It takes a village to raise a child: everyday experiences of living with extended family in Namibia

Emmerentia Leonard, Janetta Ananias and Victoria Sharley

Abstract: The family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of children. The Namibian Constitution protects the family, without specifying what 'family' means—which allows for legal concepts of family to evolve to fit social realities. The caring for children, most commonly by extended family or kinship carers is widespread and a practice acceptable in most Namibian cultures in the spirit of *Ubuntu*. This article foregrounds the importance of carer-child relationships in the care provided by extended family for children who do not live with their birth parents. It further investigates children's everyday understandings of what family means to offer a multiplicity of experiences of child fosterage practice. These are presented from a range of carers and children within the fosterage context and considered within children's unique and positive relationships within their families.

Keywords: Extended family, family, fosterage, kinship care, Ubuntu, Namibia.

Note on the authors: see end of article

Introduction

Families are the basic and essential building blocks of society (International Federation for Family Development 2017) and as such are regarded as very important throughout Africa (Assim 2013), and indeed, elsewhere. Similarly, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989) in its preamble posits that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Similarly, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union 1990: 17) under Article 18 acknowledges the family as 'the natural unit and basis of society.' The Namibian Child Care and Protection Act (CCPA) 3 of 2015 does not define a family, but it describes a family member in relation to a child, as a:

> (i) Parent of the child; (ii) any other person who has parental responsibilities and rights in respect of the child; (iii) a grandparent, step-parent, brother, sister, uncle, aunt or cousin of the child; or (iv) any other person with whom the child has developed a significant relationship, based on psychological or emotional attachment, which resembles a family relationship (CCPA 2015: 14).

Besides the significant role ascribed to the family globally and specifically in Namibia, there is no clear definition of family attributed mostly due to the diversity of family forms and living arrangements (Assim 2013; Okon 2012; Sharma 2013). This article does not aim to craft a definition of the term 'family,' but it considers it as an integrated and functional unit of society tasked with the primary responsibility of the upbringing, protection and development of children (Sharma 2013).

In modern Western societies, children are typically raised by their biological parents in a central nuclear family unit (Brown *et al.* 2020). The nuclear family is often associated with the idea of being the 'ideal' or 'proper' family or family form and as such, is assumed to be the benchmark from which all other family forms differ or deviate (Assim 2013). In most African contexts, the responsibility for the care of children is not only on the biological parents within the nuclear family set-up, but is shared by all in the extended family network (Amos 2013; Assim 2013; Madhavan & Gross 2013). Extended household organisation refers to the presence of adults other than parents and their partners, such as grandparents, other kin, and housemates sharing in the fosterage of children (Mollborn, Fomby & Dennis 2012).

The practice of fosterage is widespread in societies on the African continent (Beck *et al.* 2014). It is based on the social philosophy of *Ubuntu* which is centred around the capacity of individuals to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). The value of

Ubuntu is illustrated in Nelson Mandela's autobiography 'Long Walk to Freedom' (Makiwane & Kaunda 2018: 2) in which he states:

> My mother presided over three huts at Qunu, which as I remember, were always filled with babies and children of my relations. In fact, I hardly recall any occasion as a child when I was alone. In African culture, the sons and daughters of one's aunts and uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins.

Childcare has historically been thought of, in Africa, as a social task performed by an entire extended family (Brown 2009). This collective sense of responsibility for the 'proper' upbringing of children is the background to the African proverb which states, 'it takes a village to raise a child', with the 'village' referring to the extended family and kinship community at large (Assim 2013: 27). This socially distributed care reflects strong kinship that serves as a social welfare system in times of need as well as the glue of teaching tradition (Brown *et al.* 2020). Social connectedness and support are widely recognised as protective factors for children (Ruiz-Casares 2010). In assessing the capacity of families in sub-Saharan African countries to care for orphan children, research has shown that it is not only about the provision of material resources, but advice, companionship and emotional support oftentimes are the only resources available in widespread poverty (Ruiz-Casares 2010). Children need a sense of belonging to their family and communities, with different types of relationships providing different kinds of support.

The informal practice of child fosterage is a kinship-based practice which entails 'the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by someone other than a parent who is related to the child biologically, by legal family ties, or by a significant prior relationship' (Leinaweaver 2014: 131). Commonly, the arrangement is a non-regulated, traditional practice (Assim 2013), negotiated informally by elders within the family (Ariyo *et al.* 2019). Child fosterage is a culturally appropriate form of family life in Africa, where, for example, in Ethiopia, historically, children were purposefully sent to live with relatives in 'normal' times for reasons that are different from resolving the problems of orphanhood and child destitution (Abebe & Aase 2007). Extended family systems thus allow childcare to be a collective social responsibility shared across wider kin, providing important mechanisms for accessing education, medical treatment, and economic opportunities (McQuaid *et al.* 2019).

Namibia is situated in the southwest of Africa with a population of about 2.5 million people (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2020) of which 1 043 323 are persons under the age of 18 (Namibia Statistics Agency 2019). Thirty years of German settler colonialism in South West Africa (1884–1915) paved the way for continued white minority rule under South African control (Kössler 2015; Melber 2019) with its notorious apartheid rule along racial and ethnic lines. Namibia gained its independence from South Africa in 1990 and has fourteen political regions with

around 11 ethnic groups, with a predominant presence of a particular ethnic group in a region (Sharley, Ananias, Rees & Leonard 2019). During the era of colonisation and the Namibian War of Liberation (1966–88), forced separation of families resulted from labour migration, exile, and relocation by military forces (Ruiz-Casares 2010). The contract labour system that prevailed during the colonial period has been associated with the increase of female-headed households and the strengthening of the extended family as a safety net (Kamminga 2000). Contract labour was a system in which labourers, mostly men above the age of 16 years and mature enough to work and without any disabilities, were recruited to work in the central and southern part of Namibia (Likuwa & Shiwedha 2017). The contract labour system prevented Black African men from fulfilling their roles as fathers and husbands as they were away for 12 to 30 months of labour and were not allowed to take their families with them to their workplaces (Hishongwa 1992). Subsequently,

> Namibia's arduous fight for liberation posed a threat to the security of family structures and, consequently, reconfigured family ties. The impact that reconfiguration of kinship networks has had since colonial occupation suggests that present day Namibian families are socially interdependent, meaning that common goals are established with others and peoples' lives are more intimately affected by the actions of others (Brown *et al.* 2020: 174).

Kinship care, customary especially among Black Namibian families, has become the norm with the extended family caring for children whose parents were unable to do so for varied reasons (Ruiz-Casares 2010). The effects of labour migration on the family, for example, were mitigated by the extended family fulfilling the functions of the absent father (Hishongwa 1992). The practice of child migration in and out of kin networks in Namibia has, therefore, been historically prevalent with as high as 40 per cent of children not living with biological parents (Brown *et al.* 2020; Brown 2009).

With a prevalence of 12 percent in 2019, HIV/AIDS remains the main cause of death in Namibia (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). Consequently, orphanhood which refers to the state of being 18 years of age and below, and being without one or both parents due to death, is rife. In 2016, 11.1 percent of all children aged 18 years and below had lost at least one parent, with 1.4 percent having lost both parents (Namibia Statistics Agency 2017). Orphanhood is exacerbated by the high levels of poverty which also contributes largely to the vulnerability of children (Namibia Statistics Agency 2012). Grandparents and, to a lesser extent, other relatives are the most frequent caretakers of children who have either lost both parents or one parent (but are not residing with their surviving parent) (Ruiz-Casares 2010). A study by Brown (2019) describes a typical household in northern Namibia as one with many children of different ages living in one house or homestead, some of whom are the biological offspring of the mother and father, some relatives (e.g. nieces or nephews) of the mother or father, whilst others still are not biologically related to

either the mother or the father. Similarly, Hishongwa (1992: 90) noted that the family in northern Namibia is 'often large, typically with six to ten children. In most families, children of relatives also live in the family house.' A large family can, however, be highly adaptive, particularly for low-income and marginalised children, because it comprises a larger pool of people who are culturally obligated to assist the transferred child (Leinaweaver 2014).

With the onset of HIV and AIDS the narrative around orphanhood in Africa has raised significant concern that orphans pose a threat and a crisis to society (Abebe & Aase 2007). The burden of orphans on the extended family and the extended family system's inability to cope with caring for the rising number of orphans has been highlighted in many studies (Assim 2013; Young & Ansell 2003). Studies have also drawn attention to how the 'fabric of the extended African family/society' faces multiple increasing stressors (McQuaid *et al.* 2019). While high levels of HIV and the rising number of orphans inadvertently place enormous stress on a society and particularly the family, this may be less true of Africa than on any other continent of the world, due to the dominance of the extended family over the nuclear and the African cultural framework which places an emphasis on socially distributed childcare (Brown 2009).

Based on the findings of a study on orphan care in Ethiopia, Abebe and Aase (2007) assert that the capacities and strengths of the informal, traditional childcare system can still support a larger number of orphans, despite the huge threat posed by the AIDS epidemic. Young and Ansell (2003) further noted how inter-household family re-allocation alleviates loss of household labour and reduces any increased caring burden in southern Africa and alternatively, members relocate to other households in the extended family for support, typically meeting basic needs. Informal kinship-based fostering in the African context is a prevalent and integral component of many children's lives expanding the number of people a child considers to be family members (Leinaweaver 2014). The study by Abebe and Aase (2007) further suggests that economic hardship due to erosion of material resources does not necessarily diminish the social capacity of families for sharing the non-material resources of care and solace, nor does it damage deeply embedded emotional exchanges with which poor people cope through crises. Even though care work is highly gendered in many African societies, with women and girls usually considered to be the primary carers, care is often conceptualised as a moral duty, founded on love, emotional attachments and reciprocal kinship responsibilities, rather than monetary exchange (Evans 2010). Kinship care as a cultural value in extended families is associated with positive child outcomes such as strong kinship bonds, flexible in its roles, and relying on cultural values to sustain the family (Bester & Malan-Van Rooyen 2015).

Without necessarily romanticising the extended family system this article aims to explore the meaning of extended family caregiving from the perspective

the children, caregivers and child-care practitioners involved in extended care arrangements in Namibia. The discussion foregrounds the importance of parent/carer-child relationships in the routine care provided by extended family members to children who have faced challenging circumstances. The article investigates everyday understandings of what family means, and in doing so seeks to challenge deficit narratives about the rationale for fosterage practice. These findings are presented and considered within children's unique and positive relationships within their carers emphasising the multidimensional nature of childhood across three regions in Namibia.

Methods

This article uses secondary analysis to examine an existing qualitative data set which explored child fosterage practice in Namibia. The primary study was undertaken in 2019 which investigated the impact of informal care arrangements on children's health and welfare (Sharley *et al.* 2020). Secondary analysis was undertaken on a sample of the data set with the purpose of investigating additional research questions to those explored in the primary study (Long-Sutehall *et al.* 2010; Heaton 2008):

1   What are children's understandings of families in Namibia?
2   What are parents' and carers' understandings of families in Namibia?

The primary study

The data set

'Child Fosterage in Namibia: the impact of informal care arrangements on children's health and welfare', provided the sample from which transcripts were sorted for inclusion in the secondary analysis. In total, 36 participants took part in five workshops with:

1   key stakeholders from various child welfare agencies (n = 6)
2   childcare practitioners (n = 5)
3   carers who were caring for children through informal arrangements (n = 12)
4   children who were being cared for within informal arrangements (aged 9–15 years old) (n = 9)
5   child protection social workers from the State welfare agency (n = 4).

The aim of the primary study was to gather knowledge about the nature, shape and perceived prevalence of child fosterage in Namibia. The workshops aimed to engage communities in the construction of knowledge from their personal and professional experiences of child fosterage (Sharley *et al.* 2020).

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was collected over a two-week period in Windhoek, Namibia's capital city. On average, each workshop lasted approximately two hours. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants for each workshop: stakeholders and childcare practitioners were accessed through the Namibia Children's Rights Network (NCRN), whilst parents, carers, and children, were recruited with the support and assistance of staff from a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Windhoek which supports children and their family members in the locality. Data was collected using a schedule which included a number of themes for discussion. The workshop with children was structured around a creative activity which invited children to draw a representation of their family life through composition of a 'tree of life': a common term for the baobab tree on the African continent, widely recognised as a symbol of positivity and life (Sharley *et al.* 2020: 3).

Ethical considerations

For the primary study, ethical approval was obtained from Research Ethics Committees at both academic institutions (University of Namibia and University of Bristol). The research was undertaken with the understanding and written consent of each participant. Prior to the workshops, each participant signed an informed consent form and gave their permission for the discussion to be audio-recorded. Children who participated and were under 16 years of age, gave assent to their participation, and informed consent was gained from the adult with caring responsibility (Sharley *et al.* 2020: 3).

With regards to the secondary analysis presented in this paper, the secondary research questions were directly related to the aim and purpose of the original study. On this basis, the consent gained from participants was felt sufficient to undertake the secondary analysis. However, to gain an independent view that this consent was sufficient, the Research Ethics Committees at the University of Namibia and the University of Bristol (who approved the primary study) were both approached for agreement that the data could undergo a secondary analysis, and approval was granted.

Secondary analysis

Research questions

The methodology of supplementary analysis was chosen with the purpose of offering a more in-depth investigation of the data which had not been fully explored in the primary study (Heaton 2004). The supplementary research questions were:

1   What are children's understandings of families?
2   What are parents' and carers' understandings of families?

Each author was a member of the research team for the primary study into child fosterage, during which time the ideas explored in this secondary analysis were generated.

Assessing and sorting the primary data

Data from the primary study was reviewed for inclusion in the analysis. Transcripts were selected dependent upon whether they responded to the research questions posed. Three of the five transcripts were identified from the primary dataset for inclusion in the secondary analysis. These consisted of those from the workshops with childcare practitioners (n = 5), carers who were caring for children through informal arrangements (n = 12), and children who were being cared for within informal arrangements (aged 9–15 years old) (n = 9). All workshops included questions about participants' understandings of child fosterage, including the purpose of the arrangements, how decisions are made to foster children in and foster children out of families, and the perceived challenges and benefits of the practice for children's health and welfare within the diverse communities within Namibia.

Aside from the children's workshop which asked, '*What does family mean to you?*' and '*What type of families do you know?*', there were no direct questions which related to the broader topic of family in the other two workshops. However, participants were guided to share their experiences of how they were '*providing care and joy to children*', '*any challenges they had experienced in caring for their non-biological children*', and '*what is important to know when caring for a child under a fosterage arrangement?*' and to '*share their experiences of supporting or working with a child who is in a fosterage placement.*'

Analysis

The three transcripts were thematically analysed in accordance with the supplementary research questions posed. Authors were all members of the original research team, possessing a comprehensive understanding of the context and relationships in which the data was produced and analysed. As with the primary study, analytical

memorandums were compiled and shared by the three authors, then refined through discussion and reanalysed. This cyclical process was undertaken via videoconferencing over a two-month period in early 2021.

Limitations

It is important that the limitations of this article be elucidated, some of which might relate to the data collection and analysis employed. The use of secondary data analysis as a methodology indeed yielded interesting findings. However, the use of primary data collection and analysis may also strengthen the findings. Another limitation is that data, although drawn from different ethnic groups in Namibia, was only collected in an urban setting in the capital city, Windhoek. It should however be noted that everyday life experiences of children in extended family settings in rural areas may be vastly different due to the socio-economic diversities.

Findings and discussion

The findings presented in this paper offer an understanding about everyday experiences of fosterage within families across a range of different household contexts in Namibia. Four themes emerged which draw upon the lived experiences of participants and contribute knowledge about the role of informal childcare within families and communities. These themes sit within the Afrocentric world view of *Ubuntu* (Bradbury-Jones *et al.* 2018; Mkabela 2005), emphasising the philosophy of reciprocity in children's everyday care, drawing specific attention to four key areas:

1 ancestry and identity
2 love and compassion
3 the nature of care
4 sharing and generosity.

Theme 1: ancestry and identity

One of the key themes that emerged was ancestry and identity. The term 'ancestry' refers to connection to people or things from the past (Mathieson & Scally 2020). Participants indicated that children may not be raised by their birth parents but are fostered within extended family settings, residing with grandparents, siblings, aunts or uncles with whom they share the same ancestors and roots. Similarly, when the child participants

were requested to draw their family tree and explained what it meant, all drawings included a family which consisted of their birth parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. The ability of children to recall their birth family members is a way to remain connected with their family of origin, as stated by one of the participants below:

> I drew my mother, my father, sister, grandmother, grandfather, auntie, cousin, baby brother or sister and me. Although I do not stay with one of them, I still remember about them. [*Child*]

Findings also indicated that it may be difficult to distinguish between the care given by birth parents and the care given by foster parents, especially where there is a family connection between the birth parent and the foster parent. In cases where the birth mother is still alive, participants stated that the foster caregiver may still be regarded as the mother by children as exemplified below:

> When I left the country, my sister was staying with my two kids and she treated them ... I don't know in which ways she treated them. When I came back [returned] I got my kids back. The treatment that I was giving them, they were not even believing that I am their mother, they just give me examples that my mum [foster mother] treated us like this and ... I am saying, but I am your biological mother. ... [*Carer*]

Leinaweaver (2014) argues that instances where children are maintaining relationships with their family of origin results in positive outcomes and it is good for the children's development. This view was also maintained by some participants who valued the importance of foster children maintaining contact with their biological children:

> They know who their [biological] mother was because they know although she wasn't really involved in their lives, and I never chased her [biological mother] away, she was coming [to visit her children]. [*Childcare practitioner*]

Skoglund *et. al.* (2019) relayed how adult children raised in kinship relationships portrayed their childhood experiences growing up in different family relationships such as with birth parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. What was evident is the degree of continuity of family relationships that is based on already existing social and emotional bonds for children who are living with extended family members. Children who are placed in kinship or extended family care also experience a greater sense of stability as family relationships that have already been established are not disrupted (O'Brien 2012).

Experiencing caregiving as a recipient or an observer from a family member providing care was noted as contributing towards developing an *Ubuntu* culture of a caring attitude towards other family members in need of care. Most of the carer participants shared how their positive experiences as recipients of kinship care in childhood encouraged them to, in their adulthood, also show solidarity and support towards a child in need of care, as exemplified in the extract below:

> I want to care because I know I grew up as an orphan and I know [how it feels to be] an orphan. [*Carer*]

In contemporary Namibia, just like in other contexts in Africa, children often have to assume responsibilities of caring for younger siblings (Assim 2013). Contrary to the belief that the *Ubuntu* values are increasingly being eroded in urban areas (Nussbaum 2003), participants pointed out that they commenced their caregiving role at a very tender age and would, in most instances, continue with their caregiving role throughout adulthood, caring for family members who might need some form of assistance:

> At that time we were also very small [young] but after school we used to come back and help my mother. [*Carer*]

Care of children in extended family settings by older caregivers is also highly valued:

> Even my own grandchild. I can raise my grandchild and the mother is in America or in whatever it is. [*Carer*]

Remaining connected with grandparents ensures that there is less disruption in the lives of children. Several studies confirm the significant role that older caregivers such as grandparents fulfil in the lives of their grandchildren who are deprived of parental care (Booys *et al.* 2015; Kiraly *et al.* 2020; Louw 2013).

Living within an extended family setting was preferred by child participants rather than institutional care. A participant who had experienced living in an institution and in a family setting stated that:

> When we stayed in a children's home ... the situation there is not that quite good. [*Child*]

This finding is consistent with existing literature that maintains that children who are placed in the care of extended family members do not necessarily feel a loss of a sense of identity since they are usually placed with relatives with whom they share a common history and culture (Assim 2013). Furthermore, queries by children to establish their family of origin can be obtained from everyday life within family and community relationships and context. Thus, the sense of identity of children is assured if the child transitions from care by birth parents to care by extended family members (O'Brien 2012) which, in turn, provides a sense of belonging.

Theme 2: love and compassion

The second theme relates to the family as the source of the basic necessities of life and health, and the love and tenderness (Amos 2013) as expressed by the participants. As would be evident from the participants' descriptions 'family in the African context often

refers to what in Western terms would be the extended family' (Makiwane & Kaunda 2018: 2). In the context of family, the term love refers to bonds characterised by deep affection, respect, loyalty and healthy attachment (Dean 2021). A number of participants indicated love as the overarching factor in the care of children, as exemplified below:

> It's a bit difficult but children are children and what they need is to be loved. If you love then them I think everything just goes well. [*Carer*]
> You raise the children with the whole heart and love and everything. [*Carer*]

Even though the children did not explicitly state the love for their family, their expression of sense of belonging to a family could be an indication of their compassion and appreciation towards their extended family. When explaining the drawings about their family, some children indicated:

> My family ... I drew [drew] my mum, my dad, my grandparents and my sister and I just forget to tell [include] my uncles and my aunt. [*Child*]

The drawings by the child participants also underscores the understanding of a family from an African perspective which is 'typically extended to aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and other relatives that form a family that functions in unison' (Makiwane & Kaunda 2018: 2).

Expressions of love and affection in the extended family set-up was prioritised by the participants irrespective of the type of relation between the child and the carer as illustrated in the extract below:

> We raise those six children [who are not related by blood] like family [and with] love ... so they have only one mother and one father. [*Carer*]

These sentiments by the participants illuminates the view that 'children are highly desired in many African communities and loved' (Makiwane & Kaunda 2018: 2).

The family is recognised as the most influential agent in the socialisation of the individual. Family provides initial human behaviour patterns in an orientation and initial interpersonal relationships (Banovcinova *et al.* 2014). This sentiment is echoed by a carer participant who stated that her caring behaviour and the consequent love expressed to children in her care, was modelled by her parents:

> So this love started from our parents. We have copied our parents and we have seen that this love will transform in us and we will love these children. [*Carer*]

An important area of socialization in the family is also the acquisition of basic rules and standards of functioning in society (Banovcinova *et al.* 2014). Kinship care in African families, among others, is a tool for the socialisation of children and a means of reducing family vulnerabilities (Assim 2013). Participants expressed how a family's love could shield a child from negative societal influences and map their future trajectories:

> ... if you don't have the love of your mother, what could you do? You could easily be in a crowd smoking and that would possibly lead to prostitution. I just want to help. You know, I want to do. [*Carer*]
>
> I think we just need to raise these kids with love and let them grow up in whatever they are going to do. After 18 years it's up to them. [*Childcare practitioner*]

This theme of love and compassion emphasises many African family values, signalled by the existence of strong kinship networks which serve as a safety net, especially for children. Kinship-based fostering expands the pool of relatives rather than replacing one parent with another (Leinaweaver 2014). Kinship carers usually include aunts, uncles and older siblings, but grandparents (especially grandmothers) form the majority (Assim 2013). The kinship family through its connections and expression of care and affection provides the child with a sense of belonging, consistency, continuity in family identity, emotional ties, and familiarity (Bester & Malan-Van Rooyen 2015). Similarly, Leinaweaver (2014) posits that 'having many caregivers is not only not harmful, but also can result in many meaningful affective relationships supporting a child's development.'

Theme 3: the nature of care

A strong theme that emerged in the data was the caregiving role of women in families and communities. Specifically, how they in charge of the care and protection of children that are considered vulnerable or in need of support. As previously indicated in many African countries, care work is highly gendered, with women and girls assuming the most significant caring roles for their families and communities (Evans 2021). Many participants in the workshops stated that the care of a child was transferred from woman to woman in the family, and that it was predominantly women who were responsible for the day-to-day management of caring for children from within or outside of their own family networks. This was highlighted by many of the children who talked about the role of women as their primary carer, referring to them as their 'mother' or 'mamma' in addition to, or often privileged over their biological parent. In the following extract a child talks about the role of her foster mother in this way:

> I am so glad that I have Mama that take[s] care of me and I take her as my real mum. [*Child*]

Another child shares how she was raised by her aunty following the death of her parents, calling her 'mum' because of the important role she has played in her care and the support she has provided to her:

> My mum's name is [xxxx]. I just call her mum because she took care of me when I was in a difficult state, so I appreciate what she has done for me. She has brought me to this chair today. If it was not for her, I couldn't be standing here or sitting here. [*Child*]

One carer talked about the challenges of caring for her non-biological siblings whilst she was still at school, when as a result of sudden unemployment, her parents migrated to the city for work, leaving her heading the household which comprised of ten children:

> I was the eldest ... I was around 13 years, and they were all behind me. My mum and my dad they went to the office for a living which was sudden ... I had to make sure that these kids must have something to eat. [Parent/carer]

In Namibia internal migrants tend to follow employment opportunities moving from regions where there are few employment opportunities, to urban areas which offer increased financial prospects (Namibia Statistics Agency 2015).

Some children also talked about specific elements of care and support that their 'mammas' provided. In the following extracts children emphasise how challenging they found growing up without the support of their mother:

> Sometimes you just cry and say 'what should I do? My mum is not here' so many bad feelings. [*Child*]
> Staying [living] without your mother, life is really hard because your mother is really important. She's the one that's really important. [*Child*]

Another child goes on to emphasise the presence of mothers in day-to-day child rearing responsibilities and the particular significance of this female role during adolescence and menstruation:

> You always think of your mum mostly not your father because he's not next to you mostly ... but when it's a girl's time your mother's always there for you ... you really, really, need a mother. [*Child*]

Most participants emphasised the role of women in the everyday care of children in Namibia and the lack of involvement of the father in child-rearing practice. The death of a mother was cited as a common reason for child to be cared for in extended family networks:

> If my sister passed away immediately I will be the one who would take care of her child. [*Childcare practitioner*]

There was very little discussion amongst the participants on the day-to-day role of fathers within their families or households which could be understood in the context of internal migration, acknowledged as being traditionally undertaken by men in the family who leave their homes in search of paid employment (Murray 1981 cited in Young & Ansell 2003). Fathers, when mentioned, were discussed in relation to situations whereby they made attempts to 'take children back' when a child had reached adolescence. Participants believed that these instances, although culturally recognised, were uncommon. This is demonstrated in the following extract from a participant:

> If the mum passed on then the father has the right to take the child, but in our communities … the father will never take care of that child. [*Childcare practitioner*]

Many children expressed how precious elders were to them in their families. They offered protection, comfort, support on every-day worries. In the following extracts children say that they would approach elderly family members for guidance and protection:

> That's why it's very important to have someone, an elder … to talk with a child that has not got a parent. [*Child*]
>
> You should go to an elder person and say, 'Auntie,' or 'Granny,' my friend says this to me [about] my mum and she keep on commenting [about] my parents … because elder people know how to handle us. [*Child*]

Carers also spoke about their desire to protect children and to provide 'a better life' for those who had suffered harm or adversity within the community. In the following extracts participants explain their motivation to care for children who were in need of support and protection, and refer to the difficulties some of the children they were caring for had experienced at a young age:

> So, I took that child to raise the child… It's just to give a better life for the child. [*Carer*]
>
> Their mum was still alive, but she's passed on now. She used to take the kids from the school around 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock and she goes and sits in front of a bottle store [liquor outlet] or shop begging for money. [*Childcare practitioner*]
>
> The mum was having sex in front of those girls while they were so small, and they were sitting there and waiting until this thing finishes … luckily I had a conversation with them about when somebody is touching you and why they mustn't do anything, and you are so young. [*Carer*]

The role of women in families in providing practical and emotional support to meet children's basic needs was a key discussion within the workshops, identifying significant challenges in accessing appropriate resources and services in the context of financial hardship for most families. Some participants talked about the added vulnerabilities of young girls and how having no parent to care for them could leave them at risk of prostitution or sexual violence within the community and in need of protection. In the following extract a woman describes the consequences for children who were not being cared for and supervised appropriately. She talks about the child she is now caring for and how she watched the child's mother 'sneak out' at night to go to the bar to drink, leaving her baby unattended:

> [I] hear the babies crying for hunger—but [she has] gone away for three or four hours … I stay with her kids, and I struggle for milk and everything now. [*Carer*]

Another participant reflects on her role as a carer, and describes feeling obliged to provide food or clothing for children she sees within the community:

> How many street kids do you see? At every stop they are running. There are kids here and there. They are asking for money. They are not going to school, they don't have clothes, they don't have shoes. I think for us people who look after the children, if I see something ... I may need to pay for them. [*Carer*]
>
> When they're not taking care of the child this child would end up in the street—it's a girl and everyone knows about girls. [*Carer*]

This theme draws attention to the role and responsibility of women in children's care and protection within fosterage practice (Brown 2009). Carers have described their experiences and motivations for caring for a child from within or outside of their extended family networks, emphasising a desire to support children who had suffered adversity, poor-parenting, or experienced the death of a parent (Goody 1982; Madhavan & Gross 2013). The absence of men in the caring role is conspicuous. Participants describe the value that female elders bring to child-rearing in a diverse range of household contexts, and the role of teachers and neighbours in providing support during times of crisis or adversity (Branje *et al.* 2004). Specifically, young girls were acknowledged as being particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and prostitution amongst communities in Namibia, within the everyday realities and challenges of poverty and forced internal migration for paid employment (UNAIDS 2013; WHO 2005).

Theme 4: sharing and generosity

The fourth theme that emerged is sharing and generosity. Participants stated that members in extended family systems share food, clothing and shelter with one another and with the broader community despite the hardships in the wider context of poverty and having limited resources. Despite the challenges, the participants indicated treating non-biological children in their care as their own and sharing whatever they have equally amongst the children as outlined below:

> We are all in it together. If there is food, then they have the same as others. [*Carer*]
>
> But she [carer] feels if you have something for them she feels better that she shares it with somebody and not for her alone. [*Carer*]
>
> Sometimes whatever I'm having we have to share. So if there's nothing, there's nothing. [*Carer*]

In support of the views expressed by the participants, Ringson and Chereni (2020) stress that the extended family remains the strongest safety net for children in vulnerable circumstances whether or not resources are available. This, besides the strong evidence that suggests that extended families where a kin member is providing childcare for non-biological children are amongst the poorest in the community (O'Brien 2012).

In households of extended families, people seem to practise generosity by sharing food, living spaces and other means with people and also strangers who are passing by. In the spirit of *Ubuntu,* generosity can be understood as an act of doing good to other people or to make a contribution towards the common good in society (Komter 2010). One participant shares her experience of generosity in the home where she was raised:

> All people passing there say 'Mummy, we're hungry. Can you give us something to eat here?' What she [mother/carer] has in this house she likes to share with those people. Sharing is good. Every time when they are passing there people know this house they used to eat here so every time they came back they said 'Please, do you have something to give us?' What she has in the house she just shares with those people. [*Carer*]

Previous studies confirm that sharing of resources by family, friends and neighbours have contributed to the socio-economic and educational development in many communities in countries across the continent, as people are willing to share the little they have for the sake of another person in need (Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley 2019). However, sometimes being generous may lead to exploitation and being taken advantage of (Munene 2001).

Values of generosity and sharing with those in need are also instilled in children. Children who are not living with birth parents may not be amongst the most fortunate in the community. However, they seem to have compassion towards other children in society who are also going through hardship, and are willing to extend a helping hand by sharing what they have with others:

> Last week we collected all our clothes like one pair of our winter clothes and one pair of summer clothes and some clothes that you don't like and we gave to the kids. [*Child*]

Another child participant added that:

> ... sometimes they [other children] don't have food to [take to] school [for lunch] and imagine ... [spending] even the whole school day ... without food ... we also just donated oranges and small toys, toothpaste. [*Child*]

Some of the participants stated that fairness and equal treatment is the norm in households of extended families. Participants further added that no distinction is made between the biological children and the children brought into the extended family, as expressed below:

> I want the child to feel that I am the mother although I was not even one. I just commit myself that this is what I'm going to do and I'm going to take good care of these children. [*Carer*]
> We raise those six children with that family love because when we treat our brother's children we treat them the same as those [foster] children; so they have only one mother and one father. [*Carer*]

Contrary to the findings by Brown *et al.* (2020) who pointed out inequalities in treatment experienced by children fostered into kinship family environments, the above

findings are consistent with scholars such as Ringson & Chereni (2020) who indicated carers in extended family systems in communities in countries across Africa were treating children in fosterage equitably to their own biological children.

Discussion

Child-rearing in Namibia, as it is in most African communities, is based upon the *Ubuntu* philosophy of caring and sharing. The extended family provides the child with a sense of belonging and identity because members of the extended family system share common roots and ancestry. Findings suggest that children who are living in extended, or kinship families maintain strong ancestral ties with a wide range of family members, as well as cultural identity with carers who are not biologically related to them. The article further established that positive experiences as recipients of kinship care in childhood places one in a better position to appreciate and to be willing to also provide kinship care to a child during adulthood. This in a way advances the philosophy of *Ubuntu* that comes from the realisation that each and everyone's life is deeply tied to the other and the choice to use personal power to commit to the common good as opposed to creating isolated individual good (Onyejiuwa 2017).

According to African socio-cultural concepts of childhood and care, children, families and communities have reciprocal rights and responsibilities as part of an 'intergenerational contract' to provide care and support when needed (Evans 2010). Children in communities across the region may also take up caregiving responsibility at a very young age which challenges the 'Western ideological constructions of childhood as a carefree phase of innocence, in which children are free from "adult responsibilities and work" as well as norms of parenting that define children as being dependent on their mothers (and fathers) for nurturing, care and socialisation' (Evans 2010: 6). The children's contribution to the family under the *Ubuntu* philosophy implies that 'what they are doing will enable or empower the community around them and help it improve' (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya 2013: 673). The communal value of a person is strongly based on what he/she does for the family and for the community, and this is a very vital and important part of daily life and family bonds in Africa (Nussbaum 2003; Schoeman 2012). Caregiving of children in kinship care being provided by the elderly, especially grandmothers, seem also very common contributing positively to the care and wellbeing of children. *Ubuntu* thus embodies the idea of interconnectedness of people to each other with every member in the community expected to visibly participate in society (Schoeman 2012).

Generosity and sharing with others in need are some of the common practices for children who are living in kinship or extended family systems. This compassion and sense of care for others in need seems to be developed from observations in the community, but also personal experiences, which results into being kind and serving

others. Having limited means or meagre resources does not prevent people from sharing food, clothing, shelter and other material means. The findings confirmed that generosity and sharing goes beyond biological family relationships and include extended family, friends and neighbours. This could be based on the premise that no one can be self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all (Nussbaum 2003) which is true to the isiZulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translated as 'a person is a person because of or through others' (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya 2013: 673). The value of generosity and sharing seem to contribute towards socio-economic development in African communities. It is only through such community solidarity that hunger, isolation, deprivation, poverty and any emerging challenges can be survived, because of the community's brotherly and sisterly concern, cooperation, care, and sharing (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya 2013).

Contrary to the findings by Leinaweaver (2014: 4) that 'informal kinship-based fostering can lead to foster children being treated differently than birth children', the children in the study upon which this article is based indicated that they were being treated equally to the biological children of the kinship caregiver and also expressed their happiness in living in an extended family network. The extended family is thus a critical safety net for orphans and children in need of care because it presents an opportunity for children to be nurtured collectively within familiar family context and community environment.

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Note on the authors: Dr Emmerentia Leonard is a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Social Work at the University of Namibia. She is registered with the Health Professionals Council of Namibia as a social worker. She teaches several courses on social development with concentration on child, youth and family welfare. Her research interests include child protection, social work field education and governance. Emma is a member of the Board of Trustees of the SOS Children's Villages Namibia and chair of a Board of a state-owned enterprise mandated with youth development in Namibia. Recent publications include: Leonard, E. & Terblanche, L.S. (2020), 'An Employee Assistance Programme for Small and Medium Enterprises in Namibia—A needs assessment', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk.* https://socialwork.journals.ac.za/pub

Janet Ananias is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Social Work at the University of Namibia. She is registered with the Health Professionals Council of Namibia as a social worker and has extensive practice experiences in child and youth services, mental health and substance abuse. She has taught a wide range of courses such as child and family care, criminal justice systems and child law, social work with groups, and social gerontology. Her research interest includes amongst others child neglect, child fosterage, intergenerational care and social gerontology. She has published widely and presented papers at several national and international conferences. Recent publications include: Ananias, J., Leonard, E. & Sharley, V. (2021), *The role of the extended family in alleviating child poverty and inequalities in Namibia*. International Federation of Social Work-IFSW Africa 2021 Ubuntu social work conference, Virtual conference Kigali, Rwanda, 23rd to 26th November 2021.

Victoria Sharley is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work with Children and Families in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. She is a registered Social Worker with Social Work England and has a background in child protection and care. Her research interests include children's health, welfare and protection, international social work, and interprofessional practice. Victoria is an active member of the University's Perivoli Africa Research Centre (PARC) and since 2015 has been collaborating with the School of Allied Health Services at the University of Namibia. With her co-authors, she has published on the care and welfare of children in Namibia and regularly delivers oral papers at international conferences. Recent publications include: Sharley, V. (2021), 'Missing Data, Complex Processes, and Differing Contexts: a case file analysis of school staff's involvement in child protection cases for concerns of neglect', *Child Abuse Review.*