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**“I Drive My Happiness When I Save a Child”: Altruistic Passion, Purpose and
Growth in Caring for Victims of Child Sacrifice and Trafficking in Uganda**

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The authors are grateful for the generosity of the participants for sharing these powerful narratives of unfathomable abuse towards children in their care and their journey alongside them.

Abstract

Child sacrifice remains an horrific contemporary crime that masquerades as an old custom. Its revival in Uganda this century as a worldwide commercial enterprise, leaves those working to expose this violence, rescue, and care for the victims of child sacrifice, psychologically at risk. This idiographic study sought subjective interpretations from six female carers, **working with a faith-based organisation** to rescue and care for victims of child sacrifice/trafficking in Uganda. Semi-structured interviews provided data for analysis using the protocols of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. A superordinate theme: *Cultural darkness, passion, purpose, and growth*; overarched five subordinate themes: *Mission in life; Dark society, dark future; Cost to self; Coming from a place of humility, openness, and learning; and Healing children, healing life and healing society*. Participants reflected on a strong 'calling' or spiritual commitment to the high needs of others, victimised by child sacrifice. This juxtaposed with inherent risks to personal safety, psychological distress, altruistic disruption, loss, and burnout. Sceptical of political will to eliminate corrupt practices, and shamed by cultural acceptance, the gratitude of child victims triggered humility, empathy, compassion, patience, and sense of purpose in the participants. Unexpectedly, carers spoke of overcoming the impossible through soothing and nurturing a renewed love of life and trust in the children and seeking opportunities for psychological and spiritual growth for themselves out of merciless inhumanity. Culturally appropriate organisational trauma-management and self-care protocols and procedures, to protect carers' mental health and well-being, is a unique field of posttrauma recovery and growth actively needing support.

Keywords: child protection work; vicarious trauma; burnout; altruism; vicarious posttraumatic growth; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Introduction

Child sacrifice is an abhorrent form of child abuse and violence, yet it remains an unrelenting criminal phenomenon hidden in modern society in many countries around the world. Long-term implications on victims' health and well-being, include permanent, disfiguring physical injuries, traumatic emotional scarring, and ongoing educational and mental health issues (Luwangula et al., 2014). Additionally, families of survivors in countries such as Uganda, are often left to carry the burden of recovery alone without any legal redress, or moral and psychological support (Dennison et al., 2013). No research exists exploring the 'lived' experience of those providing care to child survivors and their families, particularly, how they make sense of vicarious exposure to witnessing horrific bodily mutilations and the unfathomable and traumatic narratives of child sacrifice. Despite the distress of complex trauma, the potential for posttraumatic growth exists (see Joseph, 2011). **In particular, psychological benefits in the face of adversity are known to be facilitated by altruism, gratitude, compassion and love, all core human traits promoted by the world's major religions (McCormack, 2010).** Therefore, this study seeks both positive and negative interpretations from child protection, health, and educational carers of child survivors of sacrifice **working for a faith-based child protection organisation in Uganda.** Specifically, it seeks to understand: 1) how these carers interpret their commitment to this extreme form of child abuse, 2) how it impacts their lives, relationships, and beliefs, and; 3) how they make sense of their role culturally and spiritually.

In contemporary society, child sacrifice is a crime of child exploitation, corruption, and a means for procuring money (Eddy & Bogere, 2014). Mirroring itself as an old customary practice, child sacrifice involves the kidnapping and killing of a child for their body parts, genitals, organs or blood (Bukuluki & Mpyangu, 2014). The potentially fatal wounds left in the aftermath of this brutal assault leave few to survive. Disturbingly, parents or other family members are sometimes complicit in 'selling' their own children. It is also

considered a form of child trafficking as witchdoctors orchestrate the trade and transportation of children's body fragments (Bukuluki, 2014).

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), a legal framework that provides international standards on the advocacy and protection of children's rights, regards child sacrifice as a complex issue of child protection violating several children's rights. **Within Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) was signed by Uganda in 1992 however, a cruel reality for millions of children is that violence persists, is widespread and socially and culturally accepted.** Specifically, these practices rob children of their inherent right to life, dignity, and freedom. As highly vulnerable individuals, children are entitled to special care and safeguards without which, many are at risk of falling victim to the abominable acts of child sacrifice and trafficking in many parts of the world.

Despite world leaders ratifying the UNCRC in 1989, the phenomenon of child sacrifice and trafficking remains a grave concern in contemporary Africa reportedly increasing, in Uganda (Byansi et al., 2014). The notion of human sacrifice is grounded in traditional religious beliefs and cultural practices, where sacrificial rituals form a fundamental element of worship, prayer, and thanksgiving (Williams, 1988). In Uganda, approximately 60%–80% of its population seek advice from traditional healers believed capable of providing health care through natural substances, e.g., plants or animals (Nxumalo, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, witchdoctors, with spurious intent, operate under the guise of a 'traditional healer' masking alternative and sinister motives, e.g., the intent to cause harm (Bukuluki & Mpyangu, 2014). Overall, the compounding effects of poverty and inconsistent regulation of witchdoctors, have curated an enabling environment for the persistence of child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda. Coupled with the lack of resources and a limited child protection workforce, an extremely dire threat to children remains and is seemingly beyond resolve.

Generally, child protection is recognised as a complex and difficult field of care, with a significant body of research highlighting the risk for compassion fatigue, burnout, psychopathology, and high staff turnover (Kim & Kao, 2014; McFadden et al., 2015; Russ et al., 2019; Truter et al., 2017). The primary precipitating factors include frequent exposure to highly stressful work environments, high caseloads, excessive paperwork, low wages, long hours, and a lack of personnel and resources (Anderson, 2000). Care workers are also vulnerable to experiencing physical threats, violent assaults, client self-harm and client deaths (Littlechild, 2005; Smith, 2004) potentially impacting psychological and physical functioning, the provision of quality client care, and effective service delivery. This presents a formidable challenge for child protection organisations' recruitment and retention of care workers (Mor Barak et al., 2001). The staff of not-for-profit organisations in Uganda, play a crucial role in combatting child sacrifice and trafficking (Byansi et al., 2014).

The dual exposure of primary (i.e., experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event) and vicarious trauma (i.e., empathic engagement with others' traumatic material) predisposes carers to a cluster of posttraumatic stress symptoms, including intrusive imagery or thoughts, hyperarousal issues, avoidant behaviours, and negative cognitions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Working with trauma survivors requires empathic engagement and therapeutic intimacy, thus predisposing carers to the cognitive and affective aspects of their clients' trauma. According to constructivist self-development theory, cognitive schemas (i.e., mental frameworks representing beliefs, assumptions and expectations) serve as the core mechanism through which individuals interpret and interact with the world (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Both primary and vicarious traumatic exposure can shatter one's existing cognitive schemas associated with certain psychological needs, such as safety, trust, power, control and intimacy (Janoff-Bulman, 1998).

Vicarious traumatisation is ubiquitous and often chronic. This poses a critical dilemma for carers of victims of child sacrifice and trafficking as there are high and increasing numbers

of child protection cases reported internationally (Higgins et al., 2019). Nevertheless, and despite the predominating deficit-oriented discourse in the child protection literature, research has found that the majority of carers (50%–70%) do not report psychopathology symptoms or dysfunction and are able to continue working effectively in the field for many years (Bell et al., 2003; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Cornille & Meyers, 1999; Russ et al., 2009). In fact, there is considerable evidence indicating that the child protection workforce is highly committed to children and family well-being, and that this is an important factor in helping carers to deal with the inherent difficulties of their work (Bednar, 2003; Khoo et al., 2002; McLean & Andrew, 1999; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Weaver et al., 2007). Additionally, McFadden et al. (2015) reported that carers find meaning in their work, experience job satisfaction and remain dedicated to providing quality services. In light of the current discourses surrounding altruism and motivation, often associated with humanitarian-directed careers, emerging research on the role of an ‘altruistic identity’ may provide a plausible explanation of protective factors leading to such dedication (McCormack & Joseph, 2012, McCormack et al, 2016, 2021).

Altruism, at its core, encapsulates “a dedication to the service of humankind” (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020, p. 575). Conceptually, it is defined as a motivational state that drives selfless acts of devotion, compassion, empathy and kindness to promote another’s welfare regardless of the cost to self (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020). The notion of ‘altruistic care’ can also be observed in the fundamental values of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other Asian religions (Pessi, 2011). It has been described as being synonymous with seeking intimacy with God, reinforcing one’s faith and expressing love for humanity (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020). Within these perspectives, humility and gratitude serve as the springboard for compassion, kindness and serving others.

People with a strong altruistic identity feel the urge to help and protect vulnerable human beings, are more willing to accept personal disadvantages for the sake of others, have

an altruistic desire to do good, overlook challenging or displeasing qualities of their job, persevere through long working hours, and are more tolerant of work-related stress (Slettmyr et al., 2019). Several lines of evidence of altruistic motivation has been found cross-culturally and in many different challenging work contexts (McCormack et al, 2013; van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is suggested that altruism is intrinsically rewarding and has reciprocal benefits for the health and well-being of the giver and receiver (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020).

Although altruism is viewed as a “prestigious trait”, it possesses its own pitfalls (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020, p. 582) and there is a vital role for organisations who engage carers, to promote a healthy altruistic identity through self-care protocols and practices (McCormack et al, 2011). In developing the construct of Altruistic Identity/Altruistic Identity Disruption (AID), McCormack et al, 2011) recognised that unresolved distress from exposure to traumatic events in those at the frontline of human suffering experienced: a) inter-related feelings of isolation, doubt and self-blame; b) self-doubt of their personal role in humanitarian work and its value; and c) engaged in self-blame behaviours, thus impacting on their healthy reintegration with family, career and society post deployment(McCormack & Joseph, 2012; McCormack et al., 2021).

Conversely, an alternative lens to the negative sequelae commonly associated with vicarious exposure to trauma is primary and vicarious posttraumatic growth (e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Barrington & Shakespeare-Finch, 2013; Hyatt-Burkhart, 2014; Manning-Jones et al., 2015; McCormack & Bamforth, 2019). Both are conceptualised under the umbrella of posttraumatic growth constructs which posit the necessary cognitive rebuilding of traumatic narratives to promote resistant schemas. Joseph and Linley’s (2005) organismic valuing process theory of growth (OVP), an affective-cognitive processing model of posttraumatic growth that describes the resolution of discrepancies between pre and post trauma schemas, postulates humans as active, growth-oriented creatures who are intrinsically

motivated towards growth and development. Personality, social-environmental conditions, and time, are some of the factors thought to influence the speed and depth of processing (see Joseph, 2011).

The emotional distress that often follows trauma exposure is caused by oscillating phases of intrusion and avoidance which continue to occur until a cognitive equilibrium is reached. Hence individuals alternate between negative (e.g., guilt, shame, anger and rage) and positive (e.g., hope, joy, pride) emotional states (Stockton et al., 2011). More recently, empathy, love, gratitude and humility have been noted as growthful domains (McCormack et al., 2009). However, as theories of posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth are embedded in western interpretations of human functioning, it is unknown whether these interpretations transfer cross-culturally to carers working with victims of child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda. Therefore, a better understanding of non-western responses to trauma exposure can inform whether these theories accommodate non-western perspectives.

The present study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the subjective ‘lived’ experiences of carers who have worked with victims of child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda. It aims to elucidate the implications of complex trauma on these carers within their unique socio-cultural reality and how these care workers culturally redefine and utilise their experiences for growth and remain committed to such intense caring.

Method

Participants

Following University Human Ethics Research Committee approval, the first author recruited six participants from Kyampisi Childcare Ministries’ (KCM) workforce in Uganda. KCM is one of the largest primary not-for-profit organisations combatting child sacrifice and trafficking. The participants included national care workers who have been involved in rescue operations, physical and psychological rehabilitation and the ongoing care of child victims and their families. *As carers with KCM, a faith-based organisation, their work aligns with the*

values of the organisation e.g., “to seek to fight poverty, empower families and communities through education, bring freedom from oppression by seeking justice through advocacy and provide physical, emotional, and spiritual support to vulnerable children” (KCM, 2021).

Participants work with the government of Uganda to address human rights obligations around ritual sacrifice of children, and directly impact outcome for victims both surviving and deceased, their families, and communities. Seeking an homogenous group, criteria for inclusion in the study was fluency in English and a minimum of two years’ working experience to seek rich insight into the experiential interpretation of their work. Eligible participants included six females, ranging between 24 and 45 years of age. Participants had varied educational backgrounds, including a: Bachelor of Accounting Finance; Bachelor of Administration; Bachelor of Education; Bachelor of Social Work/Bachelor of Social Science; Certificate in Child Protection; or Postgraduate Certificate in Secretarial Administration. Their duration of employment with KCM ranged between 3 to 10 years. All participants have been de-identified.

Materials and Measures

Prior to the first author’s arrival in Uganda, participants were invited to participate in the present study via recruitment flyers and by word of mouth using a snowballing effect common to IPA studies. Potential participants were provided with an information statement, consent form and demographics questionnaire which included questions regarding the participants’ age, educational background, and their duration of employment with KCM. These were collected prior to the interview. The interview schedule (see Appendix A) was distributed to participants one day before the interview to allow for a period of pre-interview reflection (Smith, 2008). The interviews were conducted face to face in Uganda by the first author a month prior to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and explored the participants’ positive and negative interpretations of their experiences in working with

children and families exposed to child sacrifice and trafficking. Each was recorded using an audio recorder with the length of interview ranging from 25 to 85 minutes.

Participants could take a break or withdraw their consent from participation at any point during the interview. They were reassured that information disclosed during the interview would remain strictly confidential, de-identified with pseudonyms and stored with password protection. Following completion of the interview participants were provided with local support contact details should they experience increased anxiety or distress after their interview (e.g., Staff Care, or the Ugandan Red Cross).

Design

Epistemology

Unlike positivist-nomothetic research, the methodology of choice, IPA, is not constrained by predetermined hypotheses (Smith et al., 2009). Rather, IPA is a qualitative research approach that aims to explore how individuals derive and attribute meaning to their personal experiences, particularly in relation to poorly explored phenomena (Smith, 2008). IPA researchers are committed to the detailed examination of individual narrative accounts, where idiographic strategies are utilised to uncover rich descriptions of sense-making, perspectives, and interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). From a critical realism stance, IPA acknowledges that individuals are unable to directly assess reality as their interpretations are largely influenced by former beliefs and experiences (Blaikie, 2000). Hence, each narrative account is unique to and representative of that individual.

Methodology

IPA is philosophically and theoretically underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism. First, IPA is phenomenological in that it seeks to explore an individual's unique interpretations of their experiences from an insider's perspective (Conrad, 1987). This approach has its originating roots in Husserl's principles of phenomenological philosophy, which constitutes the careful examination of human

experience (Moran, 2002). Second, IPA's interpretative stance is informed by hermeneutics (i.e., the theory of interpretation), which posits human beings as "sense-making creatures" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). Through the use of a double hermeneutic approach, IPA researchers strive to make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences. The central notion of hermeneutics recognises that IPA is an inherently interpretative activity, where researchers are limited to the participant's interpretations as well as their own. Third, the theory of symbolic interactionism provides a platform for practical considerations where the use of dialect, images, sense, and inferences are deduced for corresponding with others in one's personal and social worlds (Denzin, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thus, 'meaning' is considered a by-product of self-reflective processes and social interactions which ultimately govern how one interacts with the world.

Analytic Strategy

The present study employs IPA to explore the subjective 'lived' experiences of carers working with victims of child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda. To adequately explore this poorly explored phenomenon, a small number of participants were drawn from this homogenous population via purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews are often used as the preferred data collection method, as they allow IPA researchers to gain a reiterative comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon whilst maintaining flexibility (Smith et al., 2009). Interview schedules are constructed using a funnelling technique, where the progression of prompts move from eliciting general to more specific responses (Smith, 2008).

The first author collected the six face to face, semi-structured interviews. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the second author. Both authors then independently employed a double hermeneutic approach striving to interpret the interviewee making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This involved: (1) listening to and reading each interview data set; (2) noting initial thoughts and ideas; (3) expanding on initial thoughts into more comprehensive notes; (4) identifying emerging themes supported by notes

and relevant quotes; and (5) establishing convergent (i.e., themes present across the data) and divergent themes (i.e., themes present in one data set) (McCormack & Joseph, 2018). Finally, the first and second authors engaged in rigorous discussions to reduce bias and arrive at jointly agreed themes.

For themes to qualify for thematic inclusion in the results, both researchers needed to reach a final consensus where all accepted themes were “unique, rich and substantiated by the data” (McCormack & Joseph, 2018, p. 6). The reporting of results followed the establishment of links between emergent themes and clusters of themes. Throughout the analysis and write-up of results, the researchers continued to ensure all identified themes were supported by the raw data (Smith et al., 2009). The small number of participants from a homogenous sample ensured the preservation of each interviewee’s unique narrative.

Credibility and Worthiness

The credibility and worthiness of qualitative research can be assessed using four key principles, irrespective of the study’s theoretical background (Yardley, 2000). These include: (1) sensitivity to context; (2) commitment and rigour; (3) transparency and coherence; and (4) impact and importance. A strong qualitative research study must demonstrate a sensitivity to the topic’s sociocultural context, existing literature, and the participants’ interview data (Yardley, 2000). Most importantly, IPA researchers must be sensitive to the raw material by supporting all arguments with a substantive number of verbatim extracts (Smith et al., 2009). This ensures the authenticity of each participants’ narrative account, while allowing the reader or reviewer to verify the researchers’ interpretations as necessary.

In addition, IPA research requires commitment and rigour throughout the data collection and analytical procedures (Yardley, 2000). This is demonstrated through the researcher’s personal commitment to a systematic approach by strictly adhering to IPA’s standard protocols and guidelines (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, each stage of the research process must be clearly delineated in subsequent write-ups to reveal transparency (Yardley,

2000). For example, this may include detailed descriptions of how participants were recruited, how the interviews were conducted and how the raw data was analysed, including tracking between the auditors as the analysis continues through the write-up. All written reports must present a coherent argument consistent with IPA's approach and underlying principles (Yardley, 2000). Furthermore, the finished write-up must encapsulate something new and of value for its readers.

Author's Perspective

The first author is a clinician and academic whose research is at the interface of complex trauma and posttraumatic growth. She works intermittently in humanitarian aid. The second author has experience as a volunteer in Uganda and has an interest in trauma-related work particularly the phenomenon of interest in this study. The present study acknowledges that each researcher brings their own set of unique lived experiences, preconceived biases and existing presuppositions to the study that was examined throughout each stage of the research and analytic processes.

Results

One superordinate theme, *Cultural darkness, passion, purpose and growth*, overarches five associated subordinate themes: *Mission in life/A call to serve; Dark society, dark future; Cost to self; Coming from a place of humility, openness and learning; Healing children, healing life and healing society* (see Table 1). Throughout these subordinate themes, the interpreted findings highlight a very personal journey of self-discovery, spiritual scaffolding, and passionate commitment from each of these participants. A fervent sense of an altruistic 'calling' to this work did not protect them from a dark and intrusive risk of psychopathology, burnout and altruistic disruption. Learning to walk in the children's feet, they opened themselves to humility and patience with a realistic discernment that this work was the foundation of a future life of giving forward. Their exposure to exploitative opportunism and destruction to young lives bluntly assaulted them with a personal cost of loss, grief, recurrent

traumatic exposure, and disconnection from family and friends. It was also the catalyst for compassionate support to and from those similarly called to serve, providing a nurturing environment for healing children and gratitude for unexpected opportunities of psychological and spiritual personal growth. These themes are represented with rich data emphasising striking and novel interpretations provided by the participants. All themes were convergent across the data sets. In the following quotations, ellipses indicate the omission of non-relevant material.

Insert Table 1.

Mission in Life/A Call to Serve

Mission in Life/A Call to Serve, conceptualises purpose and calling as a higher order responsibility to serve. For these participants, that calling was to rescue and serve some of Uganda's most vulnerable, neglected and mutilated children, and expose a modern phenomenon, camouflaged as an old custom. Participants describe a powerful sense of duty led by prayer to establish a school for neglected children in Kyampisi, an area where poverty and child neglect feeds the risk of child sacrifice and trafficking, and a rehabilitation centre for those rescued from child sacrifice. Motivated by an integral sense of authenticity, supported by their spiritual and religious beliefs, *Mission in Life*, reflects a call to serve as a separating passion in life, a desire for good over what is seen as evil.

Priscilla places an importance on her desire to live a meaningful and purposeful life. She understands her role to be a part of her "*purpose*" to serve children, and in doing so she feels that she is "*servicing god*". This demonstrates the significant role of faith in her life:

I'm trying to fulfil my purpose of living on earth ... I want to do that purpose that my creator made me for ... when I'm serving them, I'm serving God. (Priscilla)

Beatrice uses the word "*need*" to describe the urgency of identifying at risk children in the immediate area of the school. She describes the children's stories as "*touching*" to the point of compelling a sense of duty to be a part of pioneering and advocating change:

The stories ... could make you cry ... Most of them have never gone to school ... most of the children were neglected ... so we thought there was that need to help this community. (Beatrice)

Specific to Siya is her loss of friendships since engaging in the work of rescuing and helping the children. Interestingly, rather than attributing the blame to her friends she understands this loss as a result of her “*selfish*” commitment to her work:

I don't have so many friends ... I have been selfish to myself. I just want to ... make sure the children are okay and I have actually left my family out. (Siya)

In spite of this, Siya describes driving her own happiness and satisfaction through rescuing and saving children at the expense of receiving support from her family and friends:

I drive my happiness when I save a child ... but ... it has affected me as a person ... “she must be in ... serving some child somewhere” ... so it has cut me off from people. (Siya)

A deep sense of loneliness pervades her work. Though there is fulfillment in her work with children, it prevents her from forming meaningful connections and relationships with others:

Sometimes you break down, but you break down alone. (Siya)

Dark Society, Dark Future

This theme captures the reality of the darkness that surrounds child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda, where cultural practices, beliefs, and superstition, render commitment and support intermittent from government and legal systems. The darkness extends to the carers who are seen as threats to the trade and at risk of being kidnapped for ransom:

Through work we are doing - rescuing and protective ... I have to be aware I was so fearful ... I've never seen them, but they are taking me, they are saying that they want to take me ... I have a very big conviction that these are kidnappers. (Beatrice)

Despite a reliance on solicitors and police for seeking justice for children, Alice describes the legal and policing systems as not being “*in tune*” with child sacrifice practices, unless there is

a financial benefit involved as their roles are precariously under-resourced thus, inhibiting the prioritisation of protecting children from child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda:

We've been advocating, like working closely with the solicitors in the parliament and the police, but of course ... there have to be a financial benefit ... which is hard because we cannot afford everything. So, they're not much helpful, but ... you have to work with them. (Alice)

Similarly, Siya uses the words "*it's just me*" to emphasise her major role in engaging with the law and police in combatting child sacrifice and trafficking. Few take on such a daunting role and a lack of resources perpetuates the grim picture of increasing numbers of child sacrifice and trafficking cases:

I haven't heard so many organisations working on ending child sacrifice. So ... where there's a case of child sacrifice ... the first organisation that will go will be Kyampisi. So, you are sure that probably you the only person in the country running after that cases. (Siya)

Cost to Self

Fear and vigilance is a part of everyday life for these participants. The close proximity to the perpetrators of a modern crime impersonating as an abhorrent custom exposes them to primary, vicarious and anticipatory traumatic distress. Encapsulated by the guilt, fear and cognitive rumination, the road to burnout and more complex psychological consequences threatens their commitment. They reflect on the erosion of their personal lives from the intensity and chronic exposure to brutalised children, their injuries, and graphic details of the children's traumatic narratives.

For Siya, guilt is never far from the surface. Her exposure at the frontline rescuing of children as a child protection worker, creates vigilance that acts as a buffer against the constancy of guilt that overwhelms her when she is not doing something to help and rescue children. The enormity of the issue of child sacrifice, the urgency of her work and her

commitment has her trapped in a cycle of intensely held responsibility and a lack of personal and professional boundaries to protect her own mental health and well-being:

I'm so guilty to just sit there ... I really don't know where the guilt is coming from. I don't know why I can't sit and say it's okay you can just be here ... the children are okay. (Siya)

Similarly, Siya is acutely aware that her work in child protection overshadows her mental well-being. She notes that unwavering altruistic passion is paramount to longevity in this work in the absence of money. For now, passion acts as an antidote to her guilt, but she perceives an ever-growing risk of burnout: *"I'm actually trying to pull out ... but ... it has to be passion because we don't earn the money here"*. Although motivation and unique strengths are invaluable in this field of work, not all have that altruistic calling to give without counting the costs, particularly the risk of psychological harm in exchange for little income:

It's just the passion because there are times when there are no funds, but you have to move ... you have to make things work. (Siya)

There is an urgency about Siya's fear of 'burnout'. *"Worried"* that her passion is about to *"run out"* she is uncertain of what will define her new role:

I'm mostly here because of my passion not because of my education ... when that passion runs out ... I'm worried that it's about ... to run out. (Siya)

Alice describes a relentless cycle of fear in her work due to the incessant flow of new child sacrifice cases. She refers to her experience of fear as a *"continuous process"*, suggesting that she has not been able to find an escape or sense of relief from her work:

Even the fear because ... whenever you see ... a new case happening your fear raises up again. You're trying to forget about what happened, then a new case comes in, your fear comes back ... so it's like a continuous process. (Alice)

While all participants demonstrate the risk of psychological debilitation from exposure to child sacrifice, Siya's brain relentlessly tries to escape the ruminative intrusion of the grim images by *"running with myself"*. In her attempts to make sense of this invasion, *"I'm*

always having meetings in conversation with myself always like always and ... I'm a late sleeper because of those conversations that I have with myself". The horror of her work exposes her to both primary and secondary trauma, so that she resorts to auditory distractions to help her sleep at night:

I sleep with my radio on ... If I don't have radio on in my room then I will go again, I will run again with myself again, again ... and again, again, again. (Siya)

Coming from a Place of Humility, Openness and Learning

The unfolding of these interviews suggests integral connections with humility, openness and learning and therefore their own authenticity. They are not afraid to confront the horrors before them, rather they engage patiently with the rescued children's experiences of psychological terror and physical mutilation. Moreover, they learn from the children by describing their journey as *walking in their feet*.

Developing the art of patience in the aftermath of child sacrifice brings participants the skills of being present, calm, and child focused not only with the children, but with one another, and in their work. A metamorphosis takes Priscilla by surprise as she reflects that she *"would never work with children"* emphasising *"first of all I don't like repeating myself!"*. Unexpectedly, her role becomes one of advocacy, determinedly exposing others to the cultural malaise and horror of child sacrifice, and triggering her own personal growth as a patient, listening advocate:

This alone has changed that in me ... I am patient, I can rethink, I can retell ... until I see the impact is won. (Priscilla)

Similarly, Lucia's patience comes through observing the children's caring nature and empathy with one another. She notes their diligence as if they recognise that they are safe at the school. Becoming momentarily absent with their intrusive memories they are seen to engage in learning as part of their healing. Lucia uses the word *"inspire"* to illustrate how the children's compassion positively encourages her to become a better version of herself:

I've learnt to be patient with children, they are patient with one another ... I've learnt to be patient with my fellow workers, and I've learnt to be hardworking ...

Personally, I've learnt that from them. They really inspire me. (Lucia)

A strong altruistic drive accompanied by humility, the participants have the courage to “*walk in their feet*” to gain a new perspective and understanding of their own trauma responses to the unspeakable acts directed against the children in their care. Alice reflects upon her own poverty as a child, now mindful that she was “*better off*” than some of the children for whom she cares. Her gratitude is palpable as she recognises education as her freedom and as a way to give back. She not only identifies with the children's suffering, but has a deeper appreciation for the few opportunities that she did have:

I feel humbled because ... I can't say I didn't have the chance ... I had the chance for education. I had a chance because I had a home - some kids don't have a home to sleep. So, I feel so humbled ... changing lives of kids who do not have any hope ... I know what it means ... because ... I can put myself in their feet.

(Alice)

Henrietta's empathy and altruistic compassion for the young lives so bitterly wounded works to bring hope to these tiny victims who now see themselves as a “*nuisance in life*” and who have lost hope:

When the children are suffering ... most of them lose hope, they think they are a nuisance in life, but when you talk to them ... in the rehab, I see them picking up the hope again ... irrespective of what happened to them. (Henrietta)

Healing Children, Healing Life and Healing Society

A reciprocal cycle of healing experienced in the children and the care workers, despite the growing cases of child sacrifice and trafficking, brings a strong sense of hope. Rather than weighed down by the heaviness of injustice on so many levels, they are buoyed by their contribution to small steps of change, advocating and creating a better and brighter future for the children in their care. This reflects their altruistic devotion to helping and protecting these

children regardless of the sacrifices they need to make. In redefining their future, they value selflessness and personal journeys of growth as contagious for healing society. Here, they are experiencing vicarious posttraumatic growth.

Lucia uses the word “*focused*” to describe her dedication to caring for the children and places a particular importance on helping those exposed to horrendous acts of physical and psychological trauma. She reflects on her awareness that they need additional attention and care compared to the other children in the community:

I always desire that ... they should have a better future even like more than me ...
I'm really focused now to make sure I do my best towards helping these children
... especially those ones who are traumatised. To love them, to bring hope into
their lives, like today it is so, but tomorrow it will be better. (Lucia)

Working with these children has opened Priscilla's eyes to new pathways and possibilities in her own life. She comments that she has the “*capacity*” to move on to higher levels of self-development mirroring possibilities for the children's lives:

I have the capacity and I want to move on to go to bigger, higher level, serving
the children. That's what I think about these days because I believe ... I can do it.
(Priscilla)

Within the context of this work, personal growth out of adversity is a beacon for Lucia who emphasises that she has become “*strong*” and “*confident*” to speak out against injustice.

Despite the enormity of this challenge, resilience and clear boundaries have emerged:

I've become strong. Actually, that's the only thing, I've become strong ... I'm
confident, which was never the case before ... I can stand out and speak my mind
... If something is wrong, I'll say that is wrong, it is right, then I'll appreciate ...
It has enabled me to overcome, although I feel it is impossible. (Lucia)

Priscilla communicates a sense of pride in who she has become since working with the children rescued from child sacrifice and trafficking. Notably, she feels that she has gained the respect and acceptance of her family, including her husband and children. Priscilla

describes how her husband “*looks after*” their children when she is helping child victims, taking on a role that demonstrates a societal repositioning between the genders in Uganda:

I think it’s good because he respects what I do, like how he is even out there waiting for me ... he supports me ... he just understands he has to go ahead ... he looks after my children because when I leave them home, he’s the person who takes charge. (Priscilla)

Compassion is the lifeblood of Henrietta’s work towards rehabilitation. Throughout the interview she exuded determination to reignite a future dream in the children:

It has really changed my mind. When a child is crying ... she’s hopeless ... When I’m talking to this child, I’m ... seeing myself as the hope that she has ... so I have to speak life again, to tell them that this is not the end. (Henrietta)

When reflecting upon her relationship with her own children, Priscilla feels pride in her ability to bring a reconfiguration of role expectations for future generations of children, and a challenge to societal views of women:

They look up to me ... you see them come to me with different questions, they believe ... mum will answer. (Priscilla)

Alice reflects the growth domains of humility and gratitude as protective allowing her to prioritise others’ needs:

I’ve learnt how to give and I’ve learnt how to sacrifice on a personal basis.
(Beatrice)

Vicariously, the children have provided the stepping-stone for Henrietta to redefine her altruistic identity as one that has purpose and meaning. In renewing her commitment to a spiritual calling, she is dedicated to bringing love to the lives of these damaged children:

I’m really becoming a different person. Like I really have this heart of helping people, helping them with all I have. (Henrietta)

Discussion

One superordinate theme, *Cultural darkness, passion, purpose and growth*, overarched the thematic findings of this idiographic study. It encompassed a dedicated path of selfless and relentless devotion to rescuing, nurturing, and supporting children with unimaginable physical wounds and traumatic narratives of child sacrifice and trafficking, despite grave risks to their own lives (*"I was full of fear"*). Despite this, their faith and their relationship with their God emerged as their primary source of strength for trauma-informed personal growth. Learning to *"walk in the children's feet"*, participants found themselves experiencing a newfound humility and gratitude for learning to live with such complex traumatic distress.

The first subordinate theme, *'Mission in life/A call to serve'*, captured the participants' fierce and passionate commitment to rescue, offer healing, and protect these children as an altruistic 'calling' or spiritual mandate from God, not unlike Rycraft (1994), who found that case workers were driven by a life 'mission' to protect children and families' well-being. Religion has often been described in the literature as shaping altruistic behaviour as a pathway to achieving inner joy, spiritual fulfilment, and a closer relationship with God (Cheng, 2015; Emerson, 2017; Neugebauer et al., 2020; Pessi, 2011; van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020; Zarea et al., 2013). Similarly, the participants of this study spoke of their faith, intimacy with God and desire to please Him, as central to understanding their motivation and dedication to this extremely challenging field of child protection.

However, for Siya, this intense, all-consuming devotion has brought isolation and disconnectedness. Friendships and relationships have withered from neglect as she seeks satisfaction and happiness from her work. She quietly conveys a deep and pervading sense of loneliness displaying the key characteristics of a strong altruistic identity, sacrificially giving for the sake of the children's welfare (McCormack, 2010; McCormack et al., 2009; van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2009). The loss of a supportive social network to help mitigate against the risk of burnout and the negative effects associated with traumatic experiences (Anderson, 2000; Griffiths et al., 2017; Manning-Jones et al., 2016;

McFadden et al., 2015; Stevens & Higgins, 2002), leaves Siya susceptible to unresolved traumatic distress and the isolation and sense of invalidation and self-blame of altruistic identity disruption (McCormack et al, 2009).

'Dark society, dark future' highlights Uganda's unique socio-cultural and political environment in which the participants work (Bukuluki, 2014; Bukuluki & Mpyangu, 2014; Byansi et al., 2014; Dennison et al., 2013; Eddy & Bogere, 2014). The cultural use of financial incentives to engage governing officials, solicitors and the police adds significant stress to these under-resourced and extremely challenged care workers and goes against Uganda's legal agreement with the UNCRC to "take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children" (United Nations Children's Fund, 1989, p. 10).

'Cost to self', encapsulates the participants' inherent emotional, psychological, and physical interpretation of their work. As frontline workers, images of ritual child killings and bodily mutilations brought no escape for the participants from the ever present gripping fear. Additionally, participants reveal an overwhelming sense of guilt and sense of responsibility to rescue and protect these children. Thus, participants battled with disengaging from an invasive cycle of cognitive rumination perpetuated by the urgency of their work.

Consistent with existing literature, symptomology described throughout these early themes was indicative of primary and vicarious trauma (Figley, 1995; Branson, 2019). Similar to Barton (2020) and Pollard (2018), the aftermath of fatal child abuse brought increased fear, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, and recurring triggers. Overall, cumulative factors perpetuated a dark and intrusive road towards burnout, found similarly in earlier research (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Cornille & Meyers, 1999; Dombo & Blome, 2016; Font, 2012; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Siya was acutely aware that the time to move on from this work was imminent recognising her emotional and mental vulnerability despite the 'protectiveness' of her Christian faith and altruistic drive.

Within the fourth subordinate theme, *'Coming from a place of humility, openness and learning'*, the participants' engaged with positive interpretations of their journey, specifically, learning from the children's pain and suffering. Faith and humility are deeply engrained in the participants' altruistic devotion to the children in their care (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020). In the Christian faith, humility is regarded as the highest moral virtue necessary for the "appropriate grasp of oneself in relation to God" (Heim, 2009, pp. 70–71). Seen through this lens, humility places the individual in a subordinate position in their relationship with God, and as a representative of their God's love, mercy and compassion for those who are poor and disadvantaged. Here, participants described placing themselves in the children's feet, where they learned to master the art of patience unlocking a world to a profound sense of gratitude, empathy and compassion, growth domains more recently identified in the literature (McCormack & Joseph, 2013). Hence, for these participants, faith, and altruistic care for the vulnerable and brutalised children in their care was intrinsically linked to representing the walking feet and hands of God's love for humanity.

The fifth subordinate theme, *'Healing children, healing life and healing society'*, highlights positive interpretations of growth following adversity. Similar to Flasch et al., (2019), these participants' strong altruistic identity was evident in their selfless devotion to fostering healing and growth in the children. Ultimately, a strong sense of hope permeated these narratives for future generations. Primarily, their fervent sense of an altruistic 'calling' gave fuel to the fight against child sacrifice and trafficking. However, juxtaposed with the fearful, dark aspects of their roles were aspirations that extended to build inner strength and grow confidence, to fight for respect and honour as capable women within their families, and shift traditional societal expectations of women. Moving forwards, they envisioned a future paved with endless opportunities for healing, growth, and development, for the children, themselves, and the wider Ugandan society.

Attitudinal ‘reciprocity’ of healing and growth displayed by these participants is consistent with previous studies that support the reciprocal benefits of altruism for the health and well-being of altruistic people (Karns et al., 2017; Pessi, 2011; van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020). Despite cultural and political challenges to their work, they remained fiercely loyal to fighting for justice, found work and life meaning through their faith in an omnipotent and compassionate God, and reported aspects of posttraumatic growth, such as humility, gratitude, altruism and love, core principles of active change for posttraumatic growth (McCormack & Joseph, 2013). Contextually, approximately 82% of Ugandans identify as Christian with the participants of this study strongly identifying faith and spirituality as strengths for coping following horrendous traumatic exposure. However, positive links between religion, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth have been found over many contexts, e.g., positive religious coping, preparedness to face existential questions, religious openness and participation, and intrinsic religiousness (Shaw et al., 2007). Conversely, pre-existing faith and a belief in God have also been reportedly rejected as a consequence of experiencing complex trauma (McCormack & Joseph, 2013). Future research that specifically seeks to unravel religion and spirituality variables, has the potential to identify links between trauma, religion, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study acknowledges that there are inherent epistemological and methodological limitations to utilising qualitative phenomenological enquiries (Larkin et al., 2006). In line with the epistemological position of this research, these findings cannot be generalised to other populations, nor can they offer explanations for cause and effect relationships (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, although eligible participants spoke fluent English, it must be acknowledged that language and cultural diversity between the interviewee and interviewer, may have limited interpretative opportunities and risked biases and presuppositions. This was consciously reflected upon throughout the analytic process.

Conversely, the constant and horrific nature of the work engaged in by these carers can be illuminated uniquely through the opportunity to reflect and interpret the life and work of these participants through semi-structured interviews and the double hermeneutic reflexivity of IPA. Giving voice to such narratives, discomfiting as they are, broadens our capacity for hypothetical considerations and future international responsibility and support.

Implications and Future Directions

The present study revealed the participants' Christian faith and strong altruistic identity as integral driving factors behind their motivation and commitment to caring for victims of child sacrifice and trafficking in Uganda. However, though these factors are protective, these participants spoke of a profound and enduring negative impact on their mental health and well-being. The implementation of protocols and procedures to reduce the impact of emotional, psychological, and physical distress on carers is acutely recognised within such organisations, but resources, political will, and the illegal international procurement of children and their body parts, require complex international law enforcement advocacy. The international community, currently distracted by the Covid-19 pandemic, may not be able to offer the organisational support critical to achieving effective psychosocial care of the carers in such high risk environments (Baugerud et al., 2018; McCormack et al., 2009). The specific child protection setting for these carers creates a chronic, cumulative, and anticipatory array of possibilities for traumatic distress, within a socio-cultural, religious, and political context. Future research can build on the present study's findings exploring the experiences of child protection care workers combatting child sacrifice and trafficking throughout the world, and how the international community, immobilised by the pandemic, might navigate this urgent area of child protection.

Conclusion

This research is a novel, context-specific understanding of care workers' motivation and drive to rescue, care for victims, and challenge the perpetuation of child sacrifice and

trafficking in Uganda where the number of cases is rapidly rising. By using IPA, this research, conducted in person just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, was able to give voice to the lived experience of these carers exposed to ongoing complex traumatic and violent situations that placed them at risk also of kidnap, physical violence and even death. Since that time, global distraction, and inability for others to engage and support such organisations has no doubt increased the vulnerability of the few carers on the ground. For these participants’ exposure to the horrifying bodily mutilations and traumatic narratives of child sacrifice trauma was interpreted as personally threatening yet offered opportunities for exponential growth. Their vulnerability to the inherent threats in their daily working lives was buffered by a strong spiritual faith and altruistic drive that provided platforms for psychological growth. Importantly, this study reminds us of the international responsibility to actively and urgently assist organisations and the individuals who call out such crimes masquerading as old customs, that shatter the lives of children, their families, and carers in many countries around the world.

Table 1.

Superordinate theme: Cultural darkness, passion, purpose, and growth overarches five subordinate themes

1.	Mission in life/A call to serve
2.	Dark society, dark future
3.	Cost to self
4.	Coming from a place of humility, openness, and learning
5.	Healing children, healing life and healing society

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview allowing for prompts:

- How your experiences and choices in life have impacted on you over your lifetime
- How you are making sense of what is happening to the children you work with here in Uganda and its impact on your life,
- How you feel you as a person have changed because of this experience
- What about this experience in particular has impacted on you either positively or negatively
- How are you making sense of the human dynamics that you have been caught up in and which are not of your own choosing.
- Any thoughts that have altered or become part of your thinking since this experience:
(Prompts)
 - 1) psychological,
 - 2) philosophical,
 - 3) existential
- How you see your life going forward from this experience
- What has changed in your feelings, thoughts, relationships, goals since this event.