The Thinker

Quarter 1 2024 / VOLUME 98

A PAN-AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

Journal ISSN: 2075 2458

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Guest edited by Lilly Nortjé-Meyer and Nina Müller Van Velden

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The Thinker
A PAN-AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS
Journal ISSN: 2075 2458

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Prof Ronit Frenkel

The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.

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The Thinker

A PAN-AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

Journal ISSN: 2075 2458

The Journal for Progressive Thought
www.thethinker.co.za

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FOREWORD

By Kammila Naidoo, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg

I was delighted to open the conference on 'Violence Against Children' organized by the Department of Religion Studies, at the University of Johannesburg, in partnership with the New Testament Society of Southern Africa (NTSSA). I am extremely pleased that a special issue on the topic has been produced so briskly. Although there is currently much work being done on violence, there is insufficient interdisciplinary and collaborative work on how violence configures the lives of children in Southern African countries. One does not hear of conferences on children or children's rights as often as one might hear about initiatives on other compelling topics. This coming together of scholars to reflect on the experiences and lived realities of children – and, on the theme of children and violence – is exciting and timely.

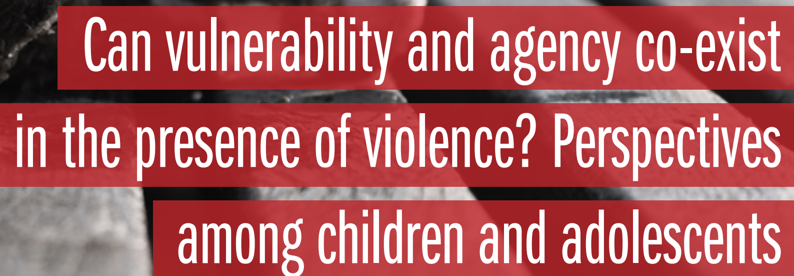
Currently, there are more than 2 billion children in the world, with the highest proportion living in sub-Saharan Africa. By the middle of this century, more than 40 percent of children younger than 5 years will be resident here. It is often pointed out that a child's life chances are shaped by the place of birth, year of birth, and privileges of the natal familial context – in this regard, class, race, nationality, regionality, and gender are some of the key predictors of a child's future. Many countries face entrenched inequalities and disparities, thus economic, socio-political, cultural, religious, and communal factors often have considerable and defining impacts on a child's future well-being and success. Interventions to create equality of opportunities and mitigate inherited disadvantages have been considerable. Despite government and civil society efforts, the situation of children today remains dire. This is distressing to note for all who work in this field and who acknowledge that a country's future stability, growth, and development, are inextricably linked to the ways in which this youngest cohort is treated, catered for, inspired, and afforded economic, social, and educational opportunities.

Some years ago, I guest-edited a special journal issue on the topic of 'Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Research, Policy, and Practice'. One of the strongest and unanticipated themes emerging out of the collection of articles was that of young women's and girls' engagement with violence, which marked their life stories but also built-up specific resistances and defensive responses from them. The theme of violence became much more urgent in the COVID-19 era when lockdowns and stringent security regulations came into effect inhibiting activities and freedom of movement, and consequently increasing encounters with violence. While the focus has been on women enduring violence in households under lockdown, there is no doubt that children too bore the brunt of immense physical and emotional abuse during that time. In 2021, many young girls in South Africa did not return to schools when they re-opened; many below the age of 16 did not return due to pregnancy. The COVID-19 pandemic offers an instrument to consider the extent to which children's lives have been set back and in what ways possibilities exist for reimagining transformed futures.

One of the central questions of the conference, and indeed this special issue, is about how violence against children is understood, experienced, and challenged. If parents in South Africa were to be interviewed and asked about corporal punishment, I doubt whether all would agree that spanking a child is an act of violence. When a child is punished and told, 'I am doing this because I love you', it becomes one of the first lessons showing the association between love and violence. We should be interrogating how socialized practices and things deemed normative become implicated and entangled in persistent forms of abuse. Apart from sharing insights on meanings and understandings of what constitutes violence, I anticipate that this special issue will probe mediations and interventions that have been evident, and or successful, in different societal contexts.' In Johan Galtung's frameworks of violence, three forms are predominant: direct or personal violence, structural or institutional violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence is recognized as overt attacks including verbal and psychological torment. Structural violence draws attention to systems and institutions that are exploitative and discriminatory resulting in the long-term suffering of disadvantaged groups. Cultural violence highlights ideologies, value systems, and socialized practices that are learned and perpetuated, and that would be experienced as abusive by those on the receiving end. Like the case of spanking, it is important to focus critically on cultural practices and belief systems and expose the harm that they can create by negatively affecting the day-to-day lives of children. As cultural violence, the hidden realities of sexual coercion, bullying, and emotional abuse are often tolerated within schools and families, and the strands of this intersect to negatively shape the lives of young people across the world. The culture of silence especially about sexual violence committed within the home, is very common in Africa and certainly South Africa.

The violence that children endure growing up, inevitably shapes how they live out their roles as socially adjusted and healthy adults. Many children carry with them mental health disorders, confidence and trust issues, and have problems keeping a job after living with violence. Children, like adults, may face crisis points in their lives. How can they be guided when they face a teacher attempting to solicit sex in order to award them a higher grade, or bullying, verbal abuse, and sexual coercion? Evidence does reveal that violence survivors commonly succumb to higher risk behaviours and accept these as 'normal'. Unplanned pregnancies, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and lack of academic success would be prevalent if there were no concerted attempts at redress and intervention. Children can be empowered to fight back, put perpetrators behind bars, and move ahead with confidence and determination. Our scholarship should therefore be high-quality, substantive, and activist-orientated. Doing research on this sensitive and complex topic can be daunting and challenging. There are ethical issues relating to how violence data can be obtained from young people, especially younger adolescents and children. Getting children to open up and talk freely and share their experiences might in some contexts prove difficult.

Against this background, it was great to note that the 'Violence Against Children' conference created space for critical views on conceptual, methodological, and ethical challenges experienced by researchers. The special issue reflects on them and brings together fresh insights and original work on addressing violence against children. Thank you to Prof Lilly Nortje-Meyer for this initiative, and to all the authors for sharing their research on this very important topic.



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Can vulnerability and agency co-exist in the presence of violence? Perspectives among children and adolescents

By Hanzline R. Davids and Eugene Lee Davids

Abstract

Children and adolescents in South Africa find themselves in contexts where experiences of and exposure to violence are prevalent. The experiences of violence often perpetuate feelings of vulnerability among adolescents. Vulnerability means exposure to more risks than peers, which is linked to diminished health and well-being. A plethora of understandings related to the complexities and richness of vulnerability exists within the body of knowledge. Kate Brown (2015) contours these complexities and richness of vulnerability across five subthemes/subtypes, namely, innate, situational, social disadvantage, universal, and risk vulnerability. Brown's understanding of situational vulnerability is used in this study to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents. The study included a sample of 16 adolescents who were purposefully sampled from two secondary schools in the Western Cape. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews that were guided by vignettes and were analysed using thematic analysis. The themes generated from the data tell the story that vulnerability and agency co-exist in the context of violence for adolescents. Agency is displayed in the capacity to make decisions in difficult situations. The decision-making styles displayed were consultative, evaluative, reflective, and considered decision making when faced with challenging circumstances. The findings extend current discussions around the experiences of vulnerability and agency among children and adolescents.

Keywords

Adolescent, Agency, Decision-Making, Vulnerability, Violence

Introduction

Agency, better defined as the ability of children and adolescents to make decisions or to act upon a situation, has often been viewed as the opposite of vulnerability (Zakayo et al. 2020). Vulnerability for children and adolescents means being exposed to risks more than their peers (Arora et al., 2015). These risks include exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse (Arora et al. 2015). It has often been thought that agency cannot exist in the presence of vulnerability. More recently, it has been thought that agency can arise through the experiences of vulnerability (Zakayo et al. 2020).

An exploration of childhood studies suggests that vulnerability and agency are distinct yet binary concepts (Andresen 2014). The binary view of vulnerability and agency suggests that children and adolescents can either experience vulnerability in situations or agency, but the two cannot co-exist simultaneously. Children and adolescents can be viewed as a vulnerable group due to their position in society and their dependence on parents and caregivers (Sultan & Andresen 2019). The perspective of children and adolescents as a vulnerable group, who often have limited abilities to engage in decision-making regarding their health and well-being, is evident when parents or caregivers make decisions that children and adolescents often need to adhere to. Children and adolescents are often in situations where they have little ability to make choices or engage in decision-making, which leads to the view of children as a vulnerable group within society.

Scholars posit that vulnerability is often viewed as detrimental to health and well-being – as it conjures images of helplessness, weakness, and victimhood. A plethora of understandings about the complexities and richness of vulnerability exists within the body of knowledge. Kate Brown (2015) has suggested one particular understanding of vulnerability. She contours the complexities and richness of vulnerability across five subthemes or subtypes, namely, innate, situational, social disadvantage, universal, and risk vulnerability (see Table 1). Another understanding of vulnerability by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014:7) considers it as being made up of different factors, namely inherent, situational, and pathogenic. One element

> “392 children in South Africa were killed in just 90 days in 2021, and another 394 survived attempted murder. (*Daily Maverick*, 2002).”

which is clear in both the understandings of vulnerability by Brown (2015) and Mackenzie et al. (2014) is the role of situational vulnerability as that which describes transgressions, adverse experiences, or individuals who are in socially difficult situations (Mackenzie et al. 2014; Brown 2015). This includes homeless persons, refugees, women, and other socially marginalised groups, such as children and adolescents. Children and adolescents are viewed as a group experiencing situational vulnerability within the context of this paper. Children and adolescents may experience situations which put them at risk of diminished health and well-being. Some of these situational experiences, like poverty, structural violence, and inequality, within the South African context perpetuate vulnerability (Kim et al. 2023). As evidenced in recent statistics, more than 40 000 young people were victims of violent crimes like murder, attempted murder, sexual assault and grievous bodily harm during a one-year period in South Africa (Hoosen et al. 2022). In an article in the *Daily Maverick*, Meulenberg (2022) points out that "392 children in South Africa were killed in just 90 days in 2021, and another 394 survived attempted murder. [With] a further 2048 children [who] were victims of physical assault". These statistics allude to the adverse violent conditions that children and adolescents in South Africa experience, and that are detrimental to their health and well-being and make them feel vulnerable. A recent systematic review has also highlighted how low socio-economic conditions, hegemonic masculinity and power contribute to violence among children and adolescents in South Africa, which perpetuates the situational vulnerability experienced (Hoosen et al. 2022). Situational vulnerability of children

and adolescents is further perpetuated through their dependence on authority figures like adults, teachers, parents and caregivers whose decision-making may increase vulnerablity to violence in homes and schools (Chetty, 2019).

Vulnerability subtheme/subtype	Definition
Innate or natural	"determined by physical and/or personal factors that are often associated with certain points of the life course such as childhood and older age" (2015:28).
Situational	"referring to biographical circumstances, situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force, and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent)" (2015:28).
Social disadvantages	"vulnerability as related to social disadvantage, the environment and/or geographical spaces" (2015:28).
Universal	"where vulnerability is seen as a state shared by all citizens, but which is socially or politically constituted to varying extents" (2015:28).
Risk	"vulnerability as a concept closely related to risk" (2015:28).

***Table 1**: Brown's (2015) understanding of vulnerability subthemes/subtypes*

Yet the role of power, epistemologically, could inform the view that vulnerability and agency can co-exist for children and adolescents when experiencing violence. When children and adolescents experience situational violence, agency can emerge where there is a shift of power from parents and caregivers who often make decisions. Starhawk (1987) refers to this as 'power-over', where parents or caregivers make decisions for children and adolescents as there is a sense of 'control over' them. The shift in power, from 'power-over' to 'power-with', is when children and adolescents realise their capacity to make decisions and choices and engage with trusted individuals to help inform their decision-making process in situations. Starhawk has defined 'power-with' as a "sort of social power, the influence we wield among equals" (1987:9), which is where individuals have equal power and collectively arrive at an alternative or decision which depicts agency in situations that might make them feel vulnerable. Children and adolescents in South Africa are faced with many situations which make them feel vulnerable, and this study explored whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents.

Methods

Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents. The study is presented using the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ). A detailed description of the methods employed in the larger study has been reported in a previous paper (Davids et al. 2021). Below is an outline of the recruitment, participants, data collection procedures and analysis employed in the current study.

Recruitment and Participants

All participants in the study were recruited from two public schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. An initial list of all public schools was generated and stratified on the basis of socioeconomic status where school fees were a proxy. Three schools in each of the strata (namely, no school fees, ZAR 1-1500 per annum, and above ZAR 1500 per annum) were randomly selected, and one school in each stratum was invited to partake in the study. A total of nine schools were invited to partake in the study but only two accepted. The remaining seven schools did not partake due to other active research studies at the school.

Sixteen participants formed part of the final sample from the two public schools. Participants at each of the schools were purposively selected to include an equal split between sex, socioeconomic status, and developmental phases. The developmental phases considered were early and late adolescence, using both age and educational level as an indicator.

All participants who were in the eighth grade in secondary school were categorised as being in the early adolescence phase, while those in the eleventh grade were categorised as being in late adolescence. The rationale for this purposive sampling was to determine whether differences in responses were found on the basis of these demographic descriptors. The procedures employed in the study started with an application for ethical clearance to the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.

Procedures

The study received ethical clearance from the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Reference 301/2017) as well as gatekeeper permission from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to access schools within the Western Cape, South Africa (WCED Reference 20170706-2719). Once permission was granted, the second author (ELD) made contact with the principals at the selected schools and set up an initial meeting with the principal and teaching staff to inform them about the study and to invite their school to partake in the study. Once the principal and teaching staff agreed to partake in the study, students were invited to participate in the study and were provided with a study information pack, which included an information sheet, parental consent, and student assent forms. Upon receipt of completed consent and assent forms, dates and times were agreed upon with the school that would have minimal disruption to the daily operations to collect data. Only the contact details of the researchers were shared with the participants, and no prior relationships were established with participants before the study commenced and data collection started.

Data Generation

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted by two researchers. The interviews took place on the school premises, where the second author (ELD) conducted all interviews with English-speaking participants (n=10), while an independent second researcher conducted all interviews with isiXhosa-speaking participants (n=6). The second author is male, with an educational background in psychology and public health and his highest qualification is a Ph.D. He was a post-doctoral research fellow at the time of the study with experience in adolescent health research. The independent researcher was a female who had an educational background in psychiatric nursing and holds a Ph.D. She was a senior psychiatric nurse at the time of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the interviews ranged between 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. The participants were presented with vignettes that guided the interviews. The current study, however, only focused on whether vulnerability and agency co-existed in decision-making in the presence of violence. The vignette used in the current study involved characters who were exposed to situational vulnerability. Participants were asked how they experienced the vignettes and about their decision-making if they were the characters in the vignettes. The use of vignettes allowed participants to consider their hypothetical responses even if they had never experienced or engaged in the scenarios presented. To elicit responses from the vignettes, participants were asked about what they would do in the scenarios presented if they were characters in the vignettes . Throughout the interviews, both researchers kept brief notes and also held debriefing sessions after each interview to discuss the emerging thoughts, interpretations, codes or themes and insights that were generated (Braun & Clarke 2021). No repeat or additional interviews were conducted with the participants during the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

All interviews conducted in English were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber and checked by the second author. The interviews conducted in isiXhosa were translated and transcribed into English by an independent bilingual transcriber and checked for accuracy by the isiXhosa-speaking interviewer. All transcribed interviews were analysed by both the first and second authors. The analysis involved manual coding informed by the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to conduct thematic analysis. The transcriptions were coded using inductive coding, where the code and themes were generated from the data guided by the process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The codes and themes generated through the analyses by the first and second authors were compared and discussed, and an inter-coder reliability of 80% was

achieved. The final themes generated were not presented to participants for feedback.

Scientific Rigour

The following strategies were employed to ensure the integrity and scientific rigour of the study: (i) Investigator triangulation was ensured to promote the credibility of the study's findings where the data and interpretations were generated by more than one researcher throughout the coding process (Lincoln & Guba 1986). (ii) Trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability of the research study were achieved through the use of rich descriptions and transparency in the detailed steps taken in the study from conceptualization, development, and presentation of the findings (Korstjens & Moser 2017). (iii) Furthermore, reflexivity, the examining of one's own judgements, assumptions, belief systems and biases, was ensured through the frequent discussion and reflection on the interviews using both field notes and reflections in the study (Korstjens & Moser 2017).

Results

The current study aimed to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents. The study provided the opportunity for adolescents to become co-creators of knowledge that facilitated agency in how they made sense of decision-making when confronted with situations in which they felt vulnerable and experienced diminished well-being, as seen in previous studies by Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty (2018) as well as Morris, Humphreys, and Hegarty (2020). Affording adolescents the opportunity to make sense of their decision-making in situations that heighten their vulnerabilities and diminish their perceived well-being allowed for agency and the shift from 'power-over' to 'power-with' trusted individuals. The themes generated from the data suggest that adolescents who were in vulnerable situations, in the context of violence, often made sense of their situations through decision-making that facilitated agency. The themes suggest that agency is evident in making decisions that are shaped by the following processes: (i) engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice, (ii) evaluation of alternatives that would yield the best outcome, (iii) developing a reflective practice informing choice, and (iv) postponing decision-making by leaving the situation promoting vulnerability (see Figure 1).

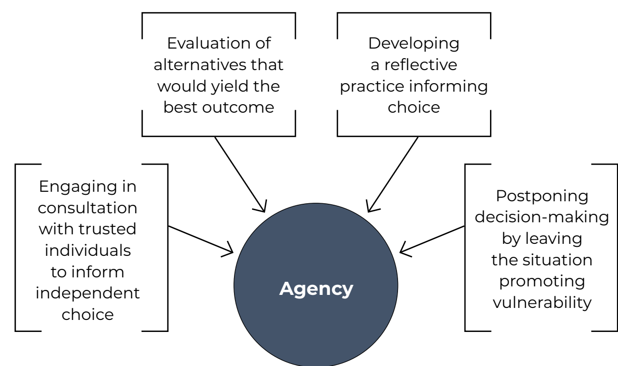

***Figure 1**: A diagrammatic representation of the themes which were generated from the data where adolescents displayed agency in their capacity to make decisions in situations where they felt vulnerable*

Theme 1: Engaging in Consultation with Trusted Individuals to Inform Independent Choice

When adolescents are in particular situations in the context of violence, they are made vulnerable as their well-being is under threat. In these situations, where the presence of violence leads to feeling vulnerable, the data suggests that adolescents display their agency in their capacity to make decisions and display 'power-with' others, by including trusted individuals (such as teachers, parents or friends) to help them arrive at a choice or decision. By engaging in consultation with individuals whom they trusted to inform their decision-making and choice, there is a shift in power, where the situational vulnerability co-existed with the agency of engaging in shared decision-making with trusted individuals. The first theme, 'engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice', became a clear indication of 'power-with', where adolescents displayed an equal balance of power or agency in their decision-making process by consulting with a trusted individual to arrive at an alternative when faced with a vulnerable situation that diminished their well-being. This theme is evidenced through the following quotes when adolescents spoke about how they consulted with others to inform their decision-making power and displayed their agency:

> 'We make decisions... sometimes we ask our teachers if we are at school, what to do about something that we do not know, or ... our parents ask them what we do not know, and what to do. So if a child has to make a decision, you have to know this to keep our health in a safe place.' (Male, Age 14, Low SES)

> 'No, when I don't feel comfortable about it, I ask like, okay dad is this right or wrong? And he'll tell me, no it's fine, you feel like doing it, maybe it's the right thing, then I'll just go for it' (Female, Age 14, Low SES)

> 'Yes, I will go ask them for advice, what do they think, okay. Is this bad for me or good for me. And if they say, okay, it's good or bad, then okay, I'll keep in mind, okay. That girl said it's going to be good and that girl said it's going to be bad for me. And I just go back on me, is this going to be good or bad for me. I make my own decisions, I listen to my heart always and my guts. If my guts says it's bad or good, then I just go with my gut. And if my mind says, okay, you're making a stupid decision be the best person and go for the good, then I go for the good always.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

It can be seen from the engagement with the adolescents that they start with a consultative process, particularly when they are unsure of what the available alternatives are for them. However, once the alternatives have been made available through consultation with those that they trust, they are able to make a decision on their own within the vulnerable situation which suggests their agency is displayed in their capacity to make a decision. The capacity to make decisions also involved an evaluative process which is suggested in the second theme.

Theme 2: Evaluation of Alternatives that Would Yield the Best Outcome

For the adolescents who formed part of the study, it became clear that when they found themselves in situations that heightened vulnerability, such as in the context of violence, they often had the capacity to evaluate the alternative and outline the course of action that would yield the best outcome to promote their well-being. The capacity to act upon the vulnerable situation and to have the ability to evaluate the alternatives which would result in the best outcome, sheds light on the ability of agency to emerge as a result of the situational vulnerability experienced by the adolescent. Below are three examples where the participants eloquently unpacked their capacity to take charge of the decisional situation and to exercise their decision-making power or agency to evaluate which alternative would yield the best outcome to nurture and develop their perceived well-being:

> 'When you want to make a decision you must first think about it, how does it help you, and what do you get from that decision you're making.' (Male, Age 14, Low SES)

> 'I usually think about how it will affect me, and my surroundings in the future, whether it's good or bad. Ja, that's pretty much it, ja.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

> 'I think I have had like a thinking process. I'll always look at the negative things first, because I don't want negativity in my life, so I would try to avoid that, and always just follow the positive, yes.' (Female, Age 17, High SES)

Being faced with a situation that left the adolescent feeling vulnerable also afforded an opportunity to display agency in not only making a decision, but also evaluating which decision or alternative would yield the best outcome. The display of agency through the capacity to make a decision, not only involved an evaluative process but also a reflective practice, which is seen in the third theme of the study.

Theme 3: Developing a Reflective Practice Informing Choice

The decision-making process that the adolescents engaged in was largely informed by a reflective practice. The reflective practice very often preceded the evaluation of the alternatives that they had. New insights often emerged from the reflective practice but it also allowed for learning about the situation that led to the vulnerable state and that impacted the well-being experienced. The reflective practice that fostered learning and facilitated agency was described by the adolescents in the following way:

> 'Ja. Because like, I have to think about like the decisions that I made before, what were their consequences, what happened, and how am I going to have to stop and avoid the things that

> happened in the past, from happening now again. So I have to think about what happened in the past, and then find a way of doing it better and stop it from.. then stop the past from repeating itself.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

> 'Regrets? It is important as a person, yes we all make mistakes but it is important to learn something from your mistakes. It is important to have a lesson learn from regrets to move forward. So I think having regrets play a huge role and it depends on the things that you regret, so it is important. Because at the end of the day there is no one perfect.' (Male, Age 18, Low SES)

The adolescents engaged in a reflective practice which informed their ability to make a decision. The reflective practice was shaped by past experiences. The display of agency in vulnerable situations also meant postponing decision-making, as suggested in the following theme.

Theme 4: Postponing Decision-making by Leaving the Situation Promoting Vulnerability

The previous three themes saw adolescents engage in active decision-making facilitated by their agency that emerged in the vulnerable situation. It also became evident that, for some adolescents, their experience of situational vulnerability meant that their decision-making power and agency involved postponing decision-making that did not involve consultation, evaluation, and reflection. Instead, they opted to leave the situation that precipitated the diminished well-being, which could be gathered from the remarks made by the participants:

> 'Okay. I would say I come from something like this, I was smoking from primary school but I realised that it is not something right that I was doing so I took a decision to leave the friends that were influencing me and leave the environment I used to stay in.' (Male, Age 15, Low SES)

> 'A decision that I had to make was to remove myself from him and not stay with him because sometimes he used to disturb me. I would be unable to study and I sometimes think that on specific he will come home and disturb me then I had to me from home to here and start a new school.' (Female, Age 18, Low SES)

Discussion

Children and adolescents experience situations which put them at risk of diminished health and well-being. The situations which predispose adolescents to situational vulnerability in South Africa are perpetuated by poverty, inequality and structural violence (Kim et al. 2023). Experiencing violence in social contexts perpetuates vulnerable situations that result in children and adolescents experiencing diminished health and well-being, often linked to the lack of agency. Many have thought that agency cannot exist in the presence of vulnerability. The current study, however, aimed to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents.

In situations where adolescents feel vulnerable, there is often a shift in power and agency, from 'power-over' (where decision-making power is displayed by parents and/or caregivers) to 'power-with' (where adolescents realise their capacity to make decisions in vulnerable situations). When the power is with the adolescent, they display agency through their decision-making. In this study, we have found that agency was exhibited through the realisation of their capacity to make decisions in four ways when faced with situations in which they feel vulnerable. The display of agency was seen in vulnerable situations through adolescents (i) engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice, (ii) evaluating alternatives that would yield the best outcome, (iii) developing a reflective practice informing choice, and (iv) postponing decision-making by leaving the situation promoting vulnerability.

Adolescents were found to display agency in contexts where violence made them feel vulnerable. The finding that vulnerability and agency co-exist suggests that the two concepts are not binary as initially outlined by Andresen (2014). Therefore, contexts in the presence of violence, which makes adolescents feel vulnerable, are examples of situational vulnerability. Mackenzie et al. (2014) outlines situational vulnerability as:

> [situational vulnerability] by which we mean vulnerability that is context specific. This may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups. Situational vulnerability may

> be short-term, intermittent, or enduring (2014:7).

The definition of situational vulnerability by Mackenzie et al. (2014) suggests, that the experiences of violence by adolescents in specific contexts might be experienced in overt and covert forms which exacerbates vulnerability that is influenced by multiple factors within the specific context. The time frame of situational vulnerability could be experienced as acute or chronic. Adolescents "who are vulnerable to harm or exploitation by virtue of the asymmetrical relations of dependency, power, and authority in which they stand to parents or other caregivers" (Mackenzie et al. 2014: 14) are in a space of situational vulnerability. It is within this ambivalent space of time and context that adolescents become aware of their capacity to make decisions. It is within the ability to make decisions that adolescents' agency often transpires to counter-act the violence experienced within certain contexts. Agency is the response to the destructive and varied nature of violence experienced where the situation left the adolescent feeling vulnerable. It is through the awareness of the ability to make decisions, that the adolescent makes a shift in the power inherent in agency that disrupts the normative condition of 'power-over'.

Agency and vulnerability, therefore, can co-exist. Furthermore, agency which stems from the autonomous self, which seeks a "self-determining life and the status of being recognized as an autonomous agent by others—is crucial for a flourishing life" (Mackenzie 2014:41). Vulnerability and autonomy (agency), for this reason, should not be viewed as opposites to seeking a "flourishing life" of health and well-being. Instead, there exists a relationship between agency and vulnerability. Mackenzie et al. (2014) have argued that, firstly, "to counter the sense of powerlessness and loss of agency that is often associated with vulnerability", and secondly, "to counter the risks of objectionable paternalism" that vulnerability and agency, which has often been viewed as distinct, binary options can, in fact, co-exist. Situational vulnerability, therefore, becomes the condition in which adolescents become aware of their capacity to make decisions. The awareness of being capable of engaging in a decision-making processes becomes a tool to facilitate autonomy through agency as seen within the four themes of the study.

The data generated in the study, tell the story of how the context of violence can make adolescents feel vulnerable. The vulnerability experienced is situational vulnerability leads to a shift of power within the adolescent and brings awareness of the capacity to make a decision in a vulnerable situation, which further instills power and agency. The decision-making process that adolescents engage in, in situational vulnerability, fosters agency through engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice (theme 1), as well as evaluating the alternatives that would yield the best outcome (theme 2) in the decisional situations, but to also develop a reflective practice (theme 3) by accounting for past experiences in informing choice and being aware that delaying or postponing making a decision, and leaving the situation which has promoted the feelings of vulnerability (theme 4) is also an alternative choice.

The findings in the current study provide an initial reflection on how vulnerability and agency can co-exist in contexts where violence is present. The initial reflections on how adolescents engaged in decision-making as a form of agency when feeling vulnerable as suggested in the current study, could lead to the following recommendations for research and practice:

- Psychosocial programmes and interventions focusing on decision-making skills and capacity could inform decision-making styles and further promote agency when experiencing contexts or situations that lead to feelings of vulnerability.
- Interventions focusing on resilience-building and decisional strengths to counteract the implications of vulnerable situations on health and well-being can be developed, particularly for those situations where violence is present.
- Future research could also examine the implications of vulnerability and agency longitudinally to add to the gap in knowledge, but also to examine differences which might exist across various cultures and age groups.

Some of the limitations of the current study are the small sample size, and the sample being limited to one geographical location which creates an opportunity for future studies to include a larger, more diverse sample. Using vignettes as the only source to elicit responses related to vulnerability and agency is only one way of gathering experience.

It might be an opportunity for studies to consider data collection approaches that extend beyond vignettes only, and that includes more visual-based research methods such as body mapping and photovoice.

Conclusion

Children and adolescents are exposed to situations where violence is prevalent. Contexts that make children and adolescents feel vulnerable have often been termed situational vulnerability. Vulnerability has implications on health and well-being, and is often viewed as a distinct yet binary alternative to agency. The results of the current study suggest that vulnerability and agency can co-exist in contexts where violence is present. Adolescents displayed agency through their decision-making process, which was generated from the data telling a story of decision-making being consultative, evaluative, and reflective, as well as having the choice to postpone making a decision when faced with situations that were deemed vulnerable.

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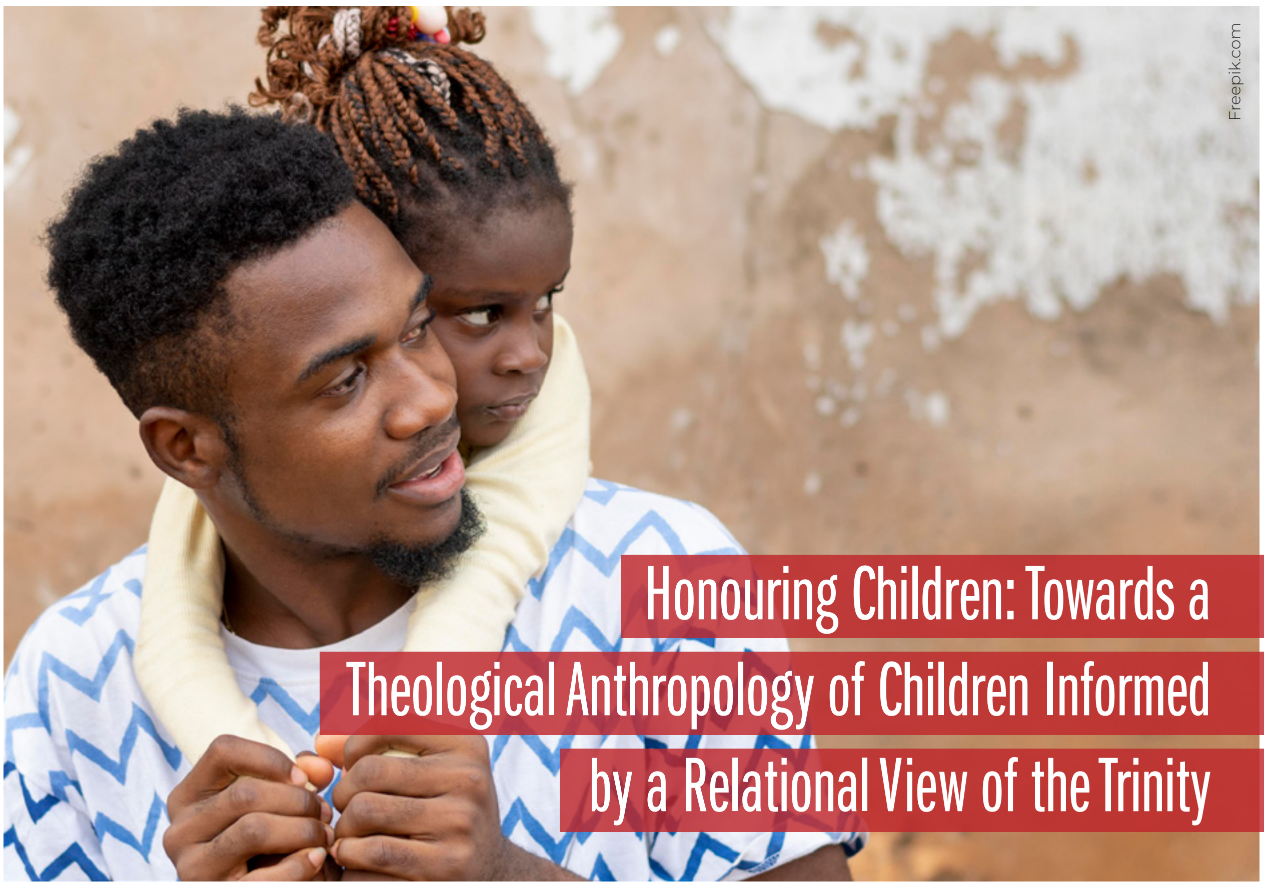

Honouring Children: Towards a Theological Anthropology of Children Informed by a Relational View of the Trinity

By Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam

Abstract

The views held about the humanity of children influence faith praxis with regard to children. Recognizing the full humanity of children will help pose questions that will lead to critical reflections on theories and practices that underpin the lived realities of neglect, abuse and violence against children. It is said that a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology. It is argued that views of children that harm them in daily life could be connected with views of God as authoritative, hierarchal, powerful and strong, a God who punishes and disciplines. There is, therefore, the need to explicate a Christian view of children that honours the dignity and humanity of children and could result in faith practices that are liberating. The Trinity could serve as a framework for a theological anthropology of children. The paper explores insights from key scholars such as Miroslav Volf (1998), Jürgen Moltmann (1991) and Catherine LaCugna (1991) on a relational view of the Trinity to glean resources that could influence a theological understanding of the personhood of children: resources which recognise the full humanity of children and honour their dignity, and interdependence as well as mutuality in faith communities and society. The paper posits that a relational view of the Trinity could provide a sounder foundation for a deeply relational and non-hierarchical Christian view of children that are honouring, and therefore, promotes faith praxis that is liberating and encourages flourishing.

Introduction

Children are all around us. They are found everywhere in the communities such as homes, schools, markets, cinemas, churches, and streets, to name a few examples. Children have a significant

influence on our world, and on every aspect of society. It is estimated that children make up one-third of the world's population. Consequently, there is a growing interest in studies focusing on issues of children, especially, lived experiences of violence and abuse in African communities. In spite of the significant interest in a theological reflection on children, there is a challenge in the views and understanding of children as well as faith praxis with regard to children in the faith community and society as a whole (Bunge & Eide 2022: xiii). There is still a significant gap in the way we think about the humanity of children, their needs and how these needs should be addressed, both in the faith communities and the society as a whole. Nelson Mandela (1995) observed that "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children". This implies that the views held about the humanity of children and the responses to their needs could paint a picture of the future state of faith communities and society. Mtata (2009:85) argues that the African construction of personhood puts children at the margins and this could partly contribute to the lived experiences of violence and dehumanisation. This marginalisation of children is not only in society but also prevalent in faith communities. It is believed that our notion of God influences our understanding of human beings. As Mtata (2009:85) observed, "a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology". This points to the fact that there is a strong connection between the views held about God and human beings. It is also argued that the concept of God as authoritative, powerful and having dominion to rule over the earth could underline the ordering of society in a hierarchical manner, where those at the top rule over those down (Moltmann 1985:241-142). This creates a relationship in which one has more power than the other and, in some cases, the imbalance of power may contribute to seeing some as inferior. For example, views about personhood could be influenced by the view of God as authoritative, powerful, and punishing wrongdoing (Johnson 2016:3).

One key notion of God that is thought to be connected to violence against children is the concept of retribution. This notion views God as impersonal and completely holy; a God who does not tolerate sin and punishes sin. One of the theologians who expounded this concept was Millard Erickson, who opined that "the nature of God is perfect and complete holiness. This is… the way God is by nature. He has always been absolutely holy…. Being contrary to God's nature, sin is repulsive to him. He is allergic to sin, so to speak. He cannot look upon it" (1984:802). This implies that God must punish sin. God cannot ignore sin because if he does, the very moral fibre of our society will be destroyed (Erickson 1984:816). Consequently, in line with the above, when children sin or go wrong, they are punished in order to help them refrain from sinning.

This notion of God could contribute to the debate on corporal punishment and abuse of children by significant authorities such as parents, teachers, caregivers and others. It is observed that corporal punishment (justifiable violence) is widely used by faith communities, with the belief that physical disciplining children is required by God as recorded in Scripture (e.g. Prov 23:13-14; Vieth, 2017:33; Hoffman et al. 2017:81-82). As a result, adherents to this view could subject children to several forms of punishment, contributing to abuse and violence.

It could be argued that this notion of God, when held in isolation, presents God as impersonal, unloving, unrelational, unforgiving and dehumanising. When God is construed primarily in terms of impersonal holiness, the biblical image of God as loving, relational and mutual is lost. Kaufman (1993:388) cautions that recognising the human origin of all concepts of God is key and it should

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continually serve as an evaluative key. This implies that the effects of our conceptualization of God on human life should be a critical factor in our theologising efforts. A fundamental factor in this regard, Kaufman argues, is examining the extent do our God-concepts enhance humanisation (well-being). We contend that the Trinity, which is the Christian concept of God, is relational and humanising. Allowing this notion of God to serve as an anthropological lens of all humans, including children, encourages a view of children that is dignifying and supportive.

The notion of retribution, coupled with the view that children are not fully human, could influence societal structures and relational spaces within which violence against children is either perpetrated or maintained. The question still remains as to how we should think about the agency, dignity and humanity of children in a way that honours their full humanity? What theological understanding – w when held by faith communities – c ould be grounded in a Christian anthropological view of children? Bunge and Eide (2022:xv) relate that embarking on theological reflections aimed at moving people from the margins of society to a place of centrality and dignity is a rocky and complex road. While this could be the case, I argue that a reflection on a theological anthropology of children, done through the lens of a relational paradigm of the Trinity, could contribute to repositioning children from the margins to a place of honour and dignity in society.

A relational view of the Trinity is conceptualised as a communion of mutual love, equality, inter-connectedness and interrelatedness, observed among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991:391). Catherine LaCugna (1991:391) opines that "the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another" is the relationship observed with the Triune God. She further argued that the reverse of this relational view is the source of dominion and abuse of power in our society. The concept of the Trinity as a model that should inform the quality of relationships within the Christian faith community and society has been explored by different scholars (Volf 1998; Moltmann 1991; LaCugna 1991). The relational view of the Trinity argues that the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit presents a relational view of God that should characterise the life of Christians. This implies that the point of departure of any discourse of Christian understanding of human beings should be the Trinity.

Developing a Christian understanding of children through the lens of the Trinity could help shape the way we think about the agency, dignity, and humanity of children in a way that they are considered full human beings, created in the image of the Triune God. I argue that this view of children could help reframe our understanding of their lived experience of violence as well as a faith praxis that could eliminate the marginalisation and dehumanisation of children. Some scholars argue that "child-attentive" theologies will honour children and give them a voice (Bunge & Eide 2022:xvii; Konz 2019: 26). I believe that child-attentive theologies, when grounded in a relational view of the Trinity, could contribute significantly to recognising the agency, dignity, and full humanity of children. It could create a relational space in our societies in which power imbalances, which often underline the violence against children, are removed.

A Relational View of the Trinity

This section focuses on gleaning brief insights and contributions on a relational view of the Trinity by relevant scholars such as Jurgen Moltmann, Catherine LaCugna and Miroslav Volf. A relational view of the Trinity suggests that the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit presents a view of God that should characterise the life of Christians. Although a relational view of the Trinity is a relatively recent concept, it is considered the source of the revival and renaissance in the Trinitarian theological discourse (Kärkkäinen, 2017: xvi). In this study, a relational view of the Trinity is conceptualised as a communion of mutual love, equality, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness observed among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991: 391). This understanding of the Trinity has dominated efforts to explicate a relational view of the Trinity that could provide a sounder framework for a Christian understanding of human beings and the quality of relationships that should exist in faith communities and extend to the larger society. A relational view of the Trinity, in the thoughts of Catherine LaCugna, is "the primacy of communion

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among equals, not the primacy of one over another" (1991:391). That is, the source of dominion and abuse of power in our society is the reverse of the quality of the relationship observed with the Triune God. Theologians believe this concept of the Trinity has shifted the discourse on the Trinity from an abstract, mystical, outdated concept, to an understanding that puts practical Christian life in the centre of the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, Pembroke remarks that "relationality is the central term in the new approach to the doctrine of the Trinity" (2006:10).

LaCugna (1991:338) also opines that the Trinity presents a relational concept in which there is no subordination between the Father and the Son or the Spirit. It is a kind of relationship of equality, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness (Tanner 2010:207; LaCugna 1991:391). This relationality observed in the Triune God offers no place for dominion and hierarchy. According to LaCugna, "the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another, is the hallmark of the reign of the God of Jesus Christ" (1991:391). As the argument implies, the reverse of this relational view is the source of dominion and abuse of power towards those considered weak and inferior in our society (LaCugna 1991:393). Although LaCugna's thesis was informed by the social injustice of the period, she believes this relational view of the Trinity is rooted in what is revealed about God in Scripture (1991:397). The practical implication is that when this quality of relationship exists in faith communities where the agency, dignity and humanity of children will be upheld. Children will not be seen as less important. As a result, children are more likely to receive humane treatment. Similarly, Patricia Wilson-Kastner (cited in LaCugna 1991:270-278) believes that the Trinity presents a divine relationship of mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom as key characteristics for communion with one another. Tanner, in her social Trinitarianism, also suggests a relationship of love and mutuality between God, the Father and God, the Son (2010:207). Tanner emphasises that, in living out this relationship, Christ becomes the model that should be followed (2012:370). LaCugna agrees with this position, stating that "living Trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived" (1991:60).

In Moltmann's vision, the doctrine of the Trinity is the only discursive approach to God. Moltmann contends that the doctrine of the Trinity is the "christianization of the concept of God" (1991:10). Moltmann also uses the concept of '*Imago Trinitas*' to drum home his relational view of the Trinity. He argued that since human beings are created in God's image, they are expected to live out that image on earth (1985:241), and that image is the image of the Trinity. He bases this argument on Jesus's prayer that "they may all be one, just as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21, ESV). Moltmann believes that this prayer is a call into the fellowship of human beings with Jesus, which is expected to reflect in our theological anthropology of human beings as well as the life of believers in society. The Father through the Son makes human beings conform to God's image on earth, and that image is the image of the Trinity (Moltmann 1985:243). The implication is that we are not just called to imitate the Trinitarian relationship, but we exist in it and mould our beings in it.

Moltmann is critical of the notion that human beings (as the image of God) are limited to God's rule over creation, and proposed that it should be extended to Imago Trinitas, that is, that the relationship between the Father, the Son and the

Holy Spirit is "represented in the fundamental human communities and is manifested in them through creation and redemption" (Moltmann 1985:242). This implies that our communities should be fashioned in ways that reflect the whole image of God. The argument put forth here is that "if the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community – the community of the sexes and the community of the generations – h as the same designation" (Moltmann 1985:241). In other words, Moltmann envisions a community in which the construction of personhood, as well as the relationship between men and women, parents and children, rich and poor reflects the whole and true image of God.

Similarly, Volf (1998:4) argues that ecclesial communion should reflect the Trinitarian communion. He attempted to develop a "non-hierarchical but truly communal ecclesiology based on a non-hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity" (1998:4). The implication is that building a community which lives out non-hierarchical characteristics such as love, peace, joy, mutuality and righteousness foster relationships between persons and communities.

Overall, it is argued that a relational view of the Trinity has practical implications for the Christian understanding of people and faith praxis in faith communities and society (Marmion & Nieuwenhove 2010:12). The belief in the Triune God, is consistent with the notion that human beings are created in the image and the likeness of God (Gen 2:26). It is indicative that human beings are called to share in the dynamics of the communion of the Triune God. This, indeed, the proponents of a relational view of the Trinity argues, has important practical "implications for anthropology, ecclesiology, and society" (Marmion & Nieuwenhove 2010:2).

Theological Anthropology of Children

Faith praxis with regard to children is often provided from some framework of anthropological hermeneutics. McEvoy (2019) argues that there is an indispensable need to put forth a theological anthropology of children for faith praxis in the contemporary church due to the increasing levels of violence against children in faith communities and also in society. Anthropology is the understanding of human beings. It entails the views that are held about the human nature. Van Arkel (2000) observes that developments in pastoral ministry in faith communities brought to the fore the renewed interest in the role of anthropology in pastoral care. Heitink (1998:86) argued that although pastoral responses are explicit, these actions are largely influenced by the implicit views held about the people who received the care. This anthropological view can be conscious or unconscious and influences faith praxis (Brunsdon 2019:1-2; Heitink 1998:86). Brunsdon opines that a theological anthropology should encompass "a Christian understanding of another person, who and what someone is in the light of God's covenant love, through the redemption of Christ and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit" (2019:3). In effect, Brunsdon suggests that a Christian view of humanity should be rooted in the Triune God. This implies that a theological anthropology should be grounded in the Christian understanding of human beings, and children are not an exception. It calls for views of children that are consistent with the Christian God, and that recognises the full humanity of children. This is because, recognising the full humanity of children will help us critically re-examine doctrines and practices by raising questions about their lived experiences (Bunge & Eide 2022: xiii).

The implication is that the views and understandings held about children in the faith community form part of the hermeneutical framework from which faith praxis is undertaken. Mtata (2009:97) asserts that faith communities as well as theological reflection in Africa have sometimes followed the African construction of personhood that put children as a lower class of human beings at the subconscious level. This has contributed to the dehumanisation and violence against children in African communities.

In the African communitarian ethos, one would have thought that African communities would hold views about all members that are liberating and nurturing each other. Is this the case in African society, including faith communities? The ubuntu notion of communal living could be described as ubuntu for adults (who are given full personhood) and ubuntu for children (who are not given full personhood). Mtata argues that African societies have not been as communitarian as it was portrayed and that "the African person was and is the hierarchical person" (2009:98). The construction of personhood in African communities has been

male-dominated to the extent that children are not given full personhood. African theological reflections appear to have followed this line of marginalisation over the years. This creates a community and a relational space in which there is an imbalance of power, thereby hindering flourishing together. However, faith communities could hold views about all members, especially the marginalised like children, that are consistent with the nature of the Christian God when the Trinity informs those views. Therefore, I argue that the Trinity should be a framework for theological anthropology. This is consistent with Jenson's observation that the Trinity is not a "separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved" (1997:31).

In addition, the Trinity is adhered to by different denominations and Christian faith traditions in Africa. As a result, theological discourse on the Trinity in Africa cuts across denominations and theological traditionswhich Sakupapa refers to the Trinity as "ecumenical discourse" (2019:2). The relational notion of the Trinity has gained wider attention in African theological discourse also due to its emphasis on community life, and the fact that it is connected to the African communitarian ethos (Sakupapa, 2019:3). As a result, African theologians such as Mwoleka (1975), Oduyoye (2000), Orobator (2008), Ogbonnaya (1994), Bitrus (2018), and Sakupapa (2019) underscored the relevance of the Trinity for human community and life. Commenting on the practical implication of the Trinity, Mwoleka (1975:204) observed that the Trinity is not abstract, but a model to be followed. This is because the three Divine persons are one and share everything in a way that does not make them three, but one. Mwoleka held that the African notion of socialism implies sharing life and flourishing together. Similarly, Bitrus opined that "an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God" (2018:187). As a result, Bitrus (2018:56–159) suggests Trinitarian relationality as a moral model for communal life. I argue that, for us to share life together and to aim at flourishing together in the authentic African communitarian ethos, our views about the different members of the community should be consistent with the Trinity, which is construed as the basis of communal life. This understanding is more likely to promote flourishing together in a relational space that is foreign to power imbalance, domination and discrimination, which could be considered the roots of violence against children.

Towards a Theological Anthropology of Children Informed by the Trinity

In this section, I investigate how a relational view of the Trinity informs a theological anthropology of children. How can this view inform a faith praxis that will eliminate dehumanisation and violence against children? The answers to these questions are not simple and straightforward. However, key insights will be drawn from the Trinity to inform a hermeneutical framework of the understanding of children, which invariably influences faith praxis.

According to Medley (2002:2), we are called into the Christian faith to bear the image of the Trinity. It also calls for building faith communities that reflect the Trinitarian communion (Volf 1998:4). Thus, building a community that lives out non-hierarchical characteristics such as love, peace, joy, mutuality and righteousness for relationships between persons. Although it sometimes appears as if the way and manner children are treated could lead to the suggestion that children are created in an image that is inferior to the image in which adults are created, it is important to underscore the fact that our belief in the Christian God—the Trinity is inconsistent with any suggestion that the value of children is different from that of an adult. Both adults and children are created in the same image of God (Gen 1:26) and there is only one image and likeness of the Triune God (Gen 2:7). Moltmann disagrees with the assertion that human beings, as the image of God, is limited to God's rule over creation and proposed that it should extend to *Imago Trinitas*, that is, the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as "represented in the fundamental human communities and is manifested in them through creation and redemption" (Moltmann 1985:242).

This implies our communities should be fashioned in ways that reflect the whole image of God. The argument put forth here is that "if the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community ? the community of the sexes and the community of the generations has the same designation" (Moltmann 1985:241). This idea

> The concept of people in relationship is an important idea that should form part of how we view children as part of the community.

of "rule" could partly contribute to the exercise of power and dominion over every aspect of creation that is perceived as inferior to those who have the power to rule. Consequently, it is difficult to create a relational space for all creation as observed in the Trinity. The faith community is made of individuals who are called by God the Father through the Son into fellowship in the power of the Spirit (Smit 2015:11). This is a fellowship of mutual relationship that first exists in the Trinity. LaCugna described this as fellowship with the notion of "primacy of equals and not primacy of one over the other" (LaCugna 1991:391). This is a community and fellowship of people with the same image of God. This notion promotes the effort to build communities in which a safe relational space is created for its members, including the marginalised and vulnerable.

The concept of people in relationship is an important idea that should form part of how we view children as part of the community. Children should be construed as persons in mutual relationships with other human beings (adults and other children). This idea is consistent with the notion of relational anthropology and a theology about the 'web of creation' by Dillen (2011). She observes that the literature presents two main views of children: the 'liberationist' view (child participation); and the 'care' view (child protection). She argues that these two do not oppose each other but should be held in a fine integration when working from the paradigm of relational anthropology. Accordingly, she contends that "relational anthropology places the dignity of both the child and the parent centrally and sees them as interconnected in a relation of give and take from the beginning" (2011:214). This interconnectedness is a mutual relationship, which exists in communion with the Father, Son and Spirit. The Trinitarian communion becomes the framework from which children are viewed. In an attempt to connect relational anthropology to creation, Dillen opines that "this relational anthropology can be theologically grounded in the view of creation as an 'interconnected web of relationships' rather than a 'fixed hierarchical ordering', where people have an ontological or natural place and status" (2011:214). The web of relationships implies a shift from hierarchy to asymmetry—different positions—and advocates that although the position of parent and children, as well as power, may vary, the respect and dignity of both children and adults remain mutual in these relational spaces. Consequently, children come into the relational spaces as those who can give and take something from the relationship, that is, as vulnerable and agents at the same time. Dillen concludes that "recognition of both the asymmetry on the one hand and the change in the balance of give and take over time and the mutuality of giving and taking on the other hand, is very important, both for parent-child relations as for other relational spaces, in order to respect the dignity of both parties"(2011:215). Asymmetry and mutuality are qualities that are prominent in a relational view of the Trinity.

Moltmann argues that the Trinity presents a clear case of persons in a relationship that is, the Father exists in the Son and the Son exists in the Father and so it also applies to the Spirit. Consequently, he opined that each Person receives the fullness of eternal life from the other (1991:173-174). Through this notion, each person looks out for the other person. This is consistent with the African concept of ubuntu, which states 'I am because of you'. It, therefore, suggests that one exists because of others' existence. Similarly, the idea is about the community of friends. Children should be seen as part of this community of friends and the children themselves should experience this friendship in freedom. Moltmann contends that friendship in freedom is the epitome of the relationship with God, a relationship of liberating men, women, and children (1993a:316). It is the friendship that emanates from Christ and is extended to all members, including those who are forsaken, and suffering. According to Kotzé and Noeth (2019:7),

the idea of friendship creates a public space to recognize the dignity of one another and to participate in the lives of others.

A relational view of the Trinity should be reflected in the faith praxis and spirituality that hold an understanding of children that is consistent with the full image of God—the *Imago Trinitas*. This is more likely to produce a sound theological anthropology of children. It should be rooted in a theological understanding that is consistent with the entire Gospel. A theological anthropology of children should be informed by our systematic theologies of children, especially children at risk. Kpalam and Light (2020:70-71) proposed a theology of children at risk with components as follows: (i) God as the good shepherd who cares for his sheep, including the vulnerable, weak, marginalised and poor in the church and society, especially widows and orphans; (ii) children are precious in the sight of God and Christian parents and churches have the responsibility to treasure and protect them; (iii) God's universal salvific plan includes children, another most powerful reason for caring for them so that no stumbling blocks to coming to faith, discipleship and opportunities for ministry are placed in their path; (iv) demonstrating the importance Scripture places on godly, able leadership in the home, church and society which necessitates a safe environment for raising children to be such leaders in the present and grow to become leaders in the future; and (v) child rearing that ensures that there is no abuse. This implies that our theological anthropology of children should consider children as important in the sight of God, just as all other human beings are, from the perspective of the Triune God. As a result, God's plans to restore all creation to himself include children. The fact that the Missio Dei includes children places the onus on the faith communities to recognise the dignity and full humanity of children just as Jesus Christ modelled and created an environment where nothing blocks their coming to the Lord (Matt 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16).

Commenting on the view of children, Bunge (2008:353) argues that children are created in the image of God and they are also gifts from the Lord to families and societies. Making reference to Psalm 127:3, namely; "children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him", she advocates for an environment where children and adults respect and enjoy each other. It could be said that this atmosphere, where children feel accepted, welcomed, and respected by adults and vice versa can be truly achieved in a community which is founded in a relational view of the Trinity.

Conclusion

To this end, our theological anthropology of children should be the one that views children as created in the same image of God just as adults. And that image is the image of the Triune God. It is in this image that children's dignity and respect are consistent with that which is accorded to all human beings created in the image of God. It holds that children are precious in the sight of God, and they are also called into the relationship with the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because they are part of God's salvific plan, he places the responsibility on adults to guide and nurture them in faith to grow in order to attain the full measure of Christ. However, this responsibility to guide does not mean they are inferior in the body of Christ. Children are considered a model of faith in Christ Jesus; hence adults can also learn some elements of faith from them. This notion makes a powerful reason to build a faith community in which all members are valued and given the dignity that is rooted in the image of the Triune God. In this view of children, and for that matter of all members of the community, it is more likely for power to be used in life-giving ways amongst parties that enjoy equal worth. It is therefore imperative to recognise that holding this view is critical to ensure an environment that honours the agency, dignity and humanity of children and eliminates all forms of abuse and dehumanisation of children in Africa.

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"Ikwekwe yinja[1] (a Boy is a Dog)": Re-humanizing Children and Childhoods in Matthew 2:1-3 & 16-18 in Light of the Boy-child Debate in South Africa

By Zukile Ngqeza[2]

Abstract

In contemporary society, the status of children as fully human is often contested and/or not accepted. The idea that children are not fully human has resulted in a plethora of abuses, including the denial of children's rights, voices, and agency both in biblical texts and in contemporary society. Notwithstanding, scholars like Marcia Bunge acknowledge that in the Judeo-Christian bible "infants and children are also whole and complete human beings made in the image of God" (2012:65). Many times, the ways in which children are treated in biblical texts (in so far as adults make decisions without their (children) approval, e.g., Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac, Jephthah's decision to kill her daughter in honour of his agreement with Yahweh, the killing of the boy children during the time of Pharoah and King Herod exhibit the idea that children are not fully human. Since Christians rely on the Bible for inspiration and conduct in both private and public life, it is necessary to study the ways in which children were treated in biblical times. Until recently, biblical scholars did not have much of a deliberate focus on studying children and how they are treated in the Bible. In

1 The phrase *"ikwekwe yinja (a boy is a dog)"* is used in IsiXhosa communities, where it is commonly believed that a boy is not yet a human being until he goes through the traditional initiation school, which makes him a man and/or fully human being (cf. Ntombana, 2011). I use this term to demonstrate the ways in which both in contemporary (South) African communities and in antiquity children are not considered fully human beings. A similar situation about girls in (South) African communities takes place whereby girls are not considered women and/or fully human beings until they attend a girls' initiation school called "intonjana". These beliefs about children, whether directly or indirectly, exacerbate the abuse and homicide of children and childhoods in (South) Africa.

2 This study is related to Zukile Ngqeza's unpublished PhD thesis entitled "Women, Infant Mortality and Poverty: A Feminist-Childist-Trauma Reading of Maternal Cannibalism in 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10 in a South African Context" (2021). Ngqeza can be reached at Zukile.Ngqeza@nwu.ac.za.

this study, I intend to read the story of the killing of boy children in Matthew 2 from a Gender-Childist Biblical Approach. Since Childhood Studies is an interdisciplinary field of research, I will make use of the work of childhood studies/childism scholars such as John Wall (2012), Sandra Smidt (2013), and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to read these New Testament (NT) texts. This study is a contribution to Biblical Studies spurred by calls by the movement against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) to focus on the boy child, if we are to end patriarchy and GBV.

Keywords: The Child, Childism, Childist Approach, Intersectionality, Biblical Studies, New Testament, Adult-Centred, Re-Humanization, Boy-Child, Gender-Perspective

Introducing the Boy-Child Debate in South Africa

As part of reading Matthew 2 in light of the boy-child debate in South Africa, it is necessary to demonstrate the situation of the boy child. Law asks "What about a boy-child?" (2017:1), due to patriarchy and GBV mostly committed by men. There has been a focus on girl-child initiatives in South Africa while neglecting the boy-child. This resulted in calls for "an equal focus on the boy-child" (Law, 2017:1). Neglecting the boy child has serious consequences which include boy children not knowing "what is expected of them as they grow up into men" (Law, 2017:1). As a result, they (boy-children) embrace toxic forms of masculinities. Hence, Law calls for programmes that are designed to empower the boy child (Law, 2017:3). A childist reading of Matthew 2 shows that children's abuse and homicide, as well as the denial of their (children) voices and agency, are as old as biblical times. A childist approach further allows us to see the boy-children in biblical texts in the light of the boy children who are neglected and abused in South Africa. A childist alternative to reading Matthew 2 is one of the initiatives of giving a much-needed focus on children (especially the boy-child) in the Bible and contemporary South Africa.

Interest in Studying Children in Biblical Studies

For many years biblical scholars did not have a deliberate focus on studying children and the ways in which they are treated in the Bible. Even in the 1990s, there was no deliberate focus given to children and childhoods (Flynn, 2018:1). I use the word "childhoods" rather than "childhood" in order to demonstrate the diversity of children and childhoods in the world and in (South) Africa. For example, the experiences of white children are not the same as the experiences of black children, and vice versa. Even among children of the same race, there are different experiences due to issues such as class, gender, and sexuality. The deliberate focus on the intersections of childhood studies and biblical studies is a new development. Flynn realized that there was a view within the field of biblical studies that the place and the role of children in the Bible did not have much to do with the biblical passage, its meaning, or the intention of the author (2018:1). As a result, prior to the 1990s scholarly work on children of the Bible was very rare and only found in a few publications (Flynn, 2018:1). However, in recent years biblical scholars noticed that children in the Bible were vital characters. As a result, in recent years there have been a number of publications on the topic (Flynn, 2018:2). A number of biblical scholars like Parker came to the realization that children are essential and fundamental to the Bible and its immediate world (2013:1). Thus there is a need for a kind of Biblical studies that takes children seriously (Parker, 2013:1). Flynn further notes that the interest of scholarly work on the subject of children in the Old Testament (OT) commenced by means of interrogating long-held suppositions in Biblical studies that the Bible does not attach a great deal of importance to children (2018:1). Thus, there was a need to question such views. However, Parker mourns the fact that while childhood

"Neglecting the boy child has serious consequences which include boy children not knowing "what is expected of them as they grow up into men" (Law, 2017:1)"

studies has developed in a great way throughout the years “with new academic departments and journals emerging”, on the contrary, the field of Biblical studies has not yet engaged childhood studies (which is interdisciplinary) in the manner that other disciplines have done (2013:1-2). Where biblical research on children has been conducted, there is still a need for engaging children in the Bible from the perspective of the boy-child debate in South Africa.

The Value of Children in the Bible and in African Contexts

The call to study children and childhoods in the Bible cannot avoid dealing with the question, “What was the value of the child in the Bible”? In other words, did all children have the same value? For instance, in the OT there is evidence of children who are abused and/or killed through the assistance of their fathers. Jephthah’s daughter, Isaac, Ishmael, etc. are examples of such abuses.[3] Yet such abuses do not mean that children were not valued in the Bible. For instance, Turner observes that children were valued in great ways in the OT to the extent that in Ancient Israel’s community the more children the person had, the more they were respected (1994:8). Even in the wedding setting, the guests would express their wish that the couple conceives as many children as possible from Yahweh (Turner, 1994:8). This is similar to the way in which children are valued in African culture/s. Baloyi and Manala observe that having children in African cultures is viewed as “the crowning glory” of a marriage (2019:1). Thus, the more children the couple has, the more praise and affirmation they get from the community (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). Africans consider childbearing as the primary reason for getting married (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). In order to demonstrate the significance of children in an African family, women who cannot bear children are regarded as a disgrace and are often rejected (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). As a consequence, the husband of the barren wife would resort to polygamy (Baloyi & Manala, 2018:1). While divorce is not encouraged in the Ashanti culture (even as a result of adultery), barrenness was an acceptable reason for divorce (Sarfo, 2017:552). The Ashanti tribe is part of the Akan cultural group which includes “Ashanti, Akyem, Akuapem, and Fante tribes” – mainly in Ghana (West Africa) (Sarfo, 2017:548). Even though the Ashanti culture is in Ghana, there are similarities between it and the African cultures in South Africa in as far as women who do not have children are treated. In the South African Nguni cultures, if the firstborn conceived by the wife is a female, this is an adequate reason for a husband to get a second wife (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:6). Sarfo further notes that in the Ashanti culture, to have a child is a sign of a marriage that is blessed and consequently a marriage that does not have children is viewed as cursed (2017:552). Sarfo further notes that in the Ashanti culture, a female married person who bears children receives a prestige honour with the name abaatan while a woman who cannot have children (abaabonin) would want to remove her “social shame” into being an abaatam (good woman) (2017:557). This is similar to other African communities. For instance, in the IsiZulu community, a barren woman is called “*idlolo*”. There is an honour and shame category when it comes to having or not having children in African communities. This demonstrates the value of children in these African communities, just like in ancient Israel.

In the OT context, the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham in Gen 12:1- 3 includes the promise to have many children. Isaac was the son of the promise (cf. Gen 17:15-27). This demonstrates the value of children in the biblical account (cf. Turner, 1994:8). There are many verses in the Bible that refer to children “as gifts of God” or indicators of the blessings of Yahweh, and highlight the idea that children bring joy to their homes and societies (e.g. Gen 33:9; Gen 48:9; Ps 127:3). The first wife of Jacob, Leah, refers to her sixth son as a present or wedding gift received from Yahweh (Gen 30:20) (Bunge, 2012:62). In the OT, many parents who conceive children are said to have been remembered by Yahweh (e.g. Gen 30:22; 1 Sam 1:11, 19) and gained a great favour (Gen 30:11) (Bunge, 2012:62). Dorff argues that even though children are a blessing and joy to their parents (in that Yahweh’s promise of blessings to the OT patriarchs and matriarchs was associated with the promise of having many

3 In Genesis 22 Yahweh asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a way of testing his (Abraham) loyalty. Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac. What is questionable is how children are used by adults to prove their loyalty to God. A similar thing happened to Jephthah’s daughter.

children), some of the OT children brought misery and pain to their parents, e.g. the relationship between David and Absalom (2012:23). Even in contemporary society, some children bring pain to their parent(s).

While this study acknowledges the significant value of children in ancient Israel and in antiquity, as well as in contemporary society, a childist perspective would ask for whom or for whose interests are children in the Bible important? Are children valued in the Bible for themselves or for enhancing the status of the mother and/or couple (as is the case in the Ashanti culture)? For instance, in ancient Israel's society, a man who had no children could not be appointed to serve as a judge because he was not able to comprehend the worth of life (since he had no children) (Dorff, 2012:23). This could demonstrate that having children in ancient Israel was advantageous for adults, but not necessarily for children themselves, since it offers adults the possibility to be respected in the community and to be appointed to positions of authority and honour. This could be the reason fathers like Jephthah and Abraham were willing to give their children over as sacrifices to Yahweh.

Gender Perspective of the Value and the Plight of Children in the Bible and Contemporary South Africa

Since Matthew 2 mentions that it is boy-children who were killed and not girl-children, it is necessary that I discuss the situation of boy-children in the Bible and in contemporary South Africa. As a result, I ask whether or not all children are viewed as equal in the Bible and in contemporary (South) Africa? Were boy-children more important than girl-children, or vice versa? In response to this concern, Turner observes that in antiquity, the firstborn boy-child was highly treasured (1994:4). There was an understanding that the male firstborn child would take care of his parents when they age and that he would take care of the entire family as well. Furthermore, the male firstborn child was considered "the first fruit' of the womb, and his birth was understood to be an indication of fertility (Turner, 1994:5).

Regarding the status of the girl-children in ancient Israel, girls were not viewed as important as boys, but ancient Israelites held a belief that all children were a gift from Yahweh. As a result they loved and appreciated their daughters (Turner, 1994:7). However, some biblical pericopes grant a low degree of importance to daughters. For example, the idea that the daughter's status came after the status of the guest (cf. Gen 19:1-8; Judg 19:16-26) (Turner, 1994:7). The household guest was perceived to be more important than the girl-child. However, firstborn girl-children were given special treatment compared to other girl-children (Gen 19:31-38, 29:26) (Turner, 1994:7).[4]

In contemporary South African communities, while both male and female children are important in African cultures, the boy-child is granted a high value of importance.[5] This has some very detrimental consequences in that it contributes to androcentrism and patriarchy. As a result, Baloyi and Manala call for affirmation of both the boy- and the girl-child (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). Baloyi and Manala further observe that while families regard the boy-child as important to the family, the girl-children are regarded as "other people's property" (2019:2). This is because they will one day get married to another family. As a result, a woman who does not yet have a boy-child (even if she has many girl-children) would continue to have more children hoping that she would conceive a boy-child in the future (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:2). Having a baby boy will enhance the women's status to her husband. The husband will value her more. Baloyi and Manala problematize the superiority of male children since it cements patriarchy and androcentrism (2019:3).

In South Africa, the concern about patriarchy which is perpetuated in households by prioritizing the interests of the boy-child led to the establishment of girl-child empowerment interventions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and also

4 Turner admits that daughters were under the legal dominion of their fathers until they got married, then they were under the dominion of their husbands. However, there were some daughters who displayed independence, for example, Rebecca, Mirriam, Deborah, Jael, and Abigail. Yet there is clear demonstration that the majority of girls submitted to a man.

5 For instance, Baloyi and Manala note that there is a saying in the Tsonga culture that says "*Vanhwana i tihuku to khomela wayeni* (girls are chickens for visitors)" (2019:2). This saying implies that there is no need to focus on the girl-child even when it comes to giving them education because, just like serving visitors with chickens, the girl-child will one day join another family through marriage. Yet, the boy-child will carry the name and the lineage of the family to the next generation (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:2).

by the government (e.g., Sonke Gender Justice, Love Life and Not in My Name movement). These programmes focus on teaching girl-children their intrinsic value ,as well as strategies for resisting toxic masculinity and patriarchy. However, this is often done without necessarily mentoring the boys to relearn the ways in which they can undo the patriarchy that they see and are taught in their homes. Thus in South Africa today, there is a concern about the neglect of the boy-child (Law, 2017:1).

Childist Biblical Hermeneutics

Since Christians rely on the Bible for inspiration and guidance in life, there is a similarity between the plight of children in the Bible and those in contemporary (South African) society. There is, therefore, a need for a childist biblical approach. Flynn refers to childist biblical hermeneutics as a "small field" of study. Hence, there are few biblical scholars who write from a childist approach (2018:2). Childist hermeneutics has similar goals to other liberation theologies and/or methodologies such as feminist and postcolonial lenses. This is a point Flynn also makes when he argues that childist or child-centered approaches are similar to feminist approaches in that they seek to liberate those who are marginalized in biblical texts, the scholarly world, and in society (2018:2). For example, since some of the OT passages present children's characters in a negative way, a childist approach seeks to save "the voiceless child from the Hebrew Bible's more negative treatment of children" (Flynn, 2018:2). Furthermore, the childist approach acknowledges that the "voiceless child is only communicated through the lenses of adults" (Flynn, 2018:2). In many biblical passages, we seldom hear the viewpoint of the child. It is adults and not children who write about children in both the biblical passages and in commentaries. The childist approach inspires scholars to read the Bible in ways that seek to undo the common trend of ignoring the characters of children by paying attention to them (Parker, 2013:199). Childist biblical interpretation intends to restore the humanity and voices of children in the scriptures and the commentaries. It is about the re-humanization of de-humanized children by the Bible writers and commentators. In the following section, I will use childist hermeneutics in reading Matt 2:1-3 & 16-18.

A Childist Reading of Mathew 2:1-3 & 16-18

In reading Matt 2:16-18 from a childist perspective, I will make use of three points that John Wall offers in order to contribute to what he considers a "more fully childist alternative" (2012:154). Wall proposes that in order to do justice in childist research and ethics, we need to go beyond the three categories[6] of how children have been viewed in Christian history into a "more fully childist alternative" (2012:145). I will also make use of the work of childhood studies/ childism scholars, Sandra Smidt (2013) and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to read these NT texts. Thus in this section, I will start by briefly discussing three views that supersede the aforementioned three standard approaches of a "more fully childist alternative" and utilize them in interpreting Matt 2:16-18 from a childist perspective.

A More Fully Childist Alternative

Wall presents his structure as "a more fully childist alternative" (2012:145-151). He then offers three responses to the questions that childist ethics often raise. The first response deals with the question of ontology (being) in terms of what it means to be a moral human being from the childhood perspective. Second, he deals with teleological objectives and goals of human communities.

6 The three categories to understanding children as understood in early Christianity are, firstly, the bottom-up approach – this is a view that children demonstrate "humanity's original gift for goodness, purity, and innocence" that must be treasured by adults and the community at large (Wall, 2012:144). This view is derived from the New Testament teaching that those who follow Jesus Christ have become "children of God" and that only those who "act like children" can enter the kingdom of God. In this "bottom-up" approach children are seen as "models of human goodness". Wall then problematizes this approach since it has the potential to "dehumanize children" by hiding their complex problems, difficulties, and diversity (2012:144). Thus if children are this "good", then society does not owe them much. Second, the "top-down approach" views children as inherently sinful, selfish, unruly, and in need of being disciplined. This approach is derived from the Pauline corpus where Christians are summoned to put away childish doings. Wall problematizes this "top-down" approach by arguing that while it is good in fostering education, ethics, and discipline in children, it has the potential to dehumanize children by means of ignoring their "gifts, agency and voices" (2012:144). Third, there is the "developmental approach" which is more neutral than the previous approaches (bottom-up and top-down) in that it maintains that children are inherently "neither good nor evil". They are "in a state of pre-rationality or underdeveloped potential" (Wall, 2012:144). They must first grow before they become "active moral citizens". According to Wall, this "developmental approach" further dehumanizes children in that it is based on the premise that "children are not yet, developed adults". Thus it seeks to suggest that children are not yet fully human. They still need to become human. Wall argues that from this viewpoint, it is impossible to consider "children as full citizens with moral agency and rights" (Wall, 2012:145).

> In South Africa, the concern about patriarchy which is perpetuated in households by prioritizing the interests of the boy-child led to the establishment of girl-child empowerment interventions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The teleological vision refers to the telos (goals, objectives, or what ought be rather than what is). Third, is a question of deontology (duties and obligations). It deals with the ways in which childism understands the obligations of human beings to each other. I make use of these three responses from Wall (2012:141-151) to read Matt 2:1-3 & 16-18 in a "more fully childist" way.

An Ontological View

Wall begins with the ontological question with regard to children as fully human beings with moral agency (2012:145). Wall further acknowledges that Christianity has, by and large, restricted its understanding of the question of right or wrong (in terms of top-down category) to the life of adults (2012:145). According to Wall "the root cause of children's dehumanization throughout Christianity has been the tendency to reduce children's ontological natures to simple goodness or fallenness (perhaps even more than women's), or instead to blank pre-morality" (2012:145).

Wall offers a childist approach to Gen 1:26-27. He argues that both children and adults share *"imitatio dei"* status. (2012:146) Thus human beings have the ability to create a new world for themselves and the whole of creation. Wall further argues that we need to go beyond a literal interpretation of "be fruitful and multiply" since it excludes children and perhaps adolescents. This is due to children's inability to produce and conceive children. I use the biblical phrase "be fruitful and multiply" symbolically. Thus from a childist perspective, the phrase refers to the ontological ability of children to contribute to social and moral agency in society, thereby revealing children's roles in making the world a better place for both children and adults. The symbolic interpretation of "be fruitful and multiply" calls for every human being (including children) "to reproduce itself in ever new ways in its relational, cultural, and historical worlds". Thus from a childist perspective, the call of Gen 1:26-27 is more sociological instead of being a bio-physiological construction - it confirms that all people are creative and inventive image-bearers of the inventive Creator of the universe.

In Matthew 2, the narrator is an adult (Matthew) and the main characters in the narrative are adults (King Herod (v. 1), the wise men (v. 1), priests and teachers of religion (v. 4), and Joseph (v. 13)). The child Jesus seems to disturb the adult-centred world of the Roman empire that is managed and maintained by King Herod. The king is specifically disturbed by the fact that "the wise men from the eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the new born king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him" (Matt 21-:2, NLT). After the king sent the wise men to look for the newly born Jesus and they failed to return to him, King Herod decided to send soldiers to kill all the boy children from the age of two and below in the city of Bethlehem and its surroundings (vv. 16-18).

It appears that in this text, the order to kill the boy children is linked to King Herod's disturbance when he heard that the wise men recognized the new born baby as a king (of the Jews). The king does not order the soldiers to kill the parents, but the boy-children.

From the perspective of the ontological question as discussed by Wall in Matthew 2, King Herod refuses to recognize and honour the newly born baby as a "fully human being with moral agency" (Wall, 2012:147). For King Herod, the baby cannot be the king since he is not an adult and does not have the moral and aged ability to lead justly. King Herod's problem is not only that he killed the boys,

but that he dehumanized the new born baby and the boys by not recognizing their "being" and agency. Furthermore, from an ontological (being) perspective, King Herod refuses to acknowledge that the newly born Jesus and the boy-children of Bethlehem "share the 'imitatio dei (image of God)" status with adults in Matthew 2 (King Herod, wise men, priests, teachers of religion and Joseph) (Wall, 2012:146). Thus, to send the wise men to look for the baby Jesus and also to order the soldiers to kill the boy children is a result of denying, as well as refusing to acknowledge, that children are also made in the image of God, like adults.

A Teleological View

Wall deals with the teleological goals and objectives of human communities (2012:147). This concerns the kind of world that humanity seeks to build for all creation. Wall argues that the Sabbath, as it is mentioned in the creation narrative in Genesis 2, provides both children and adults an opportunity to form a replica of Sabbath (rest) that leads to peace and justice in relation to each other (2012:147). The way children relate to parents and teachers, as well as to their friends, should translate into how they relate to visitors and neighbours. Adults are also expected to relate to children in a similar way than they do to fellow adults. Therefore, the teleological vision of human societies, at least from the childist perspective, is to see children and adults as equal partners in creating a new Sabbath-like world of peace, justice, and inclusion (Wall, 2012:147).

When we read Matt 2:16-18 from a teleological view, we recognise that King Herod does not see children having the ability to partner with adults in creating a telos for their communities. King Herod's actions deny children's ability to have a societal goal (telos) for the good of all creation. For King Herod, a baby cannot be king (of the Jews) since kings lead their people to the future (telos). King Herod does not accept that children (just like the baby Jesus who was announced as king) have the potential to play a role in creating a "Sabbath-like world" for their communities. Therefore, the killing of the boys in Matt 2:16-18 is a result of Herod (as an adult) refusing to honour the teleological competence of children.

A Deontological View

What do the deontological duties of human beings from a childist perspective look like? Wall argues that from the childist perspective, children are beseeched to love other people and they also need to be loved by others. But this kind of love does not require self-sacrifice. Children are not required to sacrifice their being for other people (especially adults). Furthermore, children also do not require adults to sacrifice themselves since they (children) still need to grow up to be adults. The real challenge is for human beings to have compassion and love each other in ways that destabilize the power relations between children and adults. In this context, love demands "an elliptical responsibility" whereby both the young and the old work towards a world where difference and diversity are appreciated (Wall, 2012:147). This is a situation whereby both children and adults have a duty to co-create an inclusive society. Wall further argues that just like Yahweh created the world by speaking in the creation story, both children and adults need to "retell their stories over and over again in more creative response to the stories of others" (2012:147). This is where the diverse stories of humanity form a communal new story. This is what Katangole calls a "new we" (2017:177).

Reading Matthew 2 from a deontological perspective makes one ask whether children have deontological (duties, obligations) responsibilities or not. Childism considers children as having the ability to take deontological responsibilities for the betterment of others (whether children or adults). This is the reason Christianity started through the life of the baby Jesus with a duty (deontological vision) to save people from their sins (Matt 1:21). However, in Matthew 2, Herod is disturbed when he hears that the wise men worshiped the baby and honoured him as the king of the Jews. Herod, therefore, does not see the baby as eligible to have a deontological responsibility (since the child is the king) for his people (who are also adults). As a result, Herod calls for the killing of this new born baby and other boy children. It is not that the baby cannot be a king because of the position (ontology) but also because of the child's inability to do the duties (deontology) of that role (at least from the perspective of Herod). However, from a childist perspective, both children and adults have deontological responsibilities to create a new story and a new world. Thus, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus sojourning to Egypt (Matt 2:14, 19-21) could be an example of this deontological responsibility that both children and adults have.

Children as Active Citizens and Social Players

The state of childhood is strictly controlled and measured in that it is adults who mostly make decisions about children's lives (Smidt, 2013:13). However, in recent years children have been increasingly considered as "social beings and players in their own life stories" (Smidt, 2013:13). Children are not just followers of adults, they are capable of telling their own stories and they should be treated as "social actors" (Smidt, 2013:13). Children have the ability and competence of actors and players in the struggle for social justice (Smidt, 2013:13). For instance, Fricker[7] notes how children from South Africa were part of the delegates who attended COP 27 (2022). These are children who are involved in climate change protests and are playing their part in actions that contribute to climate justice in South Africa (Friker, 2022). As a consequence, children have started to question their parents, teachers, and those who hold positions of power about issues of equality, equity, impartiality, and justice (Smidt, 2013:13). Children are no longer seen as invisible dependents, but they emerge as responsible citizens and agents of change.

The idea of agency is vital in the field of childhood studies (Spyrou, 2018:117). Thus children's agency is a new focus of childhood studies. It is based on the idea that it is not only adults who have the ability to be active citizens and social actors who work for social transformation - also children have such abilities and competencies (Spyrou, 2018:118). This presents a new way of seeing the position of children in the world today. The idea that "children are beings and not mere becomings (in that they will grow to be adults)" has serious effects on the way we study children and childhoods in the Bible and in the contemporary world (Spyrou, 2018:118). Seeing children as active citizens and social agents challenges the old and long-lasting adult-centred methods of writing scholarly works about children and childhoods (Spyrou, 2018:118). It further challenges the way children have been presented by adult narrators in the Bible and also by authors of biblical commentaries.

In Matt 2:1-3, King Herold is surprised and disturbed by a version of the new born baby as an active citizen and social role player (king of the Jews). It seems that King Herold is angered by a baby who is a social player instead of being an invisible dependent on adults. However, this baby from his first day on earth engages in a national role as a king of the Jews. The adult-centred King does not expect this from a child and as a result, embarks on a mission to find him (the child). From a childist perspective, the killing of the boys is an attempt to prevent the newly born baby and the "child body" he embodies from active social role-playing.

Muting the Voices of Children

The voices of children are important in childhood studies. In many writings and interpretations of texts and narratives, the voices of children are silent or silenced. As a result, Spyrou argues that scholars of childhood studies should resist the boundaries that inhibit the voices of children from being heard in literature. Childhood studies seek to investigate and explore the unstated voices of children and childhoods in order to bring new meanings and representations of children to textual narratives (2018:86). The practice of putting the voices of children in the centre of our scholarly work presents us with an "opportunity to [not] decenter the child as a subject" (Spyrou, 2018:86). Therefore, childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field of study has been built on the idea of the voices of children (Spyrou, 2018:87). Through examining the silenced voices of children by means of making their voices heard by the readers, scholars begin to understand children and childhoods in new ways[8] (Spyrou, 2018:87).

In Matthew 2, children do not speak, cry or resist King Herod and the soldiers' attempts to kill them. In these biblical texts, it is only adults who speak and not children. For instance, in Matthew 2, adults speak in the following verses: 2:2 "the wise men asked, where is the new born king of the Jews?"; 2:4 He [Herod] asked, "where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"; 2:5 "In Bethlehem in Judea, "they said [priests and teachers of religion])",; 2:8

7 Toby Fricker is the Chief Communication Officer at UNICEF South Africa. He was interviewed on SABC news in November 2022 regarding the role that children played in COP 27.

8 Spyrou cautions us from thinking that the voice of children is "individual, fixed straightforward, linear or clear" (2018:87). Furthermore, Spyrou argues that in our pursuit of placing the voices of children at the centre of our scholarship, we must be aware of "epistemologies and power relations in data generation" whereby the adults who write on behalf of children consider their views about children as "authentic" (2018:88).

"then he [Herod] told them "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child"; 2:13 "the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph "' Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother, the angel said". Furthermore, the narrator does not demonstrate the voices of the boy children who are killed. The boy children are silent in this chapter. They do not cry or even resist. Matthew shuts the voices of children down and only allows us to hear the voices of adults (cf. Matt 2:18). Masenya would consider Matthew's decision to mute the voices of children as "narrative violence" (2017).

Concluding Remarks

The childist approach to biblical texts helps biblical scholars to read texts in solidarity with children. Childism grants us theories that aid us in restoring the voice and agency of children in the biblical texts and in contemporary South Africa. This study primarily used John Wall's three questions of the ontological-teleological-deontological values of children, as well as the work of Sandra Smidt (2013) and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to re-humanize the children of Matthew 2. Such an approach enables us to recognize their (the children's) agency, voice, and competence which the male narrator (Matthew) ignored. Furthermore, this study has established that childist biblical interpretation helps us to see children in the text and in contemporary society as equal partners with adults in creating a better world for all (children and adults). This study further contributes to attempts by Biblical Studies to engage with scholars of other disciplines in order to rediscover the place of the child in research and in society.

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Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith? How Faith Communities Can Contribute to Ending Violence Against Children

By Selina Palm and Carola Eyber

Abstract

Violence against children is shaped by social norms which are frequently underpinned by faith-related beliefs and values. There is renewed global recognition of the role of religions in legitimating or challenging harmful attitudes and practices, and this highlights the relevance and influence of faith communities in child protection. Faith communities may also have a unique role to play by engaging *spiritual capital and faith mechanisms* for positive change. These approaches go beyond an instrumentalised yet important role in service provision alone, to also transform harmful beliefs and offer positive alternatives grounded in faith mandates. This article draws on insights from a 2019 scoping study that explored positive and negative beliefs across multiple faith traditions that shape the perpetration, justification, or engagement to end violence against children. The study included three research components: a literature review, a case study submission process, and key informant interviews with experts on child violence working with diverse faith communities. Its findings show many ways in which religion's spiritual capital can either help place children at society's centre or can support harmful hierarchies of power that enable violence against children and seek to resist positive change.

Keywords: Violence against children, faith actors, faith-based abuse, spiritual capital, harmful beliefs

Introduction

Violence against children is a global crisis. Statistics show that seven out of ten children aged 2-4 are subjected to violent discipline in the home and every 7 minutes an adolescent is killed by an act of violence (UNICEF, 2017). Child labour also affects an estimated 165 million children and around 15 million

girls experience forced sex, with an additional 150 million marrying before they turn 18 (UNICEF, 2017). However, violence against children is also preventable. In the last decade, a range of effective strategies have emerged, such as the INSPIRE (https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention/inspire-technical-package) approaches, that focus on how to end violence against children (UNICEF, 2014). These strategies include engaging parents and primary caregivers, changing harmful social norms and beliefs, as well as creating safer environments and stronger response and support systems. These strategies also highlight the important role of faith institutions in the shared task of ending violence against children, especially in relation to transforming social norms and beliefs.

In a world where 84 percent of people identify as religious (Pew Research Centre, 2017), faith communities and religious institutions have a unique, indispensable role to play in ending violence against children (Hackett & Grimm, 2012; McLeigh & Taylor, 2020). In many parts of the world, faith leaders hold moral authority and profound, trusted relationships with their communities. They can play a key role in changing harmful practices, establishing child protection systems, providing direct services, and serving as advocates at multiple levels (Hanmer & Robinson, 2014; UNICEF, 2017). Over the past decade, a body of literature has begun to capture evidence of this work of faith-affiliated groups in the lives of many communities (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). At the same time, disturbing evidence is also emerging of faith leaders and faith communities either violating children directly or allowing the perpetuation of violence against children through religious justifications or the silencing of survivor voices within religious spaces such as churches (Everhart, 2020; Australian Government, 2019). This includes the sexual abuse of children by faith leaders, but also the justification of, or carrying out of child marriage by faith actors, (Le Roux & Palm 2018) or the acceptance of corporal punishment or child labour in some faith schools and institutions (Rutledge & Eyber, 2018). While child protection experts highlight the urgent need to counter these abuses, faith communities may be slower to confront and eradicate these practices or beliefs that can result in violence against children, especially if they believe that they are allowed or mandated by their faith, or believe that faith leaders cannot be reported or held to account by secular courts (Fontes & Plummer, 2010).

Key milestones do exist in the public journey of global faith communities around their historical silence and complicity in certain forms of violence against children, and their increasing commitment to engage in ending all forms of violence against children. These include the Kyoto Declaration in 2006 and the Panama Declaration in 2017. Prominent faith leaders around the world, for example, South African Christian Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, American Jewish Rabbi Diane Gerson, Japanese Buddhist leader Reverend Takeyasu Miyamoto and Deputy Grand Iman of the Centre for Islamic Learning in Al-Azhar in Egypt, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, became global faith ambassadors around ending a range of child violence issues which were still highly contested in many faith spaces, including child marriage, female genital mutilation and corporal punishment. This points to a global movement for change within faith spaces that more leaders are invited to join. However, implementing these positive religious changes consistently also requires engaging with the many ambivalent roles that faith still plays in this area and the urgent need for new theological education (Eyber & Palm, 2019).

This article draws on a scoping study focused on this engagement as part of renewed recognition of faith communities' complex relevance and range of influences in child protection, especially through initiatives that aim to influence local communities through their faith affiliations (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm & Colombo, 2019).

Methodology

In 2018, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFC)[1] commissioned a scoping study to explore how faith communities are involved in ending, as well as in contributing to violence against children (VAC). The unique aspects of faith actors' approaches and practices to ending violence from within their religious belief systems were analysed (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019;

1 The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFC) is an international collaboration on evidence for faith groups' role and contributions to local community health and wellbeing and ending poverty.

Palm, 2019; Palm & Colombo, 2019). This scoping study, conducted by two academic institutions, one located in the Global North and one in the Global South, took place between January and December 2018 and included three published research components: a literature review (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019), a case study submission process for practice-based models that focused on ending violence against children; (Palm & Colombo, 2019) and a consultation stage with experts identified through JLIFCs membership (Palm, 2019). This article draws specifically on the literature review and the interviews with experts from varied faith traditions and country contexts with academic and practical experience working at the intersection of faith and VAC (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019).

The literature reviewed included journal articles, book chapters, media articles and NGO reports. Efforts were made to locate literature from all major faiths and a range of geographic regions with 172 pieces reviewed in-depth. The second component of the study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 expert practitioners across the field of religion and initiatives to end violence against children. Efforts were made to fill gaps identified at a literature level through interviews across 13 countries with experts from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim contexts, with practical experience of working with local faith communities to end violence against children. University ethical approval was secured.

Limited academic literature was seen to focus on faith-based initiatives, especially in the global South. In terms of the major religions, a large part of the literature was related to Sub-Saharan Africa and focused mainly on Christianity, Islam and Traditional Beliefs. Most literature reviewed was in English.

Findings

One of the key overall insights that emerged from the 2019 scoping study was the value of engaging the direct mechanisms of faith (Palm & Eyber, 2019). Harmful beliefs were identified across various faiths in relation to children. While these can be challenged using secular arguments only, because they are beliefs, experts in this field note that they are best tackled by using faith mechanisms. How this is to be done varies between different faiths and regions, but promising approaches draw on patterns of spiritual power within their traditions, including the critique of abusive beliefs and practices and development of positive values and norms. These mechanisms of faith may include religious rituals, sacred texts, faith doctrines, faith leaders, faith spaces and religious experiences. Spiritual power is manifested in various ways e.g., prayers, religious stories, divine commands, exorcisms, anointed leaders etc. These can be an asset or a liability in the shared task of ending violence against children.

Both the literature review and the interviews highlighted the unique roles played by many faith actors as a form of 'spiritual capital' (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). This included positive and negative beliefs, behaviours and a range of spiritual mechanisms (such as prayers, sermons, religious rituals and sacred texts). This article focuses on the findings regarding the unique value of spiritual capital in relation to ending violence against children. This emerged in the study through promoting positive beliefs, transforming harmful beliefs, and changing behaviours.

> "In a world where 84 percent of people identify as religious (Pew Research Centre, 2017), faith communities and religious institutions have a unique, indispensable role to play in ending violence against children (Hackett & Grimm, 2012; McLeigh & Taylor, 2020)"

The Role of Spiritual Capital

In many parts of the world, faith leaders have both significant moral authority and profound, trusted relationships with their communities. They can act as gatekeepers to communities with the power to allow or deny access by outsiders (access capital). They frequently have holistic, sustainable influence in promoting or challenging prevalent ideologies and behaviours (Palm, Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017; Le Roux & Palm, 2021). Faith leaders are increasingly being engaged by secular development programs for their social capital, such as with buildings, volunteers, and networks to carry out many roles across the prevention/response continuum. However, the study also identified an additional cross-cutting domain around *spiritual capital* as a unique role that faith communities can also play, which had received less attention to date than their wider social or access capital.

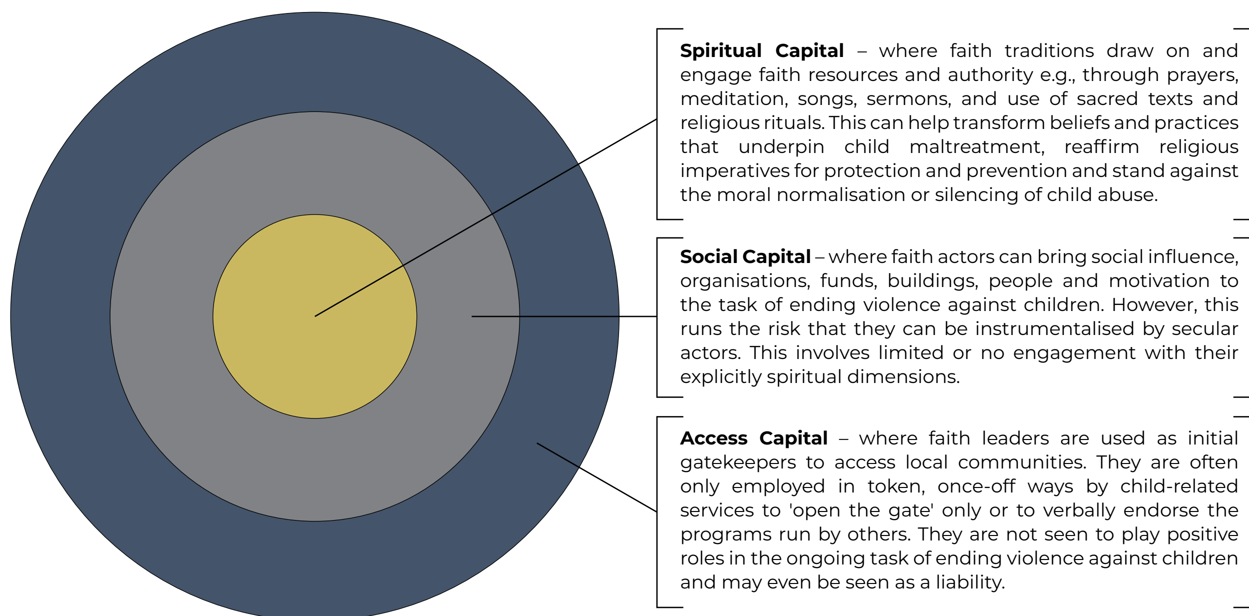

***Figure 1**: (adapted from Palm & Eyber, 2019)*

Dutch religious sociologist Gerrie Ter Haar (2011) describes spiritual capital as involving four types of religious resources in the forms of organisations, practices, experiences and ideas/beliefs. She suggests that these spiritual ideas or beliefs have often been overlooked in development work but provide unique resources that go beyond faith actors' recognised roles in social and access capital. Spiritual capital can be either a resource or a roadblock in efforts to end violence against children. It draws influence from pre-existing notions of religious authority. While this can be misused, it can also motivate, reinforce or challenge existing beliefs and practices in effective ways (Palm, 2020b).

The scoping study (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm, 2019) showed that faith leaders can speak about faith and ethics in ways that hold unique authority and influence for their followers. They also have an impact on how people behave in the multiple domains of their lives, including families and workplaces. In places of worship, each week sit presidents, political leaders, teachers, caregivers, children, perpetrators, and lawmakers. Religious beliefs, sacred texts, and images of the divine can all be deployed in ways that relate to, and position children in certain ways. They can connect faith, child protection and child rights or disconnect them. For example, faith-based approaches that critically engage sacred texts have been used as an effective strategy by both faith actors and child rights activists to rethink harmful interpretations or translations and to offer alternative interpretations (Arigatou International, 2019; Veith, 2018). Common principles are shared by many faiths such as respect for human dignity. Faith leaders can be equipped to act and speak about relationships between

adults and children in ways that 'do no harm' as identified by the experts interviewed (henceforth 'the experts'):[2]

> *(T)here are a huge number of people for whom their faith is a critically important part of their lives. I think that it is the role of leaders within different faiths to set an example above all else but also to talk about things like respect for human dignity, appreciation of diversity, your obligations, we all have rights...We need churches and faith leaders to search their texts and their hearts for ways to make humankind nicer to each other. To forget about power and control and dominance (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

Mainstreaming faith engagement alongside the disturbing contemporary global realities on violence against children, such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse, child marriage and child labour, into the interpretation of core faith values like justice, peace, human dignity, equality, compassion, with a commitment to life, was another approach identified as being valuable across different faiths:

> *They all profess respect for the human dignity of a child and compassion, equality, justice and non-violence and how do these square up with violence against children. If they are able to preach these particular beliefs and values and they have enormous potential to do that.... the religious themes that people have been happy with, like peace and justice, which have never included violence against children in the past, are now doing so... for the first time, children's rights are included (Interviewee, 2019, United Kingdom).*

These underlying beliefs can shape protective norms for children. Rethinking how faith communities are shaped makes a contribution to how children experience places of worship and participate in them. Finally, attitudes regarding whether the situation of children can be improved may exist in tension with fatalistic beliefs that suffering may be deserved or is to be accepted as 'God-ordained'. The study findings highlighted the powerful role of religious ideas and beliefs with both positive and negative consequences for the task of ending violence against children and urgently need deeper critical engagement. However, the mechanisms of faith by which beliefs are transmitted need to be explored.

Use of Faith-Based Mechanisms

Religious actors can be essential players in challenging misinterpreted religious beliefs and helping faith communities unlearn and relearn patterns and pass information on. This engages beliefs ,including deep-seated emotional responses, as essential for sustainable behaviour change. An evidence base is emerging around religious scholars and leaders using their spiritual capital to correct misinterpretations of sacred texts, to engage their spiritual messages and rituals with issues of child protection (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm & Le Roux, 2021). However, according to both the literature and interviews with the experts in this 2019 scoping study, religious ideas and beliefs were seen to form an underexplored area in relation to violence against children and it was noted they are best transmitted in ways that tap into existing spiritual structures, rituals and roles within faith communities. Understanding and use of, those existing faith mechanisms is recommended if messages are to be adopted. Four examples are given below that offer unique ways for faiths to engage, namely through sacred texts, religious rituals, spiritual counselling, and weekly religious messaging. These channels often play an important role in beliefs and norms around children and child violence.

Engaging Sacred Texts

Sacred texts and their interpretation are being taken more seriously as a core shaping mechanism for many faith communities, in relation to beliefs around ending violence against children. However, the study findings suggest that more work is needed, especially beyond the Christian tradition and with those who have oral traditions. Some faith leaders are engaged, but it has rarely becomes a compulsory part of formative training for all faith leaders. A focus on critical yet respectful engagement with sacred texts is used by some faith-based organisations for engaging with a faith-based approach. This has been an effective strategy for bringing change in faiths which have a central text but may marginalise faiths that do not

2 All quotations from interviewees are taken from the expert consultations of the scoping study (Palm, 2019).

have a single central sacred text at their core, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

Promising approaches to, for example, contextual Bible study, such as the Tamar campaign in Kenya which focused on sexual violence, engage directly with the potentially harmful stories in their sacred texts rather than ignoring them (West & Zondi-Mabizele, 2004). This may need to be done for other sacred stories where children are positioned as voiceless or harmed, such as the sacrifice stories of Isaac or Jephthah's daughter in the Bible. Some theologians are re-interpreting their sacred texts in the light of patterns of child harm and developing alternative interpretations that do not endorse harmful practices. Religious structures can disseminate these to their adherents in ways that are internally authoritative. This was seen to work well with text-based religions as experts noted that there are places where mistranslation has been embedded into religious texts for centuries and many people assume this is the Word of God. However, careful reinterpretation of, for example, both Islamic and Christian texts by well-recognized scholars within those traditions enabled a fatwa to be announced against female genital mutilation in 2006, and child marriage to also be condemned along with a range of other violent practices against children (Al-Azhar University, UNICEF & Coptic Orthodox Church, 2016a).

Involving Religious Rituals

A range of diverse religious rituals were also shared, including traditional African religions and in neo-Pentecostal Christian religious movements of Latin America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. These religions place less emphasis on sacred texts and formal teaching, and grant more spiritual authority to religious experiences with some grassroots faith leaders even seen as appointed by God as 'anointed Prophets' with unquestioned power, which can at times lead to further faith-based abusive practices against children by these leaders (Briggs & Whittaker, 2018). Critical interaction with these religious movements can develop positive techniques to engage these sources of religious authority which may contain a complex entanglement of culture and religion. They also offer new possibilities for engagement and can appeal to low literacy populations through their experiential spiritual rituals in which adults and children can participate together. Other faith leaders may also play an important role in engaging these perpetrators by using religious frames of reference. They employ a language around sin and evil that can enable them to engage perpetrators of violence through using their spiritual authority, access, and spiritual tools, such as prayer and sacred texts, to speak to perpetrators and victims and to advocate for change. Religious rituals often include components of change and forgiveness, such as the Islamic concepts of *Tawbah* and *Rahma*, and Christian notions of repentance. These rituals were identified as effective mechanisms for bringing change to patterns of violence against children in certain contexts (Le Roux & Palm, 2021).

Religious communities also use the spiritual rituals which form part of their faith to reinforce child protections such as baptism, name days, prayer and religious ceremonies (CNNV, 2015). Where these rituals are causing harm, they can help to develop alternative rituals as noted in the study (Palm, 2019). For example, an expert working with Maasai communities in Kenya found that religious and traditional leaders played a key role in stopping the tradition of female genital mutilation/cutting by replacing it with an alternative celebration that satisfied the girls' need to have a ritual that people in their community accept. This type of approach has also been successful with wider faith actors (Le Roux & Palm, 2021).

Undertaking Spiritual Counselling

Faith leaders also have the authority to visit homes, to counsel elders and to speak to parents and caregivers. These form opportunities for engagement with both adults and children and draw on shared mechanisms of faith such as prayer and confession to encourage behaviour change by perpetrators of abuse within family settings. One expert pointed to the unique authority of faith leaders to call for change amongst adherents that has led to testimonials of changed behaviours of or changed practices of violence against children by previous perpetrators. Evidence also emerged of adults changing their behaviour because of what children had said to them or by the use of mechanisms of faith such as prayer with and by children. This involves children directly in nonviolent spiritual practices for change, as this quote from an expert working in this area in East Africa shows:

Some of the parents, when we meet them, they will give testimonies, 'I used to abuse my children a lot, not giving them food or this, but as soon as they asked us to pray more often...', you will find the parents changed. The way they are abusing their children, or not giving them food. That is how prayer changed the household, even to stop violence in the home because children were insisting to pray. They are the ones leading prayers, simple prayers but a big change to the household (Interviewee, 2019, Tanzania).

Employing Weekly Religious Messages

The experts across different faith traditions offered suggestions for ways that faith leaders could harness the unique spiritual tools at their disposal. These tools can help reshape the ethical perceptions of millions of citizens who sit in spaces of worship across countries and faiths if the religious leader is a credible witness to what is being preached. This includes what they say in their weekly sermons or religious messages to both children and adults:

They are looked up to in the society, for example, if a faith leader speaks about disciplining the child and uses a reference from the faith perspective like if you want to discipline a child you have to beat them. You have to thrash them according to a (sacred text) verse. So, if a faith leader says, whatever is written in the sacred text, it may be written that way but beating a child is physical abuse. If he explains that to his congregation or society in such a way so it is not misinterpreting what is in the religious text. If faith leaders come from the religious perspective that really counts, that is really good (Interviewee, 2019, Nepal).

Local faith leaders often see themselves as having a special role in the spiritual development of children. Approaches like the Arigatou Prayer and Action for Children program connect this role to enabling children to recognise and challenge abusive patterns in their environment (Arigatou International, 2019). Child workers also develop child-centred approaches directly with children in places of worship that promote child-friendly spaces and beliefs and enable children to be active participants within religious spaces, an area of focus strongly recommended by the study as indirectly improving child protection.

Promoting Positive Beliefs

Faith leaders can offer moral authority and motivation to end violence against children, by helping to bridge the gap between global declarations and grassroots practices. Their spiritual or 'pulpit power' in their communities can be used in positive ways to protect children, to denounce violence as evil, and by using special days to build momentum for change such as the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children. The literature component of the research study (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019) shows that all religious traditions contain protective elements for marginalised and vulnerable people, which can be carefully strengthened and reclaimed for children.

Some examples of positive messages emerging from sacred texts include the Islamic view of children as a blessing and the mandate to care for orphans. While discipline is needed, harm to the body and soul is prohibited. Core tenets of Buddhism reject causing pain to others and point to a code of discipline based on mutual respect, loving kindness, and compassion. This connects to the idea that children must not be ill-treated. Sikh scriptures, for example, note that God cherishes all children and in the Bahai faith, relationships are seen to be structured through loving fellowship, consultation, and mutual respect, including family relationships where violence towards, vilification or humiliation of husband, wife or children is not seen to be an acceptable part of family life. The Christian Bible connects true religion in God's eyes to care for widows and orphans in distress. In a Hindu context, the principle of the sacredness of life and the foundational principle of non-injury means that a failure to protect children from abuse and exploitation is incompatible and at variance with basic Hindu teachings and their cardinal ethical principle of non-injury (*ahimsã*) (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). While these different religions do have diverse understandings of God, other multi-religious studies and interfaith declarations also reinforce the findings from this research that there are important commonalities on which work to end violence against children can built (Arigatou International, 2019).

A second way in which faith leaders can build positive momentum for treating children differently is by expanding the religious categories

of justice, peace, and human dignity to include children. This offers ways for religious communities to build a movement for change and collaborate to end violence against children across faiths by drawing on shared religious values and on the roles that faith leaders play as teachers, theologians, leaders of worship, chairs and community activists. These key religious themes can reinforce the value of the child. Doctrines regarding a 'theology' of the child in each tradition were also highlighted as relevant by the experts. Children are depicted in different ways within religious teachings, and this can influence how they are treated both socially and religiously. For example, one Hindu expert in the study pointed to engaging childhoods of divine beings to remind people that a child has divine power to shake up evil, while themes of the child as 'made in the image of God' in Judeo-Christian tradition, or as placed in the centre of the mandala[3] in Buddhist thought, were also promising entry points identified. One practical example was given where Buddhist leaders partnered with the government to put the child in the centre of the mandala where the deity normally goes with the articles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child around them as an example of a positive collaboration between child rights and religious teachings. This approach was also reinforced by experts within both Asian and African contexts as being important to counter prevalent perceptions here that child rights are Western, secular, at odds with religious teaching and are to be automatically resisted (Palm, 2019).

A third strategy identified was through he use of religious stories about key faith persons or their childhoods in religious traditions. These can either reinforce or challenge practices of child violence. Examples include Mohammad, Tamar, Isaac, Aisha, Rama, Mary and Jesus, who all encountered violence or vulnerability as children themselves. Whether a child is seen as inherently bad or pure or as capable of being religiously enlightened, may shape the education a child is given and the mode of teaching. In Buddhism, there is a belief that a child can be enlightened because the first people that the Buddha taught his insights to after enlightenment were children. In Christianity, Jesus prioritises children's access to him and places a child at the centre of his vision of the kingdom of God (Palm, 2020a).

Finally, faith leaders often have regular and trusted access to children of all ages in their places of worship, schools and homes, as well as in programs run by faith actors. These spaces can build childrens' capacities to internalise protective norms as part of their spirituality. Religious rituals for children around, for example, birth, baptism, naming, blessings, coming of age, marriage and death offer opportunities for renewed engagement with child protection and child rights in ways that speak to the spiritual purpose of these rituals, whilst also requiring critical reflection from faith actors on the need for rituals to evolve and to do no harm. For example, both female genital mutilation and child marriage are often shrouded in auras of religious morality, but have been increasingly contested publicly by religious leaders such as Islamic religious scholars (Al-Alzar & UNICEF, 2016b). Religion plays a role in human lifecycles from before birth to after death and is expected to speak about morality, especially around families, child rearing and education. Divine images, religious founders, sacred stories and doctrines shape social structures around the child who may then internalise what is seen to be normal.

Transforming Negative Beliefs

Despite the many positive examples and protective beliefs identified, faith actors were seen by the experts and in the literature as often perpetuating problematic mindsets about children described as 'toxic theology' (Trofgruben, 2018; Palm, 2020a). Local faith engagement can be at odds with global religious discourses, creating a gap between high level policies and grassroots practice. Local faith actors are seen to have legitimacy to address entrenched beliefs and practices, and need to be equipped to bridge this gap. If this does not take place, faith actors may be seen as a liability by the wider child protection sector and their spiritual contributions will be mistrusted or marginalised. Study findings, however, suggest that faith communities' unique contributions to ending violence against children may be their potential to promote, challenge, and re-interpret religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence

3 Mandala means "circle" in Sanskrit, a spiritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism that represents the universe.

against children, particularly those with a spiritual foundation or basis in sacred texts:

> *We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because of underlying beliefs…in many cases, there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed (Interviewee, 2019, Panama).*

Some faith leaders, faith actors or faith communities perpetuate violence against children through the misuse of their spiritual authority by justifing violence through religious teachings, or silencing and covering up in the face of child abuse. This is also why engaging faith and faith communities is critical if current complicity with perpetration is to be reshaped. As a result, local faith communities hold a unique position in relation to wider efforts to end child violence. Acknowledging that religion can be used to defend or hide child violence is an important first step towards building forms of allyship to address and end child violence globally. Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist and Christian experts all pointed to what they feel are ongoing "wrong beliefs and assumptions" regarding the provision of care to children that underpins patterns of continued violence within many faith communities. The 2019 scoping study highlighted a number of problematic religious beliefs, often entangled with cultural patterns, seen to indirectly shape violence against children (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm, 2019). These included, but were not limited to, beliefs about evil spirits or witchcraft, demon possession of children, disability or albinism in children as a curse, repressive gendered patterns such as son preference, damaging beliefs about sexual purity and physical punishment seen as essential for education or discipline in the home. These beliefs can underpin a reluctance by communities to change by offering an aura of morality, underpinned by spiritual beliefs interpreted in harmful ways, as one Hindu religious expert pointed out:

> *Children with disability are looked at as freaks of nature and because we believe in the theory of karma so the actions in this life, they influence our next life so they would say perhaps the person did not do good deeds in a past life, so the child has been punished. That is a very negative attitude (Interviewee, 2019, India).*

Religiously endorsed patterns of silencing children and expecting unquestioned obedience as a form of hierarchical respect for adults become particularly problematic in light of global sexual abuse scandals emerging across various faith groups (Everhart, 2020). These patterns have been found across multiple faith traditions and continue to affect many children. When the underlying drivers of harm against children are perceived to be spiritual or religious (e.g., by perceiving children as witches, child marriage as religiously ordained, or corporal punishment as mandated by sacred texts) spiritual engagement becomes an essential part of challenging these religiously infused root causes effectively.

One specific area that emerged strongly from the research study was around corporal punishment. Experts highlighted this area as forming a unique nexus between faith and violence against children, as an area of deep contention across all regions and faiths. This needs sensitive engagement to dispel the aura of religiously infused morality that still often surrounds it. For example, a legal expert from a Christian organization in Central America noted that "leaders in the church Biblically establish that they have to discipline children physically" (Interviewee, 2019, Honduras).

Faith actors play a powerful role in running schools in many regions and in some of these, physical modes of punishment remain standard practice. Corporal punishment, in both homes and schools, was also named as an ongoing concern across many faith traditions. The experts noted that this issue emerged consistently in training with faith leaders. For example, in some religious schools, selected phrases from diverse sacred texts are still used to justify beating children in order to inspire learning.

Some of the experts suggested that corporal punishment may sit at the root of all other forms of child violence where the corporal punishment of those viewed as 'less than' becomes religiously justified and is not even named as violence. Children are most vulnerable to violence within their homes and families. A religious view which sees corporal punishment as an accepted form

of discipline as part of a patriarchal household model was named as underpinning entrenched patterns of violence against children with close links to other forms of violence in the home. An expert from South Africa noted:

> *(W)e have focused on corporal punishment in particular as we believe it to be fundamental to all other forms of violence. It is so commonplace that it has become normalized as a parenting tool. So many children in so many societies are physically punished as children. This says something as it is normally state-sanctioned violence so it affects the status of the child and the whole problem of [child] violence in society is because of their very low status in society (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

A second area of harmful beliefs identified in the study was that of strongly gendered religious messages about sexual purity, including issues such as virginity and menstruation, which shape social mindsets around adolescent girls in particular. These underpin specific harmful practices such as virginity testing or monthly exclusion from religious spaces as 'unclean,' as well as religious ceremonies that endorse child marriage. While reinterpretation of these messages may take place at a global level, at a local level these beliefs may persist and impact the lives of many girl children. Religion has often exacerbated social taboos about gender, sex and sexuality, which become a source of harmful beliefs and myths. Engaging faith leaders to disentangle these taboos personally and communally is an important part of change. Religious law loopholes are still used in many regions to justify harmful sexual practices with children, as seen for example around child marriage (Le Roux & Palm, 2018). Repressive social patterns were also identified under the cover of the sexual 'protection' of girl children by parents, justified by religious ideas. For example, one Hindu expert noted the religiously sanctioned practice of a young girl going to live with her future family when she is too young to be married as a harmful practice that is focused on enabling the "girl's chastity to be protected…it then becomes the responsibility of the in-laws, not the parents" (Interviewee, 2019, India).

The study also highlighted the fact that religious taboos around discussing sex, LGBTIQ+ issues, or comprehensive sexuality education, can also make children more vulnerable to hidden forms of sexual abuse. One expert noted that guilt and shame form a significant issue for children, which can be further exacerbated when faith leaders are the abusers, where "sometimes the children feel guilty, as if it is their fault, that is what we are trying to change, these beliefs" (Interviewee, 2019, Cambodia). Finally, they noted that a focus on the girl child alone can reinforce binary gendered assumptions that girls need special protection, which can lead to potentially repressive forms of protection by parents or faith communities. The study insists that faith responses in this area must ensure that child protection approaches can support protection and agency for all children, albeit in gender-informed ways.

A third area that emerged from the study findings was that religious themes of obedience and respect shape a social hierarchy where children are often expected to be 'seen but not heard' (Palm, 2020a). These beliefs about children can be embedded within various mechanisms of faith and require nuanced challenges from within faith traditions, by drawing on alternative resources of faith that can support the voices and agency of children, and challenge the underlying paradigm of patriarchal ownership of children by adults common in many religious spaces:

> *Patriarchal religion, and the three mono-theistic faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, are particularly hierarchical… We set up a pattern where men are dominant, a patriarchal construction of reality, a devalued worth of women and children, and where children are at the bottom of the pile. People think that they own their children… Men are the ones in charge who make decisions. Women need protection, someone to look after them and children must be seen and not heard, and they are ours to do whatever we like with them. We say things like, 'I brought you into this world I can take you out' (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

Underlying beliefs play a role in shaping patterns of power between adult and child. These include themes that see suffering as divinely ordained or redemptive, requirements of filial piety, or a punitive male parent God with women and

children seen as male property. This belief can be tied to modelling God by punishing others. These religious assumptions need to be challenged if the roots that underpin violence against women and children, in family settings in particular, are to shift. Religious themes shaped by popular perceptions of *karma* (you get what you deserve), *fatalism* (things cannot be changed), or *retribution* (God as a violent punishing parent) are interpreted in ways that perpetuate the power of abusers. Children's religious duties to 'always honour your father and mother' can be interpreted in harmful ways with the family unit positioned as sacred in religious traditions, creating unregulated spaces for abuse. Stories of child violence as required by divine forces exist in many religious teachings, such as the sacrifice of Isaac by his father, as noted by a Jewish faith leader:

> *It is the most disturbing story in the Bible. It can be understood either as a paradigm for, or as a polemic against child sacrifice. It speaks directly to the issue of ending violence against children as you can take this text and say it is okay after all God told Abraham to sacrifice his son for a greater purpose. Viewed widely in Judaism as a polemic against child sacrifice, it lays the foundation of who are we? How do we deal with this? (Interviewee, 2019, USA).*

Finally, parents are often expected to fulfil religious moral duties regarding their children, often premised on a patriarchal family model. Religious family rituals can reinforce harmful social preferences – for example, a religious blessing of the womb so the child will be a boy. One expert noted beliefs in her tradition, dedicating a child to the monastery secures blessings for the parents. Beliefs that the religious leader is a reflection of the divine often made their words and actions authoritative. One Buddhist expert noted that "if the monk tells you something, you will believe them" (Interviewee, 2019, Thailand). This can silence reporting abuse by children themselves who are confronted by the spiritual authority of someone who may also be providing them with social care, food or education.

Conclusion

This 2019 scoping study shows that local faith leaders already play a range of roles in informal child protection systems as first responders and as moral influencers in families and communities where children remain most vulnerable. Faith actors are also being equipped to bridge the gaps between children and a raft of other child protection processes, and are able to play practical roles alongside other actors to strengthen child protection systems at various points across the prevention/response continuum.

However, interviews with experts working in diverse faiths and for child protection as part of the study call for deeper engagement with questions of spiritual capital that they see as influencing their work. They feel that faith leaders can do more to engage their unique spiritual roles to challenge complicities of legitimated patterns of child violence within religious spaces and beyond. Reinterpreting sacred texts that have been used to harm, as well as traditional and ritualised practices that affect children, by adopting more liberating hermeneutics for children, was deemed essential but was identified as less developed to date. Spiritual capital needs to be better understood and engaged by all working to end violence against children, if the root causes that legitimate and underpin prevalent norms and practices in the world today are to be transformed into a set of beliefs and actions that people of faith can hold with equal fervour and commitment. This could better extend the core values of all major religions to patterns of justice, peace and love to children. It also offers a unique way of tapping into people of faith's sense of ethical behaviour, and the mechanisms which shape their worldview regarding children. By transforming beliefs at this level, it opens spaces and motivates for new ways of engaging children as agents and spiritual beings.

Faith communities have an opportunity to make a unique contribution to the elimination of violence against children through their potential to challenge, re-interpret and refuse to promote specific religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence against children. Their moral ability to mandate practical social action in relation to children can be a significant asset. However, this will only be the case if they also deal constructively with entrenched harmful faith beliefs used by some to underpin abusive adult/child hierarchies, break the silence and secrecy on hidden practices of child abuse or maltreatment within religious institutions and families, and take concrete steps toward preventative action.

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Violence Against Children: A Social-Ecological Perspective

By Jace Pillay

Abstract

Violence against children (VAC) is a global phenomenon that needs deliberate attention. Children exposed to violence in their families, communities, and schools in their early years are likely to maintain this cycle of violence in their youth and adult lives if no efforts are made to break this cycle. Taking this into consideration the author adopts a social-ecological theoretical perspective in exploring global, regional, and South African literature on the risks and causes of VAC as well as the protective factors that can prevent VAC. Embedding VAC within a social-ecological perspective warrants the need to explore it at four crucial levels, namely individual, relationships, community, and society. The literature review embodies the relevance of these four levels since all risk and causal factors of VAC are easily categorised in one or more of these levels. As such, the author provides a social-ecological perspective comprising all four levels that holistically address the prevention of VAC. The literature review indicated that many of the risks and causes of VAC are a common trend across countries even though it is more prevalent within African contexts. This suggests that the preventive measures discussed are likely to have global value.

Keywords: children, community, relationships, schools, social-ecological, society, violence

Background and Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is a global public health crisis (Cerna-Turoff et al. 2021; World Health Organisation [WHO] 2020; Zheng et al. 2019). It has been estimated that about half of the world's children have been affected by violence in the preceding year, with significantly higher rates of VAC in low- and middle-income countries,

> Some estimates indicate that more than a quarter of children in South Africa have experienced some kind of physical violence in their lifetime (Fang et al. 2016).

particularly in Africa (Hillis et al. 2016). As such, it has been recognised by the United Nations as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically, SDG 16.2 which aims to end VAC by 2030 (United Nations General Assembly 2015). Low- and middle-income countries are priority regions where VAC needs to be reduced as the prevalence of VAC in these countries tends to be higher (Cerna-Turoff et al. 2021). South Africa is no exception, with some estimates indicating that more than a quarter of children in South Africa have experienced some kind of physical violence in their lifetime (Fang et al. 2016).

The WHO (2020) defines violence against children as "all forms of violence against people under 18 years old, whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peer, romantic partners, or strangers" and includes various types of violence such as maltreatment, bullying, youth violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and emotional or psychological violence. The WHO (2020) identifies various impacts of VAC which include severe injuries, impaired brain and nervous system development, unintended pregnancies, and negative coping and health-risk behaviours. Further, violence perpetuated against children can result in negative impacts later in life such as children dropping out of school, difficulties keeping a job and increased risk for future victimisation and/or perpetration of violence (Wessells & Kostelny 2021; WHO 2020). Experiences of trauma or violence in childhood for males have been associated with an increased risk of being a perpetrator of intimate partner violence later in life (Fulu et al. 2017). There exists a variety of contexts where children may experience violence such as in war zones (Catani, 2018; Gormez et al. 2017), gang-related violence (Hendricks 2018), or everyday spaces such as schools and homes (Gao et al. 2017; Petrus 2021). Much VAC occurs in spaces that are meant to be safe such as schools and homes (Wessells & Kostelny 2021). Violence has a negative impact on the socialisation of children as they could learn that violence can lead to positive outcomes such as increased power or status. It could also lead to intergenerational cycles of violence as victims may turn to the use of violence later in life making the cyclic nature of violence essential to address with urgency (Wessells & Kostelny 2021). The mental health impacts of violence are numerous, including PTSD, depression, anxiety as well as cognitive difficulties due to possible traumatic brain injuries in cases of severe physical violence (Fang et al. 2016; Wessells & Kostelny 2021). Physical health consequences of violence experienced by children are numerous too, including increased physiological markers of stress (Theall et al. 2017), risk of chronic disease (Chang et al. 2019), and obesity (Ferrara et al. 2019). Thus, this public health crisis is essential to understand and develop interventions at various levels to aid in violence reduction.

Taking the above background into consideration the author discusses VAC within a social ecology perspective that takes cognisance of schools and communities. This is followed by a desktop review of the literature on the causes and risk factors in relation to VAC from an international and African viewpoint. Finally, a discussion of possible protective factors and key intervention strategies is presented.

Violence Against Children – A Social-ecological Perspective

A social-ecological perspective is imperative to get a better understanding of the causes and risk factors associated with VAC. Inevitably, such an understanding would contribute to the prevention and protective factors that are needed to combat VAC. This seminal perspective was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1986) in the 1970s who postulated that a child cannot be seen in isolation from the context (ecology) in which he or she lives. Such a perspective is appropriate because it explores VAC

on four levels, namely individual, relationships, community, and society (Dahlberg & Krug 2006). The interaction between individual learners, their relationships with others, community exposure, and societal factors have a holistic impact on VAC (Edberg et al. 2017). Enoch (2006) blames society for VAC but Pillay and Ragpot (2010) assert that VAC must be seen as a dynamic and interactive ecology. At the individual level, a child's biological and personal history (age, family income, and education) contributes to him or her becoming a victim or an instigator of violence. At the relationship level, the child's interaction with family and community members as well as peers at school can result in him or her becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence because children model what they see (Govender 2006). At the community level, schools, local environments, and religious organisations could also influence VAC, for example, gangsterism in communities spills over to schools. The last level focuses on a variety of societal factors that contribute to VAC, such as social, and cultural beliefs and practices and policies that promote economic and social inequalities among people. All four levels of influence as well as the pathways of influence (interactions) are crucial in the understanding of VAC. For example, this would mean that school-based violence does not result from a single cause but from multiple systemic influences such as unemployment, family breakdown, poor school facilities, and community-based violence (Van Vuuren & Gouws 2007) since schools are structures of society (Dasoo 2010). As such, schools are mini-communities mirroring the wider communities in which they exist (Pillay & Rajpot 2010)

Causes and Risk Factors for VAC

VAC is a global problem (UNICEF 2014; WHO 2012) as highlighted in numerous international studies. Finkelhor et al. (2013) used data from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence in the United States of America (USA) of 4,503 children ranging from 1 month to 17 years of age. They reported that in the last year, 41.2% of children and youth had experienced some form of physical violence while one in ten had suffered from an assault-related injury. Approximately 10% of girls between the ages of 14 to 17 years old had been victims of sexual assault or abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2013). Further, Peterson et al. (2018) estimated that the total lifetime economic cost of fatal and non-fatal VAC in the USA was approximately $428 billion in 2015. Devries et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of studies from Latin America and the Caribbean, covering 34 countries, regarding rates of VAC, reporting that caregiver-perpetrated violence ranged between 30% to 60% and physical violence perpetrated by students ranged between 17% and 61%. Intimate partner violence among girls aged 15 to 19 years old ranged between 13% and 18% (Devries et al. 2019). Similarly, a systematic review of prevalence rates of VAC in Arab states reported that population estimates for physical punishment of children in the past month were higher than UNICEF's global estimate (which is 60%) (Elghossain et al. 2019). Violence among males was more prevalent even for sexual abuse, which contradicts studies in other regions of the world. The authors suggested that this is perhaps due to boys having greater freedom of movement and less supervision, or perhaps because girls are less likely to report sexual abuse due to cultural sanctions of sex before marriage in Arab countries (Elghossain et al. 2019).

A systematic review and meta-regression identifying the relative importance of various forms of VAC with a focus on low- and middle-income countries, reported that no specific factors were significantly associated with physical violence. However lower socioeconomic status (SES), being female, and primary education of mothers and adults were associated with emotional abuse (Cerna-Turoff et al. 2021). Being a girl was found to be associated with sexual abuse and physical violence was most reported in the studies analysed, while sexual violence was the least common (Cerna-Turoff et al. 2021).

One highly vulnerable subgroup of children is those undergoing migration. Jud et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of the rates of violence among this group of children, reporting that physical abuse was experienced by children in migration between 9% and 65% of the studies analysed, while sexual abuse ranged between 5% to 20%. Often, this violence was perpetrated by caregivers of the children. One challenge of this research was that it was difficult to track exactly which countries these children had come from or where their final destination was (Jud et al. 2020). A study based in

China among migrant and local families reported that migrant adolescents were approximately 1.4 times more likely to have experienced psychological or physical violence perpetrated by their parents compared to local adolescents (Gao et al. 2017). Risk factors for violence included low academic performance, lower family SES status, as well as neighbourhood disorganisation (Gao et al. 2017).

Various aspects of identity put some children more at risk than others, including factors such as sexual orientation, (dis)ability status, ethnicity, religion, and social class (Wessells & Kostelny 2021). Devries et al. (2017) produced a systematic analysis of age-specific and sex-specific prevalence estimates for perpetrators and victims of VAC. Their results showed that household members were the most common perpetrators of VAC followed by student peers. Emotional abuse was reported more frequently than physical abuse, although the caveat is to be added that these two domains do overlap (Devries et al. 2017). Sexual violence against teenage girls between 15 and 19 years old was most perpetuated by intimate partners. For caregiver-reported data, between 60% and 70% of children aged between 2 and 14 years old experienced emotional violence from a caregiver or household member over the previous month; while physical violence levels for children younger than two were surprisingly high between 50% and 60%, however these levels seemed to decline in older age groups dropping to about 40% to 50% by the age of 14 (Devries et al. 2017). Unfortunately, emotional violence levels seemed to remain constant regardless of age. Globally, it was estimated that between 70% and 80% of children aged 8 to 11 years old had experienced emotional violence from a school peer in the past year, while this figure dropped to 50% in 12- to 17-year-olds, most likely due to fewer children attending secondary schooling globally as opposed to primary schooling (Devries et al. 2017).

It is also important to understand the impact that VAC has on various domains. One key area of potential concern is how parents choose to discipline their children, with some believing that spanking (not abusing) is acceptable (Afifi et al. 2017). However, research has indicated that this type of physical punishment has negative consequences such as increased risk for suicide attempts, increased risk of substance abuse, lower levels of socioemotional development, and increased aggression (Afifi et al. 2017; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Pace et al. 2019). A recent multi-country study consisting of 62 low- to middle-income countries on the relationship between parental spanking and child well-being reported that 43% of children between the ages of 36 to 59 months had been spanked or were in a household where another child was spanked (Pace et al. 2019). No country in this study was found to have a positive relationship between spanking and children's socioemotional development (Pace et al. 2019).

A systematic review and meta-analysis from 21 countries globally was conducted by Fry et al. (2018) to assess the associations between VAC and educational outcomes. The authors discovered that all forms of VAC had an adverse impact on educational outcomes, with performance on standardised tests being more likely to be lower due to experiencing violence (Fry et al. 2018). Overall, the results suggested that children who experience violence have a 13% probability of not graduating from school. Bullying was found to have a very strong impact on school attendance and participation, but less of an impact on academic achievement compared to other forms of violence (Fry et al. 2018). Interestingly, males who were victims of bullying were almost three times more likely to be absent from school. Similarly, girls who had experienced sexual violence were three times more likely to be absent (Fry et al. 2018).

In African countries, rates of VAC are similarly high, and sometimes higher, compared with the rest of the world (Hillis et al. 2016). VAC in Africa is a key contributor to the burden of disease among children (Van As, 2016). In their study conducted in Uganda, Devries et al. (2014) assessed the levels of school violence, mental health and academic performance. They reported that rates of physical violence among 3,706 of the primary school learners who took part in the study were extremely high, with about 93% of boys and 94% of girls reporting physical violence from a staff member in their lifetimes, with over 50% reporting such incidences in the past week (Devries et al. 2014). Unsurprisingly, physical violence in the past week was associated with higher odds of poor mental health, with girls twice as likely to have poor educational outcomes. Approximately 40% of staff members admitted to using physical violence on learners. For male

staff members, being a victim of violence was associated with an increased likelihood of them using physical violence on learners (Devries et al. 2014). Although this study had extremely high rates of violence, other African countries seem to show lower rates, which are nonetheless still high. Stark et al. (2017) reported elevated rates of violence against adolescent girls who were internally displaced migrants in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over 54% of these girls had experienced victimisation over the past 12 months, with psychological violence being most prevalent (38%) followed by sexual abuse (approximately 20%). As several other studies corroborate, much of this violence was perpetrated by people close to the victims (Devries et al. 2017; Fang et al. 2016; Stark et al. 2017).

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>
> (Wessells & Kostelny 2021)"

Anwar et al. (2020) conducted a population-level quantitative study examining the associations between gender and violence in young people aged 13 to 18 years old in Senegal. The authors reported that boys were 1.6 times more likely to have experienced emotional abuse as compared to girls; while girls were twice as likely to have been victims of sexual abuse. Their findings also suggest that boys living in peri-urban settings were more likely to report higher rates of physical violence compared to girls (Anwar et al. 2020). Research undertaken in 2019 in Kenya on young people between 13 and 24 years of age indicated that 58.3% of females had experienced any form of violence in their lifetime, while for males this was 56.6% (Annor et al. 2022). Physical violence was experienced most frequently by males (52.7%) and females (49.9%), followed by sexual violence experienced by females (25.2%) and then emotional violence by males (11.5%). The study also compared results on the same survey conducted in 2010 to their results in 2019. Between these time periods, Kenya implemented various programmes and policies aimed at reducing VAC, alongside legislative reforms including setting the minimum marriage age to 18 years old and strengthening the existing Children's Act. Considering these changes over the nine-year period, overall lifetime violence experienced decreased by over 24 percentage points for females and by over 26 percentage points for males, both statistically significant drops (Annor et al. 2022). This does provide some promising evidence for violence reduction programmes in countries like Kenya.

Zimbabwe's complex sociopolitical history and landscape have contributed to the vulnerability and risk of VAC (Izumi & Baago-Rasmussen 2018). Research indicates that for girls, the loss of both parents puts them at increased risk of emotional violence as well as sexual violence (Chigiji et al. 2018), while for boys the loss of a father puts them more at risk of being subject to emotional violence (Chigiji et al. 2018). Izumi and Baago-Rasmussen (2018) report on various risk factors for girls and boys across different domains of violence. In terms of physical violence, boys and girls are at risk if they come from a lower SES, while girls are more at risk for this type of violence if they have been emotionally abused before 13 years old. For sexual violence, boys and girls who have been emotionally and physically abused before 13 years old are more at risk, while having maternal absence for girls before the age of 13 is an additional risk for this form of violence. Girls who are between 15 and 16 years old are particularly at risk for emotional violence, while boys who have an ill adult at home or who have lost a father before 13 years old are at increased risk (Izumi & Baago-Rasmussen 2018). More macro factors also seem to be drivers of violence, such as pervasive patriarchal norms

and gender inequalities which are socialised into children. Child marriage is also not uncommon in Zimbabwe with around a quarter of girls aged 15 to 19 years old currently married or living in a union while only 1.7% of boys of the same age were married/in a union (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2015).

Zooming into South Africa, VAC does not differ much in respect to other countries in Africa. Child abuse is the second cause of death of babies less than 6 months old in South Africa, only second to sudden infant death syndrome (Van As 2016). While this statistic is quite stark, differing cultural and legal understandings of what constitutes abuse have likely led to underreporting of cases of VAC in South Africa (Van As 2016). Some forms of abuse may also be difficult to prove such as emotional abuse or forms of sexual abuse that do not mark the body with any sign of abuse (Van As 2016).

The Optimus Study, which provided the first nationally representative data on child sex abuse in South Africa, investigated the prevalence of annual and lifetime child sex abuse as well as maltreatment of children (Artz et al. 2016). Drawing on a sample of 4,086 15- to 17-year-olds drawn nationally from schools, as well as 5,631 participants from households, the study identified that in the school sample, one in three participants had experienced some form of sexual abuse in their lifetimes, while one in four in the household sample had experienced this (Artz et al. 2016). These estimates mean that at least 784 967 young people in South Africa had experienced some form of sexual abuse by the age of 17. In the school sample, 42.2% of participants had experienced some form of maltreatment (such as sexual, physical, or emotional neglect). Girls and those living in urban settings were more likely to report such incidences compared to boys living in rural areas (Artz et al. 2016). Risk factors for sexual abuse included not living with either or only one biological parent, parental absence, parental substance abuse, disability status of the child as well as how many people shared the same room as the child (Artz et al. 2016). Younger children in South Africa are more at risk of experiencing physical violence as they are vulnerable and unable to protect themselves (Mathews et al. 2013; van As 2016). In terms of gender, girls are more at risk of sexual violence (Jewkes et al. 2010), while boys seem to be more at risk of physical violence due to gang violence as well as using physical violence to deal with conflict (Petrus 2021). Having absent parents is a risk factor at the family level (Artz et al. 2016) as well as the presence of domestic violence in the home which could result in children using violence to resolve conflict (Mathews & Benvenuit 2014). At a societal level, high levels of unemployment and pervasive poverty are contributing factors to VAC (Mathews & Benvenuit 2014), as are the social norms where violence is often normalised in South Africa alongside violent ideals of masculinity (Morrell et al. 2012).

The impacts of VAC at a societal level cannot be understated. Fang et al. (2016) examined the economic burden of VAC in South Africa as evidence for policymakers so that budgetary allocations can hopefully be made in this regard. In terms of prevalence, physical violence was most prevalent with 26.1% of children experiencing this form of violence, followed by emotional violence at 12.6%, neglect at 12.2% and sexual violence at 7.2% (Fang et al. 2016), rates which are consistent with Artz et al.'s (2016) findings. In 2015, taking into account the violence experienced by children in the country, it is estimated that around ZAR238 billion was lost (6% of South Africa's GDP in 2015) considering non-fatal violence, fatal violence, child welfare costs and reduced earnings (Fang et al. 2016). Educational and health outcomes are also important factors to consider as these certainly contribute to the economic cost of VAC. Zheng et al. (2019) studied the short- and long-term educational and health outcomes in relation to violence experienced by children in South Africa. Violence of any form was reported by 58% of participants, while 53% had experienced emotional violence and 34% had experienced physical violence. The most recent statistics from UNICEF (Muhigana 2022) reveal that 352 children were violently killed between October and December 2012, 394 survived attempted murder, 2048 children were physically beaten, and more boys than girls were killed. All forms of violence were associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes, poorer academic achievement, and lower education levels both in the short-term and long-term. Physical health was reported as being more detrimental to health and educational outcomes (Zheng et al. 2019). The results also suggested that the long-term mental

health implications of VAC are more pronounced than physical health outcomes. In terms of gender differences, males who had experienced abuse were more likely to have poor numeracy and literacy skills, while girls had poorer mental health outcomes. However, in the short term, violence experienced by girls had a stronger relationship with their physical health (Zheng et al. 2019).

Protective Factors and Key Intervention Strategies

The WHO (2020) argues that violence against children is preventable, a view which is supported by others such as Hillis et al. (2015). The WHO (2020) provides seven strategies, based on the word 'INSPIRE' to address the problem: implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values change; safe environments; parental and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response service provision; and education and life skills. However, whether countries can put resources towards these various aspects is a key challenge to having INSPIRE realised (Wessells & Kostelny 2021). Similarly, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has published a package called THRIVE to help reduce VAC. This package is a "select group of complementary strategies that reflect the best available evidence to help countries sharpen their focus on priorities with the greatest potential to reduce violence against children" (Hillis et al. 2015: 6). This package includes the following key elements: training in parenting; household economic strengthening; reduced violence through legal protection; improved service; values and norms that protect children; education and life skills; and surveillance and evaluation (Hillis et al. 2015).

Such technical packages are well-researched, yet still quite ambitious in scope. However, studies on VAC have identified specific protective factors both internationally and locally that contribute towards elements of these technical packages. In war contexts, parenting can act either as a risk factor or as a protective factor (Saile et al. 2014). More supportive and caring parenting styles can buffer against the deleterious mental health impacts of war (Catani 2018; Saile et al. 2014). Similarly, Izumi and Baago-Rasmussen (2018) report that in Zimbabwe, families can act either as risk factors of VAC or as a buffering protective mechanism. In Zimbabwe, in terms of sexual violence, boys who have a close relationship with their mother protect against this form of violence, while girls who attend school, feel connected to their friends, and feel secure in their communities likewise act as protective factors. For boys, feeling like they could trust community members and feeling like their teachers cared for them was protective against physical violence (Izumi & Baago-Rasmussen 2018). Protective factors for emotional violence included feelings of a trustful community and caring teachers for both boys and girls: a protective factor for boys particularly is to feel close to their mothers, and girls who were attending school are also protected against emotional violence (Izumi & Baago-Rasmussen 2018).

The Optimus Study in South Africa reported similar results in terms of parental support. Parents' knowledge of who their children were spending time with and how they spent this time was protective against sexual violence. Supportive parent-child relationships were also a protective factor against sexual violence, particularly for girls (Artz et al. 2016). Other studies also support the central role of caregivers as well as increased knowledge about abuse and how to protect against it (Mathews & Benvenuit 2014). If parents are more equipped with parenting skills, this can help protect against violence (Cluver et al. 2020) alongside services such as access to health care and social support services (Mathews & Benvenuit 2014). One promising study investigated a trial parenting programme in rural areas in South Africa with 552 family dyads to see if the intervention would reduce VAC (Cluver et al. 2020). The investigation yielded four possible mediating variables to reduce VAC which included improved parenting, caregiver mental health, substance abuse avoidance, and family economic strengthening. Particularly interesting in these findings is that helping strengthen a family's economic condition had a positive impact on VAC reduction. Likewise, Anwar et al. (2020) found a correlation between low poverty scores and increased chances of having experienced physical abuse in their study based in Senegal. However, in this parenting programme trial, the authors question whether parenting programmes themselves may help reduce VAC or if the alleviation of the socioeconomic burdens linked to financial distress can reduce VAC (Cluver et al. 2020).

> At the relationship level, positive, healthy, and close relationships may contribute to the prevention of school and community-based violence.

Fang et al. (2016) make several recommendations within the South African context to help fight against VAC. They argue that investments need to be made in evidence-based prevention programmes, which include tackling the issue on an individual level, at the level of the family and at the community level. They also recommend that policymakers need to improve the quality of tracking systems to monitor VAC and to assess if intervention methods are effective (Fang et al. 2016). As an example, monitoring tools such as the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS), which systematically monitors the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse prevalence rates of VAC, can be utilised to monitor and keep track of any notable changes in VAC in various countries in the world (Chiang et al. 2016). Similar arguments are put forth by Zheng et al. (2019) regarding how South Africa can address this crisis. They argue that the government needs to consider VAC as a public health issue so that legislation can be put in place to ban violent punishment against children. Parenting and caregiver programmes need to be put in place to help build parenting capacity in the country. Interventions such as those by Cluver et al. (2020) show promising results. They further recommend that schools should become sites of support where teachers and governance structures can provide supportive services for children who have experienced violence (Zheng et al. 2019). Thus, in South Africa and more globally, creating awareness and maintaining that awareness of VAC for all stakeholders including policymakers, doctors, educators, and parents/guardians is essential in addressing this crisis (Fang et al. 2016; van As 2016).

A Social-Ecological Perspective for Prevention

Earlier it was noted that a social-ecological perspective is crucial in the understanding of VAC and all four levels (individual, relationships, community, and society) must be taken into consideration in preventing VAC and putting support mechanisms in place (Dahlberg & Krug 2006). At the individual level, it is imperative for schools to expose learners through the school curriculum to conflict management skills, life skills training, social-emotional learning, and healthy relationships (Dahlberg & Krug 2006). Individual counselling and support groups for both victims and perpetrators of violence should be available in schools. Learners should have ways in which they could anonymously report incidences of violence and it is crucial that they see results since many learners often do not report cases of violence because of fear of retribution or the belief that nothing is done about it. Addressing individual challenges are likely to combat the risks mentioned earlier such as some biological factors that make children vulnerable to violence, particularly gender-based violence where boys are more exposed to physical violence and girls to sexual abuse. Children's participation in the curriculum activities mentioned above provides them the opportunity to rise above their experiences of violence.

At the relationship level, positive, healthy, and close relationships may contribute to the prevention of school and community-based violence. Bronfenbrenner (2000) would note that the relationships learners have with their parents/caregivers, family members and peers are crucial in them becoming victims and/or perpetrators of violence as noted in the literature discussed. Prevention strategies at this level should focus on positive parenting and family relationship skills, parent-child communication skills, mentoring, and peer education programs.

At the community level characteristics of schools and local neighbourhood settings play an instrumental role in VAC. Prevention programs should be directed at improving the physical and

social environment in schools and communities to create safe places for children to learn and play (Dhalberg & Krug 2002). School curriculums, community-based organisations and religious organisations can play a meaningful role in addressing community issues that contribute to VAC, for example, poverty in communities, residential segregation, access to alcohol and drugs, and lack of facilities for children to learn and play in their neighbourhoods. Schools play a valuable role at the community level because children spend a considerable amount of time at school. This means that school management teams (SMTs), school-based support teams (SBSTs), school governing bodies (SCBs), and educators are strategically placed to address VAC. SMTs should work on specific anti-bullying and anti-violence programs at schools in consultation with relevant stakeholders including learners. SGBs could assist with anti-violence policies and programs because they are the point of connection with the community. They can assist with parent support groups and interact with NGOs and community and religious-based organisations to prevent VAC. More support should be given to teachers to empower them to deal with school-based violence (bullying, fights, etc.) and the process they should follow in reporting violence in schools.

The last level explores broad societal factors that contribute to VAC. Some of these factors are related to social and cultural beliefs and practices that support violence as a means of solving conflicts. There should be a critical analysis of education, health, economic and social policies that maintain social and economic inequalities that exist among people often propagating violence in society. The history of violence and severe inequality from South Africa's past is exacerbated by the current high poverty and unemployment rates that reinforces the vicious cycle of VAC. Prevention at this level should be directed at addressing the social and economic inequalities that exist in society, for example, social grants for the unemployed, social grants for single-parent and child-headed households, free health services for the poor, no school fees for children from very poor homes, and service delivery for disadvantaged communities.

Conclusion

VAC is a global problem even though it seems to be more prevalent within low-and-middle income countries. African countries seem to have more incidences of VAC which may be related to high poverty and unemployment rates. South Africa is high on the list of VAC with at least a quarter of its children experiencing some form of violence. Irrespective of countries there are some common trends in the causes and risks for VAC such as the loss of both or one of the parents, gender, age, socioeconomic status, poverty, and crime. The adoption of a social-ecological perspective in combating VAC is a viable option for success since it requires interventions at individual, relationships, community, and societal levels propagating the need for intersectoral, multilevel and multidisciplinary interventions to prevent VAC.

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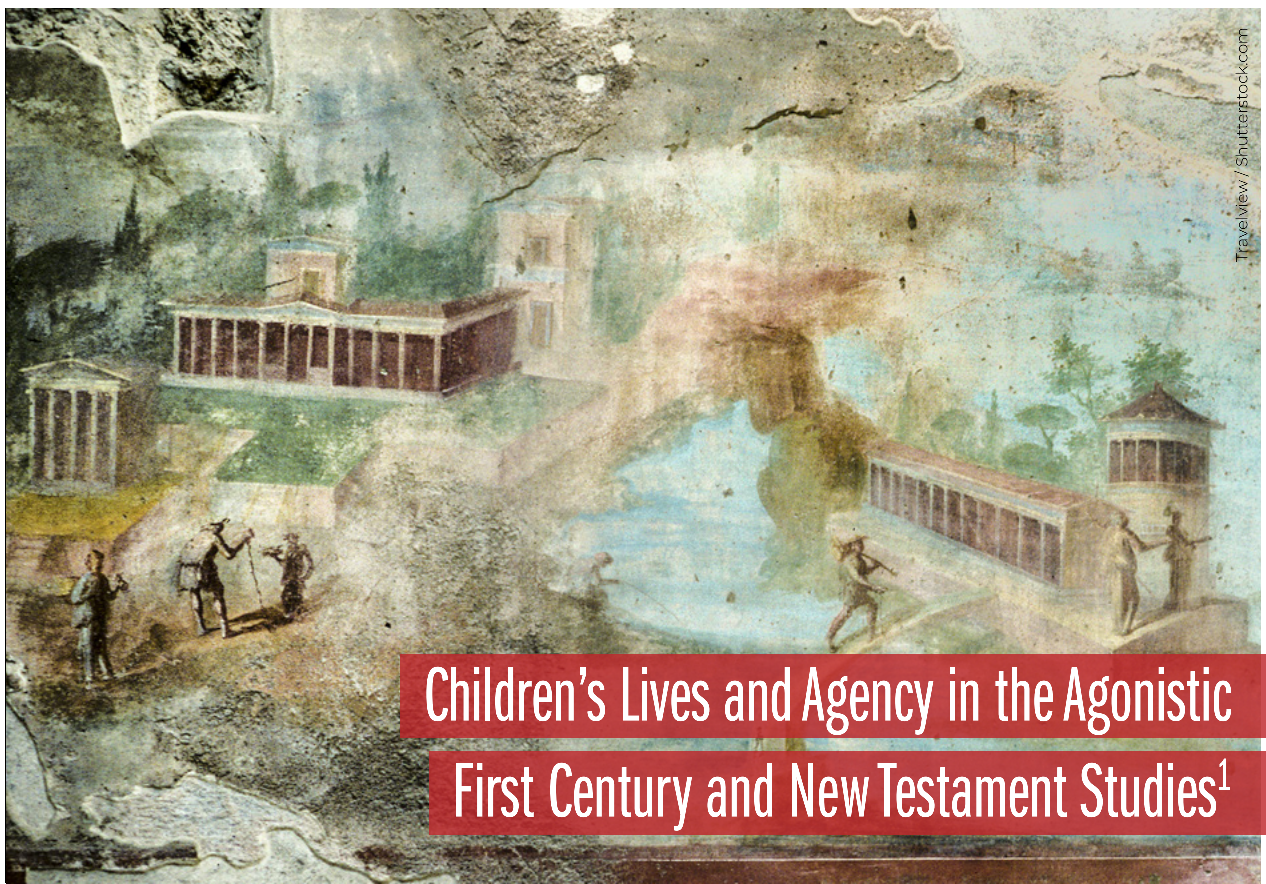

Children's Lives and Agency in the Agonistic First Century and New Testament Studies[1]

By Jeremy Punt

Abstract

While theoretical approaches attempt to map ancient childhood, the material and incidental nature of children's lives in all their varieties and differences, are crucial for understanding ancient childhood. Recent investigations into children in their living environments have shown attention to their clothing, childhood care, social relations, leisure and play, health and disability, upbringing and schooling, and their experiences of death. Children's lives and activities were framed also by the agonistic nature of first-century society, making them susceptible to structural violence in various ways. The purpose of the paper is to track and trace children's experience and in particular their agency in the ancient Roman world that were often hostile to little lives and bodies, and to consider the value of such studies for the interpretation of the New Testament.

Introduction: Agency of Children in Ancient Agonistic Society

Ancient childhood, and particularly children's bodily realities, in all their varieties and differences, are crucial but difficult to trace. Children's living environments including elements such as their clothing, childhood care, social relations, leisure and play, health and disability, upbringing and schooling, and their experiences of death, can give us an inkling of ancient childhood experiences. All of these were framed by the agonistic nature of first-century society, with children being even more susceptible to violence than others, and to structural violence in particular. Since agency was (and is) key

1 Revised paper read at an interdisciplinary conference on "Violence against children", University of Johannesburg, 17-18 August 2022.

when it comes to dealing with violence, and since children's agency was yet more constrained than those of other marginalised groups such as women and slaves,[2] coming to terms with their agency is crucial for understanding the links between violence and children in the time of the NT. Even the lives of children of the elite were not spared if political interests came in the way, as the lives and experiences of Cleopatra's children show (McGrath 2022). Such considerations urge more input from a history-from-below angle, and skilful manoeuvring between sentimentalising, distanced, and cold-hard-facts and other approaches.

Of late more studies have appeared on children in the Roman family and beyond (Krause 2011), sometimes with a specific focus such as on up to one-year-old infants (Carroll 2018), or even calling for a new method such as Childist Criticism.[3] Particularly helpful have been attempts to explore children's lives beyond adults' perceptions. *Children and Everyday Life in Roman and Late Antique World* (Laes & Vuolanto 2017b) is exemplary in tracing pre-modern children's experience and agency, by incorporating a wide range of scholarship ranging from archaeologists, classicists, ancient historians, theologians to scholars of Judaism and early Christianity.[4] In a concluding essay, Aasgaard (2017: 318-31) proposes an interpretive grid for studies of children in their living environments. He notes the need for a new approach that centres on children's lives rather than new methodologies (see also Garroway & Martens 2020), promoting interdisciplinarity and intersectionality.[5] His six-fold grid for understanding children's lives incorporates physical, social, and ideological environments, and their actions, bodies and minds. Seven criteria serve as tools to fill in this grid: children as originators; attestation by adults; embarrassing to adults; non-elite material; reflections of children's everyday worlds; reflections of children's interests; and attitudes that are critical or negative in relation to adults. Allowing for porous borders and conceding the subtleties and hybridities that taxonomies cannot always express adequately, such frameworks can deepen engagement with ancient children's lives. Emulating Aasgaard's fine balance between problematizing and identifying the potential in pursuing joint interests in the study of ancient childhood, my paper considers children's agency in context and in relation to violence, and reflect on the possible value of such studies for New Testament (hereafter NT) interpretation.

Children in Ancient, Agonistic Society

In the Roman Empire, children were outsiders within (Laes 2011). Amidst doubts that childhood was seen as a stage distinct from adulthood in ancient times (Rousselle 1988:47-62; see Kraemer 1993:106), the growing consensus is that childhood was taken to be part of the human life cycle – even if more in philosophical and social terms than according to modern, psychological models (Frilingos 2014:45).[6] Actual age was less important than appearance and physical development in ancient society (Laes 2011:282). Whether in social convention and practice the category of childhood carried as much weight for the ancients as for people today, remains a point of dispute.[7] Children

2 See also the section in a volume on marginalised persons in the Roman world (Peachin 2011: 589-733), and other scholars on the voices of Roman children, in relation to the voices of women and slaves (Dixon 2005).

3 Garroway and Martens, who devote much attention to the term and discuss Parker's invention of a six-stage grid in this regard, admit that some scholars may be more at ease with child-centred or childhood studies (Garroway & Martens 2020:11), which would entail one or more of the following four components: "assigning voice to the (silent) child, asserting agency and filling in the gaps in a child's narrative, pointing to the adult-centric nature or interpretation of the text and or artifact, and finally, noting the interplay between the value and vulnerability that children experience". For the origins of the term childist beyond biblical scholars' use of it, see Garroway and Martens (Garroway & Martens 2020:7, n21).

4 This book differs from other perspectives such as Wiedemann who, on the other hand, deliberately tried to track the changes among adults attitudes towards children in the first four centuries of the common era (Wiedemann 1989); some scholars' focus is even more specific, such as attention focussed on the "cultivated male perspective" on children in the late Roman Republic and Empire (Laes 2011:10).

5 Cautiously optimistic about projects that want to understand better ("come closer"), Aasgaard (2017:324-26) reminds us of the tensions between positivism and plausibility; idealised and real positions; emic and etic studies; and, postulating children's experiences and recovering (empathically relating to) their real experiences.

6 In *Creation of the World*, Philo of Alexandria described not unlike other ancient sources, children's development in cycles of 7 years. Dasen puts the context well: "Roman childhood was seen as a separate stage in the life cycle, composed of several steps, each with physical and intellectual qualities and defects, as was the case for the other ages of life" (Dasen 2021:117).

7 Laes is at pains to explain how age, while not insignificant to ancient society, was less well-defined and very loosely applied notwithstanding Roman jurists' careful use of 14 or 15 years as the threshold age. A social rather than a psychological category, the marginal importance of age for ancient children was reflected e.g. in their early introduction into work, age's secondary importance in matters of education or sexuality (Laes 2011:280-85)

found themselves in households in which they not only had to find their way but within which they also actively participated and worked from a very young age (Oakes 2020:3-30).[8] "In a high-mortality society, Romans had to acknowledge some tough demographic conditions. The early stages of life were tenuous and not all children were equally valued" (Lindsay 2021:531). Such incorporation in the household made them vulnerable in various ways but at the same time bestowed on children in antiquity agency that does not really exist in the modern romanticised notion of children viewed from the perspective of unspoilt youth.[9]

In a broader sense, children's lives were framed by violence which was part of everyday life and which children had to negotiate in the first-century, agonistic Mediterranean world, aspects of which emerges also from an analysis of NT texts. Violence and brutality were everyday experiences for children, who as incomplete adults, were associated with marginalised groups such as slaves, and were caught between *pater familias'* pietas-based treatment and *auctoritas*-based punishment of slaves (Laes 2011:282-85). While the vocabulary for violence was used for different purposes, from physical human violence, to the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and metaphorically to the Christian's life of service to God (a spiritual battle), it is evident that military terms dominate (Desjardins 1997:63-64; see also Punt 2016). The military focus may have been indicative of an imperialist context, yet violence in general was ingrained in the first-century world. Violence was naturalised as was common in agonistic societies where the exercise of power – as the ability to exercise control over the behaviour of others – was a highly rated means value, which facilitated the achievement of core and secondary values (Pilch 1993:139-42).[10] The prevailing hierarchical-patriarchal (Bakke, 2005:81-83 epub) and educational systems saw children exposed to slave-educators and accompanying harsh realities (Bakke 2005:85-88; Laes 2011:282-83). Evidence suggests that violence was common in ancient households and that even children and spousal abuse occurred in Roman households, even if frequency and whether violence was part of children's daily experience is difficult to determine (Dolansky 2021:255).[11] At the same time, literature from the time suggests that violence was not always the default option, as the remark of Publilius Syrus demonstrates: "Youth ought to be curbed by reason, not violence" (Publilius Syrus Max. 108; see Bakke 2005:82 epub).

Agency and Experience as Slippery and Fluid

In tracing children's agency and experience in ancient times even the terms are contested. Infants and very small children's agency were tangential and depended on the circumstances of parents, family, and community. As much as most people today see "late abortion and infanticide as roughly morally equivalent, and both as morally forbidden", before Christian traditions started to weigh in in Roman society neither late abortion nor infanticide were unacceptable even if preferably avoided since they caused pain (Crisp 2010).[12] Looking at children in terms of their everyday lives is about more than sketching out the objects, instruments, spaces and so on, that they encountered. Children's everyday lives return some of the lost voices of children (Frilingos 2014:45) and also assist in understanding how (and, at times, why) they were considered in terms of their relationships to their parents, other adults, animals, and gods, and the reasons for volitional constraints in their little lives (cf e.g. Vout 2015:603).

8 In the words of Osgood (2011:74), "Children were, without a doubt, put to work as soon as they were able to do anything of use and contribute to the family's survival".

9 Slave children may also have been present in the household but not necessarily seen as children of the household but simply as young slaves (see e.g. Kartzow 2018). For the blurring boundaries, see in the NT e.g. Gal 4:7 (οὐκέτι … δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός no longer a slave but a son); in the same event in Lk 7, ὁ παῖς μου (7:7) becomes τὸν δοῦλον in 7:12; and in Lk 12:45, τοὺς παῖδας (used alongside τὰς παιδίσκας or slave girls) can be understood as boys, or male slaves.

10 In addition to children suffering violence, antiquity has various reports of children engaging in violence, often confirming their outsider status such as when they take up the role of executioners within a specific community. So e g was Cassian of Imola, a third-century Christian school teacher handed over to his pupils who executed him with their styluses, Prudentius, 'Passion of Saint Cassian of Forum Cornelii', *Peristephanon 9* (see Wiedemann 1989:179).

11 Adult-child sexual activity was common at the time, with pederasty (not to be simply rolled into modern-day understandings of paedophilia) deriving from Greek practices however frowned upon by Romans (see Frilingos 2014).

12 Frilingos (2014:45) also notes that adults' calculations of children's lives and values did not always work in the latter's favour; second-century physician Soranus (Gynecology 2.79) determined criteria for whether to keep or expose a child.

Vuolanto (2017:15-16) suggests that the understanding of experience gains from differentiating whether it is seen as knowledge gained or awareness gathered more generally; the experience itself or meaning given to it; and, individual or shared experience. Experience is linked closely with agency: "to have agency means that an individual has a sense of having the means to influence the course of one's own life (and thus the world) within the opportunities and constraints provided by history and social circumstances" (Vuolanto 2017:18). Laes and Vuolanto's (2017b) recently extended agency beyond a strong sensory approach regarding touch and movement in particular, to include also real-life experience in terms of children's physicality and height and their impact on children's movements in places like Pompeii in general, and with regard to household spatiality and religious activities, specifically (see Laurence 2017:27-42). Children's agency and experience can be plotted otherwise, too, such as primarily in distinction from that of adults, with their agency emulating from, for example ,the differences in children's clothing and what such differences signified about adults' attention to and care for (their) children (see Harlow 2017:43-59); or in children as subjects of breastfeeding, touching and kissing (see Laes 2017:61-79).

Agency, then, can be framed as the ability of children to act on their own in the general sense of the word, or volition can be made determinative, such as that "agency is not what children do as such, but also what they *choose (not) to do*" (Cojocaru 2017:258). Agency can also be seen in a more inherent way, such as Mackey's (2017:181-97) focus on inherent core or ('primitive') physiological capacities that enable cognitive agency;[13] or, more prominently, agency as resistance, not only in the negative sense of countering and rejecting social norms and even direct adult instructions but also in creatively moving beyond traditional understandings of social norms (Toner 2017:99-115). Such tendencies are apparent later, also in early Christianity where amid an increasingly porous set of boundaries between childhood and adulthood, children exercised religious or ascetic choices and made life-changing decisions in the extension of conventional expressions (Caseau 2017:217-31).[14]

Children's Agency and Experience as History from Below

Even more difficult than describing slippery terms like children's experience and agency, is to find first-hand examples given temporal, spatial, socio-cultural and a host of other factors complicating such investigation – not least of which has been the adult-focused nature of the contemporary world. It is not only the scarcity of resources but also the nature of the meagre sources that pose a challenge in establishing ancient children's agency. Studies of children's lives in ancient times suffer from a deficit of material available directly from children and often rely on evidence from adults, usually elite men. Using the available evidence, one has to hypothesise, construct and construe, and make connections to make a useful contribution to the study of ancient childhood. Notwithstanding self-imposed caveats, delimitations, and remaining questions, the focus should remain on children and their perceptions, voices and lives. Still, written evidence of the time may indicate childhood's challenges, such as a Roman funerary law that allowed adults and children over six to be mourned for a year, but a child below six for a month only.[15] While according to the shortest mourning time for infants signals their low status (Barton 2011:582), children's agency and experience remain buried.

Trying to identify children's agency and experience, therefore, benefits from so-called history from below, and with the focus on "tiny people", "below" becomes thicker in meaning. Looking away from history with its all too often focus on the adult, elite, "great men" as shapers of history and world events, people's history shifts the perspective to the non-elite and their significance for and in history

13 "Roman children's capacities for social cognition – not only *understanding* but also sharing in the intentionality of others – potentiated their agency in religious imitation, ritual participation, and choral hymn learning" (Mackey 2017:193). Mackey's focussed on three elements, children imitation of others; religious participation; and, religious instruction.

14 As Caseau (2017:218) argues, "Resistance to the rules of holy deportment is one of the areas where we can see children acting for themselves" and lists as examples children's play during formal religious gatherings, disobeying parental instructions and their food rules.

15 Gender and kinship produced further differentiation: "A husband can be mourned for ten months, close blood relations for eight months. Whoever acts contrary to these restrictions is placed in public disgrace'" (Barton 2011:582) citing Konstan (Konstan 2007).

(Sharpe 1991:26).[16] The focus of studies increasingly is to understand children in the light of their own experiences and reactions to such experiences. Such a history "from below" has to contend and deal with all aspects of life, having to employ interdisciplinary approaches for its research. Beyond the dearth of evidence and sources, a people's history of children remains problematic given the variety in children's age, gender, parents' status, and social location generally, especially when determining experience and agency.[17] In valuing difference, common to such historiographic strategies is, however, concern with ordinary experience and people, and their impact on the course of events in history. At times children, amidst hugely asymmetric power relationships, pushed back against social norms and conventions often embodied by their parents or guardians.

Children's Agency, Experience, and Power

The Roman Empire, even in its waning form towards late Antiquity, and various constellations of power framed the context of experience and agency of first-century children. Studying children's leisure which also served a socialisation purpose or for training children in styles of social interaction, Toner (2017:99-115) explicitly accounts for the imperial context and how children at play were located also between the push and pull of Empire. "Leisure [...] can be seen as providing Roman children with the same kind of relatively free space in which to challenge authority that, if we only look at their formal education, can otherwise seem to have been constantly smothering them" (Toner 2017:113).[18] Amidst children's agency conceived as resistance, conformation to some degree or another never fully abated. Children simply playing was not necessarily unaffected action, as "parents and other members of the household undoubtedly encouraged a variety of activities, including types of play, as a way to suggest appropriate roles in life" (Osgood 2011:79). Toner recounts the example of Ausonius who advised his grandchild to work at developing hard-faced self-control so as to disallow a menacing teacher to obtain power through the child's fear; a strategy at once resisting, but through socialisation, also conforming.

It would eventually be early Christianity, following in the footsteps of Augustus, that used family and children images to express the depth of bonds between people, especially between those at the extremities of the social spectrum. This does not exclude the possibility that such sentiments may also have been in the interest of a "well-ordered, interconnected and contented society" as much as for the sake of "a more encompassing form of authority and more penetrating form of government" (Toner 2017:109). Often, resistance or push-back was directed closer to home, to adults and parents in particular, even if both artifacts and representations of play are products of adult imaginations and even ideals (Dolansky 2017:117). In fact, the dynamic idea of socialisation is less of a recent development (dating back to the 1970s) compared to the notion of children as social actors, and shows how Roman children's play was an opportunity for expressing creativity and shaping identity. Dolansky reaffirms her earlier conclusions (2012:256-92) that with dolls' adornments, capacity for movement, and resemblance to imperial figures, monolithic notions about them as simply preparing girls for married life and motherhood are surpassed, and the ambiguity of gendered play and gender, also in Antiquity, is confirmed.[19]

16 As part of the new approach to history and historiography, history from below in the sense of the experiences of ordinary people rather than history from above or the great (male) figures of history, joins a few other characteristics of a new historical perspective. The other elements are: history as concerned with more than politics, including every human activity; rather than seeing history as a narrative of events, new history is more interested in the analysis of structures; going beyond a chronicles approach favouring documents, other evidence attesting to human activities are also considered; allowing for a wider range of historians' questions, new history looks at collective movements and individual actions, trends and events; accepting the ideal of neutral, unbiased historiography is impossible, cultural relativism is acknowledged; and, taking history beyond the realms of professional historians, new history has also become inter-disciplinary (Burke 1991:2-6).

17 The explicit goal of some recent scholars and the at least implicit attempts throughout some recent publications are to move away from the earlier tendency among scholars to postulate childhood in both rather abstract and monolithic ways (e.g. Laes & Vuolanto 2017a, 2-4; Vuolanto 2017:11-13).

18 "Play was never simply about passive socialisation into predetermined forms of culture. Leisure continued to offer all children, Christian or pagan, an element of freedom and provided them with the opportunity to push back the boundaries of their own confinement" (Toner 2017:113).

19 The archaeological finding of dolls in burial sites rather than in settlements does not clarify their use, but to restrict it to educational role-play in the service of adult virtues, distance them from their primary users namely children and children's agency (Huntley 2017:138-39). As Osgood argued, "Toys help children to internalize a picture of the world their families might wish them to have" (Osgood 2011:79; see also Madenholm 2021).

The converging and diverging lines of imperial push and pull among children are well-observed in formal education structures. Children's voices were often and explicitly structured, modified and even curtailed in Roman-era schools, where schooling was synonymous with punishment (see Horster 2011:84-100). With educationists like Quintillian extolling the virtues of education in exaggerated forms amid the theoretical justification for and implicit systematicity of accompanying punishment, "the fundamental experience of school was the nexus of fear, resistance, and fantastical revenge and imagined coming to power" (Bloomer 2017:174; also Horster 2011:78). And when it came to children's eating, notwithstanding a fair amount of parental control, evidence abounds of children's resisting agency over their diets, which, at times could also turn into reversed hegemony, such as Symeon's sixth-century extreme fasting practices as a way of exercising control over others (Caseau 2017:227-28).

As much as children's agency was probably most impeded in the choice of a future (see Caseau 2017:225), one of the clearest, recognisable instances of children's agency is emerging from the study of graffiti. Huntley (2017:137-54), making use of developmental psychology to identify instances of graffiti drawn by children in the Vesuvian archaeological sites, sees children's agency in their drawings that were focused on interpretation rather than reproduction.[20] The placement of the graffiti in and around domestic and other urban sites further attests to their agency, understanding of social conventions, and the activities they engaged in, as much as the content of the graffiti suggests their exposure to urban life, particularly the different kinds of animals they encountered.[21]

Children's Agency and Experience: Difficulties and Concerns

Does a focus on their agency and experience help us to hear Antiquity's tiny voices? Some interpretive patterns are reconfirmed, such as the lasting importance of the family in the broader sense of households, or even its surrogates, in accounting for children's lives in Antiquity. A deliberate focus on the perspective of children and their lives, sees this interaction become more poignant and mutually beneficial. "When we allow children and their experience to be the focus of the family we can observe many more influences on family structure, bonds and the values and obligations attached to them" (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:88). As much as recent scholarship reaffirms the importance of certain well-established patterns of social life in ancient times, neglected areas of investigation also receive attention. For example, making sense of the involvement of uncles and aunts with legal and economic matters like adults' guardianship-roles or children's apprenticeships while teasing out care for and affection shown to children, shows the lasting importance of sibling bonds in their transgenerational effect[22] (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:79-95).

Scarcity of information, especially literary forms such as letters written by children, but also other material objects like clothing, toys and so forth, remain problematic and lead to an interesting array of interpretations of the same texts and artefacts for different purposes.[23] A particular challenge arises from the very nature of the "objects of study" themselves, namely that children often were seemingly uninterested in discussing or reflecting on their experiences: they lived in homes, they got dressed, they played, they hurt themselves, and so on, but mostly without reflecting upon these events. As much as "children do not really lament, express their feelings and pains, or display their own actions after the injury" (Graumann 2017:278), as much is true of other experiences in their lives.

Dealing with literary texts and teasing out particular socio-historical contexts, with material culture

20 Children are also mentioned in inscriptions; although it does not have a dedicated chapter in this regard, a recent publication contains numerous references to children included in inscriptions (Bruun & Edmondson 2015).

21 Wiedemann explains also how children in the time of the NT were important intermediaries when it came to the religious, and for that matter, also household matters such as the food-stores which had to remain untainted – children were marginal figures and such useful go-betweens for adults in everyday life (Wiedemann 1989:179-82). See also children as religious agents in the early Christian church (Mackey 2017:181-97).

22 "They [uncles and aunts] were not merely practical assistants, but brokered their nephews' and nieces' experiences in the transition to adulthood, acting as important social and cultural agents in children's lives, but salso [sic, also] added significant emotional dimensions to children's lives" (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:90).

23 E.g. P Oxy I 119 [Theon's letter to his father on the Alexandria trip] is used by Vuolanto (2017:19-20) for demonstrating direct agency exercised by the boy; see Laes (2017:66) for its references to embrace and touching.

at hand, enticing comparison and consolidation of evidence for settings postulated, remains in the shadow of the text and reality-tension – of particular concern to trained ancient historians (see Graumann 2017:268). Acknowledging the importance of the genre and the thrust of texts (see Caseau 2017:217 on hagiographical texts), pairing textual work with other interdisciplinary labours renders richer results. Since history narrated is not history that occurred but rather history remembered by people for reasons contemporary to a remembering community, how does this impact literary evidence, considered in tandem with material "texts" or artifacts? To what extent does conventional iconography (Graumann 2017:268) present children's real-life experiences when societal expectations determine portrayals, or real-life agency of children when adult agency is the medium to express the former? Bloomer's (2017:68) comments stretch further than communicating the value of education: "Adult commemoration need not be taken as a transparent index of social practice, but it does communicate norms and expectations"; so too his comments that scenes portraying children playing are social protocols not scenes of reality (Bloomer 2017:172).

Such general difficulties point to further challenges.[24] With scholars acknowledging that childhood cannot and should not be universalised over time and contexts, restricted attention to gender distinctions becomes apparent.[25] Harlow (2017:43-59) refers to Huskinson's study on age and stereotyping depicted at least in the clothing imagery of children, with boys' loose tunics encouraging play and comfort outside the home, and girls' longer garments suggesting a more sedate and interior orientation.[26] Toner (2017:101-2) flags the gender differentiation exemplified in games children played, with boys' games reflecting the importance of social hierarchy, the emphasis on training in other areas of life, and the need to participate enthusiastically. Girls' games prepared them for lives as wives and mothers, almost amounting to functional training but allowed some leeway in terms of creativity which resisted traditional female passivity.[27] Playing and games developed social skills, taught the value of niche expertise, stressed social status and urged mobility, how such status was won in a local sphere requiring self-confidence and at times underhanded strategies, and even developed an appreciation for risk-assessment and decision-making under pressure. However, gender patterns can all too readily be assumed without the required discernment. Gendered leisure among children entailed conventional patterns and ambiguities which emerged through differences in styles of play: girls being quieter and cooperative as opposed to the boisterous and competitive play of boys (Dolansky 2017:116-36). Such patterns, however, are largely unrelated to most of the toys made available by archaeology, with dolls and equestrian figures as gendered toys with status connotations being the exceptions. Both these types of toys, if for different reasons (dolls' malleability and associations with imperial hierarchies; and women's associations, even if restricted, to equestrian matters) demonstrate the inappropriateness of fixed gender categories in Antiquity.

Conclusion: Implications of Tiny Bodies and Voices for NT Studies

At least four implications seem to flow from the above. Firstly, ancient childhood's ambiguity is reflected in the ambivalence of portrayals of

24 The focus here is on gender differentiation as a neglected element in studying children's lives in antiquity. However, at least two other aspects requiring further work can be noted, as well: one, perspectives and foci of the different studies of children's flesh-and-blood lives impact one another, such as did children's lives in monasteries allow for leisure or play of some form, require more attention. Two, a central aspect of human and therefore children's lives in terms of everyday experience and agency, is children's eating and drinking patterns, and particularly the possible differences in rural and urban contexts.

25 Generally, the tendency to romanticise children and their lives are avoided. The comments that "Although children were mainly seen as imperfect adults in Antiquity, in the Christian faith, children were better than adults in the eyes of God because they were imagined innocent and free from passions … Their humility and simplicity were praised", should be balanced with "the Augustinian theology of the original sin condemned unbaptized children to remain at the door of Paradise, even if they had had no time to sin before dying" (Caseau 2017:222, 230; see also Berner et al. 2012:95-96). Also, the extent to which changed mental attitudes towards children had a tangible impact on their daily lives, is less clear (see e.g. Laes 2011;287)

26 However, except for some scholars' fleeting attention to e.g. pointing out that girls early on needed to learn "appropriate body language" (Harlow, 2017:49), further development of such notions awaits.

27 The significance of restraint required from girls in their play and gaming, in contrast to the wider berth of boys' play for their social location or identity, signals both differentiation and perhaps some ambiguity.

children and their accoutrements in the NT. The relative insignificance of age for childhood in Antiquity should already give us pause in monolithic appropriations of the Bible's children as exemplary models to which modern life should be measured.[28] The, at times, pride of place accorded to children in the NT texts aligns with the ancient context, with its texts equally sharing in the ambiguity of ancient childhood. Ancient folks believed children needed more divine protection, that they "were both nearer to the gods, and dearer to them" because of children's low social status which in turn resulted from their weakness and liability to succumb to danger (Wiedemann 1989:184-85).[29] In the NT too, children feature in different ways, with Jesus first profiled as a child but later receiving, welcoming, blessing, and healing children as well as using child-related terms and metaphors (Berner et al. 2012:86).[30] In the Synoptic gospels, children are used as examples but, in different ways, to point towards dedication, humility, and receptivity. In the Pauline epistles, however, children disappear at the bottom end of the social hierarchy, amidst emphasis on the crucified Christ's lordship (1 Cor 2:5) rather than in the Gospels, where baby Jesus became the Son of God and children are named the inheritors of the Kingdom.[31] And children's agency seems to be entirely lost in 2 Peter and Hebrews that celebrate the Aqedah with no explicit concern for Isaac's life or even well-being.[32] Secondly, the agonistic context provides the overarching framework for the NT texts, too. Amidst the elite-people divide in antiquity, perhaps childhood was somewhat of a leveller, in the sense that all children were equally vulnerable to natural (disease and death) as well as socio-structural (agonistic power tensions) exigencies.[33] However, "children of wealthy families with private teachers were prepared for quite another social life than were those who had only a public schooling" (Horster 2011:98). The high child mortality rate saw children excluded from civic life while, in contrast, Second Temple Jews and early Jesus followers accorded children of all ages and even unborn children the same place as adults within the religious community (Wiedemann 1989:204). Still, children were largely written out of the NT narrative, except for the nostalgia around baby Jesus and the odd child or two in the crowd favoured by Jesus, albeit generally without them having any agency.

Three, our understandings of ancient childhood agency live in the tension of broader and more theoretical approaches, and attempts to uncover the real-life experiences of children's lives in all their varieties – to allow tiny voices to be heard. The agency of children is largely absent in the NT texts as it is mostly in contemporary literary documents, with children often on the margins. The frictions and pressure between, on the one hand, broader, theoretically focused approaches and, on the other hand, allowing for the wide and diverse spectrum of everyday contextual and concrete dimensions of children's lives and voices to emerge are framing current conversations about children in the Bible. Trying to unravel what children's agency would have looked like in those days is crucial for understanding their exposure to and experience of violence directed at them.

Four, and connected to three above, the NT also seems to provide evidence of adults using children for their own ideological and rhetorical purposes. The worlds of adults and children simply were not as far apart as they often are today.[34] What Laes identified as a *leitmotif* for his book, the tension between children as outsiders yet also as sources of hope and expectation (Laes 2011:283), equally applies to the portrayals and positions of children in the NT texts. Children's portrayals in the NT raise the suspicion that in the narrative,

28 This holds too for the impact of Christianity on children's lives, which was also characterised by ambiguity e g the relationship between Augustine's original sin theology and farming out punishment beyond slaves to also women and children (e.g. Osgood 2011:80).

29 "...classical society saw children as especially associated with the divine world because they were unimportant, not because they were the same as adults" (Wiedemann 1989:185).

30 For children in the early Jesus follower-communities, see also the extensive study of Bakke (2005).

31 For Wheeler-Reed (2017:67) such attitude stems from Paul's general lack of concern with procreation: "Children appear to be an afterthought with Paul, putting him at odds with the larger Greco-Roman world and its belief that women and men marry in order to procreate".

32 What does the child-symbolism including imagery relating to childhood (e.g. milk, etc.) say about the social fabric in general and our texts' rhetoric in particular?

33 Further on slave children agency, see Kartzow (2018:111-26).

34 By late Antiquity, the puer senex or the child represented as a serious adult became a popular ideal (Laes 2011:285).

children were brought to Jesus by their parents, not on their own terms, but rather to offset the wayward adults. Framing children as open and receptive and humble all too often ends up leaving children vulnerable to adults' religious and other fantasies while compromising children's agencies, autonomy and aspirations (Berner et al. 2012:95).

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Support Services Provided by a Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC) to Adolescent Witnesses of Domestic Violence

By Shahana Rasool and Suzanne Swart

Abstract

Objective: This article presents the results of a case study conducted at a Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC) in Pretoria, South Africa, on social service practitioners' (SSP) views of the support services provided by a CYCC to adolescent witnesses of domestic violence. These support services are explored in terms of four inter-dependent levels including the micro, meso, exo and macro levels of the Ecological Theory, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Method: For this study, a qualitative holistic case study design was adopted. This single case study design was chosen as information was gathered from various sources in only one CYCC. Information was triangulated by using various sources of data, that is interviews with SSPs and the children, as well as the policies of the CYCC regarding services offered for children who have witnessed domestic violence.

Results: This study revealed that there are no specialised services at the identified CYCC to support adolescent witnesses of domestic violence. The services that are available seem to be generic and aimed at addressing problem behaviours in children and adolescents, rather than providing proactive, therapeutic support to deal with trauma such as witnessing physical and verbal domestic violence in their home of origin.

Keywords: Social Service Provider (SSP), Adolescent Witness, Domestic Violence (DV), Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC)

Introduction

Various studies in South Africa have reported a high prevalence of domestic violence (DV) (Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011; UNICEF, 2010; UNICEF, 2014). The National Demographic and Health Survey in South Africa established that 13% of women (1 in

8) reported having been assaulted by a partner at some point in their lives (Breetzke, 2012). Although there is some data on DV in South Africa, very few studies focus on the children and adolescents who witness this violence (Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011). However, a study conducted in a different city, but in the same province in South Africa as this study, indicates that adolescents have witnessed up to 2.8 incidents of domestic violence (Rasool, 2022). A national study on child exposure to DV indicated a 23.1% prevalence rate for adolescent children. In the United States of America, the figures were higher, where it is estimated that approximately 30% of children and adolescents are exposed to parental DV, with many of these children and adolescents being exposed to severe physical violence and abuse (Garrido, Culhane, Petrenko, & Taussig, 2011). Previously, adolescents were not always seen as 'victims' of DV themselves, but rather as 'silent witnesses' (McIntosh, 2003). However, there are cases in which they are victims as well.

Holt, Buckley, and Whelan (2008) define witnessing DV as a child physically seeing violent interactions between two parents or caregivers. Adolescents under 18 are still considered children (Rasool, 2002). For this article, witnessing DV is described as a child/adolescent being exposed to a caregiver physically, emotionally, or verbally abusing another caregiver within the home they lived in. DV includes a caregiver hitting, biting, shouting at, swearing at, blackmailing, threatening or sexually assaulting another caregiver (Holt et al., 2008). Research has found that exposure to parental DV within the home is directly related to psychological and social problems children may experience, such as conduct disorder (Trevillion, Oram, Feder, & Howard, 2012), substance abuse (Ponziano, Stecker, Beasley, Jason, & Ferrari, 2016), and income related problems (Holt et al., 2008).

Consequently, in South Africa, children and adolescents who live in harmful and dangerous circumstances such as those who witness severe DV, may sometimes be removed, and placed in temporary safe care by social workers in accordance with the Children's Act, 38 of 2005 (Children's Act). Often, adolescents who cannot be placed in foster care are placed in child and youth care centres, hereafter referred to as a CYCC. This care is meant to be provided outside the family environment, in harmony with a specific care plan for every individual child, as legislated by the Children's Act. Despite the requirements of the Children's Act that therapeutic plans should be designed for every individual child, it is unclear if these plans are appropriate or effective, and whether they are specifically tailored in cases of children who witness DV to their needs. Beck (2015) is of the opinion that these plans are not always successfully implemented or executed.

> "Various studies in South Africa have reported a high prevalence of domestic violence. (Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011; UNICEF, 2010; UNICEF, 2014)"

It is also unclear whether there are programmes within CYCCs that specifically provide adolescents with the necessary support to deal with the trauma associated with witnessing DV (Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011). Therefore, this study explores the support services that a selected CYCC provided to adolescent witnesses of DV. It also assesses whether Social Service Providers (SSPs) view these services of the CYCC to be appropriate and useful. It is the latter aspect that this article will focus on, that is SSPs' views of these support services. In this article, Social Service Providers refer to social workers, auxiliary social workers, community workers, child and youth care workers, centre managers and house parents.

Contextualisation

For this article, support services are defined as the emotional, physical, and psychological supportive programmes that a CYCC provides to adolescent witnesses of DV. It is estimated that there are 345 registered CYCC's in South Africa (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). The CYCC chosen for this study is situated in

Pretoria, Gauteng and can house up to 110 children. It is a non-profit organisation (NPO) that has eight houses each with approximately 12 children, aged 5 to 18 years at the time of the research. Although much of this part of the research (i.e. interviews with SSPs) could apply to both adolescents and children, the bigger project interviewed and focussed only on adolescents, who in any case are classified as children when under 18. However, this specific paper which focuses on the interviews with SSPs could be relevant to all children who live in the CYCC. There are four boy houses and four girl houses at this CYCC. Previously the houses were divided into mixed genders, however, due to the high volume of sexually abused children placed at this CYCC, the SSPs thought it better to separate the boys and girls into different houses. The manager at the CYCC, mentioned that "approximately 70% of the children and adolescents within this CYCC were sexually abused" whilst "approximately 30% have witnessed DV". It is for these reasons, that this CYCC was chosen as the site for this study, and the first author chose this CYCC as it was in proximity to her field of practice.

This CYCC employs one manager, two full-time social workers, eight house parents and four child and youth care centre workers. The children placed at the CYCC are removed from their parents' care and placed by the South African Children's Court at this CYCC due to abandonment, neglect, and/or emotional and physical abuse. According to the manager at the CYCC (Andrea, pseudonym), this CYCC's primary purpose is to provide the children placed there with clothing, housing, schooling, food, security, and stability. In addition to this, they also aim to provide the children with the necessary therapy, life skills and emotional support that they need to become responsible adults and curb the cycle of abuse.

A CYCC can offer a family-like environment to a child placed at such a facility. This environment should aim to meet basic needs, psychological needs, safety, and security. Even though adolescents receive some form of care in CYCCs, Grobelaar and Oldewage-Theron (2013) argue that placing a child in a CYCC should be the last resort, as the child might be re-victimised in the form of emotional neglect. Children often enter care after experiencing trauma, such as witnessing or experiencing DV, but are not necessarily supported to deal with the trauma that they experienced prior to entering the CYCC or while they are in the CYCC (Beck, 2015). Hence, understanding the perceptions and experiences of SSPs of the services provided by the CYCC, is imperative.

This study will use the ecological system theory, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), to consider what services SSPs viewed as being appropriate to support child and adolescent witnesses of domestic violence. We will consider the suggestions made by the SSPs to assess if they were able to identify services at the various levels of the ecological framework. Hence, the next section will describe the ecological theoretical framework utilised to consider if services were provided at the various levels.

Ecological Theoretical Framework

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994:37) "in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs". The ecological theory is concerned with four inter-functioning levels that are defined as the micro, meso, exo and macro levels. Furthermore, it points to the interdependency between different persons, systems, and environments to understand the individual better (Dube & Ross, 2012). This theory is useful because it studies the interactions between people, systems and the environment and recognises these as a functioning whole.

In this paper, the ecological system theory is to evaluate if the support services provided by a CYCC to adolescent witnesses of DV cover all the levels or focus more on some, and which levels are considered as important for service provision by the SSPs. Perumal and Kasiram (2009) mention that a practitioner should consider the ecological system theory when placing a child in a CYCC, since the child placed in a CYCC was removed from his or her natural environment and therefore needs to adapt to the new and unfamiliar environment within the CYCC to cope and function within this new system. However, if the child or adolescent is unable to adapt to this new environment, this will impact the entire system, and disrupt other aspects of the system. Also, the way in which the system is organised, and the services provided will also affect the way a child brought into the system adapts, functions and/or thrives.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) is of the opinion that an individual's stressors, needs and problems can be attributed to the interactions between the individual and his or her environment, and the systems within this environment. Research suggests that DV might have devastating consequences for an adolescent's development, which would in turn affect their needs, stressors, and problems (Holt et al., 2008). For this reason, it is important to understand the different areas in the ecological systems that can influence an adolescent's adaptation to the environment of a CYCC.

The different support systems are discussed based on the four inter-functioning levels as described by the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) – including the micro, meso, exo and macro levels.

Micro Level Analysis

Bronfenbrenner (1979) outlines the micro level as the systems closest to the individual/adolescent. The adolescent would have regular and direct contact with micro-level systems, and they would form the main source of support (or not) that the adolescent would receive to deal with witnessing DV daily. There are several micro-level systems that can be included in such an analysis, however, for the purposes of this discussion, the biological family, the social worker as well as the house parents at the CYCC are discussed.

Biological Family. Some have argued that the support an adolescent receives from their biological family after removal can impact how well they adapt to their alternative placement. Supportive behaviours by the biological family might increase the possibility that an adolescent can be reunited with their family as soon as possible (Perumal & Kasiram, 2009). According to the Children's Act, the reunification services offered to a biological family after the removal of their child are essential in the social welfare field. A study conducted by Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder and Landolt (2014) illustrates how adolescents perceive support from their parents as the most essential source of support. Therefore, if the adolescent receives support from biological parents after removal, the child's ability to adapt to their environment and deal with their trauma will be improved. The decision of whether an adolescent is returned to the care of their biological family is largely dependent on the biological parents' efforts to improve their circumstances, as well as their attachment to the adolescent (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008). The SSPs therefore need to understand this dynamic and provide the necessary support for building, maintaining and enhancing this relationship, as well as facilitating reunification at the earliest possible time.

The support received by siblings is also viewed as a vital source, even though this is not always possible (Kasiram, Partab, & Dano, 2006). Often siblings are placed together at a CYCC, therefore the interaction between siblings should be motivated and monitored by the SSPs. Peers include other children at the CYCC which are an important source of support or distress for the adolescents, depending on how they connect.

Social Workers. Social workers are an essential component of the multi-disciplinary team at CYCCs. A model that is utilised by some CYCCs when working with children and adolescents is the strengths-based approach, called the Circle of Courage (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008).

In summary, the Circle of Courage aims to identify four developmental needs, namely, *belonging*, *mastery*, *independence*, and *generosity*. Perumal and Kasiram (2008) mention that this Circle of Courage seems to be broken when an individual's functioning is in imbalance, such as when an adolescent is removed due to exposure to DV and afterwards placed in a CYCC. Therefore, once this Circle is broken, it is the responsibility of the social worker to identify the exact point where it was broken. Once this has been identified, the social worker can develop an individualised care plan so that the adolescent can return to optimal functioning. According to the manager at the CYCC, the Circle of Courage is the main intervention approach used at the CYCC to identify the needs of the children living there to plan further interventions.

In conjunction with the Circle of Courage, social workers should be able to function as enabling agents or catalysts in any practice situation to assist the children and families concerned to identify, create, or utilise resources (Thomas, 2015). However, Van Niekerk (2007) points out, that despite social work professionals having years of experience and knowledge, it is crucial they include the child

or adolescent in the decision-making process, as they often know and understand more about their experiences than professionals. Social workers need to support adolescents in dealing with the DV they have witnessed, especially when the adolescent is unable to express their own feelings and emotions appropriately (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008). The support provided by social workers can also help to mitigate the effects of future perpetration and victimisation.

House Parents. An important system in CYCCs is that of the house parent. House parents are the caregivers who care for the children at the CYCC daily. Having capable and reliable house parents in CYCCs is important, since they are the primary caregivers of the children placed at the CYCC. Kiraly (2001) mentions that house parents can play a vital role in supporting an adolescent to adjust, develop and re-integrate into the CYCC's environment. Neimetz (2011), however, argues that the environment of a CYCC can be socially isolated from the rest of society.

The interaction between house parents and children on an individual basis is often limited when house parents are overwhelmed due to the multiple demands of residential care and multiple children. In such cases, children receive minimal attention and emotional support whilst house parents primarily only provide physical support. Because a CYCC is not equal to a family environment, adolescents often do not receive sufficient individual attention (Neimetz, 2011). However, some suggest that the support received by house parents can be essential in adjusting to the environment, as well as the trauma experienced prior to their placement (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008), and can be an important source of individualised attention. SSPs need to provide adequate support and guidance to house parents on how to support adolescents who were witnesses of DV more effectively.

Meso Level Analysis

Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to the mesosystem as the association between the different systems on the individual's micro level. In other words, the meso level is the system that links the micro-level systems and describes the interactional processes that exist between the two systems on the micro level. For example, the connection between the adolescent's biological family and the social worker, or the connection between the social worker and the house parents.

Perumal and Kasiram (2008) stress the importance of a functioning relationship between the biological parents and the CYCC staff, including the social worker and the house parents, to ensure that the adolescent is returned to the care of the family as soon as possible. Therefore, both support systems need to be involved directly and continuously in this process. In the case of DV, the SSPs need to intervene at a family level or refer so that the DV is managed and the home becomes a safe place for the adolescents to return to. A stable and reliable relationship between the SSPs and the adolescents at the CYCC is vital to an adolescent's development and therapeutic success.

Exo level analysis

Bronfenbrenner (1979) delineates the exo level as the larger social system within the adolescent's environment. The SSPs have regular contact with the system at the exo level, and it can have a vital impact on the adolescent's functioning. There are several systems that can lay at the exo level, however for the purposes of analysing the support systems available to adolescent witnesses of DV, the welfare service delivery system and the CYCC as an institution are considered.

Welfare Service Delivery System. Patel (2005) defines social services or the welfare service delivery system as the social assistance and social welfare services delivered by governmental ,as well as non-governmental organisations (NGO's). In this article, social services are defined more narrowly to refer to the SSPs that provide services to the adolescent witnesses of DV placed in the care of the CYCC, and the broader welfare system, where appropriate. The specific SSPs in this study include social workers, house mothers and child and youth care workers.

A vital function of the welfare services delivery system is to provide services to the families of adolescents placed in alternative care. These services should aim to assist the family in restructuring their environment into a more appropriate and conducive setting (Perumal & Kasiram, 2009). The SSPs at the CYCC are not responsible for this implementation, as

a designated reunification worker (from the Department of Social Development, or a designated welfare organisation) delivers these services. The broader welfare system is crucial in the removal of an adolescent and similarly can be an important element of ensuring the child is either reintegrated into the family or a suitable alternative placement, such as a CYCC.

Child and Youth Care Centre (CYCC). McKay (1994) promotes the idea that all adolescents need individual and sensitive attention. Additionally, these adolescents need intellectual stimulation, emotional support, and familiar surroundings. Even though many CYCCs would not be able to sufficiently provide for these needs, a dysfunctional and depleted family environment might not be able to fully satisfy these needs either (Perumal & Kasiram, 2009). Often, adults do not listen to adolescents as they are not seen as valuable contributors to the situation that needs to be dealt with.

Various authors have argued that by giving an adolescent a voice in the decisions concerning them, they are more likely to adapt to the placement at the CYCC (Van Niekerk, 2007). From an ecological system approach, an adolescent's involvement in the decision-making processes will add to the harmony and fit between the adolescent and the environment. For some children who have been exposed to DV between their parents, a placement which consists of a close, nuclear-type family, such as a foster care placement, can be more frightening than a CYCC because it is like their home environment (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008). For this reason, many children might find the emotional distance often present in a CYCC, more protective and comforting. Additionally, being able to identify with other children (peers) who have had similar experiences, might be supportive of their adaption in a CYCC-setting.

Working from an ecological system approach, an adolescent's level of functioning is greatly determined by the amount of social support received. A healthy, safe, and nurturing environment is vital to an adolescent's development and well-being (Hepworth & Rooney, 2010). A variety of researchers and authors have argued that social support can be a buffer against psychological and behavioural problems in adult life (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2011). For this reason, it is vital to create a nurturing and safe environment for adolescent witnesses of DV who have been placed at a CYCC.

> "A child and youth care centre must offer a therapeutic programme designed for the residential care of children outside the family environment, which may include a programme designed for the reception, care and development of children other than in their family environment".

Macro Level Analysis

Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms the macro-level system as the outermost layer of an individual's environment. The macro level does not necessarily comprise specific systems, but is guided by cultural values, laws, and customs. The most important components at this level that are relevant to this article include the legislation and policy environment, particularly the Children's Act, as well as various cultural aspects within South Africa and various cultural ideas about family and child-rearing.

Legislation and Policy. CYCCs are often given structural support by the government through legislation to care for the vulnerable child. CYCCs receive more assistance and support from the government than other alternative care placements such as foster care. Perumal and Kasiram (2008) reason that the ecological system theory can be helpful in analysing how policies and legislation can be developed and improved to assist

effective service delivery in CYCC's. Upon studying the Children's Act, we have concluded that the Act may lack certain guidelines on the specific services that CYCCs should provide to adolescent witnesses of DV, as emerges in the discussion of this paper.

The Children's Act stresses the importance of a supportive and developmental environment for all children and adolescents placed at a CYCC in Section 191(2)(a) by stating: "A child and youth care centre must offer a therapeutic programme designed for the residential care of children outside the family environment, which may include a programme designed for the reception, care and development of children other than in their family environment". However, it is important to note Section 191(3)(b) of the Act which states that: "A child and youth care centre may in addition to its residential care programmes, offer therapeutic and developmental programmes". In relation to Section 191(3)*(b)*, one could argue that by using the phrase 'may', a CYCC is not necessarily bound by legislation to provide a therapeutic programme, such as assistance to adolescent witnesses of DV. Hence, provision is made in the Act for a variety of services.

The Department of Social Welfare produced a guide namely, "Developmental Assessment of Children, Youth and Families" (Department of Social Welfare, 2002:27) to assist CYCC's in developing individual development plans for children. This refers to the Circle of Courage (Perumal & Kasiram, 2008) which can be used to develop a specific care plan for each individual child in alternative care. It would be useful to consider such approaches when working with vulnerable children, in this instance, specifically with children and adolescents placed in a CYCC.

Culture within a South African Context. According to Davies and Dreyer (2014), patriarchal ideas influence the prevalence and acceptability of DV. Several authors have suggested that patriarchy can determine the level of support victims and witnesses of DV will receive (Kleijn, 2010). Unfortunately, in South Africa, a patriarchal culture still plays a major role in determining whether abuse is classified as such or not, and how it is responded to (Rasool, 2021). Many patriarchal families believe that the man is supposed to beat his wife to 'protect' the entire family and to keep his wife under his control. DV is often not viewed as abusive or abnormal; instead, it is considered as the norm in many societies and cultures (Davies & Dreyer, 2014, Rasool, 2015b). Since a strong patriarchal mindset remains in South Africa, where boys learn at an early age that they should have power and control over females, these witnesses may become future perpetrators or victims (Rasool, 2015a). Furthermore, if their mothers are not receiving support for the trauma of DV, similarly, the children will be less likely to receive support after witnessing such violence within the home. This could perpetuate the cycle of both perpetration and victimisation.

Vatnar and Bjørkly (2009) argue that many women tend to place what they believe is the best interest of their children first and thereby sacrifice their own safety. The sacrifices that these women make can be attributed to the culturally constructed expectations surrounding the roles and responsibilities of mothers when protecting their children (Rasool, 2015a). It would appear as though the different cultures within a South African context have an impact on the prevalence of DV as well as the frequency of the reporting of this social issue. Bearing this in mind, one can argue that cultures that are somewhat accepting of DV can impact the way adolescent witnesses of DV experience the support services that they receive at a CYCC.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study since it "attempts to understand the world from the participants' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences and to uncover their lives world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale (in Sewell, 2001:1). A qualitative approach was chosen because it assisted in gaining a deeper understanding of the SSPs' views on the support services available at the CYCC. It also provided insights into how this affected the adolescents and how the CYCC assisted them in dealing with the trauma associated with their DV exposure experiences.

A single, holistic case study design (Woodside, 2010) was utilised in order to conduct an in-depth analysis or exploration of a system, single or multiple cases. In-depth data collection methods were used to gain rich information from a variety of sources, in the case of this one CYCC, by conducting interviews with the various SSPs in the CYCC (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011).

A holistic single case design was implemented by using some participants' responses as a representative sample of the larger population. For a holistic case study, a specific case is chosen as it demonstrates a process or features that are of particular interest (De Vos et al., 2011). In this study, the views of SSPs on the support services provided by the specific CYCC to adolescents who witnessed DV, were explored. Babbie (2001) illustrates that a case study researcher should aim to conduct the actual interviews only after extensive research has been conducted on literature in the specialised field, hence a literature study on CYCC's, adolescent witnesses of DV and the policies of CYCC was conducted.

Population and Sample

UNICEF (2010) reported that up until 2010, South Africa had approximately 345 registered CYCCs which provided care to approximately 21 000 children. These CYCCs are therefore identified as the population for this study. The specific CYCC chosen in this study was identified as it focuses on working with traumatised children in Pretoria, Gauteng. A focus was placed specifically on adolescents as they are often ignored, discredited, or stigmatised due to their developmental stage (Geldard & Geldard, 2010). The number of adolescent witnesses of DV placed at CYCCs in South Africa is currently unknown. However, due to the work the first author completed at another CYCC in her capacity as a social worker, she is aware that there are a substantial number of adolescent witnesses of DV placed at the CYCC. The identifying details of the CYCC are withheld due to the ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity of both the institution and the participants.

This study used purposive sampling, to identify the populations that could shed light on the phenomenon being studied. In this case, designated SSPs were interviewed as they had insight and knowledge on the services provided to adolescent witnesses of DV.

Participants. To identify appropriate participants who can reflect on the services provided by the CYCC, specific sampling criteria were established (De Vos et al., 2011).

The participants interviewed for this study included seven SSPs at the CYCC who had been providing services to adolescent witnesses of DV. The criteria for participation stipulated that they had to have been employed at the CYCC for at least six months prior to the initiation of the research process so that they would have adequate knowledge of the services being offered to the adolescents. In the end, a sample of one manager, two social workers, two house parents and two child and youth care workers who provided services to these adolescents were selected. This CYCC employs one manager, two full-time social workers, eight house parents and four child and youth care centre workers. There was therefore an adequate representation of the professionals (social workers) in this study. There was however a somewhat inadequate representation of the house parents and child and youth care workers' opinions, due to the number of SSPs in this category that volunteered for this study.

All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The aim was to consider the SSPs views of the support services provided by the CYCC in relation to the policies and service vision and mission of the CYCC.

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' beliefs and perceptions of the support services available in a CYCC (De Vos et al., 2011). DV is sometimes classified as controversial and is sensitive, therefore semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and understanding of the worldview of the participants.

Only one individual interview was conducted with each of the SSPs as their interviews focused predominantly on the support services provided by the CYCC. These interviews lasted between one to one and a half hours. The interviews were recorded, and the importance of recording was explained to all the participants since it allowed us as the researchers to concentrate on the participant, rather than the information provided in the interview (De Vos et al., 2011). All but one of the participants provided consent for the use of a tape recorder to record all interviews. Therefore, we attempted to write down the exact words of the participant to ensure that the specific responses were recorded. Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions were completed soon after the interviews to ensure that the quality of the interviews was not lost, and the eight-step data

analysis process described by Tesch (1990) was utilised. The eight steps of data analysis that were followed can be summarised as follows:

1) All the transcripts were read as a whole and ideas of possible themes were jotted down. This assisted in obtaining a sense of the information as a whole.
2) After gaining a general idea of the data, all the transcripts were considered individually to determine the relevant information from each interview in terms of the research topic and objectives of the study.
3) After all the transcripts were worked through and emergent themes were identified, these themes were classified into columns labelled main themes and sub-themes.
4) The data was then reviewed by taking into account the identified themes. The themes were abbreviated through coding.
5) The themes were divided into groups by naming and categorising each theme. Lines were drawn between the different categories to display interrelationships between these.
6) A final decision was made on the abbreviation for each category.
7) Main themes and sub-themes were created wherein each piece of information in each category was then grouped.
8) The research findings were written up through a discussion of the themes. Each theme was supported by providing direct quotes from the participants. Additionally, the findings were linked to other research done in the area.

Findings

Demographics of Participants

A total of seven SSPs who had been delivering services to adolescents at the CYCC were interviewed. One manager (M), two social workers (SW), two house parents (HP) and two child and youth care workers (CYCW) were interviewed. The manager interviewed is White and had been employed at the CYCC for 12 years. Two Caucasian social workers aged 25 and 24 years were also interviewed. One social worker had a degree in Play Therapy. The one social worker had been working at the CYCC for only four months, but she had to be interviewed as there are only two social workers employed at the CYCC, hence she could not provide much information on the services as she was still in the orientation phase. The other social worker had been at the CYCC for approximately two years and she shared rich and valuable information about the services provided by the CYCC. One of the biggest challenges was that many of the other SSPs, including the house parents and child and youth care workers, shared limited information relating to the services delivered by the CYCC. This made it difficult to correlate the information shared by the various stakeholders.

One African house mother aged 44 years had been working at the CYCC for three years, and one Caucasian house mother aged 61 years had been working at the CYCC for approximately 11 months. Two African child and youth care workers aged 45 and 38 years had been working at the CYCC for five and four years respectively. None of these participants had completed any degrees at a tertiary level. All the workers spoke English; therefore, a translator was not required for these interviews. All these individuals freely volunteered to participate in the study.

SSPs' Views on the CYCC

SSPs' Knowledge of Support Services Provided by the CYCC. The aim of interviewing was to consider the adolescents' and SSPs' experiences of the support services provided by the CYCC to discover the extent to which policies were implemented at the CYCC. However, the CYCC did not have specific policies relating to the services that should be provided to adolescent witnesses of DV. National policies determine the extent of support services that should be available to children and adolescents residing in a CYCC in South Africa, as mandated in the Children's Act. Section 158(3)(a) mandates that "the provincial head of social development in the relevant province must place the child in a child and youth care centre offering the residential care programme which the court has determined for the child, taking into account, the developmental, therapeutic, educational and other needs of the child…" There are, however, no specific guidelines on the support services that need to be provided to adolescent witnesses of DV.

Four of the SSPs mentioned several support services provided to the children and adolescents at the CYCC as reflected in the quotes below, however, these services were more generically aimed than specifically at witnesses of DV. Andrea

(M) mentioned that she is known as the Head of Children's Affairs and the Multidisciplinary Development Centre at this specific CYCC and describes the generic services available at the CYCC, and not specifically social services:

> I suppose the normal stuff, like the house parent cooking, cleaning that we try and make it like a normal house. Getting the kids to school, … things that are generic because they just need to be done. General maintenance, … And a lot of meetings … we also have a sister, we call it a clinic… And then obviously we outsource, … We make mainly use of the government … But there are a few private doctors that are willing to help. If there are specialised things because our kids come in extremely badly. They are malnourished, lice, rotten teeth, medically they have sores on their body. Then until a certain stage where the doctor appointments get less, such as once a month.

The manager initially spoke about the services to the CYCC as a whole and not much about social services. The two social workers reported on the social services and indicated that they have six different group work sessions per week divided between the two social workers. These groups take place on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Andrea (M) explained further that the social workers do "either an age group…or as part of the different houses… depending on the weaknesses we have identified during the IDP [Individual Development Plan], then they format a group for those children who are struggling". Laura (SW2) stated that she tries to do individual therapeutic interventions on Thursdays, however, there is not always time. She added that medical attention is also provided to the children and adolescents at the CYCC when needed.

Michelle (SW1) provided an extensive explanation of the services provided by the CYCC, especially by the social workers. She reported the following services are available:

> So firstly, we provide care to these children and the house parent is mainly responsible for that, it's like food and clothes and love and stuff like that. The social workers mainly focus on executing the IDP of the child, that also includes what the child chose such as participating in sports or going for therapy or visiting their parents or guest parents or anything that will contribute to their development.

Laura (SW2) added that several support services are provided to the adolescents at the CYCC. She explained:

> We usually speak with them [about their concerns and issues], but usually the house mom is the first line of defence, but if they don't want to talk to the house mom, they come and talk to us. If it is an issue that occurs a lot, we refer them for therapy. We do have interns from TUT [Tshwane University of Technology] and M-students [Masters students] that come to do therapy, so we usually will put the child's name on the waiting list. If it is a child that we think needs medication, we'll make an appointment at Steve Biko [hospital] and they will see the psychologist and then they will decide if the child needs medication. But we usually just talk to the child and see if we can offer emotional support, but if they need long-term therapy, we will arrange that for them.

Laura (SW2) mentioned later in the interview that there are no specific services aimed at the adolescent witnesses of DV. It is discouraging that there is no ongoing individual counselling by the social workers for all the children at the CYCC, irrespective of their background or problem. This counselling seems to be available only when the children are experiencing issues. Subsequently, their prior experiences of witnessing DV may be neglected unless they display behavioural issues.

In addition to the groups (e.g., behavioural issues, emotional development and communication and self-care groups) that are run by the two social workers, Andrea (M) stated that the social workers also must do individual counselling with the children. She explains:

> Both social workers are required to see four children per year themselves in therapy. And then we have a minimum of twelve interns of psychology or second year master's students of psychology. So, they get that therapy as well. Speech therapy, occupational therapy and sometimes we outsource to people who specialise in certain things, other social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists. So, there is therapy as well.

Andrea (M) added that the social workers' other main responsibilities are:

> Social workers need to admit new children, develop an IDP…support house parents…

Mary (HP2) who provided information on these services offered her perception of the services that are mainly delivered by the social workers and other relevant professionals. Mary (HP2), mentioned:

> They [social workers] have got groups by the office whereby they spend time with the children weekly. And there is church… So that is about all the support that they can get…they have got individual therapy. [Doctor] is also coming to the children, he is a psychiatrist. He is coming here daily to talk individually to the children about all their problems in the past.

She shared that there is a psychiatrist who visits the CYCC daily to check up on the children. During a follow-up interview with Laura (SW2), she mentioned that there is no psychiatrist who visits the children to check up on them. She added that there was once a clinical psychologist who visited the children, however, he was not involved with the children anymore. This could therefore be a misperception of the role of the doctor who had previously visited the CYCC. Furthermore, Laura stated that there are insufficient resources to see all the children for individual therapy, therefore only those who present with concerning and problem behaviours are referred to an external person for therapeutic intervention. It would seem as though a lack of resources was forcing the SSPs to do reactive, rather than proactive and preventative interventions.

Considering this, Andrea (M) mentioned that they cannot focus specifically on adolescent witnesses of DV because there are many other issues that also need to be dealt with. She explained:

> Because everyone has been exposed to so much, we can't just focus on one theme if I can put it like that. Everyone has been through hell and back. Some are obviously worse than others. And that's what makes it difficult for the social workers. Everyone gets the same services. Obviously, if someone is acting out really badly, or has psychiatric problems, then it is Weskoppies [psychiatric hospital] … you basically go by it in terms of their behaviour.

Three of the SSPs reported not knowing anything about the services that were provided by the CYCC; they especially reported that they were unaware of services specifically for adolescent witnesses of DV. This lack of information could be contributing to some of the adolescents' negative experiences of the services provided by the CYCC. These three participants reported the following:

> Sarah (CYCW1): I don't know about that; I just receive the children here at the house after the social worker has seen them.
>
> Amy (HP1): No, I don't know anything about that.
>
> Winnie (CYCW2): I really don't know about that… Basically, I don't know about that.

It was concerning that one house parent (Amy) and two child and youth care workers (Sarah and Winnie) did not have any knowledge whatsoever of the support services provided overall by the CYCC and specifically to adolescent witnesses of DV. It is disconcerting that this could have a negative impact on the well-being and sense of belonging of the adolescents at the CYCC. This is contradictory to the information of Laura (SW2) who stated that all the staff members were informed of the services available and did have knowledge of how to access these services.

It is concerning that the abovementioned participants did not share any information regarding social support services which could mean that they did not have any information about these services, or they did not understand the processes that needed to be followed when accessing these services. It is therefore important that the CYCC staff be educated more regularly on the support services available at the CYCC and on how they can handle specific cases within their houses at the CYCC.

More knowledge by all SSPs could result in better outcomes and development for all the children at the CYCC. Moreover, Laura (SW2) suggested that there was too little time and too many children to provide individual services by the in-house social workers. More specific and specialised care and support need to be developed and made available to adolescent witnesses of DV frequently, considering the devastating impact that this could have on future functioning and well-being.

Difficulty in Reaching the Children and Adolescents. The two social workers who were interviewed mentioned that there were insufficient social workers at the CYCC to address the needs of all the children at the CYCC. Michelle (SW1) states:

> I think it would be useful if we could see them all individually. I think it is a lot easier to build a relationship I have tried, there's just no time. I also think the house mothers could also be educated more, not just in terms of DV, but also in a broad spectrum of issues. Then they would be able to identify these issues and respond to them, because they see the kids more. I think the referral system could be better.

Laura (SW2) argued that she wished that there was more time in a day so that all the children at the CYCC could be seen individually. She said: "Well time is not a service. I think in an ideal world we will have more time." Andrea (M) mentioned: "I think they [social workers] want to do more individual therapy, I think it is their passion, but there is just not enough time to see all the children individually."

Having only two workers employed at a CYCC with approximately 110 children could be why there are not sufficient services available to the adolescents and children living at the CYCC. There could be sufficient time in a month to see every child individually, however, once a month might not be sufficient. A lack of social workers or other counsellors can result in negative outcomes for witnesses of DV. Other services need to be procured to assist witnesses of DV, otherwise the inter-generational cycle of violence could be reproduced.

Difficulty in Managing Children at the CYCC. The staff at the CYCC reported that managing the children and adolescents was challenging. One of the SSPs, Amy (HP1) reported that she often struggles with some of the children who live in her house. She reported that she has complained to the social workers about these children and about their behaviour on several occasions, however, the social workers do not respond adequately to these complaints in her view. Additionally, she reported how she does not think that there are sufficient and strict disciplinary measures put into place at the CYCC. Amy expressed that the social workers at the CYCC do not enforce the rules as well as she would want them to. Amy said:

> So, there are kids that I am complaining about almost all the time and then there's nothing done... If I can really say, all of them, even the social workers, are not strict at all. Like I said there's no punishment. So, the kids just do it again and again.

Amy (HP1) seems to be struggling to manage the children adequately. It appears she feels that it is the social workers' job to manage the behaviour of the children and not hers. In theory, it is the house parents' job to discipline and manage children daily. The role of the social workers is to provide therapeutic and other services to children. One wonders what training the house parents have been given to manage the children and if they have role clarity – of their own role, and the role of the social workers. It is imperative that the social workers and managers at the CYCC work closely with the house parents and child and youth care workers as they are the ones who are engaging with the children daily. It may also be that house parents do not feel empowered to make decisions and enforce rules.

The issues raised by Amy (HP1) could indicate systemic issues in the CYCC. Perhaps communication between the social workers, the manager, and the house parents was limited or role clarification was unclear, such that house mothers had a particular expectation of social workers and not of themselves. During her interview, Andrea (M) described the role of the social workers as follows:

> They must admit kids, you know new children, because we want to be full as often as possible. They must format and implement an IDP [Individual Development Plan], that's very important to us. Marketing and fundraising are on everyone's job description here. They are the project leaders of their four houses, so they also must do supervision and support their house parents, cause they also don't have an easy task. We have a school leavers' programme for our school leavers, to find a job and work or if we can find money for them to go and study. They are responsible for that as well. And then group activities or therapy... We have group activities, say for example you enjoy cycling, you start a cycling group. We are very developmentally approached, that's the approach that we use.

Additionally, in comparison to the roles and responsibilities of the social workers, Andrea (M) described the roles and responsibilities of the house parents as follows:

> They must create a home. Obviously, a care plan to provide food, the basic needs, clothing

> like on Maslow's Hierarchy. I always say to them that the basic needs are the most important, because otherwise if a kid is hungry, you are not going to do therapy, they are not going to work at school. Also marketing and fundraising is a big thing for them. We don't try and be their parents, it's not our role. We are just a substitute parent. But to really nurture the kids, is a big thing...

After Andrea (M) provided this explanation of the roles and responsibilities of the house parents, I explored who the responsible party was for handling the discipline of the children in relation to Amy's (HP1) complaint. Andrea stated:

> That's a difficult one, because it is supposed to be the house parent. But sometimes it gets a bit much. I'd say the most difficult thing is being a parent but raising someone else's kids I think is even worse. So, it is supposed to be the house parent. And that is what makes the therapeutic role in the CYCC so difficult, because then they require that they say you must speak to this kid, because they can't anymore. And then the social workers must take a disciplinary role, but they are supposed to have a therapeutic role. So, it lies between the two, but it is supposed to be the house parent.

It is concerning that the house parents expect social workers to discipline the children placed in their care. As mentioned by Andrea, this complicates the role of the social worker wherein they must act as a disciplinarian whilst still maintaining a therapeutic relationship with the children. This role confusion could be a contributing factor to the lack of satisfaction of the support services on the part of the adolescents (Bezuidenhout, 2017). The role confusion could be due to a lack of training and skills on the part of the house parents.

Sarah (CYCW1) reported that she enjoyed living and working at the CYCC because she had become more confident in working with the children who lived there. She experienced a sense of loss when the children left the CYCC. She expressed the following:

> And then I work very nice, because I love children. I've gained a lot of experience; I've gained that confidence to help children in this place. So, I just enjoy myself. Some of the children you know are difficult, some of them just enjoy being here and some of the children will go out of this place. So, you have that bond with them. When they are going out, you just feel sad, because it's like your children.

For Sarah, it seems as though working at the CYCC has been a growth experience. However, similarly to Amy (HP1), she expressed that she struggled to deal with the children. She explained that the children often challenged the boundaries and their authority. However, this is normal, especially for children exposed to violence, who may replicate the behaviours they have seen at home in the CYCC.

Conclusion

If a child is removed from their home and placed in a CYCC, it would mean that the DV was intense, and the child/ren were at risk of serious harm. Hence a CYCC is an important space for assisting child witnesses of DV to deal with the trauma of exposure and to prevent the inter-generational transmission of violence. It seems from this study that the CYCC is creating a safe and nurturing environment for the adolescent witnesses of DV. They provide generic services to all the children, however there are limited specialist services for child witnesses of DV available.

Despite evidence of the co-occurrence of DV with other social issues and child abuse, there still seems to be surprisingly little application of programmes that target such issues as evident in this CYCC. Even though there is a considerable need for support services that focus on supporting adolescent witnesses of DV, it seems that this CYCC does not have programmes aimed specifically at addressing this. However, these issues could be addressed adequately if counselling was provided weekly or frequently to the children who witnessed DV to deal with those issues.

When considering services through the ecological lens, it seems that there are various interventions at the micro and meso level, however these are not specific to child witnesses. It is imperative to consider the impact that other systems at the macro level, such as the broader welfare system, the culture of violence, and patriarchy have on the CYCC and thus the children, and interventions are needed to address these. At the meso level, the interaction between social workers, house parents and the children's home of origin is given

> It seems that CYCC's and their SSPs are over-stretched and so the children are not receiving specialised attention that addresses their exposure.

inadequate attention. This is important since this is where they were exposed to violence, and interventions in the home are required for the reintegration of the children and to create a safe and healthy environment for them to return to. If reintegration services are not ongoing on both levels, it will be difficult for the children to fully heal and be ready to return home. Hence, support services relating to the adolescent and their biological families are critical for the well-being of the children.

At the meso level, depending on the number of adolescent witnesses of DV that there are in a CYCC, a specialised programme could allow adolescent witnesses of DV to share their experiences and to deal with the trauma they associate with this violence. Instead of just age-appropriate groups, the CYCC could have specialist group work services that address issues such as exposure to DV at the meso level. In addition, a general programme on fostering healthy relationships and addressing gender attitudes would also be beneficial to all adolescents as a peer group to address the patriarchal culture of South African society more broadly.

Although CYCC's are complex environments and the SSPs have a huge responsibility and have multiple and complex demands to deal with, they nevertheless need to be effective in addressing the psycho-social issues presented by children who were exposed to DV. The context from which they come should be clear in their individualised plans, as this is an important aspect of working from an ecological perspective. It is, however, imperative to consider the impact that other systems at the micro and meso levels have on the effectiveness of the intervention at this CYCC. For example, if the interaction between social workers, house parents and the children's caregivers is inadequate, it will in turn have a negative impact on the development and support of these adolescents. This is an important factor to keep in mind for future research and implementation of interventions.

There is also a concern about the support services relating to the adolescent and their biological families. It could be recommended that specialised programmes supporting the adolescent and their biological families, could also be useful in practice. At the micro level, the IDPs need to acknowledge and deal with the issues faced by the adolescents or children when they present with exposure to DV. Additionally, the Circle of Courage, as discussed by the SSPs, need to be utilised to develop effective programmes to address the issues that emerge from witnessing DV. At the same time, social workers need to develop interventions at the meso-level that deal with gender attitudes that contribute to the potential perpetuation of DV.

It seems that CYCC's and their SSPs are over-stretched and so the children are not receiving specialised attention that addresses their exposure. This needs to be redressed and the staff need to receive training on DV, and how to deal with children who have witnessed DV. Not just social workers, but house mothers need to receive this training to adequately understand the behaviour of these children and to respond appropriately. At present, it seems that the services offered by this CYCC are only generic with no focus on the adolescents' exposure to DV. Even though legislation seems to suggest that CYCCs should develop supportive and therapeutic programmes, the legislation should be amended to include specific guidelines for the implementation of specialised programmes to accommodate the needs of child witnesses of DV.

Hence, both policy and practice to enhance the understanding and responses of CYCCs to children who witness DV is urgently required. There is a need to recognise that DV is a macro issue, and hence the interventions need to address the impact of the broader culture of violence and patriarchy is needed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This publication was supported by the Department of Social Work and Community Development, University of Johannesburg.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of the participants of this study and for sharing their traumatic experiences by engaging in this study. The authors would also like to thank the Department of Social Work at the University of Johannesburg for their support.

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