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The protective effects of the collective cultural value of *abiriwatia* against child neglect: Results from a nationally representative survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing commitment to strengthen community norms—to foster informal support for families and enhance community commitment to protect children from child abuse and neglect. The current study examined the relationship between child neglect and normative interpretations of the dominant cultural value of *abiriwatia* in Ghana. It was hypothesized that the norms of *abiriwatia* were associated with lower incidence of child neglect.

Methods: We used a random, stratified four-stage cluster design to select a nationally representative sample of 1100 female caregivers in Ghana. Norms of the cultural value of *abiriwatia* were measured using a new 11-item Likert scale questionnaire developed by the authors, and child neglect was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale.

Results: Factor analysis of the *abiriwatia* scale retained three factors, community authority, collective childcare, and lineage, as the core norms of *abiriwatia*. We found that the *abiriwatia* norm of community authority was associated with fewer instances of child neglect. Norms of community responsibility for childcare were negatively associated with child neglect frequency ($B = -0.31, p < .05$). However, the relationship between the *abiriwatia* norm of lineage and child neglect was positive ($B = 0.24, p < .05$).

Conclusion: The protective associations among the norms of community authority and collective childcare and child neglect suggest that traditional practices that strengthen and enforce the collective norms of *abiriwatia*, including storytelling, family byelaws, community *durbars* (community meetings), taboos, and reciprocal farming activities (*nmboa*) could be protective against neglect.

1. Introduction

Collective cultural values, characterized by interdependence and interpreted into positive social norms, have been identified as mechanisms to protect children against maltreatment in communities (Korbin, 2002; McDonell et al., 2015; Molnar et al., 2021, 2022), based on the logic that children are protected when community members share norms that frown on child maltreatment and support

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collective child-rearing practices. Growing research has focused on strengthening collective efficacy (Barnhart et al., 2018; Guterman et al., 2009; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016) and cultural norms that support child-rearing to mitigate the risk of child maltreatment (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Kimbrough-Melton & Melton, 2015; Melton & Anderson, 2008). In the past decade, the Strong Communities Project has made cautious efforts to raise community awareness and change community norms to protect children against maltreatment in the USA (Kimbrough-Melton & Melton, 2015; Melton & Anderson, 2008) and, recently, Israel (McDonnell et al., 2015). This multi-million-dollar cross-continental project is based on the logic that enforcing positive collective norms on childcare will lead to stronger communities, where each individual is prepared to care for children (Holland et al., 2011) and protect them against maltreatment. A public health model of child maltreatment prevention can be realized if norms of childcare and child protection are strengthened in communities (Lonne et al., 2019). In contrast to Israel and the USA, which are broadly classified as individualistic societies (Hofstede & Bond, 1984), jurisdictions such as Ghana that are broadly known to have strongly held communal values and norms (Hofstede & Bond, 1984) have made little effort to harness the positive benefits of traditional collective norms on childcare to promote child protection. Wave five of the recent World Value Survey (2018) ranked Ghana higher in collective values than countries like the US and Germany, and lower in self-expression values.

Ghana, like many sub-Saharan African countries, is characterized broadly by the practice of communal collectivism (Hofstede & Bond, 1984), with enabling cultural norms that support community childcare practices (Famakinwa, 2012). The foundation of this collectivism is a notion that makes reference to a common putative ancestor known as *abiriwatia* (especially among Akan-speaking people). *Abiriwatia* as a communal value is interpreted to develop norms that support the collective rearing of children and sanction parents/community members for nonconformist childcare practices. Yet no study has examined how normative interpretations of the value of *abiriwatia* influence child maltreatment in Ghana. This study examines for the first time the relationship between the norms of *abiriwatia* and child neglect using a newly developed scale for the cultural value of *abiriwatia*. Parsons (1951) argued that the legitimacy of values and commitment to them may be ubiquitous, but normative interpretations may differ. Also, an individual's interpretations of a norm and their judgment about its legitimacy (Borsari & Carey, 2003) affect how they act within a specific context. Therefore, it is important to identify the normative interpretations of the value of *abiriwatia* and how they matter in child neglect. The findings will support community education and the development of culturally informed interventions that protect children from neglect. Considering that what is considered acceptable/unacceptable parenting is culturally motivated, a culturally informed intervention grounded in collective values (*abiriwatia*) will contribute significantly to addressing child neglect.

Globally, neglect is considered the most common and the most substantiated type of child maltreatment (Mennen et al., 2010; Radford et al., 2013; Solem et al., 2020; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). A global meta-analytic study reported that 163 per 1000 children in the world have experienced physical neglect in their lifetime (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). About 3.4 million children in Ghana, roughly one in four, were reported to have experienced at least one type of neglect during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Department of Social Welfare, UNICEF, 2020). Neglected children were identified as developing more depressive symptoms than their peers (Norman et al., 2012). Chronic neglect is associated with several adverse outcomes, including emotional disturbance, insecure feelings, externalizing and internalizing behavior (Vanderminde et al., 2019), and negative impacts on brain development (Clement et al., 2017) and physical development (Dubowitz, 2013). In their meta-analytic study, Norman et al. (2012) established the impact of children's exposure to neglect and the increased risk of alcohol use, substance abuse, and suicide ideation.

1.1. Collective value of *abiriwatia*

The basis of social life in Ghana is expressed through kinship, clan, and descent systems (Nukunya, 2003) encompassed under the value of *abiriwatia*. Nukunya (2003) noted that an important aspect of Ghanaian collectivism is the shared tradition of ancestor worship. The beliefs around this ancestral worship generated a collective value that embraces the notion that "our source is the foundation of who we are" (Antwi, 2017). The source here refers to a putative common ancestor, whom the Akan-speaking people identify as *abiriwatia*. Thus, most Ghanaians commit to the value of collectivism based on their acceptance of the belief that they are descendants of a common ancestor to whom they have a spiritual connection. The worldview and beliefs of the largest ethnic groups in Ghana (e.g., the Akan, Ga, and Ewe) connect them to a single ancestor (Antwi, 2017). Kinship social groups are established to draw these ancestral linkages and uphold collective practices and norms that support communal well-being (Nukunya, 2003). For example, the Akan have eight clans: Oyoko, Bretuo, Agona, Asona, Asenie, Aduana, Ekuona, and Asakyiri (Nukunya, 2003), while the Anlo Ewe people have 15, among them the Amlade, Adzovia, Likei, and Tsiamie (Greene, 1981).

A stark difference among the Ghanaian ethnic groups with respect to collectivism is the descent system. Descent describes the processes of drawing a direct genealogical connection between an individual and their forebears for the purpose of recruitment into a kin group (Nukunya, 2003). Members are identified within the kinship system based on their descent—patrilineal or matrilineal. The Akan ethnic group, constituting about 47.5 % of Ghana's population as of 2012 (Antwi, 2017), practice matrilineal descent, while the Ewe, Ga, and Tallensi are well known examples of patrilineal descent groups. Despite the different paths of descent, the ethnic groups share the common belief of descent from a known ancestor, thereby making *abiriwatia* a belief or value shared among all ethnic groups in Ghana, irrespective of the path of kinship.

The symbolic term for collective values, *abiriwatia*, emerged from our oral history interviews with chief linguists, elders of the chief's palace, directors of cultural centers, and older adults in the Ashanti region (an Akan-speaking territory). The aim of the oral history interviews was to generate insights into the collective values in Ghana, particularly among the largest ethnic group, the Akan-speaking people. Findings from interviews with cultural experts (chief linguist, elders of the chief's palace, and directors of cultural centers), which have been reported elsewhere (Abdullah, 2022), provided narrative evidence to support the development of a scale

that captures the core norms of the value of *abiriwatia*. Because the interviews were limited to local cultural experts within the Akan ethnic group, specifically the Ashanti subgroup, the term “*abiriwatia*” for collectivism may be considered specific to the Ashanti or the larger Akan matrilineal descent group. *Abiriwatia* literally means “a wise grandmother” and is connected to the maternal descent system practiced by the Akan. However, the fact that the practice of ancestor worship is shared by all ethnic groups in Ghana (Antwi, 2017; Famakinwa, 2012; Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003) indicates that *abiriwatia* is widely held, although the term applied to it may differ among them.

The cultural value system in Ghana provides social rules that regulate individual behaviors and social relationships. Findings from a review of the limited body of research on cultural values in Ghana (Famakinwa, 2012; Goody, 1966, 1973; Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003; van der Geest, 2004), coupled with narratives from our oral history interviews, identified three main normative interpretations of the collective value of *abiriwatia*. These are: lineage membership, community authority, and collective childcare.

1.1.1. Lineage

This is the norm that defines membership of a subgroup within the clan (Greene, 1981). A lineage (*abusua* among the Akan people) is created to foster social connections and enforce values of collectivism. Social rules are created to regulate behaviors and ensure that practices are in conformity with the beliefs and dictates of the ancestors. Rules on taboos—anything forbidden by the lineage—such as intra-lineage marriages are enforced through lineage norms. The goals of each *abusua* are to promote unity, strengthen social bond, and ensure the intergenerational survival of the lineage (Goody, 1973; Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003). The *abusua* is the basic unit for organizing marriages, funerals, naming ceremony, and other collective neighborhood activities. These activities provide avenues for members to come together, strengthen familial bonds, and discuss measures to promote the welfare of members (Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003). Children are socialized to uphold the social rules of their lineage to ensure its intergenerational survival. Indeed, it shows that culture is not only learned and shared, but also guides interaction among a group of people (Korbin, 2002). The normative component of *abiriwatia* confirms that in collectivism the family is the basic unit (Bond, 2002; Hofstede et al., 2010). Membership of the lineage and the collective practices enshrined within it have effects on parenting practices and neglectful behaviors.

1.1.2. Community authority

A critical component of ancestor worship, *abiriwatia*, is the hierarchical ordering of individuals within cultural groups or communities, and responsibilities assigned based on social status. Members are expected to obey elders, chiefs and heads of families (*abusuapanyin*) and respect them (Famakinwa, 2012; Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003). Community leaders and family heads are blamed for problems within the community or *abusua*. They are endowed with the authority of spiritual leadership by the putative ancestor, which should be utilized to promote togetherness and ensure social order through the application of sanctions on rule breakers (Nukunya, 2003). The *abusuapanyin* and elders are regarded as embodiments of the past who are mandated to transmit knowledge and belief systems to younger generations (Adjaye & Aborampah, 2004). Families feel secure when the community’s normative authorities are upheld, and respond with an increased loyalty and commitment to these authorities (Sawrikar, 2014). An emphasis on respect and obedience to community authorities confirms *abiriwatia* as a hierarchical and vertical cultural value, similar to the Chinese cultural value of filial piety (Ho, 1996; Sung, 1998). Sawrikar (2014) found that hierarchical inequality, in terms of age and gender, is considered appropriate within collectivist societies. This is consistent with Hofstede’s power dimension in culture (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Awareness of the hierarchical nature of collectivist cultures is a significant demonstration of cultural competence (Sawrikar, 2014). All told, the hierarchy of authority within communities/families promotes conformity to social standards and discourages deviations from accepted norms. The application of sanctions on rule breakers could have a positive influence on child-rearing practices. Nukunya (2003) argued that community authorities ensure peace by adjudicating disputes and family problems, promote social bonds by organizing festivals, and promote preservation of cultural values through storytelling and socialization. Elders use mechanisms such as short stories and oral narratives to teach younger generations the collective values of their society (Adjaye & Aborampah, 2004).

1.1.3. Collective childcare

Children in Ghanaian communities are considered the responsibility of their community as a whole, and their upbringing is a collective duty of all members in the community (Nukunya, 2003). This normative commitment stems from the collective value of *abiriwatia*, whereby members consider each other as belonging to the same ancestral source. It is a notion symbolized by the cultural maxim “it takes a woman to give birth to a child, but it takes a village to raise the child” (Verhoef, 2005). This maxim strengthens the community’s commitment to childcare (Goody, 1973) and enables community members to intervene and address observed neglect (Abdullah, Frederico, et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2022). Research findings in the Ghanaian context have shown that the normative commitment to collective childcare is strengthened through kinship care (Abdullah, Cudjoe, & Manful, 2020; Imoh, 2012; Kuyini et al., 2009). Kinship care is an arrangement in which children are sent to live with relatives of their parents on a short- or long-term basis (Abdullah, Cudjoe, et al., 2020; Abdullah, Cudjoe, & Manful, 2020). This type of care arrangement is known to be conventional in sub-Saharan Africa due to norms of consanguinity (Nukunya, 2003) and the existence of external family structures (Theron & van Breda, 2021). Theron & van Breda (2021) argued that kinship ties in sub-Saharan Africa can function to protect children from maltreatment and boost the resilience of children who have experienced adversity. Families arrange kinship care placements as a way of strengthening collective bonds (Kuyini et al., 2009), utilizing normative social support (Abdullah, Cudjoe, & Manful, 2020) and protecting children against neglect (Abdullah, Frederico, Cudjoe, & Emery, 2020).

1.2. Current study

Cultural norms and values relating to childcare are theorized to motivate collective childcare and parenting practices that can protect against child maltreatment, such as (1) promoting community support to vulnerable parents, (2) promoting community normative responsibility to safeguard children, and 3) sanctioning negative childcare practices. Although the collective value of *abiriwatia* and its normative underpinnings (i.e. collective childcare, community authority, and lineage) are theorized to be sanctioned and legitimized in Ghanaian communities, there is no empirical research on the collective value of *abiriwatia* and its protective effects against child maltreatment. The lack of empirical evidence on the role of *abiriwatia* in child maltreatment could undermine the development of community-oriented, culturally relevant programs to strengthen and boost the efficacy of *abiriwatia* in the prevention of child maltreatment.

It is theorized that the norms of collective childcare create a sense of trust and social solidarity necessary for neighbors' intervention when child maltreatment is observed, and to support parents in caring for their children (Holland et al., 2011; Melton, 2013). Melton (2014) argued that the presence of a legitimate collective norm that commits community members to safeguard children could ensure that vulnerable parents are supported when in need of help with childcare. Because the *abiriwatia* norm of lineage entails a collective identity, the norms of community authority involve the application of sanctions on nonconformist behavior, and collective childcare norms lead to community-based child-rearing and protection practices, we predict that these norms will protect against neglect in Ghanaian communities.

Specifically, we hypothesize that:

H1. When controls are held constant, the frequency of child neglect will be negatively associated with *abiriwatia* norms of (a) community authority (b) collective childcare, and (c) lineage membership.

2. Methods

2.1. Data and procedure

We used a stratified four-stage random probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling technique to obtain a nationally representative sample of 1100 female caregivers in Ghana. We sampled only female caregivers in this study since women are the primary caregivers of children in traditional African communities (Nukunya, 2003). The cluster PPS sampling technique entailed, first, a stratification of Ghana into rural (59 %) and urban (41 %) regions. Though 57.3 % of the population in Ghana is urban, we over-sampled rural settlements because traditional collective values are considered to be strong in rural areas (Nukunya, 2003). Using the available census data, we randomly selected seven districts (4 rural and 3 urban) from the 265 districts of Ghana using a PPS approach. PPS sampling ensured that the chances of a district being included increased by its proportional representation in the country's population. Also using PPS, we randomly selected 22 settlements in the seven districts (at least 3 per district). In each settlement, we selected 50 female caregivers following a next-door-neighbor cluster, map-based sampling approach (Emery, Trung, et al., 2015). Settlement maps developed from Google map were used to facilitate the selection of female caregivers within households. Five start points were identified on each settlement map using a random draw from a uniform distribution. The start points were thoroughly vetted to ensure that they were close to residential buildings. Five research assistants were trained by the lead author and the project's team to identify ten households close to each start point and interview one female caregiver in each. Because the study focuses on neglectful behaviors by primary caregivers, only female caregivers who were caring for a child were considered eligible to participate in the study. The ten households constituted a closed-next-door-neighborhood cluster within the settlement. Thus, the sampling process yielded 110 closed-neighborhood clusters, located within 22 settlements in Ghana. A sample of 1100 provides a margin of error of ± 3 % on national prevalence estimates.

The five research assistants and the lead author conducted survey interviews (questionnaires) with the randomly selected 1100 female caregivers in Ghana. The researchers were trained to explain the study's objective in order to seek the caregiver's voluntary consent to participate in the study. The consent form detailed the voluntary nature of their participation, the possible risks, and the benefits of their participation in the study. Each caregiver was made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The consent form was endorsed (signature or thumbprint) by the participants after the details were read and explained to them. A 95 % response rate was recorded, suggesting that these female caregivers had a strong interest in the project. An honorarium of 10 Ghanaian cedis (~US\$2) was given to each participant for their time.

The survey questionnaires were translated into Twi (the lingua franca in Ghana) by a local Ghanaian expert and translated back into English to ensure that the questions fit the local context. Completed surveys were stored in locker cabinets, and data were stored on the password-protected computers of the first and last authors. Identifying information, including the telephone numbers of the participants, were separated from the final data and stored in a separate folder. The study received ethics approval from the IRB committee of the University of Hong Kong, with approval number EA200074.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Child neglect

The five items measuring child neglect on the Conflict Tactics Scale for measuring parent child relationships (CTSPC) (Straus et al., 1998) were used to measure neglect frequency. Caregivers self-reported instances where they had failed to provide needed care for

their children by endorsing the items: (1) You were not able to make sure your child got the food he/she needed; (2) You had to leave your child alone, even when you thought an adult should be with him/her; (3) You were not able to make sure your child got to the doctor when he/she needed; (4) You were so stressed that you had problems taking care of your child; and (5) You were so caught up in your own problems that you were unable to tell your child you loved him/her. Two additional items capturing educational neglect and neglect as a result of parent-child conflict developed by Emery et al. (2020) were included to create a seven-item neglect scale. These additional items were: (6) My child ran away, so I did not know where he/she was, and (7) My child skipped school after a fight with me. In line with the suggestions of Straus et al. (1998), caregivers' endorsement of the number of instances of neglect in the past 12 months was recoded using midpoint values: (1) for once in the past 12 months, (2) for twice in the past 12 months, (4) for 3–5 times in the past 12 months, (7.5) for 6–10 times in the past 12 months, (15.5) for 11–20 times in the past 12 months, (21) for >20 times in the past 12 months. Neglect that occurred but not in the past 12 months and no neglect were coded as zero (0). Responses to the neglect items were directed towards a focal child, one child in their care. For caregivers with more than one child, the child with the most recent birthday was selected as the focal child. Due to excessive skewness in the neglect frequency scale, a log transform function was used to log transform the neglect scores to ensure the normal distribution of the data. All else held constant, a continuous outcome is more sensitive; the reason for the log transformation of the neglect scores was to ensure that we maintained continuous response structure and satisfied the normality requirement, instead of creating dummy neglect scores suitable for non-parametric tests. The internal reliability of the neglect scale was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).

2.2.2. Cultural value of *abiriwatia*

Abiriwatia was measured using a set of 11 Likert-scale items. Caregivers were asked to endorse the following items, indicating their degree of acceptance from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree): (1) This community has a collectively agreed-on authority when it comes to family affairs, (2) In this community, people tend to listen to that authority figure, (3) The authority figure (e.g. *abusuapanyin*, chief) makes decisions that are binding on members of the family, (4) This authority figure greets me whenever he sees me, (5) The rearing of children is the collective responsibility of everyone in the community, (6) My neighbor's child is my own child, (7) Children are products of communities, (8) Caring for a child in the neighborhood is part of what it means to be a member of this community, (9) I owe allegiance to my lineages, (10) Commitment to lineages (*abusua*) is a value that still informs decisions and daily life, and (11) I believe that all members of my family are descendants of a common ancestor.

Because this is the first study conducted in Ghana to systematically analyze and study the collective cultural value of *abiriwatia*, a new scale was developed based on evidence from extant reviews and the theoretical findings of our qualitative oral history interviews with cultural experts, chiefs, and elders in the Ashanti region. The interviews with the cultural experts (six males and three females) focused on the historical antecedents of the collective value of *abiriwatia* and the constitutive norms that underpin it (Abdullah, 2022). An exploratory maximum likelihood factor analysis of the 11 items retained three factors after varimax rotation of the factor loadings. Table 1 shows that the first four items loaded onto the first factor, the next four loaded onto the second factor, and the final three items loaded onto the third factor. Consistent with a three-factor solution, we used the conventional eigenvalue cut-off of >1 to determine the factor structure. The remaining factors had eigenvalues below 1, and very close to zero. Based on the theoretical findings, we combined the first-factor items, labelled "norm of community authority," the second-factor items were combined and labelled the "norm of collective childcare," and the third-factor items were combined and labelled "norm of lineage." The internal reliability of the

Table 1
Factor analysis of the collective value of the *abiriwatia* scale.

Factor/dimension	Item	Eigenvalues	Variance explained (%)	Factor loading	Uniqueness
F1 (community authority)		3.5888	45.72		
1	This community has a collectively agreed-on authority when it comes to family affairs			0.92	0.13
2	In this community, people tend to listen to that authority figure			0.96	0.07
3	The authority figure (e.g. <i>abusuapanyin</i> , chief) makes decisions that are binding on members of the family			0.94	0.09
4	This authority figure greets me whenever he sees me			0.88	0.21
F2 (collective childcare)		2.6561	33.84		
5	The rearing of children is the collective responsibility of everyone in the community			0.73	0.44
6	My neighbor's child is my own child			0.82	0.32
7	Children are products of communities			0.88	0.22
8	Caring for a child in the neighborhood is part of what it means to be a member of this community			0.76	0.39
F3 (lineage beliefs)		1.6051	20.45		
9	I owe allegiance to my lineages			0.64	0.50
10	Commitment to lineages (<i>abusua</i>) is a value that still informs decisions and daily life			0.86	0.23
11	I believe that all members of my family are descendants of a common ancestor			0.61	0.54

norm of community authority was exceptional (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$), that of the norm of collective childcare was very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), and that of the norm of lineage was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$).

2.2.3. Kinship network

Caregivers' kinship network within the neighborhood was measured using two items: (1) How many of your relatives or in-laws live in the neighborhood? and (2) How many close friends do you have in your neighborhood? Possible responses were (1) only 1, (2) 2–4, (3) 5–6, and (4) >6.

2.2.4. Control variables

We controlled variables for the age and sex of the focal child, the caregiver's marital status, and their household size. Household income was measured in Ghanaian cedis and converted to US\$. Caregivers' incomes were divided by the number of children in their care to obtain income per head. Caregivers' age and education were measured in years and included in the model as controls.

2.3. Analytic issues

Stata (version 17) was used to analyze the data. A fixed effects regression model was run (Hsiao, 2003; Johnston & DiNardo, 1997) to account for clustering at settlements. The use of a multistage cluster design in selecting the study's sample generates autocorrelation (row dependence within settlements) which can bias statistical inferences and may violate model assumptions (Hsiao, 2003; Johnston & DiNardo, 1997). Fixed effects regression models concurrently eliminate biased statistical inferences that occur as a result of correlation in the error terms and bias due to unobserved settlement characteristics. Model diagnostics did not indicate violations of other model assumptions. The highest variance inflation statistic (VIF) was 1.90 (household income), indicating that multicollinearity was not a problem in the model.

3. Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the study sample. Half (556; 50.64 %) of the focal children were female and caregiver reports indicated that 62 % of the focal children in this study had been exposed to at least one instance of neglect in the past year. Caregivers resided in households with an average of six members ($SD = 4.02$), and reported an average monthly household income of 1303 Ghanaian cedis per month (US\$212.59) ($SD = 269.69$). The larger average household size in our sample compared to jurisdictions such as Korea, Russia, and Kathmandu (Emery, Eremina, et al., 2015; Emery et al., 2020), can be explained by the predominance of compound housing in Ghana (Danso-Wiredu & Poku, 2020), and communal residential arrangements (Abdullah, Frederico, et al., 2020; Imoh, 2012). Most of the caregivers had completed primary education, with an equivalence of seven to eight years of education ($SD = 3.80$). Seventy-four percent of the caregivers were married or engaged in common-law marriages ($SD = 0.44$), and 86 % had at least one member of kin living in the neighborhood. The average age of the caregivers in this sample was between 38 and 39 years ($SD = 12.16$), and the average age of the focal children was eight years ($SD = 4.46$).

Table 3 shows the prevalence of neglect in the last 12 months among the study sample. All categories of neglectful behaviors were represented which suggests that the focal children had been exposed to at least one form of neglect in the past 12 months. Caregivers' failure to adequately supervise a child was the most frequently reported neglectful act (36 %), followed by neglect due to caregivers' failure to provide needed care to a child (33.58 %), while neglect due to parent-child conflict was the least endorsed item by the caregivers (10.77 %). Thirteen percent of the caregivers reported that they had left their children without any adequate supervision three to five times in the past year. A similar trend was recorded for caregivers' failure to provide food (12.02 %), seek medical care for children (4.56 %), and failure to provide adequate care for children (13.78 %).

Table 4 shows the fixed effects regression results for the logged child neglect model. *Abiriwatia* norms of community authority were negatively associated with frequency of child neglect ($B = -0.21, p < .05$). The results suggest that stronger acceptance of community

Table 2
Sample descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Child neglect frequency	1100	10.51	15.32
Log neglect	1100	0.63	2.42
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Lineage	1096	3.04	0.77
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Community authority	1093	3.27	0.85
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Childcare	1097	3.56	0.49
Income per child (US\$/month)	1018	44.41	62.32
Married	1100	74.00 %	
Child's age	1099	8.03	4.46
Female child	1098	50.64 %	
Household income (US\$/month)	1018	212.59	269.69
Respondent's age	1099	38.37	12.16
Household size	1071	6.10	4.02
Education	1090	7.88	3.80
Kinship network	1100	86.00 %	

Table 3
Prevalence of neglect in the last 12 months in Ghana.

Variable	Never (%)	Once (%)	Twice (%)	3–5 times (%)	6–10 times (%)	11–20 times (%)	>20 times (%)
Leave the child alone	64.0	1.91	4.45	13.00	5.82	2.00	8.82
Unable to tell the child you love him/her	66.55	3.09	12.39	11.73	4.73	0.55	2.00
Unable to provide food needed	69.67	2.28	6.74	12.02	6.10	1.18	2.00
Unable to send the child to hospital	78.65	6.02	7.48	4.56	2.55	0.27	0.46
Problems taking care of the child	66.42	3.65	9.58	13.78	4.47	0.46	1.64
Did not know where child ran away to	77.80	3.82	4.91	6.73	2.37	2.27	2.09
Child skipped school after fight with parent	89.23	2.10	3.56	4.01	0.64	0.27	0.18

Table 4
Fixed effects regression model results of logged child neglect frequency ($N = 973$).

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE (<i>b</i>)
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Lineage	0.24*	0.11
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Community authority	-0.21*	0.10
<i>Abiriwatia</i> _Childcare	-0.31*	0.15
Income per child	-0.01	0.01
Married	0.05	0.17
Child's age	0.07***	0.02
Female child	-0.33**	0.13
Household income (US\$/month)	-0.01**	0.01
Respondent's age	-0.01*	0.01
Household size	-0.01	0.02
Education	-0.04*	0.02
Kinship network	-0.07	0.22

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

authority and the legitimacy of the norms of community authority may help reduce the frequency of neglect in Ghana. Controlling for household size, and kinship network among other factors, *abiriwatia* norms of community childcare responsibility were negatively associated with child neglect ($B = -0.31, p < .05$). Increased adherence to community norms of childcare is likely to reduce the frequency of neglect in the selected Ghanaian communities. The association between the *abiriwatia* norm of lineage and child neglect was positive ($B = 0.24, p < .05$).

A year's increase in caregivers' education was associated with fewer instances of neglect ($B = -0.04, p < .05$) and an increase in the age of the focal children was strongly associated with neglect frequency ($B = 0.07, p < .001$). This means that increases in the age of children could have concomitant effects on the number of neglectful acts they experience in a year. Having a female child predicted fewer instances of neglect ($B = -0.33, p < .01$). Further, higher household income (per month) was negatively associated with neglect frequency ($B = -0.01, p < .01$). This was highly expected given that neglect, especially of basic needs, is significantly influenced by caregivers' parenting capacity, including financial capacity (Horwath, 2007). The associations between neglect frequency and caregivers' marital status, household size, and kinship ties were not significant.

4. Discussion

This study is the first to examine the association between the core normative interpretations of the collective value of *abiriwatia* and child neglect frequency in 22 communities in rural and urban Ghana. Consistent with current evidence on the prevalence of neglect globally (Solem et al., 2020; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013), this study reveals a lifetime neglect prevalence of 56 %, suggesting that more than half of children in Ghana experience some form of neglect in their lifetime. Also, results on the associations between household income, caregivers' level of education, and child neglect corroborate existing evidence on the robust association between poverty (Pasian et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2017), parents' level of education (Barth, 2009), and instances of child neglect.

Findings from the fixed effects regression models support the hypothesis on the relationship between neglect frequency and *abiriwatia* norms of childcare and community authority. Stronger norms of community authority are negatively associated with child neglect, and similar findings were recorded for the association between collective childcare norms and neglect in the past year. In contrast, the association between the norm of lineage and child neglect frequency was positive.

4.1. Community authority norm

The significant negative association between the norm of community authority and child neglect frequency has several implications. First, it indicates that local community authority, including the authority of family heads (*abusuapanyin*), could have a significant influence on the rate of child neglect in families, neighborhoods, and communities in Ghana. Community authorities can

influence the rate of neglect through the application of local sanctions on those who violate accepted caregiving practices. Community and family heads in Ghana are known to have spiritual leadership powers and the physical authority to address family issues through adjudication and application of sanctions on rule breakers (Nukunya, 2003). They can develop social rules to regulate the behaviors of parents, encourage them to desist from being neglectful. The desire to achieve social order in communities is a key objective for developing social rules in collective societies (Sawrikar, 2014; Sawrikar & Hunt, 2005). Engaging in nonconformist behaviors including neglect and abuse can tarnish the image of families and communities, especially when such issues are reported to formal child protection workers (Bensley et al., 2004; Sawrikar, 2019). Social rules that promote conformist parenting behaviors could prevent negative outcomes.

Further, the normative authority of community leaders and family heads communicates to parents that they are being monitored/surveilled by someone who can sanction or report them for punishment if their conduct violates established community standards for child-rearing. Caregivers may desist from engaging in acts of neglect in the presence of community leaders or members, or even when their actions could be easily noticed by the community authorities. The hierarchy of authority within communities has been found to promote conformity to social standards in collectivist cultures (Nukunya, 2003), and to discourage deviation from accepted practices (Nukunya, 2003; Sawrikar, 2014). Community members who subscribe to the value of *abiriwatia* are expected to respect elders, chiefs, and *abusuapanyin*, and obey their instructions (Famakinwa, 2012; Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003). The current child protection system in Ghana recognizes the role of community authority in addressing cases of child neglect (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Department of Social Welfare, UNICEF, 2020). Local leaders including family heads are mandated by the Department of Social Welfare to prevent child maltreatment in their communities through the application of family rules and local byelaws. This study confirms that such measures could be instrumental in the effort to reduce the frequency of child neglect in Ghana.

4.2. Collective childcare norm

We found support for the hypothesis that the norm of collective responsibility for childcare is negatively associated with instances of child neglect in Ghana. Globally, the majority of emerging child protection programs aim to establish or strengthen community norms to promote collective childcare and a duty of child protection among ordinary members (Holland, 2014; Holland et al., 2011; McDonnell et al., 2015). Notable among these programs is the Strong Communities for Children Project implemented in the United States and Israel (Kimbrough-Melton & Melton, 2015; McLeigh et al., 2015; Melton & Anderson, 2008). The findings of the current study support this practice trajectory as it demonstrates the relevance of the collective norm of childcare in the effort to build strong communities that protect children from neglect.

The relationship between the norms of collective childcare and child neglect can also be explained by social control theory. Within collectivist societies, where norms of childcare are legitimized, communities are more likely to respond to and engage in social control practices to inhibit neglect (Abdullah & Emery, 2022b). Fewer neglect cases can be expected when more neighbors and family members engage in social control practices to remedy or sanction child neglect behaviors (Abdullah & Emery, 2022a; Guterma et al., 2009). Studies have shown that informal social control practices are negatively associated with child neglect in Ghana (Abdullah & Emery, 2022a; Abdullah et al., 2022), the US (Guterma et al., 2009; Yonas et al., 2010), and Russia (Emery et al., 2020). Also, adherence to the norm of collective childcare can increase attachment to the desires or expectations of others (community members) and commitment to the extent that they would deter people from engaging in deviant behaviors (including neglect) that would bring cost to themselves (Hirschi, 2001) and shame to the group as a whole (Abdullah & Emery, 2022b). Neglectful behaviors that are reported to child protection workers are deemed to bring shame (Abdullah & Emery, 2022b) and to stain the image of families and communities within collectivist societies (Sawrikar, 2019).

4.3. Lineage

Our study did not find support for an association between the norm of lineage and child neglect in the expected direction. The evidence suggests that only membership of the *abusua* do not in themselves deter neglect: instead they can predict more neglect in Ghana. Our unexpected findings suggest that the norm of lineage membership may not promote desistance from neglect. Theoretically, the norm of lineage membership is a component of *abiriwatia* that may provide an entry point to develop and enforce other normative components, community authority, and collective childcare. Community members may not uphold the norms of collective childcare and community authority if they do not identify themselves as members of the lineage. Indeed, these norms are stronger in communities that share strong bonds of lineage (Greene, 1981; Nukunya, 2003). Studies that specify the hierarchical relationship between the norm of lineage and the other normative components of *abiriwatia* would provide clarity on this association. Also, the unexpected finding on the relationship between child neglect and the norm of lineage may be explained by differences in lineage paths. While the symbolic term of *abiriwatia* is associated with the Ashanti, an Akan-speaking ethnic group that practices matrilineal descent, the survey participants included members of other ethnic groups who practice patrilineal or dual lineage systems. The different interpretations of lineage norms in matrilineal, patrilineal, and dual lineage systems may account for the unexpected finding.

Sensitivity analysis of our results based on ethnic differences (measured as 1 for Akan, and 0 for non-Akan ethnic groups) did not show any significant difference from the main model. However, we did not have enough cases to classify the non-Akan ethnic groups by their lineage path in order to adequately vet the outcome. About 651 individuals of our sample were drawn from the Akan ethnic group. Further studies with sufficient samples from other ethnic groups that practice dual and patrilineal descent may provide more clarity on the relationship between lineage and child neglect.

4.4. Practical implications

This study has implications for child protection in Ghana, and in other collectivist societies. It reinforces the longstanding argument that normative interpretations of collectivist values are useful in promoting child protection and community-based child maltreatment prevention (Korbin, 2002; Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999; Melton & Barry, 1994). The associations established in this study demonstrate empirically the usefulness of collective norms in the prevention of child neglect in Ghana. As part of its community care programs, the Department of Social Welfare in Ghana should increase community campaigns that enforce the norms of collective childcare and community authority. Such campaigns should include models that educate community members on the benefits of these cultural norms, especially in protecting children against child maltreatment.

In general, strengthening adherence to the value of *abiriwatia* would be of benefit to children in Ghana despite the positive coefficient of the lineage norm. After standardizing the coefficients to allow for comparison, the pooled effect sizes of the norms of community authority ($B = -0.09, p < .01$) and collective childcare ($B = -0.07, p < .05$) collectively ($B = -0.16$) outweighed the effect size of the non-significant finding of lineage norm ($B = 0.06, p > .05$). This suggests that community campaigns and advocacy that strengthen *abiriwatia* holistically could have a positive impact on reducing the rate of neglect in Ghana. Traditional practices of collective norms—storytelling, family byelaws, community meetings (*durbars*), taboos, and reciprocal farming activities (*nnoboa*)—could be strengthened and enforced to enhance a protective environment for children. Chiefs, community elders, and family heads should be empowered to enforce the norms of *abiriwatia* to ensure better outcomes for children.

4.5. Limitations

There are a few limitations to consider when interpreting the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, the associations established do not denote causality. The significant associations found between the norms of *abiriwatia* and child neglect do not in any way suggest that the norms lead to reduced or increased child neglect. Also, the findings are not generalizable beyond the Ghanaian context. However, this study provides empirical findings that establish a foundation for replication in other collectivist communities in Africa and in other parts of the world. The findings are limited to female caregivers in Ghana. Men can also assume primary caregiving duties; hence, future studies should explore reports from male caregivers or both men and women. The newly developed *abiriwatia* scale should be validated in collectivist societies to provide clarity on the normative interpretations of collective values and how they influence child maltreatment. As a nationally representative sample, a sample of 1100 is adequately powered, but on the smaller side. Although collective values based in ancestor worship are widely held in Ghana, the term *abiriwatia* is broadly limited to the Ashanti or Akan ethnic group. Therefore, future studies should use a mixed methods approach to investigate how the collective values of ancestor worship manifest in other ethnic groups, such as the Ga, Ewes, and Dagombas. Identifying the terminology for collective values in other ethnic groups would help to avoid the risk of ethnic lumping (Fontes, 2005) and uphold the principle of cultural relativism (Famakinwa, 2012). Despite these limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on child neglect in Ghana, with offers findings relevant to other collectivist cultures, especially within sub-Saharan Africa.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alhassan Abdullah Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing-original draft, Proofreading of final draft.

Lucy P. Jordan Methodology, Data curation, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing-original draft, Proofreading of final draft.

Clifton R. Emery Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing-original draft, Proofreading of final draft.

Declaration of competing interest

Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in the writing of the manuscript.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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