Is the Mzungu phenomenon a help or hinderance? The repercussions of western childcare interventions among street children in Kampala, Uganda

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A B S T R A C T
The deprivation, adversity, and lack of protection for children on the streets of urban Uganda are well known; as is the reality that most of their support is facilitated by Western Missionary operated, non-government organisations (NGOs). However, their approach is problematised as ineffective, oppressive, and colonial. Yet there is a dearth of research from the children’s perspectives, capturing the meaning of such actors’ interventions within their lifeworld’s, and no such literature within the Ugandan context. Therefore, this case study focuses on the ‘Mzungu Phenomenon’, a theme unearthed from critical hermeneutic analyses of the life stories of 30 former street children within an orphanage in Kampala, Uganda. The Mzungu phenomenon refers to the meaning and influence of the Western Missionaries and volunteers that feature within the children’s experiences, captured within their narratives. Underpinned by Ricœur’s narrative philosophy, this study illuminates and problematises the way in which Western NGO actors feature within the children’s lifeworld’s, and the wider ramifications from postcolonial, and postcolonial feminist theoretical perspectives. This includes the perpetuation of colonial legacies, ideologies, and praxis, that contribute to disempowerment for children, their families, and their communities, and the dual oppression of women. Therefore, this piece argues that despite a need to enhance child protection measures in Uganda, the current approaches that do not align with national and international rights-based policies must be further critically examined, challenged, and reformed, to ensure the wellbeing of the children.

Introduction
This critical hermeneutic case study is one of a series of articles (see Bunyan, 2021; 2021) focused on the life stories of 30 children living within an orphanage in Kampala, Uganda, who previously lived on the streets. Inspired by Ricœur’s (1984) narrative philosophy, this study illuminates and problematises the way in which Western operated, non-government organisation (NGO) actors, such as international Missionaries and volunteers, feature within the children’s lifeworld’s. As well as elucidating the meaning of their intervention to the children, this piece sheds light on the wider ramifications for them, their families, and their communities, from postcolonial and postcolonial feminist theoretical perspectives.

As Qualitative researchers, we should have a duty and commitment to social justice without boundary or exclusion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, this piece demonstrates how historical representations of ‘the other’ are reproduced within praxis today, to the detriment of social justice for children and their families facing financial hardship in Uganda. Through the continued institutionalisation of street children within orphanages or childcare institutions (CCIs) known to facilitate access to education through international donors, as well as serving as a pull-factor towards the streets away from impoverished families, colonial legacies are – mostly unknowingly – maintained. Such legacies, reinforce historical dichotomies that frame ‘the other’, such as the children, their families and local communities as ‘inferior, incapable, and dependent on the White Saviour’ from the ‘superior, civilised West’,...
wherein cultural imperialism persists (Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017; De Wet, 2016; Moore et al., 2021; Mulumba et al., 2021). As a result, colonial power relations permeate contemporary society, underpinning the operation and receipt of charitable support for children in Uganda, shaping their experiences and choices. Namely, as this piece illuminates; the choice to leave home for the streets of Kampala, and consequent experiences there.

The importance of this issue is twofold; firstly, as the use of orphanages directly contradicts both Uganda’s and the United Nations’ ([UN], 2009) National Alternative Care Frameworks (Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [UMoGLSD], 2012) in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC], 1989), which stipulate institutionalisation as a last resort, owing to the detrimental impact to children’s development and wellbeing (Mutenyi et al., 2019). Secondly, because in addition to undermining the efforts of families to provide for their children, by attracting children towards the streets in search of NGOs by which to access education or other fee-based services, children are exposed to the increased deprivation and adversity well known to characterise life in street settings. For example, within sub-Saharan Africa, this includes; dramatically increased physical and sexual abuse and violence, exploitation, a lack of access to basic necessities, including health care, lack of access to education, and increased exposure to virus and disease (Ayaya et al., 2021; Beyene & Berhane, 2017; Chimdessa & Cheire, 2018; Cumber & Tsoka-Gwegweni, 2015; Mandalazi et al., 2013; Walakira et al., 2014).

While efforts at deinstitutionalisation and cessation of the promotion of orphanages have been made in Uganda through the above national and international alternative care frameworks, in recent years the increase in unregistered, unregulated childcare institutions has been exponential (Mutenyi, 2019). This article takes the position that the failure to reform the approaches of NGO actors involved in the creation and operation of orphanages is attributable to a lack of critical understanding of the children’s life-worlds, comprised of their experiences and sociocultural environment, that are shaped by historical dispositions. However, this lack of understanding can be traced back to the knowledge base from which relevant stakeholders draw upon to inform interventions, wherein there is currently no academic literature foregrounding the children’s life-stories, focussing on how such NGO actors feature within them. Thus, the evidence base must expand beyond positivist methodological approaches, to delve beyond assumed realities, superficial interpretations, and homogenising representations, to explore the meanings of children’s experiences not only within their broader sociocultural context, but also within the histories of colonial hegemony that continue to – both consciously and unconsciously - shape power relations today.

The need to cultivate this critical knowledge base is imminent amidst the Covid-19 global health crisis wherein NGOs, Missionaries, and humanitarian volunteers are beginning to embark on trips to assist in the provision of healthcare and vaccinations after prolonged travel bans. Therefore, with this influx of such actors, it is vital that efforts are made to ensure that approaches employed uphold the UNCRC (1989), which foreground the wellbeing and social justice of all children.

In what follows, initially a contextual overview comprised of relevant literature is provided to allow an understanding of the Ugandan setting in which the study occurs, including the situation and experiences of children separated from family, and on the streets. Subsequently, to adequately situate the study and confer rigour and transparency; a detailed methodology is presented. Providing such detail is purposeful and important here, in demonstrating how Critical Hermeneutics may be useful in similar study contexts to capture the complexity within the life experiences of marginalised or disenfranchised groups. Guided by Ricœur’s (1984) narrative philosophy and theory of interpretation, this highly reflexive and contextually sensitive approach combines the hermeneutics of faith with suspicion to delve beyond superficial narrative interpretations, to illuminate the silenced stories hidden behind those told explicitly (Josselson, 2004, 2006). As elucidated, engaging this approach to the life-story narratives of 30 (n=15 f, 15 m) children living within an orphanage near Kampala whom the researcher, a Scottish, non-religious, White, Woman, had worked alongside for a decade, revealed a theme that was not initially an intended topic of enquiry within the wider study: the Mzungu Phenomenon. The Mzungu (a term used across East Africa to refer to White people) phenomenon refers to the meaning and influence of white people from the West, operating as Missionaries or non-faith-based Volunteers, within the children’s life stories.

Subsequently drawing on theoretical and conceptual literature embedded in Postcolonialism and particularly Postcolonial feminism to lend sense and salience to this theme, this piece allows critical understandings of the ‘Mzungu Phenomenon’. Postcolonialism refers to a theoretical perspective that is concerned with identifying, analysing and challenging the perpetuation of colonial systems of power, discourse and hegemony in contemporary contexts, that maintain an oppressive binary between the West and formerly colonised nations (Loomba, 2016; Pathak, 2016; Toyosaki, 2018). Further, Postcolonial feminist perspectives foreground the patriarchal, racialised, gendered nature of this dichotomy that constructed a monolithic ‘third world woman’, meaning that African women were first marginalised for being African, and then for being women. Critiquing the universalistic, Eurocentric tendencies of Western feminism; this theoretical lens examines and problematises the intersectionality of colonial legacies, particularly illuminating how they influence the lives of women today (Minha, 1989, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Parashar, 2016; Spivak, 1988).

Overall, this case study questions the way in which the Mzungu phenomenon features within the children’s lived experiences, its meaning and influence on the children’s choices and actions, and the wider repercussions, in terms of the Ugandan social, cultural, and historical context. In doing so, this piece doesn’t seek to minimise the suffering or challenges that many Uganda children face, or the need for support from the global community. Rather, it problematises an aspect of existing approaches and ideologies, in hopes of provoking more critical sociocultural awareness among those engaging with communities in the field to begin to dismantle neo-colonial power relations and discourse, within praxis.
Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

The Ugandan Study Context

In recent history, Uganda has suffered the effects of colonialism, as a protectorate of the British Empire from 1894 to 1962; a two-decade civil war (1986-2006) between the Lord’s Resistance Army rebel group (LRA) and the army of the Ugandan government, and the ongoing adversity of poverty and corruption under the semi-authoritarian regime of Museveni, president since 1986 (Gumisiriza, 2021). Colonial legacies continue to influence Uganda’s governance, from laws and legal frameworks that have been maintained since the colonial era; to healthcare policies and their models of implementation, impacting the provision of and access to health care within a country that faces substantial poverty (Mulumba, 2021). As such, Uganda is classified as a low-income country, with 19.7% of the 34.6 million (UBOS, 2016) population living below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2016), leading to vast disparities in education and healthcare provision (World Bank, 2016; Marus et al., 2019). Further substantial inequality in Uganda include the position of women, who are considered a marginalised group in a patriarchal society wherein female genital mutilation and gender-based violence persist (United Nations Population Fund Uganda, 2017). Considered a young country, over half of the population (56%) accounted for in Uganda is under 18 years old, equating to 17.1 million children (MoGLSD, 2011), based on most recent published data. However, given the social and economic conditions of Uganda, many children are described as vulnerable, and either ‘orphans’, defined as bereaved of one or both parents (Swahn et al., 2017), or ‘street children’, who live on the streets with transient sources of shelter (Kamya & Walakira, 2017). Whilst there is a myriad of relevant terms to distinguish between groups and definitions are contested, the terms used within this article reflect those used by cited authors. Or, in the case of the study findings, terms used by the participants. However, the ambiguity surrounding the various terms used to define groups of vulnerable children in Uganda is reflected in the practices of those supporting Ugandan children, whereby both children within orphanages and those on the streets are misidentified and misrepresented, as without living parents or families (Cheney & Rotabi, 2015). Therefore, to contextualise the position of the participants within the study that follows, the subsequent sections present relevant literature on the experiences of children whom enter orphanage care in Uganda.

Children Separated from Family in Uganda

Despite the common misconception that children living within orphanages are orphans, in Uganda, many, if not most, are not. For example, Riley (2012) reported that 85% of children within orphanages had living, contactable parents. Further, within a sample of 1282 children, Walakira et al (2014) found that most (64%), had living parents, with only 19% reporting orphanhood as their reason for being there. Childcare institutions in Uganda are described as part of a money-making industry, with Western donors believing that they are responding to ‘orphan crises, when in fact, such institutions recruit children from impoverished families, or from the streets (Brubacher et al., 2021; Cheney & Rotabi, 2015; Kamya & Walakira, 2017). Although Uganda has a large population of children who spend time on the streets, many are not homeless, instead they are described as ‘street connected children’ who go to such settings to generate income rather than living there (Kamya & Walakira, 2017). Though there is neither recent nor exact figures capturing the number of children living on the streets in Uganda, the last estimates in 2014 were around 10,000 (Fallon, 2014). The lack of data by which to quantify the number of street children is attributable to a high prevalence of unregistered births, and lack of systematic methods in accessing and accounting for this population (Bhatia et al., 2017; Dutta, 2018). Despite the ambiguities, Fallon (2014) reported a 70% increase in street children between 1993 and 2014, with approximately 16 new children coming to the streets of Kampala every day (Fallon, 2014). However, contrary to common assumptions amongst those from the West, that children on the streets in Uganda are all orphans, the causal factors behind their being there are complex and nuanced with each child carrying a unique story. Although recent literature is scarce, in examining causal factors among a population of children on the streets of Kampala, Young (2004) found the most commonly self-reported reasons were mistreatment at home (34.6%), poverty (25.7%), and the death of parents or guardians (20.6%). Walakira et al (2014) reported similar figures based on thematic analyses of interview and survey data from children on the streets across 21 major towns in Kampala. When investigating the children’s exposure to violence, they found that 35% reported abuse and neglect as the main catalyst in leaving home for the streets. Moreover, rapidly increasing urbanisation is thought to contribute to the increasing number, due to the inflation in living costs to beyond that which is affordable for families, forcing children to streets combined with the pull factor of perceived increased economic opportunity (Kakuru et al., 2019; Kawala et al., 2020). However, what is missing within academic literature, is critical examination of the part played by Western actors as a pull factor towards the streets, as this study illuminates.

Experiences of Children on the Streets

It is important to understand both push and pull factors the streets, because, globally, having relocated to the streets, children live in conditions of severe poverty and deprivation (Mandalazi et al., 2013). In Uganda, children face severe risks to health and wellbeing unmitigated by a lack of government support in ensuring their welfare (Kawala et al., 2021). Of particular concern amid the Covid-19 health crisis currently gripping Uganda, children on the streets do not have access to clean water, adequate food, or sanitation facilities (Kamya & Walakira, 2017; Kawala et al., 2021; Walakira et al., 2014). Moreover, for those that do have shelter in which to sleep, conditions tend to be overcrowded meaning there is a rapid spread of disease, within a nation that already suffers a high prevalence of HIV, Malaria and Tuberculosis.
Despite the lack of recent literature, research in the Uganda context has highlighted the high prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced by the majority of children on the streets (Cumber & Tsoka-Gwegweni, 2015; Renzaho et al., 2017; Walakira et al., 2014). However, as scholars such as Hansson (2003), Aptekar and Heinonen (2003) and Van Blerk (2006) demonstrate, the experiences of street children are especially varied according to gender. Girls are disproportionately marginalised, and face the highest rates of rape, sexual abuse, and exploitation within street settings wherein their options for self-sustenance are much less than that of boys, predominantly relying on transactional sex (Cumber & Tsoka-Gwegweni, 2015; Walakira et al., 2014). Much of the physical, sexual, and emotional violence experienced by children on the streets emanates from the stigma and hostility directed towards the children by adults and authority figures, who view them as problematic thieves and drug addicts (Walakira, 2014). Relatedly, police and law enforcement officials are among the highest perpetrators of physical and sexual violence, and often use extortion or unjust detention under the guise of identifying and reunifying children with families (Walakira, 2014; Young, 2004). Overall, children on the streets of Kampala are not afforded the rights and protection that they are entitled to under UNCRC (1989). Renzaho et al (2017) highlighted the degree of disenfranchisement as per the convention, particularly within slum settings, reporting that children’s experiences were characterized by: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, exploitation, homelessness, abject poverty, and social exclusion.

**Support for Children on the Streets**

Evidently, the rights and protection of children on the streets of Uganda are not upheld, despite the ratification of the UNCRC (1989), National Policy on Orphans and Vulnerable Children ([NOVC], UMoGLSD, 2011) and National Alternative Care Framework ([NACF], UMoGLSD, 2012). Attributed to a lack of funding directed towards the implementation of models and programmes aligned with these policies and frameworks which emphasise institutionalisation as a last resort, support for children on the streets is predominantly fulfilled by Western funded NGOs (Kakuru et al., 2019; Kawala et al., 2020). While there are NGO’s that comply with national and international policy and legislation underpinned by children’s rights and protection, evaluating the approaches taken proves difficult given that the majority of organisations engaging with children are unregistered, and unregulated (Cheney & Rotabi, 2015; Mutenyo et al., 2019; Riley, 2012). However, the types of services provided include the provision of emergency health care and education, but, at the heart of these response efforts is institutionalisation of children within orphanages as a first response, prioritised over family reunification, familial or community based support (Cheney & Rotabi, 2015; De Wet, 2016; Mutenyo et al., 2019; Riley, 2012; Walakira et al., 2014). Often, orphanages, or CCI’s that support, ‘rescue’ or ‘recruit’ children from the streets, are labelled as Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), schools, or other unknown initiatives (Mutenyo et al., 2019). Given the illegal nature of such institutions, neither reliable nor recent figures are available however, in 2012 there was an estimated 800 CCI’s, housing approximately 150,000 children, with only 70 institutions licensed by the UMoGLSD, almost all of which funded by Western Religious Groups, predominantly North American Evangelical Christians (Cheney & Rotabi, 2015; De Wet, 2016; Mutenyo et al., 2019). As such, service provision is largely based on religious beliefs and values as opposed to national and international frameworks of children’s rights and protection, and the indigenous beliefs and values of the children and community in which the NGO operates.

Therefore, this approach is problematised for “re-enacting an imperial power dynamic that enhances and promotes a colonial dependency between the marginalised poor and the NGO organisations, whilst their international volunteers, staff and financial backers are reproduced as the “White Saviours” (De Wet, 2016, p.4). For example, in a study with Ugandan social workers, NGO workers and Orphanage directors, De Wet (2016) found that the perpetuation of this model has led to substantial disempowerment amongst Ugandans - particularly mothers, - and the further marginalisation of those facing poverty. Writing from a Postcolonial theoretical perspective, De Wet (2016) illuminated how Western perpetuation of this model evoked the notion that these orphanages are superior to local solutions based on local perspectives, beliefs, and values, creating a dichotomy between Westerners and “the other”.

Moreover, in addition to highlighting government failings in ensuring the social protection of street children, scholars such as Kakura et al (2019) problematised charity-based NGO response efforts for their failure to ensure the human rights of children they support. For example, they found that children were being forcefully ‘rescued’, ignoring the free will of the children, thus contradicting core principles of the UNCRC (1989). They contend that whilst rescue may alleviate immediate short-term problems faced by street children on a small scale, such activities are counterproductive in the medium and long term without appropriate targeted efforts to reintegrate children within their communities, with adequate social protection service delivery. Without such efforts, children continue to return to the streets – often with “new recruits” (Kakura, et al., 2019 p. 7). Moreover, as they suggest, the functioning and standard of care provided within childcare institutions such as orphanages is largely unregulated, of poor quality, and described as a commercial enterprise that uses the sad stories of children in poverty to attract international donors and fee-paying Missionaries and volunteers.

Though these studies have explored the views of Ugandan adults about children entering orphanage care, there is no published literature capturing the children’s stories and perspectives on their transition from home into an orphanage. How do Western NGO workers feature within children’s lifeworld’s, from their perspectives? What part do they play in the children’s life stories? This case study aims to illuminate this matter, within the following approach.
Methodology

Life stories, captured within the narrative approach to research, allow an insight into an individual’s own perspectives of their lifeworld; their experiences, and the way in which they make sense of others (Moen, 2006; Zellermayer, 2002). Within the following study, the children had previously shared their powerful life stories with the researcher voluntarily, owing to close bonds already formed, rendering narrative the most appropriate, most natural, and least invasive approach to capturing their situation (see Bunyan, 2021). However, in interpreting, analysing, and understanding these narratives, the study was underpinned by the philosophies and theories of renowned critical hermeneuticist Paul Ricoeur (1976, 1984). Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics is described as an innovative methodology and method within the human and social sciences: it “is at once a philosophy, a philosophical approach, and a methodological model for the human and social sciences, which works to coordinate explanation and understanding under the rule of interpretation” (Busacchi, 2016, p. 82; Roberge, 2011). Broadly, a philosophical framework of hermeneutic interpretivism involves the integration of unfamiliar information or knowledge, into existing knowledge, context, or content (Kruger, 2019). Given the multitude of approaches to both narrative and hermeneutic research, before elucidating the interpretive processes it is important to first understand the underlying philosophical assumptions that consequently influence how findings can be situated, in addition to elucidating how one may operationalise this approach in similar research contexts.

Ontology & Epistemology

The ontological assumptions enveloped in employing Ricoeur’s hermeneutics entail a view on the nature of reality that assumes that the meaningfulness of people’s lived experiences are socially, culturally, and context bound, created through interactions with others and shaped by the historical context within which one is embedded. Consequently, these meanings form the basis of interpreting one’s own reality, both in the context of the researcher and as applied to their interpretations, for example, of narrative transcripts (Crotty, 1998; Cohen et al., 2017). Particularly emphasised within Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics, there is therefore a need to reflect upon one’s own social, cultural, and political positioning as a researcher, as well as prior assumptions formed through experiences within the study context with participants, to develop critical, contextual, understandings. This is the premise of the epistemological assumptions of the study, which acknowledges and embraces the interrelationship between epistemology (how one interprets information) and ontology (the understandings and meaning of that information to the interpreter), throughout (Geanellos, 2000).

Ricoeur’s Narrative Philosophy

According to Ricoeur (1984), although there are a multitude of varieties of narrative, each share a common purpose; to trace, organise, and clarify temporal experience within a schematisation, or mental representation. Such representations of temporal experiences are manifested around a central plot, or “narrative emplotment”. However, contrasting Descartes subjectivism, Ricoeur contented that people are already embedded within a world of traditions and meaning of which they have little to no control, thus influencing the meanings embedded within narratives. To Ricoeur (1984), remnants of our world of meanings and traditions are both left and formed when we express ourselves. However, these meanings are often hidden, rendering it impossible to directly understand an individual’s experiences without a process of critical interpretation that combines the hermeneutics of faith, with that of suspicion (Moen & Birkelund, 2020).

This critical dimension within Ricoeur’s approach was inspired by Habermas’ (1976) critique of the role of tradition in influencing understandings of the self and world. Consequently, to Ricoeur (1984, 1992), hidden within expressions or descriptions, language, and ideas, often lies the structures of power that influence our realities that manifest distorted ideologies and false ideas. To Habermas (1976), connection or assimilation within tradition is essentially compliance with, or maintenance of tradition, thus allowing dominant power structures to be left unnoticed or unchallenged (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). Therefore, in Habermas’ (1976) view: misunderstanding is our historical heritage, distorted by the power relations of family, society, and state, and they must be scrutinised and exposed within critical reflection.

This critical perspective is assumed by Ricoeur (1984, 1991), enveloped within the centrepiece to his narrative philosophy: the Three-fold Mimesis.

Three-fold Mimesis

The Three-fold Mimesis does not refer to an imitation of reality, rather; in the Aristotelian notion it describes the process by which narrative interpreters attain complete comprehension, obtained by revealing the traces of meaning hidden within a narrative transcript (Russo, 2021). Ricoeur’s (1984) mimesis comprises three components of narrative theory, corresponding with his theory of interpretation; prefiguration (spontaneous and immediate relationship with the emotionally-experienced world), configuration (narrative construction and temporally organised narrative), and refiguration (return to the world of acting and of suffering, strengthened by previous experience and a new understanding of the world which have an impact at ethical level).

Mimesis 1 pertains to life as it is before being articulated into verbal or written narratives, constituted by existential conditions such as hope, fear, courage, spirit, unease and suffering (Moen & Birkelund, 2020; Russo, 2021). Corresponding with Husserl’s conceptualisation of lifeworld, mimesis 1 refers to the everyday pre-scientific world encompassed by existential phenomena that influence the situation of the individual, in positive or negative ways (Moen & Birkelund, 2020). These existential phenomena
cannot be captured by scientific method, instead: An understanding of them can only be developed through interpretations of the traces left within the language, attitudes, and actions of an individual; captured within their narrative.

Mimesis II refers to the natural configuration of the plot of the narrative as articulated by the narrator. Comprised of the features that signify the beginning, middle and end of an individual’s ‘story’, the interviewer must listen as opposed to asking pre-formulated questions or interjecting to avoid influencing the way one structures their narrative or the issues they choose to include. Rather, the interviewer listens to determine the consistent elements that provide structure and wholeness, or the thread that weaves through the story to provide overall theme of the text (Ricœur, 1992). The way this plot is configured is naturally articulated by the narrator who portrays experiences or phenomena in a meaningful order, with purpose and intentionality. Thus, the structuring of one’s narrative is of importance within Ricœur’s narrative philosophy and must therefore be analysed by the interpreter. Ricœur contended that meaning structures within texts are objective, and thus can be analysed and connected to the explanation of texts; contrasting Dilthey’s (1958) view that explanation and understanding are opposites. Rather, to Ricœur (1984, 1991), “explanation”, comprised of structural analysis, is conceived as an integral part of the procedure towards understanding, and consequently forms a dialectic process in the interpretation of texts.

Furthermore, drawing from the field of linguistics, Mimesis II involves what Ricœur (1984, 1991) referred to as “distanciation”. He described this process - a distancing of oneself from the original narrative context - as facilitating the generation of plurality and multiplicity in meanings within the text for further critical exploration, meaning that “the world of the text can cause the author’s world to explode” (Ricœur, 1981, 109). Drawn from Gadamerian thought in that one’s understandings are situated in, and always shaped by, their historical context, the purpose of this process is to expand the interpretive horizons of the interpreter by “emancipation of the text from the oral situation” (Ricœur, 1981, pp. 109). Although distanciation is framed as objectifying the text, the interpretive hermeneutic ontology is maintained in that the “knower” is connected with the “known”, within a process that seeks to allow broader interpretative scope to facilitate the “Refiguration” stage in Mimesis III (Geanellos, 2000; Russo, 2021; Charalambous et al., 2008).

Refiguration denotes the point of intersection between the world of the text and that of the interpreter, engendering a point of introspection whereby the interpreter generates self-understanding in their process of interpreting the text (Ricœur, 1984; 1991). To expand; understandings manifest through a ‘fusion of horizons’ of the text, and interpreter (Gadamer, 1976). Understanding the text therefore involves the interpretation of multiple layers of meaning, within an endless spiral. The text itself is a product that encapsulates a process of accumulated meanings in that a whole is created by the sum of its parts. Therefore, interpreting the meaning of a text requires movement between the whole and parts, and vice versa; and neither can be understood - neither the parts nor the whole - without each other (Missel & Birkelund, 2020; Tan et al., 2009). This endless spiral illustrates Ricœur’s hermeneutic arc (1981); a process by which to gain understandings of the meanings of people’s lived experiences.

Methods

After obtaining informed written and verbal consent from prospective participants and their guardians, the Ricœurian methodological approach was operationalised within 30 (15=F, 15=M) individual narrative interviews with children aged 10-17, living within the NGOs homes near Kampala. Recruited using opportunistic purposive sampling, this number constituted the total number of children living in the homes fulltime during the study, whereby others were attended intermittently for varying lengths of time. For example, those attending boarding school, or those who returned to the streets or elsewhere temporarily. Each of the participants had discussed their life experiences with the researcher before in spontaneous one-to-one conversation, prior to the study. After asking the participants “please tell me your story”, no further probes or questions were used thereby allowing the participants the opportunity for a free narrative. The duration of the narratives varied between approximately 15 and 60 minutes.

Whilst the researcher has worked alongside the same group of children for a decade, formal fieldwork took place over the course of three months, with permission for access to the orphanage population granted by the director of the facility, who is also one of the caregivers there. The orphanage was established by two former street children in collaboration with the North American evangelical Christian Missionary Community, the latter of whom are predominantly responsible for financial and operational maintenance of the organisation: including child sponsorship, street outreach projects, education, healthcare and day-to-day activities.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Queen Margaret University Research Ethics Panel.

Reflexivity

Within the interpretive process as guided by Ricœur’s Narrative philosophy; this study took an innovative approach with regards to facilitating critical reflection and situating myself as researcher, by engaging in a systematic autoethnography, as discussed in Bunyan (2021; 2021). Though encompassing a myriad of definitions and approaches, autoethnography represents both a process and a product, that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences and observations (auto) in relation to their wider cultural (ethno) context, producing an account of this critical process (graphy) to enhance sociological understandings. This process allowed critical reflection upon my own experiences within the research context, in addition to influential social, cultural, and political factors and their implications to the study, and particularly - interpretations generated. In making sense of experiences and observations within the study context, Postcolonial theory provided useful theoretical and conceptual understandings, regarding the
way I am implicated within and by the research. This informed the use of the Postcolonial and Postcolonial Feminist theoretical lenses operationalised within the analyses described below.

Overall, while maintaining the ontological assumption that the meaning of a text resides only within its author, this reflective process worked synergistically within the critical hermeneutic research design, supporting Distanciation within Mimesis II. Approaching the narrative transcripts in this way embodied the view of Ricoeur (1994, p. 66) concerning narrative life stories in that: ‘interpretation is the hinge between language and lived experience’, but that one must operationalise a critical lens within reflection and a hermeneutics of suspicion within interpretation to achieve understanding.

Analysis

Therefore, the Threefold Mimesis inform the three levels, or stages, of analysis when interpreting narrative texts, between a naive reading, structural analysis and finally, the critical interpretation and comprehensive understanding, within a fusion of horizons resulting from a dialectical process between explanation and self-reflection. The purpose of analysis overall was to extrapolate meaningful components of the participants experiences, and consequently, understand them comprehensively. This is important, because without understanding the children’s life experiences, relevant stakeholders lack the informational resources by which to support them within a situation of ever-increasing numbers of street children, and children entering orphanage care.

i. Naive Reading
   a) Transcribing, reading and re-reading verbatim narrative transcripts and field-notes
   b) Developing an explanatory overview of each transcript
   c) Distanciation, supplemented by autoethnography as above.

ii. Structural Analysis and Distanciation
Informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis
   a) Identifying patterns within and across transcripts
   b) Identifying sub themes
   c) Thematic mapping to analyse the relationships between sub-themes
   d) Identifying themes

iii. Critical Interpretation and Understanding
   a) Critical analysis of themes: explanation and understanding in relation to existing theoretical, conceptual, and relevant research literature.

Results & Discussion

Mimesis II: Explanatory Structural Analysis Overview of Life stories

Findings beyond the Mzungu phenomenon theme are presented elsewhere (Bunyan, 2021), however, the following provides a brief overview for contextual understanding. Upon analysis of the children’s narratives, a recurring structure within the children’s life-stories emerged, akin to Ricoeur’s emplotment (1984) concept. The children each shared their stories of their lives and how they came to be living within the orphanage. Beginning with what was portrayed as their earliest memories, from life with their biological families, through subsequent events leading to life within the orphanage, each recounted their experiences in detail. All the children spoke of experiences of physical abuse at some point in life, either at their original homes or whilst on the streets, and all girls had been sexually abused or raped, again either at home, on the streets, or both. The existential or emotional factors, such as tenacity, hope, sense of agency, hopelessness, fear and trust, among others, were interwoven throughout, but specific to different stages of the narratives. For example, a sense of agency and tenacity were combined with anguish, associated with the point at which children leave home for the streets, versus an existential situation of fear, hopelessness and mistrust after some time living on the streets. Additionally, the ways in which children coped with, or overcame existential challenges differed poignantly in relation to the structure portrayed by their narratives. Overall, each narrative was comprised of three ‘chapters’; beginning within children’s early memories from their birth homes comprised of narrations of their familial situations, adversities faced in this context, and the particular factors that catalysed their leaving for the streets of Kampala.

The second ‘chapter’ of their stories was characterised by the children re-counting their lives on the streets within Kisenyi slum, Kampala. Interwoven throughout the narrations of this stage, were the children’s portrayals of the specific challenges faced there, the ways in which they coped, and overcame these challenges, and finally their accounts of moving from the streets to the orphanage. Concerning life on the streets, further themes emerged concerning coping and the meaning, importance, and functions of the children’s agency. Upon first analyses, the primary means of coping with the adversity of street life both physically and psychologically was substance use, predominantly by means paraffin inhalation in order to numb physical and psychological pain or distress. Additional coping systems included friendships and working to generate income, however, critical analysis revealed
substantial gender-based differences in the meaning, function and mitigating influence of both systems, as illuminated below. Overall, however, within this stage of life, the significance of the children’s agency to them becomes palpable; their ability to make their own choices and enact them on a day-to-day basis, and the repercussions of threats to their ability to do so.

The third and final ‘chapter’ where each child ended their narratives was characterised by a relatively brief portrayal of life in the orphanage in comparison to the depth of detail in the rest of their stories, which is considered under methodological reflections in concluding. Here, the children narrated their experiences of waiting for sponsorship to attend school, experiences at school, challenges still faced, and aspirations for the future.

Within the following sections, all names are replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. Additionally, findings and discussion are amalgamated in order to reflect the critical hermeneutic process with clarity.

The Mzungu Phenomenon

The underlying theme from which most other major themes emanate within and across the transcripts, was the situation of poverty that the children were born into. Where in their stories the children each recount their experiences and resilience in overcoming the challenges, this presents; with regards to acquiring school fees and securing an education or work. Understanding their stories as ‘a whole’ in this way is important in understanding the part of the Mzungu phenomenon theme, and vice versa; reflecting the hermeneutic arc (Ricœur, 1981). The following extract from Sarah, a 13-year-old female, conveys the nature of the Mzungu phenomenon, including the ideological dichotomy between a White person from the West, and Ugandan families facing poverty and its influence on the children’s decisions, and lived experiences. Illustrating Ricœur’s (1984) threefold mimesis, explanation and critical interpretations follow Sarah’s extract, however, key elements within the extract are the ways in which she describes her parents and their situation, in contrast to others, and the conclusions she draws on her perceived options.

Sarah

I asked myself where am I going now? Can I go to my dads place or my mums place? I started thinking then I said no, I have to do something else. I want to go back to school what can I do? My dad he would never pay school fees for me, my mum, she don’t have money to pay school fees for me...[pause in speech]. Then I was there at Kibouli, I heard people saying there is a home but those homes, there is people, Americans came other people they came to Uganda, they help children to raise up there talents or their work. And I said ah this will work for me that’s what I said in my head, I said yeah, it will work for me. Then I started saying and asking myself where am I going to find those homes? Yeah, because I had no idea in my mind about homes. Then I said what I am I gonna do. But I heard people saying they help children, they pick children from the street they help them to those homes, they pay their school fees. But my main intention was trying to find school fees to go back to school. Then I said oh, I tried three times to look for schools, but I had no money. I had no anything to use to use you know requirements what they need for school, ah, everything, because everything is surrounded by money. Because you can’t do anything without money. Then I said, I don’t have money what am I going to do, I want to go to school but I have no money, so I have no rights, I don’t even have a place to stay. What am I going to do? But the only chance I had was to find out about those homes.

Explanation

Like many of the children, whilst Sarah conveys her vast agency and resilience in going to the streets to secure her own future, the power structures influencing her experiences, choices, and decisions within her life story emerge from the offset. Specifically, like most of the children, whilst she has living parents close-by, due to the situation of poverty facing them meaning they cannot provide school fees, in contrast to the well-known opportunities presented by Western organisations that “pick children from the streets”; the latter option appears more conducive to securing her future aspirations within education. Like Sarah - the children recognise and empathise with their families struggles, rather than blaming them; exemplified here in recounting how her mum didn’t ‘have money for school fees’. Moreover, the way in which Sarah refers to “Americans...they help children to raise up their talents”, is significant. Like Sarah, the children do not portray a defeated, or victim mentality; rather, they recognise their own talents, strengths and tenacity. Equally though, as Sarah’s extract captures, they recognise the parameters within which they may capitalise on these talents, including the barriers of poverty, and perceived proponents to overcoming them. Here, Sarah captures the essence of this notion that the Mzungu, or affiliated NGO, is required to enable the children to implement or showcase their talents in order to progress in life. However, as we begin to understand further in critically interpreting extract two from a male participant, there is substantial difference between genders in the situations and meanings of the Mzungu phenomenon in this context. Also significant to this dichotomy, as discussed further below, is the way in which, like the other girls who recounted their process in leaving their families, Sarah’s framing of the “homes” affiliated with “Americans [came], other people”, as her “only chance”. The poignance of this framing is not only important in critically analysing the origins and implications of the narratives and ideologies of the Mzungu phenomenon, but also in understanding the contrast between the perspectives of boys, opposed to that of the girls, as emerges below within the interpretive process.

Beginning to evoke Ricœur’s hermeneutic of suspicion within the interpretive process, concerns are raised immediately surrounding the nature of children being “picked from the streets” for entry into the orphanage (“homes”), all of whom having living parents or relatives. It is well documented within academic literature that most children living within orphanages in Uganda, are not there due to the death of parents; but because their families are facing - often short term - financial crises (De Wet, 2016). That is not to say
there aren’t instances where abuse within familial homes means that staying or returning was impossible from the children’s perspective, however; this is not a sole, or majority causal factor according to the children’s transcripts. Thus, questions are raised concerning why efforts are not being directed towards supporting families or reunification more than, or at least in equal measure, to orphanages? Why are we - from the West - promoting and perpetuating “homes” (orphanages), a British model introduced within the colonial period, that we do not advocate for children within our own countries?

While the positive contributions of international actors acting on behalf of NGOs is undeniable and support for children is needed in ensuring their rights and protection, we must recognise the pull factor that we (myself included) represent towards the streets of Kampala, and the wider implications. This includes the perpetuation of colonial legacies and discourse in which the Western model encapsulated within the Mzungu Phenomenon is framed as superior to indigenous efforts, based predominantly on financial resources. Consequently, children, their families and local communities are disempowered, and their agency impinged upon further, as well as impeding local child protection efforts. By recognising and examining this situation critically, thus challenging existing approaches, we can be better informed in facilitating more effective support, that fosters empowerment and social justice to ensure locally sustainable child rights and protection, respecting indigenous beliefs and values.

**Critical Understandings**

Originating largely from Edward Said’s (1995) Orientalism, Postcolonial theory allows an understanding of the ways in which narratives, generated by those in the West manifest into discourse, whereby representations defined by Westerners are reproduced as a body of knowledge, forming an ideological dichotomy between Westerners (Mzungu) and ‘the other’ (Ugandan). Colonial Discourse sought to engender cultural and racial hierarchy by constructing a stereotype of those from the West versus ‘the other’ as a social reality (Chakrabarty, 2001). Thus, when scrutinising the situation conveyed by Sarah through this lens, in which her “only chance” appears, to her, to be leaving family for a Western led NGO, or in the hopes of being “picked from the streets” by a White person, one begins to recognise the perpetuation of colonial legacy in which the Mzungu can offer superior support. Postcolonial theorist Bhabha (1994) describes this process in terms of the subjectification and representation of the “other”, whereby stereotypes and consequent ideologies are assumed. For example, within the context of street children in Uganda, the dominant narrative within the literature has contributed to a stereotype of the population as helpless, desperate, and defenceless, and in need of rescue, most commonly assumed to be orphaned. But equally, on the opposite side of this dichotomy: the Mzungu is framed as the saviour, perpetuating the kind of distorted ideology that Habermas (1967) described, that has been shaped by the historical, sociocultural, geopolitical and economic conditions wherein the two populations interact. Flaherty (2018, p.18) attributes this situation to systemic rather than individual flaws: “The saviour mentality is not about individual failings. It is the logical result of a racist, colonialist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal system setting us up against each other”. He contends that this is apparent in everyday life; from the way disaster relief funds are advertised on TV, to film plots and education in schools and universities (Bunyan, 2021).

Moreover, from a postcolonial perspective, the continued imposition of the orphanage model, or “homes” and associated recruitment in street settings, predominantly among North American Evangelical Christian groups (Cheney & Rotabi, 2015; De Wet, 2016) implies a sense of cultural imperialism in enforcing a Western belief system. Specifically, in addition to the orphanage being a colonial concept, the maintenance and activities facilitated by organisations such as that of the children, are based on the religious beliefs and values of NGO agents and actors, as opposed to those of the indigenous communities they ‘serve’. Consequently, a situation arises in which the children must relinquish, or at least appear to, their beliefs and values and adhere to those of the NGO in order to receive the support that they seek, for example for school fees. Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, this process reproduces the colonial legacies, and social as well as cultural imperial tactics associated with the London Missionary School, regarded as agents of British Imperialism (Olsen & Shadle, 1996).

This approach is problematised by Cheney and Rotabi (2015) who argue that within the Ugandan context, Western evangelicals perpetuate the discourse of orphan rescue, exacerbating the misappropriation of the term “orphan” to promote a missionary agenda that reproduces the colonial construct of Ugandan children as passive victims in need of rescue. Consequently, amongst an influx of western missionaries establishing orphanages, local systems of community-based care and effective national child protection policies are impeded. Synonymous with the way in which the ‘Mzungu Phenomenon’ featured within the children’s narratives, Cheney and Rotabi (2015) report that what Westerners don’t understand is that most children in Uganda are in orphanages for education, or because they present an attractive option of vulnerable families, as opposed to representing a need for child protection or care outside of family. Similarly, De Wet (2016) found that Western led (faith-based) NGO’s employing the orphanage model in Jinja have disempowered Ugandan families and community child protection initiatives, particularly by prioritising orphanage care over other services. For example, grassroots services and proactive interventions that support families to avoid having to resort to institutional care.

In addition to a sense of cultural imperialism in enforcing a Western conceptualisation of a religious belief system, De Wet (2016) reports the sense of disempowerment this power dynamic engenders, which resonates with that associated with the Mzungu Phenomenon of this study. Associated with a loss of agency, disempowerment was a feature of Mzungu phenomenon theme emerging from the children’s narratives, particularly from the perspectives of Males, as is illuminated within following extract and critical discussions.

**Isaac**

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As well as critical understandings of the Mzungu Phenomenon in the context of disempowerment and agency, the following extract from 14-year-old Isaac illuminates the contrasting situations of males and females, and consequently, the nuances in meanings of the phenomenon. Like Sarah, Isaac recounted his journey from home to the streets within a slum setting. He attributed this to a situation of poverty facing his facing, before discussing his on the streets within the slum, beginning with being invited to accommodation there (by an orphanage outreach worker), that acts as a temporary ‘safehouse’ prior to moving into the orphanage. The purpose of the safehouse is reportedly to offer shelter in which to sleep, a point of contact between children and orphanage directors, missionaries and volunteers, and a place in which to begin a process of gradual substance use cessation.

When I was eating some boys came, one called Wasswa. He told me I have some homes, it is not bad, come and I show you. I went to the slums, but when I saw this home, it was not good, it was not good in the slums, slums is bad. Some man came called Joshua; I think you know Joshua. Joshua told me do you want to go to some home? I told him yes, I want. He took me to a place, that’s where I found Frank, Brian and Shafiq and some others that are still in slums. Joshua told me here is not bad when you are not bad. So I was there in that house, the first safehouse near slum for I think one year. Uncle [orphanage caregiver] came some days not all days. Some days there was no food but some days there was food. Then a mzungu came and brought us food and said I will be here in slums on Thursdays with food and some games for you to enjoy. So, it was good those days. I thought oh I’m not going to leave, this is a good place, now I don’t want to go anywhere. Street is not good when you don’t have work, if you have work it is good, because you work you get some money you get something to eat, you don’t have to steal when you have a job. You can work, get some money and something to eat. When you don’t have some work, it is bad, because when you don’t have some money, you’re just going to sink. My friend told me don’t walk there again, it’s bad, we have to walk together. My friend is older, he’s not young but he has power he’s strong. I walked with him all the time, well sometimes. He helped me find scraps, we keep all the scraps to sell, he sold his scraps and I sold mine. The man told me when you have money you come back to buy some more here. I told him now we are going to get some money because there was so much scraps. So, we bought more, and some wire, he told me don’t worry this wire will make much money. Then we found somewhere to sleep by the road. So that is my life on the streets I think, but it’s not so bad, for girls I think it is worse. There is no job for girls, they just have to go to some place and sell themselves, like they just stand there, and the man comes and says they will give them some money but then they take her to some place and use her and doesn’t give her the money, they are lying they say let us use you but after they use you, they are just lying they just run away after.

In addition to illuminating the meaning of the Mzungu further as a pull factor towards the streets, Isaac portrays their influence in staying there, despite a frequent lack of food and the challenges faced in confrontations with other members of the community. Moreover, Isaac conveys the contrast between perspectives on the ‘home’ on a day-to-day basis without the presence or material input of “a mzungu”, versus when they are. For example, emphasising that dichotomy previously examined: “it was not good” versus “Then a mzungu came and brought us food and said I will be here in slums on Thursdays with food and some games for you to enjoy. So, it was good those days”.

A key element within this extract and indeed across the narratives of male participants was the meaning of working and self-sustenance as a matter of agency and empowerment, particularly in mitigating both the material and existential adversity of street life. Although it seems inconceivable given the living conditions of the streets within the slums, as Isaac contends; to the males of the sample, there are significant positives relating to their ability to maintain agency in navigating and overcoming poverty, to a greater extent than they were able to do before leaving home. This is not only important in understanding children’s experiences on the streets, but also in illuminating why so many children, particularly Males, run away from the orphanage after relocating there in order to return to the streets.

However, the way Isaac contrasted male’s position and perspectives on the streets to “for girls (I think) it is worse”, was common across the males within the sample in their acknowledgement of the gender disparity in agency and self-sustenance. Reflecting Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic arc (1981) in moving backwards and forwards between the parts of the texts and the whole and vice versa, both within and across texts, engenders the recognition that whilst the Mzungu phenomenen represents opportunity on the whole, girls do not have the same options for alternative opportunity as boys. As Mark indicates, where boys are able to generate income predominantly through plastic and scrap metal collection or market selling, income generation for girls on the streets in the slums is predominantly prostitution, within a high-risk environment owing to prevalence of HIV, of which they are aware. Although important to recognise that some may wish to engage in this work, in girl’s narratives as above, and as further illustrated below, the Mzungu is framed more as an “only hope”, or “only choice” for those who don’t, as a means of securing basic necessities or education. Whereas to boys, the Mzungu can represent more of an option, or supplement, in navigating poverty and self-sustenance. Whilst gender inequality in Uganda can be understood from a number of perspectives replete with a system of causal factors that span beyond the scope of this article, unfortunately, the current approaches associated with the Mzungu phenomenon contribute to the maintenance of this patriarchal system, that has been long acknowledged as a colonial legacy (De Wet, 2016).

Critical Understandings

To make sense of this complex, nuanced situation, again Postcolonial theory allows an understanding of the Mzungu versus ‘the other’ dichotomy engendered by the Mzungu phenomenon. However, Postcolonial Feminism perspectives such as that of the renowned Spivak (1999) lends enhanced sense and salience. Spivak, amongst others including Mohanty (1988), Minha (1989) and Oyèwùmí, (1997) describe the ‘double colonisation’ of women, whereby they not only faced the domination and oppression of
colonialism or imperialism, but also the patriarchy embedded within this power structure. Postcolonial feminists illustrate how the construction of the ‘other’ in terms of inferiority were highly gendered, and synonymous with the way in which Western women were oppressed by elite Western men as an inferior construct of ‘the other’ (de Groot, 2018). As such, women face ‘dual oppression’, firstly for being African, and secondly for being a woman, leading to further interiorisation and marginalisation. Spivak (1999) uses the term ‘subaltern’ for such women, illustrating how “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”. Emphasising the silencing of the subaltern, she criticises the colonial narrative that suggested “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1999, pp. 284).

As De Wet (2016) contends from the perspectives of Ugandan adults, this conceptualisation resonates with the ongoing approach employed by Western run orphanages, wherein the Mzungu, albeit perhaps unconsciously, “is essentially saving the brown child from the brown mother”, deemed incapable, or inferior in caring for her own child. Unfortunately, despite perhaps the best intentions of NGO actors, by examining the Mzungu phenomenon within this lens we see the oppressive cycle this system of power perpetuates through the children’s perspective. Firstly, that a Mzungu led facility offers superior support to that of their mothers to the extent of children actively seeking them. And secondly, for female participants especially, three of whom already mothers to infants themselves; that in instances of poverty, their own children may be ‘better off’ within the Mzungu led NGO. The repercussions of this, as observed amongst the participant sample, is that young mothers sometimes face the painstaking situation of leaving their children within the orphanage, before returning to the streets or moving on elsewhere when they no longer wish to stay there. This is not due to their lack of love or care for their children, it is because of the perpetuation of the disempowerment and distorted ideologies associated with the Mzungu phenomenon.

Furthermore, from a postcolonial perspective Mulumba et al (2021) highlighted the ramifications for women in similar situations, illustrating the ways in which the Mzungu Phenomenon intersects with national policy, legislation, and health infrastructure to exacerbate the oppression of women. As they contend, healthcare still resembles that of a colonial system, in which provision is largely in accordance with the religious ideologies and Missionary providers. Consequently, women and sexual minorities face unparalleled barriers to health, due to the maintenance of colonial legislation including the Penal Code Act of 1950, and the Public Health Act of 1935. These acts still regulate the facilitation of sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as: access to safe abortion, sexual orientation, sex education, family planning services (contraception), and control of venereal diseases (Mulumba et al, 2021). Therefore, the situation of girls such as those of this study, whose access to health is largely determined by Western Missionary donors in line with their religious beliefs, forms a contemporary ‘dual oppression’ of women: they are first oppressed for being women (or sexual minorities), and secondly, for being women within a religious based orphanage.

Whilst the gender inequality in Uganda is a failure on behalf of stakeholders far beyond NGOs, examining the wider context in which the children are embedded is important in understanding the way the Mzungu Phenomenon features within their lifeworld’s, and what it means to them. Although males within the participant group also faced severe adversity including abuse and exploitation, understanding the Mzungu as an option or supplement available to them amongst other - albeit limited - options for self-sustenance, allows comprehension of the difference in experiences and meanings of the phenomenon to females. When contrasted with the female participants evocation of the Mzungu phenomenon (a part) as an “only chance”, recognising their limited alternate options and wider social context (a whole), the deeply embedded complexity of a colonial power system is elucidated.

Conclusions

In concluding, this critical hermeneutic case study has illuminated and problematised the perpetuation of oppressive colonial legacies enveloped in the approaches employed by Western, predominantly religious based, operators engaging with children on the streets of Kampala. By employing a Ricœurian methodology that seeks to understand meanings distorted or hidden within narratives thus engaging a critical lens, the findings were consistent with the limited existing research on the matter. Though only the perspectives of Ugandan adults appear within the literature, this includes the maintenance and perpetuation of colonial power relations, ideologies, cultural imperialism, and disempowerment reported by De Wet (2016); the lack of long-term benefit, detrimental impact and motivations of Western NGO actors in formerly colonised nations globally (Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017; Gray & Campbell, 2007), and the twofold oppression of Ugandan women (De Wet, 2016; Mulumba et al., 2021). As such, the manner in which children institutionalised as recounted within their narratives, does not align with the rights based principles of Uganda’s DOVC (UMoGLSD, 2011) or NACF (UMoGLSD, 2012).

Ultimately, the meanings of the children’s experiences and perspectives embedded within the children’s narratives of ‘the Mzungu Phenomenon’, reveal the maintenance of a colonial construction of the self and the other - the white saviour versus the inferior, uncivilised - in need of rescue. Thus, as postcolonial and feminist theorists have contended, such a dichotomy - with no recognition of the historical power relations that shaped concepts of the self and other - merely reproduce and perpetuate a system based on essentialist, racialized constructions that maintain the oppression of colonial legacy (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). However, this study, through a process of critical reflection, acknowledges that this situation is not a result of individual failings. Rather, as discussed in Bunyan (2021), a result of what Flaherty (2018, p.18) succinctly captures in saying: "It is the logical result of a racist, colonialist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal system setting us up against each other”. This is largely unconscious, with those acting on behalf of NGOs likely maintain the best of intentions. Thus, in terms of implications for those affiliated for policy development and
implementation, as well as those already engaging with children in Uganda, we must interrogate and problematise these underlying systems of power, fostering a broader critical consciousnesses.

Although methodological reflections and limitations are discussed elsewhere (Bunyan, 2021) it is pertinent to note here that this study would benefit from further exploration on the Mzungu phenomenon in and of itself, from a range of indigenous and alternative perspectives, especially those of children. This is particularly important in navigating the future of support for children in Uganda in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, wherein there is already global inequality in vaccine provision and access to healthcare. Moreover, while my existing relationships with the children were the progenitor of the study, in future, such studies could be improved by employing a child led approach that does not feature a White researcher such as myself within data collection. The reason being that, inevitably, children’s responses are influenced by the interviewer; and try as I may to distance myself from it, I too represent the Mzungu Phenomenon (see Bunyan, 2021).

Finally, concerning the implications for researchers engaging in field studies, this paper demonstrates that meanings, practices, and policies effecting the lives of children in Uganda must be examined critically and understood within their wider histories of colonial discourse. This is important, because without doing so, we as researchers risk contributing to the existing colonial dichotomy that frames ‘the other’ in terms of powerlessness, affliction and need. By problematising existing representations and consequent praxis and fostering a greater critical awareness within the knowledge base from which NGO actors may operate, we can contribute to a more socially just future for Uganda’s children. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state, this commitment to social justice should be our duty.

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