pro-posições
e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

ARTICLES

Exploring vulnerability in residential childcare institutions in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The narrative on institutionalised children.

Explorando la vulnerabilidad en instituciones de cuidado residencial en Addis Abeba, Etiopía: La narrativa sobre los niños institucionalizados.

Explorando a vulnerabilidade em instituições de acolhimento residencial em Adis Abeba, Etiópia: A narrativa sobre crianças institucionalizadas.

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Abstract

This article explores how the notion of vulnerability unfolds in residential childcare institutions involved in humanitarian aid interventions in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It examines the prevailing narratives of adults and Western positionality regarding institutionalised children in the Global South, and discusses the methodological implications of conducting participant observation in such settings.

Drawing on data collected during ethnographic research, the contribution deconstructs the concept of vulnerability as it pertains to institutionalised children, illustrating the structural and relational factors that reinforce their marginality and social exclusion. Finally, it proposes a methodological lens for involving children in the research process and recognising their perspectives.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ethiopia, Voluntourism, Vulnerability, Anthropology

pro-posições
e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo se desarrolla la noción de vulnerabilidad en instituciones residenciales de cuidado infantil involucradas en intervenciones de ayuda humanitaria en Addis Abeba, Etiopía. Examina las narrativas predominantes de los adultos y el posicionamiento occidental respecto a los niños institucionalizados en el Sur Global, y analiza las implicaciones metodológicas de realizar observación participante en dichos contextos.

A partir de datos recopilados mediante investigación etnográfica, la contribución deconstruye el concepto de vulnerabilidad en relación con los niños institucionalizados, ilustrando los factores estructurales y relacionales que refuerzan su marginación y exclusión social. Finalmente, propone una perspectiva metodológica para involucrar a los niños en el proceso de investigación y reconocer sus perspectivas.

Palabras clave: *Poscolonialismo, Etiopía, Voluntarismo, Vulnerabilidad, Antropología*

Resumo

Este artigo explora como a noção de vulnerabilidade se desdobra em instituições de acolhimento residencial envolvidas em intervenções humanitárias em Adis Abeba, Etiópia. Examina as narrativas predominantes de adultos e a positionalidade ocidental em relação a crianças institucionalizadas no Sul Global, e discute as implicações metodológicas de realizar observação participante em tais contextos.

Com base em dados coletados durante pesquisa etnográfica, a contribuição desconstrói o conceito de vulnerabilidade no que diz respeito às crianças institucionalizadas, ilustrando os fatores estruturais e relacionais que reforçam sua marginalidade e exclusão social. Por fim, propõe uma lente metodológica para envolver crianças no processo de pesquisa e reconhecer suas perspectivas.

Palavras-chave: *Pós-colonialismo, Etiópia, Voluntarismo, Vulnerabilidade, Antropologia*

pro-posições
e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Introduction

In 2017, the Ethiopian government officially suspended inter-country adoption. Public opinion in Addis Ababa split[1]. On the one hand, it was considered a form of protection and a chance for children to grow up within the Ethiopian culture, customs, and social values. On the other hand, there was fear that residential childcare facilities, domestic adoption, and alternative childcare would not have the capacity to address and support the number of orphans and vulnerable children in the country. The official ban on inter-country adoption in 2018 further amplified the controversy and deepened concerns among experts in the child protection sector, making evident the different moral assumptions and logics that govern the debate around orphanhood, adoption, and the child's best interest (Roux, 2022). Participant observation in private childcare institutions was conducted during this pivotal period of transition. It provided the opportunity to investigate notions of vulnerability and orphanhood as shaped by both local understandings and dominant humanitarian narratives concerning institutionalised children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

This article starts by exploring how the concept of vulnerability is implemented by the prevailing humanitarian logics that portray institutionalised children as unaware of their social, cultural, and political conditions. It then further examines the implications for the actors involved in such a setting. Additionally, it problematises the main categorisation applied by donor-driven logics and predominant international child protection discourses in such contexts, the Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVC) category. Eventually, it analyses the implications of how "such conceptualisation affects notions of family and social cohesion" (Crivello & Chuta, 2012, p. 538), the depoliticised view of OVC, and the child rescue narratives associated with it.

Rooted in ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of a doctoral research project[2], this contribution discusses the conceptual framework and practical challenges surrounding research involving institutionalised children exposed to humanitarian aid interventions, voluntourism

[1] Earlier that year, the Ethiopian House of Representatives removed all references to inter-country adoption from the Ethiopian Family Code - resulting in the Revised Family Code (Amendment) Proclamation No. 1070/2018-, thus making the adoption of Ethiopian children by foreigners de facto illegal in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

[2] The findings are part of a study that explored competing imaginaries on inter-country adoption from Ethiopia, highlighting tensions between the perspectives of the Global South and North.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

and inter-country adoption. Empirical data were collected from October 2017 to December 2019 over a period of 12 months. Information shared in this article was gathered through participant observation in two private residential childcare institutions in Addis Ababa.

The first part of this article examines the concept of vulnerability as it pertains to the specific setting of this research. Field notes function as epistemic and narrative devices to explore ethnographic methods and self-reflectivity in reframing the concept of vulnerability. The second part unpacks the complexity of the researcher's positionality during fieldwork. It deals with existing imaginaries regarding foreign visitors in settings involving international actors. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of voluntourism in reproducing discourses on vulnerability and concerning children.

The third part addresses residential childcare institutions as privileged settings to investigate the notions of orphanhood and vulnerability as universal assumptions applied to institutionalised children in a framework of structural post-colonial inequality. Lastly, it elucidates factors that contribute to making residential childcare institutions spaces of social marginalisation, thus reiterating conditions of depoliticisation and exclusion.

Finally, the article suggests a potential approach for research involving children, which entails the participation of children, their guardians, and the community in creating an environment that allows for a just and equitable engagement of institutionalised children.

"What do you do here?"

April 2018, Ethiopia. I am in the courtyard of a childcare institution, standing outside the manager's office where I have to attend a meeting. Next to me is a child, a resident of the institution, waiting for his turn. We start talking about my phone, and after some time, the boy asks me, "Who do you take?". Since I am a farenji, a foreigner and, more specifically, a White woman, the boy assumed I was an adoptive parent-to-be, coming to take a child home with me, as recorded in my field notes.

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

I arrive at the childcare institution at around 9:30. A 7-year-old boy is sitting on the steps of the director's office. I move closer, waiting with him for my turn. He sees my phone and asks, "Can I see it?" I answer yes, and he takes it. He tries to switch it on; he laughs because he cannot make it, and then I show him how to do it; he smiles and asks again, "Can I see it?". I nod.

Me: Is the director here?

Boy: What did you take?

Me: Mmh?

Boy: Who do you take?

Me: Sorry?

Boy: Who do you take?

Me: Nobody.

Boy: You only just came?

This excerpt reveals my unintentional embeddedness in the broader scenario of institutional and humanitarian expectations. It reflects how encounters with foreigners in this setting are deeply shaped by children's adoption imaginaries and the assumptions that such institutional spaces - and the actors that navigate them - shape and project. The ways this child drew on previous encounters and experiences to position adult figures, particularly those marked as foreign, within familiar narratives of mobility and departure epitomise the reciprocal influence between subjects and their social context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), making evident that interactions are unavoidable elements of subjectivity. Echoing Liamputtong (2007), in this scenario, the creative co-construction process that involved my 'self' in such specific settings deemed reflexivity as crucial to assembling social knowledge (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012) and negotiating my role in terms of age, race and class inequality, positioning, data management and analysis (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). In such a theoretical context, the child's question epitomises not an isolated curiosity but an interactional, meaningful response to the selective attention institutionalised children often receive, bringing to the fore the role of participants in shaping the research process. This example shows how empiric experience continuously shapes and informs individual and collective categorisations and knowledges, challenging essentialist

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

ontologies. Researching children's understandings, interactions, and entanglements opened up the opportunity to explore what Spyrou (2017) describes as "processes that constitute and delineate the child as an entity and childhood as a phenomenon" (p. 433). It emphasises their contribution to depicting the nature of knowledge encounters and problematising the implications of international research within (post)colonial and local contexts (Sultana, 2007). As underlined by Abebe and Skovdal:

> As a Caucasian, born, raised and educated in the Global North, Skovdal had to enter the field in Kenya with an awareness of his position as 'other' and an outsider. As an outsider, he constantly had to negotiate the politics of representation, which called for reflexivity and a constant awareness of his positioning amongst the children, their guardians and the community as a whole. (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012, p. 87)

Abebe and Skovdal's compelling illustration of how "ethnicity was experienced" during their fieldwork in Kenya (p. 86) underscores challenges akin to those faced during fieldwork in Addis Ababa, where positionality as an outsider required constant negotiation of representation during the events that occurred.

As pointed out in the introduction, the suspension and consequent ban on inter-country adoption in the Ethiopian legislation raised several concerns amongst adoptive agencies and childcare institutions still involved in inter-country adoption. Many rushed to conclude the pending adoptive processes and provide as many families as possible with a match before the proclamation entered into force. During this period of transition, institutionalised children demonstrated awareness of how they were positioned within the shifting categories and nature of their visitors, together with their expectations. Participant observation was instrumental in grasping such phenomena within residential childcare institutions even though, as made evident by the dynamics within the compounds, ethical concerns have been one of the main problematic points of exploring children's experiences and dimensions. In this regard, previous research involving children, their guardians and the community (Costa & Tisci, 2016; Costa, 2015; Costa, 2011) underscored the relevance of the researcher's theoretical knowledge of the know-how and the broader local, social and personal context (Henderson, 2006; Meintjes & Giese, 2006) in ensuring the ethical conduct of the research. It has been shown that, to some extent, the quality of data depends on the relationship researchers build with their surroundings, including the ability to respond to children's requests and events that might arise during the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

research (Schenk & Williamson, 2005) whilst also integrating, understanding, and respecting local ethos.

"Do you have parents?"

As epitomised by the previous field note, it became evident during fieldwork that addressing vulnerability required going beyond the basic procedural requirements of ethical guidelines to offer a two-way perspective. As Razy (2018) discussed, one may find oneself dealing with the discrepancy between principles and practice. On the one hand, the normative and pragmatic ethics, namely academic procedures (p. 5); on the other hand, the ethical challenges and considerations arising from the interaction between the researcher and the other adult and young actors navigating childcare institutions, which may be defined as "ethics in the field" (Sakoyan, 2008, p. 4), or applied ethics – referring to the holistic interactional awareness in research encounters, relations and entanglements. This tension converges towards what Graham & Powell (2015) identify as the ERIC approach – Ethical Research Involving Children, rooted in reflexivity, rights and relationships – to critically explore the "microethical moments" (Ebrahim, 2010) emerging during fieldwork as an integral part of the research. Drawing from this theoretical stance, this research deployed ethically engaged methodologies to investigate the construction and negotiation of vulnerability. Therefore, it was crucial to consider the multiple interpretative frameworks that actors involved in participant observation applied to interpret institutionalised children's vulnerability in order to implement a methodologically and ethically robust approach.

Rather than discrete categories, these interpretative frameworks inform and affect one another, intersecting and shaping practices, policies, and landscapes in which children navigate their interactions and identities. Building on this point, three distinct socio-constructed categories emerged when addressing institutionalised children.

The first one is the Global South perspective, which looks at institutionalised children through the binary framework of the Global South and Global North. It applies to discussions about children a "shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p. 12) on a global scale. Social researchers have employed this perspective to highlight the impacts of inequalities broadly

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

resulting from imperialism and austerity policies – such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) – on power dynamics that intertwine children, families and communities. Recent debates also readdressed it in decolonial terms, framing coloniality as "an onto-epistemologically alive geo/biopolitical affective force" (Araneda-Urrutia, 2022, p. 295) that must be considered when addressing children's lives in the Global South.

Araneda-Urrutia discusses how racialised attitudes and logic contribute to the construction and application of the notion of vulnerability to children who do not conform to W.E.I.R.D. – Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic – models and concepts.

Interventions and expectations theoretically anchored on W.E.I.R.D. societies' assumptions and peculiarities (Henrich et al., 2010) are incorporated by the second discussed category, the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC). Promoted and applied by international organisations and agencies, this notion informs policies, programming, and research worldwide. As anticipated, the OVC construct is rooted in developmental narratives and child protection strategies, and its application is primarily geographically situated: informed by epistemologies of the Global North, applied in the Global South. In its implementation, this category typically targets orphans, defined by UNICEF (2001) as children under the age of 15 who have lost one or both parents.

Lastly, the local socio-economic perspective, namely the socio-culturally constructed assumptions that produce specific knowledges and regimes of truths (Foucault, 1998). It builds upon notions of childhood and orphanhood embedded in specific contexts, habits and values to identify and address disadvantaged children. It privileges local understandings, narratives, and categorisations that shape the socio-cultural and political stance on institutionalised children.

The interplay between these three categories has implications for the conceptual conflation of orphanhood and poverty and the resulting methodological approach.

The conceptual conflation addresses the intersection of orphanhood and the colonial imaginary, which disconnects the hegemonic narrative of the exotic child (Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi, 2016, p. 304) from the structural factors that affect the lives of children in the Global South. However, as previously argued, children's marginalisation is primarily linked to their socio-economic background, which affects their life conditions and leads them to childcare

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

institutions, rather than being directly caused by their orphan status *per se*[3]. In this framework, as argued by Cheney (2017), the depoliticised OVC category affects orphans by tying them to child rescue narratives of policies that ignore the element of poverty and, combined with orphanhood, expose them and make them vulnerable.

The resulting methodological approach concerns how the notion of vulnerability intersects with two core categories, namely age status (childhood) and kinship (orphanhood). As anticipated, the existence of institutionalised children is often characterised by both practical and theoretical peripheralisation as well as inconsistent representations of vulnerability and resilience. This narrative offers little space to rearticulate the analytical placement of those socio-constructed categories that produce cultural – and political – exclusion and represent a challenge in the negotiation of representation. Such a notion, described in different contexts by Tsing (1994) and Foucault (1980) through the spatial metaphor of marginality, applies here to how dominant discourses on orphanhood constrain the capacity of institutionalised children to define, redefine, discuss and represent their condition either in alignment – or in opposition – to these prevailing narratives. Indeed, participant observation revealed a substantial gap between institutionalised children's experiences and Global North participants' descriptions of orphanhood as a condition of social disability and dependency, an aspect that has also been underlined by other scholars (Abebe, 2009b; De Graeve, 2015) concerning Ethiopian children. During fieldwork, this gap became more apparent when examining the practice of voluntourism, a key phenomenon in the social construction and reproduction of children's vulnerability.

Voluntourism, a neologism generated by collapsing the words "volunteer" and "tourism", is a socio-economic practice that – in this case – targets childcare institutions in the Global South and mainly involves the Global North population. It operates within the moral economy of humanitarianism and consists of organising holidays that include short periods of volunteering within charitable or non-governmental organisations active in the humanitarian aid sector, broadly speaking. Voluntourism is often marketed as ethical travel and has a general connotation of moral consumption. Within settings where child care and protection are implemented, its consequences on a local and international level have been explored and labelled

[3] Even though orphan status may contribute to exacerbating conditions of marginality, it is neither a sole nor a universal determinant for children accessing childcare institutions. The reliance on childcare institutions as a means of securing basic needs stems from socio-economic constraints, even for children that may not encompass the definition of being orphans. From this perspective, acquiring orphan status may be instrumental to answering short-term or medium-term needs.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

as the Orphan Industrial Complex (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019; Cheney & Rotabi, 2017), referring to the commodification and exploitation of the orphanhood narrative. In residential childcare institutions, where fieldwork was conducted, 'orphan tourism' was configured as a constant movement of volunteers who arrive in the facility to stay for a short period, from half a day to a few weeks. In line with what Richter and Norman (2010) argued, it emerged that one of the significant consequences of this practice is that the repetitive exposure of institutionalised children to experiences of abandonment reinforces their marginality. Additionally, Voelkl's investigation on the impact of voluntourism in a Ghanaian orphanage illustrated how children may intentionally modulate the quality and intensity of their relationship with volunteers with the awareness "of the fact that there is a leaving date" (Voelkl, 2012, p. 36). Generated by dynamics of affective consumption, voluntourism tends to economically and materially reward institutions that provide visitors and donors with a specific humanitarian narrative of vulnerability. This active contribution to emphasising children's marginality and dependency delineates a discursive space that tends to reproduce their commodifying narratives and visitors' moral positioning.

During fieldwork, the performative and narrative tension between institutionalised children's lived experiences and the social production of discourses on vulnerability - that voluntourism contributed to reproducing - emerged in many interactions. However, it became evident when children's reactions did not meet visitors' expectations, as in the following event recounted by a German volunteer, a woman in her twenties. She relates being stopped by children playing in the courtyard, who asked her directly, "Do you have parents?". She described having felt unsettled – "so badly", in her words – that she ultimately decided not to answer. "It is really difficult to talk to them", she later explained. When asked for clarification on this point, she explained to me that this question provoked a feeling of unbearable sadness: How could she tell those parentless children that she had "a lovely family"?

Her silence, though it was intended to protect the children, unintentionally reaffirmed the narrative that positioned them as "lacking" – in family, stability, and belonging. However, her reaction showcases that she was unaware of socio-cultural, spatial and economic factors that influenced children's experience in the compound. Indeed, the children's questions reflected their acute understanding of the socio-situational structures surrounding them, where family-making practices, both in terms of construction and separation, are a central topic. The legal condition of parentless children was a constitutional element of their status and permanence in

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

that place. Considering this, participant observation indicated that institutionalised children were aware that their orphan status was the reason for the volunteers' presence, and that their visits often corresponded with exceptional activities, such as drawings, games, taking pictures, coffees or religious ceremonies. Therefore, from a relational perspective, it could be argued that her choice not to answer (because of her assumptions about vulnerability) impacted their agency more than their understanding of their social condition.

I was also involved and observed in my interactions. Participant observation was indeed a situation of reciprocity, where I was interpreted and categorised by children according to the same representational logic of the other childcare institution visitors. From this perspective, fieldwork offered a privileged spot to reflect on how my own presence was involved in the negotiation and modulation of representations and vulnerability.

This perspective on the pervasiveness of practices of vulnerability reproduction takes us back to the coexistence of general ethical considerations and the specific challenges encountered during fieldwork and raises questions about how to navigate it. How can children's ethical and practical protection be ensured by the researcher, considering power (in)balance, informed consent, and the "circumstances of production, circulation and consumption" (Mitchell, 2006, p. 63) of data concerning them? How can they be provided with the information they are entitled to while respecting their feelings and experiences? The existing research data may offer answers to such analytical questions. Focusing on the material and discursive socio-construction of the category of orphanhood in African contexts provides a broader analytical lens to explore its relationship with persistent narratives on vulnerability and how it is constructed from an institutional level.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Orphanhood and children in care

Social geographer Tatek Abebe has addressed the vulnerability of orphans in terms of "divergent conceptualisations of orphanhood" (2009a, p. 70) to explore the role residential childcare institutions play in contemporary orphanhood in Africa – a problem identified by UNICEF (2003) as one of the major issues afflicting children across the continent[4].

According to Abebe, this issue is intrinsically tied to global inequalities, as well as age-based deprivation and marginalisation – both rooted in poverty (Bailey, 2009; Abebe, 2009b). His study argues that, within the context of Global South and North relations, orphanages serve as physical spaces where local and international logics converge, making orphans "global" (Abebe, 2009b). Similarly, Drah (2012) theorised residential childcare institutions as 'places-in-between' specific socio-cultural contexts and broader rhetoric on universal development.

In line with this, the residential childcare institutions where fieldwork was conducted provided a privileged setting to observe such divergent conceptualisations alongside the normative construction of notions of marginality, vulnerability, and commodification. The paradox of institutionalised children caught in hierarchies of adoptability, framed as vulnerable and in need of protection, yet rendered ineligible for inter-country adoption, further intensified in the post-ban period. Children considered unadoptable were paradoxically made hyper-visible as symbols of humanitarian failure while remaining structurally invisible within the national welfare system. As also noticed by Roux (2020), humanitarian representations of these children portrayed them as left in a state of social marginality, forgotten by the inter-country adoption system and its actors – most of whom withdrew from the country – that ultimately failed to "rescue" them. At the international level, the central debate on precariousness and marginality surrounding institutionalised children ineligible for adoption emphasised their condition of exclusion.

This discourse, rooted in the inter-country adoption rhetoric, has been critically examined by the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2012). The ACPF highlighted the persistent contradiction that characterised childcare institutions, often funded by the same organisations and donors who eventually condemn the conditions to which institutionalised

[4] Contemporary studies on this topic also argued that orphanhood being central in the international child protection discourse (Crivello & Chuta, 2012) does not necessarily make it the determinant of child vulnerability (Ansell, 2016), as discussed elsewhere in this article.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

children are exposed. This contradiction is made evident in findings showing that donors financing and supporting childcare institutions simultaneously frame them as inadequate environments where children face precarious conditions (ACPF 2012, Hübinette & Andersson 2012). Furthermore, the ACPF contested the stereotypical gaze commonly cast on orphans and orphanages (ACPF, 2012), disputing the core justification for the existence of residential childcare institutions, namely that community-based mechanisms for childcare and protection[5] are inadequate in dealing with the increasing number of orphans (Abebe, 2009b; UNICEF, 2001). Moreover, the presence of such institutions has been observed to amplify reversed effects. Locally, they exacerbate social inequalities within communities (Abebe, 2002), whilst internationally, media campaigns perpetuate a disempowering "discourse of vulnerability" (Costa & Tisci, 2016). This jeopardises public understanding of orphans' agency and resilience. It has been argued that this narrative, other than blurring situational factors that influence the social construction of orphanhood categories in specific contexts (Evans, 2005), neglects the structural causes of poverty and marginality experienced by children in economically vulnerable communities (Abebe, 2009b).

Research on youth vulnerability and access to resources shows that child protection policies targeting OVC often overlook the needs of those not formally classified as vulnerable who nonetheless face significant socio-economic hardships (Ramabu, 2020; Abebe, 2009a). Such selective targeting results in uneven resource distribution. Whilst improving OVC access to education, healthcare, and work opportunities, it renders children in similar geographical, economic, and socio-cultural circumstances – but categorised as non-vulnerable – even more susceptible to poverty and disadvantage. This contradiction has been showcased by studies on orphanhood and vulnerability in Ethiopia, arguing that "the very concept of OVC illustrates the tension that exists between targeting specific groups of children for support - such as orphans - and developing strategies for addressing child vulnerability more generally" (Chuta & Crivello, 2012, p. 538).

[5] This perspective focuses on the social resilience and capacity of mutual support and aid mechanisms, which might function as a safety net and ensure that children remain within their communities and cultural environments to the greatest extent possible according to the opportunities the specific context might offer. While informal childcare strategies – such as child circulation, family collectives, fictive kinship, and fostering – may not always be defined by specific terminology, they play a vital role in the existing care-sharing system.

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e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Targeting the OVC category over children belonging to different statuses, a mechanism already widely reproduced by many actors over time[6], hides even more the structural issues of poverty and inequality connected to residential childcare institutions that emerged during fieldwork.

A narrative of vulnerability

Although residential childcare can vary significantly in terms of capacity, mission and donors (Cahajic et al., 2003), the two institutions where participant observation occurred were similar in size, resources and internal organisation. During participant observation, three key elements that shaped the self-perception of institutionalised children became apparent.

The first element is the implications of living in a condition of marginality within the neighbourhood. In Ethiopian urban contexts, geographical proximity is usually associated with mutual aid and support dynamics. However, the compounds of residential childcare institutions tend to prioritise children's interactions with Global North visitors, such as volunteers or donors, over engagement with the local neighbourhood. In cases where the childcare institution is funded by charitable organisations, it may include a religious facility, such as a church, which could attract neighbours for regular services or events. However, participant observation revealed that neighbours' involvement is usually limited to religious activities and does not extend to meaningful interactions with the compounds' population.

As a result, even though the staff is predominantly Ethiopian and the children attend public school, the childcare institutions remain largely disconnected from the social network and activities of the neighbourhood. This pattern of interaction, which fosters reciprocal social exclusion between the compound and its surroundings, limits the children's exposure to the local environment and hinders their development of social skills. The strict internal organisation and management of the compounds also discourage children's involvement in the neighbourhood social life, further affecting their sense of belonging and role within the local

[6] International organisations, inter-country adoption agencies, non-governmental organisations – to name a few – and Academia might eventually contribute to the process of orphan status commodification (Meintjes & Giese, 2006) and reiteration of universal assumptions concerning children (Ansell, 2016).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

social network. This detachment reinforces their sense of 'otherness', deepening their marginalisation within the broader social arena dynamics.

The second element is the persistent narrative of marginalisation associated with and experienced by institutionalised children, which reinforces their stigma. This perpetuates a view that portrays them as outcasts, influencing their self-perception and interactions. As emerged during fieldwork, childcare institutions' directors and staff emphasised the lack of meaningful local social networks for institutionalised children, attributing this absence to their marginal social status. This narrative was further compounded by claims of discriminatory treatment from external service providers. For instance, on different occasions, childcare institutions' staff expressed mistrust towards hospital personnel, alleging that "doctors experiment on orphans" using treatments that non-institutionalised children, supported by broader and stronger social networks, would not be subjected to. This perception was reinforced when, a few weeks after these conversations, a child from the institution passed away in a hospital. Staff attributed the death to an excessive number of medical tests, claiming that a life-threatening volume of blood was extracted, which they believed caused the child's demise. Shortly thereafter, another infant in the same institution fell ill. This time, the staff decided to keep him in the facility, fearing that he would receive similar treatment to the child who passed away and referring to her as being treated "like a guinea pig" due to her orphan status. Another childcare institution's director expressed similar concerns and sought to address this issue by building a private hospital within the facility.

These events occurring during participant observation underscored feelings of discrimination from external entities, including hospital personnel, administrative staff, and agencies responsible for providing basic utilities – such as water and electricity. Findings showed that access to resources alone is not sufficient to guarantee dignity in their implementation. Participants consistently linked this issue to the children's lack of robust social networks, which stemmed from their social status as institutionalised children. Eventually, a strong, meaningful local network has been described as vital for activating and fostering reciprocal support and assistance dynamics.

The third element revealed by participant observation, in addition to the issue of stigmatisation, is the potential self-fulfilling prophecy effect created by interactions within the residential childcare institution. Daily communications between adults navigating the

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compounds and the children conveyed the idea, both verbally and practically, that children's orphan status inherently resulted in discrimination and restricted access to services on a structural level.

Lastly, it could be argued that this narrative of vulnerability shapes children's social marginality into a defining characteristic of their identity and representation rather than viewing it as a temporary condition tied to their residency in a childcare institution.

This point is relevant because it showcases the risk of reframing their condition of marginality as intrinsic to their being and identity. Such a depoliticised perspective may undermine their ability to recognise and assert their agency as they transition into adulthood.

In line with such considerations, a striking element that emerged during fieldwork concerning the notion of vulnerability was the linguistic choices used by international participants to describe institutionalised children's circumstances. Children were often labelled as "vulnerable", "incomplete", and "broken", with occasional use of medicalised terms – such as "traumatised". Araneda-Urrutia (2022) discussed the use of similar descriptors in the Chilean context. He argues that the discursive enactment of biopolitical discourses and devices historically justified post-colonial narratives to essentialise and racialise certain categories of children "as weak, incomplete and unfit in the name of social and economic development" (ibid., p. 302). Similarly, portraying children as defenceless, helpless, and fundamentally unprotected and exposed reinforces deficit-based narratives against children's subjectivity and experiences.

From an analytical perspective, this primary focus on vulnerability conveyed contiguous notions of marginality. The perpetuation and exposure to this specific mono-normative narrative of vulnerability may have negative consequences for institutionalised children's agency and overlook the structural conditions inherent to residential childcare institutions (Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi, 2016) that characterise and influence their actual situation. This narrative assesses children's status in terms of deficits based on normative discourses surrounding childhood, belongingness and kinship, disregarding the systemic factors contributing to their marginality, such as inequality, poverty and structural violence (Cheney, 2010a; Cheney, 2010b). Therefore, it is crucial to understand children's experiences and the impact of these normative discourses on their well-being. By framing orphanhood through the lens of donor-driven policies and normative universalised categories (Chirwa, 2002), the "orphan problem" is addressed in ways

pro-posições
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

that often fail to account for specific socio-economic, historical, and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it risks ending up jeopardising children's skills to cope with marginalisation. Eventually, this approach might end up misallocating crucial resources at the expense of children's well-being (Abebe, 2009b, p. 81) and hiding contextual factors contributing to the social construction of orphanhood(s) and the institutionalisation of children (Evans, 2005). The complexity of these narratives and their embeddedness in institutional discourses call for a focus on how children's participation in research may be addressed in practice. The following section outlines how this was approached methodologically in this research.

Research involving children

As explored through micro-interactions and institutional discourse, the reproduction of narratives concerning children's vulnerability impacts both their external representation and social legitimacy in articulating their own experiences and perspectives. Yet, fieldwork repeatedly revealed children's agency in interrogating, interpreting and resisting the main assumptions concerning their way of experiencing vulnerability, orphanhood and marginality. The complex, changing context of the childcare institutions involved in this research demonstrates the analytical need to include and recognise children's subjectivities as an integral part of the setting, even when formally excluded from decision-making processes. Their perceptive understanding of institutional environments and interactions reflects their active engagement with and interpretation of family reconfiguration and re-organisation, power structures, and future aspirations. This perspective encourages deeper exploration of what lies behind and beyond the child. It moves away from frameworks of vulnerability to recognise the relevance of children's experiences for understanding the impact of power relations and post-colonial effects on their condition. This methodological shift aims to integrate children's relational strategies and situated knowledges (Szulc et al., 2012) and calls for a stance in which consent and participation are seen as a continuous co-constructed process. In line with what was argued by Christensen and James (2008), addressing children's subjectivities as dynamic narratives allows researchers to recognise the ways in which they construct meaning from their experiences across cultural contexts. Researchers can examine children's perceptions of the social environment, interpretation and exercise of agency, their desires, and the strategies they employ to negotiate and influence decisional processes. Similarly, children's engagement echoed

pro-posições
e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Razy's concerns (2018) on adapting responsively to the ethical demands emerging from fieldwork and their realities – such as, in this case, the disclosure of sensitive information, emotional distress or strain, feelings of anxiety, and self-doubt. These aspects were methodologically approached during preliminary fieldwork by involving participants as competent interlocutors in the process of potential risk identification and mitigation. It was conducted in collaboration with children's guardians, who contributed to establishing the conditions for children to express their experiences in a secure environment. During fieldwork, the focus on children's activities and discourses intended to address their perspectives, involvement, participation, and experience of the care and adoption system. Additionally, children engaged in multi-modal recreational activities tailored to accommodate their individual competencies, knowledge, and interests (Smith, 2016). Multi-modal recreational activities and participant observation facilitated a balance between protecting children and promoting their involvement. This approach encouraged discussions about their personal experiences, helped them become familiar with me, and fostered a relationally friendly environment. Finally, particular attention was given to the relationship between me and the children to remain "mindful of the implications of the research encounter for children's lives and the legacy left" (Abebe & Bessell, 2014, p. 130). This balance ensured the ethical integrity of the research, particularly considering the children's past experiences of dislocation, parental loss or abandonment.

Conclusions

This article explored how the narrative of vulnerability unfolds in the case of children residing in childcare institutions in Addis Ababa who were exposed to humanitarian aid interventions, inter-country adoption, and voluntourism. It uses data excerpts collected during fieldwork to articulate the positionality of institutionalised children, foreign visitors and the researcher in relation to the local network and the wider 'humanitarian aid community'. It pointed out structural factors that led to the construction of notions of children's vulnerability, social marginality, and exclusion.

Following Abebe and Bessell (2014), this article endeavoured to move the practice of research with children in the Global South "from the geographical and conceptual margins to the centre" (p. 127) thereby inviting a critical reflection on how geo-culturally situated narratives

http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

might be inadequate in other contexts. As Edward and Mauthner (2002) highlighted, an ethic focused on care – framed as a responsibility – should consider reciprocity, diversity, and accountability without perpetuating processes of "fragilisation" and depoliticisation of institutionalised children.

The contribution brought to the fore the contexts in which institutionalised children live, illustrating the gap between children's agency and how Global North visitors perceive their capabilities. It provided a focused analysis of how vulnerability narratives are collectively produced and reiterated in childcare institution settings.

Additionally, it explored the methodological dialogue between the socio-constructivist epistemology of the research and the ethical issues emerging from fieldwork. Finally, this article suggested strategies to encompass institutionalised children's understandings and knowledge and emphasised the importance of recognising their agency.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by the Thematic Research Grant scheme of the British Institute in Eastern Africa – BIEA.

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Notes

Submission data:

Submitted to evaluation on June 24th, 2025; revised on June 24th, 2025; accepted for publication on July 18th, 2025.

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pro-posições
e-ISSN 1980-6248
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2024-0050EN

Authors' contributions:

Costa, Chiara – Conceptualization (Lead), Data curation (Lead), Formal Analysis (Lead), Funding acquisition (Lead), Investigation (Lead), Methodology (Lead), Project administration (Lead), Resources (Lead), Software (Lead), Supervision (Lead), Validation (Lead), Visualization (Lead), Writing – original draft (Lead), Writing – review & editing (Lead).

Support and Funding:

British Institute in Eastern Africa.

Canterbury Christ Church University (doctoral program).

Research data availability:

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Copy Editing services:

English Version: Chiara Costa <ch.costa@unito.it>

Text preparation and English revision: Munirah Bishop <munirah.bishop@gmail.com>

Responsible editors:

Associate Editor: Alice Sarcinelli <alice.sarcinelli@u-paris.fr>

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