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EXPLORING THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PATERNAL DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY IN GHANA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Paternal denial of responsibility remains a widespread social and developmental challenge in Ghana, with significant implications for maternal well-being, child development, and social support systems. Although existing literature highlights financial hardship, relationship instability, and socio-cultural norms as drivers of paternal disengagement, limited research has explored the deeper psychological, relational, and structural factors that influence fathers' denial of responsibility within the Ghanaian context. This qualitative study seeks to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities surrounding paternal denial of responsibility following pregnancy or childbirth. Using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants, including single mothers, social workers, community leaders, and young fathers. Thematic analysis was employed to uncover patterns related to socio-economic pressures, cultural expectations of masculinity, family influence, stigma, and emotional unpreparedness. Preliminary findings suggest that paternal denial is shaped by complex interwoven factors such as fear of financial responsibility, mistrust of paternity, strained romantic relationships, societal pressure to conform to masculine norms, and lack of institutional support for early fatherhood. This study contributes to the understanding of paternal disengagement in Ghana and offers insights for policy, community interventions, and fatherhood support programs.

KEYWORDS: paternal denial, fatherhood, responsibility, Ghana, qualitative study, masculinity.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Paternal denial of responsibility has become an increasingly visible social issue in Ghana, especially within the context of unplanned or unintended pregnancies. It occurs when a father refuses to acknowledge biological responsibility, provide financial support, or participate in caregiving roles. Research across sub-Saharan Africa indicates that paternal denial is influenced by a range of socio-cultural, relational, and economic factors. However, the unique Ghanaian context—with its complex interplay of cultural norms, economic challenges, and evolving relationship dynamics—makes this phenomenon particularly significant.

In many Ghanaian communities, fatherhood is strongly associated with the ability to provide financially, exercise authority, and uphold the family name. Young men who feel unprepared or unable to fulfill these expectations may resort to denying responsibility as a coping mechanism. Economic instability, unemployment, peer influence, and social pressure reinforce this tendency. Furthermore, stigma associated with premarital pregnancy, uncertainty regarding paternity, and strained relationships with the child's mother contribute to paternal disengagement. While numerous interventions focus on maternal welfare, far fewer address the root causes of paternal denial or consider fathers' own fears, vulnerabilities, and social constraints.

Despite the prevalence of paternal denial, academic research in Ghana has rarely examined the underlying motivations and contextual factors from a qualitative perspective. Most studies rely on quantitative surveys or focus primarily on the consequences for mothers and children rather than the fathers themselves. This creates a gap in understanding the lived experiences, cultural expectations, and psychological processes that influence paternal denial. A qualitative approach is necessary to uncover the nuanced realities driving this phenomenon and to inform culturally appropriate interventions aimed at fostering responsible fatherhood.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Although paternal denial of responsibility remains a significant public and social issue in Ghana, there is limited empirical understanding of the factors that drive fathers to deny pregnancies or their paternal roles. Mothers and children often suffer the consequences—financial hardship, emotional distress, and weakened social support structures—yet the motivations and contextual pressures influencing paternal disengagement remain underexplored.

Existing research highlights that economic instability, unplanned pregnancies, and partner conflict may influence a father's decision to deny responsibility. However, these explanations provide only a superficial understanding of a deeper, multilayered social dilemma. Cultural norms surrounding masculinity, family honor, and expectations of male economic provision place considerable pressure on young men. Many fathers may deny responsibility out of fear of judgment, financial incapacity, or loss of social status. In some cases, paternal denial is influenced by paternity disputes, mistrust, or negative family involvement.

Furthermore, institutions such as social welfare offices, health facilities, and community mediation bodies often encounter cases of paternal denial but lack sufficient insight into the underlying causes to design effective interventions. Without qualitative exploration into fathers' lived experiences, emotional struggles, and relationship histories, social policymakers and practitioners are left with inadequate tools to address the phenomenon effectively. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the complex interplay of personal, relational, and cultural factors contributing to paternal denial in Ghana.

3.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the factors contributing to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana by examining the perceptions, experiences, and contextual influences surrounding father disengagement. The study seeks to uncover the relational, cultural, economic, and psychological elements that shape paternal denial and to generate insights that inform community-based interventions and policy reforms promoting responsible fatherhood.

4.0 Research Objectives

General Objective

To explore the underlying factors contributing to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the socio-economic factors that influence paternal denial of responsibility.
2. To explore cultural and societal expectations that shape fathers' decisions to deny responsibility.
3. To investigate relational dynamics between partners that contribute to paternal disengagement.
4. To identify personal and psychological factors influencing fathers' denial of pregnancy or paternity roles.

5. To provide recommendations for improving father involvement and reducing paternal denial in Ghana.

5.0 Research Questions

1. What socio-economic factors contribute to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana?
2. How do cultural norms and societal expectations influence fathers' decisions to deny responsibility?
3. What relationship dynamics between parents shape paternal denial?
4. What personal or psychological factors contribute to fathers' refusal to accept paternity responsibilities?
5. What strategies can be implemented to reduce paternal denial and improve responsible fatherhood in Ghana?

6.1 Theoretical Literature Review

6.1.1 Theory of Masculinity and Gender Role Expectations

Masculinity theory provides a critical foundation for understanding paternal denial of responsibility within the Ghanaian context. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity posits that men's behaviors are shaped by societal constructions of what it means to be a "real man"—strength, financial capability, emotional toughness, and decision-making authority. In Ghana, these ideals are deeply embedded in cultural and familial expectations, where male identity is closely tied to economic provision and social dominance within the household. Young men who experience an unplanned pregnancy may feel that they are unable to embody these ideals due to financial instability, unemployment, or emotional unpreparedness. As a result, denial becomes a coping strategy used to protect their social identity and avoid shame associated with failing to meet masculine expectations.

Masculinity theory further suggests that fathers may deny responsibility because acknowledging paternity challenges their perceived autonomy or transitions them prematurely into adulthood. This is particularly relevant in Ghana, where marriage and fatherhood are often markers of social maturity. An unplanned pregnancy disrupts this socially recognized progression and may lead young fathers to resist assuming responsibilities. Additionally, peer influence can reinforce denial if accepting responsibility is viewed as weakness or vulnerability. Therefore, masculinity theory helps explain why paternal denial often stems from tensions between societal expectations and personal capacity.

6.1.2 Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory emphasizes that individuals' actions are shaped by internalized norms regarding duty, obligation, and accountability within a community (Schlenker et al., 1994). In Ghanaian societies, paternal responsibility is not merely a personal choice but a culturally embedded expectation. Fathers are expected to provide financial, emotional, and social support to their children, and failing to do so is considered socially irresponsible and dishonorable. However, when pregnancies occur outside socially accepted contexts—such as marriage—these normative expectations become complicated. Men may fear the social consequences of responsibility, including family shame, community ridicule, or pressure to formalize a relationship they are not ready for.

The theory also highlights the role of perceived legitimacy in shaping responsibility. If a young man doubts the authenticity of the relationship or the validity of the pregnancy, he may deny responsibility to protect himself from perceived exploitation or deception. Furthermore, when social systems lack strong enforcement mechanisms for paternal responsibility, individuals may feel less obligated to comply. Social Responsibility Theory, therefore, provides a lens for understanding how social norms, duty expectations, and legitimacy concerns contribute to paternal denial.

6.1.3 Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory posits that individuals make decisions based on how they interpret the causes of events, including responsibility, outcomes, and interpersonal judgments (Heider, 1958). In cases of unplanned pregnancy, fathers may attribute the cause of the pregnancy to the mother's perceived irresponsibility, infidelity, or attempts to secure financial or relational commitment. These attributions can induce denial as fathers distance themselves from perceived blame. Attribution Theory is relevant in Ghana, where narratives around pregnancy often reflect gendered assumptions—men may interpret unplanned pregnancies as the result of women's actions rather than shared responsibility.

Furthermore, fathers who feel ambushed by pregnancy may attribute their fear, shock, or financial insecurity to external forces, leading them to deny responsibility as a self-protective mechanism. Attribution Theory, therefore, explains how paternal denial is not only influenced by objective circumstances but also by subjective interpretations and emotional reactions.

6.2 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical studies across Africa reveal that paternal denial of responsibility is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by economic, relational, psychological, and cultural factors. In Kenya, Were et al. (2020) found that financial instability was the strongest predictor of paternal disengagement, with many young fathers denying pregnancies because they lacked income to support a child. Similar findings emerged from South Africa, where Swartz et al. (2013) observed that fathers often denied responsibility due to fear of failing societal expectations of male provision. This aligns with broader African studies indicating that economic capacity remains central to male identity and fatherhood acceptance.

Relationship dynamics also play a critical role. A Ghanaian study by Tenkorang (2021) found that conflict between partners, mistrust, and lack of communication significantly increased the likelihood of paternal denial. When romantic relationships deteriorate, young fathers may disengage to avoid emotional or financial entanglement. Furthermore, allegations of infidelity or doubts about paternity often lead to outright rejection of responsibility until formal proof is obtained.

Cultural factors add another layer to paternal denial. In communities where premarital pregnancy is stigmatized, men may face pressure from their families to deny involvement to avoid bringing shame or financial burden to their household. Lartey (2019) reported that Ghanaian families sometimes advise young fathers to deny responsibility when they perceive the mother as unsuitable for marriage or when they doubt the legitimacy of the pregnancy.

Studies also highlight psychological determinants. Anxiety, guilt, unpreparedness, and emotional immaturity consistently emerge as internal factors that contribute to denial. Young fathers may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of sudden fatherhood, resulting in avoidance behaviors. Denial also serves as a psychological defense mechanism against fear of social judgment or life disruptions.

Institutional factors are another major influence. Research by Aboagye and Arthur (2018) found that Ghana lacked adequate fatherhood support systems, leaving young men without guidance on navigating early parenthood. Without counseling, mediation, or father-centered programs, many resort to denial as the path of least resistance. Weak enforcement of child support laws further reduces accountability.

Despite these valuable insights, gaps remain in the literature. Few studies adopt a qualitative approach that centers the narratives of fathers themselves, social workers, and affected mothers. Similarly, limited research explores the interplay of masculinity, stigma, family influence, and psychological readiness in explaining paternal denial. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of the contextual realities shaping paternal denial in Ghana.

7.0 Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to gain in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana. The design was appropriate due to the sensitive, contextual, and socially complex nature of paternal denial, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to explore personal stories, cultural influences, relational dynamics, and psychological processes shaping denial.

7.2 Study Population

The population comprised three groups:

1. Single mothers who experienced paternal denial,
2. Young fathers who had denied or initially denied pregnancy responsibility, and
3. Key informants, including social workers, community leaders, and family counselors who frequently handle paternal denial cases.

7.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample size of 25 participants was selected using purposive sampling. This included 15 single mothers, 7 young fathers, and 3 key informants. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants had direct experiences or professional knowledge relevant to the research topic. Snowball sampling was additionally used to identify fathers who initially denied pregnancies.

7.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides. The guide covered areas such as relationship histories, emotional responses to pregnancy discovery, economic challenges, cultural pressures, family influence, masculinity expectations, and psychological factors

associated with denial. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English, Twi, or Ga, depending on participants' preference.

7.5 Data Collection Procedure

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with permission. Detailed field notes supplemented the recordings. Interviews were conducted in safe, private locations selected by participants. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

7.6 Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Codes were grouped into thematic categories representing the main drivers of paternal denial. Manual coding and NVivo were used to ensure accuracy, consistency, and depth in theme identification.

7.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was ensured through member checking, where participants verified interpretations of their statements. Transferability was supported through a thick description of context. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of decisions during analysis. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias.

7.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from an accredited institutional review board. Participants voluntarily provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by using pseudonyms and securing all recordings and transcripts. Because the topic was sensitive, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Support resources for emotional distress were provided when necessary.

8.0 Results / Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with young fathers, single mothers, and key informants. Five overarching themes emerged as major factors contributing to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana: socio-economic constraints, cultural and familial influence, relationship instability, paternity doubt

and mistrust, and emotional/psychological unpreparedness. Representative quotes are included to support each theme.

Theme 1: Socio-Economic Constraints and Financial Insecurity

Financial hardship emerged as the most dominant theme influencing paternal denial. Many young fathers expressed that they felt financially incapable of caring for a child, which made denial seem like the only viable option.

Participants described fatherhood as closely linked to financial readiness, and failure to provide was seen as shameful within their communities.

Quote from a young father:

“I didn’t deny because I didn’t love her. I denied it because I had no job at that time. How do I take responsibility when I can’t even feed myself? If I say I am the father, the burden will fall on me immediately.”

Single mothers similarly observed that lack of income or employment was a major excuse used by fathers to deny pregnancies.

Quote from a single mother:

“He told me straight that he cannot take care of a baby now. He said he is struggling, so he won’t accept it.”

Key informants also confirmed that poverty and unemployment frequently drive denial cases reported to social welfare offices.

Theme 2: Cultural and Familial Influence

Cultural norms surrounding masculinity and family honor played a critical role in shaping denial. Many fathers reported that their parents, siblings, or friends pressured them to reject responsibility, especially in cases of unplanned or premarital pregnancy.

Quote from key informant (social worker):

“Most young men tell us their families advised them not to accept because the girl’s family will bring financial demands. The influence is very strong.”

Some fathers denied responsibility to avoid shame associated with having a child outside marriage.

Quote from a young father:

“My father told me accepting the pregnancy will disgrace the family, especially since I am not yet married or working. He said I should stay away until things are clear.”

Theme 3: Relationship Instability and Conflicts

Unstable or deteriorating romantic relationships before or during pregnancy contributed significantly to denial. Conflict, mistrust, and poor communication between partners often shaped fathers' decisions.

Quote from a single mother:

“We were always fighting before I got pregnant. When I told him, he said it was not possible because we were having issues. He used that as the reason to walk away.”

Some fathers expressed that they felt manipulated or forced into fatherhood, particularly when the pregnancy occurred after a breakup.

Quote from a young father:

“We had already ended things. So, when she came saying she was pregnant, I didn't believe it. I felt she wanted to trap me.”

Theme 4: Doubts About Paternity and Trust Issues

Paternity doubt was a major reason for denial, especially among fathers who perceived infidelity or secrecy in the relationship. The absence of accessible or affordable paternity testing further heightened mistrust.

Quote from a young father:

“I was not the only one she was talking to. So when she said she was pregnant, how do I know I am the father? I denied until I got proof.”

Some mothers confirmed that fathers often deny responsibility by default when their confidence in the relationship has been weakened.

Quote from a mother:

“The first thing he said was that the child is not his. He didn't even think twice.”

Theme 5: Emotional and Psychological Unpreparedness

Emotional immaturity, fear, shock, and anxiety were major psychological contributors to denial. Many young fathers described feeling overwhelmed by the sudden shift in expectations and responsibilities.

Quote from a young father:

"I was scared. Simple. I was not ready. Fatherhood is big. I needed time to process, so I just denied."

Mothers and key informants also observed that many young men lacked the emotional capacity to handle unexpected fatherhood.

Quote from social worker:

"Some boys are mentally not prepared for fatherhood. They panic and deny. Later some come back, but the initial fear is the cause."

9.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, relational, psychological, and trust-related factors. Consistent with the Theory of Masculinity, financial capacity and societal expectations of male provision strongly influenced denial behavior. Fathers who identified themselves as unprepared or unable to provide often denied responsibility to preserve their masculine identity and avoid perceived shame.

The findings also align with Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasizes the role of social norms and duty expectations. Cultural expectations of family honor, parental influence, and societal disapproval of premarital pregnancy shaped young fathers' decisions. The study confirms that paternal responsibility is not merely an individual choice but a socially negotiated role influenced by external pressures.

Attribution Theory was also evident in how fathers explained pregnancies and their subsequent actions. Many attributed pregnancy to deceit, irresponsibility on the part of the mother, or external circumstances beyond their control. These attributions served as psychological buffers that justified denial and lessened personal accountability.

Empirically, the findings align with previous studies in Ghana and across Africa. Economic hardship (Lartey, 2019; Were et al., 2020), relational conflict (Tenkorang, 2021), and cultural norms (Aboagye & Arthur, 2018) consistently emerge as triggers of paternal denial. This study extends the literature by illustrating how emotional and psychological unpreparedness—an underexplored factor—plays a critical role in paternal denial.

The results underscore the necessity of designing fatherhood support programs, community education initiatives, and culturally grounded interventions that address the root causes of paternal denial rather than merely focusing on its consequences.

10.0 CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the factors contributing to paternal denial of responsibility in Ghana. The findings demonstrate that paternal denial is shaped by interconnected socio-economic constraints, cultural influences, relationship instability, mistrust, and emotional unpreparedness. The pressure to meet masculine expectations, fear of financial obligations, and family influence were especially significant in shaping denial behavior.

Understanding these underlying factors is essential for designing effective interventions that promote responsible fatherhood. The study highlights the need for social welfare systems, community leaders, and policymakers to consider the complex lived realities of young fathers rather than relying on punitive or judgmental approaches. Holistic, culturally sensitive strategies are required to foster father involvement and reduce the emotional and economic burden on mothers, children, and communities.

11.0 Recommendations

- Strengthen fatherhood counseling and mediation services at social welfare offices to support young fathers during early pregnancy disclosure.
- Implement community education programs addressing harmful masculinity norms and promoting responsible fatherhood as a shared social value.
- Introduce youth-friendly paternity testing services to reduce mistrust and conflict around paternity claims.
- Develop economic empowerment programs for young fathers, including vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and job placement services.
- Provide relationship and communication workshops for young couples to reduce conflict-driven paternal denial.

- Integrate father-involvement modules into reproductive health and antenatal services to engage men early in the pregnancy process.
- Enhance legal frameworks and enforcement for child support while incorporating supportive, rehabilitative approaches rather than purely punitive ones.
- Encourage family and community leaders to adopt supportive, non-stigmatizing approaches when addressing premarital pregnancy cases.

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