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Original Research

"I Have Since Repented": Discursive Analysis of the Role of Religion in Husband-to-Wife Abuse in Ghana

Journal of Interpersonal Violence
2022, Vol. 37(5-6) NP3528–NP3551
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DOI: 10.1177/0886260520948528
journals.sagepub.com/home/jiv
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Abstract

Religion has long been recognized as a powerful tool capable of shaping the lives of people in many societies. In this study, we draw insights from discursive psychology to explore the influence of religious beliefs and practices on the perpetration of husband-to-wife abuse and the entrapment of victims in Ghana. Semi-structured focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 40 participants, comprising 16 (60%) perpetrators (men), 16 (60%) victims (women), and eight (20%) key informants from rural and urban Ghana. Participants' discursive accounts suggest that both perpetrators and victims invoke religious instructions on gender norms to legitimize male authority over women in marriage. While perpetrators construct husbands' conjugal authority over their wives in terms of *prescriptive* religious norms, victims construct their entrapment in abusive relationships in terms of *proscriptive* theology of divorce in the bible. The double-edged role of religion in providing both motivational and inhibitory support for wife abusers is also discussed.

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Keywords
religion, intimate partner abuse, spousal abuse, discursive psychology, Ghana

Results of ample research suggest that violence against women in intimate relationships occurs in all societies (Adjei, 2015; Adjei & Mpiani, 2018; Burczycka & Conroy, 2018; Durevall & Lindskog, 2015; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2014). Globally, 30% of women who have been in intimate relationships have experienced violence by their partners (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). For example, in 2016, violence against women by their intimate partners accounted for 79% of police-reported violence in Canada (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). In Australia, more than 1.6 million women have experienced violence from their current or previous partners (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Although violence against women is a marked feature of every society, it is more prevalent in Africa (WHO, 2013). Scholarly research demonstrates that between 31% and 36% of ever-married women in Nigeria (National Population Commission and ICF Macro, 2009), 53% in Uganda (Olayanju et al., 2013), 54% in Ethiopia (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006), and 63% in Zambia (Durevall & Lindskog, 2015) have experienced one form of violence or the other in marital relationships.

The most recent statistics available indicate that in 2009 and 2010, the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service recorded 14,428 and 12,316 cases of abuse against women by their intimate partners, respectively (GhanaWeb, 2011). This may not represent the actual figures on violence against women in Ghana as many if not most incidences go unreported. A recent study in Ghana found that approximately 34% of ever-married women had been abused by their partners (Adjah & Agbemafle, 2016). Factors that contribute to husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana have been well-researched (e.g., Adjei, 2016b, 2017, 2018; Amoakohene, 2004; Asiedu, 2014; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2014; Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). While some studies argue that individual psychopathologies such as borderline and antisocial personality disorders predispose men to abuse their wives (for a detailed review, see Sijtsema et al., 2014), other studies maintain that structural and cultural factors such as patriarchy and the custom of bride price shape husband-to-wife abuse in the Ghanaian context (Adjei, 2016b; Adjei & Mpiani, 2018; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2014). It has been observed that the notion of patriarchy ingrained in Ghanaian culture promotes violence against women as it normalizes male-perpetrated violence in intimate relationships (Adjei, 2018; Amoakohene, 2004).

Although studies on structural and cultural accounts of husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana provide valuable insights into the phenomenon, a few have investigated how perpetrators' religious beliefs and practices influence their

abusive behaviors (e.g., Jesse & Takyi, 2009). Furthermore, how victims' religious beliefs and practices shape their stay or leave decisions in abusive conjugal relationships have received relatively little scholarly attention. Religion deeply permeates all shades of Africans' life that it cannot be distinguished from their nonreligious aspects of life. Africans have often been aptly described as *notoriously* and *incurably* religious *in all things* (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1989; Parrinder, 1969). Research shows that Ghana is one of the most religiously devout countries in sub-Saharan Africa as religion remains a significant factor in social relations among Ghanaians (Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). For example, according to the 2010 population and housing census, over 70% of Ghanaians profess the Christian faith with more females (73.4%) than males (68.8%) being Christians (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). The global "Religiousity and Atheism Index" report by WIN-Gallup International (2012) ranked Ghana first in 2005 and 2012 on the global religiousity index, with 96% of Ghanaians (in both 2005 and 2012) describing themselves as religious persons. Given the salient and influential role of religion in the social life of many Ghanaians, it is surprising that the link between religion and husband-to-wife abuse has been largely ignored. This study aims to fill the empirical void in the literature by exploring the role of religion in husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana. Specifically, it investigates two main research questions: (1) How do the religious beliefs and practices of perpetrators motivate or restrain them from abusing their partners? (2) How do victims' religious beliefs and practices shape their leave or stay decisions in abusive relationships?

Overall, the study contributes to the scant literature on religion and spousal abuse in Ghana. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: First, we provide a review of existing literature on the nexus between religion and intimate partner violence (IPV) to contextualize the study. Second, we provide a detailed description of how the study was carried out—methodology. This will be followed by presentation and discussion of the findings of the study. A conclusion is provided in the final section.

Religion and IPV

Religion has long been recognized as a powerful and influential tool capable of shaping the lives of people in many societies. Many influential scholars have, for many years, offered various definitions of the concept of religion. For example, Durkheim (1915) defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" and this system of beliefs and practices "unite into one single moral community called a Church" (p. 47). Geertz (1973, p. 90) also conceptualizes religion as a symbolic and belief system which acts to "establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] by establishing

ideas of a general order of existence" to the extent that these beliefs are considered by religious adherents as necessary part of existence. We use religion in this study to mean a system of beliefs, practices and individual's attachment to Supernatural deities or Supreme Beings such as God, Allah, Angels, and so on. In many societies around the world, religion provides instruction on gender norms in both public and private/domestic spaces, though interpretations of these instructions have been contested for generations (Hajjar, 2004; McMorris & Glass, 2018).

Generally, research on IPV and culture has been afforded significant scrutiny (Alio et al., 2011; Barnett, 2000; Dery & Diedong, 2014). Existing studies show that an amalgamation of economic, life-course and cultural factors account for IPV. For example, studies that draw on life-course framework posit that factors such as early exposure of individuals to abuse predispose them to abuse their intimate partners in the future (Etherington & Baker, 2016; Tenkorang & Owusu, 2018). Research rooted in cultural perspectives holds that some cultural institutions and practices (such as patriarchy, payment of bride price, etc.) promote IPV (Adjei, 2015; Adjei & Mpiani, 2018). Despite the preponderance of research on the link between IPV and culture in general, a handful studies that are mostly conducted in Western societies have examined the role of religion as a crucial cultural variable in IPV (see (Brutz & Allen, 1986; Ellison et al., 1999). The findings of these studies are less conclusive about the role of religion in our understanding of IPV. While some researchers claim that religion provides context for IPV, other scholars suggest otherwise. For instance, it has been documented that spouses who regularly attend church services and remain committed to their religious beliefs are less likely to abuse their partners (Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Ferguson et al., 1986). Takyi and Lamptey (2020) further note that religion provides a congenial and supportive environment for healthy family life as it limits the use of alcohol and other substances which are significant predictors of IPV. Conversely, some studies show that the language of religion (for example, conservative Christianity) offers strong support for patriarchy and its attendant abuse that women suffer in conjugal relationships (Westenberg, 2017; Winkelmann, 2004). Conceptions of gender and appropriate behavior for men and women in intimate relationships tend to be emphasized in societies that have strong religious leanings and where institutional norms legitimize male dominance (Bailey, 2016; Krause et al., 2015).

Particularly, it is posited that the teachings of some religious groups perpetuate the control of women by their husbands and excuse male-perpetrated violence in intimate relationships (Giblin, 1999). In their qualitative study which explored the experiences of 10 abused women within Christian faith communities in the United States, Knickmeyer et al. (2016) found that the male partners of the

abused women justified their abusive behaviors based on patriarchal religious ideologies which emphasize male authority/control and female submission. The abused women in the study pointed out that their Christian doctrines and beliefs facilitated abuse in their marriages as they are admonished in the bible to submit themselves unto their husband as unto the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife (see Ephesians 5:21-23). Due to this and other similar biblical commands, Christian women who suffer domestic violence often display a tendency to use Christian symbolism and religious language to explain and tolerate abuse, and remain in abusive relationships (Knickmeyer et al., 2016; Westenberg, 2017). Similarly, women who adhere to traditional roles of womanhood, grounded in religious tenets, are often entrapped in abusive relationships (Knickmeyer et al., 2004). In particular, women who are more committed to their religion have been found to have stayed in their marriages and abusive relationships longer than women of lower religiosity (Horton et al., 1988).

In addition to the patriarchy-endorsing religious scriptures, religious leaders have often been found to provide advice that supports male batterers' behavior (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Alkhateeb (1999) investigated partner violence among Muslims and found that most Imams or Islamic religious leaders blamed women victims for their abuse. The foregoing accounts suggest that religion is an important factor that influences IPV. This article examines how the religious beliefs and practices of men who abuse their wives encourage or discourage them from doing so as well as the extent to which victims' religious beliefs and practices shape their stay/leave decisions in abusive marital relationships.

Method

The present study draws insights from the theory and methods of discursive psychology (DP), which involves the application of ideas from discourse analysis (DA) to the study of social phenomena in psychology (Potter, 2003). DA is both a method of conceptualizing and analyzing language (McMullen, 2011). DA, particularly in the tradition of DP, is theoretically and epistemologically informed by social constructionism (Augoustinos, 2017). As a methodological approach, DP provides a systematic framework for the analysis of interviews and interactional data (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). Discursive analysts adopt a dual approach to the study of discourse, focusing on both the construct*ed* nature of discourse or how it is put together using a range of discursive practices (e.g., lexical, prosodic, syntactic) and the construct*ive* nature of discourse or how it produces different representations of the world (Potter & Hepburn, 2008). Thus, DP studies and pays attention to *action orientation* of talk; that is, *the way in which* things are said as well as

what is being said by participants in social interactions to achieve a certain effect (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013). The action orientation of talk focuses on reading for what participants are *doing* with their talk rather than simply reading for meaning or what participants are *saying* (Willig, 2013).

DP holds the view that the "truth" about a psychological phenomenon is not given by individual participants in a social discourse but effected through the lenses of their given context because participants in a social interaction are both producers and products of culture within their social environment (Adjei, 2013). Central to discursive analysis is the concept of *interpretative repertoire*, which refers to terminologies, stylistics and grammatical features, preferred metaphors and figures of speech and general commonsensical ways used by members of a given community to characterize and evaluate actions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Talk about a social issue such as spousal violence is organized as social action in its immediate context, and around culturally resonant interpretive resources that reveal the shared sense-making discourses of participants within a given broader social and historical context (see Edley & Wetherell, 2001). The present study considers DP as an appropriate theoretical and methodological tool because of its flexibility and reflexivity, where historical, sociocultural and religious experiences of both researchers and participants shape and direct data analysis and interpretation (Adjei, 2013). It also allows for the study of how religious and gender identities are constructed in discourse and its implication for husband-to-wife abuse.

Location and Relevant Demographics of Participants

The rural sites for this study were in the Ashanti region while the urban sites were suburbs in Kumasi (Ashanti region) and the capital Accra (the greater Accra region) of Ghana. While Accra and Kumasi, the urban sites, are characterized by heterogeneity, weakened family bond and traditional values due to mainly urbanization and social change (Nukunya, 2003), the rural areas of Ghana largely consist of indigenous homogeneous ethnic group with deeply entrenched traditional norms and values. Both rural and urban participants were included to ensure much deeper understanding of the phenomenon of religion and husband-to-wife abuse by examining responses and meanings that are shared *within* and *between* rural and urban settings.

The number of participants in this study was 40 adults, comprising 21 (52.5%) males and 19 (47.5%) females. This was made up of 16 (40%) perpetrators, 16 (40%) victims, and eight (20%) key informants (police, traditional elders, religious leaders, social and local government workers). The

Table 1. Key Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Variable	*N*	%
Gender		
Male	21	52.5
Female	19	47.5
Status/Group		
Perpetrators (men)	16	40
Victims (women)	16	40
Key Informants	8	20
Occupation (self-defined)		
Farmers	11	27.5
Petty traders	7	17.5
Commercial drivers	6	15
Hairdressers	4	10
Teachers	4	10
Police	2	5
Social workers	2	5
Priests	2	5
Local government workers[a]	2	5
Ethnicity		
Akans	31	77.5
Ewes	4	10
Ga-Adangbe	1	2.5
Dagomba	1	2.5
Unknown	3	7.5
Religion		
Christians	33	82.5
Muslims	4	10
Unknown	3	7.5

Note. [a]These are men and women who represent their communities at the local government, popularly known in Ghana as Assemblymen/Assemblywomen.

ages of victims and perpetrators ranged from 24 to 60 years with between four and 22 years of marriage, while the ages of key informants ranged from 35 to 70 years. The majority (82.5%) of the participants were Christians. In terms of ethnicity, the majority (77.5%) of the participants were Akans. The study settings were predominantly inhabited by Akans. The Akans are the largest ethnic grouping in Ghana, and their language (Akan) is the most widely spoken in Ghana. A summary of participants' relevant demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Design and Procedure

The data collection for the present study spanned a period of seven months on a field work in Ghana, beginning from January to July 2014. The data were obtained through semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth individual interviews. We adopted purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to recruit participants with richer knowledge and insights into the phenomenon of interest (Marshall, 1996) and in line with the purpose of the study (Patton, 2001). The participants for both the FGDs and personal interviews were sampled through home and community visitation, contact with DOVVSU, and other snowballing contacts. The purpose of the study was introduced to officials of DOVVSU and community leaders who in turn assisted in identifying potential participants to seek their consent. Additional recruitments were made through snowballing contacts provided by recruited participants. Snowballing sampling approach was preferred because of the sensitive nature of the phenomenon and the rareness of the characteristics to be possessed by the sample (i.e., abused wives and abusive husbands).

The DOVVSU, created by an Act of Parliament (Act 732) in 2007, is a specialized unit of Ghana Police Service responsible for preventing crimes against women and children, and to particularly provide them with protection from domestic violence. Contact with the DOVVSU and community leaders ensured the recruitment of participants with richer knowledge and insights into the phenomenon under study. The purpose of the study was explained to all prospective participants. They were also informed that their participation and/or answering of questions were voluntary. The inclusion criteria were women with (self-reported) experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse from current or past marital partner and men who had inflicted physical and/or sexual abuse on a current or past marital partner. We chose these inclusion criteria because, regardless of how one explains violence in intimate relationships, the perspectives one offers may remain irrelevant to those who actually experience it (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997). Ethical clearance for the data collection was given by the DOVVSU.

There were 24 FGD participants; comprising 12 perpetrators (men) and 12 victims (women) recruited from rural and urban settings. Four FGDs were held, two each for rural and urban perpetrators and victims; six all perpetrators (men) group and six all victims (women) group in each case. Single-sex FGD allowed discussants to be more open and communicative than they would in a mixed group (see Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Given the patriarchal norms and the hierarchical nature of the Ghanaian society, putting males and females in a mixed group may lead to males overshadowing their female counterparts (Adjei, 2012). For purposes of confidentiality, analysis and

reporting, codes were adopted for FGD participants to reflect their status, interview site and seating position (sitting order). For example, RV1 and UV1 represented rural victim number one and urban victim number one, respectively. All FGDs lasted between 45 and 60 min.

Additional in-depth personal interviews were conducted with four perpetrators and four victims (different from FGD participants) from rural and urban settings to cross-check the patterns of participants' discourses. For each interview setting, two perpetrators and two victims were interviewed. All interviews lasted between 25 and 35 min. In order not to compromise the safety of victims, only one member from the same marriage/household (either the husband or the wife) was selected as participant in the study. To further shed light on institutional, traditional, and religious perspectives, eight key informants selected from religious and traditional groups, government and nongovernmental institutions were interviewed. A semi-structured interview guide was used for both the FGDs and personal interviews, which included topics such as participants' description of themselves and their marriage; their general views about husband-to-wife abuse; the relationship between their religious beliefs and IPV perpetration; religion and divorce; help-seeking and family interventions.

All the FGDs and personal interviews were conducted by the first author (a married man and a native Ghanaian) with adequate knowledge of the religious norms, meaning systems and power relationship between husbands and wives in Ghana. His insider and male role helped in his interaction with participants in terms of asking the right questions and managing power differentials. Apart from the two key informant interviews which were conducted in English, all the FGDs and personal interviews were conducted in *Twi*, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language belonging to the Akans. The use of *Twi* ensured a relative power balance between the researcher and the participants on one hand, and among participants on another. All FGDs and personal interviews were held at convenient locations selected by participants; audio-recorded with the consent of participants; and later transcribed into English. Data transcription emphasized readability rather than details of Jeffersonian notation that indicates pitch, prosody, timing, and pauses (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Wetherell, 1998).

Data Analysis

The overall analysis of the data reflected our primary concern—that is, exploring the role of religious beliefs in IPV perpetration and victimization in Ghana. We (the two authors) first of all carefully listened to the audio-recordings with frequent playback to check and recheck for data accuracy. We

iteratively read the transcribed data to have an intimate and interpretive familiarity with it. Transcripts were then imported into NVivo 10 for inclusive coding—searching and grouping of extracts related to the focus of the study (Potter, 2003). Different words or phrases that were repeatedly used and pointed to the regularity and patterns of participants' discursive constructions were assigned to data corpus. For example, perpetrators' constructions of religious faith as both enabling and constraining the use of violence against their wives were identified, coded and mapped for further analysis and formulations. In line with the purpose of the study, we selected extracts and individually made analytical notes that expressed our initial thoughts about assigned categories. We then compared and merged notes based on careful considerations and extensive discussions.

The selection of extracts for analysis then became focused by identifying how informants draw upon everyday familiar socioreligious discourses to construct the realities of husband-to-wife abuse. Upon close inspection, we chose and analyzed extracts by taking into account the context of what was said, how participants said it and why they may have said it. Particular attention was paid to what was being said by participants, their choice of words and expressions, as well as voice tone—they all reflect discursive practices embedded in participants' cultural milieu (Potter & Wetherell, 2001). The relevance of participants' discursive constructions for analysis depended on the purpose of the study and the researchers' (both native Ghanaians) lived perspectives of the Ghanaian culture and knowledge of the discursive context allowed for a satisfactory identification and analysis of the function of words (what participants were *doing* with their words/talk) and how they related to other constructions produced in the surrounding text. These are concerned with what has been referred to as the *action orientation* of talk. For instance, perpetrators invoked religious belief system in talk to repeatedly construct spousal violence as transgressive. The initial assembled discursive patterns were further pruned down and/or merged. Discursive constructions of religion and its relationship with gender norms and male power crystallized into different categorizations and the emerged discursive patterns and concepts were formulated and interpreted in the light of cultural context within which in-the-moment performative discourses of participants are embedded (see Adjei, 2019).

Findings

Based on the analysis, three main discursive patterns were identified in participants' accounts: (a) prescriptive theology of male headship and authority in marriage; (b) proscriptive theology of divorce and religious discourses of

entrapment; and (c) double-edged discourses of religion in IPV perpetration and victimization. We analyze these three key findings below by presenting extracts from interview transcripts alongside interpretations that have been made of them.

Prescriptive Theology of Male Headship and Authority in Marriage

Both perpetrators and victims invoked religious instructions on gender norms to legitimize male dominance and authority over women in marriage. As one male participant explained; " . . . the Bible has given much authority and power to men in marriage and as you are aware, Christianity is an integral part of the social life of every Ghanaian" (Urban perpetrator 3, personal interview). The perpetrator in this quote constructs the authority of husbands over wives in terms of prescriptive instructions and norms of the bible. In addition, he grounds the salience of religion (Christianity) in the social lives of Ghanaians.

In a related account, participants highlighted the subordinate position of women and the headship role of men in marriage as part of the prescriptive theology of marriage, and adherence to this theology is an outward manifestation of a Christian woman's (and man's) piety and spiritual faithfulness. As one of the victims corroborated, "The Bible advises wives to be submissive to their husbands regardless of their status because they control the home" (Urban victim 3, personal interview). The victim in the quote appears to unquestionably accept that men are religiously entitled to "control" the conjugal home including their wives, "regardless of [the social and economic] status" of the wife. The above accounts (i.e., urban perpetrator 3 and urban victim 3) highlight how scripturally (biblically) scripted gender norms and expectations that appear to endorse women subordinate position and men's dominance in marriage may have mutually reinforcing effect on IPV perpetration and victimization. The discourses suggest that a wife has a religious duty and an implicit moral obligation to be "submissive" to and obey her husband's command as noncompliance may be penalized:

> The Bible also admonishes women to be faithful and submissive to their husbands because a man is the head of the family. I think sometimes we have to also consider what some of these women do to get punished by their husbands. (Rural perpetrator 4, FGD)

The perpetrator seems to appeal to and invoke appropriate religious script on gender norms and behavioral prescriptions in marriage to provide effective warrant for a husband's violent behavior toward his wife. By the

discursive use of the term "punished," the perpetrator appears to be evidently constructing husband-to-wife abuse as a legitimate sanction (punishment) for women who transgress religious directives on gender norms. The perpetrator in the above quote can be seen positioning women who are not "faithful and submissive to their husbands" as publicly undermining not only male authority and headship role in the conjugal family, but also, the authority of the Bible from which the male headship role and conjugal authority is derived.

Proscriptive Theology of Divorce and Religious Discourses of Entrapment

Theologically, divorce is generally believed in Ghana as an act proscribed by God and those who do so, except for adulterous behavior of one of the partners, violate God's moral principle. The commonest religious mantra recited by pastors during church marriages in Ghana is "what God has put together let no man put asunder." Respondents in the present study draw heavily on the proscriptive theology of divorce as a key risk factor of entrapment in abusive conjugal unions in Ghana. For example, one of the victims explained; "I have reported him to my pastor . . . I think that is the best thing to do because as a Christian, I cannot divorce my husband. That is not what the Bible teaches" (Urban victim, FGD). The victim seems to be locating the difficulty for a Christian woman to leave abusive relationship in the proscriptive religious norms on divorce. As the victim in the above quote indicates, the wisest decision for a Christian woman to take when abuse occurs is to report the incidence to a priest who will often encourage victims to be more submissive and obedient to the wishes and demands of their partners (see Cantalupo et al., 2006). As one such religious leader puts it; "it is unbiblical for a priest or priestess[1] of God to ask a married woman to leave her matrimonial home, that's not the solution" (Religious leader, key informant interview). It is most unlikely that a religious leader will advise a victim of spousal abuse to terminate her relationship as divorce appears to be against the fundamental principles of marriage in the Holy Scriptures and thus considered morally transgressive if one chooses to go that path. These discourses affirm a scriptural injunction that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone (1 Corinthians 7:39, KJV).

Psychologically, religious socialization, practices and rituals that endorse female submissiveness and legitimize male supremacy, or proscribe divorce may potentially reinforce violent behavior of husbands and covertly coerce battered women to remain in abusive marital partnerships. The accounts of

participants repeatedly emphasized that victims who have deep conviction of God are less likely to end their unsatisfactory relationship because of doctrinal position on marriage and divorce

> Though I am not very happy with his aggressive behaviour, I cannot end the relationship because that will be going against the teachings of God . . . if he decides to end it I will not insist on staying but I cannot initiate it. I have to make our marriage work otherwise I will be regarded as a failure. (Rural victim, personal interview)

Although the victim in the quote above acknowledges that her marriage does not provide her any sanctuary of comfort as one would have thought, she feels compelled to remain in the abusive relationship by reason of her religious faith and powerlessness. She seems to place the burden of decision on her violent partner, in further demonstration of the power differentials in marriage particularly regarding the prerogative of divorce. The quote further indicates the heavy social and religious obligations of women in Ghana to "make their marriage work" as their self-esteem, and social image, as well as their religious faith appear to be complicatedly linked with their ability to keep their marriages, even in the face of abuse (see Adjei & Mpiani, 2018). The quote emphasizes that divorcees with strong religious values tend to regard divorce as an outward testimony of their inner character flaws or as a transgression against God. It thus appears evident in the account that entrapped victims of spousal abuse may look around them and compare their relationship with that of their social others and feel a sense of personal failure about their situation. They feel that it is their responsibility to "make their marriage work" so that they are not seen by real or imagined "faithful" bystanders as (religious) failures. This sense of responsibility evoked by profound religious commitment may prevent victims from fleeing violent marital relationships. For these victims, divorce may portend a character defect and/or a willful act of rebellion against God, at least in their internal self-talk. Thus, it may not be part of their consideration to begin a divorce proceeding against a husband regardless of their personal unhappiness and the dangers that may be associated with their continuous stay in abusive relationships. These victims identify with their religious beliefs at the expense of personal freedom.

Double-Edged Discourses of Religion

Participants in the study also positioned religion as playing a double-edged role in post-abuse rationalization and disengagement practices of wife abusers in Ghana. For example, one perpetrator indicated that

> I couldn't forgive myself afterwards; I knew it was wrong to beat my wife but she tempted me [. . .] The Bible condemns aggression so it doesn't matter if the victim is your wife. I have since repented and even advised other men not to fall for the devil even under extreme provocations. (Urban perpetrator, personal interview)

The perpetrator in the quote positions his sense of responsibility and remorse in terms of personal religious conviction. Although the perpetrator repeatedly positions himself as personally responsible for and remorseful of his misconduct, "I couldn't forgive myself . . . I knew it was wrong," he shifts the focus from personal to external moral standard; "the Bible condemns aggression." He constructs physical aggression as *biblically* immoral, condemnable, and a violation of religious injunction—thus constructing his sense of morality as shaped by *outside* religious belief system rather than *personal* moral conscience. The reference to the "Bible" (the word of God) as a moral buffer resonates with the Ghanaian context where morality and ethics are constantly merged with religion. Religion as a moral standard differs significantly from nonreligious moral buffers or ethical values such as internalized and personal value systems, particularly prevalent in most Western contexts (see Ikuenobe, 2006).

It seems evident that deep religious belief may enhance wife abusers' capacity for self-control and evaluative moral self-sanction and increase their empathetic feelings to anticipate the negative effects of violent misconduct. By drawing on the interpretive repertoire of *repentance* ("I have since repented . . . "), the perpetrator constructs religious conviction as a potent moral buffer capable of restraining wife abusers from unleashing further and persistent abuse. This perhaps indicates that perpetrators of IPV may have the capacity for self-regulation and personal control of violent behavior through religious belief systems in which they have invested their self-worth and adopted as personal standard of moral behavior.

Contrary to its protective role, religion is also constructed by the perpetrator in the above quote as providing motivational support for wife-abuse. As evident above, he positions his violent conduct situationally by shifting blame to "temptations of the wife," advising potential perpetrators to be wary of the "devil even under extreme provocation." By this discursive shift, the perpetrator downplays his personal agentic role and employs situational attribution strategy that locates the cause of violence in external "provocations" and "temptations." The metaphor of "temptation" and "devil" are discursive devices flexibly deployed by the perpetrator to manage his moral accountability for acts of spousal violence. He seems to see himself as a faultless victim pushed to injurious conduct by forcible provocations (see Bandura,

1999). Though it appears unclear whether "the devil" in the quote refers to the wife or an unseen supernatural being, the perpetrator mobilizes this discursive strategy to construct his violent conduct as forced by compelling situational factors rather than conceived as dispositionally oriented and deliberate. The discursive practice of deferring responsibility for violence to precipitating situational conditions appears to neutralize the inhibitory function of religion, or at least casts religion as double-edged—playing both risk and protective functions of husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana.

Discussion

This article explored the influence of religious beliefs and practices on the perpetration of husband-to-wife abuse and the entrapment of battered women in Ghana. Specifically, we examined how participants in this study invoked religious discourses and belief systems to construct the perpetration of husband-to-wife abuse and the entrapment of victims in abusive marital relationships. Discursive accounts of participants draw on religious scripts on gender norms to justify men's exercise of control and authority over their wives in marriage. Religious belief systems and practices have historically been manipulated to justify IPV and men's authority over women, and religious leaders have contributed to the conspiracy of silence around IPV (Bailey, 2016; Merry, 2001). Significant proportion of the Ghanaian population is devoutly Christian or Muslim (Adinkrah, 2012), both of which have doctrines and teachings that endorse and legitimize male supremacy and female acquiescence in marriage. The prescriptive theology of husband-as-heads of the conjugal family is invoked to apparently justify and legitimize husbands' unfettered control over and the use of violence against their wives. Religious teachings and practices that apparently endorse male headship and authority and female acquiescent behavior in marriage also endorse patriarchal social order in Ghana, and this may consequently reinforce the abusive (e.g., controlling) behaviors of men toward their wives. Previous studies have observed that cultures with strong religious leanings have been noted to espouse patriarchal ideologies (Risman, 2018) that reflect and emphasize hegemonic masculine norms where "men lead and women and children follow in submission" (Bailey, 2016, p. 225).

The finding of the study also highlights the negative effects of religious narratives on spousal abuse victimization. Both the Christian Bible and the Islamic Quran apparently encourage women's acquiescent position in marriage in Ghana and these religious traditions further advise its followers against acts of divorce. Victims with religious convictions see divorce as an outward evidence of their inner character flaws and thus a violation of

biblical injunction. The accounts of participants of husband-to-wife abuse in the present study suggest that religious scriptures could be literally interpreted to socialize women into believing and accepting that "submission" to their male intimate partners or avoiding divorce is the righteous and recognized way of divine worship. Religious leaders in Ghana are most unlikely to ask a victim of husband-to-wife abuse to terminate her marital relationship because they see divorce as proscribed by the Scriptures and that those who choose to leave their partners commit a grievous transgression. Similar studies have pointed out that religious leaders in Ghana generally reject the possibility of recommending divorce for victims of marital aggression (Cantalupo et al., 2006). Instead, they frequently advise victims of spousal abuse to be more submissive and endure the violence in their relationships (Cantalupo et al., 2006). Religious teachings and socializations that treat marital abuse as a normal part of marriage in Ghana, and therefore should not be grounds for divorce, may prevent victims from fleeing violent unions or seeking external help (e.g., reporting to the police). Religion has been noted to provide a sanctuary and source of strength for abused women as they draw on their religious beliefs and invoke God's will to imbibe themselves with a sense of hope that the situation will change and spirituality for healing and forgiveness (see Krause et al., 2015). Battered women may continue to stay in abusive marital relationships by considering the implications of divorce on their religious belief systems and social status.

Religious discourses and gender norms that appear to downplay husband-to-wife abuse and regard it as normal and legitimate activity of marriage in Ghana may not only create a psychological mind-set in victims to hold tolerant views about wife abuse, but also, it may restrain victims from recognizing the adverse effects of abuse and keep them from publicly reporting or seeking both psychological and material assistance. As Dunham and Senn (2000) point out, denying or justifying a partner's abusive act may, in the long term, keep a victim from recognizing the behavior as aggressive, identifying its damaging effects, and seeking external help.

Perpetrators in the present study invoked the valence of religious instructions and norms to position religion as playing a double-edged role in post-wife-abuse rationalization and abusers' disengagement. The religious belief system of perpetrators provides both motivational and inhibitory support for their post-wife-abuse disengagement processes as they come to see wife-beating as aggression, regardless of prevailing conventional notions of society. They construct husband-to-wife abuse as both enabled and constrained by religious belief systems and practices in which men have invested their self-worth and adopted as personal standard of moral behavior. While

perpetrators' religious beliefs allowed them to water down their agentic role in unleashing violence against their wives, and locate the source of their violent attacks in external unseen beings such as the devil, their accounts also revealed the restraining power of religion, particularly in terms of unleashing further violence on their wives.

Religion is often believed to be two-edged (Greenberg, 2013), as it can evoke empathy and facilitate prosociality in people (Saroglou et al., 2005) as well as provide belief systems that help to maintain the ideals of patriarchy and male authority in marriage (see Jesse & Takyi, 2009). For example, religion can serve as a protective factor of intimate partner abuse by providing both social support and enhanced integration for family functioning (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). A strong religious commitment may serve as a potential compensatory factor of spousal abuse as it increases a person's capacity for self-control and moral self-sanctions. A strong and enduring religious conviction enhances individual's capacity for self-regulation, promotes both external and personal control, and provides a powerful defense against anxieties aroused by misperception or uncertainty (Kay et al., 2010). Regular religious attendance has been found to have strong protective effect for the perpetration of domestic violence, performing a more powerful mediating role than social support, substance abuse and mental health (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). It is theorized that attendance at regular religious services may affirm positive models of intimate bonds and family relations from the pulpit, through informal social contacts with other congregants and through official pronouncements (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). In many ways, however, religion could be a sociocultural variable that affect IPV because it has the potential to provide belief systems that help to maintain the status quo in society (Jesse & Takyi, 2009). Religion can also evoke open criticism by other congregants or clergy when members of a religious group fail to conform to religious norms (Williams & Sternthal, 2007).

Although the present study provides relevant insights into the role of religion in husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana, its findings are based on self-reported data from only 40 adults in two regions (of 16)—The Greater Accra and Ashanti—in Ghana. That notwithstanding, the current study was principally committed to the experiential perspectives of victims and perpetrators of IPV and the interpretive understanding of human experience (IPV). Rather than aim for representative sample to allow for generalizations, the primary goal of many qualitative studies is to "interrogate subjectivity and intentional actions and experiences embedded in real life contexts" (Adjei & Mpiani, 2018, p. 934). Another limitation of the study is that a male interviewer may have made the female interviewees less reluctant to share their

views. However, a married man's insider positionality in investigating a subject matter that is sometimes considered in Ghana as "women's issues" has been noted as an important resource in qualitative interviews involving victims of IPV (Adjei, 2016a).

Conclusion

Religious instructions on gender norms tend to espouse the cultural ideology of patriarchy which is grounded in notions of male headship and authority over women, women's submission, and expressions of masculinity that may justify the use of physical force against one's wife. However, the present study also contributes to the understanding that perpetration of spousal violence in Ghana may not be necessarily predetermined by imposed and unrestrained conventional norms, but instead, individual perpetrators may have the self-regulatory capacity and personal control of violent behavior by reason of their religious belief systems. A profound religious conviction may serve as a protective factor of husband-to-wife abuse perpetration by restraining men from yielding to social expectations and cultural notions of abuse. It may be a grievous oversight to discuss widespread husband-to-wife abuse without a careful analysis of the complex religious beliefs on gender norms and religiously-scripted behavioral prescriptions for both men and women in marriage in Ghana. An important implication of the present study is that proactive advocacy and psychoeducational campaigns that target the structural causes of spousal abuse should be encouraged. For example, churches, mosques, and other religious communities could use their platforms to publicly and explicitly condemn husband-to-wife abuse and help foster an awareness of its destructive consequences on individuals, families, and society.

Acknowledgments

We thank all participants who spent their time to talk about their personal and difficult experiences of spousal abuse.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Although some churches/Christian denominations in Ghana do not accept females as pastors and priestesses, some others, particularly the contemporary Charismatic and Pentecostal denominations, do permit female pastors and priestesses.

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