

An Exploration of the Vatsonga People's Markers of Childhood

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Contributions

The three authors contributed equally in coming up with this research article.

Abstract

Children are entitled to a host of rights cutting across the socio-economic and cultural fabric. These are contained in various international and regional conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child among many more. The concept of childhood is socially constructed therefore childhood is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but rather a specific cultural component of given societies. The paper is based on a qualitative study in which purposively selected 40 Indigenous Knowledge Systems experts and 11 social workers drawn from Mozambique and Zimbabwe participated in the study. The article explores the Vatsonga people's markers of childhood drawing lessons for social workers working with indigenous groups. The findings revealed that childhood among the Vatsonga is not determined by chronological numeric age but by various markers such as maturity and rites of passage. Childhood was romanticised by the Vatsonga as a period of innocence and irrationality. Children were viewed as of great value as they represent the posterity of society and a gift from their ancestors. We conclude that a people's construction of childhood has a bearing on upholding child rights hence it is important for social workers to have an understanding of their clients' views on childhood to effectively prevent child rights violations.

Keywords: Construction of childhood; Childhood; Child; Child rights; Vatsonga people; Zimbabwe

Introduction and Background

Concepts such as childhood and child maltreatment are social constructs. Childhood, like many phenomena, is socially constructed and not genetic, universal, and biological as advanced by some (Smith et al., 2011). Therefore, "ideas of childhood are inextricably linked to a society's culture and organisation" (Descartes, 2012, pp.53). Social constructionism advances the argument that childhood is neither a natural nor a universal feature of human groups but is a specific structural and cultural component of given societies (Prout & James, 1997). Childhood cannot be exclusively understood through constructionism, however,

acknowledges that the use of numeric age to strictly define childhood is equally flawed (Thomas, 2021). As such some societies define childhood based on culture (Hammersley, 2017). The definition of childhood differs from society to society based on culture, beliefs, and periods in history (Norozi & Moen, 2016). Childhood is a variable of social analysis that proposes multiple childhoods rather than a single or universal phenomenon as advanced by non-constructionists thus childhood is different from one society to another (Prout & James, 1997; Thomas, 2021).

In this sense, Descartes (2012) explains that age is a social construct based on the norms and values of a specific context, and perceptions of age will thus vary across cultures. Different understandings or constructions of childhood are based on the perspectives of a specific society at a specific time and will determine how families and society think about children (Smith et al., 2011). Age is classified as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, however, “the biological categories of age differ from the social categories” (Descartes, 2012, pp.53).

The social construction of childhood manifests among others in the beliefs, cultural norms, laws, and policies, and in the daily actions of children and adults in their environment (Moletsane, 2012). Childhood attitudes are influenced by the dominant belief system within a society and are located within a particular social, political, cultural, and economic context. In many societies, age categories are determined by rites of passage, rituals, and ceremonies that form part of the culture and belief systems of the society and are furthermore determined by the laws of a particular country (Descartes, 2012). Constructions of childhood are therefore not independent from the socio-political, economics, and culture of any given context, which then produces constellations on conceptions of child and childhood (Knapp van Bogaert, 2012). Eric Erickson’s psychosocial development theory also recognises the influence of social and cultural factors on a person’s lifespan from childhood to old age (Sacco, 2013; Berzoff, 2011). Although the psychosocial development theory was developed in European contexts, it is equally helpful in conceptualising the concept of childhood in Africa. This shows that by advocating for an Afrocentric approach to issues of childhood and child rights, one is not advocating for the total obliteration of decades-old theories which were in use but calls for equal recognition of African theory.

Some have argued that the construction of childhood is by and large shaped by prevailing neo-liberal political contexts (Keddel, 2018). Childhood could be viewed as a sensitive time in human development characterised by dependence, vulnerability, and innocence (Keddel, 2018; Knapp van Bogaert, 2012). Wilson et al. (2008) concur that childhood is normally romanticised as an angelic period of innocence and dependency which then elevates their protection as a priority; on the other hand, childhood is also viewed in terms of being a period of irrational thinking, needing discipline and constraint. Thus, viewing a child in terms of dependence and innocence is part of socially constructed views that may not be generalised to all contexts. Knapp van Bogaert (2012) advances that childhood is a fluid social construct that is not static but changes with time. The stance that views conceptions of children and childhood as neither fixed nor static and adopts the notions of diverse childhoods is shared by many (*cf.* Giesinger, 2017; Pupavac, 2011).

The view of the child as “a blank slate” in which children are prepared to become adults in line with the ideas of their parents and society aligns with the concept of “becoming child”. On the other hand, the “new” sociology of childhood brought about a paradigm that views children as “the being child”, thus active participants that construct their lives and that of others in interaction with others in their social and cultural environment, and having the

agency to contribute to society (Huang, 2019). These are based on social constructions and would determine how society views and acts towards children. Modern sociological approaches to childhood tend to support the concept of “being child” and “recognises children as social agents, subjects rather than passive objects of social structures and processes” (Daskalakis, 2015, pp. 166). Unfortunately, the majority of literature on childhood perspectives is largely Eurocentric hence the need to bring alternative perspectives such as the Afrocentric view of childhood.

Internationally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] (Office of the High Commissioner, 1989) defines childhood as a “human being below the age of eighteen years” but makes provision that the majority may be attained earlier under the law applicable to the child. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child [ACRWC] (African Union [AU], 1990) defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen years. It appears that the ACRWC places a stronger focus on the “being child” by assigning responsibilities to children “to work for the cohesion of the family ... and to assist them in case of need” (Article 31). AjaNwanchuku (2016) highlights the role of the law in determining the legal definition of “child” and suggests that this definition may differ from that in customary settings, where childhood is determined by the local norms of the people. In addition, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples calls for the need to respect the rights of indigenous peoples and the right to revitalise their cultural traditions and customs (United Nations [UN], 2018).

This paper explores the markers of the childhood of the Vatsonga people of Southern Africa as a deliberate effort to promote indigenous perspectives on childhood and child rights. An expose of how these markers of childhood sometimes lead to violations of child rights is provided. In addition, based on these markers of the childhood of the Vatsonga, the article draws lessons for other social workers working with indigenous groups in different societies.

An Overview of Child Rights

Child rights are the human rights of children entitled to every child regardless of their religion, creed, social status, race, or sex (Collins, 2017). Internationally, the CRC is the main UN convention guiding member states on the implementation of child rights. Regionally, the ACRWC domesticates the CRC on the African continent and it was designed to deal with the deficiencies of the CRC concerning the African context (Nyarko, 2018). The major deficiencies of the CRC in an African context include its silence on children’s responsibilities and the individualistic view of the rights whereby children are regarded as autonomous beings. This is contrary to the African philosophy of Ubuntu which emphasises collectivism and the well-being of the group as opposed to focusing on the individual’s rights (Magano, 2018). The notions of child rights as contained in the CRC are regarded as foreign to traditional sub-Saharan Africa given its focus on individuals as autonomous whilst African cultures are communal and collectivist (Simbine & le Roux, 2021). Child rights and its associated terms such as neglect, maltreatment, child abuse, and other terms are social constructs hence considering the unique context of every society to understand issues of childhood and child rights violation is paramount (Bornstein, 2013; Simbine & le Roux, 2021).

The implementation of the CRC is guided by the four core principles: non-discrimination (article 2), best interests of the child (article 3), right to life, survival, and development (article 6), and respect for the views of the child (article 12) (Thomas, 2011; UNICEF, 2010).

Based on the CRC three categories of child rights are identified as provision rights, protection rights, and participation rights known as the three 'Ps'. Protection rights entail a basket of rights that include protection of children from all forms of harm, exploitation, child sexual abuse, and child labour among others (UNICEF, 2014b). Provision rights are a bundle of rights that include the right to education, right to health, right to name and identity, right to family life, right to life, survival, and development among others (UNICEF, 2014c). Last, participation rights are largely comprised of various freedoms such as freedom of religion and thought, right to privacy, right to be heard, and freedom of assembly and association (UNICEF, 2014a). Child rights by their nature are indivisible and interdependent hence they cannot be met in silos as standalone (Mahuntse, 2021). Thus, the violation of provision rights by not addressing poverty may lead to the violation of both protection and participation rights as a result of the vulnerabilities that poverty may create (Masuka, 2013). Therefore, child rights are indivisible hence the violation of one right may lead to violation of a host of other rights whilst fulfilment of one right may create conditions for other rights to be met.

Child rights are not without responsibility. The debates on rights and responsibility largely centres on parental responsibility whilst a few especially Afro-centrists centre on the responsibility of the child to their family and society. Parents and families are 'morally' compelled to meet their children's educational rights something viewed as the government relegating its responsibilities to parents (Maithreyi & Sriprakash, 2018). Parental responsibility includes ensuring that their children are protected and that they create conducive conditions for the right to life, survival, and development to be met (Moyo, 2014). Some have called for greater parental responsibility in youth justice and children in conflict with the law characterised by the payment of fines and other penalties by parents of offending children (Hollingsworth, 2007). However, there is a need not to lose focus on emphasising the rights of children and parents as opposed to focusing on their responsibilities (Hollingsworth, 2007).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the emphasis has been on challenging the individualistic nature of child rights as enshrined in the CRC through calling for the inclusion of the child's responsibility to family, community, and society at large, and the need for the child to be accountable to some of their actions which may be in conflict with the law or perceived to be dangerous to society (Evans & Skovdal, 2015; Songca, 2018). Pessimists on the inclusion of responsibilities of the child argue that this may limit the full realisation of the child's participation rights and may comprise the child's enjoyment of their childhood (Sloth & Boezaart, 2017). It is our view that despite the challenges associated with the inclusion of corresponding responsibilities to child rights, for these rights to be acceptable by the wider society in the African context there is a need to ensure that there is some focus on responsibilities as well. This would reflect the African view of persons as belonging to a group not as autonomous beings with individualistic entitlements.

Theoretical Framework

The paper utilises both the Afrocentric worldview and the social constructionism theories as its theoretical lens. The Africa Social Work Network (ASWNet) identifies Afrocentrism theory as one of the relevant social work theories for African scholars (ASWNet, 2022). The theory refers to giving urgency to African ways of doing, values, ethics, and African philosophies in viewing the world (ASWNet, 2022). It is intrinsically linked to the broader African worldview of Ubuntu. The Afrocentric worldview determines African people's perceptions, interpretation, and understanding of their world or reality (Mutisya & Ross,

2018; Kalu, 1978 in Nwoye, 2017). People's worldview links directly with the theory of social constructionism (Makhubele & Qualinge, 2008). This theory has a long history but it was popularised by the works of Kuhn (Kuhn, 1962) and Berger and Luckman (1966). Its basic assumption is that people's interpretation of their world is influenced by their culture, values, traditions, religion, and lived experiences (Moore, 2016; Schenk, 2019). Social constructionism as a theoretical framework was relevant to this study as it allowed the researcher to analyse and present the findings of the study from the Afrocentric worldview of the Vatsonga people and their culture and behaviour (Asante, 1998 in Makhubele et al., 2018).

These theories are thus relevant to the purpose and scope of this paper, which is meant to unlock knowledge embedded in Vatsonga Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) that informs cultural values and practices that could relate to the construction of childhood. IKS refers to community-based local knowledge embedded in local culture, rituals, belief systems, customs, and oral history, and is transmitted from one generation to another through oral tradition (Mahuntse, 2021). Thus, the Vatsonga markers of childhood which are the focus of this paper are based on their IKS.

Aim of the Study

The goal of the study was to explore the potential contribution that IKS could make to child protection based on the study of the Vatsonga people of Southern Africa. Drawing from the findings, this paper explores the Vatsonga markers of childhood and their implication for social workers working with indigenous groups. The article adds an Afrocentric voice to *childhood and child rights debates*.

Research Questions

The study's research questions on the interview schedules relevant to this paper included the following:

- What are the markers of childhood among the Vatsonga people?
- What elements of Vatsonga's markers of childhood could enhance the promotion of child rights?
- What elements of Vatsonga's markers of childhood could violate child rights?
- How could knowledge of IKS be utilised by social workers in the field of child protection?

Research Methodology

The research approach, research design, sampling issues, data collection, and data analysis methods are discussed in the ensuing sub-sections providing an overview of the paper's research methodology.

Research Approach and Research Design

The study was based on a constructivist research paradigm hence the research participants' experiential knowledge was regarded as a credible source of knowledge (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). A qualitative research approach was adopted and is seen by Mafokane & Shirindi (2018) as a constructivist research approach that allows participants to

construct the meaning of a particular phenomenon under the study. Mabvurira & Makhubele (2018a) posit that beliefs, values, and reasoning may not be measured through quantitative methods. This research involved dealing with the Vatsonga people's culture, beliefs, and value system hence the need to use a qualitative research approach. A case study research design was adopted in line with the dictates of a qualitative research approach as espoused by Maree (2016). The Vatsonga people were regarded as a case in this study. A case study design is suitable for exploring an understudied phenomenon (Babbie, 2013). The Vatsonga people were found to be one of the under-studied ethnic groups in Southern Africa (Hove, 2012; Levine, 2005; Manganye, 2011). Therefore, a case study research design was deemed suitable for this study of the Vatsonga people.

Sampling Procedures and Sample

Non-probability sampling methods were used to select the study participants who could provide rich information that would be appropriate for achieving the goal of the study. Mafokane & Shirindi (2018) encourage the use of non-probability sampling procedures such as the use of community gatekeepers in selecting participants. Chiredzi district in the Masvingo province of Zimbabwe and Chokwe district in the Gaza province of Mozambique were purposively selected due to their high-density concentration of Vatsonga-speaking people. Key informant sampling techniques and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the 40 community-based participants whilst availability sampling techniques were employed in selecting the 11-child protection social workers. The number of participants in the sample was found to be sufficient, as data saturation has occurred which implies that interviews yielded no new information (Wiedner & Ansari, 2017).

Profile of Participants

The study's community-based participants were 20 from Mozambique comprising of 9 female and 11 male and 20 from Zimbabwe comprising of 8 females and 12 males. Their age range was 36–85, thus, the youngest participant was a 36-year-old male whilst the oldest was an 85-year-old female participant. In addition, there were 11 child protection workers who participated in the study: 6 females and 5 males; 4 were from Mozambique and 7 were from Zimbabwe. They ranged in age from 28 to 53.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The researchers collected data through the use of semi-structured one-to-one interviews for the first stage of data collection whereas focus group discussions were used in the second stage of data collection. In both stages, the data were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. This data was then transcribed into written narratives and the transcripts were captured in English after translations from *Xitsonga* language. This paper relies on the data from the first stage of data collection only and does not utilise the findings from the feedback on the developed programme (second stage of data collection). The use of various methods of data collection as well as the use of about three categories of the study sample was designed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study findings. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse data from the two stages of data collection. In particular, patterns in the qualitative data were identified followed by the refining of these patterns into themes reported by the researchers (Lochmiller, 2021). The authors followed the Clarke et al. (2015) six phases of thematic analysis which are:

| Thematic analysis phase | Actions of the authors |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Familiarisation | The authors listened to the audio and made transcriptions. They read and re-read the transcribed data set several times and established the patterns |
| Coding | We identified and labelled the features of the data utilising research questions as well as the study objectives |
| Searching for themes | We established key patterns in the data |
| Reviewing themes | We posed to review the candidate themes to see if they were in sync with the coded data and the entire data set. We found them to be in order hence we proceeded to the next phase |
| Defining and naming themes | We selected and finalised theme names. We also provided summaries of each theme and we were satisfied that this reflected what was in the data set |
| Writing of research report | We utilised participants' verbatims to discuss the themes and concluded |

Ethical Considerations

The study observed all applicable research ethics and it was cleared by the University of XXXX's relevant Ethics Committee under the reference number GW20170520HS. The researchers in particular observed the following ethical considerations: avoidance of harm and beneficence, voluntary participation and informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, non-deception of subjects, feedback to the participants after the study, and moral, and ethical reporting of findings. Thus, participants were given full information about the research, and those who chose to participate voluntarily consented by signing the letters of consent. To ensure the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used in this article.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The study findings show that the Vatsonga people have certain constructions of childhood that may differ from western-oriented notions. Consequently, the findings show that the Vatsonga people use various markers of childhood to demarcate childhood from adulthood as opposed to the use of chronological numeric age. The results are presented and discussed in the themes that emerged, which include physiological changes as a marker, rites of passage, maturity as a marker of childhood, and childhood as a period of innocence and irrationality. With the aid of participants' views, the study findings are presented and discussed below:

Physiological Changes as a Marker

The research findings show that for the Vatsonga people, childhood would not be determined by the child's chronological numeric age but determined by various socially constructed markers. One such marker was physiological changes that happen as boys and girls grow. Study participants revealed physiological milestones and changes which include speech development, ability to walk, and menstruation among other physiological milestones children are deemed to go through. There was consensus among the community-based participants and social work participants that once a person attains some of these physiological milestones they cease to be viewed as a child regardless of their numeric age. Thus, boys or girls under the age of eighteen with a big body, a big chest, or who have started

their menstrual cycle were deemed to be adults among the Vatsonga people. Such a way of conceiving childhood and adulthood in terms of socially constructed markers of childhood was a bone of contention for social work participants who viewed childhood in terms of chronological age laid down in the Zimbabwean and Mozambican law.

The social work participants argued that such practices were likely to lead to violations of children's rights. The participants have this to say:

You see this age issue in terms of the number is not something we consider. I told you that once the child gets weaned off they gain some form of autonomy from the mother and rely more on their siblings for care and support, so from as early as they (boys) can walk adequately and have gained speech, they accompany the other boys to herding cattle.”(Muringo)

What the adults consider is not numeric age but physical indicators like menstruation, breasts, and buttocks, then one is sent for initiation. When they come from there, they are deemed ready for any sexual relationship. (Smith)

To them, childhood ends with social markers such as starting menstruation, initiation, and body physical changes, among other indicators. But I am sure if that is addressed; we can tap into their xinto/ubuntu philosophy. (Selby)

They look at milestones like breasts, beard, and social status or indicators such as marriage and initiations. These various conceptions of child and childhood bring confusion because if a married child for example suffers abuse the likelihood of the case not being reported is high because they consider such a child to be an adult. (Tedi)

The above views were shared by most of the participants in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The findings mirror those of Ndofirepi (2013), Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014), and Bokaye-Boaten (2010) who established the use of various markers of childhood among traditional African communities as opposed to the use of the chronological numeric age. As highlighted by some of the social workers who participated in the study, the use of socially constructed markers of childhood may lead to violations of child rights. Phenomenon such as child marriage may easily proliferate as girls under the age of eighteen who would have achieved milestones such as starting their menstrual cycle and having a big body would be deemed to be adults. Child-to-child marriages may also become rife with the blessings of society.

In addition, the possibility of parents diminishing their parental responsibility for the protection, provision, and participation rights of children for children who would have shown to have satisfied the physiological milestones is very high. Issues of child labour and school dropout may also rile society as children who exhibit to be mature physiologically are likely to be allowed to seek gainful employment. Whereas Afrocentric scholars are supposed to challenge the Eurocentric notions of childhood, these social ills associated with the adoption of an Afrocentric construction of childhood pose an ethical dilemma. However, it is interesting to note that our adjudication of violations of child rights erroneously and unwittingly relies on the Eurocentric views of childhood we have learnt over the years through the consumption of literature, theories, models, and international conventions from the Global North. Therefore, there is a need for African scholars to develop Afrocentric

theories, models, and concepts that will provide the knowledge base and theoretical underpinnings upon which to base our arguments. In the absence of such, it will mean the continued use of Eurocentric concepts to advance an Afrocentric agenda that is queer.

Puberty Rites of Passage (vukhomba)

Puberty rites of passage were established as the major social marker for the transition from childhood to adulthood in the *Xitsonga* culture. Once initiated, even at the age of twelve, one is considered an adult; hence, children who complete these rites of passage can marry and get admitted into adulthood. On the other hand, a man or a woman who is above the age of majority but is still going through initiation ceremonies is regarded as still a child among the *Vatsonga* hence they are deprived of the respect and privileges accorded to adults. The practice of initiation rites known as *vukhomba* was unique to the Zimbabwean *Vatsonga* people. Those in Mozambique did not practice the *Vukhomba* rites of passage. The participants expressed the following views:

Our rites of passage, the most celebrated being the ‘vukhomba’ process for both girls and boys; this is a source of pride for every mutsonga girl and a mutsonga boy. Tied to this were the names associated with the initiation, it was a source of inspiration for a boy to emerge from the process with a new name, heh, one would say ‘I am, Kazamula, Muzamani or Hlengani’ - that was for boys. Those not initiated are not counted as adults even if they have grey hair. For girls, one would say ‘Now I am Njakeni or Mhlava’. (Hlaisani)

On girl initiation, it is also a good avenue because the beauty of it is that it does not involve genital mutilation as what other ethnic groups do. The *Vatsonga* initiation is all about teachings, song, and dance so if we can convince the *Vatsonga* in this area that they send their girls at a later stage, say at 18. However, my challenge with the practice is that it exposes young children to sex and sexuality education which may see the initiated children wanting to experiment (Tobinas)

The sentiments of the participants are a testament that the community-based participants and the social work participants hold conflicting views on the practice of puberty rites of passage. The former glorifies the puberty rites of passage as an important rite that instils a sense of identity and belonging whilst the latter call for the practice to be limited to those persons above the age of eighteen. However, it seems apparent that the social work participants acknowledge the benefits the practice of the puberty rites of passage may have on *Vatsonga* children; however, their worry is on the potential exposure to child rights violations such as child marriages and Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) that may arise due to conflicting constructions of childhood.

Children in Zimbabwe receive Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) at an early age such as when they are still in primary school. Thus, the concern of social work participants that puberty rites of passage (*Vukomba*) expose children to sexuality education at younger age expose the biases that social workers have towards local culture. This then leads to a rushed dismissal of African cultural practices as harmful whilst condoning the same practices deemed to be modern. The findings above cement Bokaye-Boaten (2010)’s findings which similarly established the use of rites of passage among the Akan people of Ghana to define childhood. In addition, the non-recognition of adults who would have not gone through the sanctioned rites of passage mirrors the findings of Glozah and Lawani (2014) who found the

same practice among the Krobo people of Ghana. Nwadiokwu., Nwadiokwu., Favour, & Okwuazun (2016) found the role played by various rites of passage such as pregnancy rites, birth rites, naming rites, and puberty rites among many critical in the lives of many African societies in Nigeria and Kenya.

Among the Akamba people of Kenya, circumcision is used as a puberty rite of passage for boys just as the study has established the same practice among the Vatsonga people. Among the Krobo of Ghana, the *Dipo* practice is their puberty initiation rite of passage that involves the participation of adults supervising the process (Glozah & Lawani, 2014). Whereas the use of puberty rites of passage as a marker of transition from childhood to adulthood may be problematic if it violates the right to education and health, it is just an African way of welcoming children into adulthood the same way European society would do through celebrating the 21st birthday of their children to mark their transition to a more independent period of adulthood. The rite of passage ushers the children into a new state of responsibility, an active community life, enjoying adult privileges, and adult obligations alike (Glozah & Lawani, 2014; Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). Therefore, there is an urgent need to promote and preserve good cultural practices as long they do not violate children's rights. It is encouraging to note that the Zimbabwean government has integrated the circumcision practice of the Vatsonga into its bigger HIV and AIDS intervention programme. This has ensured that children go through a safe circumcision procedure whilst satisfying the traditional demands of the *Vukhomba* puberty rites of passage.

Maturity as a Marker

Participants highlighted maturity as a marker of childhood, implying that childhood can be determined by gauging one's maturity. In this case, one can be viewed as an adult before he or she reaches the age of majority if they demonstrate maturity in dealing with societal expectations, including the capacity to do chores such as the construction of huts, hunting, ploughing, and making pottery. Childhood is also context-specific based on the existing personal relational status. Thus, a married child is considered to be an adult, doing most of the adult chores and fraternising with other adults. Various scenarios were put forward by the participants.

What you call a child might not be a child in our eyes and what you call an adult may not be an adult in our system. So, they [social workers] need to know the rites of passage and how we perceive issues of childhood. I think that is very important, very important.” (Hlengani)

“Someone not married, and for a girl, they have not yet started their menstrual cycle and for boys, they have not started to experience wet dreams, then you know that they are still a child. Age is not an issue, but we look at maturity ... So, we look at maturity and what one knows to see if one is still a child or an adult. (Xirelele)

Maturity as a marker of childhood is problematic given its subjectivity. Thus, it depends on the adults' subjective perceptions which may not accurately determine the transition from childhood to adulthood. Maturity as a marker of childhood as understood by the Vatsonga culture is not aligned with the definition of the child as described in the CRC, Article 1 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1989) and the ACRWC, Article 2 (African Union, 1990). Both of these documents define a child as a person under the age of 18, whereas child marriages, initiation rites that can be harmful to the child, and child

labour, are condemned in ACWRC, Articles 15 and 27, and the CRC, Article 32. Likewise, the United Nations General Assembly in its 69th session calls for an end to child, early, and forced marriages (UN, 2018). Thus, the use of maturity to mark the transition to childhood just like the use of physiological changes exposes the child to the vile of child marriages which warrant condemnation. These aspects are also highlighted in the literature on child rights and child well-being as indicating different conceptualisations of childhood (*cf.* Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016) and confirm the view of AjaNwachuku (2016) that customary conceptualisations of childhood may differ from the legal definition thereof. Consequently, social workers should educate themselves on the local constructions of childhood to be able to promote the positive aspects of culture which enhance child protection whilst addressing the harmful conceptions that may expose children to abuse and a host of other violations of their rights.

Childhood as Innocence and Irrationality

Furthermore, participants in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe associated the period of childhood with innocence and irrationality. There was concurrence among the participants that children are ‘blank’, irrational, and cannot comprehend instructions. Most striking is the emphasis of the participants that children need adult supervision given their irrational reasoning. Some participants who expressed their opinions on childhood reported the following:

A child knows nothing, they are just blank, and they can do anything even eating millipedes when not monitored by an adult. (Kesani)

A child is someone who is not mature and cannot tell what is wrong or bad. If I send them, they cannot comprehend my instruction. Like this little one you see here; if I send them, what can they bring to me? They will bring nothing because they do not comprehend my instructions. (Tinyiko).

The meanings of child and childhood remain contentious as observed in the verbatim above, an argument equally put forward by Valentine (1996). To this end, childhood is characterised in many ways as a period of dependence, innocence, vulnerability, and needing protection, and that they have to be feared, nurtured, and regulated (Beier, 2015). Many of the participants’ views on childhood resonate with those in literature in which childhood has always been viewed as a period of innocence and irrationality in the historical Western construction of childhood (*cf.* Woodhead, 2009; Beier, 2015; Valentine, 1996). From the perspective of the so-called moralists, children are seen as blank slates that need adults to “moralise” them through education an argument associated with the works of Rousseau (Beier, 2015; Giesinger, 2017). The above views of the participants emphasise the IKS perspective that children should be socialised by adults. Resultantly, children among the Vatsonga communities are raised as subordinate to any adult in their communities. Thus any adult could discipline the child including those to whom they are not biologically related to them. This reflects the collective nature of the Vatsonga people’s worldview that is hinged on the Ubuntu philosophy.

Uncertainties and Conflict Caused by Different Conceptions

The research findings showed conflicting conceptualisations of childhood and childhood responsibilities between indigenous people and social work professionals, as in the views of the indigenous and social work participants.

Children cannot have rights without responsibility, just rights (Laughs), that is killing our children, it is making them lazy. ... those social workers who come here to tell people about child rights, focus on rights, rights, rights, and rights. We never hear them talk of responsibilities as you are telling me here. (Khesane)

... all we hear from them (social workers) when they visit our communities to teach us about child rights ('tifanelo tavana'), they focus on rights and rights alone. So, there is a need by some for you to teach them that there are responsibilities for the child as well, I think that would help. (Hluvuko)

Indeed, there is some confusion among the local people over who is a child and what are their rights but let me hasten to tell you that within Tsonga cultural practices there are a lot of positive cultural practices which enhance the realisation of children's rights. ... So, there is a need to clarify this legal position to the local communities to ensure that they align themselves to the law. (Thomas)

One participant suggested that potential misunderstandings and conflicts that emanate from different perceptions of childhood could be resolved by mutual understanding and respectful collaboration between social workers and local communities.

They (social workers) have their own culture in which they are entitled to practice it, but as people who work with us, it is good for them to know our systems ('nawu') and cultural practices so that there is unity between us and them. ... they must know what we think works on child rights. They should know that we have our traditional 'social workers' embedded in our kinship system and they can utilise that system for the better of the children. (Hleketane)

In this regard, Makhubele (2011) highlights the importance of a respectful attitude by social workers when working with communities whose culture and IKS, and thus their perceptions and norms, have previously been met by degradation and marginalisation.

Implications for Social Work and Child Rights

The current findings have a bearing on social work from many perspectives. The current global definition of social work acknowledges that social work is underpinned by theories that include indigenous knowledge to address life challenges and enhance well-being (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2021). IFSW acknowledges the value of indigenous knowledge departing from the founding position that devalued and discounted indigenous knowledge; valuing contributions to science by indigenous peoples. Whilst formal instruments exist to protect vulnerable groups such as children, there exist indigenous beliefs, sanctions, and practices that protect children. As shown in the findings from this study; there are socially constructed markers that may enhance the protection of children. As such, social workers can tap into indigenous knowledge to address life challenges and enhance the well-being of the people that they work with.

It appears that the Vatsonga views childhood as a period in which children need to be nurtured as well as prepared for adult responsibilities find some balance between “being child” and “becoming child”; a situation that links with the perspective held by Huang (2019:101) that “children are both human becomings and human beings on their way to enter the society created by adults.” Social workers, who work in Afrocentric contexts, must be mindful of and gain knowledge of the Afrocentric worldview and values (Sewpaul, 2016).

Another important lesson that can be gleaned by social workers is that indigenous definitions and markers are not always aligned with formal definitions and rights such as the definition of the child as described in the CRC, Article 1 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1989) and the ACRWC, Article 2 (African Union, 1990). In addition, the study findings point to the notion of universal human rights as a fallacy given the plurality of views on childhood and child rights (Hammersley, 2015). Legal and formal definitions of childhood may differ from indigenous definitions and socially constructed markers. In this regard, social workers need to acknowledge that socially constructed markers such as the child are socially constructed and may differ from society to society. Thus, social work practice in indigenous communities needs to be mindful of the potential incongruence in definitions between socially constructed definitions and those in the CRC as well as those in Eurocentric literature. This will help social workers respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of societies. It is important then for social workers to ensure that whilst acknowledging indigenous knowledge systems in their skills and intervention strategies, they take into account such differences and contexts. This would help them to be on guard to ensure that constructions of childhood with the potential of child rights violations are kept in check whilst promoting those that promote child wellbeing, identity, and sense of belonging.

Interestingly, whilst respecting the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings and the ethnic and cultural diversity of societies, social workers challenge beliefs and actions that may violate the rights of people, including those of children (IFSW 2021). This study found that children may be initiated into adulthood at the age of twelve and considered an adult, doing most of the adult chores and fraternising with other adults. It is, therefore critical for social workers to strive to ensure sustainable intervention strategies and understand that social norms can perpetuate beliefs and actions that may violate the rights of people (Chadambuka & Warriia 2019). Whilst celebrating the inclusion of indigenous knowledge into the knowledge base of social work, social workers must be mindful of potential violations of rights.

Conclusion

Guided by a social constructionist theoretical perspective, the paper has discussed the concept of childhood based on a case study of the Vatsonga people of Southern Africa. We conclude that the notions of childhood are socially constructed. Therefore, child protection social workers should apprise themselves of the local constructions of childhood to develop culturally appropriate interventions. In addition, there is a need to educate communities to change norms and practices that may be violate children’s rights. We further conclude that an Afrocentric view of child rights and childhood should guide child protection intervention on the African continent as opposed to importing Eurocentric notions of childhood wholesale. However, social workers should be mindful of the fact that the legal definition of the child continues to reign supreme over other constructions of childhood, hence the need to make

communities aware of violations of rights that may arise from the differences in the definition of childhood.

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Ethics declarations

Consent for Publication

All the participants consented for their views to be used for further research publications on conditions that their names and identity remain protected. In this article, the identity of participants is concealed in line with the agreement reached with the participants during the data collection stage.

Consent to Participate

The participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study evidenced by signing of the

Ethics Approval

The study was approved by the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee under the reference number GW20170520HS.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data set for which this study is based was submitted to the funding university for storage as per the university protocols.

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