family particularly their fathers. During such discussions, youngsters sometimes blurted out: "We will jail our fathers" (Author 2013:47). Observations during the period of field work also showed that relatives and parents seldom visited while children were in committal. This was further established by focus group discussions where eight out of ten youngsters said they did not receive visits from parents and relatives while in committal. Not all youngsters at the SCC were escorted out of the gate by their relatives upon discharge from the institution and even with those who were escorted by relatives, there was little guarantee that youngsters would settle with relatives upon discharge from the centre (idem).



Official interactions with detaining authorities also confirm the absence of the supportive role of parents which according to the authorities, makes the employment of probation methods difficult. Even in difficult situations where young females give birth while in confinement, the institutions cannot release such inmates. For instance, the head of the JCC stated in respect of a fifteen-year-old girl, namely Afua, who gave birth while in committal that probation options were not viable as 'no relative was willing to assume responsibility if Afua was released. (Author 2013:121)

In this section I examine the youngsters' narration of mobile lives as an example of the creative efforts and actions that they embark upon to survive in difficult situations. Frequent movements from one social setting and occupation to another was typical of the pre-custodial lives of most youngsters, according to interviews. For example, Kojo's narrative was replete with several of such movements:

Following the death of my father, I lived with my paternal aunt and later with my grandma and then went back to my aunt. While with my aunt I stopped school and got connected to a contractor. I went back to my mum after poor working conditions with the contractor and when I realized I had nowhere to go. My mum provided no support and so I went back to my timber work and decided to rent my own house. Along the way, my grandma decided to put me in an apprenticeship for three months to learn carpentry but I found it difficult working as an apprentice. My older brother tried to teach me how to drive; I did that for eight months and stopped and tried to learn masonry for two and could not continue that either. (Author 2013:51)

Following the death of his father, Kojo embarked on several movements within the family and as a result schooled at different locations. In all, Kojo undertook approximately twelve different movements, mostly on his own initiative. Once, having encountered several frustrations of not being able to settle in a stable apprenticeship and occupation, he even moved to a village unknown to him before so as to make a living. However, he was paid a very low wage and got frustrated. It was in the process of considering what to do next that he committed the offence and got arrested. Kojo therefore maneuvered from one setting to the other until he was eventually on his own. In all these attempts, he needed to survive and so embarked on several attempts to learn a trade and make some income. His movements sometimes seemed to drift from one family, career and apprenticeship to the other; a kind of erratic, and yet other times, were purposeful movements. Youngsters sought through these frequent movements to find temporal occupations, meet their survival needs of food and clothing and also meet non material needs such as friendships.

Yaw also engaged in frequent movements in varying situations: 'I stayed with my aunt following the death of my mother... I found it difficult to stay with my aunties as I farmed a lot and so I left to stay with friends at a lorry station in Accra. While with my friends, there was misunderstanding about the sharing of booty after a robbery act and, in the process, I got arrested' (Author 2013:51). Yaw's frequent movements depicted less family settings and family involvements as compared with Kojo. Nevertheless, the attempts of both youngsters to explore and exhaust residential options available to them are courageous yet dotted with uncertainty and characterized by 'trial and error' experiences, disappointments and difficulties.

They might not even have an idea what their next destination would be, yet regardless of challenging situations, they sometimes managed to find a place to perch.

### **The social world of youngsters in non-familial settings**

So far we have mainly discussed narratives of youngsters focusing on the familial context. Friendships which encompassed peers as well as older boys, constituted a good source of social support for youngsters. Nana Bonsu shared his experience: 'My uncle did not take good care of me and so I stopped school at primary two and left to stay with my Mum in Accra. I was with friends who were between the ages of fifteen and fifty-five and quarried for my friend's mum. We used to visit night clubs in the evenings to dance and I was very good at dancing'. (Author 2013:55). Besides his friendship with other boys of varying ages, Nana Bonsu also shared intimate an intimate romantic relationship: 'One day, a girl who was in Junior High School saw me dance and she became interested in me and we became friends. The girl came from a wealthy family and attended school for wealthy people' (ibid).

Youngsters such as Yaw admitted that their offences were also linked to the activities they engaged in with their friends: 'I had many friends and was happy. I remember that one time there was a dance which I wanted to attend and I did go but was sent out as I did not pay the entrance fee. I felt sad as I did not have the money; I therefore went home and took our father's money... (ibid)'. Some friendships, according to Yaw, carried unpleasant experiences. Yaw shared the repercussions of reporting a friend with whom he committed an offence:

A friend and I stole money to the tune of GHS800 (US\$471) and yet he gave me only GHS2 (0.5 USD). I got very angry I thought that was so mean of him and decided to report my friend to the man whose money was stolen. My friend was caught and the money was taken from him. My friend later got to know that I reported him about the and so he told other people that I was a wizard and I was shunned as a result of this when I was admitted to the SCC in 2005. For the same reason, I was also seriously maltreated by inmates in the first dormitory...The isolation and the maltreatment was beyond me and so when we were asked on one occasion to go and weed, I seized the opportunity to run away and that was after four months of stay. (Author 2013:55-56)

Thus, whereas the social world outside the family setting was pictured as one of the most pleasant times for youngsters, relative to their experiences with parents and family, such friendships also had their repercussions.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

### **The gap between literature and youngsters' views**

Literature would have it that youngsters such as Kwesi, Kojo and Yaw are themselves to blame for their beatings, curses, rejection and abandonment, on grounds that it is only the rebellious child that gets to suffer such treatment. Thus youngsters who suffer beatings and rejection are

easily categorized as recalcitrant, not 'smart' enough, and unable to offer the hope of a good pay-off or assume responsibility of family property at a later stage. Such children are therefore considered unworthy of the investment of parents or family. The writings of Chant and Jones (2005), Coe (2008) and Twum Danso (2009) therefore seem to share the viewpoints of the youngsters themselves that the maltreatment and neglect of the child is a deliberate effort of the parents rather than their inability to assume responsibility of care.

However, in spite of the commonalities of the life histories of these youngsters, their growing up experiences are far from being homogenous, as the above fragments from their stories show. This contrasts with the image from the literature which tend to suggest then that the child is a single, homogenous category in the family and community. By depicting 'the child' as a single, homogenous category, such literature disregards the heterogeneity of experiences of the children in conflict with the law and their own different constructions of those different experiences. Such literature, are inclined to simplistically reduce such desperate but differentiated and creative efforts, labelling them as 'bad'.

Youngsters' frequent movements appear to be so important to them and crucial to their livelihoods and survival. Mobility from the viewpoint of juvenile and young offenders is incited by the rejection and abandonment they encounter. For such children, it is both an escape and a coping attempt and clearly on their own initiative and not that of their parents or foster arrangements as portrayed by literature. Narratives depict children's movements as frequent, highly diverse and resembling drifting, as they oscillate from one location to the other. Further, such movement are not limited to the familial context. This image contrasts with the literature which conceives of child mobility as located predominantly within the family context and strategically planned by the family and parents. Such movements, for instance, contrasts with the movements of youngsters such as Kojo, whose mobility are erratic, uncertain and at the initiative of Kojo instead of adult members of his family.

In spite of the essentialist views advanced by scholars who describe child rearing practices as located within a rigid family structure that resists change and projects sameness lacking diversity, we may also note some ambivalence. For instance, scholars like Boakye Boaten (2010) admit that concepts on childhood are changing and that the traditional African family may have been overrated in its potential to be a stabilizing unit and a protector of children. So do authors like Oppong (2006) and Twum Danso (2009), who having upheld the orthodoxy of Ghanaian child rearing practices, nevertheless admit that the family structure is far from being monolithic and that the extended family is retreating from its roles.

On the social world of youngsters in non-familial settings, youngsters, according to their narratives, heavily relied on different kinds of friendships outside of the family in an effort to meet their survival needs. Such friendships were diverse and ambiguous; some intimate and desirable while others were opportunistic. Youngsters did not necessarily assign discrete categories to their joint activities; for instance, they did not label such activities offences – though some admitted engaging in what they termed 'bad activities'. Instead, they considered such activities inseparable from their daily efforts of survival. Thus it sometimes came as a surprise to youngsters when they were arrested for activities they engaged in to meet their basic survival needs. Moreover, these friendships positioned them within a continuum of practices usually associated with childhood and adulthood thereby rendering them children in some respects and adults in other respects. While creating fun and experimenting with new environments and actions together with their peers resonated with child fun, their economic and occupational and social independence equated them to fully functional adults.

The fragments of narratives cited here depict the social life of youngsters with peers outside the familial setting as mostly pleasant, in a world where they feel accepted and having an identity, which provides them with a social support that counters their experiences of neglect from relatives and other adults.

Interestingly, the literature reviewed above is silent about the social world of children lacking familial support. Scholars within the Ghanaian and wider African context rarely discuss the social world of children outside the familial context. The emphasis on the economic needs of the family for child mobility clearly overlooks the autonomous children lacking family support, and the social and emotional livelihood support that are emphasised by the youngsters' narratives.

In addition, these sources portray such non-familial activities of peer groups as criminal practices, while for these youngsters the initial effort to engage in an activity that yields some economic gain is a desperate endeavour to escape familial hostilities and to survive. Besides, these joint activities provide these children with the opportunity to forge friendships and have fun. Engaging in what the literature would label as criminal or delinquent activities is thus narrated more positively and creatively by the youngsters themselves. They regard what is considered a criminal or delinquent act by adult authors and rights practitioners primarily as an effort to meet material and non-material needs.

The assumption that African children engaged in activities such as child labour, street life, and migration always have some family support network or that children always keep some contact with the family (Aptekar 1994, Bourdillon 1994, Schimmel 2006, Orme and Seipel 2007) does not necessarily hold for children involved in this research. The recommendation by Bourdillon (1994) to direct policies which seek to improve the lot of children in Harare as well as their families rather than move children out of their communities is a useful one. Yet, for juvenile and young offenders in Ghana, this is quite problematic. In the first place, Bourdillon's generalized usage of term community suggests that the child's community is assumed to be the family. But youngsters construe their community differently, referring to peers, occupational or religious associates. Secondly, the presumption by Bourdillon and other writers of the existence of a family network for children tends to overlook the fact that some children and youngsters may have no such familial support, as demonstrated above by narratives of the youngsters.

Drawing binary connections between the home and practices of child labour, the street and migration may also result in analytic limitations. For instance, certain practices of children on the street are construed as involving both the street and the home, that is, children make a living on the street and retire to the home at the end of the working day (Aptekar 1994, Orme and Seipel 2007). Similarly, authors assume a connection between the home and other non-familial settings, like in the case of children who after migration make efforts to maintain contacts with the home (Anarfi and Agyei 2009, Anarfi and Kwankye 2009). Reducing such contacts to a binary relationship with the home has serious limitations. It overlooks dynamic and complex relational aspects involved in the diverse processes of growing up within multiple settings, and the oscillation of frequent moves between diverse settings as narrated by Kojo and Yaw. Their life histories depict pathways that are far from linear as they criss-cross from one setting to another and also from one social world to another.

## CONCLUSION

Youngsters perspectives as discussed above are based on a small-scale research which cannot constitute the basis to refute foregoing literature accounts about growing up experiences of children.

The authors nevertheless establish on the grounds of empirical evidence that narratives of the youngsters are at variance with views from the literature in three important ways. Firstly, these narratives place the child or youngster central stage, highlighting parental neglect, hence their own initiative to move out of the family structure into a risky and uncertain life. Secondly, the importance of peer groups and friends. Although wielding ambivalent relationships of trust and betrayal, membership of these groups provides the youngster with a feeling of belonging and identity that they did not experience within the family.

Both narratives and literature show that, for the children that engage the attention of this study, child neglect is not necessarily attributable to some structural occurrence such as poverty, divorce, occupational status or death of a parent. Though these factors may contribute in some regard, youngsters share the viewpoint that in most cases they are deliberately abandoned by the family. However, the process of rejection is construed differently. While the literature tends to uphold the notion of the child as a homogenous category of a subordinate member of the family, the youngsters' stories recount experiences of neglect and frustration, taking initiatives to escape from that structure in different ways, and attaching various meanings to those experiences. The over-association with a familial context misses out on the relevance of the experiences of these youngsters regarding their membership of peer groups that provide them with material and non-material resources.

Finally, narratives clearly demonstrate that while youngsters encounter challenging and difficult situations, they are seldom restricted permanently to a position of powerlessness where they are beaten to submission and helplessness. On the contrary, youngsters manoeuvre their way through varied everyday encounters, embarking on certain pertinent actions such as to quit school, move to another setting, or negotiate friendships.

## Future Research

There is the need on account of the foregoing discussions for more knowledge about the social experiences of children in conflict with the law, one that moves beyond the establishment of criminal acts, to understand youngsters' position outside of and abandoned by family.

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