Mother or Wife?
An African Dilemma Tale and the Psychological Dynamics of Sociocultural Change

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Abstract. Inspired by “Mother or Wife” African dilemma tales, the present research utilizes a cultural psychology perspective to explore the dynamic, mutual constitution of personal relationship tendencies and cultural-ecological affordances for neoliberal subjectivity and abstracted independence. We administered a resource allocation task in Ghana and the United States to assess the prioritization of conjugal/nuclear relationships over consanguine/kin relationships along three dimensions of sociocultural variation: nation (American and Ghanaian), residence (urban and rural), and church membership (Pentecostal Charismatic and Traditional Western Mission). Results show that tendencies to prioritize nuclear over kin relationships – especially spouses over parents – were greater among participants in the first compared to the second of each pair. Discussion considers issues for a cultural psychology of cultural dynamics.

Keywords: personal relationship, cultural dynamics, Ghana, Charismatic Christianity, globalization

“A man, his wife, his mother, and his mother-in-law were attacked by a marauding band. They fled to the river, but his canoe could take only the man and one passenger. Which did he take?” (Doke, 1947)

Dilemma tale as cited in Bascom (1975, p. 93)

Suppose that someone presents you with a similar dilemma in which you must choose between saving your mother or your conjugal partner from drowning. To whom does your love stay true? In standard versions of this African dilemma tale, narrators typically imply that the correct choice is to save one’s mother: “Which did he take? Of course NOT his mother-in-law. His wife then? No, he can get another wife! But he could not get another mother” (Bascom, 1975, p. 93).

The choice of mother over spouse resonates with research on the primacy of kinship in West African settings. Constructions of relationship in many West African communities prioritize consanguinity over conjugality (e.g., Sudarkasa, 2007) and propose relationships of birth as the site of “true love.” However, the choice contrasts with constructions of relationship and family in WEIRD settings (Western educated, industrial, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) that inform scientific imagination in mainstream psychology. In these settings, there is a tendency to prioritize conjugality over consanguinity, and to construct the “romantic” relationship as the setting for “true love” (see also Wu, Cross, Wu, Cho, & Tey, 2012, for a similar discussion of parental prioritization in East Asian settings).

How do differences in the construction and experience of love and family arise? Rather than supposedly characteristic or essential features of reified cultural groups, the present study uses a paradigm inspired by “Mother or Wife” dilemma tales to explore the dynamic construction of personal relationship tendencies. In particular, we consider how people make decisions about allocation of health care resources in sociocultural conditions where ecological and ideological forces increasingly promote neoliberal-individualist subjectivities.

Cultural Dynamics: A Cultural Psychology Analysis

Appropriations of cultural psychology in mainstream psychological science tend to entail problematic reifications of culture and self. With respect to “culture,” the prevailing
focus on group comparisons tends to promote notions of static, monolithic entities with timeless, traditional essences (Adams & Markus, 2004; Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2008). With respect to “self,” the focus on self-construal tends to locate the source of action and experience in internal characteristics that crystallize during early childhood, persist throughout the lifespan, and direct experience as a trait-like essence. These reifying tendencies are ironically at odds with foundational statements of a cultural psychology analysis, which consider the relationship between cultural context and psychological experience to be one of dynamic, mutual constitution (Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Shweder, 1990).

One direction of the mutual constitution relationship refers to the cultural constitution of psychological experience (Adams, Salter, Picket, Kurtis, & Phillips, 2010). People are not monocultural beings with a singular, solidified self-construal; instead, they inherit a fluid intersection of cultural-ecological niches that continually afford particular understandings and behaviors. Although this process may sometimes result in a coherent cultural self, the more general result is the production of multicultured actors with multiple social identities whose habitual responses exist in dynamic attunement to the structure of multiple, overlapping cultural realities (e.g., meaning systems, ideas, institutions, and practices; Heine & Lehman, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The cultural constitution of psychological experience does not merely refer to deliberate incorporation of coherent ideologies that people can articulate and consciously consider as a guide for everyday action (as in the concept of self-construal). Rather, a more dynamic understanding of the cultural constitution of experience refers to something more like habitus: direct inscription of ecological affordances on a person’s habitual modes of affect, cognition, motivation, and being in the world (Bourdieu, 1977).

The other direction of this relationship refers to the psychological constitution of cultural reality (Adams et al., 2010). As people enact their culturally shaped preferences, they deposit traces of their subjectivity into the structure of everyday reality, producing (and reproducing) realities that objectify their understandings of the way the world is and should be (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). In the process, they exert a selective force on the evolution of cultural realities, passing along some ways of being while silencing potential alternative realities. Rather than the fading residue of distant tradition, the mutual constitution framework emphasizes that cultural worlds are active representations that evolve in dynamic attunement to changing subjectivities as people reproduce them to better align with other forces in their lives.

Applied to the topic of this special issue, a noteworthy implication of the mutual constitution framework is an emphasis on cultural dynamics as active generation of experience. Human actors construct emergent experience from multiple ecological affordances and not only produce change, but actively generate stability in the face of logical pressures toward change (e.g., globalization). Even when cultural patterns appear to be static and unchanging across generations, this appearance of inertia often reflects reproductive activity. Within this framework, preferential selection to maintain desired cultural ecologies reflects dynamical forces, too.

**Sociocultural Variation in Relationship**

Research exploring personal relationship from a cultural-psychological perspective has highlighted the extent to which relationship patterns in many West African communities reflect cultural ecologies that promote experience of embedded interdependence in environmentally afforded networks of interpersonal connection (Anderson, Adams, & Plaut, 2008). The notion of embedded interdependence refers to a sense of rootedness in context with overlapping networks of relatively “sticky” connections that provide little opportunity for choice or easy exit (see also Adams, 2005). These constructions of relationship are not just a set of values about connection, but also include the social realities—such as limited social and spatial mobility (e.g., Oishi, 2010; Yuki & Schug, 2012), eating from communal bowls, and lifelong communal coresidence in extended-family compounds (Fiske, 1991)—that directly foster an experience of embeddedness. We propose that engagement with these ecological realities promotes an emphasis on kinship as the prototypical relationship—a person is born into family ties that are not easy to break—and constructions of true love as dutiful performance of obligation within these relationships.

The contrast in these discussions is with the experience of abstracted independence that is prominent in WEIRD settings (Henrich et al., 2010) and informs normative standards of relationship in psychological science. These constructions of reality afford a sense of abstraction or insulation from the context and experience of personal relationship as a tenuous, voluntary agreement between inherently separate actors (Anderson et al., 2008). Again, these constructions are not just sets of values about choice and independence, but include social realities—such as high mobility, eating from individual place settings, and residence in self-contained apartment units—that promote the experience of self as a free agent in a frictionless, free market of relationship possibilities. Engagement with these ecological realities promotes an emphasis on conjugal connection as the prototypical relationship and constructions of true love as romantic self-exploration and emotional intimacy within these relationships.

**Sources of Sociocultural Change**

As our discussion of cultural dynamics makes clear, these constructions of relationship are not static forms; instead, people reproduce them in everyday activity as they nego-
tiate the interpersonal, social, and material influences that inform everyday existence. In this section we consider some current configurations of forces that impact relationship experience in many West African settings.

An overarching set of forces that impact identity and cultural production are associated with processes of globalization. Broadly defined, globalization involves the increased circulation of capital, ideas, and technologies across international borders. This process not only affects material realities (e.g., access to new technologies), but can have an impact on more ideational, psychological processes as well (Arnett, 2002). Particularly, “global culture” is heavily dominated by “western” values of individualism, free markets, and freedom of choice as globalizing affordances tend to flow out of the west to unevenly cover the rest of the globe (Arnett, 2002; Ferguson, 2006; Giddens, 1991).

Among the many ideologies circulating in global spaces, one of the most influential concerns the concept of romantic love as a basis for conjugal relationship (Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006). Discourses of romantic love are increasingly ubiquitous in global media, featuring prominently in television programming, music recording, and cinematic production. A cultural psychology analysis emphasizes a conception of these discourses as cultural technologies for the production of particular kinds of subjectivity and desire (Holland, 1992; Holland & Eisenhart, 1991). Within West African settings, discourses of romantic love are associated with desires for intimate companionship (rather than complementarity) in conjugal relationship, a related focus on emotional (rather than material) manifestations of care, and a risky tendency to disinvest in the security of broader kinship networks (Adonu, 2005; see also Cole, 2010).

### Urban Migration and Mobility

People in West African settings have also witnessed profound shifts in residential patterns over the course of the past century as economic opportunities attracted migrants from small, face-to-face communities to more anonymous, urban spaces. One implication of this pattern is a nuclearization of family experience. Life in a residentially stable community provides the ecological scaffolding for an emphasis on kinship and other forms of environmentally afforded connection. This stability ensures that people will grow, live, and die within a relatively small circle of people who occupy the same time and space. With increases in mobility, people leave behind those environmental affordances and rely to a greater extent on relationships of choice. This process frequently results in people choosing to reside with a spouse or partner, often distant from extended family of either partner. People build worlds around these relationships – nuclear-family dwellings rather than compound family houses – thereby producing ecological affordances that concretize and reproduce experience of separation from extended family influence.2

### World Religions

Another force of sociocultural change that has had a strong impact across many West African settings during the past century is a rapid rise in the influence of world religions, especially Christianity and Islam. The interpenetration of world religions and local realities provides an interesting window on cultural dynamics.

Regarding the cultural constitution of psychological experience, engagements with particular manifestations of world religion are associated with changes in personal relationships. The topic of the present research is one of the most important religious forces in many West African spaces during the last few decades: Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Robbins, 2004).

Three features of PCCs stand out for their resonance with the experience of abstracted independence. One feature is a conception of salvation as rescue from poverty. While Traditional Western Mission Churches (TWMC) typically encourage conservative values and modesty in the presence of God, PCC leaders teach that prosperity is a sign of God’s blessings, and they are often more visible than their constituents in display of expensive jewelry, nice cars, and unique personal styles (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). A second feature is a conception of salvation as transformation and empowerment. Many PCCs urge their members to become “born again” into “a new family in Christ” with the power to pursue personal and spiritual fulfilment. A third feature is a conception of salvation as healing and deliverance from sin and oppressive circumstances that limit opportunities for personal spiritual development. Pastors urge their congregation to make “a complete break with the past” (Meyer, 2004, p. 448) and to distance themselves not only from friends and family who have not been saved, but also from traditions and rituals (e.g., offerings of food and drink to ancestors) that otherwise reflect and reinforce the sense of embedded interdependence and prioritization of kinship. Together, these conceptions inform the hypothesis that a history of PCCs engagement will be associated with

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2 Of course, the effects of mobility are not categorical shifts. People who migrate to urban spaces often make extensive use of environmentally afforded connections by receiving practical assistance and residing with urban kin or people from the same community of origin (Hart, 1988). Moreover, urban migrants still feel a strong pull of relational obligation toward (and influence of) distant rural relatives (Geschiere & Gugler, 1998).

3 Prototypically, charismatic churches have been modeled after the Pentecostal/Evangelical traditions. However, “charismatic” churches throughout Africa are not confined to Pentecostal denominations, but have also manifested in prayer groups within long established Protestant, Roman Catholic, and other nondenominational churches (Meyer, 2004).
a shift in conceptions of love and family away from an emphasis on kinship networks to an emphasis on conjugal relationship and nuclear family.

Regarding the psychological constitution of cultural reality, one can note how people exercise agency over their encounters with world religions. People in West Africa are not passive recipients of hegemonic foreign influence. Instead, they selectively appropriate global cultural forms, adapt them to everyday local circumstances, and “Africanize” or localize those global forms in the process. Ethnographic research suggests that PCCs may have a particular attraction for upwardly mobile, middle class youth who acutely feel tensions between their desire for personal fulfillment and the webs of kinship obligation (Meyer, 2004). For these people, PCCs provide a legitimate moral cover to pursue forms of personal fulfillment which would otherwise expose them to social approbation and anxiety about accumulation (Adams, 2005). From this perspective, PCCs have risen to relative prominence in West Africa because people in those settings have selectively woven them into the fiber of everyday life to a greater extent than other forms of global or Christian influence.

**Overview of the Study**

To explore the resonance between personal relationship tendencies and cultural-ecological affordances associated with abstracted independence, we administered a resource allocation instrument in three locations (two in Ghana and one in the United States). The study assessed the tendency to prioritize support to conjugal (nuclear/spousal) over consanguine (kin/relatives) relationships along three dimensions of variation in independent selfways: national context (US, Ghanaian), residence within Ghana (urban, rural), and church membership within Ghana (PCC, TWMC). To the extent that affordances for abstracted independence promote an emphasis on conjugality over consanguinity, we hypothesized that tendencies to prioritize nuclear over kin relationships – and especially spouse over one’s parents – would be greater among participants in the first compared to the second of each pair of comparison settings.

**Method**

**Participants**

We recruited participants from two Ghanaian locations (Accra: N = 34, Mage = 31.7, 26% women; Navrongo: N = 36, Mage = 29.8, 50% women) and one US location (Kansas City: N = 31, Mage = 40.5, 48% women). Navrongo is located in the predominantly rural, Upper East Region of Ghana, and Accra is the cosmopolitan, capital city. Kansas City is a metropolitan area in the Midwestern region of the US. Summary of demographic information appears in Table 1.

**Procedure**

In the Ghanaian locations, 26 participants self-administered the survey. The remaining participants responded to survey questions with the assistance of four research assistants who provided translations in local languages (Kasem, Nankam, or Twi) as needed.4 We surveyed participants who attended PCCs (N = 33) and TWMCs (N = 34). The Navrongo Health Research Centre assisted in the recruitment of participants from local churches. In Accra, we

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4 In most of the “as needed” cases, this procedure was similar to an interview procedure. That is, the assistant read the survey item in the local language and recorded the response. In a few cases (n = 5), the assistant read the survey items (in English) and the participant followed along and recorded responses on the participant’s copy of the survey.

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recruited participants before church services. Participants from Kansas City self-administered the survey (in English) outside local Christian churches. During consent procedures, participants were informed of their confidentiality.

Participants first read a description of a resource division task: “Suppose there is a health emergency and several people request your help in paying for medical treatment. The requests are more than you can manage with your limited resources. Whom do you help?” Participants then ranked 10 relationships – best friend, brother, daughter, father, mother, neighbor, sister, self, son, and spouse – in the order that they would provide treatment. We instructed participants to imagine any relationships that they did not currently have. After completing the resource division task, participants responded to several demographic questions regarding their sex, age, marital and parental status, and frequency of church attendance (i.e., “About how often do you attend church?”). Church attendance ranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (= once a month) to 5 (= everyday; see Table 1).

Results

We computed relationship priority scores for each participant by subtracting raw ranking responses from 9 (i.e., the number of relationship targets excluding oneself). Higher numbers indicate that a participant placed greater priority on the associated relationship. We created a nuclear family priority score for each participant by averaging scores for spouse, son, and daughter. Similarly, we created a kinship family priority score for each participant by averaging scores for mother, father, brother, and sister. We assessed hypothesized differences by conducting two sets of comparative analyses. The first was a comparison of priority scores for nuclear and kin family relationships. However, because the composite indicators in the first comparison contain points of conceptual overlap – that is, parent-child relationships appear in both the nuclear construction as son/daughter and the kin-based construction as mother/father – we also conducted a comparison that focused on priority scores for spouse and parents (the parent priority score is a mean composite of priority scores for Mother and Father). We also examine our hypotheses by comparing their relative difference scores (nuclear minus kinship and spouse minus parent) as a measure of prioritization. Analyses include sex as a between subjects factor. Variations in degrees of freedom across analyses reflect cases in which participants failed to provide required information.

Geographical Location

We conducted mixed-model ANOVAs for relationship priority scores with Location (Navrongo, Accra, Kansas City) and Sex (men, women) as between-participant factors and Relationship Type (nuclear versus kinship in the first comparison, spouse versus parents in the second comparison) as a within-participant factor. To provide focused tests of hypothesized location differences, we conducted orthogonal planned contrasts with codes of (−1, −1, 2) and (−1, 1, 0) for Navrongo, Accra, and Kansas City samples, respectively. The first contrast tested the hypothesis that prioritization of nuclear/spouse relationships over kinship/parental relationships would be greater among participants in the American sample than in the Ghanaian samples. The second contrast tested the hypothesis that prioritization of nuclear/spouse relationships over kinship/parental relationships and their difference score would be greater among participants in the globally integrated, Accra sample than in the less globally integrated, Navrongo sample. Because these hypotheses are directional, we evaluated contrasts with one-tailed tests of significance.

Nuclear Versus Kinship

The mixed-model ANOVA revealed a main effect on the within-subjects factor such that nuclear relationships (M = 5.71, SD = 1.38) received more resources on average than kin-based relationships (M = 4.21, SD = 1.01), F(1, 90) = 46.30, p < .01, ηp2 = .34. There was no main effect of location, F(1, 90) < 1, p = .46, ηp2 = .02; however, the Location × Relationship Type interaction was significant, F(2, 90) = 6.65, p < .01, ηp2 = .13 (see Table 2). Neither the main effect of sex nor its interactions with relationship type and location were significant, ps ≥ .15.

To interpret this Location × Relationship Type interaction, we conducted orthogonal planned contrasts to test ef-

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5 Although mother is the specific subject of the dilemma providing inspiration for the study, many of the people of northern Ghana participate in patrilineal cultural practices and express related values. This contrasts with southern and central Ghana, where many people are matrilineal. Specifically, patrilineal practices are likely to affect prioritization of fathers in our Navrongo sample. Thus, we use a parent composite to test our hypotheses.

6 We conducted preliminary analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) where we included age, marital status, and parental status in the model. However, in this case the covariates primarily further indicate that Ghanaians and Americans live in different cultural contexts with different modal realities. Marital and parental statuses are related to age and the median age differs across these contexts, even outside of our study ( 21.4 years in Ghana; 36.9 in the United States; see CIA Fact Book (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011)). While age, marital status, and parental status variables are independently related to our prioritization task, the covariates did not consistently reach traditional levels of significance when entered simultaneously into our models. In choosing which analyses to report here, we leaned toward parsimony since ANCOVA results were similar to the analyses without these covariates. In some cases our hypothesized between-subject factor effects slightly decreased, but they remained significant and consistent throughout.
Table 2. Relationship priority scores and composites by geographic location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority score</th>
<th>Navrongo, GH</th>
<th>Accra, GH</th>
<th>Kansas City, US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>3.28 (1.94)</td>
<td>3.88 (1.98)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best friend</td>
<td>2.06 (2.00)</td>
<td>1.53 (1.40)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>5.00 (2.03)</td>
<td>5.33 (1.69)</td>
<td>5.79 (2.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>5.12 (1.90)</td>
<td>3.85 (2.45)</td>
<td>4.18 (1.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>6.43 (1.90)</td>
<td>6.21 (1.95)</td>
<td>4.18 (2.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbor</td>
<td>0.83 (1.48)</td>
<td>0.68 (1.41)</td>
<td>0.57 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>3.09 (1.65)</td>
<td>3.52 (1.56)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>5.72 (1.77)</td>
<td>5.58 (1.94)</td>
<td>6.57 (1.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>4.72 (2.64)</td>
<td>5.76 (2.15)</td>
<td>6.29 (1.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>5.16 (1.38)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.38)</td>
<td>6.21 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>4.51 (1.06)</td>
<td>4.39 (1.02)</td>
<td>3.67 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear-kin difference</td>
<td>0.64 (2.27)</td>
<td>1.24 (2.23)</td>
<td>2.54 (1.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>4.72 (2.64)</td>
<td>5.76 (2.15)</td>
<td>6.29 (1.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>5.74 (1.58)</td>
<td>5.03 (1.58)</td>
<td>4.18 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-parent difference</td>
<td>−1.09 (3.68)</td>
<td>0.80 (2.89)</td>
<td>2.11 (2.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. GH = Ghana; US = United States. Within each row, means with different subscripts are significantly different using the Tukey honestly significant difference test (p ≤ .05). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

effects of location on nuclear priority scores, kinship priority scores, and their relative difference. The first contrast, testing hypothesized differences as a function of national setting, was significant for nuclear priority scores, t(94) = 2.90, p < .01; kinship priority scores, t(95) = −3.49, p < .01; and the relative difference score, t(94) = 3.29, p < .01. Participants in the American setting (M = 6.21, SD = 1.15) showed greater prioritization of nuclear relationships than did participants in the Ghanaian settings (M = 5.34, SD = 1.39); but participants in Ghanaian settings (M = 4.45, SD = 1.03) showed greater prioritization of kinship relationships than did participants in American settings (M = 3.67, SD = 0.91). Combined into a single indicator of relative prioritization, participants in the American setting (M = 2.54, SD = 1.97) showed greater tendency to prioritize nuclear over kinship relationships than did participants in the Ghanaian settings (M = 0.93, SD = 2.25). The second contrast – testing hypothesized differences as a function of location within Ghana – was not significant for any of the three outcomes (ps ≥ .11; see Table 2 for means).

Spouses and Parents

The mixed-model ANOVA revealed a main effect on the within-subjects factor such that spousal relationships (M = 5.48, SD = 2.37) received more resources on average than did parental relationships (M = 5.03, SD = 1.67), F(1, 89) = 4.26, p = .04, ηp² = .05. There was no main effect of location, F(1, 89) < 1, p = .95, ηp² < .01; however, the hypothesized Location × Relationship Type interaction was once again significant, F(2, 89) = 8.79, p < .01, ηp² = .17 (see Table 2). To interpret this interaction, we conducted orthogonal planned contrasts to test effects of location on spouse priority scores, parent priority scores, and relative prioritization based on the spouse-parent difference scores.

The first contrast was significant for spouse priority scores, t(94) = 2.03, p = .023; parent priority scores, t(94) = −3.43, p < .01; and the relative prioritization score, t(93) = 3.20, p < .01. Participants in the American (M = 6.28, SD = 1.97) setting showed greater prioritization of spouse than did participants in the Ghanaian settings (M = 5.22, SD = 2.45); but participants in Ghanaian settings (M = 5.39, SD = 1.61) showed greater prioritization of parent than did participants in American settings (M = 4.18, SD = 1.56). Combined into a single indicator of relative prioritization, participants in the American setting (M = 2.11, SD = 2.58) showed greater tendency to prioritize spouse over parents than did participants in the Ghanaian settings (M = −0.17, SD = 3.43), who tended to prioritize parents over spouses.

The second contrast was significant for spouse priority scores, t(94) = 1.87, p = .03; significant for parent priority scores, t(94) = −1.88, p = .03; and significant for the relative prioritization score, t(93) = 2.49, p < .01. Participants in globally integrated, urban Accra (M = 5.76, SD = 2.15) indicated greater prioritization of spouse than did participants in less integrated, less urban Navrongo (M = 4.72, SD = 2.64); but participants in Navrongo (M = 5.74, SD = 1.58) prioritized parents more than did participants in Accra (M = 5.03, SD = 1.58). Combined into a single indicator of relative prioritization, participants in Accra (M = 0.80, SD = 2.89) showed a greater tendency to prioritize spouse over parents (i.e., a positive spouse-parent difference) than did participants in Navrongo (M = −1.09, SD = 3.68), who tended to prioritize parents over spouse.

Results also revealed a main effect of sex, F(1, 89) =
3.84, *p* = .05, $\eta^2_p = .04$, and a marginal Sex × Relationship Type interaction, *F*(1, 89) = 3.43, *p* = .07, $\eta^2_p = .04$. Men (M = 6.00, *SD* = 2.15) prioritized spouses more than women did (M = 4.90, *SD* = 2.49), *t*(94) = 2.30, *p* = .024 (two-tailed); but women (M = 5.06, *SD* = 1.64) and men (M = 5.06, *SD* = 1.72), prioritized parents similarly, *t*(94) < 1, *p* = .99 (two-tailed).

### Charismatic Church Participation

We conducted mixed-model ANOVAs for relationship priority scores of Ghanaians participants with Church (PCC, TWMC) and Sex (men, women) as between-participant factors and Relationship Type as a within-participant factor.

### Nuclear Versus Kinship

Results of the mixed-model ANOVA revealed a main effect of relationship type such that participants overall prioritized nuclear (M = 5.35, *SD* = 1.37) more than kin-based relationships (M = 4.40, *SD* = 0.97), *F*(1, 62) = 10.98, *p* < .01, $\eta^2_p = .15$. However, results revealed no other main effects or interactions (*ps* ≥ .42), including the hypothesized Church × Relationship Type interaction, *F*(1, 62) < 1 (see Table 3).

### Spouses and Parents

The mixed-model ANOVA for the comparison of spouse and parents did not reveal a main effect of relationship type, *F*(1, 61) < 1, *p* = .53, $\eta^2_p = .01$. However, there was a marginal effects of Church, *F*(1, 61) = 2.93, *p* = .09, $\eta^2_p = .05$, and most important for evaluation of hypotheses, the spouse versus parents analyses revealed a significant Church × Relationship Type interaction, *F*(1, 61) = 4.13, *p* = .047, $\eta^2_p = .06$ (see Table 3).

Follow-up analyses confirm that PCC participants (M = 5.88, *SD* = 2.24) prioritized spouse more than did TWMC participants did (M = 4.59, *SD* = 2.52), *t*(64) = 2.19, *p* = .033. Participants from TWMC churches (M = 5.47, *SD* = 1.54) tended (but not significantly) to prioritize parents more than PCC participants did (M = 5.26, *SD* = 1.71), *t*(64) < 1, *p* = .60. The combined effect of these opposite tendencies was to produce the hypothesized difference in relative prioritization, *t*(63) = 1.97, *p* = .05. Although participants from TWMCs (M = 5.95, *SD* = 3.39) tended to prioritize parents over spouse, participants from PCCs (M = 0.69, *SD* = 3.32) tended to prioritize spouse over parent.

### Cultural Engagement

Our final analyses explored whether the tendency to prioritize resources to spouses relative to parents was merely a function of categorical church membership or linked to PCC engagement as indicated by church attendance. In order to assess this question, we examined the relationships between church attendance and prioritization scores (zero-order correlations, one-tailed). Consistent with the hypothesized effects of PCC attendance, results confirmed a positive relationship between frequency of PCC attendance and nuclear prioritization, *r*(32) = .29, *p* = .052. In addition, there was a significant negative relationship between PCC church attendance and the nuclear-kin difference score, *r*(32) = .35, *p* = .020. The positive significant relationship between PCC church attendance and the nuclear-kin relationship score, *r*(32) = .35, *p* = .025, provides evidence that the prioritization of nuclear relationships over kin-based relationships was linked to PCC attendance. TWMC attendance was not significantly correlated with nuclear, kinship, or nuclear-kin difference prioritization scores, *ps* ≥ .25.

Neither the relationship of PCC attendance with spouse nor parent prioritization reached traditional levels of significance, *ps* ≥ .12; however, the correlations were in the predicted directions. When calculated as a difference score, prioritization of spouse over parent (spouse-parent difference) was correlated (marginally) with PCC attendance, *r*(32) = .25, *p* = .088. TWMC attendance was not significantly correlated with spouse or the spouse-parent difference prioritization scores, *ps* ≥ .36; however, there was a marginally significant, positive relationship between TWMC attendance and parent prioritization, *r*(31) = .24, *p* = .093.

### Table 3. Relationship priority scores of Ghanaians participants as a function of church membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority score</th>
<th>PCC N = 32</th>
<th>TWMC N = 34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>3.53 (1.97a)</td>
<td>3.23 (1.82b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best friend</td>
<td>1.66 (1.64a)</td>
<td>1.81 (1.85b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>4.91 (1.94a)</td>
<td>5.52 (1.82b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>4.34 (2.18a)</td>
<td>4.29 (2.34b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>6.03 (2.12a)</td>
<td>6.68 (1.60b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbor</td>
<td>0.63 (1.18a)</td>
<td>0.81 (1.58a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>3.44 (1.87a)</td>
<td>3.26 (1.34a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>5.56 (1.83a)</td>
<td>5.71 (1.90b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>5.88 (2.24a)</td>
<td>4.65 (2.47b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>5.45 (1.36a)</td>
<td>5.25 (1.40b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>4.42 (1.03a)</td>
<td>4.46 (1.02b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear-kin difference</td>
<td>1.11 (2.22a)</td>
<td>0.79 (2.23a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>5.88 (2.24a)</td>
<td>4.59 (2.52b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>5.26 (1.71a)</td>
<td>5.47 (1.54b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse-parent difference</td>
<td>0.69 (3.32a)</td>
<td>−0.95 (3.39b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** PCC = Pentecostal Charismatic Church; TWMC = Traditional Western Mission Church. Within each row, means with different subscripts are significantly different using the Tukey honestly significant difference test (*p* ≤ .05). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.
Discussion

The results provide evidence for the hypothesized association between ecological affordances for abstracted independence and tendencies to prioritize conjugal over consanguine relationships. We observed this evidence along three dimensions of cultural-ecological variation in affordances for abstracted independence.

Cross-National Variation

Most typical of “cultural” research within social psychology, we observed a cross-national difference such that tendencies to prioritize conjugality were greater among participants in a North American setting (associated with ecologies of abstracted independence) than in Ghanaian settings (associated with ecologies of embedded interdependence). This pattern is consistent with previous research that considers sociocultural influences on conceptions of “true” or defining relationship. Although North American spaces and mainstream social psychology tend to valorize the “sacred” conjugal couple, everyday discourse and social practice in many West African settings reveal a valorization of kinship as the primary site for personal affection, loyalty, and obligation (Adams, Anderson, & Adoun, 2004; Adams, Kurtis, Salter, & Anderson, 2012). This pattern is also consistent with previous research that considers sociocultural influences on conceptions of love and care (Dion & Dion, 1991). Mainstream social psychology and people in North American settings tend to valorize pleasurable companionship and verbally oriented, emotional support as the essence of love and care. Constructions of relationship in many West African settings emphasize dutiful fulfillment of interpersonal obligations and tangible practical assistance as the essence of love and care (Coe, 2011).

Regional Variation

The potential problem with this type of conclusion is that, regardless of researcher intentions, it affords an entity concept of culture as timeless, essential difference between categorical groups (Adams & Markus, 2004). One strategy to minimize such binary essentialism is to consider variation within nations as a function of engagement with more specific cultural processes. As a step in this direction, we compared responses of participants from the cosmopolitan capital of Ghana (Accra) and a rural town (Navrongo) that differ in opportunities for global engagement. In support of hypotheses, results indicated that— even within Ghana—participants from a globally integrated setting showed greater prioritization of spouse over mother than did participants in a less integrated setting.

Documenting microcultural variation in relationship experience between settings that vary in global integration within a national context represents an important contribution to the study of cultural dynamics, especially when conventional practice is to investigate culture via “cross-cultural comparisons” of university students from different nations. Patterns of experience across Ghana are not the timeless manifestations of some traditional Ghanaian essence. Instead, people within Ghanaian settings vary in their engagement with modal “Ghanaian” patterns, just as people within American settings vary in engagement with modal “American” patterns (e.g., Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). The present study illuminates within-nation variation and disrupts tendencies to reify diverse patterns into a homogeneous, Ghanaian other (see Okazaki et al., 2008).

Despite benefits of exploring regional variation, this strategy still compares tendencies of people across locations and then infers cultural processes from observed group differences (and homogenizes these tendencies). A preferable alternative strategy might be to consider individual variation in engagement with cultural-psychological influences rather than compare people in locations that vary along several dimensions of cultural influence.

Church Participation

As an example in the present study, we considered variation in engagement with different constructions of Christianity, which previous research (e.g., Meyer, 2004) suggests may be associated with variation in experience of personal relationship. In support of hypotheses, results suggested that participants who attended PCCs showed greater prioritization of conjugal relationship— and did so as a function of more frequent church attendance— than did participants who attended TWMCs.

Cultural constitution accounts of this association propose that church participation exerts causal influence on relationship experience. As people engage with PCC patterns, they learn to prioritize conjugal relationship and direct resources away from consanguine relationship. Although the present results are consistent with this interpretation, their correlational nature does not rule out reverse causal influence: that prioritization of conjugal relationship leads people to select PCCs and attend them with greater frequency than TWMCs.

Rather than regard the ambiguity of the correlational result as a shortcoming, we take it as an opportunity to emphasize the complementary focus on the psychological constitution of cultural reality. Ethnographic research suggests that the popularity of PCCs among relatively young, upwardly mobile members of society or people in middle-class African communities is not an accident (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Obadare, 2006). Rather, people in these settings find the message of PCCs attractive because it legitimizes their desire for personal fulfillment (including conjugal companionship), and because it relieves anxieties associated with prioritizing obligations to spouse and children at the expense of competing demands from broader
relational networks. These expressions have implications for the reproduction of cultural reality. As people “vote with their feet” (or wallets) and choose some churches rather than others, they extend the popularity of some constructions of Christianity, while silencing others.

**Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, the design relies on data from a single timepoint to make inferences about sociocultural change. Although results are consistent with expectations derived from ethnographic observations of West African contexts and the increasing global influence of PCCs (Meyer, 2004; Robbins, 2004), we do not have longitudinal data to compare relationship experience before and after engagement. Second, although we propose that observed tendencies to prioritize conjugal or consanguine relationship are a reflection of ecological affordances for abstracted independence or embedded interdependence, we did not include a measure of either these ecological forces or individual differences in embodiment of these forces (e.g., self-construal).

**Implications for Understandings of Development**

Results of analyses comparing the three research settings are compatible with a “development” or “modernization” story of cultural dynamics. Participants in the Kansas City setting showed the strongest evidence of prioritization of conjugal relationship, the pattern associated with postmodern individualist subjectivity. Participants in a “traditional,” rural Ghanaian setting showed the strongest deviation from this pattern. Participants in Accra showed tendencies that were intermediate between these two extremes, broadly consistent with the idea of movement along a developmental path from “traditional” patterns evident in the Navrongo sample to “modern” patterns evident in the Kansas City sample.

Although not common in psychological science (see Burman, 2008), critiques of modernization or development accounts abound in other fields. One critique emphasizes the possibility of multiple modernities. Rather than converge on a single track of cultural evolution leading to what looks like European American modernity, people in different settings exert agency over globalizing forces to create multiple local modernities, each of which can constitute viable paths to well-being (Adams et al., 2012).

Another important critique targets the assumption of progress: the idea that movement from traditional African patterns to something akin to current European American patterns constitutes liberation or betterment of people’s lives (Appiah, 1992; Burman, 2008). Implicit in “progress” accounts is a pathologization of African emphases on kinship as an antiquated barrier to people’s emotional security and personal fulfillment in companionate conjugal relationships (Adams et al., 2012). The apparent movement from “traditional” prioritization of kinship to a “modern” prioritization of conjugalty is presumed to represent progress to the extent that it liberates people (perhaps especially women) from oppressive family control.

A variety of work challenges progress narratives of cultural change. Observers in African spaces have noted that the status of romantic love as a beneficial force is somewhat ambiguous (see Cole & Thomas, 2009; Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006). Fueled by global media discourse on romantic love and companionship as prescriptive standards of modernity, people in many West African settings increasingly forgo the security of kinship-based relationality for the adventurous promise of personal fulfillment in conjugal relationality. However, those who do so put themselves at risk for hardship when the fantastic promises fail to materialize. In particular, they find themselves stranded without support networks that are essential for basic survival in the economic circumstances that characterize many West African worlds.

Even when people do achieve the promise of personal fulfillment in conjugal/nuclear relationality, this achievement comes at a cost to broader kinship networks. Given declining mortality and birth rates, many communities worldwide have unprecedented proportions of elders requiring care from a decreasing proportion of potential providers. The combination of trends means that people are disinvesting in broader kinship networks at the same time that demand for support to elders is increasing. One potential consequence for community well-being in North American and other “modern” settings is that elder abandonment and abuse are an increasing societal problem (e.g., Cooper, Selwood, & Livingston, 2008).

**Psychological Science as a Force of Cultural Dynamics**

We psychological scientists are not neutral observers of cultural dynamics. Instead, we are active, often enthusiastic, participants in prescriptive discourses of development (Burman, 2008). Acting in accordance with a call to contribute to human welfare, scientists and practitioners prescribe patterns of relationship as normative standards for

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7 The utility of individual difference measures to assess hypotheses about mediation of group differences (Matsumoto, 1999) is open to debate. Reasons for doubting their utility include the problem of reference effects (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002) and doubts about accessibility of relevant processes to introspection (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). To this we add another reason for doubt. Cultural influence is not always associated with individual differences of experience (e.g., individual SES); instead, cultural influence is often a product of engagement with shared constructions of reality (community wealth or poverty), whether in the form of intersubjective norms (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010) or embodied traces of engagement with common cultural ecologies (Bourdieu, 1977).
happiness. A cultural psychology analysis suggests that scientists practice greater reflexivity regarding the sociocultural contexts that inform their research and proceed with caution when making relationship prescriptions. The imposition of standard prescriptions without regard for context—for example, influencing people in West African settings to disinvest in the security of consanguine/kinship models for more risky investment in conjugal/nuclear connection—can have unanticipated negative effects in settings where everyday ecologies afford different models of relationship. Moreover, disregard for sociocultural context can also have negative implications even within the European and American settings that inform scientific imagination (for example, by emphasizing relationship patterns that contribute to personal fulfillment at the possible expense of collective well-being). An ongoing task of a cultural psychology analysis is to disrupt the progress narratives of cultural dynamics that inform mainstream research and practice.

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