



The Social Intentionality of Battered Women's Agency in Ghana

Psychology and Developing Societies
30(1) 1–18

© 2018 Department of Psychology,
University of Allahabad
SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0971333617747320
<http://pds.sagepub.com>



Stephen Baffour Adjei¹

Abstract

There is a growing body of research which suggests that victims of intimate partner violence (IPV; mostly women) continue to remain in abusive relationships. Many of the Western psychological theorisations focus on battered women's personal dispositions and/or the self-creating (individualistic) view of agency to explain why victims remain in violent relationships. These studies seem to suggest that staying in a violent relationship is a personal decision that victims make in free will, and that victims who continue to stay fail to act on their own behalf. Drawing upon the Ghanaian communal conceptualisation of personhood and the social norms of marriage and divorce, this study questions the individualistic theorisations of battered women's decisions to stay in or leave abusive relationships. The article argues that battered women's agency in negotiating the stay/leave decisions in abusive relationships does not only originate in an independent autonomous self, nor constituted by a person's internal motives, but also, and even primarily, it is culturally grounded and dependent on social relations for its realisation. The article concludes that the agency of abused women in Ghana has a *social intentionality*, in the sense that battered women's intentional behaviour in marital relationships is both constituted by self and constrained by their relational embeddedness.

¹ University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

Corresponding author:

Stephen Baffour Adjei, College of Technology Education, Faculty of Education and Communication Sciences, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, PO Box 1277, Kumasi, Ghana.

E-mail: stevoo24@yahoo.com

Keywords

Agency, battered women, IPV, relational embeddedness, communal personality, Ghana

The growing body of research suggests that intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global health burden that needs urgent attention. Globally, almost 30 per cent of all women who have been in a relationship have been physically and/or sexually abused by their intimate partners (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). About 38 per cent of all femicidal killings (murder of women) occur in intimate relationships (WHO, 2013). The highest prevalence of IPV occurs in Africa, with approximately 37 per cent of ever-partnered women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives (WHO, 2013). There are many health implications of IPV including physical injuries such as cuts, broken bones, fractures and burns to women (Johnson, Ollus, & Nevala, 2008). Mental health problems such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008) and post-abuse psychological distress and suicidal ideation amongst women is very high (Adinkrah, 2008; Issahaku, 2015). Women's substance dependence such as alcohol and cigarette has also been associated with IPV (Gao et al., 2010).

However, research reports indicate that victims of IPV (mostly women) continue to remain in abusive relationships (e.g., Adjei, 2017a; Dare, Guadagno, & Muscanell, 2013; Eckstein, 2016). Although IPV rate in Ghana is very high (see Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999), many women justify husband-to-wife abuse and continue to stay in violent relationships. For example, the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2012) reports that about 60 per cent of women and 36 per cent of men believe it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife, with an acceptance rate of 70 per cent for rural women and 51 per cent for urban women. The high prevalence of IPV in modern society and its negative health ramifications on victims makes it hard to comprehend why some women remain in abusive relationships. The literature is replete with theoretical assumptions about why battered women continue to remain in abusive intimate relationships. There is a preponderance of research evidence, mostly western, that generally indicates that individual psychological orientation (e.g., personality traits) moderates whether or not victims of IPV continue to stay in or leave violent relationships. Western research on IPV theorises that battered women who continue to stay in abusive relationships

suffer from depressed self-esteem or have acquired a pattern of learned helplessness (Walker, 2000), have dependent personality disorder (Laos, Cormier, & Perez-Diaz, 2011) or have developed tolerance for violence and maltreatment through repeated exposure to violence during childhood (Rhatigan & Axson, 2006). Other researchers have argued that battered women's lack of agency and/or *commitment*—personal resolve to keep a relationship and to remain psychologically attached to it—are the key to understanding why women stay in abusive relationships (Dare et al., 2013; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Semaan, 2004).

The individual-based studies are designed to address the most obvious pair of questions that are asked by both researchers and the general public: 'Why do they stay?' and its equivalent, 'Why don't they leave?' (Semaan, 2004). Though these questions are legitimate and logical, they are inherently problematic. They imply that staying in a violent relationship is a personal decision, a choice that battered women willingly exercise, and that victims who continue to stay fail to exercise the agency to act on their own behalf to flee abusive relationships. These individual-focused questions pay little, if any, attention to cultural and structural meaning systems that frame and shape battered women's decision-making. Thus, the individual-based research questions and theoretical explanations invariably equate staying-and-not-leaving with being docile or with failing to act on one's own behalf (lack of agency) and being passive (Semaan, 2004). These studies largely rely on a cultural background of individualism as a social representation and the Western atomistic view of agency to account for why victims of IPV remain in violent intimate relationships. The objective of this article is to draw upon the communal personality and the meaning systems of marriage and divorce in Ghana to develop a framework in which battered women's agency in negotiating stay/leave decisions could also be understood from their social embeddedness and familial value orientation. I draw upon empirical and theoretical studies to show why emphasis should be placed on battered women's *relationality* as the primary source of agency in negotiating stay/leave decisions in Ghana. In the following sections, I attempt to conceptualise agency, followed by a discussion of the social positioning of personhood in Ghana. Next, I discuss marriage and divorce in Ghana, and show how battered women's agency in negotiating stay/leave decision in abusive relationships in Ghana is culturally grounded and dependent on social relations for its realisation. In the final part, I demonstrate how battered women's agency co-exists with relational embeddedness in Ghana.

Conceptualising Agency

Personal agency, the experience of the self in action (Markus & Kitayama, 2004), is an important determining factor in guiding human thoughts and actions. Agency is an essential element in shaping the empowerment processes of women (Adjei, 2015a) as well as the stay/leave decisions of victims of IPV. There are two contrasting views of agency: *subject position* that is determined by dominant discourses (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrrin, 2011; Davies & Harré, 1990) and *self-creating* subject (Bruner, 1990). The subject position view of agency holds that individual actions and choices are given to them by social, historical and/or biological forces, subjecting the person and determining his/her action potential. Thus, the world, the social environment and dominant discourses embedded in a given sociocultural context determine the direction of a person's action potential. This view conceptualises human agency as a social phenomenon which depends on and needs social relations to be realised (become real) and objective (objectified; Ratner, 1999). That is, agency has *social intentionality* in the sense that it is sensitive to and integrates itself in social relations (Ratner, 2000). On the contrary, the self-creating view of agency is based on consciousness and free will in which the human subject creates itself, and is capable of making independent decisions and agentively engage in both world and self-making (Bruner, 1990). In this regard, individuals are agents, having the free will to actively and independently engage in the construction of their own life. The self-creating view construes agency as less social and more a personal attribute. Though it may recognise the existence of societal institutions, social conditions and customary and normative actions, these social structures do not (or have little) influence the individual. The individual is considered as the centre of his/her own awareness and intentional actions.

Agency has also been understood to reflect the given cultural–psychological ecologies, structural social situations and norms in which individuals are embedded (Adams, Bruckmüller, & Decker, 2012). This view also frames agency according to two distinct views: *disjoint* and *conjoint* models of agency. According to the disjoint model of agency, people experience action as the product of discrete actors abstracted from social context, usually associated with independent construction of self in Western societies (Markus & Kitayama, 2004). On the other hand, interdependent construction of the self (in contexts such as Ghana, see Adams, 2005) is associated with conjoint model of agency in which

individuals experience action as a joint product of contextualised actors in concert with social or relational forces (Markus & Kitayama, 2004). Agency has also been described in recent times as negotiated (Adjei, 2017a; Jazvac-Martek, Chen, & McAlpine, 2011). Negotiated agency involves engaging in joint decision-making and being responsive to expectations and demands of social others in a network of interconnectedness (Adjei, 2017a). It can be said that the subject position, the conjoint and the negotiated view of agency all conceptualise human action (agency) as culturally situated and intentionally based behaviour whose realisation depends on social referencing. This study draws upon the culturally situated view of agency to explain how battered women respond to the expectations and demands of the extended family in Ghana in terms of the behavioural choices they make while in an abusive marital relationship.

The Social Positioning of Personhood in Ghana

The intent of this section is to review how, within the social context of Ghana, people generally express their sense of self (personhood) with reference to their community, and how this externality of self-positioning, in turn, gives form and direction to thought and social behaviour. Personhood, the fact of being a person, having those qualities that confer distinct individuality, is essentially social and normative in Ghana (Adjei, 2016a). Although Ghanaian personality is not like a blank slate on which culture makes its imprint without protest, Ghanaian society is primarily communal and normative based on specific values and meaning systems that shape human thoughts and actions (see Adjei, 2015b; Gyekye, 1996). Communalism is the theory that the focus of the activities of the individual members of society is the community (Gyekye, 1996). African communalism is a normative theory about what a moral person, community and their connection ought to be (Ikuenobe, 2006). Though not necessarily detrimental to the individual, the theory of communalism emphasises the activity and the success of the wider society.

Ghanaian social life is principally organised on the basis of interdependency and communal value orientations which emphasise life and social relations organised on the basis of social welfare, responsibilities, obligations, interconnectedness and solidarity. Personhood is, thus, based on 'relational individualism' (Adams & Dzokoto, 2003). Individuals make daily interpersonal decisions by taking into account

their relational connections (Shaw, 2000). In this view, individuals' agentive actions are more social than a personal attribute because the self is 'ontologically, cosmologically, spiritually, and normatively connected to the community', that, in turn, provides the person with the way of life, logic and mode of reasoning (Ikuenobe, 2006, p. 53). The self in African thought is indeed the community (Verhoef & Michel, 1997) because 'the individual self is, by various organic processes, *constituted* by the community and the community is an *organically fused collectivity* of individual selves' (Ikuenobe, 2006, p. 56, emphasis in original). Adjei (2016a) has observed that the individual person, within the communal context of Ghana, does not have a choice of not belonging to a particular community because a person's ability to take on prescribed social responsibilities defines his/her personhood.

The communal ontology of personhood provides insight into the view of agency in Ghana as not only a personal attribute, but also as a negotiated and jointly shared intentional action. The *shared intention* enables persons in this particular cultural context to act in that world together intentionally, in a coordinated and cooperative fashion, and to achieve collective goals (see Schweikard & Schmid, 2013). Agency of persons in Ghana does not originate in independent autonomous self, neither does it only result from one's own desires, intentions and choices. Agency (normatively good actions) in this cultural milieu originates in interdependent self, reflecting culturally constructed patterns of society and individuals' relational connectedness with the family in which they are embedded. In the communal worldview, the world is experienced as perceptually available to a plurality of agents (such as the individual, the extended family and cultural institutions), and identity is never separable from their sociocultural environment (see Adjei, 2016a). Agency and personhood, thus, extend into the social as a relational unit in a systemic web of social meaning. That is, the conceptual dichotomy between the individual (personality) and the social in the cultural context of Ghana is indistinguishable because the individual is ontologically part of the social firmament (Adjei, 2015b).

The communal understanding of who a person and his actions are in Ghana is contrary to the Western construction of identity and self that is believed to be located in the internal properties of inherently separate particles (Adams & Dzokoto, 2003). Persons in Ghana exist as individuals, as members of a group and as members of a community, all of which are constantly interacting and inter-penetrating one another (Adjei, 2016a). There is an emphasis on the externality of

self-positioning in this cultural context, where the ‘other’ person and social institutions such as the extended family gain precedence over and above the individual self and choices (Adjei, 2017b). The social positioning of the self in Ghana is very central to the understanding of intentional actions of battered women. It provides the broader frame of reference by which behavioural choices and personal agency of battered women in negotiating the decision to stay in or leave an abusive relationship are understood.

The Social Activity of Marriage and Divorce in Ghana

There are three main legally and customarily recognised types of marriages in Ghana as defined by their contractual mode: marriage under the ordinance, marriage under the Mohammed ordinance and marriage under customary law (Nukunya, 2003). The customary and the Mohammedan marriages are celebrated under customary laws of a given ethnic community or Mohammedan laws respectively, while ordinance marriage could be either civil or church wedding (Nukunya, 2003). The entry and exit process of marriage in Ghana is not a psychologically or an individually given activity, it involves group negotiations, solemnity and institutionalisation (see Adjei, 2016b). Despite the general assumption that marriage is between two consenting individuals, marriage in Ghana is a group affair involving families rather than individuals (Nukunya, 2003). This is because the two individuals (a man and a woman) do not give themselves into marriage, their families do. One of the fundamental practices in all marriages in Ghana is the payment of bride price, popularly called ‘tiri nsa’, according to which the family of a prospective husband, through *negotiations* and *consultations*, present money and/or gifts to the family of a prospective bride.

The dissolution of marriage in Ghana is also not an individually given intentional activity; it involves solemnity, institutionalisation and social recognition (Assimeng, 1999). For example, among the Akans of Ghana, if parties to a marriage, particularly customary marriage, decide to end the relationship, it usually goes through the customary process of ‘nkurobo’ where each party gives his/her case in the presence of ‘badwafo’ (assembled witnesses or members) from the two families. If an aggrieved party to the marriage makes a good case, assigning a recognised reason entitling him or her to obtain a divorce,

the assembled witnesses confirm the wife's or husband's decision to obtain a divorce (Danquah, 1928). Parties married under the ordinance may appear before a court of competent jurisdiction for the purpose of effecting a legal divorce. However, the party seeking divorce is customarily required to go through the traditional process of marriage dissolution by returning the 'tiri nsa' to the family of the man or the woman before official dissolution of the marriage is granted. Essentially, the process of marriage and divorce in Ghana is socially and jointly organised, with profound implications for the identity and behavioural choices of particularly the two parties to the marriage. The social and customary activities of marriage and divorce in Ghana are significant in understanding how battered women negotiate their intentions in violent relationships in Ghana.

Cultural Grounding of Battered Women's Stay/Leave Decisions in Ghana

Thoughts and actions of individuals are not private or self-contained cognitive activities; they are regulated by normative systems, and the source of psychological experiences is out there in the social world (Moghaddam, 2010). As discussed earlier, both marriage and divorce processes in Ghana are not personal intentional actions, rather, they are group and *social decisions* (socially intentioned), which take into account the normative expectations of society and the family. This view has received empirical support. For example, research on IPV in Ghana has reported that battered women subordinate personal decisions and choices to the requirements of the collective value orientation of the extended family to remain entrapped in violent marital relationship (Adjei, 2017a). Though people generally demonstrate personal agency, Adjei (2017a) found that battered women in Ghana exercise personal agency in a given relational context, and as partly constituted by family relationships and identities. Thus, stay/leave actions of battered women in violent marriages are negotiated with and impelled by others, in a relationship and interactions with contextualised others. He provided an empirical account of one of the female participants (victims) to exemplify the social intentionality of battered women's agency in Ghana:

I don't think I will feel ashamed [for leaving him]. Of course, people will always talk about me but I will not mind, after all it is my life not theirs.

But the problem is that I cannot take this decision alone, I have to consult with my family because I didn't give myself into marriage; they did. (Rural victim 5; Adjei, 2017a, p. 742)

While the victim positions the self as highly agentic, as a person who comes across as in control and self-determined, the account also indicates how battered women in Ghana are positioned (influenced) by the expectation of the extended family or its values. The victim emphasises social positioning over and above her personal positioning. The externality of the victim's self-positioning clearly evinces the fact that, within the interdependent context of Ghana, agency is construed and exercised as a cultural phenomenon, in the sense that its quality or character depends on the quality and character of social relations in which an individual participates (see Ratner, 2000). The customary *consultative* decision-making process between a victim of abuse and her extended family is a form of *negotiated agency*, in which battered women engage in joint decision-making by being responsive to expectations and demands of social others and their family of embeddedness (Adjei, 2017a).

The primacy of victims' family identity and their subsequent alignment with the familial values to remain in abusive marriage is consistent with the view of human agency as a social phenomenon, dependent upon social relations for its realisation. As shown in the extract earlier, the extended family is viewed as the 'great self' (see also Bedford & Hwang, 2003), to which battered women appear obligated. That is, though battered women in Ghana demonstrate intentional behaviour, they do so in a coordinated and cooperative fashion, and in tune with their relational embeddedness to achieve collective goals. As pointed out earlier, in Ghana, a woman is given to marriage by her extended family and for this reason, ending a marital relationship, even if the relationship is abusive, is not a decision battered women can make alone in free will without reference to the family. As Adjei (2017a) empirically asserts, battered women have the moral duty to protect the identity and image of the extended family (the great self) against any divorced-induced negative social evaluations that may either threaten family image or portend bad omen for its members. In much the same way as marriage involves members of the family, the intentional behaviour of divorce is also not free-agent behaviour; it involves prior negotiations with the family and contextualised others. As has been argued, the content of the repertoire of socially possible actions (agency) of a person is bounded by taken-up positions that, in turn, implicitly limits how much of what is logically possible for a given person to say or do at a certain moment in a particular context.

The Co-existence of Battered Women's Agency and Victimisation

While asserting personal sense of self and agency, an indication of person-to-world direction of agency, the tendency of battered women in Ghana is to acquiesce to and align the self with the value orientations of the extended family, suggesting a world-to-person direction of control. For example, one of the responses of female victims in Adjei's (2017a) study demonstrates the co-existence of intentional action (agency) in an abusive relationship and battered women's relational embeddedness:

I couldn't take his behaviour any longer and reported him to the police because I thought that might change things for the better. But the family advised me to withdraw the case and said I should avoid reporting every single incident to the police. I listened to them and withdrew. (Urban victim 4, p. 744)

As the account suggests, agency—intentional behaviour of battered women (such as reporting abuse)—is both constituted by self and constrained by family relationships. Apparently, in relation to stay/leave actions, battered women in Ghana do purposefully initiate intentional action aimed at resisting abuse or changing their predicament, but they may not function effectively in judgement and choice without prior negotiations with the extended family. Thus, an intentional act of divorce, in the face of abuse or personal pain, becomes depersonalised and a jointly negotiated activity (agency) between individual victims of abuse and the extended family (Adjei, 2017a), to the extent that the expectations of the latter may prevail. This reflects the sense of self in Ghana as enmeshed in a communal network of influences with *rights* and *obligations* to this network of social relations (Adjei, 2016a). The decision to leave an abusive marriage cannot be taken alone in free will—it involves *interpersonal-consensus* that takes into account personal agency of victims and the shared beliefs (intentions) of the extended family (Adjei, 2017a).

Whether they are in subordinate or dominant positions, humans do act assertively, but they act within historically produced social relations (Semaan, 2004). To this end, battered women in Ghana can be said to resist abuse in ways that illustrate the co-existence of their agency and relational embeddedness (Adjei, 2017a). Personal meanings and experiences do not transcend normative cultural patterns, they emerge from distinctive experiences with a given people in a given social situation

(Ratner, 2000). Although people are intentional agents and are highly active in the process of self-making, 'the materials available for writing one's own story are a function of our public and shared notions of personhood' (Oyserman & Markus, 1998, p. 123). If (battered women's) agency is reduced to and conceptualised as merely an individual wish or action, it is as inexpressible and impotent as thought without language and intelligence without performance (Ratner, 2000). Accordingly, if battered women's agency has a social character that depends upon social relations, it is not intrinsically creative, fulfilling or empowering. It only becomes so by creating social relations that will promote these characteristics. Using language to analogously illustrate the social intentionality of agency, Ratner (2000) argues that everyone possesses language ability and everyone expresses some language to some degree. However, the specific kind and level of language that a person expresses depends upon her position in a specific cultural context. Similarly, he further argues, 'agency is merely a potential (capacity) which must be developed through social intercourse into a specific form' (p. 426).

The view of battered women's agency as a socially intentional behaviour resonates with Bourdieu's (2000) concept of *habitus*, which represents intentional action that is socially constrained. According to Bourdieu (2000), the human agent is never completely the subject of his practices, instead, the beliefs which are the basis of engagement in the game find their way into apparently the most lucid intentions. Similarly, the agency of victims of IPV in Ghana always operates within and through a social structure. The agentic actions and experiences of battered women in this context are profoundly embedded in the cultural habitus (i.e., beliefs and values) and in resulting psychological functions and behaviour. This does not in any way suggest that the relational agency of battered women in Ghana is unhealthy or regarded as the second-best way of being. The prescriptive models of self and well-being that inform mainstream psychological science are not naturally superior, but rather, they reflect androcentric conception of self and agency (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). Social intentionality seems to be a basic characteristic of humans, and it is exemplified in social referencing, joint attention and imitation (Ratner, 2000). People's actions are not freely constructed but rather, they are guided by the socially built-up habitus (Ratner, 2000).

African gendered life essentially involves collaboration, negotiation and compromise (Nnaemeka, 1998). African feminist scholarship has established the notion of womanhood and its related concepts as a kind of unity and collective strength (i.e., agency) amongst African women.

It shifts the focus away from individualist drive or agency and emphasises and recognises agency within a collectivity and the important place and contribution of all those who constitute the collectivity such as kinship, ethnic groupings and the family (Morell & Ouzgane, 2005). An uncritical acknowledgement of the self as the dynamic centre of its universe apparently reduces behavioural actions of battered women to individual (intra-psychic) level of analysis at the expense of more structural (interpersonal) explanations. As Adjei (2017a) points out, given the conventional psychological understanding of humans as active subjects (agents), an apparent acquiescent behaviour of battered women in Ghana, without critical reflection of the context, could be (mis)interpreted as lack of agency. The view that battered women should act on their own to extricate themselves from abusive intimate relationships overlook the social intentionality of agency, the fact that 'agency is oriented toward, depends upon, and is constrained by social activities, institutions, conditions, and movements' (Ratner, 2000, p. 421).

The decision to leave abusive marital relationship in Ghana is inspired and constrained by culturally organised meanings and institutionalised activities of marriage and divorce. The moral behaviour in marriage in traditional Ghanaian society (e.g., whether or not a woman should leave her marriage) may depend on the social expectations of the community rather than personal choice (Adjei, 2015c). This view embodies the cultural affordances of self in interdependent cultural contexts where the functional unit of conscious reflections of people may cease to be the individual and his/her private motives. Rather, their sense of belongingness to the social relation may be so significant and strong that it may be reasonable to think of people's relationality as the primary unit of consciousness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, theoretical explanations of battered women's agency that are solely rooted in individual psychology, such as personality traits, self-determination or self-efficacy beliefs, may be problematic in these cultural contexts where implicit and explicit theories about the self and agency are socially anchored and understood. In this context, the collective or normative system, assimilated through socialisation processes, becomes the main source of the social and psychological experiences of people (see Moghaddam, 2010). Thus, society, the collective, in a way enters into each individual, and the psychological experiences of people belonging to the collective are through this entering. There are many assumptions of the collective we take on through this 'entering' that are never questioned (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 472), because they are the

moral hinges (Wittgenstein, 1972) or contingent universals (Shweder, 1991) that help the smooth running of the social order.

The social intentionality view of battered women's stay/leave decision reflects the subject position view and the conjoint model of agency, both of which articulate the view that socially important others and institutions (such as the family), and human's relationship with those others and institutions are focal and necessary for normatively good actions. The agency of battered women in Ghana should be understood as part of a dialectic that is full of contradictions and tensions rather than construed as polar opposites where agency and victimisation are each known by the absence of the other (see Mahoney, 1994; Semaan, 2004). To equate staying in abusive relationship with battered women's passivity or lack of agency (failing to act on one's own behalf) will be a one-sided focus on agency which may leave little conceptual space for discovering the subtle and ambivalent ways by which abused women negotiate differential power relations and structural constraints in interpersonal relationships (Davis, 1983).

Conclusion

This article has shown that the agency of abused women in Ghana has a social intentionality. The social intentionality of battered women's stay/leave decisions embodies the normative meaning systems and cultural affordances of marriage and divorce in Ghana, in which normatively good actions require the consideration and anticipation of the perspectives of social others. For example, it is the family of a woman that traditionally gives its daughter in marriage, the same reason for which bride price is paid by a prospective suitor and his family to a bride's family (Adjei, 2017a; Nukunya, 2003). The process of marriage and divorce in Ghana is based on shared belief systems and value orientations manifested through negotiations, concessions and compromises made by individuals and the family.

A person's collective identity is the most significant and psychologically primary component of self-concept and, therefore, it is impossible to form personal identity without a collective identity to serve as a reference point (Taylor, Bougie, & Caouette, 2003). Victims of IPV in Ghana modify or balance personal intentions in order to comply with social expectations and values of their families, and to promote an experience of embedded interdependence. Balancing personal agency with social embeddedness

departs from the *all-agent* or *all-victim* conceptual dichotomy of agency, where a person is either an agent if he/she is not a victim and a victim if he/she is not an agent (Mahoney, 1994). Rather than perceived as helpless victims, lacking in agency, battered women in Ghana act in ways that illustrate the co-existence of agency and relationality. To ask why battered women stay in abusive relationships may have an unintended implication that they are impervious to contextual factors, or that they are expected to ignore the sociocultural constraints that impact personal behaviour and choices (see Adjei, 2017b). It may be an important oversight to explain battered women's intentional behaviour in violent relationships only from their private internal space and motives without a critical reflection of their interdependency, social embeddedness and normative meaning systems that circumscribe people's thought and sense of personhood.

References

- Adams, G. (2005). The cultural grounding of personal relationship: Enemyship in North American and West African worlds. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 88(6), 948–968.
- Adams, G., Bruckmüller, S., & Decker, S. (2012). Self and agency in context: Ecologies of abundance and scarcity. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, 1(3), 141–153.
- Adams, G., & Dzokoto, V. A. (2003). Self and identity in African studies. *Self and Identity*, 2, 345–359.
- Adinkrah, M. (2008). Spousal homicides in contemporary Ghana. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36(3), 209–216.
- Adjei, S. B. (2015a). Assessing women empowerment in Africa: A critical review of the challenges of the gender empowerment measure of the UNDP. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 27(1), 58–80. doi:10.1177/0971333614564740
- . (2015b). Partner dependency and intimate partner abuse: A sociocultural grounding of spousal abuse in Ghana. *Psychological Studies*, 60(4), 422–427. doi:10.1007/s12646-015-0336-4
- . (2015c). 'Correcting an erring wife is normal': Moral discourses of spousal violence in Ghana. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence (Advanced Online Publication)*. doi:10.1177/0886260515619751
- . (2016a). Masculinity and spousal violence: Discursive accounts of husbands who abuse their wives in Ghana. *Journal of Family Violence*, 31(4), 411–422. doi:10.1007/s10896-015-9781-z
- . (2016b). *Exploring the psychosocial, cultural and structural accounts of spousal abuse in Ghana* (PhD thesis). Denmark: Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University.
- . (2017a). Entrapment of victims of spousal abuse in Ghana: A discursive analysis of family identity and agency of battered women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(5), 730–754. doi:10.1177/0886260515586375

- Adjei, S. B. (2017b). Sociocultural groundings of battered women's entrapment in abusive marital relationship in Ghana. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 26(8), 879–901. doi:10.1080/10926771.2017.1284171
- Assimeng, M. (1999). *Social structure of Ghana: A study in persistence and change* (2nd ed.). Tema: Ghana Publishing.
- Bamberg, M., De Fina, A., & Schiffrin, D. (2011). Discourse and identity construction. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. Vignoles (Eds), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 565–584). New York, NY: Springer + Business Media, LLC.
- Bedford, O., & Hwang, K. (2003). Guilt and shame in Chinese culture: A cross-cultural framework from the perspective of morality and identity. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 33(2), 127–144.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coker-Appiah, D., & Cusack, K. (1999). *Violence against women in Ghana: Breaking the silence, challenging the myths and building support*. Accra: Gender Studies & Human Rights Documentation Center.
- Danquah, J. B. (1928). *Akim Abuakwa handbook*. London: Forster Groom.
- Dare, B., Guadagno, R., & Muscanell, N. (2013). Commitment: The key to women staying in abusive relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Relations, Intergroup Relations and Identity*, 6, 47–53.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The social construction of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43–63.
- Davis, A. (1983). *Women, race & class*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Eckstein, J. J. (2016). IPV stigma and its social management: The roles of relationship-type, abuse-type and victims' sex. *Journal of Family Violence*, 31(2), 215–225.
- Gao, W., Paterson, J., Abbott, M., Carter, S., Iusitini, L., & McDonald-Sundborn, G. (2010). Impact of current and past intimate partner violence on maternal mental health and behavior at 2 years after childbirth: Evidence from the Pacific Islands Families Study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 44(2), 174–182.
- GSS [Ghana Statistical Service]. (2012). *2010 population and housing census: Summary report of final results*. Accra, Ghana: Author.
- Gyekye, K. (1996). *African cultural values: An introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing
- Ikuenobe, P. (2006). *Philosophical perspectives on communalism and morality in African traditions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Issahaku, P. A. (2015). Health implications of partner violence against women in Ghana. *Violence and Victims*, 30(2), 250–264.
- Jazvac-Martek, M., Chen, S., & McAlpine, L. (2011). Tracking the doctoral student experience over time: Cultivating agency in diverse spaces. In L. McAlpine & C. Amundsen (Eds), *Doctoral education: Research-based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators* (pp. 17–36). New York, NY: Springer.

- Johnson, H., Ollus, N., & Nevala, S. (2008). *Violence against women: An international perspective*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Kurtiş, T., & Adams, G. (2015). Decolonizing liberation: Towards a transnational feminist psychology. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 3(1), 388–413.
- Loas, G., Cormier, J., & Perez-Diaz, F. (2011). Dependent personality disorder and physical abuse. *Psychiatry Research*, 185(1–), 167–170.
- Mahoney, M. R. (1994). Victimization or oppression? Women's lives, violence, and agency. In M. A. Fineman & R. Mykitiuk (Eds), *The public nature of private violence: The discovery of domestic abuse* (pp. 59–92). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253.
- . (2004). Models of agency: Sociocultural diversity in the construction of action. In V. Murphy-Bermen & J. J. Bermen (Eds), *The Nebraska symposium on motivation: Crosscultural differences in perspectives* (Vol. 49; pp. 1–57). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Mechanic, M. B., Weaver, T. L., & Resick, P. A. (2008). Mental health consequences of intimate partner abuse: A multidimensional assessment of four different forms of abuse. *Violence Against Women*, 14(6), 634–654.
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2010). Intersubjectivity, interobjectivity, and the embryonic fallacy in development science. *Culture & Psychology*, 16(4), 465–475.
- Morrell, R., & Ouzgane, L. (2005). African masculinities: An introduction. In R. Morrell & L. Ouzgane (Eds), *African masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present* (pp. 1–20). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nnaemeka, O. (1998). *Sisterhood, feminisms and power: From Africa to the diaspora*. Trenton, NJ/Asmara: African World Press.
- Nukunya, G. K. (2003). *Tradition and change in Ghana: An introduction to sociology* (2nd ed.). Accra: Ghana Universities Press.
- Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. (1998). Self as social representation. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The psychology of the social* (pp. 107–125). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Ratner, C. (1999). Three approaches to cultural psychology: A critique. *Cultural Dynamics*, 11(1), 7–31.
- . (2000). Culture and agency. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30(4), 413–434.
- Rhatigan, D. L., & Axsom, D. K. (2006). Using the investment model to understand battered Women's commitment to abusive relationships. *Journal of Family Violence*, 21(2), 153–162.
- Rusbult, C. E., & Martz, J. M. (1995). Remaining in an abusive relationship: An investment model analysis of nonvoluntary dependence. *Personality and Social Psychology bulletin*, 21, 558–571.
- Semaan, I. (2004). *Battered women's agency: Beyond staying and leaving*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association,

- Hilton San Francisco, CA. Retrieved 24 November 2017, from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p110515_index.html
- Schweikard, D. P., & Schmid, H. B. (2013). Collective intentionality. In N. Z. Edward (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved 24 November 2017, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/collective-intentionality>
- Shaw, R. (2000). 'Tok af, lef af': A political economy of Temne techniques of secrecy and self. In I. Karp & D. A. Masolo (Eds), *African philosophy as cultural inquiry* (pp. 25–49). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Shweder, R. R. A. (1991). Cultural psychology: What is it? In R. A. Shweder (Ed.), *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology* (pp. 73–110). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, M. D., Bougie, E., & Caouette, J. (2003). Applying positioning principles to a theory of collective identity. In R. Harré & F. M. Moghaddam (Eds), *The self and others: Positioning individuals and groups in personal, political, and cultural contexts* (pp. 197–215). Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.
- Verhoef, H. & Michel, C. (1997). Studying morality within the African context: A model of moral analysis and construction. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26(4), 389–407.
- Walker, L. E. A. (2000). *The battered woman syndrome* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Springer.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1972). *On certainty*. In G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright (Eds) and D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe (Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- WHO [World Health Organization]. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO Press.

Author's Biosketch

Stephen Baffour Adjei, PhD, is a Social/Cultural and Human Development Psychologist. He is a lecturer at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Education and Communication Sciences, College of Technology Education, Kumasi, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. He applies his research to understand the interactional complexities between culture, context and psychological processes, with a particular emphasis on interpersonal violence, human development and learning, agency and identity. He has taught, carried out research and directed programmes at universities in Africa and overseas, including University of Aarhus, Denmark, and Norwegian

University of Science and Technology, Norway. He has published several scholarly articles some of which have appeared in such international peer-reviewed journals as *Journal of Family Violence*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Psychological Studies*, *Psychology and Developing Societies*, *The Qualitative Report* and *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*.