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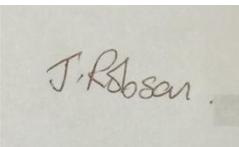
# Exploring Ghanaian Children's Perception of Friendship

## Introduction

All children have the right for their voice to be heard. MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith (2007) assert that the first step in acknowledging children's rights is to listen to children. Focusing on friendship, children should be given the opportunity to express their understanding of friendships. The field of early childhood has conducted a plethora of studies on defining children's friendship, friendship development, and the effects that friendship have on children. Findings have revealed that in early childhood, successful friendships amongst children add to the quality of the children's lives (Yu, Ostrosky, and Fowler, 2011). While this has been acknowledged, the studies that have been conducted on peer relationships, peer interactions, and social behaviours between children are predominantly of children from the United States (U.S), the United Kingdom (U.K.), Canada and many other individualistic cultures (Adams, 2016; Lindsey, 2002). Individualistic cultures stress "'I' consciousness" and autonomy, while collectivistic cultures emphasise "'we' consciousness" and collective identity (Brewer and Chen, 2007, p. 133-134). The research studies about cross cultural friendships in collectivistic cultures that have been conducted are typically not of children in the early childhood age frame, but of adolescents (French, Pidada, and Victor, 2005; Gonzalez, Moreno and Schneider, 2004). Henceforth, the aim of this research is to explore Ghanaian children's, children of a collectivist culture, perception of friendship.

This research will specifically focus on children from the Yaa-Kwaku village of Ghana. Pseudonyms, such as Yaa-Kwaku, will be utilised throughout the study to protect the privacy of those involved. Alderson and Morrow (2011) explain that pseudonyms are used in research to prevent the participants of a study from being identified. To effectively explore Ghanaian children's perception of friendship, these three research questions will shape the study:

1. How do the children of Yaa-Kwaku define friendship?
2. What do the children of Yaa-Kwaku identify as the value of friendships?
3. How do the children of Yaa-Kwaku characterise a good friend?

## Literature Review
### Definition, Theories, and Developmental Stage

Friendship is defined as a relationship which is voluntary, and not one that is mandatory (Dunn, 2004). Szarota, Cantarero and Matsumoto (2015) go on to further define friendship as a close relationship that is unromantic and intimate. The necessities of friendship, as stated in Hartup (1992), are reciprocity and the devotion between persons who regard themselves as equals. Piaget's (1965) theory of moral development demonstrates the impact of social relations on a child's moral development through equality and reciprocity (Berndt, 1998). It is imperative to remember that Piaget's (1965) theory did not directly refer to friendships, but, equality and reciprocity are mere standards in the development of friendships (Berndt, 1998).

The aspect of being equal is important as it highlights a balance in power relations between the individuals in a friendship. Berndt (1998) explains that Piaget (1965) described the social relations between children as egalitarian, as they lack the capability of enforcing their peers to obey them. For the children to have a developing friendship through ongoing interactions, they must cooperate with their friends (Berndt, 1998). Cooperation indicates an understanding that the children cannot coerce their peers into partaking in an activity that the other one does not want to partake in. Without having mutual respect, cooperation between the children will be unattainable. Therefore, it is necessary for children to respect one another as equals (Berndt, 1998). If the children do not see themselves as equal, the development of the friendship may suffer.

In addition to the children being equals, reciprocity is as meaningful to the development of children's friendships. Reciprocity is especially significant to friendships as it highlights the willingness of one to do what the other has done for him or her. "To enter into friendships is to know that a friend will seek out one's support but it is also to understand that with the prerogative of being able to ask for help comes with reciprocal obligations" (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010, p. 446). Although children may not be able to label their actions as being reciprocal, studies have shown that children are cognizant of the need to do for their friend as their friend does for them. An observational research study by Ross and Lollis (1989) reveal that children are friendly towards those children who were previously friendly to them. With time, there is an increase in friendly exchanges allowing for the relationship between the children to endure, creating an understanding amongst the children (Ross and Lollis, 1989). For Piaget (1965), understanding individuals and being understood by individuals establishes feelings of solidarity, as the children are obligated to adhere to certain forms of conduct (Youniss, 1992). The concept of solidarity portrays the interpersonal relationship in children's friendships.

Correspondingly, Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory places significant emphasis on the satisfaction that is received through close friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2014). Sullivan's theory (1953), being one of the most cited theories on friendship, asserts that children's friendships are "…based on closeness, and self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, and collaboration that requires sensitivity to the other person" (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2014, p.11). Friendships provide the opportunity for children to develop social skills, but it also develops children's concept of self. Gifford-Smith and Brownell (2003) state that without friendships and the intimacy and feelings of well-being that it offers, children would be unsuccessful in acquiring essential social skills. While Sullivan's (1953) theory is compelling, not all children's perception of friendship is so profound. This means that certain children are not aware of the psychological constructs underpinning friendships and cannot speak on concepts such as self-disclosure. However, McDougall and Hymel (2007) explain that children's perception of friendship are based on actions such as helping each other and participating in common activities (as cited in Poulin and Chan, 2010).

Children participating in shared activities and helping each other are examples of expectations in friendships. Bigelow and La Gaipa (1980) state that children establish expectations that their friends should maintain, and that children are appealed by those who meet such expectations (as cited in Clark and Ayers, 1993). A study conducted by Bigelow (1977) revealed that there are three stages in which to classify children's expectations of their friends (Erwin, 1993). As this research project is focused on children from the ages of five through eight, the egocentric or situational stage which is the first stage, will exclusively be looked at (Erwin, 1993). During the egocentric or situational stage, the child is self-centred, placing emphasis on "…rewards and costs, propinquity, shared activities, physical appearance, and possessions (Erwin, 1993, p. 48). Instead of going in depth with each of these characteristics, propinquity, solely, will be explained.

Hartup (1992) states that propinquity is the beginning of close relationships, defining propinquity as physical proximity. In selecting individuals to play with, children are most likely to associate themselves with others who are in their primary social environment (George and Hartmann, 1996). In effect, "…every demographic force that brings two children together is relevant to their becoming friends" (Hartup, 1992, p. 181). While an environment does not ensure that a friendship will develop between two children, it does increase the likeliness of the friendship forming. Regarding environments, it is crucial to consider Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory on ecological systems. Even though Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is not a theory on

friendship but a model of human development, it can be applied to children's friendship development (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2014). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory model focuses on one's culture as a constituent of the socioecological setting. The macrosystem, one aspect of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, may be used to explain how the social and cultural values of an environment cultivates friendships in children (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2014). Hinde (1987) stresses that peer relationships may be more directly impacted by cultural values than the characteristics of individuals, as peer activities are generally established on social norms (as cited in Chen, French, and Schneider, 2006). Therefore, it is critical to explore the cultural environment of children's friendship development.

## Collectivism

Ghana is a collectivistic country; thus, it is essential to analyse how collectivism may affect children's friendships. To effectively evaluate collectivism, individualism must also be defined. Collectivism is defined as cultures which "…foster interdependent selves and ingroup goals, encourage communal relationships, and place relatively more importance on norms as determinants of behaviour" (Szarota et al., 2015, p. 181). Collectivistic cultures highlight a cohesive nature, prioritising the need of the group rather than the need of the self (Hofstede, 1980). By contrast, individualistic cultures place more emphasis on the independent self, prefer personal goals rather than ingroup goals, promote interpersonal exchange, and assert the importance of attitudes as explanation of behaviour (Szarota et al., 2015). With these definitions in mind, it is possible that children's friendships and children's perception of friendships vary per culture.

## Belief

Yaa-Kwaku is a faith based village, therefore, it is important to analyse belief and the impact that it may have on the children's friendships. However, research conducted on children's friendships in relation with religion is quite limited. Regnerus (2003) affirms that there is an insufficient amount of research on children's friendship and religion. The limitation of research on religion influencing children's friendships results in a gap in research. Nonetheless, there are some research studies that have focused on a child's spirituality. Birkinshaw (2015) states that "'spirituality' may be fast becoming the more acceptable term in place of 'religion' in the west, possibly…due to spirituality being politically and religiously harmless, and potentially less offensive" (p. 83). Spirituality, though, is distinct from religion. Hyde (2008) defines

spirituality as a vital human trait, and as being an outward expression of the soul through beliefs and values of institutional religion, but can also be characterised through selfless deeds. A child's spirituality, then, may affect the child's perception on friendships. In short, it is not necessary to explore spirituality any further as this research project does not focus on children's perception of spirituality.

### Family

Before proceeding to examine the methodology, it is necessary to explore an additional factor which may influence children's friendships; family. Familial relationships are the first relationships that children develop, hence, these relationships may have a profound impact on the children's friendships (Dunn, 2004). Siblings, precisely, may influence children's friendship development. Dunn (2004) asserts that it is not a question of "…whether having a sibling or being an only child affects a child's friendships or vice versa, but how the kind of sibling relationship a child experiences connects with the sort of friendships he or she develops" (p. 146). Thus, the quality of a child's relationship with his or her sibling has the capability of either enhancing or diminishing a child's peer relationship. Dunn (2004) goes on to state that a child who is constantly in conflict with his or her sibling will most likely have an enjoyable relationship with a friend, while a child who has a close relationship with his or her sibling may be detached from friends. Hence, children's friendships are affected by their relationship with their family.

## Methodology

As a researcher, it was essential that my methodology accentuated a child's perspective rather than underemphasizing the results of his or her views and experiences. Greene and Hill (2005) state that a researcher who values the perspectives of children will be encouraged to discover more about the ways in which children feel, understand, interpret and negotiate the experiences of their daily lives. It is for this reason that my research paradigm was interpretivism. Mukherji and Albon (2015) characterises interpretivism as a "…position that emphasises gaining a detailed insight into an issue as opposed to being concerned with being able to make generalisations…" (p. 25). Interpretivism is based on subjectivity, the meaning in which individuals ascribe to their behaviour. Therefore, a qualitative approach was applied to my research project. A qualitative approach will not obscure the child's individuality or diminish the richness of the child's life (Greene and Hill, 2005). Instead, a qualitative approach is open-ended, holistic and narrative (Greene and Hill, 2005).

As an interpretivist with a qualitative approach, I conducted a case study with children ranging from five to eight years of the Yaa-Kwaku Christian School in Ghana. Yin (2013) states that a case study permits a researcher to focus on a "case", while maintaining a real-world and holistic perspective. To effectively yield results that are reflective of an individual, group, or organisation, multiple methods of data collection should be utilised (Robson, 2011). In utilising multiple methods of data collection, I applied a mosaic approach to my research project. The mosaic approach is a "…strength-based framework for viewing young children as competent, active, meaning makers and explorers of their environment" (Clark, 2008, p. 29). More specifically, the mosaic approach is a combination of observation and interviews, along with participatory tools (Clark, 2008).

To accomplish the mosaic approach, I utilised distinct data collection methods. I was a participant observer during the children's school day, observing them in their natural setting. Participant observation entails a researcher becoming a member of the group that is being observed, along with learning the habits, social conventions and many more of the group (Robson, 2011). The children also created drawings which provided them the opportunity to express themselves. O'Kane (2004) states that drawings grant children the freedom to convey and interpret their world by their own terms. Coupled with the drawings were semi-structured interviews which allowed me to be flexible in my questioning. Semi-structured interviews "...take the form of a series of predefined questions and a sequence of prompts and probes" (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2007, p. 152). A research design consisting of observation, drawings and interviews grants the children the opportunity to communicate their perception of friendship efficaciously.

## Discussion of Findings

After careful analysis of the compiled data, the findings of this research project will be divided into two main themes, with one of the themes consisting of sub-themes. The themes, including the sub-themes, are propinquity, and collectivism: belief and family. Even though the findings of this research solely exemplify Yaa-Kwaku's children's definition of friendship, it is nevertheless noteworthy.

### Propinquity

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, the children of Yaa-Kwaku village asserted that they went to the farm, caught fish, and retrieved water with their friends. To adequately comprehend why the children articulated such activities, it is imperative to remember that the children are from a village. Their environment plays an active role in how they define their friends and how their friendship unfolds. The data from this research project accentuates the statement from Hartup (1992) which declares that propinquity is influential in children's friendship development. Furthermore, by stating that friends retrieved water, caught fish and farmed together, the children of Yaa-Kwaku are giving prominence to communal activities. These activities are more than shared activities, they are activities that may only be carried out in a specific environment. Thus, it is unmistakable that the children's environment is shaping who they consider as friends, and the activities in which they engage in together. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory is visible throughout this analysis. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, the environment in which a child lives will contribute to the development of the child (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2014).

## Collectivism
## Belief

During the children's interviews, given the different activities which have already been articulated, there was another significant activity that the children expressed doing with their friends. The children of Yaa-Kwaku village revealed that, with their friends, they prayed. The acknowledgment from the children that they pray with their friends is intriguing, as it beckons further explanation. While conducting semi-structured interviews provides me with the opportunity to probe and prompt (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2007), I was unable to acquire a further response from the children as I was ill prepared. Regnerus' (2013) assertion of the lack of research on children's friendship in correlation with religion, as stated in the literature review, amplified my inability to evaluate the children's response of praying with their friends. In an attempt to bridge the gap in research, spirituality will be utilised to analyse children's friendship in a collectivistic culture. For the sake of this research project, religion and spirituality, although slightly different, will be used correspondingly. Hyde (2008) explained an act of spirituality as the characterisation of selfless deeds. Henceforth, a child that is spiritual will be selfless. Being selfless translates to an individual portraying an interdependent self rather than an independent self. The focus on the interdependent self, accentuates collectivism, the encouragement of communal relationships (Szarota et al., 2015). The data gathered throughout this research project emphasises belief as a significant attribute in understanding Ghanaian

children's perception of friendship. While it is not known how belief may affect children's friendship development, it is worth future exploration.

### Family

In collecting the data for this research project, the children were asked to draw their friends. During the children's interviews, when questioned about the individuals in their drawings, some of the children stated that it was either a brother or a sister. Assuming that the children did not understand the purpose of the drawings, the children were furthered questioned. From further questioning, it was revealed that the children did understand the objective of the drawings. As intriguing as the children expressing that they pray with their friends, drawing family as friends raises a significant question: Can the terms "friend" and "family" be used interchangeably? To answer this question competently, it is essential to analyse Ghanaian children's perception of friendship through the lens of collectivism.

As has been defined throughout this paper, a collectivistic culture places emphasis on the integration of individuals who are concerned with and care for each other (Hofstede, 1980). A collectivistic culture, then, promotes a tightly knit environment in which close relationships may develop. Ghana, being a collectivistic country, helps to clarify why the children would draw family members as friends. Equally important as the children drawing family members as friends is their response to the activities that they engage in with their friends. When inquired about the activities which regarded family as friends, the children expressed that they lived, played and ate together. According to the children, their siblings were regarded as friends because of these activities. Dunn (2004) asserts that a positive relationship with a sibling can lead to a child being detached from peers, but it was not evident that any of the children who mentioned a sibling lacked close relationships with their peers. Additionally, there were some children who stated that they swept and washed dishes with their friends, exemplifying common household activities. It can be inferred that in the Yaa-Kwaku village, family and friends are not defined concepts. The activities which the children stated are all communal activities, stressing the aspect of communal relationships in collectivistic cultures. Communal activities signify friendship to the children of Yaa-Kwaku.

### Conclusion

In exploring Ghanaian children's perception of friendship, the data revealed supports, contradicts, and builds on current literature on children's friendships. It is evident that friendships adhere to various constructs such as similarity and collaboration, stressing Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory. The findings also revealed that Bigelow's (1977) egocentric or situational developmental stage is accentuated through children's friendships as they expressed a plethora of shared activities that they engage in with their friends. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory on ecological system was distinctly visible because of its macrosystem's focus on social and cultural values. Through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, the collectivistic culture of Ghana was emphasised, displaying that collectivism has the capability of affecting children's friendship development. As there is a lack of research on young children's friendship in collectivistic cultures, along with inadequate research on children's belief possibly influencing children's friendships, there are gaps in the literature. This research study has, moreover, asserted that the definition of friendship is dependent on culture as friends and family are vaguely defined, leading to blurred lines between friends and family. While the exploration of Ghanaian children's perception of friendship provided new knowledge to the field of early childhood, there is, nevertheless, more research that needs to be conducted.

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