

924 VATSONGA PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Samuel Lisenga Simbine, Liana le Roux

Dr Samuel Lisenga Simbine, Postgraduate student, Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

Dr Liana (MP) le Roux, Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

Samuel LisengaSimbine: smahuntse@gmail.com

Liana le Roux: liana.leroux@up.ac.za

This article is based on the findings of a qualitative study that explored the Vatsonga people's perceptions of children's rights to protection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 community-based participants and 11 child protection social workers who were familiar with the Vatsonga people's cultural heritage. Key informant and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select the community-based participants and availability sampling for selecting the social work participants. The study established that the Vatsonga people recognise the provision, protection and participation rights of children. Child participation is perceived as comprised of childhood responsibilities, not the right to be heard perse. The paper argues that some of the purported violations of child rights in Africa emanate from the universal application of a Eurocentric worldview of children's rights. We conclude that to understand child rights in Africa, African people should be allowed to contribute to the construction of an indigenised and contextualised perspective on child rights.

Keywords: Africa, children, children's rights, social construction; social work, Vatsonga

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Dr Samuel Lisenga Simbine, Postgraduate student, Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This article explores the Vatsonga people's construction of children's protection rights. Children's rights are the human rights of children, hence children's provision, protection and participation rights are inalienable and indivisible entitlements to be enjoyed by every child regardless of race, sex, religion, creed, geopolitical space, or social status (Collins, 2017). Internationally, children's rights are recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) In Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) is -the regional document to contextualise child rights in the continent's richly diverse cultures by the inclusion of uniquely African issues such as harmful cultural practices (African Union, 1990; Kaime, 2007). In addition, the ACRWC came into force as a direct response to perceptions of marginalisation and exclusion of the majority of African states in the drafting of the CRC (Sloth &Boezaart, 2017). Nyarko (2018) elaborates on the inadequacies of the CRC in dealing with the perceived uniquely African problems of child soldiers and some harmful cultural practices, amongst others, but the African cultural heritage led to the adoption of the ACRWC. However, more than 25 years after the adoption of the ACRCW, its effectiveness is still to be determined as there is limited data available on the subject.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is the most celebrated treaty for the protection of children to date. Earlier attempts to bring child rights into the United Nations arena can be traced as far back as 1924. In 1924, soon after the First World War, the League of Nations came up with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, mainly meant to address emerging post-war child protection issues (Barrett, 2017; Mandlate, 2012). This declaration did not have much impact and has been criticised for not being binding on member states and for regarding children as the recipients of charity (Mandlate, 2012). In addition, it was criticised for being 'welfarist' in nature (Barrett, 2017). In 1959, under the auspices of the United Nations, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child came into effect and became known as the Declaration of Geneva (Barrett, 2017). This declaration adopted a rights-based approach but, like the 1924 declaration, was not binding on member states and hence did not receive wide ratification by member states (Barrett, 2017; Mandlate, 2012).

Mulinge (2010:10) describes the CRC as:

the first international human rights treaty to bring together the universal set of standards concerning children in a unique instrument, and the first to present child rights as a legally binding imperative.

Until 2014, a total of 194 countries ratified the CRC, except for the United States of America, Somalia and South Sudan (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In 2015, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child announced South Sudan as the 195th state to ratify the CRC (UNICEF, 2015a) and Somalia as the 196th state to ratify the CRC (UNICEF, 2015b). The advent of the CRC has resulted in greater public awareness of children's rights (Kruger & Spies, 2006). The rights of children have become more pronounced as an area dominating debates on child protection, often propelled by the topics of child labour, harmful cultural practices, education, child marriages, among other issues. In this article child rights are viewed as a social construct; hence the Vatsonga people are accorded space to express their understanding of child rights on issues of provision, protection, participation and education.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There has been a growing perception that child rights are a Western construction imposed on African nations and has led to some concluding that Western constructions of childhood form the foundation of the CRC (Burman, 2008). This perception has resulted in a fear permeating the Global South that child rights as contained in the CRC could easily be used to further agendas and value systems that may be foreign to the child's environment and culture (Tobin, 2011). Children's rights are a social construct, hence their meaning is localised to the context of the claimant of rights (the rights holder) (Mayall, 2000; Moore, 2016). There have been calls that children's rights in Africa should not only be founded on the provisions of the CRC, but must reflect African cultural values, ethos and heritage (Kaime, 2007). According to Kaime (2007), some of the international human rights texts are a mere 'cloning' of statements (in terms of their composition), which has to be resisted when drafting African children's rights legislation. Research and publications by African scholars in the area of children's rights are needed to respond to the calls for the Africanisation of the child rights debates. This article contributes to debates that seek the contextualisation of child rights in Africa by presenting research findings on the perceptions of the Vatsonga people on children's rights in a study that focused on child protection in the Vatsonga socio-cultural context.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Child protection and associated factors such as child rights, child abuse, child neglect and child maltreatment are tied to the politics related to the construction of childhood. Hence, the debate on what constitutes a child's right or child maltreatment entails ascertaining the meaning and the process of constructing the relevant reality by local people. Child welfare policies and practices are therefore discourses showing how people attach meaning to concepts (Reisig & Miller, 2009). Conley (2010) propose that, rather than being an objective reality, child maltreatment is a culturally defined social act whose meaning is constructed on the basis of the values and norms that society holds about children, child development and parenting. North (2018) concurs and posits that child abuse – including emotional, physical and sexual abuse – is a social construct. Thus, the nature of child protection could be understood better when viewed from a social constructionist perspective (D'Cruz, 2004). Bornstein (2013) proposes that one must take into account what is normative in a particular society. This is currently not the case as the CRC sets the child rights nomenclature to be adopted by every society regardless of the heterogeneity of the world's cultures and contexts.

Constructions of child rights and the associated concepts such as neglect, abuse and maltreatment are largely foreign to Sub-Saharan contexts. In a Eurocentric worldview, the responsibility of children's care and protection is the responsibility of parents and immediate family members (the nuclear family), and the role of the broader society in children's care and protection is diminished as society is mistrusted as the vulnerability of the child may be used for selfish financial gain (Ansell, 2016). This Western notion of childhood and maltreatment prevails in Europe and the United States of America as it is compatible with the Eurocentric philosophy of individualism that is powered by neoliberalism and capitalism as opposed to the Afrocentric worldview of collectivism (Ansell, 2010). The Eurocentric philosophy of individualism refers to Europe's set of beliefs, practices and notions linked to the view of an individual as an autonomous being, hence the individual is accorded inalienable rights. Contrary to this philosophy is the Afrocentric worldview of collectivism that refers to African practices, beliefs and notions linked to the view that life and the rights of an individual are meaningless and incomplete without the rights of a group of people to which they belong. Thus, an individual's rights are subordinated to the rights of a group for the common good. Concerning children and their rights, Ndofirepi (2013) notes that in the African cultural context a child is not viewed as an autonomous individual, but as a member of a bigger group (ethnic group, community, or society) guided by the spirit of *ubuntu*.

The CRC has been accused of leading to the globalisation of a Western construction of childhood that is meant to mirror Europe's and the United States' constructions of notions of a child, childhood and child maltreatment, which have been absorbed by child protection social workers through their non-

decolonised education (Kreitzer, 2012). Zastrow (2013), in a similar vein, states that social work ethics and values embrace diversity, including ethnocentric diversity, yet due to their socialisation (social work education and training), social workers struggle to become culturally competent in specific contexts. Zastrow (2013) advises that social workers ought to respect areas of diversity such as the understanding of age, gender, class, colour, culture, ethnicity and disability.

The legacy of colonialism continues to prevail in child protection policy and practice in Africa. This could be summed up by the Malawian case of 2010 in which parliament debated the Child Care, Protection and Justice Bill (Laird, 2016:304).; one of the members of parliament is reported to have stated that:

Malawi is located to the east of Central Africa and not to the east of Europe ... parents are punished for asking their children to feed goats, assist them on tobacco work ...

These comments attributed to a Malawian member of parliament are a testimony to the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa has its own conception and construction of what constitutes the rights of the child, which is contrary to Western views on child abuse, for example. However, Midgley (2017:64) raises the point as to “whether traditional values, beliefs, and practices are always benevolent and invariably enhance social wellbeing.” Midgley (2017) indicates that a strict culture of conformity and traditional ceremonies and practices such as arranged marriages do not support free choice and freedom of expression. In this regard, it is noted that the ACRWC (African Union, 1990) in Article 21 specifically proclaims children’s right to protection against harmful social and cultural practices, including those that affect the welfare, dignity, development and normal growth of the child. Customs and practices that place the child’s life or health at risk, and discrimination against children based on sex or status, as well as child marriages, are highlighted in this regard. However, differences in cultural practices should not be made a scapegoat for other cultures to be imposed on Africa, for example when the yardstick used to adjudicate what constitutes harmful cultural practices is– based on Eurocentric views.

As an example, the implementation of child rights related to the protection of children against child labour in most instances clashes with the African drive to have children realise their provision rights. It has been argued that the application of protection rights such as protection against child labour has the potential of undermining children’s welfare if such rights are universally applied, ignoring the child’s unique context and circumstances (Bourdillon, Levison, Myers & White 2010). Giving the protectionist stance priority over consideration of other rights has been blamed on the default take on rights by the CRC, which frames rights as rules to protect children, ignoring the economic needs of children that sometimes have to be satisfied through some form of child labour (Morrow & Boyden, 2018).

Social constructions based on cultural beliefs and values have been found to determine the beliefs and practices related to the nature of child protection in a specific society. This proposition is supported by the social constructivist theory (Moore, 2016; Schenk, 2019) and by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Louw, Louw & Kail, 2014), which highlight the wide-ranging influence of cultural values on aspects such as child-rearing practices (microsystem), the wider child-rearing environment (mesosystem) and services for the protection of children (exosystem). Consequently, Africa must assert the significance of her cultural heritage as the foundation for the definition of children’s rights on the continent.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore the Vatsonga people’s perceptions of what constitutes children’s protection rights.

Research question

What are the perceptions of children’s protection rights of the Vatsonga people?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and research design

A qualitative research approach located within a constructivist research paradigm was adopted for the study. The Vatsonga ethnic group is considered an understudied group with an inadequately recorded history (Hove, 2012; Levine, 2005; Manganye, 2011). According to Henn, Wenstein and Foard (2008), a qualitative research approach is best suited for studies interested in exploring a phenomenon about which little is known (Babbie, 2013), as was the case with this study. In addition, the research approach was suitable given that the researcher sought to collect verbal data to capture the participants' experiences and the meaning they constructed about the phenomenon under study (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013; Makofane & Shirindi, 2018). The Vatsonga ethnic group was considered a case, hence a case study research design was adopted (Maree, 2016). The design involves exploration and description of the case based on detailed data collection from a person or number of people to "obtain an intimate familiarity with their social worlds and to look for patterns in the research participants' lives, words and actions in the context of the case of a whole" (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:320). Against this background, the case study design was appropriate for the research study as the researcher aimed to gain insight into the social world of the Vatsonga people as influenced by their culture and the views of the social workers as informed by their work experiences and professional knowledge. In particular, an instrumental case study was a relevant research design to enable the researcher to gain insight into a complex issue, namely children's protection rights, by exploring the context and practices of the Vatsonga people to facilitate an understanding of the use of their indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in child protection (Fouché & Schurink, 2011; Nieuwenhuis, 2016). IKS refers to the system of knowledge of specific communities that developed over time, is transmitted orally from one generation to the next, and shows how the people understand their cultural beliefs and practices (Dewah & Mutula, 2014).

Sample and sampling procedures

In line with a constructivist research paradigm, research participants were treated as active partners in knowledge creation, thereby involving them to contribute in semi-structured interviews (De Vos, Strydom, Schulze & Patel, 2011). Key informant and snowball sampling were used to recruit a total of 40 community-based participants regarded as Vatsonga IKS knowledge bearers (Strydom & Delpont, 2011). The first participants were recruited with the assistance of traditional leaders who had knowledge of Vatsonga IKS knowledge bearers in their communities, who in turn referred the researchers to other IKS knowledge bearers. Thus, 20 community-based participants in the Chiredzi district (Zimbabwe) and another 20 in the Chokwe district (Mozambique) were recruited. These 40 Vatsonga community-based participants were considered as Vatsonga IKS custodians. Only people fitting the set criteria classifying them as custodians and knowledge bearers of the Vatsonga IKS were selected. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for one to be selected as a community-based participant (IKS expert) included residency in the Vatsonga communities for at least five years, knowledge of Vatsonga cultural practices and beliefs, and willingness to participate in the study. In addition, 11 social work professionals who were working in the Vatsonga communities in the field of child protection were also selected to participate in the study. However, as there was a likelihood of there being a limited number of social workers in the two districts where the research was conducted, availability sampling was also applied (Bless *et al.*, 2013), meaning that the researcher had to interview all the social workers who were available and who met the following sampling criteria:

- Social workers working with child protection cases;
- Social workers who worked in the Vatsonga communities in the Chokwe and Chiredzi districts and had accrued knowledge of the traditions, culture, and lifestyles that could hinder or promote children's protection rights.

As the number of social workers in the area could not be estimated, a final sample size could not be determined before undertaking the study; however, those who were selected were sufficient to answer

the research problem in line with the dictates of the principle of data saturation, which refers to a scenario whereby interviewing participants no longer yields no new information, but merely a repetition of what the researcher would have heard from the earlier participants.

Data-collection methods and data analysis

Data-collection methods relied predominantly on semi-structured interviews guided by the use of a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions. Creswell (2014) states that the use of semi-structured interview schedules with open-ended questions is beneficial in allowing the participants to express themselves. All the interviews were audio recorded with permission granted by the participants (Greeff, 2011). Data were analysed through thematic analysis, following the different steps in the iterative process in Creswell's (2009) model of data analysis; the steps are: reading and familiarisation with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the research results (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Thus recurring issues were grouped into themes that guided the final writing up of findings.

Ethical considerations

According to Strydom (2011) and Creswell (2014), social researchers should be ethical in their conduct and observe the appropriate ethical principles. As part of ethical conduct, researchers are expected to submit their research proposals for ethical review by the relevant ethics committees (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Strydom, 2011). Accordingly, the authors submitted their proposal to the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria and the study was granted ethical clearance under the reference number GW20170520HS. The following ethical considerations were observed: avoidance of harm, 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.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The core focus of the bigger study was on the role of Vatsonga IKS in child protection. In this paper, we present and discuss four sub-themes that emerged from the research findings that relate to the Vatsonga people's perceptions of children's rights, namely children's rights to basic care, their rights to education, rights against harm and corporal punishment, and views on the right to child participation. These are discussed in the ensuing sections.

Children's provision rights

It was established by the study that the Vatsonga people largely view children's rights as their right to provision as comprised of the rights guaranteeing access to food, shelter, clothes and freedom to play. Basic rights are conceptualised by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as the most fundamental basket of rights such as the right to life and the subsequent rights that make life worth living such as the rights to food, education, health and liberty (OHCHR, 2021). Waterston and Mann (2005) highlight that basic rights linked to children include a special provision for children with disabilities, access to health, access to insurance and social security, access to an adequate standard of living, and access to education enshrined in the CRC Articles 23, 24, 26, 27, and 28 respectively. As explained by the participants below, children's rights for the Vatsonga people relate to the provision of basic care and allowing children the freedom to play.

Clothes, the child has a right to be clothed, well clothed. They should also have food and have respect for their elders. To me, that is my understanding of rights. (Xisiwana)

It includes the right to shelter, freedom, the child should be free to play, they should play with others. Moreso, they should have food. These are important rights among the Vatsonga but nowadays some of us have added education to those rights. (Muhluli)

The right to shelter is another right which was so pronounced among the Vatsonga. There is a distinct hut for boys and another one for girls and their mothers that ensured that children accessed shelter. The right to food is yet another important right, children of the same age ate from the same plate to ensure that no child was left behind. That also fostered bonding and unity among the children, and they grew up together knowing that they were a family. Finally, I would share that the right to play is another right observed by the Vatsonga. During the day the children do their role plays (madzumba) and during the night they played various games among them but whilst they enjoy their rights they should respect their elders. (Xinyambela), (Hlulani)

The above descriptions indicate that the Vatsonga people's perceptions of children's rights largely meet the CRC understanding of provision rights. As such, access to shelter, food, clothes and the right to play are established as basic rights to provision. Children's provision rights are also referred to as children's rights to survival and development, with the focus on meeting the child's basic needs (Conley, 2010). Whilst the Vatsonga have a fair appreciation of children's rights to provision, they equally demand respect from their children in return. Social workers working with the Vatsonga communities should include the aspect of respect as a responsibility of the child, if child rights campaigns are to be successful. Any calls for child rights without incorporation of the child's responsibility to show respect to their elders is likely to face resistance.

Children's right to education

Children's right to education forms part of the category of provision rights. In this study's findings, this right emerged as a stand-alone theme given the prominence of the right related to its violation through cultural beliefs and practices. The participants explained that traditionally and before the rise of the emphasis on formal schooling, the family would be the main educator of the Vatsonga-speaking children. Even with the emphasis on education, young girls' involvement in household chores and young boys' responsibilities in agricultural practices would often be prioritised over formal schooling, as would their attendance of traditional ceremonies. Hence, children would absent themselves from school to herd cattle, work in the home and fields, or attend initiation ceremonies, things which violate the children's right to fully access formal schooling. Thus, when it comes to education, the Vatsonga perceive this right as less important to the household economy than the provision of labour in the fields and herding cattle. The following are some of the views of the participants:

The main education institution in Vatsonga was the family. The child learnt by observing their older siblings, parents, and the community at large. The 'bandla' (men's forum) was also key in teaching the boy child what life is all about. Male circumcision and female initiation are also key education systems of the Vatsonga people. We also used some myths and taboos (zviyila). Women at their place also taught girls. We also used story-telling to teach our children Vatsonga values of generosity, kindness, and humility. (Kazamula)

Nowadays, the important rights of children are going to school. They also have a right to learn their language, to be clothed, and to have a share of the land. Especially the boy child should have the land because you cannot start a family without having a piece of land. (Ingwani)

As Vatsonga people, our life is tied to cattle and goats, but cattle are very central to our lives. Cattle to a Vatsonga family was the real wealth. The more cattle you had, the more wives and children; you were the richest man in the village. ... It was not surprising to see the children of a rich man not attending school looking after goats and cattle, which was their wealth; so, the child was looking after their wealth. (Xinyori)

... but in some instances, if there were ceremonies to honour the ancestors, some of these children ... will be at the centre of the ceremony. They may even end up being absent from school if the ceremony coincides with schooling, so that is another setback though has its advantages. (Vusiwana)

As indicated in the comments above, children's responsibilities for working in the fields and their participation in cultural practices were often prioritised above attending formal schooling. Several participants shared that children around 10 years of age accompany the adults to the fields at dawn and then bath and go to school, which could impact on the child's concentration at school. To the Vatsonga people, food security is a primary concern before education and other child rights. The social work participants confirmed that many Vatsonga-speaking children consequently record low school attendance during the cropping season as their parents prioritise food security over the child's educational interests.

During cropping season, it becomes a challenge because some parents choose to have their children go to the fields rather than going to school. I am sure if you verify with the Department of Education you are likely to receive shocking figures of low attendance during a cropping season. (Thompson)

Children are woken up at dawn to go to the fields; after the fields then they proceed to go to herd cattle or to do other household chores. If it is school days then they go to school, they get to school tired, hence their concentration is compromised. (Trust)

They value education but when there are pressing household tasks to be performed, it is normal for them to have a child absent themselves from school so that they perform household tasks. (Thomas)

As it stands, if the Vatsonga's agricultural and other livelihoods activities are not handled properly, it would expose children to harmful practices such as being absent from school during the peak cropping season. These practices, if unchecked, threaten the fulfilment of children's right to access education as guaranteed in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) Article 28 as well as in the ACRWC's Article 11 (African Union, 1990). In addition, the CRC stipulates in Article 32 that children should not perform any work that can interfere with their education (United Nations, 1989). The above findings demonstrate how a universal interpretation of children's rights can be problematic. The right to education is viewed as sacrosanct in Western perspectives, whilst the Vatsonga view such a right as secondary to the family's economic rights, which when realised give impetus to the realisation of other children's rights such as education. This situation could be a consequence of the 'commoditisation' of rights, which result in the fees and other costs which families in Africa pay for their children to access education. Therefore, social work intervention should be sensitive to the socio-economic context and aim to lift families out of poverty rather than merely seeking to enforce the observance of children's rights by poor families whose violations of rights may be linked to their poverty.

Children's right to protection against harm and the use of corporal punishment

The research findings showed that the use of corporal punishment among the Vatsonga people to achieve socialisation goals is still widely practised as a way to discipline children to behave according to local social norms. Thus, the Vatsonga do not perceive the use of corporal punishment as harmful to the child, but view it as punishing deviance from the norms and setting cultural standards. Some participants expressed the following views:

The parenting practices entrenched in the Vatsonga IKS seem to be the same in Mozambique and here, the issue of corporal punishment of children is condoned in Xitsonga culture. Children [in Zimbabwe], if they do what an adult thinks is wrong, they get beaten. (Xirelele)

If they are naughty, they are rebuked and corrected, even using a whip. That is not abuse, it is child discipline. So that is acceptable in our culture to discipline a child. (Vitanani)

In terms of beating the child amongst the Vatsonga, that is permissible but it was regulated, for example, you were not supposed to hit the child in the presence of their grandparents. If you did so, that was an abomination; you were supposed to pay the grandparents under the 'kuriha' system. (Mulwayini)

When it comes to corporal punishment, it was permissible, but it was done in a way that did not injure the child but just as a way to instil discipline in the child. If the child runs away for safety at their grandparents, who normally are not located far from where the child would be –because in Xitsonga we settle just outside our father’s homestead – so if the child dashes to the grandparents’ place you were supposed to spare them. (Talani)

Most of the participants from the traditional community did not view corporal punishment as abuse, because it was an accepted form of discipline in Vatsonga culture. The Vatsonga, however, had systems in place to regulate the use of corporal punishment, such as grandparents having a role to intervene and keep corporal punishment in check. The use of corporal punishment was also established in another study as linked to the family’s culture (Lansford, 2010). The CRC, Articles 37 and 39, stipulates that no child should be subjected to degrading treatment or punishment (United Nations, 1989). The ACRWC (African Union, 1990), Article 11(5), stipulates the following in this regard:

State Parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is subjected to school or parental discipline shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the child and in conformity with the present Charter.

Differences in conceptions on specific social issues or phenomena in different contexts can be explained by social constructionism (Moore, 2016; Schenk, 2019). The use of physical punishment as a discipline strategy is a much-debated issue, with the dilemma that in some cultures such as that of the Vatsonga, physical punishment is regarded as an accepted way of imposing discipline, whereas in others it is regarded as abusive, as established in other studies (Bornstein, 2013; Robinson, 2007). In another study by Robinson, it was established that parents in collectivist societies such as those found in most parts of Africa tend to rely more on physical punishment as a method to discipline children than parents in Western contexts do (Robinson, 2007). Collectivist societies subscribe to the notion that an individual does not exist as an island, but that they owe their existence to the society that they belong to. In addition, an individual is viewed as incapable of being autonomous, since their existence is dependent on the support and existence of others; hence they cannot have individual rights divorced from the rights of a collective group. The right of the child to protection against harm and physical punishment could thus be viewed as a threat to Vatsonga’s societal goal of raising a disciplined *mutsonga* future adult, and as such the use of corporal punishment for the collective good is condoned.

Children’s right to participation

Vatsonga views on the child’s right to participation areas associated with childhood responsibilities of doing household chores such as working the fields, cooking, and fetching firewood, among others. In the study the participants referred to children learning through observing and doing, described by various participants as an “apprenticeship” that prepares children for adult life. As such, Vatsonga children are exposed to various socio-economic activities as a form of training. This perspective shows a departure from the dominant view of children’s participation rights as ‘voice-based’, that is participation that is viewed in terms of children being given space to express their views as guaranteed by the CRC, Article 12. The Vatsonga view participation as ‘action-based’, that is, children have to participate in the socio-economic activities of their households and communities for them to learn lifelong skills. In pursuing this value, children were required to take on allocated responsibilities as commented on by participants as follows:

Children in a Vatsonga village are not just bystanders in the household economic activities; they have roles in the household. They do chores such as drawing water, fetching firewood, cooking, working the fields, and working for money for neighbours, among other tasks. This is more or less the same in Mozambique just as it is here [Zimbabwe]. (Mikensio)

We grill our children to work hard so that tomorrow they are self-reliant and look after their children. A boy child is exposed to hunting, cattle herding, ploughing, and construction of huts,

among other masculine chores. The girl child in Vatsonga is not left behind; they have their chores as well including working in the field, sweeping, cooking, and childcare. They were socialised to ensure that when married, they were in a position to support their children and husbands. (Tiyani)

The boys ... do not work long hours like adults, but they just work a little as part of socialisation. But they should play. Boys would get their chance to do their games whilst herding cattle whilst girls as they go about their chores, they would also have time to do their games. (Vulani)

We have our child-rearing practices of which some of you may not approve but that is the way we were raised. ... the older siblings would also ensure the safety of the younger children. It is a cycle because the adults would socialise their children, then the children when older they would also socialise the younger children as they would take them to do their errands like fetching water, fetching firewood, playing games and it was the duty of the older children to care for younger children whilst the adults would be away working maybe in the fields or elsewhere. (Miyeto)

For this one, we can pass a hundred percent as Vatsonga people because we ensure that our children do not just work without play. After working, the boys would go hunting and herding cattle, and that was also done for fun. There were many games they played whilst herding cattle, so it was time to play as well. (Miyelani)

These findings portray the role that Vatsonga-speaking children play in the household and the socio-economic activities of the family. Children are responsible for various chores which they are given to socialise them into being responsible citizens. In other contexts, the active participation of children in income-generating activities could be viewed as child labour, as was also mentioned by the above participants. The concepts of child responsibility and child labour are often contentious in different socio-cultural contexts (Laird, 2016). Child labour is regarded as one of the key challenges to child wellbeing and child protection on the African continent; (Lachman & Poblete, 2002; Nhenga, 2008). However, as proposed by social constructivist theorists, perceptions of social phenomena are based on social constructions and can vary in different contexts (Moore, 2016; Schenk, 2019). In Africa, children's responsibilities are regarded as a form of child participation and are therefore not regarded as a social problem (Nhenga, 2008; Wyness, 2013). Through a Eurocentric lens, the participation of children in basic economic activities is viewed as harmful to the child (Laird, 2016). This perception creates a challenge to most African people, who do not see children's participation in economic activities such as assisting adults in working in the fields, as harmful to them (Nhenga, 2008). The research findings are reflected in literature that shows that African children are socialised to assume responsibilities from a young age, which include their participation in running errands for and doing tasks in the family (Louw et al., 2014; Nwoye, 2017). The Vatsonga people view the right to participation as associated with involvement in the household economy, contrary to the CRC, which emphasises 'voice-based' participation.

IMPLICATION FOR CHILD RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK

The findings of this study have a bearing on both the policy and the practice of child rights and for social work in general. From a developmental perspective to social work, it is critical to decolonise and Africanise child rights debates. One way to do this is to adopt a social constructivist approach by allowing local communities to contribute to the child rights debate. This paper highlighted the views of the Vatsonga on child rights, especially those related to their provision, participation and protection against harm. Whilst the Vatsonga recognise the above rights, they do so on their terms, which in some instances converge with the CRC dictates whilst diverging in others.

First, the findings of the study indicated that the Vatsonga people view children as entitled to the right to have all their basic needs met (provision rights) and that these are the most important rights for the children. The perception that provision rights are elevated by communities above the protection and participation rights was established in other studies in Africa that investigated the realisation of children's rights (Redmond, 2008). This perception implies that Vatsonga communities do not view child rights as indivisible, as is the dominant view of child rights enshrined in the CRC and advanced by authors such as Kaime (2005) and Collins (2017). In this case, rights such as food security are so important to the Vatsonga that the right to access education is sacrificed in favour of the attainment of food security, as indicated by the drop in school attendance during cropping seasons. In the spirit of decolonisation and the developmental agenda, social work should seek to understand and contextualise the local community's understanding of child rights before blindly labelling communities, families and parents as violators of rights. In addition, African social work must communicate the contrary view held by communities on rights as divisible to influence child rights debates. The notions of rights as divisible held by the Vatsonga would mean that social work needs more research to be able to refute or affirm the current dominant CRC view of rights as indivisible. Information gained by research could provide new insights on the Western interpretation of child rights by offering an alternative African worldview.

Second, the paper has established that children's right to education is recognised by the Vatsonga as a stand-alone right from the rest of the provision rights. The right to education is viewed as including both informal (socialisation at home) and formal (modern schooling) education. Whereas the Vatsonga people acknowledge the child's right to education, they view it as subordinate to the economic rights of the family. Child rights experts and social workers working with agrarian indigenous communities should be watchful to ensure that children's right to education is not infringed. Equally important is the need for social workers not to prohibit the practice of involving children in household and agrarian activities as that will deprive poor households of the much-needed family labour. Social workers should consult with and encourage local communities to involve children in age-appropriate household and agrarian chores during weekends and school holidays to guard against infringement of their right to education. This approach allows for the social worker to strike a balance between the promotion of local beneficial cultural practices without condoning those that violate the children's rights. Such an approach to child rights would ensure that social workers intervene from a strengths-based perspective by taking into consideration local culture, practices and local knowledge as opposed to imposing foreign knowledge and practices -without consideration of the specific context.

Third, the views of the Vatsonga on the right to protection against harm and the use of corporal punishment were established as one of the key findings of the study. The Vatsonga do not view the use of corporal punishment as a violation of children's rights. The use of physical punishment as a discipline strategy is a contested issue, with the dilemma that in some cultures physical punishment is regarded as an accepted way of discipline, whereas in others it is regarded as abusive (Bornstein, 2013). The use of corporal punishment of children cannot be condoned; however, the study's findings imply the need for social workers to engage in reflective discussions with the communities they serve. An authoritarian social work approach backed by modern laws that are characterised by legal action against parents who perpetrate corporal punishment will not eliminate the problem. From a developmental perspective, social workers should seek the reasons behind the widespread use of corporal punishment. One such reason that stands out in this study is the cultural norms that condone corporal punishment as a socialisation strategy. In Africa, another reason may be poverty, which does not allow African parents to utilise alternative methods of discipline such as withdrawal of benefits. Poor parents have no resources to adopt the 'carrot-and-stick approach' whereby a child is given good things to reinforce good behaviour and the same things are withheld to punish unbecoming behaviour.

Fourth, the findings established that the Vatsonga recognise children's right to participation; however, their views of what constitutes the right differs from the dominant view of participation as a right to be heard. Their understanding of the right to participation is tied to childhood responsibilities such as

working the fields and fetching water, among other tasks. Childhood responsibilities were flagged as a way of raising responsible citizens. The active participation of children in household and income-generating activities could in other contexts be viewed as child labour, as was alluded to in the right to education above. The concepts of child responsibility and child labour are often contentious issues in different socio-cultural contexts (Laird, 2016). In Africa, children's responsibilities are regarded as a form of child participation and are therefore not regarded as a social problem (Nhenga, 2008; Wyness, 2013). Debates on the subject of child participation should be opened up and the CRC should be reformed to broaden the concept of participation to include childhood responsibilities as espoused in the ACRWC in Article 31. We advance the view that childhood responsibilities in Africa are an aspect related to the way to raise an African child. In addition, childhood responsibilities are a way of introducing the child to the household economy, hence preparing them fully for their adult life. However, caution must be taken to ensure that childhood responsibilities do not infringe on other child rights such as the right to education, health and protection from harm, including protection against hard labour.

CONCLUSION

The paper has revealed that the Vatsonga people's perceptions of child rights sometimes converge with those of the CRC as well as the ACRWC and diverge on other aspects. The dominant Vatsonga view is that children are entitled to access education (formal and informal) and have all their basic needs met. Thus, the Vatsonga's perception of rights largely revolves around provision rights, while corporal punishment and childhood responsibilities that impact on school attendance are condoned. Childhood responsibilities in the view of the Vatsonga are a part of raising socially responsible adults who will have the ability to fend for their families. However, this may be viewed as child labour by outsiders, as the narrative of basic provision rights such as food security could be viewed as being at odds with children's right to education. We conclude that African countries should consider reviewing their child rights, child protection policies and the associated legal frameworks with a view to incorporating their culture, traditions, indigenous knowledge and religion in a more contextually relevant manner.

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