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An International Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, and Practice

ISSN: 1556-4886 (Print) 1556-4991 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uvao20

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To cite this article: Stephen Baffour Adjei & Anthony Mpiani (2018) Bride Price, Cultural and Gender Identity, and Husband-to-Wife Abuse in Ghana, Victims & Offenders, 13:7, 921-937, DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2018.1506372

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2018.1506372

Published online: 24 Aug 2018.

VICTIMS & OFFENDERS
2018, VOL. 13, NO. 7, 921–937
https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2018.1506372

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Bride Price, Cultural and Gender Identity, and Husband-to-Wife Abuse in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Although much anecdotal evidence about the legendary practice of bride price exists in Ghana, there is a paucity of empirical studies that explore the psychological impact of the practice on the people who pay and those for whom bride price is paid. This paper draws insights from discursive psychology to explore the subjective interpretations of and contextualized discourses around the time-honored custom of bride price, and how it shapes cultural and gender identity and husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana. Semistructured focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 32 participants, comprising 16 perpetrators (men) and 16 victims (women) from rural and urban Ghana. The age of participants ranged from 24 to 60 years old. Discursive accounts of participants suggest that payment of bride price serves as a material condition necessary for accomplishing desired masculinity and femininity, legitimizing husbands' exercise of matrimonial authority over their wives, and apparently objectifying and commoditizing women in marriage. The paper concludes that the marked and continued saliency of the practice of bride price results from its significant role in conferring cultural identity status on both men and women in Ghana.

KEYWORDS

Bride price; cultural identity; gender identity; husband-to-wife abuse; discursive psychology; Ghana

Marriage is a cultural universal. In most cultures, the process of marriage involves transfers between the families of the groom and the bride. These transfers mostly come in the form of payments. Generally, such marriage payments can be categorized into two: dowry and bride price (Anderson, 2007). The custom of dowry, mainly practiced in South Asia, involves payments made by the bride to the groom or his family (Callaway, 2017; Mangena & Ndlovu, 2013). Conversely, bride price refers to the payments that a prospective groom and his family make to a prospective bride and her family (Adjei, 2016b; Anderson, 2007). Payment of bride price remains a common and valued cultural practice in most African countries. The practice is particularly prevalent in more than 90% of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Ngutor, Yendev, & Arumun, 2013). For example, between 1980 and 1990, 88% and 79% of marriages contracted in rural and urban Uganda respectively involved payment of bride price (Huzayyin & Acsádi 1976, as cited in Anderson, 2007).

Historically, the institution of bride price is ancient, dating as far back as 3000BCE when ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, Mesopotamians, Incas, and Aztecs were all believed to

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have practiced the tradition of bride price (Anderson, 2007). The social science has in recent times seen a burgeoning number of studies that have contributed to our understanding of the practice, its relevance, and its influence on gender identities. Traditionally, bride price payment serves to validate customary marriages in most African societies (Thiara & Hague, 2011). For example, extant studies have demonstrated that the bride price custom indemnifies the bride's family for the loss of her (re)productive services to her husband's family, solidifies the new affinal bonds created by marriage, and legitimizes children born to the union (see Bourdillon, 1997; Muthegheki, Kule, & Naeemah, 2012; Thiara & Hague, 2011). These research accounts essentially suggest that any marriage that does not involve the payment of bride price may be considered as casual sex.

Over the past years, the relationship between the practice and intimate partner violence (IPV) has also received research attention. For example, Matembe (2004) indicated that the custom of bride price influences violence in intimate relationships particularly in Africa. A handful of the existing studies further suggest that the motivations, processes, and outcomes of the bride price custom are gendered and reinforce male dominance and female subordination in marriage (Kaye, Mirembe, Ekstrom, Kyomohendo, & Johansson, 2005). In this regard, the bride price institution is believed to reinforce patriarchy by perpetuating the low status of women and keeping them in eternal bondage. For example, Mangena and Ndlovu (2013) argued that a woman whose bride price is paid is commoditized and her husband may choose to treat her the way he wants.

Although the extant studies provide useful insights into how the bride price custom shapes gender identities and male dominance, a critical analysis of the literature reveals two major limitations. First, while many of these studies generally and objectively examine the influence of bride price on gender identities and male dominance, only a few have contextualized and explored the subjective interpretations of the people who pay and those (women) for whom bride prices are paid (Rudwick & Posel, 2014; Thiara & Hague, 2011). Second, while most of the studies view identity as something people have, only a few of them have conceptualized and analyzed it (identity) as something people do or construct in everyday mundane discursive activities (e.g., Rudwick & Posel, 2014). These limitations leave little conceptual space for understanding the broader implications of bride price practice and the nuanced ways by which the practice influences gender identities and male dominance in marriage. The empirical focus of this study is to fill this gap by exploring the extent to which bride price custom shapes cultural and gender identity, and husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana.

A synoptic view of bride price custom in Africa

The intent of this section is to briefly show the different framings of the African bride price system by early social scientists, and to provide relevant context for appreciating contemporary discourses around the practice in Ghana. There are different names for the practice of bride price in different countries and regions of Africa. Among the Zulus of South Africa, it is often known as *ilobolo* (Hague & Thiara, 2009), the Tiv of central Nigeria call it *kem* (Ngutor et al., 2013), and the Akans of Ghana call it *tiri nsa*. In the period between 1929 and 1931, anthropologists studying in Africa engaged in a lively controversy concerning the best term to use for designating the transfer of property that frequently takes place at African marriages. A number of these researchers suggested

different nomenclature to be used to describe the function of the custom of bride price as practiced in Africa. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1931) proposed the term "bride-wealth " as a relatively neutral term to capture both theories and functions of the custom. For the most part of subsequent contributors to the debate on the subject, *bride-wealth* came to prevail over alternative terms and was widely accepted as the best way to avoid "bride-price" (Gray, 1960). Fundamentally, all these early researchers agreed that *bride-price* was an objectionable term, and thus, these social scientists believed themselves to be correcting a view of African marriage which they thought was wrongly represented as an essentially commercial transaction, with wives being treated as possessions (Gray, 1960).

However, other anthropologists have strongly argued against such comparisons insisting that the institution of bride price in Africa cannot be akin to a commercial transaction (see Mair, 1969; Radcliffe-Brown, 1969). Arthur (1953) observed that the view that African marriage involved a price for a woman or was akin to "wife purchase" and thus morally repugnant was oversimplified and wrongly perceived. This (mis)understanding of the bride price custom stems mainly from a single ethnocentric (Eurocentric) interpretation of the practice—namely, that wife purchase is necessarily debasing for the people who practice it because of its economic character. This view unfortunately overlooks the immeasurable intrinsic and social value of the practice to the two families engaged in marriage. As indicated previously, here, we examine the contemporary discourses of those who pay and those for whom bride price is paid.

The custom of bride price in Ghana: Then and now

The Ghanaian society and its cultural practices have undergone several changes over the past years. Among the cultural practices that have been significantly altered is the custom of bride price. In this section, we briefly consider the practice of bride-price in two time periods. First, we examine how the tradition of bride price was practiced then. The word *then* used herein refers to the period before 1867 when Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) was colonized by the British (Levy, 2002). Particularly, it represents the time period before cash was introduced into the Ghanaian economy by the British colonialists. Second, we look at how the bride price custom is practiced now. The word *now* denotes the period during and after British colonization of Ghana (i.e., from 1867 to present), when the Ghanaian economy was monetized and payment of bride price involved cash either in addition to or in lieu of other items such as drinks and ornaments.

Traditionally, marriage is contracted between two families—those of the groom and the bride. In Ghana, formal establishment of marriage results from the payment of *tiri nsa* by the groom and his family to the bridal family (Adjei, 2015a; Nukunya, 2003). In the old days, payment of bride price was a family affair. A woman's bride price was paid by her groom and his family (Nukunya, 2003). That is, a groom was usually supported financially by his family in paying the bride price of his wife-to-be. Particularly, among the Asantes, the father of the groom played a pivotal role in the payment of bride price for his son (Ghanaweb, 2015). Perhaps, this was the case because the male child usually lived with and worked freely for his father before marriage. Thus, the payment of bride price by a father on behalf of his son demonstrated an appreciation of the free labor services provided to him by his son. Bride price traditionally included items such as bottles of schnapp, ornaments, clothes, and cowries for the bride's mother, father, and brother(s) (Okyere-

Manu, 2015). There were reasons for the inclusion of each of these items. For instance, among the Asantes, ornaments and clothes were usually included because it was anticipated that a child would quickly follow after the marriage and the bride would need to use these items so that she would appear good in public (Okyere-Manu, 2015). Customarily, bride price was not negotiated (Assimeng, 1999; Osei, 2002). The groom and his family usually decided on what and how much to pay, and this would be voluntarily and willingly paid to the family of the bride.

In the contemporary Ghanaian society, however, payment of bride price is an individual affair—a groom mainly funds the expenses of his marriage (Bogya, 2014). However, it is worth noting that some families still provide financial support to their sons during marriage. Unlike the old days, the payment of bride price is now rigorously negotiated by the families of the groom and the bride (Osei, 2002). Usually, the groom asks for a list from the bride's family. The groom can informally ask for the list via the bride or he can formally go with his family member(s) to ask for it from the bride's family. The bride's family responds with a list of items and an amount of money they demand from the groom. Although bride price list may vary among families and ethnic groups in Ghana, most lists include items such as bottles of schnapps, ornaments, clothes, and cash for the bride's mother, father, and brother(s). As noted previously, bride price was a token of appreciation from the groom or his family to the family of the bride. However, a lot of changes have occurred in recent times in terms of what and how much is paid as a bride price. For example, in her visit to a bride price ceremony, Okyere-Manu (2015) observed that the groom presented expensive wines, soft drinks, and amount of 4,000 Ghana cedis (GHS 4,000), an equivalent of US$958. It is reported that some families demand modern electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptops, and iPads as bride price (Myencounterssite, 2016; Quartey, 2016). It is imperative to note that a lot of factors determine how much a groom pays as a bride price. These factors may include the wealth and status of the groom, the level of education of the bride, among others (Osei, 2002). The primary question this study addresses is: to what extent does bride price custom shape cultural and gender identity and husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana?

Method

The present study draws insights from the theory and methods of discursive psychology, which involves the application of ideas from discourse analysis to the study of social phenomena in psychology (Potter, 2003). Discourse analysis is both a method of conceptualizing and analyzing language (McMullen, 2011). Discursive psychology provides a systematic framework for the analysis of interviews and interactional data (Seymour-Smith, Wetherell, & Phoenix, 2002). It generally studies the flow of meaning making and how this flow is patterned, what shapes it, and how it is organized (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Wetherell, 2003). Discursive psychology pays attention to action orientation of talk; that is, the way in which things are said as well as what is being said by participants in social interactions to achieve a certain effect (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013). Thus, action orientation of talk focuses on reading for what participants are doing with their talk rather than simply reading for meaning or what participants are saying (Willig, 2013).

From a discursive psychological perspective, the truth about a psychological phenomenon is not given by individual participants in a social discourse but effected through the

lenses of their given context because participants in a social interaction are both producers and products of culture within their social environment (Adjei, 2013). The concept of interpretative repertoire is very central to discursive psychology. Interpretive repertoire basically refers to terminologies, stylistics and grammatical features, preferred metaphors and figures of speech, and general commonsensical ways used by members of a given community to characterize and evaluate actions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Talk about a social issue such as bride price is organized as social action in its immediate context, and around culturally resonant interpretive resources that reveal the shared sense-making discourses of participants within a given broader social and historical context (see Edley & Wetherell, 2001). Discursive psychology is an appropriate theoretical and methodological tool for the present study because of its flexibility and reflexivity, where historical and sociocultural experiences of both researchers and participants shape and direct data analysis and interpretation (Adjei, 2013). It also allows for the study of cultural and gender identities as constructed in discourse and negotiated among speaking subjects in a given social context by drawing upon familiar cultural practices.

Location and participants

The rural sites for this study were in the Ashanti region while the urban sites were suburbs in Kumasi (Ashanti region) and the capital Accra (the greater Accra region) of Ghana. The total number of participants was 32 adults, comprising 16 perpetrators (men) and 16 victims (women). The age of participants ranged from 24 to 60 years old, with between 4 and 22 years of marriage. The majority of the participants (n = 25) were Akans (the largest ethnic group in Ghana), and the remaining were Ewes (n = 2), Ga-Adangbe (n = 1), Dagomba (n = 1), and unknown (n = 3). Over 81% of the participants were Christians (n = 26), and the rest were Muslims (n = 4), and unknown (n = 2). The participants were mostly farmers (n = 11) and petty traders (n = 7), as well as commercial drivers (n = 6), hairdressers (n = 4), and teachers (n = 4). While Accra and Kumasi (the urban sites) are characterized by heterogeneity, weakened family bond, and traditional values due mainly to urbanization and social change (Nukunya, 2003), the rural areas of Ghana largely consist of indigenous homogenous ethnic groups with deeply entrenched traditional norms and values. The purpose of including both rural and urban participants was to achieve a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon of bride price and its implications by comparing and examining responses and meanings that are shared within and between rural and urban settings.

Design and procedure

The data for the present study were obtained through semistructured focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth individual interviews conducted with 32 participants in Ghana over a period of seven months (January to July 2014). The participants for both the FGDs and personal interviews were sampled through home and community visits, contact with the domestic violent and victim support unit (DOVVSU), and other snowballing contacts. The purpose of the study was introduced to officials of DOVVSU and community or opinion leaders who in turn assisted in identifying potential participants to seek their consent. Additional recruitments were made through snowballing contacts provided by

recruited participants. A snowball sampling approach was preferred for two reasons: (a) the sensitive nature of the phenomenon (i.e., relationship between bride price and husband-to-wife abuse) and (b) the rareness of the characteristics to be possessed by the sample (i.e., abused wives and abusive husbands). The DOVVSU, created by an Act of Parliament, Act 732, in 2007, is a specialized unit of Ghana Police Service responsible for preventing crimes against women and children, and to particularly provide them with protection from domestic violence. Contact with the DOVVSU and community or opinion leaders ensured the recruitment of participants with richer knowledge and insights into the phenomenon under study. The purpose of the study was explained to all prospective participants. They were also informed that their participation or answering of questions were voluntary. The inclusion criteria was women with (self-reported) experiences of physical or sexual abuse from a current or past marital partner and men who had inflicted physical or sexual abuse on a current or past marital partner. These criteria were relevant because, regardless of how one explains violence in intimate relationships, the perspectives one offers may remain irrelevant to those who actually experience it (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997). Ethical clearance for the data collection was given by the DOVVSU.

There were 24 participants in the FGDs, comprising 12 perpetrators (men) and 12 victims (women) recruited from rural and urban settings. A total of four FGDs were held, two each for rural and urban perpetrators and victims; there were six in the all perpetrators (men) group and six in the all victims (women) group in each case. Single-sex FGD was relevant, as it allowed discussants to be more open and communicative than they would in a mixed group (see Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Given the patriarchal norms and the hierarchical nature of the Ghanaian society, putting men and women in mixed group may lead to men overshadowing their female counterparts (Adjei, 2012). For purposes of confidentiality, analysis, and reporting, codes were adopted for FGD participants to reflect their status, interview site, and seating position (sitting order). For example, RV1 and UV1 represented rural victim number 1 and urban victim number 1, respectively. All FGDs lasted between 45 and 60 min.

Additional in-depth personal interviews were conducted with four perpetrators and four victims (different from FGD participants) from rural and urban settings to cross-check the patterns of participants' discourses. For each interview setting, two perpetrators and two victims were interviewed. All interviews lasted between 25 and 35 min. To not compromise the safety of victims, only one member from the same marriage or household (either the husband or the wife) was selected as participant in the study. A semistructured interview guide was used for both the FGDs and personal interviews, which included topics such as participants' description of themselves and their marriage, their general views about husband-to-wife abuse, the relationship between bride price and IPV, whether or not bride price custom should be proscribed, abuse and divorce, help-seeking, and family interventions.

All the FGDs and personal interviews were conducted by Stephen Baffour Adjei (a married man, born and bred in Ghana) with adequate knowledge of the norms, meaning systems and power relationship between husbands and wives in Ghana. His insider and male role helped in his interaction with participants in terms of asking the right questions and managing power differentials. As far as possible, all personal presuppositions and perceptions, during the group and individual interviews, were

placed into bracket so that the participants were regarded as experts in the subject of interest. Both the FGDs and personal interviews were conducted in Twi, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language belonging to the Akans. The use of Twi created a relative power balance between the researcher and the participants on one hand, and among participants on another. All FGDs and personal interviews were held at convenient locations selected by participants; audio-recorded with the consent of participants; and later transcribed into English. Data transcription emphasized readability rather than details of Jeffersonian notation that indicates pitch, prosody, timing, and pauses (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Wetherell, 1998).

Data analysis

The overall analysis of the data reflected our primary concern—exploring the extent to which bride price custom shapes cultural and gender identity and husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana. We first of all carefully listened to the audio recordings with intermittent back and forth movement to check and recheck for data accuracy. We iteratively read the transcribed data to have an intimate and interpretive familiarity with it. Transcripts were then imported into NVivo 10 (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) for inclusive coding; that is, searching and grouping of extracts related to the focus of the study (Potter, 2003). Different words or phrases that were repeatedly used and pointed to the regularity and patterns of participants' discursive constructions were assigned to data corpus. For example, participants' constructions of bride price in terms of defining womanhood as well as cultural and gender identities were identified, coded, and mapped for further analysis and formulations. In line with the purpose of the study, we selected extracts and individually made analytical notes that expressed our initial thoughts about assigned categories. We compared and merged notes based on careful considerations and extensive discussions.

The selection of extracts for analysis then became focused by identifying how informants draw upon everyday familiar discourses to construct the custom of bride price. Upon close inspection, we chose and analyzed extracts by taking into account the context of what was said, how participants said it and why they may have said it. Particular attention was paid to what was being said by participants, their choice of words and expressions, and voice tone—they all reflect discursive practices embedded in participants' cultural milieu (Potter & Wetherell, 2001). The relevance of participants' discursive constructions for analysis depended on the purpose of the study and the researchers' (both born and bred in Ghana) lived perspectives of the Ghanaian culture. Our knowledge of the discursive context allowed for a satisfactory identification and analysis of the function of words (what participants were doing with their words or talk) and how they related to other constructions produced in the surrounding text. These are concerned with what has been referred to as the action orientation of talk. For instance, bride price payment was repeatedly constructed in terms of defining the value, worth and dignity of womanhood. The initial assembled discursive patterns were further pruned down or merged. Discursive constructions of bride price and its relationship with gender identities and male power crystallized into different categorizations and the emerged discursive patterns and concepts were formulated and interpreted in the light of participants' contextual features such as history, values, beliefs, and culture.

Findings

Three main discursive patterns were identified in participants' accounts: (a) bride price as a gender and cultural identity marker, (b) payment of bride price as a material condition for conjugal headship and authority, and (c) acquisitive discourses of bride price payment. We analyze these three key findings subsequently by presenting extracts from interview transcripts alongside interpretations that have been made of them.

Bride price as a cultural and gender identity marker

As noted in the background, bride price custom in Africa is associated with a large number of cultural elements. Discursive accounts of both payers and those for whom the price is paid draw upon familiar and shared meanings of the practice to emphasize its cultural and gender identity functions. Participants' accounts reveal a broad consensus about the obligation to uphold bride price practice because of its significant role in conferring social status on both men and women in society. Participants constructed bride price practice as a necessary tradition for constructing gender identities—for accomplishing desired masculinity and femininity. While female participants positioned the custom as an important part of womanhood, their self-worth and honor, men constructed the practice as a necessary condition for marriage and for defining the identity of men in Ghana. For example, in terms of defining womanhood, one female participant, in response to whether or not bride price practice should be proscribed, indicated that

> No. How can we abolish our tradition? I will not agree that a man should walk into my house and take my daughter without a bride price. If any family does that then it means they do not value their daughter and they do not expect the man to treat her with respect and dignity in the marriage. (Rural Victim 3)

In the previous extract, bride price is constructed as a cultural constant, a "tradition" that positions women as treasured and accomplished in their society. It is suggested that the practice of bride price guarantees that women are treated with "respect and dignity" in marriage. The victim positions the practice of bride price as a kind of "marriage insurance" especially for the bride—protecting her against possible ill-treatment from her husband (see Valsiner, 2006). It is thus implied in the quote that because men obtain women from their extended families with valued resources, they are expected to protect and take proper care of them. The rhetorical question "How can we abolish our tradition?" that follows her emphatic "No" highlights the fact that bride price tradition is not regarded in any way by women in Ghana as objectionable or demeaning because it does not offend communal morality or societal ethos. The use of the determiner "our" in the rhetorical question also demonstrates the communal-sense of ownership that Ghanaians in general and women in particular have toward the custom (cf. Adjei, 2012; Dery, 2015). The quote thus stresses that, apart from the tradition being paramount in promoting and maintaining women's respect and dignity in marriage, it also (and even primarily) helps in securing and maintaining the Ghanaian cultural identity.

The relationship between bride price practice and womanhood or feminine identity is so significant that some participants constructed the amount of money or the value of the items presented to a bride's family as corresponding to a woman's self-worth. As one

victim explained, "If a man pays so much, he should be proud because your [his] wife is perhaps more treasured and worthy of the price demanded" (Rural Victim 4). Despite the embedded cultural and symbolic meanings of worth and value associated with the practice, some discursive accounts appeared to position women as worthless unless paid for.

> If we abolish the practice, men will abuse their wives more than it is the case today. If they abuse us even after paying a price to appreciate our value, how do you think they will behave toward us if they don't pay anything at all? Obviously, they will treat us with contempt and disrespect because we will mean nothing to them but just a cheap commodity on the market. (Rural Victim 4)

It is implied that nonpayment of bride price rather leads men to belittle, abuse, or treat women "with contempt and disrespect." By implying that nonpayment of bride price rather engenders ill-treatment of women in marriage, the victim is essentially inverting and challenging the logic that associates bride price payment with the likelihood of spousal abuse. The victim draws on the interpretive repertoire of "cheap commodity" to emphasize a commonly shared belief in Ghana that things obtained cheaply or free of charge are not properly taken care of. The rhetorical robustness of this repertoire is that it allows the victim to defend the bride price tradition by highlighting the value and worth that it confers on womanhood. However, the "commodity on the market" repertoire equally positions a bride, at least at the perceptual level, as having a price and is thus akin to a commodity on the market. Such familiar and embedded discursive practices may reinforce men's belief that "women will be too cheap without this practice" (Rural Perpetrator 3).

On their part, male participants constructed bride price custom both in terms of cultural and male identity in marriage and society. As one male participant puts it, "we cannot abolish a tradition that adores and respects womanhood" (urban perpetrator, personal interview). Here, the perpetrator discursively invokes the inclusive pronoun "we" as a communal marker to highlight the shared belief and collective ownership of the custom, thus positioning it as a significant cultural practice that confers a socially recognized identity and self-worth on "womanhood." The quote further suggests that the definition of women identities, their sense of self-worth in marriage, is determined by men through payment of bride price. The custom was also constructed in gendered terms: "It [bride price] is a good practice […] It also defines the role of a man in marriage; that he is the provider for his family" (Rural Perpetrator 4, FGD). As evident, the custom is constructed as "a good practice" because it defines the breadwinner role of men within the conjugal home. It can be seen that the perpetrator positions the provider role of men in marriage, often associated with masculinity (see Adjei, 2016a), as deriving from and requiring marital payment to be realized (become real) and objectified (become objective).

Another male participant emphasized the relationship between bride price payments and embedded notions of maleness in Ghana; "Yes, as a man I have to pay something to show that I am capable; that I am not useless to be given a woman to marry" (Rural Perpetrator 1). Notice how the perpetrator invokes the bride price tradition as a material condition necessary for maintaining culturally assumed masculine identity in society. In this view, the custom is positioned as a moral obligation of men; as a tradition that men "have to" fulfill as a marker of a man's worth and responsibility; and as indicative of a man's future ability to provide for his wife. By positioning himself as "capable" and "not

useless" (*obarima hunu*; in Twi/local language), the perpetrator constructs bride price custom as an *embodied* relational account of male identity and authority in marriage. It is thus suggested that men who are unable to fulfill this material condition could be regarded as *mmarima hunu* (useless men) and that could greatly undermine their male identity and dominance in marriage. Essentially, having a bride-priced wife is seen as a masculine accomplishment as men who can afford bride price in Ghana are accorded decorum, and thus become socially recognized in society.

Payment of bride price as a material condition for conjugal headship and authority

Although the legendary tradition of bride price in Ghana may be well intentioned, discourses of male participants suggested that the practice could serve as the main axis of male dominance over women in marriage. As one male participant explained,

> It is a good practice. It shows the authority of a man over his wife because he pays the money and all the items presented […] That is why it is important that the woman respects and obeys the husband because the man has shown respect for her by accepting to pay what her family demanded as bride price. (Rural Perpetrator 4)

In the previous quote, payment of bride price is constructed as guaranteeing men the right over their wives as women are essentially exchanged and thus become subordinated to men in the family. The perpetrator seems to be constructing bride price custom as a symbolic reciprocal exchange that produces and enacts a complex power relationship between men and women in marriage. It is suggested that a wife has an implicit moral obligation to "respect and obey" her husband's command and wishes as a gesture of reciprocity for the "respect" shown by a man in "accepting to pay what her family demanded as bride price." The quote evidently highlights the interpretive ambiguity that bride price practice engenders, as it may imply an activity of purchasing a wife or as a symbolic show of a man's respect for womanhood. While the participant re-echoes the idea that the bride price tradition symbolizes "respect" for womanhood, he simultaneously positions the practice as a familial "demand," suggesting a kind of personal consequence or financial burden on men rather than a symbolic gesture of goodwill. Thus, despite his discursive attempt at constructing the practice as "good," the perpetrator could be seen, in its extreme interpretation, as constructing wives as possessions or products of a commercial transaction, such that the rights and privileges of wives may be at the behest of their husbands who wield and exercise unquestioned authority over women. The view that women can be disposed of according to men's set standard of wifely behavior because of marriage payments appears to contradict the conventional wisdom of value and identity that the institution of bride price is believed to symbolize. A similar kind of reading that can be made of the previous extract is that women and their families may become indebted to men after the man "accepts" to pay what the extended family "demands." The perpetrator appears to suggest that once the man and his family keep their side of the bargain, the bride and her family are also morally required to respect and obey the terms of the customary transaction, even in the face of abuse. Apparently, this indebtedness may render the bride's family psychologically weakened in terms of the family's capacity to intervene on behalf of victims (women) when abuse occurs.

In related discursive accounts, perpetrators positioned bride price payment as a material condition necessary for assuming the headship role in marriage. For example, in a focus group, one perpetrator indicated that "it [bride price payment] doesn't make me powerful per se; it makes me the head of the family. That is, the woman is not on her own in marriage; she is under me" (Rural Perpetrator 6, FGD). It appears that, by default, a man assumes the headship role after the payment of bride price. The perpetrator can be seen discursively creating a dichotomy between being "powerful" and being "the head of the family." While he agrees that the payment of bride price makes him the head of the woman, he does not readily accept the view that it makes him powerful. Though this dichotomy may appear logical and reasonable to an objective observer, the perpetrator's subsequent claim that the payment of bride price subordinates women to their husbands ("the woman is not on her own; she is under me"), betrays his attempted logic of distinction between bride price payment and male conjugal power in Ghana. His attempted dichotomization could be a discursive strategy to counter the possibility of others interpreting his headship role as exercising power over the wife.

Acquisitive discourses of bride price payment

The practice of bride price is performative, in the sense that it serves to define and demarcate the identities and behavioral prescriptions of men and women in marriage. Despite being regarded as an embodiment of respect for womanhood in Ghana, some of the participants suggested that bride price practice objectifies and commoditizes women. The acquisitive discourses of participants implicitly position wives (women) as acquired possessions by their husbands (men) to be taken care of. For example, in a focus group discussion, one male participant indicated that

> I believe bride price is part of the reason [why husbands abuse their wives] because it shows that I have acquired you from your parents or family so they know I have to take care of you. If I take care of you then you must also obey what I say. Once the family accepts the bride price, they also accept that the woman is in my care and if anything should happen to her they will ask me. I also must make sure that I use my power and wisdom to protect and ensure that nothing happens to my wife. (Rural Perpetrator 2, FGD)

In this quote, the perpetrator constructs wifely obedience as the quid pro quo—as a favor granted to men by women in return for men's financial commitment to marriage and economic responsibilities in conjugal relationships. The quote is an embodied account of the traditional belief that obedience in marriage in Ghana is not a mutual property; it is a one-sided virtue demanded of wives by husbands. As evident, the perpetrator positions the bride as a precious property of her family, "acquired" to be taken care of. Although the perpetrator constructs the wife as valued and treasured, and thus requires protection and proper attention, the idea of property or commoditization of women remains implicit in his account, even if it is unintended. For example, he suggests that the money and items for the payment of the price is an offer to the family, such that the family upon receiving the payment of the bride price (accepting the offer), surrenders their rights in their daughter and thereafter relinquishes whatever control the family has over her.

These discourses suggestively position the bride price custom in acquisitive terms and apparently objectify those for whom the price is paid. The acquisitive discourses are

carefully and normatively worked up in talk by men to engender an inflated sense of entitlement to objectify their wives and implicitly position them as properties of their husbands. This sense of entitlement may consequently reinforce the belief that spousal violence is morally warranted and necessary (see Adjei, 2018).

Discussion

In the present study we explore the subjective interpretations of and contextualized discourses around the practice of bride price and its relationship with cultural and gender identity, male dominance, and intimate partner abuse in Ghana. Participants constructed bride price practice as a gender and cultural identity marker; as a material condition for men's conjugal power and headship role; and as one of the main axis of objectification and commoditization of women in marriage.

Both male and female participants in the present study positioned the custom of bride price as not only a cultural identity marker but also, as an ontological or existential duty of men. The kernel of participants' discursive constructions appears to lie in the locus of social or cultural and gender identity of men and women in Ghana. Bride price custom legitimizes marriage for both the woman and her unborn offspring in the sense that a customarily celebrated bride-priced marriage gives a woman and her children a socially recognized husband and father respectively. From a psychological perspective, the custom serves as a necessary condition for the family to carry out its function of position conferring—conferring dignified social and cultural statuses on both men and women in the Ghanaian society. Previous studies have observed that bride price payment is significant and so tied to gender identity in Africa that failure to afford it is a huge embarrassment for the community and the family (Rudwick & Posel, 2014). Men's inability to afford bride price payments may emasculate them and hamper their male power (Hunter, 2004). In most African contexts, having a bride-priced wife is regarded as an accomplishment and a coming of age for a man (Rudwick & Posel, 2014). Perhaps, men in the present study construct bride price practice as "good" because they do not want a change in the custom, which could consequently affect their power, status, and social recognition in society.

The institution of bride price in Ghana produces complex power relationships between men and women in marriage. From the onset of marriage, the custom functions as a material condition necessary to establish the headship position of the man as the responsible center around whom conjugal authority and economic power revolve. The view that payment of bride price confers and guarantees headship and authority status on men embodies a familiar dominant cultural notion in Ghana that suggest that men marry but women are married (Adjei, 2017). It has been observed that African bride price can be both symptomatic and cause of male dominance and power in families as it makes men assume more powerful positions in families and grants women very little power to influence the custom (Hague & Thiara, 2009). The practice of bride price may strengthen the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity and simultaneously contrast women's apparent passivity and lack of agency with men's activity and agency in marriage (see Adjei, 2016a).

We do not pay much attention to the social and psychological implications of the practice of bride price because we take it for granted that it is a cultural constant that has to be fulfilled. As shown in the present study, the custom has significant manifest and

latent functions. The manifest function indicates the conscious motivations and recognized and intended consequences of bride price practice, whereas the *latent* function involves the objective, unrecognized and unintended consequences of this social and institutionalized practice. Manifestly, the practice of bride price creates and strengthens the affinal relationship between the respective kinship groups or families of husband and wife. The practice also legalizes marriage, as it gives legal sanctions to the wife's rights that a man has purchased (Gray, 1960; Nukunya, 2003). In accepting the bride price, the bride's family relinquishes all rights to the man, including the right to give her to another man in marriage. The practice again promotes the stability of marriage. Because of the traditional requirement that the bride's family has a duty and moral obligation to refund the bride price especially if a wife initiates divorce proceedings against her husband, there is a moral and economic motive by the bride's family to protect and promote the stability of the marriage. The stability view has however been challenged in contemporary times, particularly in the face of high bride price demanded by some families, as it may rather weaken marital stability (for a detailed review, see Ngutor et al., 2013).

Despite the many positive manifest functions, the practice may latently have unintended negative consequences for married life and spousal violence. As the present study has demonstrated, bride price may lead women to appear worthless unless paid for, to belittled, and to be treated however a man wants. For example, the unintended consequence of the commodity-referenced discourses in the present study is that it may create ownership mentality in men, which may lead them to see their wives as their purchase over whom they may exercise unfettered authority. The exchange of items and money for a bride, particularly high bride price, may perceptively create indebtedness in both the bride and her family such that when the husband mistreats the bride in the trajectory of the marriage, the extended family may implicitly feel morally weakened and psychologically defeated to intervene on behalf of the victim (see Adjei, 2012; Okereke, 2002). Though the practice was not regarded in acquisitive terms as a price in the precolonial era, recent research accounts in Africa suggest that bride price custom has become a commercialized practice, with women treated as though they were commodities (Hague & Thiara, 2009). For instance, the requirement for women and their family members to return the head-drink or the price before marriage dissolution is granted indicates women's obligation toward their husbands. As Armstrong (2010) has argued, in most African countries, a woman is presumed bought and owned by a man after the payment of bride price. Consequently, she has no say in how she is treated by the man, the purchaser. If the man wants sex, she has no right to refuse him and if she does refuse, he will rape and beat her for insulting him (Armstrong, 2010).

In recent studies, bride price in Africa has been associated with the perception of women as properties over whom men exercise authority and control (Cantalupo, Martin, Pak, & Shin, 2006; Kaye et al., 2005). However, the suggestion that women are akin to properties, that African bride price makes African marriages transactional, was rejected by some early anthropologists and regarded as faulty analysis of social systems. Early anthropological scholarship argued that, unlike European economic and market terms for property to which the owner is attached in absolute way and which he can dispose of as he wishes, in the African bride price system, a man does not have an absolute right over his wife as a property because of restrictions and conventions imposed on him by the society to which he belongs (see Mair, 1969; Radcliffe-Brown, 1969). As Dalton (1966) also

observes, bride price custom primarily deals with the occasional use of items such as goats and drinks as special purpose money in noncommercial transactions. It should be pointed out that though the custom of bride price in Ghana involves transactional exchanges and may suggest that a bride has a price, the practice is not regarded in any way as objectionable because it does not offend any communal morality/ethos. The term *commoditization* is thus used in the present study to describe only the latent and unintended functions of bride price and the essentially economic character of marriage transactions in Ghana. As Gray (1960) observes, African wives themselves do not seem to consider it debasing to be exchanged for a price or wealth. On the contrary, as the present study has demonstrated, African women often express approval of the bride price custom and think of it as an important source of pride and prestige for a prospective bride and her extended family (see also Adjei, 2012).

Although the present study provides useful exploratory insights into the practice of bride price and its relationship with gender and cultural identity as well as IPV, its major limitation is that experiences of nonvictims and nonperpetrators of IPV were not explored. In addition to perpetrators and victims, perhaps a more holistic approach would have been to examine the experiences of nonvictims and nonperpetrators to have a comparative understanding of the phenomenon. This would have probably helped in further explaining the association among bride price, gender identity, and IPV. Nonetheless, the central goal of the present study, as in most qualitative research, was to interrogate subjectivity and intentional actions and experiences embedded in real life contexts rather than aim for representative or comparative sampling. As DeKeseredy and MacLeod (1997) pointed out, no person can offer better and relevant perspectives to violence in intimate relationships than those who actually experience it.

Conclusion

Bride price practice has both social and psychological implications for the people (men) who pay and those (women) for whom it is paid. The discursive accounts of participants in the present study indicate a broad consensus about the obligation to uphold the custom of bride price based on a complex web of cultural and gender identity considerations. Cultural identity is a collective enterprise and each individual in the Ghanaian society is a locus of action that contributes to promoting this collective enterprise and to continue with the tradition that defines the people. People do not have identity; they do and construct identity in their mundane social and discursive activities, and around embodied practices of historical and cultural significance. Although the main axis of patriarchal power is still the overall subordination of women and dominance of men, lack of material conditions may potentially place patriarchy at increased risk and uncertainty. The marked and continued saliency of the custom of bride price could thus be due to its significant role in conferring conjugal power and authority to husbands as well as defining the cultural and gender identity of both men and women in Ghana.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all informants who spent their time to talk about their personal and difficult experiences of spousal abuse.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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