

Indigenous mentoring and monitoring system amongst Vatsonga speaking people towards child protection

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ABSTRACT

Despite most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa being signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, many children in the region experience conditions that infringe on their right to protection. It appears that the Southern African region traditionally had intact child protection systems, which has since become extinct or is on the verge of extinction. This article is based on a qualitative study that investigated the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge to the protection of children, based on the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) of the Vatsonga people of Southern Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 participants drawn from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The findings revealed several IKS that could contribute to the mentoring and protection of children. We conclude that the use of IKS could complement formal child protection services in indigenous communities hence the need to promote its revival.

Keywords: child protection; indigenous knowledge; indigenous knowledge systems; IKS; culture

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Introduction

The child protection system in Sub-Saharan Africa is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (Save the Children, 2013:2). Signatory countries to the CRC (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR], 1989) and the ACRWC (African Union, 1990) agree to put measures in place to uphold children's rights. The reality of many children in Sub-Saharan Africa is, however, marked by adverse conditions that infringe on their well-being and their rights, including their right to protection. These conditions include, amongst others, extreme poverty, social inequality, armed conflict, displacement, violence, HIV and AIDS, and harmful cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation and child labour (Save the Children, 2013:2; Mulinge, 2010:11; Watkins & Quatri, 2016:7, 22, 23; UNICEF, 2014:17). Adverse conditions have a profound impact on children's well-being and their rights to nutrition, shelter, health, education, care, and play, amongst others, and increase their vulnerability for abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, human trafficking, and child labour (Mulinge, 2010:12). Therefore, the rights of children to protection and other essential services are intrinsically intertwined and compounded by the psychosocial and economic conditions prevailing in society.

Children's right to protection is one of the three categories of child rights, namely provision, protection, and participation rights (Staller, 2008 in Conley, 2010:41). This article focuses on children's right to protection; however, with the recognition that child's rights are indivisible and must be approached from an ecological perspective (Collins, 2017:33). The goal of child protection is to “promote, safeguard and fulfil the right of children to protection from abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect ... [to] live in a supportive and caring environment that promotes

their development and the realization of their rights” (Child Frontiers, 2012:3). In addition, child protection services aim to protect children who are at risk of maltreatment (Kirst-Ashman, 2013:286), are provided by the child protection social service workforce by role players that include “providers and actors, paid and unpaid, both informal and traditional such as family and kinship networks, community volunteers as well as formal, employed professional and paraprofessional workers” (Davis & McCaffery, 2012:8). Therefore child protection refers to a continuum of services, laws, policies, programmes and interventions designed to prevent or respond to child rights violations. In addition, child rights are indivisible therefore child protection efforts would include both a protection approach and a welfare approach where material resources such as school fees subsidies, uniforms and stationery are provided to needy children.

Generally, children's right to protection is hampered by risks in the family environment, in the socio-economic and political contexts, and/or risks due to natural or man-made emergencies, thereby requiring a holistic rather than a single-issue approach (UNICEF, 2010:5). Socio-economic and political barriers continue to undermine the capacity of many African countries to guarantee children's rights (Mulinge, 2010:11). In Sub-Saharan Africa, societal problems such as widespread poverty, unemployment, HIV and AIDS, and an increase in the numbers of orphans due to the AIDS pandemic, deplete of the resources of families and communities to care for children (Luwangula, Twikirize, Twesigye & Kitimbo, 2019:136; Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016:39-4). However, some accusations levelled against African states and society on violations of child rights are based on a misunderstanding of African values, ethos, norms and worldview. For instance, a child who participate in the household economy of their family in traditional Africa is seen as going through mentoring and preparation for adult life whereas Eurocentric child

rights activists may view this as child labour hence a violation of child rights.

A lack of social support for at-risk families increases the chances of child maltreatment (Conley, 2010:44). Due to globalisation, families too have evolved and some of these at-risk families too single-parent families, child-headed families, amongst others and social support from significant others seems to be lacking. Families are individualised rather than gregarious just like in the past. Despite significant progress, the welfare and social services sector in Sub-Saharan Africa is ill-equipped to deal with the protection of children because of a lack of resources and capacity as well as a lack of collaboration between formal and informal service delivery systems (Davis & MacCaffery, 2012:32). Moreover, it is believed that the implementation of a Western model of child protection in developing countries “fails to address problems of poverty, stress, and social isolation at the root of child maltreatment” and is “ineffective in dealing with social problems in societies marked by poverty and deprivation” (Conley, 2010:39). The adoption of Western models is linked to colonisation hence the continued wholesale use of these foreign models is a sign that child protection conceptualisation remains trapped in its colonial past. Whereas, some of the practices from the West are beneficial, there is a need to adapt them to African realities as opposed to wholesale importation.

Another factor that is seen as affecting child protection services in different contexts is that of different constructions of social phenomena. Social constructionism explains that people construct their realities through their relationships and interactions within their local cultural and social contexts (Schenk, 2019:71). Understandings of social problems are socially constructed, making them open to differences in interpretation in different contexts (Hepworth, Rooney,

Drewberry Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2017:253). Thus, child maltreatment is not an objective reality, but “a social construction that is culturally defined and shaped by prevailing values and norms about children, child development, and parenting” (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam, 1997 in Conley, 2010:32). Different constructions of child maltreatment are evident in debates on some cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa that are contentious issues in terms of child rights and child protection, for example child marriages, child labour, gender discrimination, female circumcision, virginity testing, and female genital mutilation(*cf.* Kaime, 2005:229-230; Katiuzhinsky & Okech, 2014:81; Maluleke, 2012:1). Therefore, harmful cultural practices have to be discontinued; however, social workers should gravitate towards the promotion of good cultural practices whilst encouraging change in harmful cultural practices. This is opposed to blind and wholesale blame of African culture as harmful to children yet the same culture has raised generations in the past who have grown up to be responsible citizens.

African scholars, however, ascribe the deterioration in the protection of children in Sub-Saharan Africa to acculturation, which led to the marginalisation of African indigenous knowledge and traditions. Acculturation due to factors such as urbanisation, industrialisation, increased mobilisation, exposure to media content, colonialism, and Westernisation, resulted in foreign cultural characteristics being integrated into the local culture (Bornstein, 2013:260; Magezi, 2018:2; Maluleke, 2012:3). In indigenous African communities, the core African philosophy of *ubuntu* places a duty on all members of the extended family and community to ensure the well-being of every child, as reflected in the African saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child (Mafumbate & Mehabo, 2016:44; Mupedziswa, Rankopo&Mwansa, 2019:25, 27). In these contexts, the extended family and wider community served as effective informal social networks to care for orphans and vulnerable children (Kreitzer,

2019:40; Luwangula, Twikirize, Twesigye & Kitimbo, 2019:136; Mupedziswa et al., 2019:26). Children at risk and children who needed care outside of the family system were thus rare phenomena in traditional African communities (Dinah, 2018:236; Luwangula et al., 2019:136). African societies therefore, had effective measures for the protection of children, well before colonisation (Mushunje, 2006:16). It is high time we call for the revival of the African traditional measures and practices that was beneficial to the growth and wellbeing of children. This dovetails with the recent calls to decolonise African social work curriculum and practice to ensure implementation of home-grown remedies and models.

Culture plays a significant role in the protection of children. As described by Gough and Lynch (2002:341), “[c]ulture is perhaps the most basic issue for child abuse and child protection. It is the context in which children live and is also something to which they contribute. It is the backdrop against which all circumstances and events affecting children occur. It provides the basis for both our definitions of abuse and neglect and the responses we have developed to protect children and to prevent abusive acts from occurring and recurring.” The strong influence of culture on children's environment can be explained through the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Henderson & Thompson, 2016:46). Culture, the laws, customs and resources of the community, forms part of the outermost level in the environment, the macrosystem. The macrosystem influences all inner environmental levels, thus the microsystem (the child's immediate surroundings such as the home, school, church), the mesosystem (the connections between the child's immediate systems) as well as the exosystem (the social settings with which the child has no direct contact, but still have a significant on the child's life, for example health policies or unemployment).

Against this background, this article reports on a study that was

conducted to explore the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) as a body of knowledge of a specific cultural group, to the protection of children. Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney & Strom-Gottfried (2017:434) recommend the mobilisation of resources in the natural ecological structures of communities, for example kinship care, informal networks and natural support systems, in contexts with limited resources. The study focused on the IKS of the VaTsonga people, one of the indigenous groups in Southern Africa. In recent times, there has been a renewed interest in indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) due to the increasing significance of indigenous knowledge and IKS in sustainable development in Africa and the developing world (Ossai, 2010:2). Therefore, this article contributes to an ongoing debate on the utilisation of indigenous knowledge and local cultural practices in the field of child protection.

Indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS): An overview

Indigenous knowledge, also called local or traditional knowledge, refers to the knowledge that develops through a group's history, beliefs, observations, experiences. It is based on their cultural beliefs and traditions, informs their way of life, and is a tacit knowledge that is transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Indigenous knowledge is thus restricted to a particular community and geographical area and differs among ethnic groups, regions, and generations, as opposed to Western knowledge that has become universal (Dewes, 1993 in Ossai, 2010:2; Dewah & Mutula, 2014:215; Dondolo, 2005:115). The characterisation of IKS as restricted to a local community is problematic as it perpetuates the status quo that Western knowledge is universal and indigenous knowledge is local. It is our submission that with increased research, publication and integration of IKS in national laws, programmes and education curriculum, IKS will equally be universal not localised as is the

currently dominant view on IKS.

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) contain the body of indigenous knowledge of a specific group of people and are expressed in their cultural values, beliefs, rituals; their spirituality, cosmology, traditional medicine and health care; and in their traditional governance and community laws. In addition, IKS manifest in the local languages, education, agriculture, natural resource management, and in the stories, songs, proverbs, folklore, dances, and traditional games of the local people (Dewah & Mutula, 2014:217; Dondolo, 2005:111; Ossai, 2010:3-5, 7). IKS has been rigorously tested through the group's history, apply to all aspects of their day-to-day lives, and contains strategies for the group's survival and practical development issues (Dewah & Mutula, 2014:215; Nabudere, 2006 in Teffo, 2013:189; Ossai, 2010:2). IKS is not systematically documented but is preserved by expert knowledge keepers, who are elders in the community who transfer it from one generation to the next through shared practice and storytelling; a responsibility captured in the African saying: "when a knowledgeable old person dies, a whole library disappears" (Ossai, 2010:7). There is a need to avert the impending extinction of African IKS through research and documentation which will preserve them for posterity.

In essence, IKS is embedded in the local culture, thus in the norms, values, practices, the symbolic representations about life and the valued competencies of a group (Bornstein, 2013:259) and contain values about proper behaviour, or the "should and should not" of life (Kanu, 2010 in Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016:31). Culture determines how a specific group constructs their world and, as such, African cultures will shape African people's worldview (Asante, 1987, Barker, 1999 in Thabede, 2008:234). Indigenous knowledge and IKS are based on culture and are socially constructed and will thus inform a specific group's worldview (Dondolo, 2005:110).

The African people adopt a collectivist rather than an individualist identity, as depicted in the proverb 'a person is a person through another person' that portrays the African assumption about personhood (Nwoye, 2017:44). The collectivist worldview is based on the African philosophy *ubuntu* that promotes values in support of “community, solidarity, caring and sharing” (Mkabela, 2014:284-285). The principles underlying *ubuntu* provide a moral guide for all people by promoting values such as empathy, generosity, cooperation, humanity, respect, and a moral obligation to support and care for one another; thereby placing an obligation on the community to act as guardian to its members (Dinah, 2018:238; Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016:29-30; Mupedziswa et al., 2019:22; Nwoye, 2017:38, 46-48; Thabede, 2008:233). *Ubuntu* is furthermore evident in the emphasis placed on the extended family, in which all members of the extended family would care for vulnerable family members (Dinah, 2018:239; Mupedziswa et al., 2019:22; Nwoye, 2017:49). *Ubuntu* has to be promoted by African scholars as one of the social work theories and guiding philosophies of the profession in the quest to fully Africanise social work and child protection practice in Africa.

An overview of the Vatsonga people

The Vatsonga people (the group relevant to the study) are one of the ethnic groups in Southern Africa and consist of a group of clans with a specific cultural identity. The Vatsonga mainly live in the Southern African countries of South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland (Joyce, 2010:87-88; Maluleke, 2018:3). Their Afrocentric worldview is reflected in their customs, beliefs and practices such as their belief in a Supreme Being and the spirits of the ancestors, indigenous rituals, traditional healing practices, values of respect and togetherness, and their unique folklore such as songs, dance, and storytelling (Chabalala & Allen, 2004:66,69; Joyce, 2010:87-88; Maluleke,

2018:3; Thabede, 2008:233).The Vatsonga are traditionally agriculturists who cultivate grains and keep livestock, of which cattle are a sign of wealth (Chabalala & Allen, 2004:68;Maluleke, 2018:6, 55). Their culture and IKS have sustained over time and are still relevant in the rural areas as well as among Vatsonga-speaking people who follow a modern lifestyle (Joyce, 2009:11; Maluleke, 2018:3-4, 6). The fact that the Vatsonga culture has remained largely intact is the reason why this article focuses on them.

Methodology

Qualitative research, as an approach is best suited for exploring people's understanding of their beliefs and values, culture, and experiences (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017:44). The approach was followed to explore aspects of the Vatsonga IKS that could contribute to the protection of children. A case study research design guided the study. Forty (40) participants were recruited from a population of traditional leaders, headmen and elders who were acknowledged bearers of Vatsonga IKS in line with the dictates of other authorities in the use of key informant sampling such as Strydom & Delport, 2011. The participants were from two rural areas, one in Zimbabwe and another in Mozambique, which were purposively selected due to the high concentration of Vatsonga-speaking people in these areas. The first participants were approached with the help of the community leaders in the two areas as suggested by (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018:37) who averred that community gate keepers could be used as focal persons in the recruitment of participants. Other participants were recruited through snowball sampling, where each participant identified others who complied with the sampling criteria and expressed their willingness to participate in the study (Babbie, 2013:129). Twenty participants were recruited in each area which then added up to 40 participants as already highlighted. Most of the participants (18) were between 70 and 85 years of age; 11 were between 60 and 69 years old; 10 were between the ages of 40 and

59 years; and one participant was between the ages of 35 and 40 years.

The sample size was sufficient for data saturation to be achieved (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013:179). Thematic data analysis was implemented and involved organising the data, obtaining a thorough understanding of the data by reading and rereading the transcripts and writing memos, coding the data, and presenting the data in themes and sub-themes (Bless et al., 2013:346; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:109-121). Measures taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings included a detailed description of the research methods, the use of reflexivity and peer debriefing and an accurate and unbiased presentation of the research findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:125). We are aware that even though the Vatsonga people adopt an Afrocentric worldview, the findings of the study cannot be generalised to all ethnic groups in Southern Africa. The study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Ethical considerations observed included voluntary participation, informed consent, avoidance of harm, beneficence, privacy and confidentiality, and no deception, and were stipulated in the written letters of informed consent.

Research findings

The study sought to investigate the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge to the protection of children based on a Vatsonga case study. Data analysis yielded findings pointing that IKS was still relevant in the lives of the Vatsonga people. The findings revealed that the Vatsonga IKS had elements that could contribute to the protection of children in their local communities. Some of the subthemes that emerged include Vatsonga children are being respected and valued, indigenous mentoring systems enhancing child protection, the extended family providing a safety net for children, and controversial indigenous practices in the child protection field. With aid of participants' verbatim and

integration of findings from the literature review we discuss these three subthemes as follows:

Vatsonga children are respected and valued

The participants emphasised the value that the Vatsonga people place on children. Children are viewed as solidifying relationships in families and communities and, are regarded as ancestors incarnate. The value placed on children ensured child well-being in their communities. This was reported by some of the participants who said:

“Vatsonga children are respected and valued ... because they are the future of every family and they are respected because they carry the name of our ancestors.”
(Participant35)

“IKS plays a big role in protecting our children. ... being incarnated ancestors protected them from any potential harm because perpetrators feared that by harming such a child one was harming the ancestors and if they dared doing so, they would face serious consequences from the ancestors.” (Participant 8)

“So, abuse of children ... was limited because people feared reprisals from the ancestors.” (Participant 37)

It can therefore be concluded that the Vatsonga's reverence of ancestors got a trickling down effect to the protection of children. The Vatsonga transfer their respect and value of the ancestors to their children whom they consider as ancestors incarnate. As a result a child who bore the name of an ancestor will not be ill-treated for the fear of potential retribution from the Vatsonga spiritual world. In addition, the findings show that children were regarded as the posterity of every community hence it is the perpetuity of the society. Overall, the value placed on children ensured that the physical and emotional needs of children were met. In return, children were supposed to show respect to their elders at all times. The respect expected to be shown to elders by

children is the common concept underpinning the concept of *ubuntu* (Mafumbate & Magano, 2016:29-30; Mkabela, 2014:284; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013:85). The Vatsonga views of children as ancestors incarnate as also shared by the Akan people of Ghana as espoused by Boakye-Boaten (2010:105-106).

Indigenous mentoring systems enhance child protection

The findings revealed that the Vatsonga people have a robust child mentoring system in which aunts and uncles provided guidance and support to girls and boys respectively. This mentoring system included the *kulaya* system and initiation practices such as the *khomba* initiation rites of passage for both boys and girls. The initiation practice was established as a key mentoring system used by the Vatsonga people to prepare and graduate children from puberty to adulthood. The participants highlighted the following views:

“The 'kulaya' system where our children grew up receiving mentorship and advice on issues of life ... ensured that issues pertinent to child safety were discussed and children were warned of such vices and dangers.” (Participant 34)

“Our culture has in place a system for morally grounding our children and helping them grow into responsible adults. We have the 'kulaya' system which allows aunts and uncles to give advice and mentor children. They inculcate good behaviour in our children ... that is very important for us as a people in this community.” (Participant 9)

“A Mutsonga child goes through the 'Khomba' system ... The boys went through their ceremony (ngoma) and the girls went through their own (tikhombata vavasati). These puberty rites ceremonies equipped both girls and boys with life-long skills as well as sex and sexuality issues of the Vatsonga people.” (Participant 16)

“Children in Tsonga culture were well protected. The 'Khomba' system instilled values of ubuntu and it was unheard of to have sexual abuse of children. If that happened, the consequences were dire.” (Participant 18)

Through the mentoring system, children would receive support and advice that would help them to grow up as responsible adults, but also receive information that could promote their safety and protection. The strong influence of *VuKhomba* system on the norms of acceptable conduct for Vatsonga men and women, served as a protective measure for all children. These traditional methods of socialisation are commonly used in traditional African societies and are part of the African IKS (Bogopa, 2012:245; Mapara, 2009:140; Ossai, 2010:4). The research findings on the *kulaya* and *khomba* practices are evidence that the extended family and the community at large play a central role in the upbringing of Xitsonga-speaking children just as it may be the situation to other collectivist ethnic groups as averred by Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006:483; Ndlovu & Hove, 2015:102). It further provides evidence of the value of informal social support networks that are still in existence in most African societies, and that can serve as a safety net for children (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013:85, 89).

The extended family and communal care as a safety net and monitoring system

The findings revealed unique childcare practices of the Vatsonga, which entail collective child-rearing that involve the members of the extended family, as a safety net for children. In this way, it was ensured that all children received good care, even in instances where the immediate family could not provide it. According to the Vatsonga culture children belong to the entire extended family and the entire community not to the biological family alone as may be the case with most Western-oriented societies. This ensured that the community keeps an eye on every child hence would not

naturally harm somebody else's child as that amounted to harming their child. Many participants praised the merits of kinship care and communal responsibility, arguing that even when misfortune strike, the child was never desolate. As such some of the participants had this to say:

“In our culture, a child has many parents who can be categorised into the biological and social parents. ... The mother's siblings (the sisters) ... play all the motherly roles to the child. Likewise, the father's brothers are also the child's fathers and they reciprocate in playing the fatherly roles.” (Participant 29)

“Kinship care ensured that children at all times have a fallback safety net system. When the family in a way could not care for the child, the extended family could just get in there and provide all the needs of the child without any difficulty.” (Participant 12)

“So, children in this community are not exposed to the harsh conditions of the city children who end up on the streets.”(Participant 26)

The findings evidenced by the verbatim above, indicate that vulnerable children would receive care from people already known to them, maintaining a sense of belonging to family and community. No distinction would be made in the treatment of these children and the family's biological children. In addition to the members of the extended family as a safety net, members of the entire community were also expected to ensure the well-being and safety of every child in the community. The concept of communal care and kinship care described by some of the participants dovetails with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* provides the moral guide that fosters values of mutual support and caring for one another as an ethos to become a complete human being (Mafumbate & Magano, 2016:29-30;

Mkabela, 2014:284-285). *Ubuntu* is described as a collectivist worldview by Mkabela (2014:285). This worldview is characteristic of traditional African societies that promote values of solidarity, communal sharing and mutual support (Magano, 2018:23; Makhubele, 2008:43; Nwoye, 2017: 57; Mupedziswa et al., 2019: 25).

Conclusion and implications to social work practice

The findings of the study highlight the influence of culture and IKS on people and their environments, thereby forming the background for practices, definitions and responses related to child protection (Gough & Lynch, 2002:341). The ecological relevance of the Vatsonga IKS is evident in its influence on all aspects of Vatsonga-speaking people's lives. The participants identified several aspects of their IKS, as part of the macrosystem that could contribute to the protection of children in the different ecological levels. Their suggestions appear to involve three interrelated processes: creating a protective environment for children, providing them with supportive relationships, and enhancing children's strengths and agency. Thus social work faced with acute shortages of resources might benefit from adopting IKS as ecological resources in child protection (Hepworth et al., 2017).

The lives of the Vatsonga people are guided by their indigenous values. The African philosophy of *ubuntu*, containing values such as respect, dignity and social justice, serves as a moral guide for people in their relationships and interactions with others (Mupedziswa et al., 2019:24). Their values place a responsibility on the family, extended family, and the entire community to ensure the survival and security of all its members, especially children and vulnerable members (Kaime, 2005:224; Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016:29).

Their indigenous values can contribute significantly to the

establishment of protective environments for children. As one of the key goals of child protection services, creating a protective environment lower the likelihood of risks to the protection of children and have the advantage of involving all children, not only those who are at risk of harm (Child Frontiers, 2012:3). The involvement of families and community members provides protective and supportive measures in the different ecological layers in children's environment and indigenous kinship networks are well-established safety nets for all children, but especially for orphans and vulnerable children, (Christensen, 2010:102). The philosophy of *ubuntu* is thus seen as relevant to child welfare on the African continent (Mupedziswa et al., 2019:32). We conclude that child protection policy and practice in Southern Africa must be influenced by the philosophy of *ubuntu* and IKS in general to decolonise it from its Eurocentric past.

Amidst evidence of norms, beliefs and practices of their IKS that can contribute to child protection, cognisance should be taken of differences in perceptions of childhood, child rights and child maltreatment base on the Vatsonga IKS and those of child protection workers. Social problems and phenomena are social constructions and lead to different interpretations that can cloud issues of child protection (Schenk, 2019:71). As an example, childhood responsibilities for household chores, which are common practice in indigenous communities, could from a Western perspective be viewed as child labour (Dinah, 2018:238). Such differences are not only a cause for concern for child protection and child rights advocates, but the research findings show that they also create tension in indigenous communities, which some participants described as “creating chaos” in their local communities. Another concern that emanated from the findings, relates to the Afrocentric collectivist worldview that regard individual interests subservient to that of the group or family and demand that children should always show respect to adults, which may lead to the suppression and under-reporting of

child abuse(Dinah, 2018:239; Mafumbate & Meahabo, 2016:29-30). Thus social work must strike an intricate balance between promoting good cultural practices and that of championing an end to harmful cultural practices.

Overall, the research findings point to the strong preventive potential of the Vatsonga IKS in the protection of children. Prevention becomes a critical aspect, given the many challenges faced by children in Sub-Saharan Africa and the lack of child protection resources and capacity in the region. Preventing the detrimental consequences of child maltreatment, afford children better chance of education, a better health status and better lifetime earnings; all of these can contribute to developmental and poverty reduction goals in Sub-Saharan Africa (Save the Children, 2013:3). This prospect is especially significant given that “[f]rom around 2030, sub-Saharan Africa will be the single region with the greatest number of children under 18” (UNICEF, 2014).

We call for collaboration between indigenous informal safety nets with formal child protection services to find common ground in terms of the protection of children. The research findings suggest that norms and practices of the Vatsonga IKS could complement formal child protection services if differences in constructions such as childhood, child maltreatment and child rights are constructively resolved. An ecological approach to child protection acknowledges the complexity of problems that children are exposed to (Save the Children, 2013:2). Therefore, child protection as a multifaceted issue needs a comprehensive approach to include all factors affecting children in their environment, including their provision and participation rights (Collins, 2017:18). Vatsonga IKS guides for children, families, communities and the justice system, amongst others, and thus touches on all ecological levels in the child's environment. Mupedziswa et al. (2019:29) relate the well-known Nigerian proverb “It takes a whole village to raise a child” to ecological

theory, suggesting that communities can create nurturing social conditions to promote children's protection, security, emotional well-being, social relationships, and economic well-being.

Social workers who work in indigenous communities must have a respectful attitude towards the culture, especially in cultures that previously experienced marginalisation and degradation (Makhubele, 2011:162). Important, is that child protection systems do not exist in isolation, nor are they the only systems that influence the well-being of children; therefore, the child protection system must not only consider its normative position but also its relational position within the broader economic, social, political and cultural contexts (UNICEF, 2010:19). Collaboration does not imply blindly embracing all cultural practices, as culture can entail both positive and negative elements (Kreitzer, 2019:52). However, the introduction of Western models of child protection without the inclusion of existing community-based interventions may alienate local communities and negatively affect child protection in those communities (Mtetwa & Muchacha, 2017:130). Teffo(2013:188-189) warns that the marginalisation of the African IKS undermines the potential contribution of IKS towards addressing practical development issues in Africa. The local relevance of child protection services and, ultimately, the best interests of the child should not be ignored, as evident in the following statement by Save the Children (2013:5): “Whatever the context, the systems approach, as an integrated approach to protecting children, will seek to ... understand, define and apply the principle of the best interests of the child in designing policies and approaches, guided by both rights conventions and local culture and values; ...”

In conclusion, we are aware that the findings on the Tsonga IKS and child protection cannot be generalised to other Afrocentric communities. Thus, we present the findings contributing to debates on how IKS could complement formal child protection

services to enhance children's protection in different socio-cultural contexts.

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