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## Conceptions of love in Ghana: An exploration among Ghanaian Christians

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We explored conceptions of love from the perspective of Ghanaian Christians. Using an ethnographic approach, we interviewed 61 participants (males = 39; females = 22; age range 20 to 70) on their understanding and experiences of love in the context of family. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed understandings of love expression in meeting material needs (of children, spouse, parents, and close relatives), helping other people in need (including the elderly, friends, and strangers), and affectionate care. Communal and maintenance-oriented love appears to characterise love expression among Ghanaian Christians.

**Keywords:** Christianity, culture, expressions of love, love, personal relationships

### Introduction

People's notions of love influence their experiences in relationships (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Coe, 2011; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). There have been relatively more studies on love in the context of intimate relationships as compared to other typical relationships; such as family and religious following. Religious following also influences notions of love among people of faith who express their best human qualities based on the universal ethos of care, honesty, and brotherhood (Prince, Denis, & van Dijk, 2009). In societies with large religious followings, matters of faith in love underlie how people relate to each other. Christian faith following is prevalent in Ghana with over 71% of Ghana's 25 million people self-identifying as Christians (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). We explored conceptualisations of love among Ghanaian Christian followers who believe Christianity is important to community living.

### Love across cultures

Loving is a private experience characterised by a sense of closeness, belonging, and an attachment to a significant other (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992; Schoenfeld, Bredow, & Huston, 2012). Love is an investment in another person for his or her own self (Hegi & Bergner, 2010). There are various types of love expression: romantic, parental, compassionate, or altruistic; and also shades of intimacy, passion, and commitment (Aron, Fisher, & Strong, 2006; Sternberg, 1986; 2006). Intimacy encompasses feelings of mutual trust and a sense of connectedness which engenders mutual self-disclosure. Passion reflects emotional investment, physical attraction (or sexual arousal in the case of romantic partners), and a need for physical closeness. Commitment refers to beliefs and expectations that the current relationship will last (Sumter, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2013).

Culture influences the salience of expressions of love by individuals and among communities (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Kaufmann, 2011). Individualistic cultures tend

to value passionate love more while collective cultures tend to value companionate love more (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Passionate love captures the experiences of how love makes one feel whereas companionate love captures feelings for and care of others (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000).

### Love and culture in Sub-Saharan Africa

In collectivist communities of Sub-Saharan Africa, love is associated with expressions of affect towards others, social relationships, and material provisioning (Coe, 2011; Cornwall, 2002). It involves deep commitment to sharing, reciprocity, fidelity, and exclusivity in social relationships; as well as the distribution of material resources (Keefe, 2016). The latter quality of love expression has been referred to as: "real love" (van Eerdewijk, 2006) and "materiality of care" (Coe, 2011).

Christian followers distinguish between *agape* and *eros* love (Thomas, 2013). *Agape* love is a "universal" type defined as a concern or regard for people of all sorts (Sullivan-Dunbar, 2009). *Eros*, on the other hand, has been described as a desire for something or someone. Whereas *agape* is other-oriented focusing on the benefits to the other person; *eros* is self-oriented and is directed towards benefits to the self (Peck, 1933). Ghanaian Christian churches promote love in family-life and relationships in ways that influence understandings of love in Ghanaian society. We could not identify any studies that explored notions of love among the Ghanaian Christian community.

Christianity is a predominant aspect of Ghanaian culture and influences everyday life of many people. The majority of the studies on love in Africa have examined love within the context of intimate relationships (Cruz, 2017; Peyper, de Klerk, & Spies, 2015; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014).

### The Ghanaian setting

Ghana attained a lower-middle income status in 2010

(Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), and most Ghanaians subscribe to duty-based interpersonal ways of expressing their sense of being (Assimeng, 2007; Gyekye, 1996; Nukunya, 2003). People are born into close-knit families that emphasise socially enforceable interpersonal obligations. Ghanaians are concerned with maintaining relational interdependence and have an *interdependent* self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Distribution of resources is a central feature of everyday life. Traditionally, children as well as the elderly are supported and cared for within the extended family structure. For this system of care to work well, individuals have reciprocal obligations, duties, and responsibilities towards family members (Apt, 1995; Mba, 2004). Ghanaians demonstrate this aspect of love through various means. For instance, through the means of internal (within country) and overseas remittances, Ghanaians are able to provide for the material needs of families and non-family members. Children, parents, siblings, spouses, as well as other relatives often send monetary and material goods to take care of the varying needs of those they have obligations toward. Purposes of such remittances are varied but include contributing towards long-term investment, household budgets, funerals and other ceremonies, as well as community development projects (Mazzucato, van den Boom, & Nsawah-Nuamah, 2008; Teye, Awumbila, & Darkwah, 2017). Coe (2011) observed that such material expressions of love are valued in Ghana, sometimes, above emotional expressions of love. However, the demands of the modern Ghanaian economy have placed great strains on the extent to which family members can care for each other. The cultural norms around reciprocal obligation to family are undergoing major transitions (Nukunya, 2003) or waning in significance (Abdul-Korah, 2011; Van der Geest, 2007; Yeboah, 1998).

### Goals of the study

The current study explored how Ghanaian Christians understand love in their lives and relationships. The guiding research question for the study was: How do contemporary Ghanaians Christians conceptualise love?

### Method

#### Research design

We used an ethnographic interview approach to explore notions of love in the everyday life of Ghanaian Christians. Ethnographic research is aimed at studying research participants in their natural cultural settings. Ethnographic interviews are useful to describe peoples' experiences of their daily living (Creswell, 2003). The approach was appropriate to the goal to understand conceptions of love among Christians in Ghana without any presuppositions as to what would be expressed.

#### Participants and setting

We recruited a convenient sample of Christians from three regions of Ghana: Greater Accra region ( $n = 20$ ;  $m_{age} = 36.45$ ;  $SD = 10.99$ ); Ashanti region ( $n = 30$ ,  $m_{age} = 41.60$ ;  $SD = 14.59$ ); and Northern region ( $n = 11$ ;  $m_{age} = 34.27$ ;  $SD = 9.17$ ) (See Table 1). Ghana is divided into ten administrative regions; but three natural geographical belts.

The Greater Accra region is in the southern belt; Ashanti region is in the middle belt; and the Northern region is in the northern belt. Eligibility criteria were that prospective participants should be 18 years and above, and self-identify as Christians. We chose to interview Christians because this is the religion of the majority of Ghanaians and also because of the significance of the concept of love within the Christian faith.

#### Data collection

The participants responded to open-ended questions about their views on love and how they expressed love to others; including children, spouse, parents, or the elderly. Additionally, they were asked to comment on some of their experiences with love. All interviews were conducted in the English Language (as it is the official language

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	No. of participants	Percentage ( $n = 61$ )
Gender:		
Females	22	36.07
Males	39	63.93
Age:		
20-29	15	24.59
30-39	23	37.70
40-49	11	18.03
50-59	7	11.48
60-69	3	4.92
70	2	3.28
Education:		
Basic Education	5	8.20
SSS/SHS	7	11.48
Diploma/Certificate	9	13.11
O'Level	8	3.28
A' Level	2	14.75
Poly/Post Grad.	2	3.28
First Degree	20	32.79
Masters	7	11.48
PhD	1	1.64
Occupation:		
Teachers	12	19.67
Students	7	11.48
Administrative assistants	5	8.2
Businessmen, -women/Trader	4	6.56
Pastor/ Priest/Evangelists	4	6.56
Pensioners	4	6.56
Medical Technician/Nurse/ Pharmacist	3	4.92
Unemployed/Former trader	3	4.92
Auto-Mechanics/Blacksmith	3	4.92
Biomedical scientists	2	3.28
Public servants	2	3.28
Security assistants	2	3.28
Caterer/Fashion designer	2	3.28
Audio-visual technician	1	1.64
Church caretaker	1	1.64
Development expert	1	1.64
Human resources	1	1.64
University lecturer	1	1.64
Shoemaker	1	1.64
Weaver	1	1.64
No data	1	1.64

Source: Field data

of business and a common language of engagement in Ghana). Each participant was individually interviewed. For credibility and trustworthiness of the data, we asked follow-up questions as needed for clarification and to ensure that the responses captured the participants' intent.

### Procedure

The Ethics Committee of the Humanities, University of Ghana approved of the study (ECH 095 14–15). Prospective participants gave verbal consent for the study and were informed that this research was about their experiences and views of love. A trained research assistant conducted the interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private space and digitally recorded with participants' permission. At the end of the interview, each participant was given a token of six Ghana Cedis (which was the equivalent of two US dollars). Two research assistants transcribed the interviews verbatim.

### Data analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process for thematic analysis: (i) Familiarisation with the data through active reading of the transcriptions; (ii) Generation of initial codes; (iii) Searching for themes; (iv) Review of themes; (v) Defining and naming of themes; and (vi) Production of results. First, one coder (the second author) read the transcriptions independently to familiarise herself with the data and generated major themes and sub-themes. Next, a team comprising two coders searched for the themes and sub-themes in each participant's transcript. Differences among coders in theme content and salience were resolved through discussions.

### Findings and discussion

Three major themes emerged to characterise love as defined by: (i) Meeting needs; (ii) Helping people (friends, strangers, and elderly) in need; and (iii) Caring. Table 2 is a summary of themes and sub-subthemes.

Furthermore, we noted that close to half of the participants ( $n = 30$ ; 49%) drew on "Biblical perspectives" by directly quoting specific Bible verses (e.g., John 3: 16), specific Bible books (e.g., 1st Corinthians), or simply referencing the "Bible", "the word of God," and "God" or "Christ." In the following paragraphs, we discuss the details of these findings along with illustrative examples.

### Theme 1: Meeting needs (of children, spouse, parents, & close relatives)

About 96% ( $n = 56$ ) of the participants understood love as meeting obligations towards children, spouse, parents, and other close relatives (such as siblings). These social obligations were met by giving financial and in-kind support (food, clothing, shelter); emergency support; being physically present (e.g., visiting the sick, attending funerals); and providing verbal support (advice or encouragement). Illustrative statements by the participants included:

*For our parents, they're number one [priority]. As I'm staying here my mother is ... 90 something [years old]. I used to go there; the least is twice a week or even more than that....When I'm going there, you know money matters. You send some little thing. (70-year-old female)*

*I also show love by supporting family when they need me. Uhm, I also show love when I make sure that my other siblings are also well taken care of. (29-year-old male)*

We identified four sub-themes: (i) Need identification; (ii) Need anticipation; (iii) Need provision; and (iv) Remittances.

#### Need identification

The first subtheme, need identification, involves getting close to people by visiting or calling them to find out what they need:

*Sometimes you see because you have [sic] married they [parents] don't want to put pressure on you. So they'll prefer; even if they are dying, they'll keep it to themselves. But you find out daddy why this, or mummy why are you doing this.... You do a general check up and make sure they are in good health. Then they'll know that oh my son is caring for me. (34-year-old male)*

#### Need anticipation

On the other hand, need anticipation involves discerning what people need and providing them without their explicit prompting or request:

**Table 2.** Ghanaian conceptions of love

Main theme	Sub-theme	Content
Love is meeting needs		Anticipating or identifying needs of those an individual has relational obligations toward and providing these needs (including material and physical, verbal support and encouragement).
	Need identification	Getting close to people by visiting or calling them to find out explicitly what they need.
	Need anticipation	Looking out for what people need and providing them without their explicit prompting.
	Need provision	Giving financial or in-kind support to meet the needs of family.
Love is helping people in need	Remittances	Monetary support sent to parents as a regular income source.
		Assisting elderly, friends, strangers who may be in need.
Love is care		Showing concern through kind actions in good and bad times.

*There was this instance and I bought eh sandals ...ladies sandals to my wife not knowing she was really in need of it, expecting me to do that. So I called and she said how do you get to know that I need this at this point in time. She was, I mean, glad. (37-year-old male)*

#### *Need provision*

The third subtheme, *need provision*, involves giving financial or in-kind support to meet the needs of family. The support given depends on the developmental needs of the recipient, but typically included clothing, food, and shelter. In addition, children's needs included providing educational essentials (such as school supplies). For spouses, need provisions included providing "chop money"<sup>1</sup>, companionship, and meeting other unspecified needs.

#### *Remittances*

Lastly participants also communicated that they give monetary support or Remittances— especially to parents as a regular income source:

*As a husband I'm supposed, as much as I'm supposed to fend [for] my family, make sure there's food, make sure there's shelter, make sure there's clothes. (30-year-old male)*

*For parents, sometimes let's say we're working. When you earn salary and you didn't give anything to your parents that means you doesn't [sic] love them. (64-year-old female)*

Although most participants highlighted the importance of meeting needs, a few indicated that this expression of love is conditional. For example, some suggested that remittances should be within one's means; except in cases of emergency:

*If you're working, I think at the end of every month you should be able to give them [parents] some money as well as you buy some ingredients and other things they may need at home. (23-year-old male)*

Over all, the expressions of love were communal. Ghanaians show love primarily through the distribution of basic material resources. This finding is consistent with that of Coe (2011) who found that distribution of material resources is a sign of love in transnational families in Ghana. This construction of love is both a function of culture and a response to the economic realities of daily life in Ghana. The findings deviate in theoretically relevant ways from the normative standard of love in mainstream social science which tends to emphasise the personal growth and private feeling aspects of love (Fehr, 1988; Jankowiak, Shen, Yao, Wang, & Volsche, 2015). However, this finding is consistent with patterns of love observed in other parts of Africa where love involves material and social configurations (e.g., Cornwall, 2002; van Eerdewijk, 2006).

#### **Theme 2: Helping people (friends, strangers, elderly) in need**

More than half of the participants ( $n = 43$ ; 70%) considered love as helping people in need such as the elderly, friends, and total strangers. For instance, the participants said:

*... if you go out and you see an elderly person who is not even from your own family, if there is anything to assist them with, you help them. If you have the means to support them, you do as much as you can. (51-year-old female)*

*Supposing a friend is having a problem, losing a loved one or in need of some money, you take care of it or give her something. (37-year-old male)*

*If you think somebody needs your help and you have the means, either you know the person or don't know the person, you should show the person love... either in kind, in physical terms. (34-year-old male)*

Previous studies have suggested that love is of relative importance in interdependent cultures (Dion & Dion, 1993; Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995; Ting-Toomey, 1991). The Ghanaian Christian participants demonstrated agape love. The Christian participants perceived loving actions, such as taking care of family obligations and neighbours important. This is consistent with Christian tenets that emphasise compassion and care of the family and others.

#### **Theme 3: Love is care**

A total of 29 participants (48%) considered love as primarily about caring actions towards others such as "showing concern". For examples, participants commented:

*...in school I've made a lot of friends... sometimes when you're not well, they call.... When you're on holidays, this long vac [vacation], they'll be calling and checking on... So that's love. (21-year-old female)*

*...when you are sick they [people] visit you in the house, when you are promoted they show appreciation they congratulate you; it's a way of showing love. (40-year-old female)*

A few participants ( $n = 6$ ; 10%) talked about kissing (children), hugging (children and husband), and touching (husband). Furthermore, a small number ( $n = 4$ ; 7%) stated that love involves openness, transparency, and not keeping secrets. These were not categorised under a main theme because they were referenced by only a few participants.

It is noteworthy that our Ghanaian Christian participants made limited references to *eros* (a kind of passionate love) but focused on agape (characterised by kind and caring actions towards another) (see also Thomas, 2013). Participants described love from a Judeo-Christian perspective as exemplified by the biblical perspectives. Definitions of love extend beyond close relationships and overlapped with the definition of what a good Christian, or person, should be.

### Implications for community counselling

In Ghana, and most parts of Africa, people may rely on *communal love* to fulfil their relational obligations (see Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). The findings revealed that love is predominantly expressed in material ways. Given this conceptualisation of love, counselling could involve addressing perceptions about whether persons are loved when there is the lack of economic resources to provide for the material needs of family members. Additionally, counselling might highlight the importance of recognising non-financial expressions of love, such as providing advice and caring for one's children.

The study findings also showed that expressions of love include meeting needs of immediate family and extended family (as well as friends and strangers). Such an overarching communal expression of love may have inherent stresses if one cannot express love for all. Counselling could support persons in managing stress and setting realistic expectations about what can and cannot be done.

### Summary, limitations and suggestions for further research

Even though the sample size was relatively large for a qualitative study, our findings provide only a snapshot of conceptions of love by Ghanaian Christians. The study should be replicated across different Ghanaian settings and groups (e.g., non-Christian groups; and rural settings). Furthermore, participants in this study did not actively express emotionality in their conceptions of love. This is worthy of further investigation.

### Summary and conclusion

We used an ethnographic approach to examine conceptualisations of love among Christians in Ghana. The study of love is an important but understudied topic in Ghana. We found that expressions of love covered a broad domain; including meeting relational obligations (materially), and helping people out of concern (not out of obligation).

In conclusion, love is rather central to everyday life among Ghanaian Christians. Emotional expressions of love and physical closeness are not central to conceptions of love in Ghana. Only a few participants mentioned physical presence. However, participants may hold multiple models of love which may be activated given different contexts.

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### Endnote

1 Chop money is customarily money a husband gives to the wife; or parents give to their children.

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