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Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

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Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

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Editorial: Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

Introduction

Children born of War (CBOW) are children fathered by foreign and often enemy soldiers and born to local mothers during and in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict. CBOW have long been overlooked as a distinct war-affected group with specific lived experiences and therefore also distinct support needs; both the scholarly community and humanitarian and political actors tasked with supporting war-affected populations tended to focus on the mothers of CBOW, many of whom were survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (Carpenter, 2010). Yet, CBOW themselves, often conceived in exploitative, abusive, and sometimes violent relations (Carpenter, 2007), face significant challenges in childhood, youth and often into adulthood as a consequence of multiple intersecting adversities, including discrimination and stigmatization as well as adverse economic and social circumstances (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Glaesmer et al., 2012; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021).

After initial conceptual and empirical studies in the early 2000s (e.g. Carpenter, 2000, 2007, 2010; Grieg, 2001; Ericsson and Simonsen, 2005), in recent years a wealth of case studies relating to CBOW and their mothers in different geopolitical and historical contexts have led to much richer empirical data and a better understanding of the experiences of CBOW. Our Research Topic is a reflection of some of those recent research developments; it is also a reflection—in this relatively young research field—of the strength of research among early-stage researchers, many of whom are single or lead authors in the papers published here. Furthermore, the Research Topic reflects where, geographically and historically, some of the foci of international scholarship have been: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Second World War in Europe.

The strength of CBOW research is evident in several of the Special Issue's papers, some of which specifically explore the relationship between CBOW and their mothers and fathers. For instance, within the context of exploring children born in captivity linked to the Lord's

Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, Kiconco draws on extensive fieldwork in the Kitgum area of Acholi in Northern Uganda, to interrogate (re)integration politics and practices of receptor communities while also identifying patterns of exclusion and alienation as well as significant levels of stigmatization of children born in LRA captivity. Evidence clearly links these ongoing stigmatization experiences to persistent discriminatory patriarchal socio-cultural practices.

Apio, while taking these experiences of stigma and discrimination as the starting point of her research, argues that descriptions and perceptions of suffering and disadvantage are a one-sided and limit our understanding of the life course experiences of children born in captivity. She instead argues for a stronger focus on CBOW's attempts at overcoming adversity. Her mixed-methods study used the Child and Youth Resilience Measure as a self-reported determination of socio-ecological resilience among 35 CBOW youth in Northern Uganda and combined it with semi-structured interviews of a cross section of respondents. Apio analysis evidences a more nuanced picture of the way CBOW youth have dealt with experiences of stigma, rejection, ill health, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities, strongly indicating that a better understanding of the variance in resilience could hold the key to more effectively tailored support of CBOW in fragile post-conflict settings.

De Nutte et al. explore a topic that has long been recognized by humanitarian actors as central to the experiences of CBOW but has not found significant academic attention: disclosure about the CBOW provenance. Based on a series of interviews with six mothers and four fathers of children born in captivity, they explore both the parents' agency in their choices to reveal to their children, their kinship group, and their local communities the circumstances of the children's conception in captivity, while also highlighting the relational and cultural contexts that might constrain this agency. Interrogating these choices in view of the age of the child at the point of considering disclosure, the emotional impact of disclosure, identity belonging and possible future stigmatization, the paper confirms the complexity of trauma communication in this case of socially negotiated choice.

Ojok paper moves beyond the context of family, kinship group, and local community when he discusses the way children born in captivity are integrated through local primary schools in Northern Uganda. Using classroom observation to understand school policies about the integration of war-affected children more broadly and drawing on writing tasks to understand the way in which CBOW experience the implementation of these policies, Ojok argues that schools play a core role in the integration of CBOW into post-conflict societies given that in schools CBOW are both confronted with traumatic memories of the past but also experience healing if an intrinsic support structure is built to facilitate their learning and simultaneous recovery. On the basis of his case study, however, it is also evident that the school amplifies experiences—both positive and negative. Children who have experienced disadvantage—among others CBOW—respond particularly positively to a caring and nurturing environment; but conversely, they are particularly sensitive to school experiences of exclusion and stigma.

Wagner et al. in their comparative paper explore a different group of CBOW, namely peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) in two different peacekeeping contexts: Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Using a large mixed-methods study in which interactions between local women and girls and male peacekeepers in both countries were explored through the Research Topic of more than 5,000 self-interpreted micronarratives, they approached a question that CBOW researchers had raised but not yet answered satisfactorily, namely how do PKFC fit into the CBOW research paradigm, given the differences between armed conflict, post-war occupation, and peace support operations. Their findings demonstrate that the impact of being born as a PKFC in many respects closely resembles the experiences of CBOW in other contexts; they encounter exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization, economic, as well as educational and social disadvantage. Therefore, Wagner et al. conclude that the inclusion of PKFC in the research and programming framework that addresses support needs of CBOW is justified and that troop-contributing countries of peace support missions ought to be included in legal and other frameworks that develop support structures for CBOW.

Moving from contemporary and recent conflict settings to historical conflicts, four papers deal with CBOW of the Second World War, the post-war occupations, and the Vietnam War. Children—understood not as persons of a particular age or developmental stage, but as offspring of a particular set of parents—in these contexts are of a more advanced chronological age and therefore research can take a more longitudinal approach.

Lee et al. interrogate the life courses of Vietnamese Amerasians by comparing the experiences of those Amerasians who stayed in Vietnam vs. those who emigrated to the US as part of several resettlement initiatives of the U.S. government. Analyzing over 370 micronarratives of Amerasians in both countries, they compare participants' self-coded perceptions to identify statistically different experiences and then use thematic analysis to complement those quantitative findings. Respondents in Vietnam declared a stronger desire to look for biological roots and confirmed that these roots impacted on their identity; in contrast Amerasians in the U.S. linked their provenance more strongly to physical and mental health challenges. Poverty was a core theme in almost all narratives, but the research also found that participants' interactions with their environment was strongly impacted by ethnicity with African American parentage amplifying stigmatization.

The remaining papers in this Research Focus explore a range of themes relating to the post-war occupations of Germany and Austria, and the children fathered by occupation soldiers. In a longitudinal study on Austrian so-called "occupation children", Schretter and Stelzl-Marx use archival and published sources as well as oral history interviews to scrutinize the changes in the way political actors and those involved in developing and implementing social policies have changed their attitudes and prioritizations of policies vis-à-vis this war-affected population over the last 75 years. They identify three phases, with CBOW initially being perceived as a (social and economic) burden for Austrian post-war society; later CBOW were hardly noticed as they were assumed to have integrated into mainstream Austrian society, only to be rediscovered, from the 1990s onwards, as the CBOW themselves became more vocal about their distinct experiences of discrimination, stigmatization and their decade-long search for their provenance in order to understand better their own roots and identity. Schretter and Stelzl-Marx argue that challenges and opportunities in the integration of these children have been tied to changes in social values and morals as well as to collective processes of coming to terms with the war and post-war period.

In their research on experiences of children of the post-war occupation, Mitreuter et al. take identity and belonging as a starting point, issues that have featured prominently in the narratives of CBOW in all historical and geopolitical contexts. In their content analysis of 122 open-ended questions among German CBOW they identify several dominant themes. Most significant among the narrative descriptors were loneliness and lack of belonging, followed by lack of emotional bonds and a sense of belonging. In addition, CBOW spoke frequently about what is often referred to in CBOW literature as a 'wall of silence' or 'conspiracy of silence' – the challenge of disclosure and the impact that non-disclosure has on the CBOW. In contrast, the research also identified instances of positive familiar relationships that led to a sense of belonging often in situations where caregivers had been open and transparent about the CBOW's provenance.

Picking up the theme of the long-term impact of being a CBOW, the final paper of our Research Topic engages with a theme of relevance to participatory researchers generally and to those working with CBOW in particular – namely the impact of research on those who support our knowledge creation through their participation in academic research. Kaiser and Glaesmer followed up their original study of German children born of the post-WWII occupation with a survey that investigated the impact of study participation on the research subjects. Utilizing a mixed-methods paper-pencil survey of 65 participants including the standardized Reactions to Research Participation Questionnaire (RRPQ) as well as questions on expectations toward participation, Kaiser and Glaesmer found that although participation itself was sometimes associated with negative emotions, participants' overall experience was positive; this was because initial expectations of study participation were met with new ways of dealing with the challenges of being a CBOW.

Taken together, the articles give a sense of the breadth and depth of research on CBOW, especially as it is driven by the next generation of CBOW researchers who have formed determined, well-trained, and multi-disciplinary group of academics building on the earlier disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. The papers illustrate the complexity of CBOW experiences as well as the significance of research to underpin tailored responses to foster post-traumatic growth and assist healing among CBOW.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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"Every Child Is Special…": Perspectives on the Integration of Children Born of War and Their War-Affected Peers at a Local School in Northern Uganda

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This article examines the circumstances of 16 Children Born of War (CBOW) who participated in a classroom activity designed to understand their experiences of integration at a local school in post war northern Uganda. The children are part of a generation of returnees who were conceived as a result of sexual violence and forced marriages between the commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and young girls abducted from their communities. The research at the Alur Primary School (APS) articulates the children's views, and how this one school managed to integrate CBOW and war-affected children, treating each as special, to advance their learning and their education. Specifically, each of the 181 war-affected children involved in the class activity was given a chance to recall key moments of their time at APS. Their write-ups were analyzed into themes illustrating what happened when CBOW were integrated into the school, and how the school responded to their educational needs. The activity did not isolate CBOW from their non-CBOW peers, hence giving every child the opportunity to freely express their views regardless of their background. This article contributes to our understanding of how schools, as one of the most influential institutions that shape the development of children, can foreground the voices of CBOW as beneficiaries of education and actors in their own right.

Keywords: education, reintegration, children, war-affected, born of war, integration

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INTRODUCTION

Visitors to Alur Primary School (APS)[1] are met with a big signpost bearing the school's symbol and flag colors. Along this sign is the familiar black, yellow, and red colors of the Ugandan flag—found in all national government grant-aided schools to remind the public of the importance of schooling to the future of the nation. Like all government-aided schools in Uganda, APS operates

[1]The name used for this school is a pseudonym, to protect its anonymity. In order to further this, some additional information such as date of establishment and precise location of the school has been left out on the basis that it would appear obvious for local residents in northern Uganda to know which school the researcher is referring to.

a free universal—based education curriculum that runs at all levels from Primary One (P.1.) to Primary Seven (P.7.)[2]. Nearly all the 800 children hosted at the school were "war-affected." They include Children Born of War (CBOW) and other groups of children who were born and grew up in northern Uganda during times of conflict and displacement[3].

The terminology CBOW has been used in reference to "persons of any age conceived as a result of violent, coercive, or exploitative sexual relations in conflict zones" (Carpenter, 2007. p. 3). CBOW in this northern Uganda study were part of a generation conceived as a result of sexual violence and forced marriages between the commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and young girls abducted from their communities[4]. 16 CBOW were identified from a total population of 181 children of the upper-classes of P.6 and P.7[5]. Of the 16 CBOW, the majority were among some 138 beneficiaries of NGO scholarships offered to war affected children[6]. In 2015 the school offered 25 placements to CBOW under a child sponsorship scheme known as Sponsoring Children Uganda (SCU)—allowing the children to enroll at the different primary grade levels. The scheme has been run in collaboration with mothers of CBOW who resided in the peri-urban settlements of the study location[7] and have formed an association known as *Watye Ki Gen*[8]. This group of young girls (hereinafter referred to as mothers, or young mothers) constitute a part of the larger number of 30,000–60,000 school age children and youth abducted in northern Uganda during the war between LRA and the Ugandan army. In this war, young female captives were forced into marriage and motherhood where they served as "wives" and sex slaves to senior commanders in addition to being domestic servants, porters and fighters in the LRA (Baines, 2014, p. 406). Under these circumstances, the young mothers conceived and gave birth to children—the subject of interest in this study.

Today, over a decade from the end of the war, studies have shown that the children usually fail to integrate into their maternal clans due to communal obstacles that their mothers face in attempting to negotiate their positions in their communities (see for example Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017; Porter, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Atim et al., 2018, p. 68). Some of the mothers reported that upon return, their families had been killed or displaced—the result of which was life in poverty, and inability to fend for their children. In as much as some of their relatives wanted their "children" (young mothers) to return to them, their having had children born from the "bush" impacted negatively on the way CBOW have been received as children of the enemies (also see Apio, 2016; Mukasa, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Research has also revealed how the mothers' lives are clouded with shame and agony of being associated with the LRA (Liebling and Baker, 2010; Mukasa, 2017; Liebling, 2018). In most of these cases, the mothers were welcomed, while their "rebel" children rejected, hence perpetuating a cycle of stigmatization and victimization during the post war period (Mukasa, 2017).

The unraveling challenges that the returnees are faced with has forced some of them to migrate and start new lives in the anonymity of *kwo town*—Luo language meaning life in urban locations. In Ojok's (2021) study, the mothers viewed *kwo town* in terms of opportunities these present to their life outside of the social scrutiny they experienced in the camp[9]. A key notion of the current study was that mothers, through their peer associations and networks[10], have negotiated their statuses with NGOs and other charity associations for support—which is a demonstration that their migration in the urban settlements became a form of social agency employed as an alternative to life in their maternal homes. According to Caramés et al. (2006) relocation to new environments (especially town centers) is often fundamental in ensuring that returnees mitigate their experience of stigma and assimilate as "normal" people. In the case of the mothers, many of them were able to benefit from different forms of educational support for CBOW, making it possible to raise the children in the peri-urban settings of the study location where their LRA identity is unknown (Ojok, 2021). Such social negotiation sometimes manifests in different forms: Erin Baines and Rosenoff-Gauvin have for instance observed that the mothers have embraced their motherhood responsibilities as an act of social repair (Baines and Rosenoff-Gauvin, 2014). By doing so, they have begun to forge a way to raise their children as opposed to being held back by the stigma they encounter in society. It also follows that in the performativity of their motherhood duties, the returnees desire that their children be educated to become *lutino makwiri* (also see Oloya, 2012), a Luo language phrase meaning "responsible children"—who are able support their parents to overcome the

[2]The school is a standard primary setting for pupils from P.1. to P.7., of which P.6. and P.7. constitutes the upper primary. After P.7., the children sit a Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) to join secondary schools or vocational training before being enrolled into the university or other tertiary institutions as a final step.

[3]Some of the children were designated by NGOs as "vulnerable children". These include orphans, those living with HIV/AIDS, street children and children in need of urgent support.

[4]The definition falls within category 3 of the four broad sub-categories of CBOW advanced in academic research, i.e. 1) children of enemy soldiers, 2) children of soldiers from occupation forces, 3) children of child soldiers and 4) children of peacekeeping forces (Mochmann and Lee, 2010, p. 271).

[5]The 16 CBOW were identified through their write ups and reflections at a composition activity organized by the research as discussed in the methodology section below.

[6]School Registry 2016/17 accessed from office of Director of Studies (DoS), Alur PS, August 6, 2018, northern Uganda.

[7]The name of the urban center located in northern Uganda (location of research) has been concealed to avoid easy identification of the school, and the children associated with it.

[8]An association of mothers of CBOW who have been formed as a non-governmental organization to advocate and draw attention to the circumstances of their children.

[9]Borrowing from elsewhere Adam Branch in his study on the urban town of Gulu in the post war northern Uganda introduced the everyday usage of the phrase *kwo town* – often ambivalently expressed to denote both challenges and opportunities that came with the growth and expansion of Gulu town following the conflict (Branch, 2013).

[10]At the time of the study a group of 100 mothers had formed three different associations under the Women Advocacy Network (WAN) – a network of the young mothers and survivors of sexual violence who have been supported by a local NGO to carry out advocacy and lobby for their needs and that of their children. For more on WAN see website http://www.justiceandreconciliation.org/initiatives/womens-advocacynetwork/. Of these, *Rwot Lakica* group comprised 30 mothers while *Kica Pa Rwot* Women's Group had 35 mothers. A third group known as *Can Rwede Peke* had 48 young mothers. However, some mothers do not join these groups due to fear of stigmatization (Ojok, 2021).

adversities faced in their communities (Ojok, 2021). In this way, the education of returnees (mothers and their children) can become a source of "emancipation" and "hope" (Mukasa, 2017, p. 363). Upon this understanding, this study examines the experiences of CBOW and their encounter with schooling at APS—contributing to our understanding of how schools, as one of the most influential institutions, can shape the development of children.

Specifically, the article discusses how this one school has managed to integrate CBOW and war-affected children, treating each as special, to advance their learning and their education. Significantly, the teachers at APS have argued that "Every Child is Special" mooting this approach as suitable to addressing the educational needs of all children, including CBOW enrolled at the school. The research revealed that there exists no consistent approach to what special education means, which does not speak to any national or international discourses around the support of children with Special Education Needs (SEN): the statement "Every Child is Special" meant different things to different teachers when it comes to CBOW. On the one hand, the statement points to the fact that all children at the school are taken as individuals with specific needs regardless of their background. On the other hand, this same reasoning also implies that some of the children require special attention and support because they returned from the LRA camps where they faced particular challenges and received an unusual socialization (Ojok, 2021). On this basis, the school's philosophy advances the view that the educational provisions at the school have been focused on the individualities of the child—the fact that every child has unique academic and non-academic needs, and that sometimes there are children who are "special" due to their circumstances, and have to be treated that way. This research is an attempt to unpack these processes as they relate to the experiences of the CBOW.

The discussion in the next section lays out the study methodology. This is followed by a section that discusses the findings arising from children's experiences—foregrounding their voices as beneficiaries of education and actors in their own right. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used for the school, the study location (district), mothers, the teachers and the children to avoid negative consequences (stigma, exclusion) for the children who participated in the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was part of a doctoral field study at University of Birmingham which was organized in the summer of 2017 and 2018 to examine the educational circumstances of CBOW in northern Uganda. This study used a mixed methods approach to understand the situation of CBOW: The main research activity required CBOW to write down their reflections during English composition writing sessions organized to generate insights about their experience at APS. Additional methods of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and face to face interviews were carried out with teachers and mothers—the children's immediate proxies—in order to understand the school practices and attitudes toward education of CBOW. In addition, the researcher undertook participant observation of the school in order to learn first-hand the experience that the children go through while at APS, as well as understand how they were treated by the school teachers and management. The use of mix methods in understanding the children's experiences offered complementary insights and understandings that would not have been possible had the researcher relied on a single method of gathering information (also see Darbyshrire et al., 2005).

The pilot phase of the field trip to northern Uganda was carried out in the summer of 2017 when the researcher spent 3 months undertaking participant observation of the school and 12 face to face interviews with the mothers. The activities were done to gain a background understanding on the situation of CBOW, and generate the different perspectives toward their schooling. Eight FGDs were also organized to that effect with the mothers. A second field trip was organized in the summer of 2018 lasting over three months that enabled the researcher to undertake an additional phase of participant observation. This was carried out along with FGDs and face to face interviews with the teachers and school management. In total, 14 class teachers of the upper-class levels of P.6. and P.7. participated in the face to face interviews. The same teachers also participated in 2 separate Focus Group Discussions (FGD) for the male and female teachers. All the FGDs and face to face interviews were carried out by the researcher who was assisted by two female research assistants. Consents were obtained both verbally and in writing in the Luo language spoken by the participants. The interviews were audio recorded, and transcription of data was carried out by the researcher. The FGD and face to face interviews with teachers were carried out within the school premises, while the ones with mothers were carried out at different places preferred by the participants. Confidentiality and comfort of the participants was prioritized in the choice of location for the FGD and face-to face interviews.

Detailed field work started in the summer of 2017—during which the researcher negotiated his entry with the school head teacher at a meeting organized to introduce the study[11]. Following this, the head teacher introduced the researcher to the teachers at a second meeting organized for the same purpose. The researcher was also introduced by the head teacher to all the school pupils and the general school community at a routine Monday morning school parade. He was introduced as someone interested in learning about the experiences of education for war affected children. They were informed that the researcher's presence would not interfere with normal school routine—a point that the researcher articulated and clarified when asked to address the school assembly, and during different occasions. He also emphasized his independence, clarifying that he had no relationship with the NGOs that provided scholarships to the

[11] A consent letter to allow school participation in the research was obtained from the head teacher. The researcher also obtained both verbal and written consent from the mothers of CBOW for their children to participate during an earlier set of meetings, interviews and FGDs organized by the researcher prior to including the school. The mothers had organized themselves under their associations *Watye Ki Gen* and WAN.

children, which minimized possibilities of perceived coercion of the children into providing responses. In essence, in order for the children to be involved in the research, it was important that the researcher adopted a role that defines and allows the children to recognize his relationship with them (also see Birbeck and Drummond, 2005).

During the participant observation, the researcher spent time understanding the school practices and policies relating to the integration of CBOW into everyday schooling which generated a rich set of field notes used to support analysis. He blended with the children during class hours and play time. Observations were also done around some of the key school activities that the researcher attended, which included: school assemblies, academic activities in the classes (teachings and interactions between teachers and their pupils), and extra-curricular activities (games, sports, drama, music and dance). Because of this, the researcher was able to probe the events, and the role of the pupils as "actors within it"—always asking the "how" and the "why" questions (Yin, 1994) to allow for a deeper reflection of what was being observed. This information helped in ensuring that the researcher developed an all-around understanding of the school system and its practices.

In the summer of 2018, the researcher introduced a creative and flexible activity for children of the upper classes of P.6. and P.7. in an effort to directly involve children and foreground their voices within the research. The researcher had been invited by a male English teacher of P.6. and P.7. to attend his introductory lessons on English Composition, during which he was also asked to speak to the pupils, as had been the case with all class observations conducted during this period. During this process, the researcher and teacher discussed possibilities of a collaborative activity that involved the children writing down their reflections to contribute their own perspectives toward the study. In doing so, the researcher introduced a more active role for children, as opposed to obtaining information from their proxies. This mitigated against underestimating the children's abilities to "draw" or "write" [Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999 cited in Darbyshrire et al. (2005), p. 423] as a form of expressing their opinions in the research.

The proposed questions for the composition for the two classes required the children to recall their experiences when they first joined the school. These questions were shared with the research supervisors, and developed into open ended questions deemed comprehensible to the pupils (Waterman et al., 2001), and pertinent to the children's own experiences (Scott, 2000). To enhance free expression and confidentiality, the pupils were not required to write their names, although all of them insisted on having their names on the scripts; these have since been coded. The children were also assured that the researcher was the only person who would be reading their compositions, making clear that no teachers would be grading them. This process was useful as it freed the children to candidly express their views of the school, resting in the knowledge that their teachers would not read their texts, hence minimizing the risk that children would interpret their involvement in the activity as "school work" (Kellett and Ding, 2004). Although the researcher told the pupils to feel free to write in the Luo language, the children opted for English, and were generally mature at expressing themselves about their lives at the school.

Of the 181 children who participated in the composition activity, 97 pupils were from P.7., 39 of whom were girls, and one student in P.7.was visually impaired. The total number of pupils who participated in P.6. were 84, 47 of whom were girls. Two boys were considered to have special needs because of their visual impairments, with one other student being physically impaired and supported by a wheel chair. Of the total number of class participants, 16 were CBOW. All the 16 (10 boys and 6 girls) identified themselves as CBOW in the write-ups. Apart from general information from the NGOs that the school is hosting CBOW at the different class levels, no attempt was made at identifying the children during the class activity, or more generally during observation at the school. However, 3 children outside of the 16 were identified by the teachers as CBOW, however they were not singled out for any activity. The study with CBOW was underpinned by the understanding that when the children are singled out, this would lead to their stigmatization.

Previous research studies with CBOW in northern Uganda had revealed that children prefer to conceal their LRA identity so that they are able to integrate seamlessly in educational and other communal settings (Denov and Lakor, 2017; Stewart, 2017). These views were confirmed with CBOW mothers during preliminary interviews conducted in February and March 2017. Although the children were not singled out on the basis of their ages, the older CBOW comfortably discussed their ages in the essays—which points to the experiences they had in comparison to their peers, as explained below. According to the age range of pupils documented in the P.6 and P.7 class rosters accessed from the Director of Studies (DoS), the group encompassed children between the ages of 12 and 17. In most schools in Uganda, the expected age range for P.6 and P.7 pupils is 11–12-year-old, although in practice, children's grade-levels are not always dependent on their chronological age due to some children's education having been delayed by war. This is especially true of CBOW, as many of them missed out on educational opportunities in their early childhood.

More than half the children were able to fill the three sheets of paper provided to them – a demonstration that they were willing to share information about their experiences at the school. At least 40 of the 181 pupils in P.6 and P.7 who participated in this activity were given extra time to keep their answer sheets as they preferred to carry their work home in order to embark on more reflections on their lives. For those who were able to complete their work in time, their answer sheets were collected and the children were thanked for their participation. After reading the children's work, the researcher spent some time with four of the P.6 and P.7 teachers reflecting on the process of the assignment without revealing details of what had been written by individual pupils. This additional session with four of the P.6 and P.7 teachers was helpful for contextualizing the way the teachers relate with CBOW.

The pupils were happy to participate in the essay writing and some of them had important messages written to the researcher at the end of their answer sheets. For example, Anefah, a girl of P.7. wrote, "sir may God bless you for bringing this project to our

school to make us talk freely about our life in school"[12]. Similarly, another young boy, Openke, of P.7. wrote, "we like this exercise because it is fun. I enjoyed writing about myself"[13]. Such remarks underline the importance of asking questions that children already know and which are not harmful, as was the case with the specific questions that were designed to allow the children to talk about daily events, routines or feelings (Mauthner, 1997). Other pupils drew pictures of flowers at the end of their work as a thank you for participating in the activity—actions which teachers interpreted as the children's enthusiasm and joy in writing about themselves. In some of the remarks, the children wrote about how they enjoyed the process of participation: "I liked throwing the ball. It was fun because I like football. Football makes me happy"[14], said Ochenda a boy of P.6. White Stream. This shows that the ice-breakers can be significant in making children feel at ease[15].

Throughout the research process, a local organization working with war affected children and their mothers—the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was on site to provide specialized support to the participants who were assumed susceptible to distress resulting from their participation in the research[16]. An ethics approval was granted by the University of Birmingham Ethics Review Board, after a lengthy review of the study methodologies and several adaptations of the study protocol. This was followed by similar approvals of the Uganda national ethics board in Kampala, and Lacor Ethics Review Board. These permits allowed participant observation at the local primary school in northern Uganda including the researcher's participation in classroom activities, conditional on permission from the school management, and respective consent from the school teachers who would collaborate in the research. Safety and security of information regarding the research was ensured by using the UoB Bear-Datashare system of research data management, where interviews, observations and primary source documents have been stored as per ethical review protocol. All written scripts/data have been coded and made available in the open access repository at UoB. In addition, pseudonyms have been used throughout the study in order to protect the CBOW and their mothers from any form of victimization resulting from the exposure they are likely get as a result of the information they provided in this thesis. On similar grounds, a pseudonym for the school (Alur PS) has been used—including its teachers—to avoid any forms of stigma that may arise from the public toward those associated with the school. On the same note, references to the specific district and town where the study took place has been avoided by simply using northern Uganda.

Data from face to face interviews and FGDs were audio taped, transcribed and all translations were carried out by the researcher. The transcripts were then checked for accuracy by the research assistant who also accompanied the researcher at all times during the fieldwork. The researcher then undertook the analysis, allowing the participants' voices to take precedent in articulating their experiences. To a large extent, most of the participants' views, and children's write-ups were quoted verbatim as a way of foregrounding the evidence gathered from the field. The analysis of the children's class activity was grounded on empirical knowledge gained from the school without relying on an overarching theory to inform the fieldwork—which is consistent with aspects of approaches adopted in ethnographic studies (see for Guba and Lincoln, 1989). As the research program evolved, the researcher was able to record and generate important patterns which were developed into the two main themes that informed the class activities, i.e., "a day I will never forget," which explored the children's feelings or narratives of their time at school, and "a typical day at school," which examined the way CBOW and their peers experienced the school policies and practices. Beyond superficial explanation, the use of questions such as "how" and "why" enabled the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants which in turn was helpful in generating themes that informed the analysis (Yin, 1994; Stake, 2003).

Although comprehensive data analysis was done after the field activities, a preliminary analysis was carried out after each phase of the data collection. The process involved "sifting, sorting, and reflecting" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 539) with constant comparisons across data sets in order to be able to identify patterns, consistencies and differences in data collected from interviews and observations (Thomas, 2013). The reflective process and cross data comparison were enhanced by making references to field diaries and reflective journals that were kept by the researcher. This enabled him to undertake analysis while integrating his personal experiences and articulation of the interface he had with the participants—as well as knowledge generated through participant observation of the field. The researcher's observation of the everyday school setting allowed him to enhance his analysis with emerging issues (Gluckman, 1961)—through an extended case study approach. In this way he was able to "close in on real life situations" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235)—many of which were given as examples to inform the different sections of this article. The analytical framework that informed the process also relied on additional literature and publications related to emerging research on CBOW and war affected children in Africa.

Lastly, the study had some limitations that ought to be considered when the results are being interpreted. Information was gathered from a single school that captured the experiences of only 16 CBOW. The sample size does now allow for generalization of findings (Yin, 1984, p. 21; Yin, 1993; Tellis, 1997; Thomas, 2011). It was not possible within the study parameters to obtain a larger sample of CBOW considering they were a hidden population within this setting. Additionally,

[12]P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 1, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[13]P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.1, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[14]P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[15]A more detailed analysis of this study methodology, its rationale and broader application to research with minors has been articulated in a recent co-authored book chapter titled "Children Born of War: Past, Present and Future" (Akullo and Ojok, 2021), and the doctoral thesis by the researcher (Ojok, 2021).

[16]During the research none of the participants obtained any form of support resulting from their participation in the overall research. Information for support was availed to the participants during the information sharing sessions at the start of the interviews, FGDs and class activity.

the researcher only considered CBOW from the upper classes of P.6. and P.7. which presumably left out a bigger sample of CBOW within the school itself. The case therefore provides practical rather than universal knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of the education experiences of only 16 CBOW at this one school. Further to this, the case study was taken from a school in the urban center of the study location. The case of APS therefore does not include the perspectives of CBOW who study in the rural areas, and whose experiences would have offered a unique and balanced view of the circumstances of CBOW in post war northern Uganda. Another issue has been that in spite of efforts to triangulate data obtained through other methods, e.g., observation of school interactions and interviews with mothers/teachers, it was difficult to rule out social desirability bias. At this particular school, it is possible that some participants did not want to provide information that would make them appear "bad" (Paulhus, 1984, p. 22) or to be perceived as speaking negatively about the school or their teachers. Similarly, social desirability bias may have existed for teachers who would not want to go against the school philosophy of treating every child as special because such views would appear unacceptable or insensitive toward CBOW.

The discussions that follow examines some of the children's written narratives, illustrating what happened when CBOW were integrated into the school, and how the school responded to their educational needs. Based on the children's perspectives, and the teachers' opinions, effort is made to evaluate the philosophy 'Every Child is Special' as a way of understanding how the children have been treated at APS. These discussions fall within two main themes of the study, i.e., "a day I will never forget," which explores the children's feelings or narratives of their time at school, and "a typical day at school," which looks at the way CBOW and their peers have experienced the school policies and practices. While discussing the first theme, 'a day I will never forget', the researcher analyzed the children's narratives on a time they spent at school. This was different from their reflections on the way they are being treated in terms of educational provision which will be discussed later where the children reflect on their typical day at school.

"MY FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL": CHILDREN'S FEELINGS ABOUT TRANSITION TO EARLY SCHOOL LIFE

Analysis from the class composition activity revealed that CBOW felt insecure when they initially joined the school because of imagined or actual experiences encountered while with their peers and teachers. Other than their concerns about being shamed as a result of their association with the LRA, the feelings of CBOW were found to be consistent with the more general experiences encountered by other war affected children. A recurrent theme in the children's frustration with life at APS stemmed from the poor socio-economic circumstances their families lived in, which did not matter whether one was from the LRA (CBOW) or not. These are discussed below.

When CBOW joined APS, there was an initial sense of withdrawal in participation in the school life. Opimma, a 15-year old CBOW of P.6. described that he remained isolated because he felt different: his peers dressed better than him because the family could not afford decent clothing for him to join the school[17]. Similarly, Okoju (P.6) a CBOW, described his circumstance in the following ways:

> I came here from Anaka very far away. My mother came with me from Sudan (the LRA) and life was not easy in school when I joined. My mother is poor and cannot buy everything I need here [in school]. Sometimes my friends laugh at me. This made me start staying on my own those days [when I just joined school][18].

The above two comments from CBOW about their sense of feeling "out of place" and loneliness during the early days of school shows that their feelings were not based on real prejudice they experienced, but on the state of mind they found themselves in as a result of being different from others. We shall however discover later below from Okoju that he was provided a supportive environment by his teachers to enable him cope with the situation he faced in the new school setting. The comments did not necessarily suggest that CBOW had a particular way they viewed the school that was different from the rest of their non-CBOW peers. From the write-ups, 16 non-CBOW expressed similar challenges related to poverty. These circumstances are indicative of the struggles experienced by many children in the post-war society—and the more general impact of war on the children's families.

In addition to the children's family situation, the write-ups indicated that some CBOW felt out of place because they were relatively older than their peers—which revealed implicit differences in the experiences of older CBOW from the rest[19]. However, the age gap did not affect their motivation to continue schooling, neither did it reveal that the school treated them differently from the rest. Rujok, a CBOW of P.6. wrote the following statements about his experiences:

> When I was about to join school, my mother struggled to get money. She was not able to get enough until when I was 9 years old. I started school late. I had to skip some of the classes in the lower primary school. I am now 17 years old. God knows why he did that to me. Even though I am very big I will still finish it (complete school)…[20].

[17]CBOW 1 (Opimma), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.3, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[18]CBOW 2 (Okoju), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[19]According to the age range of pupils documented in the P.6 and P.7 class rosters, the group encompassed children between the ages of 12 and 17. In most schools in Uganda, the expected age range for P.6 and P.7 pupils is 11-12-year-old, although in practice, children's grade-levels are not always dependent on their chronological age due to some children's education having been delayed by war. This is especially true of children born in captivity, as many of them missed out on educational opportunities in their early childhood.

[20]CBOW 3 (Rujok), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

Although the statement shows that the CBOW felt different from his peers, he did not view his circumstances negatively; instead the age difference has propelled him to become an ambitious child. Similarly, at 15 years old, Akali who is a CBOW, joined APS while she was older than most of her peers in P.5. Akali remarked, "I felt bad when I found out that other children were younger than me…"[21]. Her narrative revealed that a teacher had encouraged her to remain in school urging that if she worked hard she would perform well in class and be able to join secondary school. This showed that Akali did not have any negative feeling about the way the teacher treated her.

According to the Ugandan average age of enrolment in P.1., by the age of 14, the two CBOW - Akali and Rujok should have already been in secondary school—a fact the teachers attributed to the school practice of providing special considerations to war affected children[22]. Of the 16 CBOW in P.6. and P.7. who participated in the essay, at least 8 were between the ages of 14–17. According to information from the school DoS, who also oversees the school admission process, all CBOW admitted to APS had started their education from P.1. in other schools, at the ages of 8–12 and therefore were 4–5 years older than many of their peers who had not been born in the LRA at the time they began their formal education[23].

In a discussion with teacher Omara Denish, an attempt was made to explain why older CBOW may feel out of place compared to their non-CBOW counterparts of similar ages. Omara Denish said:

> The reason they may want to talk about their experiences as older pupils in this school is because their case is different from say a child who stayed home because his parents could not afford the additional charges at school, or whose parents died in the war, and others. However, this does not mean we have been treating them differently. Like others, we treat the older children who returned from the bush the same way we treat all other children, but I really see there is a difference between these ones [born in the bush] and those who found themselves in difficult situations[24].

Considering the school philosophy on inclusion, this teacher's statement is a surprising revelation—seemingly contrary to the understanding that all children have to be treated equally regardless of circumstances. On this particular issue, it is clear that CBOW feel negatively impacted by their age compared to their younger counterparts, which also impacts negatively on the way they interpret other people's feelings toward them.

Of those who did not write about their experiences of studying in the same class as their younger peers, the school records held by the school DoS show that at least 13 children in P.6. and P.7. were of comparable age to their older CBOW counterparts, i.e., between 14 and 17[25]. The DoS, however, revealed that to a large extent some of the children were older due to several reasons such as ill-health, being asked to repeat grades due to poor performances and the pressure to provide domestic labor. Such trends are not unique to APS. Observation of schools at the study location still shows that there is a high incidence of children missing school—a demonstration of how widespread the problem has been in the post conflict region. It also shows that in spite of the existence of universal education, school age children still abscond or remain out of school due to factors that are sometimes beyond their control.

From the above evidence, CBOW often felt prejudiced on the basis of their backgrounds and feeling of indifference from their peers—in spite of school emphasis that every child is special. In reality, the research also shows that the children's feelings stem from perceived realities derived from the children's viewpoints as opposed to being derived from objectively different treatment by their peers, or the school community. Having discussed the children's feelings of life upon joining APS, the next section will examine what the children felt about the relationship with teachers.

CHILDREN'S FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHERS

To a large extent the narratives showed that CBOW became accustomed to life in their school—allowing them to establish viable relationships. On the whole, the CBOW's narratives showed that they were afforded the environment they required to excel socially and academically, which was different from their early experiences. Regardless of these sources of support, the children's narratives showed that some of the teachers' negative attitudes toward CBOW influenced affected their self esteem-which was a feeling that both CBOW and their non-CBOW peers reported. These aspects contradicted the school practice of treating every child as special as we can see below.

In terms of the positive relationships, CBOW reported that their teachers were able to help them overcome academic and social challenges that held them back from enjoying their time at school. In the case of Okoju (discussed above), the child was able to overcome the social intimidation in the relationship he had with his peers. He wrote, "so when I came here I was scared I would not be able to understand the way of the school (system) but I was happy…". He added, "here if you come in the middle of the term, teachers can give you work and you do it alone. There is one teacher who used to give me work to do even after class has ended. She wanted me to catch up with my friends in class. That is what I liked"[26]. The comment shows that the individual attention paid to the child has been important in helping the

[21] CBOW 4 (Akali), P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.5, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[22] Personal Interview with Director of Studies (DoS), APS, May 6, 2019, northern Uganda; Personal Interview with Mr. Opiyo Chris, Maths Teacher for P.6. and P.7., APS, August 4, 2018, northern Uganda.

[23] No systematic age records of P.6. and P.7. exists in a register. The researcher was able to trace the ages of the CBOW by looking at their data during the time of enrolment record. Some of the children mentioned their ages in the compositions they wrote.

[24] Personal Interview with Mr. Omara Denish, SST teacher APS, May 7, 2019, northern Uganda.

[25] School Registry 2016/17 accessed from office of Director of Studies (DoS), APS, August 6, 2018, northern Uganda.

[26] CBOW 2 (Okoju), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.1, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

CBOW overcome his weaknesses. Similar efforts were extended to Opimma who is also a CBOW. She said:

> Why do I like this school? It is because one of my teachers maybe knew that I was from the bush, he is always calling me to staffroom and finding out how I am doing in school. He used to call me many times so I began to think that he knew [I came from the bush]. But he made me begin to like teachers and go to them when I have something to talk about[27].

The statements from the two CBOW, Okoju and Opimma, show how the pupils value the individual efforts teachers make toward their progress in school; which is also a demonstration of the efforts their teachers put toward inclusion of individual children ensuring that every child is supported on the basis of their background. These forms of support reveal that CBOW are likely to develop positive attitudes and become better pupils when they feel welcomed by the teachers in the school.

Some CBOW however provided negative feedback in the way they related with their teachers. The case of Odupi, a CBOW who recollected his experience from two years back, shows how some teachers can be abusive and less caring toward children. He wrote:

> …whenever I see this teacher I do not concentrate because he does not like me. One day he said to me, "Odupi I don't know where this head of yours came from. It must be from your parents. They are wasting a lot of money on a useless boy, bringing you to school as good as APS. You will never be of use to them even if we waste our time teaching you…". I don't like this teacher[28].

The child's negative feeling is influenced by the way his teacher made a mockery of his academic ability. Although it was difficult, within the confines of this study, to conclude that CBOW are singled out for mockery, such attitudes from the teachers directed against any child is likely to discourage the child's efforts to succeed at school, and contradicts the way teachers are supposed to handle every child with compassion—a likely betrayal of the school philosophy of treating every child as special. As observed by Stewart, such experiences show that schools can become "simultaneously a place of hope and a place of exclusion." Hope in the sense that CBOW viewed schools as avenues where they could build positive relationships with their peers, and a route out of the "harmful aspects of their identities." At the same time, they also viewed schools as places where they experienced everyday exclusions and stigma from their peers and teachers (Stewart, 2017, p. 137). In the case of APS, children wrote about the way teachers were abusive and less caring.

Odose's statement illustrates the emotional and psychological distress that CBOW can encounter when they become victims of mockery:

> Some teachers can decide to use abusive words which are so bad to mention in public. Like some of them can abuse the child, "You are rubbish, you are useless..." It can hurt the child emotionally. Like when the teacher comes to teach, the child will not understand because they hate the teacher. When the teacher enters class, they remember the words which the teacher said to them. Even sometimes when the teacher comes to teach, they deliberately choose not to concentrate[29].

The direct insults thrown at pupils can have negative consequences on their feelings of inclusion. The act of withdrawal and lack of attention shown by the CBOW in the above quote is a testament to how far these feelings can impact individuals. For most of the part, this can reinforce feelings of victimization toward the targeted children at school.

Similar comments were also made to pupils who were not born in the bush to LRA fathers. At least six pupils commented on the fact that their teachers are sometimes rude toward them whenever they do not perform to expectation. Atigi (P.6) for instance expressed upset with the way she encountered insults from her teacher upon giving a wrong answer during a class activity, which was the same way Anenocon (P.7.) felt when she failed to respond to a class activity. This shows a more general indication of the complacency that some of the teachers have when it comes to observing their professional teaching ethics. This result is likely to breed mistrust and suspicion from children, regardless of their background.

Sometimes the attitudes of teachers toward children stood out when it came to providing feedback on the children. Ms. Adong Irene a teacher of Social Studies (SST) in P.6. for instance commented on how teachers address the behavior of children at school in the following ways:

> We try to treat these children equally, but one thing for sure is that the children who come from the bush their behaviors usually stand out from others; they are very cruel to other children. We had many of them in the past. One almost fought a teacher but he had to reform. At APS we know how to deal with these ones (swaying the cane in demonstration) …sometimes they even fear us. What is a teacher here for then? You find them staying alone, which is dangerous[30].

The teacher's comment shows how the behavior of one or a few children can make teachers feel differently about the CBOW. These are sometimes genuine challenges that teachers face in teaching children who have been socialized in a setting that encouraged and necessitated behavior that in a school context is challenging (and may be perceived as threatening by the teachers). Bush and Saltarelli have argued that such teachers (usually from the majority group) in post-conflict situations may display negative dispositions against the non-normative groups, then employ certain sentiments to justify their in/actions (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, p.15). However, in this study, evidence from two FGDs and individual interviews with teachers confirmed that the returnees sometimes indeed displayed different behavior from their peers, far from just looking at their behaviors as

[27]CBOW 5 (Opimma), P.6. White Stream, August 8, 2018, APS, northern Uganda.
[28]CBOW 6 (Odupi), P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no. 4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.
[29]CBOW 7 (Odose), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.6, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.
[30]Ms. Adong Irene during FGD female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

stereotypical to having been born from the bush. During FGD with mothers of CBOW, they too have conceded that CBOW tend to display negative behavior due to their early socialization in the bush where behavioral norms were different[31]. Therefore, Ms. Adong Irene's less tolerant attitude in the above statement suggests a reasonable basis to assume that CBOW's behavior indeed differed at APS and was not acceptable or in line with school policies. However, even so, it may not be appropriate to identify a child as CBOW or articulate in front of them that this behavior was linked to their past experiences in the bush as this might result into their feeling of not being valued at the school, or by society more generally.

From the above evidence we can see that although the school teachers have attempted to treat all children as special, in practice CBOW have felt that certain practices and attitudes undermines their experiences of war. The teachers' attitudes reinforced feelings of prejudice among a group that already feels different.

Having explored the children's feelings about their social life at school, the next section examines the reflections by CBOW on how they are being treated in practice—and these have been derived from the children's write-ups regarding their "typical day." The discussions are divided into two short themes: the first looks at the children's school routine which is centered on their academic experiences, and the second theme specifically examines their experiences in classrooms which is centered on streaming policy and other classroom practices and activities.

THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL ROUTINE (THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOL)

More generally, the children's reflections demonstrate that they are determined to succeed—which is what their teachers and parents demand of them. Their determination to succeed did not however make the children hold back on their views: the philosophy "every child is special" was to some extent undermined by the extreme focus on academic routine of the school above everything else. On that basis, children were unable to adequately explore other aspects of their life that would guarantee them opportunities to socialize, derive therapy and healing and develop life skills. The positive academic environment and emphasis was also seen, however, as an avenue where CBOW can harness their abilities to work hard and meet the performance benchmarks set by their school—which promoted a positive feeling among the group. These views are discussed below.

At the time of this research, P.7. pupils were due to sit their mock preparatory examinations, in time for the national Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) that was due in November. The pupils of P.6 and P.7 wrote about the intensity of class activities and the attention that teachers pay to their performance. Obeno of P.7. said, "In P.7 we do not waste time outside the class. All the time there is teaching, reading, tests and revisions. There is no time for playing even when you want to relax…"[32]. The pupils provided different opinions on the school's focus on academic life: Rujok of P.6 (discussed earlier above) for instance wrote that, "the teachers here are serious. They say we have to perform well. I like to stay in class so I can read and pass well. This is why I like this school. In my former school the teachers sometimes did not teach us…"[33]. In this comment, Rujok's taste for his school is centered around the teachers' commitment which is different from those at his former school. Similarly, another child, Ouma, remarked on how the school focus on academic life is in line with his dream to become a responsible person in future. He said, "…for me I think this is the school that if one wants to perform well they have to follow what their teachers tell them. I want to become someone in future, say like a doctor even if it is difficult and my parents do not have money"[34]. Despite his parents' circumstances, the child dreams for a better future.

Other children discussed their experience of becoming accustomed to school life. One CBOW mentioned, "when I first came here it was very difficult. The children here like to be in class from morning to evening. I would always fall sick, but my class teacher warned me if I want to perform well I should go to class like others. I wanted to leave school but now I like the school"[35]. This experience shows the efforts teachers put in with some children to ensure they conform to the school standards. The children's views indicate that some pupils are sensitive to how education can affect their social standing by opening up employment opportunities (although better qualifications in Uganda, and elsewhere does not necessarily guarantee these opportunities). This is in contrary to the social stigma associated with living in poverty which children appear to associate with having not gone to school or for having failed to work hard in school.

All pupils at APS were expected to strictly follow school routines, failure of which usually led to punishments in the form of caning, school suspension or dismissal. At least half of the pupils of P.6. and P.7. reported being punished for acts of disobedience related to the non-compliance to the school schedule and academic expectations required of them. Comments from some of the children showed initial apprehension with the school punishments, but then later they came to accept that it played a role in their academic performance or improved discipline. However, some mothers of CBOW were hesitant about the caning of children. Ababu, a CBOW of P.6. reported that she was caned wrongfully for wasting time in the school dormitory while other children attended classes[36]. She was feeling unwell but her plea was not welcomed by the teacher in charge. When she reported the issue to her mother, she

[31] FGD with mothers of CBOW, May 3 2017, northern Uganda.

[32] P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.5, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[33] P.6. White, (Folder 3), Script no.4, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[34] P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 6., August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives.

[35] CBOW 8 P.6. Red (Folder 4), Script no.5, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[36] CBOW 9 (Ababu), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.10, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

contemplated moving her away from the school on grounds that that such forms of punishment were a reminder of the violence they faced during LRA captivity[37]. This shows that physical forms of punishment may not bode well with those who returned from the LRA—some of whom still held bitter memories of the past[38]. This shows that the position on punishment is far from resolved: Some parents, including the mother of CBOW above, may not like that their children are punished physically because of previous experience with the LRA, while others have embraced it. The teachers on the other hand do not want to do away with a practice that they have relied on as a disciplinary approach for so long[39], and which some pupils continued to refer to as a practice that led to their better academic performances. This has implications on the school approach to violence, and the way this has affected the different stakeholders at the school.

Despite the children's narratives on physical punishment, teachers have insisted that the school's priority lies in the academic success of its pupils. Mr. Kifefu Albert, the class teacher for P.6. and P.7 has said, "our goal is to make these children become tomorrow's future. We want the children of APS to shine their light among others [children from Uganda]…even those born in captivity, they need to be considered here [at APS]"[40]. Here the teacher assesses the role of teachers in ensuring their children excel like their peers in other regions less affected by the war. This is an interesting consideration in light of APS's approach to education ("every child is special")—a demonstration that the teachers perceive APS as being "a war-affected school" teaching war-affected children. More generally, it has to be considered that the teacher's view is informed by the fact that the majority of schools in the north remain below par in terms of academic standards compared to schools in the South—a fact largely attributable to the impact of war and underdevelopment in the region.

In relation to the school academic focus explained above, some pupils have remarked about having to deal with competing and contradictory expectations. Petero, a pupil of P.7. commented on how his participation in football activities were met with mixed reactions from his teachers and parents—making him decide to drop out of sports[41]. Ababu, a CBOW in P.6. has mentioned that she used to spend most of her time at the Music, Dance and Drama (MDD) activities because it makes her forget about bad things. She wrote:

> MDD makes me to forget my problems. I come from a poor family and never met my father, life at home is not easy because my mother is always in town looking for money for food for us. When we came from the bush we had no one to help us. I was always thinking about my life in future so MDD has helped me forget about what happened to us…[42]

The child's case shows how therapeutic some of the activities at the school can be for CBOW[43]. It is therefore of no coincidence that NGOs and child rehabilitation agencies in post conflict northern Uganda have placed a high value on these activities for the role they play in supporting children to come to terms with their traumatic past—Gulu Support the Children Center (GUSCO) and World Vision Children's Rehabilitation Center being cases in point. During the field visits to the peri-urban outskirts of the study location where the returnees settled, mothers used music, dance and drama as a way to galvanize their associations around a common identity. The activities were also used by organizations like *Watye Ki Gen* as options for psychosocial support for CBOW during school breaks. While at the site visits, the researcher noted that CBOW were encouraged to interact with the other members of the community—who usually joined them in the cultural dances. The spectacle of entertainment that ensued during these communions were found to contribute to the positive collective empowerment of returnees and their communities[44]. On this basis, the activities have to be viewed as a kind of celebration of shared Acholi identity between the children and community, which in this case of APS children temporarily displaced, provided an alternative to the school's policy and insistence on academic priorities. Similarly, the connection with the community members shows that the dances are a way that CBOW can display their resilience outside of the school context—which can also help them manage depression or other harmful feelings (also see Liebling and Baker, 2010).

The above statements from the children point to the fact that in practice the competing priorities and contradictory messages the children receive tend to affect the way they make choices on the academic and non-academic options available at the school. The conclusion is that in this school, the tension between academic and extra-curricular activities is not resolved for the pupils of P6 and P.7 leading to frustrations among some CBOW who might have other non-academic priorities. This implies the school's approach of putting the individual at the center is undermined by the focus on academic merit (performance and "under"- performance) espoused by the school. This tends to ignore the stakeholders' expectations (including pupils') as it engenders a league-tables oriented mentality amongst the teachers and their pupils. Because of this, the ability of other children who would have preferred non-academic options is

[37] This was also confirmed during a separate personal Interview with Josephine Adong, mother of CBOW (Ababu), October 1, 2018, northern Uganda.

[38] Also confirmed during reflections in FGD with mothers of CBOW, May 3 2017, northern Uganda.

[39] FGD male teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda; FGD female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

[40] Mr. Kifefu Albert, FGD male teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

[41] P.7. White (Folder 1), Script no. 2, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[42] CBOW 10 (Ababu), P.6. White (Folder 3), Script no.10, August 9, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[43] The MDD teacher mentioned to the researcher that "the traditional songs and dances brings out the passion in a child making them forget what happened to them. They are able to mingle with other pupils and feel they are part of one APS community, whether they are orphans, from the bush or children from poor homes. All are one…", he remarks. He was however not aware of the existence of a CBOW among the people who were being trained to participate in the interschool MDD competition.

[44] Field Note, July 2017; also based on Personal Interview with Nancy, a secretary and member of *Rwot Lakica* peer group of mothers, December 17, 2018.

hindered. This is counterproductive as it sends the message to CBOW that failure in exams defines their destiny and as a result influences the value teachers place on them based on performances vis-à-vis their peers—which ends up stigmatizing the children and promoting school disaffection (also see Nicholai and Triplehorn, 2003; Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Although this may seem to directly contradict the school's approach to special education, the different views show the dilemma posed when there is no agreement on what good education means for children. In principle, if parents want a good education for their children, and children need to pass national exams—failure of which results into them not being afforded further educational opportunities and thus perpetuation of poverty cycles, then the school has little option but to focus on academic merit.

This final section discusses the children's reflections on the school policy regarding streaming and other classroom practices.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF STREAMING AND OTHER CLASSROOM PRACTICES

The children's reflections on classroom practices were mainly centered on the school's streaming arrangements. At APS, the streaming of children of the upper classes of P.6 and P.7 has been practiced on the assumption that this would maximize students' potential through providing them an ability-appropriate learning environment. The streaming practices reinforces the school's policy of integration (every child is special) because it considers the uniqueness of the child, where segregating them on the basis of their intellectual abilities ensures that they attend classes that match their ability, promotes positive competition resulting from their drive to be promoted to the higher streams.

Specifically, all CBOW begun their education at APS from the lower stream—a fact that the DoS explained was necessary to assess their levels before being assigned. 90% of the study sample still remained in the lower stream at the time of this study. In most cases, their belonging to the lower streams reinforced the feeling of being viewed as academically weak or deemed slower than others. Specifically, the children have complained about the bias teachers hold toward them when grouped in different class streams. Anyum, who is a CBOW of P.7. noted: "I am in P.7. and my mother is not happy that I am in Red Stream because when you look on one side you have a dull person, you look another side there is also a dull person. You cannot be able to discuss with someone because you see that they are also weak like you. This is the bad thing I see about APS"[45]. In this quote, Anyum assesses her situation in P.7. Red in terms of the gloomy picture she has painted about the academic ability of her peers. In the case of Anyum, streaming can be counterproductive because the homogeneity of student ability undermines the opportunity for the valuable learning and social dynamic of inter-pupil learning—brighter students reinforcing their own understanding of concepts by helping other children grasp those same concepts.

Some of the observed relationships in the classrooms (especially among the girls) naturally extended into the playground: the children of P.6. and P.7. usually preferred to play with those in their streams—with whom they shared classes or were allocated by the teachers to sit together. The implication is that the streaming significantly reduces the scope to learn with, and therefore to communicate and socialize with, the broader class cohort. Therefore, the argument that "Every Child is Special" has been complicated by a streaming policy that leaves certain groups of children, especially CBOW with a feeling of marginalization on the basis of their weak academic standing compared to their peers. This practice runs contrary to inclusive education and the concepts of academic and social inclusion within the education system. When accompanied by negative attitudes from the teachers such a policy runs a risk of widening the gap in relationship between children in the different streams, hence impacting negatively on affected groups such as CBOW. However, this is not to undermine the fact that some children still had positive experiences from the streaming process. Comments from a significant 10 of the pupils still shows that in spite of streaming practices, they sometimes do gain positively from their interactions with peers, regardless of the streams they occupy.

In addition to the streaming policies, some classroom practices were notable in the children's comments. More generally during the four classes attended by the researcher, teachers have attempted to arrange the way pupils sit in an attempt to effectively address some of their learning needs. Notably in both classes of P.6. and P.7., the boys and girls occupied clearly distinguishable locations—the younger boys and girls of 11–13-year olds sat in the front and middle section of the rows in the classes, while the older and bigger boys and girls between the ages of 14–16 sat behind the class. Sometimes students were assigned seats at the back of the class based on their physical appearances, i.e., those who appeared bigger and taller, even if a few were relatively younger compared to their size. In lesson 4 of P.7., the class teacher informed the researcher that the 8 older girls who were seated together at the back of the classroom were friends from P.4. and had since been very hardworking in their classes. This arrangement for the 8 older girls suggests that sometimes friend groups and seating arrangements to accommodate friend groups increases enthusiasm and school performance. However, the case was different when it came to friendship groups among the older CBOW. With some teachers, there was evidence of deliberate efforts to discourage such associations among CBOW. One female teacher Ms. Adoch Flavia mentioned:

> The children [who returned from the bush] were not concentrating...always talking and not paying attention to teachers. They wanted to sit very far so that teachers do not disturb them. When those children come together they are usually impossible...the bad things that happened in the bush keep coming. We had to separate them. One was actually forced to repeat P.6. because his performances were not good. He is in White Stream[46].

[45]CBOW 11 (Anyum), P.7. Red (Folder 2), Script no.8, August 15, 2018, University of Birmingham Archives, Birmingham, UK.

[46]Ms. Adoch Flavia, during FGD with female teachers, APS, August 16, 2018, northern Uganda.

The comment shows that unlike the non-CBOW peers, the teachers sometimes viewed the relationships among CBOWs with suspicion. As discussed above, teachers and mothers of CBOW noted that sometimes the children may indeed display different behavior, and it appears the teacher's approach to the CBOW was based on his previous experience working with the group. The above example relates to what the teacher perceived as bad behavior—and the response in addressing the children based on their individualities as seating them together may indeed have adverse effects on the learning environment—which is a pointer toward a positive approach the teachers have adopted to improve the group dynamics in the class. According to the researcher's observation of the different classes from P.1. to P.7. it was common to have different seating policies in order to manage the classroom; one teacher mentioned her preference to have the older boys sit away from each other because of the possibility of having bad influence on other children because they were adolescents. This points to the fact that it is not a foregone conclusion that seating CBOW separately is based on prejudice or stereotypes: sometimes the seating arrangements reflect the way teachers' wish to ensure that all pupils learn without disturbances from their class cohorts, as it is also in keeping with the school's approach of treating children as special, i.e., based on their individualities.

Finally, in terms of teaching practice, the children wrote how they sometimes loved the way their teacher praised them whenever they responded to the questions asked in class. For instance, during one of the class observations in P.7., when a girl was able to answer a question posed to her by the teacher, the teacher congratulated her saying, "Stella I can see that you are finally going to pass well and join Sacred Heart School. Can we clap for Stella please? (followed by all pupils clapping in three uniform rhythms)." Such praise from the teacher is aimed at motivating the girl to achieve her academic goal of joining secondary school. This is similar to the way the children admitted in their essays that they enjoyed the way their teachers praised them: Obinah wrote, "whenever I do something good in class like when I raise my hands and give the right answer, I enjoy when the teacher asks the children to clap for me". The method adopted by the teacher contributes to a positive and hardworking atmosphere for the pupils. It also shows that in this school some of the teachers put some efforts and enthusiasm in the learning of their children, which has a positive impact on the way they feel when are being supported a the school.

CONCLUSION

CBOW experience socially stigmatizing labels that affect their everyday lives (Apio, 2007; Carpenter, 2010; Seto, 2013, 2015; Denov and Lakor, 2018), which to a large extent minimizes the potential for successful integration into their communities. From the education point of view, Dryden-Peterson (2011) has argued that there often is a danger of physical integration without social integration. This implies that more generally for children to be accepted, local attitudes have to change (Apio, 2007; Erjavec and Volcic, 2010; Denov and Lakor, 2017) to enhance schooling opportunities for CBOW. Drawing on the experience of education of CBOW at APS, this article singled out the school as an important place in the children's lives. It noted that the school can become a place where children can recall their memories of the past, and yet also recover from bad memories of the war. The case further shows that the potentially harmful experiences that children undergo has been encumbered by barriers that are sometimes entrenched in social and professional attitudes as well as values and misunderstandings about differences (also see Ainscow and Miles, 2009)—impacting on the way CBOW or their peers who had not been in the bush felt they were treated or accepted into the school setting. CBOW who arrived at APS when they were overaged lacked prior exposure to formal education which limited their abilities to learn (also see Sommers, 2009), hence positioning them as "a problem" to their teachers in the academic-oriented curriculum of the school. In line with this limitation, the more general emphasis on academic performance along league standards potentially limited the children's abilities at the school—which undermined the school philosophy of treating every child as special because such as approach betrayed the focus on individual limitations and competences in the non-academic areas. On the whole, there was no significant differences at APS between the experiences of CBOW and other war-affected children who had not been born in the LRA. Moreover, CBOW did not link much of their school experiences to the LRA in spite of contrary interpretations of their behavior by school teachers. In practice, however, whenever there was reluctance by school teachers to acknowledge differences, children encountered and felt a sense of instability (also see Weinstein et al., 2007) and which often led to self-stigmatization of CBOW. For example, CBOW expressed apprehensiveness in the way they related to their teachers in the initial stages of their time at school, but also made specific attributions to the way teachers sometimes became a source of frustration to their lives. These arose whenever the children's LRA backgrounds were uncovered owing to the observed behavior and stereotypes held about the returnees.

Stigmatization and exclusion can also become prominent when children feel different, feel treated differently from the rest—or simply put "out of place" (see Stewart, 2017). Evidence from the streaming policy revealed that the children in the lower streams or those with talents outside the core academic subjects often felt less able to adapt to the formalities of the school. In terms of teaching pedagogy, it was found that treating CBOW categorically as "problem children" rather than acknowledging specific attributes/individualities also made the children to feel fundamentally different from others. However, the study also shows that CBOW respond very positively when they felt cared for: at APS, the teachers have adapted pedagogical approaches to support the children in the lower-class streams. They have also provided avenues where children can progress through positive aspects of teaching, such as delivering messages of encouragement to the pupils. In essence, such measures show that the school's approach to education, i.e., "Every Child is Special" has worked to

the extent that in spite of challenges, it has triggered a learning environment quite adaptable to children in the post-conflict setting.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary materials, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Birmingham Ethical Approval Committee. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

BO was responsible for field research and analysis of this article.

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Children Born of Rebel Captivity: Politics and Practices of Integration in Uganda

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Many studies have documented and analyzed the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) forced conjugal association patterns and practices ("forced marriage"). However, the focus has been on the experiences of abducted girls forced to serve as conjugal partners to commanders ("forced wives"). The experiences of children born as a result of these relationships are under-investigated. Receptor communities in northern Uganda are assumed to be places of hope, comfort, and protection for these children. However, they can also be hostile, leaving the children in precarious and vulnerable situations. This article draws from ethnographic fieldwork in the Acholi region and interviews with formerly abducted mothers focusing on their children's integration processes and experiences. It argues that return is not integration, as it often coincides with further exclusion and alienation. In Uganda's patriarchal and patrilineal social systems, children with no paternal lineage are viewed as of lower status. Stigmatization facing children born of the LRA captivity condemns them to this status, consequently excluding them from mainstream society. Findings show that stigma remains central to the life experiences of these children several years after the end of the conflict in 2006. Their persistent stigmatization is linked to broader discriminatory socio-cultural and patriarchal ideas and practices.

Keywords: conflict and gender, abduction, forced marriage, children, integration, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

Girls have been widely recruited in recent African wars, including Libera, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria. In most of these wars, as in northern Uganda, armed groups and militias target and abduct girls to join their campaign of violence against their governments. In rebel custody, their abductors subject them to sexual violence, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and forced pregnancy to fill their military units (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Coulter, 2009; Baines, 2017). Abducted girls and their experiences have attracted substantial research and policy analysis from researchers, practitioners, and the international community, bringing these experiences to the forefront of international debate. However, this analysis and intervention tend to ignore or overlook their children's experiences born during these girls' time with rebels (Watson, 2007; Carpenter, 2010a; Veale et al., 2013; Denov, 2015; Theidon, 2015; Seto, 2016; Lee, 2017; Baines and Oliveira, 2020).

The characteristic of the harm the children suffer "renders their status as a victim group elusive" (Di Eugenio and Baines, 2021: 327). Since no harm is perpetrated directly against them, the children are seen as secondary victims of wartime abduction, captivity, and sexual violence. Nevertheless, experience shows that they endure ongoing harms in post-conflict societies (Goodhart, 2007; Carpenter, 2010b; Apio, 2016; Seto, 2016; Lee, 2017; Eramian and Denov, 2018). The harms they

"endure are structural and cultural, forms of violence in which a single perpetrator or specific transgression is difficult to discern" (Di Eugenio and Baines, 2021: 329).

While their suffering is entangled with their parents' predicament, the focus continues to be on their parents. On the one hand, their fathers are perceived as perpetrators and criminals who should be prosecuted, including those abducted as children and turned into "forced fathers" (Baines, 2009; Aijazi and Baines, 2017; Denov et al., 2019). Viewed as potential aggressors of post-conflict peace, they are given priority in designing and implementing Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) interventions (IDDRS, 2006). On the other, the presence of children is seen as worsening mothers' situation during and after conflict (see Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Veale et al., 2013; Atim et al., 2018). The children continue to fall through the cracks of policy frameworks (Carpenter, 2010a). Critical policy documents on child soldiering recognize "child/girl mothers" as a particularly vulnerable group, needing explicit attention and consistent follow-up within post-conflict societies (see, e.g., Paris Principles, 2007; UNICEF, 2009). The reproductive rights agenda informs such perspectives, whose advocates see children as a side effect of their mothers' suffering (Carpenter, 2010a). Available research is directed at mothers and their role in caring and providing for their children (see Mukangendo, 2007; Veale et al., 2013; Shanahan and Veale, 2016; Atim et al., 2018; Denov et al., 2018). Yet, children might have some needs that are more complex and in tension with mothers' needs. Society's understanding of these children and their wellbeing often conflicts and causes tension with their human rights, needs, and interests (Lee, 2017: 171–172).

Children born of wartime sexual violence are yet to be recognized and appreciated in their own right. Their unique and complex needs remain unacknowledged and comprehensively undiagnosed (Carpenter, 2010a,b; Apio, 2016; Hamel, 2016; Seto, 2016; Lee, 2017). Notably, there is a lack of research about how their integration unfolds and how they navigate problems and tensions resulting from their existence in receptor communities. Di Eugenio and Baines (2021) propose a survivor-centered approach to study these children, drawing on their lived experiences and realities. They emphasize that the approach recognizes and foregrounds their agency as sites of reproducing societal norms, ultimately contributing to post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction processes.

One of the legacies of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in northern Uganda is the birth of thousands of children by girls, abducted and subjected to forced marriage and early pregnancy by commanders (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017; Kiconco, 2021a). Born in the LRA camps in northern Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and recently the Central Africa Republic, many children find their way to receptor communities in the north of Uganda. They join these communities to seek survival, comfort, and protection.

Studies have explored these children's integration processes in northern Uganda. They are not explicitly included in DDR and post-conflict recovery programmes. The government provided women returnees with a basic reintegration package and no additional support for women returning with children (Ladisch, 2015; Neenan, 2017). The debate for a national reparations programme addressing these children and their needs, including land ownership and access to specialized rehabilitation, continues.

Children rely on several strategies to support their integration, including participating in welcoming ceremonies and ritual cleansing, cultural naming, adapting to changing family structures and managing disclosure (Shanahan and Veale, 2016). Some decide to trace their fathers or families to legitimize their identity, consequently holding paternal kin relations responsible for their belonging and welfare (Stewart, 2015; Atim et al., 2018; Baines and Oliveira, 2020; Tinashe et al., 2020). Indeed, when fathers or paternal families assume responsibility for their identity and future wellbeing, the experience significantly secures the children's best interests (Oliveira and Baines, 2020). The children also construct their identities based on the past LRA memories, reconstruct identities, navigate stigma, and envision future selves (Stewart, 2017; Denov and Piolanti, 2020). They view education as a tool to support their integration, seen as a meaningful way to boost their prospects (Stewart, 2017; Ojok, 2021).

However, the integration contexts in northern Uganda remain highly charged, constrained, and potentially insecure for these children. Yet they have to integrate into these contexts, needing multiple support systems to ensure protection and survival (Denov and Lakor, 2017). In the LRA, they often lived with both parents, affording them a sense of social identity, status, belonging, and love. In the receptor communities, their status and situation are complicated. Experience shows that initial integration experience often involves families welcoming their daughters and children. However, when the return excitement wanes, the situation becomes problematic (Veale et al., 2013; Opiyo, 2015; Apio, 2016; Shanahan and Veale, 2016). In wider communities, violence, and rejection in many situations dominate experiences of this return in northern Uganda (ibid). From a long-term perspective, their integration is characterized by stigma, abuse and exclusion, and issues of identity and belonging (Denov and Lakor, 2017; Stewart, 2017, 2020; Baines and Oliveira, 2020).

The consensus in the literature is that stigmatization is the dominant challenge facing these children and their integration in northern Uganda. They receive stigmatization from sections of society, making their lives unbearable and excluding them from mainstream society (Shanahan and Veale, 2016; Baines and Oliveira, 2020; Stewart, 2020). They are "perceived as proxy members of the LRA, symbols of misfortune, and stereotyped as violent, unproductive, unequal members of society" (Neenan, 2017: 34). They are segregated in the host families and have a lower status compared to their mates with never-abducted parents (Opiyo, 2015). Their stigmatization is compounded by everyday broader patriarchal discriminatory socio-cultural ideas, norms, and practices (Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018).

Patriarchy and patrilineality significantly contribute to their contested identities, as paternity ties determine access to social identity, belonging and status, and resources, particularly land. Clan members are often reluctant to accept children considered

not of the clan, including born out of wedlock or with unknown fathers, as with most LRA men (Opiyo, 2015; Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018). Because they have no paternity ties, the LRA parented children are displaced from Acholi personhood (Schulz, 2018). Their suffering is broadly a consequence of their illegitimate status at birth, which results in their ongoing stigmatization (Apio, 2016; Neenan, 2017; Atim et al., 2018). These intersecting oppressions create a sense of not belonging and integration failure among these children in northern Uganda (Stewart, 2020).

Integration does not take place in a vacuum but in a social-cultural framework. Many studies have highlighted the problem of stigmatization among these children in northern Uganda. However, fewer investigations attempt to problematize and contextualize this challenge. In her research in the Lango region, Eunice Apio explores these children's integration through normative frameworks of gender, motherhood and kinship. Apio discusses *rucurucu*, a cultural and social disorder and tension that followed the war and the LRA returnees, including forced marriage children. She observes that "This *rucurucu* gave rise to tensions over the reintegration of formerly abducted women and their children" (Apio, 2016: 6). Her study identifies links between the children's experiences and the cultural practices and politics controlling their mothers' sexual and reproductive lives. Much the same applied among the Acholi, where social harmony became difficult to maintain during and after the war (Porter, 2017). In Acholi society, social harmony "denotes a state of normal relations among the living and the dead, linked to an idea of cosmological equilibrium and a social balance of power and moral order" (Porter, 2017: 15). This experience suggests that "social harmony is the highest goal of the Acholi community" (Ofumbi, 2012: 116). Transgression of social harmony is heavily punishable with mob violence, organized revenge, collective killing or summary execution (Porter, 2017). The LRA captivity children are at the center of this social disharmony in Acholi, often expressed in everyday stigmatization and exclusion. Indeed, Stewart (2020: 113) observed that the children are stigmatized because they are seen as embodying the "insecurity and immorality of the war" in the Acholi region.

Studies often overlook such social disorders and their influence on the integration of the LRA captivity children in northern Uganda communities. Yet, applying them yields a more nuanced understanding of family and community treatment of these children and their mothers (see, e.g., Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018). This article situates itself within the emerging subfield of wartime sexual violence and integration that documents, theorizes, and contextualizes integration in northern Uganda.

The article explores the messiness of integration in using the analytical lens of stigma. According to Goffman (1963: 12), stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting." Its presence of this attribute is invoked to reduce/devalue the person possessing it "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3). According to Pescosolido and Martin (2015: 91), stigma 'is the mark, the condition, or status that is subject to devaluation." From this understanding, the stigmatized person possesses (or is believed to possess) "some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker et al., 1998: 505). According to Goffman (1963), society views such persons as possessing "an undesirable difference," and they are stigmatized based on what society considers "different" or "deviant," applied through codes, rules, and sanctions.

This classic view of stigma draws from the lived experiences of people who have physical deformities, suffer from mental illness or are perceived to practice deviant behavior, including criminal behavior. Notably, these definitions and characterizations of stigma share the assumption that the stigmatized person is born with this "deeply discrediting attribute." This implies that both the mark and their consequent experiences are relatively static, as the attribute that defines them as different perpetually marks them as devalued in the eyes of society.

However, some studies argue that stigmatized persons are not different from "normal" people but engage in the same life processes as "normal" people (Crocker et al., 1998; Dijker and Koomen, 2007; MacDonald and Kerali, 2020). Link and Phelan (2001: 366) argue that "stigma or mark is seen as something in the person rather than a designation or tag that others affix to the person." However, Cumming and Cumming (1965: 449–50) assert that "whether it is a visible mark or an invisible stain, stigma acquires its meaning through the emotion it generates within the person bearing it and the feeling and behavior toward him of those affirming it. These two aspects of stigma are indivisible, as they each act as a cause or effect of the other." Nevertheless, experience shows "stigma might be best considered to be the negative perceptions and behaviors of so called-normal people to all individuals who are different from themselves" (English, 1971: 5). To the non-stigmatized person, the discrediting attribute reduces the stigmatized person's character/persona to that which is deemed "stained," "polluted," "devalued," "spoiled," "flawed," and "inferior" (Crocker et al., 1998). Such stigma is widely recognized as a problem for children of LRA captivity in northern Uganda. While this stigma is continually changing and resisted, social, cultural, and patriarchal processes underpin and inform its persistence. The findings discussed below corroborate Goffman's recommendation that the conceptualization of stigma needs "a language of relationships, not attributes" (Goffman, 1963: 3).

The article examines the socio-cultural situation facing children born within the LRA. It focuses on processes of socialization, establishing social relations and kinship ties to ensure survival and safety in post-conflict northern Uganda. It draws from ethnographic fieldwork and interview with 40 formerly abducted mothers in the Acholi region, focusing on their children's integration. Therefore, the findings presented and discussed in this article are based on mothers' perspectives of their children's situation. The findings show that the children's background as conceived or born with the LRA rebel group has led to no easy integration arising from problems associated with their stigmatized identity, both as children and former members of the LRA. Three key sources of stigmatization emerge in the data: born in the bush, association with the rebellion and illegitimacy at birth. The article reveals the messiness of integration in northern Uganda by unpacking these sources. The central argument here is that return is not integration, as it often coincides with further exclusion and

alienation. In Uganda's patriarchal and patrilineal social systems, children with no paternal lineage are viewed as of lower status. Stigmatization facing the LRA children condemns them to this status, consequently excluding them from mainstream society. Stigma is thus a valuable concept to understand their everyday experiences and the challenges they face in their attempt to integrate into receptor communities.

To appreciate the context within which this discussion is situated, it is perhaps important at this point to chart the events and the situation leading to the abduction of these children's mothers (and sometimes fathers) from their communities into the LRA rebellion.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY INSURGENCY

The Acholi area is one of the seven sub-regions of Uganda.[1] For two decades (1986–2006), the area was the scene of the conflict between the Government of Uganda and the LRA.[2] While the conflict escalated to affect other parts of Northern and North-Eastern Uganda, most victims have been the Acholi people. The LRA emerged in late 1987 in response to the seizure of power by the southern-based rebellion, National Resistance Army (NRA), renamed in 1995, Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF). The LRA leader, Joseph Kony, was a soldier and self-proclaimed spiritual leader from Odek community of the Acholi region, who went to wage war on the Ugandan Government forces (Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011). Starting as a relatively unknown figure, Kony gained notoriety for his kidnapping and forcibly recruiting child combatants into his army (Pham et al., 2007; Annan et al., 2008; Blattman and Annan, 2010).

It is estimated that the group abducted 54,000–75,000 people, including 25,000–38,000 children (Pham et al., 2007). Approximately 30% of the group were girls (McKay and Mazurana, 2004). These abductions frequently resulted in years of captivity, with victims being forced to become agents of terror and violence against their own families and communities. Girl abductees were socialized and forced to serve as sexual partners to commanders. Boys were also socialized to take on abducted girls as wives later. Many children were born out of these "forced marriages" (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017; Kiconco, 2021a).

The Government of Uganda resolved to prevent the LRA from forcibly recruiting children into their guerrilla army by establishing Internally Displaced People's (IDPs) Camps. By 2001 about 1.7 million civilians were forced to relocate to these camps (Dolan, 2009). The IDPs catered for two cohorts: the majority who government forces had moved from communities, and those who had escaped, been released by LRA commanders, or captured by the Ugandan army.

In another attempt to restore peace, on 16 December 2003, the Ugandan government referred the situation in the north to the International Criminal Court (ICC). On 8 July 2005, the ICC prosecutor officially issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and his top four allies/commanders for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Allen, 2005). On 6 December 2016, Trial Chamber IX of the ICC commenced its trial against Dominic Ongwen, one of the five LRA commanders indicted. Ongwen was accused of 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Presently, the other three are dead, and only Kony remains at large.[3]

On 6 May 2021, the court sentenced Ongwen to 25 years of imprisonment.[4] The trial was the first in which the ICC convicted a rebel commander for forced pregnancy as a war crime and a crime against humanity. It was also the first time that the ICC convicted forced marriage (charged under the category of "other inhumane acts"), constituting a crime against humanity. Being the first person to be charged for crimes "of which he is also a victim" (Baines, 2009: 163–164), Ongwen also represents 10,000 LRA ex-combatants holding such conflicting statuses in northern Uganda.[5] The ICC, human rights, and child protection organizations have been applauded for strengthening the criminalization of child recruitment and involvement in armed conflicts. However, in situations where all parties involved in forced conjugal associations happen to be minors turned into combatants, the conventional explanations and ensuing responses may be deficient. Moreover, the neglect of children born as a result of forced conjugal associations between child combatants and girls forced to marry them complicates the task.

When all peace efforts failed in northern Uganda, the LRA relocated itself to the vast bushy region between Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central Africa Republic. Thus, a period of relative peace followed in northern Uganda, resulting in movements from IDP camps back to people's communities. The re-integration of ex-combatants, abductees, and children born of rebel captivity is ongoing.

Early research suggested that by the end of the war in 2006, most ex-combatants, formerly abducted persons and their children returned to their home communities and became productive members of society (e.g., Annan et al., 2008). However, a longer-term perspective shows the situation to be very different, with significant problems around their re-integration as a result of ostracism and exclusion (Apio, 2016; Shanahan and Veale, 2016; Denov and Lakor, 2018; Baines and Oliveira, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Kiconco, 2021a).

I now move the discussion to analyze the extent of the problem in relation to the integration of children born in the LRA in communities of the Acholi region. I am interested in how this manifests within the receptor home/community cultural setting, where in most cases, the children have joined their maternal

[1]For a detailed political history and origin of Acholi people and culture, see Atkinson (1994).

[2]The historical background and root causes of the conflict, and how it evolved over the years, have been well-documented (e.g., Behrend, 1999; Finnström, 2008; Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011). This section restricts itself to an introductory snapshot that focuses on two key areas in this long-term evolution: abductions and mass displacement (which both provide an excuse for, as well as an indictment of conflict).

[3]Case available: Case Information Sheet—The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen (ICC-cpi.int).

[4]Sentencing available at: CR2021_04230.PDF (ICC-cpi.int).

[5]See also the trial of Thomas Kwoyelo in the International Crime Division (ICD) of the Ugandan High Court (Macdonald and Porter, 2016).

families to live alongside their mothers. But first, a note on the research methodology and validity of the data is in order.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 2012–2013, I carried out 6 months of ethnography in northern Uganda, undertaken for my doctoral research, which focused on LRA abductions, forced marriage, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction issues. The study examined the formerly abducted women's lived conflict and post-conflict experiences (Kiconco, 2021a). The research received ethical approval from my university and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

I was born and raised in the rural Ankole region, western Uganda. As an adolescent, I relocated to the capital, Kampala, in the central region. With this ethnic background and internal migration, I speak many Bantu languages spoken in Uganda's central and west, different from the Luo language spoken in the Acholi region. As a Munyankole (person from Ankole) woman working in northern Uganda for the first time, my project's success depended on recruiting an interpreter and transcriber to help with the research. Thus, the research team consisted of five people: two interpreters (man and woman), two male transcribers, and me, the researcher. However, I managed the fieldwork, data collection and analysis.

The research adopted in-depth interviews and observation as the methods of collecting data. The research team interviewed 40 formerly abducted women in the Acholi region's Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, and Pader districts. These women were accessed through rehabilitation centers and referrals *via* already interviewed women. They had had 68 children fathered by LRA men, including some who died in the LRA camps or once subsequently back home. During fieldwork, 58 children were still alive, 28 girls and 30 boys. Because I was not ethically equipped to interview the children, the study limited itself to observing them while working with their mothers. Therefore, the data on the children presented and discussed below was generated through interviews with their mothers.

The children's age at joining receptor communities ranged between 0 and 8 years, averaging 1.8 years. The majority, 75% ($n = 51$), were born and started their development within the LRA units and camps, while 25% ($n = 17$) were born upon their mothers' return home. Most children joined host communities in their early childhood years of 1–4 years. During fieldwork, the children's age ranged between 6 months and 17 years, averaging 9.5 years, with the majority 28.47% ($n = 19$) in the range 6–9 years.

These age brackets all fell within that of the childhood development cohort, the most important phase for the overall development of a human being. Experts in child development show that environmental influences are crucial in the brain and biological development in this stage of life. A child's experiences determine their health, education, and economic prospects overall. Any exposure to risk factors over a period will have its outcome later on in the person's behavior. Therefore, my data is a result of a scan of both immediate and long-term integration processes and experiences and how they influenced the children's survival, safety, and relationships.

During fieldwork, the children were in diverse custodianships. As the table below shows, the majority, 34 children, lived with their mothers in different situations. Then 13 children lived with maternal grandparents, while nine with relatives. Two lived with LRA/biological fathers.

No. mothers and their children as single parents	No mothers and their children in new relationships (new partner or husband)	No. mothers and their children with LRA husbands	No. mothers and their children living with maternal clan (grandparents or extended family)
8 (13 children)	11 (15 children)	2 (6 children)	4 (7 children)

The goal of my research was hinged on tracking and exploring their integration through their mothers' perspectives. Mothers were asked to reflect on questions concerning the welfare and integration of their children. The interview guide included open-ended questions to guide the conversation. Some of these questions included:

- Can you please tell me what it was like for your children when you first returned home? How did your family/neighbors/friends welcome you and your children? How did this treatment make you feel about your children?
- How has the experience changed over time? Do you think the way your family and community treat your children has changed with time?
- Where are your children staying now, and how is their situation?
- Is the fact that the LRA man fathers your children affecting your relationship with your children? How do you view the effects on the children's integration?
- How do your new husband and in-laws treat your children?
- How do your family and community members treat your children now?
- Are there some people in your family and community who think better and worse of your children? Who thinks worse of them? Why do you think that is? Who thinks better? Why do you think that is?
- Do you feel you are supported with the upbringing of these children? Who supports you? Who do you think should be supporting them?
- What prospects do you have for your children?

The research generated a considerable amount of data from responses and accounts. It relied on a qualitative thematic content analysis approach to analyze the data. It applied Nvivo10 to organize, manage and analyze the data. First, the analysis process included familiarizing with the data by repeatedly reading interview scripts, comparing with field notes and making notes on potential themes, patterns, and categories. Secondly, all the transcribed interviews were transported from Microsoft word to the Nvivo10 for organizing, managing and bringing order to

the data. The move facilitated the inductive thematic/focused coding and analysis (Creswell, 2013). The theme of stigmatization emerged as a significant integration problem. The final analysis focused on finding the meaning behind this response to help understand the situation of the LRA captivity children. I draw on mothers' perspectives to provide evidence for the argument, using quotations to illustrate the broader set of life stories. Most interviewees gave expressed permission to use their correct details in data dissemination. But to protect their identities, I have anonymised all names and places.

INTEGRATION: ESTABLISHING SOCIAL RELATIONS, KINSHIP TIES AND ACCEPTANCE

When the children in this study exited the LRA rebellion with their mothers, reintegration agencies connected them with their maternal kin and communities. Indeed, when I visited the Acholi region in 2012/2013, I found most of them residing in rural areas, living in maternal familial units based on extended families. Consultations show that according to Acholi customary law and practice, children born out of wedlock belong to the mother and her clan. Therefore, integration for these children (born out of wedlock) thus meant joining maternal families and broader clan communities. With family serving as the entry point into society, socialization and the establishment of social relations and kinship ties, I cannot emphasize enough how crucial maternal families were to the children when they first entered society. Families created the initial integration space, providing socio-cultural, psychological, and economic support. The children then depended on the established familial relations to connect with clans and community networks. A woman who returned with two children stated:

> When I returned home, my family was supportive of my children and me. They were telling us things we could or could not do. They encouraged us to live freely with other people in the community. This [family support] helped us cope and relate with other people in the community.[6]

From the safety of the family unit, the children were supported in participating in neighborly activities, going to church, attending school, working with government and non-governmental organizations, and engaging with the broader society.

However, accounts show that initial integration often meant being part of diminished or dysfunctional immediate familial relations, forcing some children to rely on extended relatives or well-wishers to support their post-LRA lives. Mothers who returned to dead parents reflected that they and their children relied on relatives to sustain their lives in the initial days of returning home. Many interviewees described their responses through such social relation framings.

Several years after joining receptor communities, I found that the realities had not changed for most children in the sample. Many still lived with their maternal kin, a move that allowed their mothers to pursue other reintegration strategies, including marriages and livelihoods (Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018; Kiconco, 2021b). They rarely saw their mothers, particularly those married in areas far from biological communities. Another category in the sample lived with their mothers, in new marriages, as single parents in their birth families, or alone in cheap town rentals.

However, this should not suggest that all family and extended relative unions were receptive to these children in northern Uganda. Indeed, family stigmatization in Acholi often forced children and their mothers to consider other options. Two mothers in the sample reflected on the events:

> When I was abducted, my mother was alive. She died during my captivity. When I came back home, I found my stepmother at home. We started living with her. We stayed with her for two weeks, but it was not a good experience. She used to talk ill of my child and me. She hated my child so much that she could say, 'I do not want to keep a bush child in my home'. She even told my father, 'if you want me to stay in your home, you have to remove this child from our home'. The abuse became too much, and we left.[7]

> If my child destroyed something at home, people reacted to him differently from other children with non-abducted parents. They always said many negative statements and words to him. People said statements like 'your father is a rebel, and you have his mentality.[8]

These examples were characteristic of many children who lived with their mothers in community trading centers and town settings. These mothers reported that their initial efforts to live with families in rural areas were unsuccessful, forcing them to relocate to new environments where they lived alone, taking care of themselves, children and other dependants. Thus, "recovery by urbanizing" became a reintegration strategy for these mothers and their children (Kiconco, 2021a; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2021).

Acholi interviews suggest three related issues foundational to the integration of the children born in LRA and social relations ruptured by the conflict in northern Uganda. First, familial/kinship ties are the most critical social ties these children have to establish for survival, security and protection. Joining communities becomes a play of social reciprocity with exchanges of support based on personalized familial/kinship, ultimately turning this social interaction into an integration asset; integration becomes a relational process in communities where systems of exchange and reciprocity exist. Second, lacking strong familial/kinship ties amounts to being "alone" or "a nobody" without anyone to draw on for support. Third, failure to establish social relations and maintain warm relationships is equivalent to failed integration.

[6]Interview 28: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 6 years, Omiya Anyima, Kitgum district, 8 November 2012.

[7]Interview 21: 24 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 6 years, Omiya Anyima, Kitgum district, 4 November 2012.

[8]Interview 38: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 14 for 7 years, Lukung, Lamwo district, 5 February 2013.

Acholi families understood that children connecting with families, clans and broader community networks were crucial for acceptance, a determinant of meaningful integration. In many cases, families accepted and embraced the children, ultimately supporting their integration. However, I found that community members continued to prioritize stigmatization in their interaction with the children, which reinforced their ongoing victimhood and marginality as children and as community members. Three Acholi mothers expressed the dilemma facing their children in this way:

> When we initially returned home, it was challenging to live with people. Every time I moved around the community with my child, people started saying, 'look at this rebel child. The rebels have finished [killed] people; this child should have been killed.' This mentality/perspective has not changed in the community.[9]

> People like uttering words to the boy, especially when he becomes offensive. For instance, 1 day, his chicken disappeared and someone killed it. He revenged by beating his uncle's pig and almost destroying it. People in our community were alarmed, saying, 'the boy is very violent. He has taken the father's character.'[10]

> The biggest challenge is the stigmatization directed toward us [with three children]. They [children] keep telling me how sad and stressed they feel. To cheer them up, I tell them how hurt I also feel and that if there was a way of returning to the bush, we would have, just to be free. The same things [stigmatization] are being said to them at schools as well. I have visited their schools to discuss with their teachers to protect them against stigmatization from their mates, but the problem persists. They are still being branded as rebels.[11]

These examples were characteristic of reports from many formerly abducted women in this research. As we might call them, the never abducted populations in the Acholi region view the children with suspicion and place them on the periphery of community life. Community stigmatization dominates their integration experiences, including off-putting thoughts, feelings, inappropriate language and actions intended to constitute defamation or slander. Mothers' accounts show that unusually close attention is paid to the children's actions, responses, and behavior, with aggressive/assertive/challenging outlook/attitude being highlighted and labeled as "violent"/"offensive" and contrary to local understanding of children and childhood. These actions and behaviors are considered alien and inferior to Acholi norms and standards.

Yet, accounts propose that integration is interactive and relational, emphasizing social relations with family, kinship, and other community members, with acceptance and trust as the primary indicators to regulate its success. However, the prospect of achieving "true" community acceptance had not materialized for most children encountered in this study. Several years after joining receptor communities, they lived under close observation by family and community members. Difficulties associated with a lack of acceptance at the family/kinship or community level undermined integration. It was my experience that many children in the sample were accepted in the immediate family but still faced stigmatization in the broader community, which led to a general sense of failure and exclusion.

According to mothers' perspectives, meaningful integration involves transitioning from rebel identity to civilian children. The process is transformative and aims to connect them to structural and cognitive elements of society, which facilitates the establishment of positive familial/kinship ties and community networks. This long-term and dynamic process involves complex negotiations and exchanges between host communities and the children. Inclusion is the ultimate goal of integration. Thus, integration involves repairing relationships characterized by positive emotions, culminating in social acceptance and inclusion.

CULTURE, PATRIARCHY AND STIGMATIZATION

Three sources of this stigmatization emerge in the data. *Firstly*, being conceived and born in the bush. The formerly abducted mothers in the study used two geographical spaces, home and bush, to contrast their children's past and present experiences. During fieldwork, I also observed a difference between the understanding of the bush and home spaces in the context of Acholi. *Lum* refers to grass that builds to a bush. Acholi people use the concept of *Lum* to refer to the "bush"—denoting an unsafe, fearful, and mysterious place not to be visited without good reason. The bush is where wild animals, criminals, and polluting spirits reside. On the other hand, a home/community is a sanctioned space where people live in harmony under the guidance of ancestral *jogi*. Some studies have also utilized moral geography to explore this bush vs. the home binary in Acholi society (Oloya, 2013; Dubal, 2018; Porter, 2019; MacDonald and Kerali, 2020).

At the beginning of the LRA rebellion, the tension between bush and home spaces became louder. The rebellion did not take place in a social and spiritual vacuum. It was largely an Acholi rebellion led by a majority of Acholi fighters. The leadership was, therefore, no strangers to Acholi culture. However, Baines (2017) argues that in the late 1990s, Joseph Kony created a "new Acholi nation," which he considered morally superior to the old Acholi. According to her research participants, Kony termed the new state Acholi A and the old state Acholi B. Besides abductions of adolescents and teenagers, Kony relied on an institutionalized forced marriage to populate the new state (Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017). The new Acholi state project complemented the spiritual initiative project introduced at the group's formation in the late 1980s (see Behrend, 1999; Van Acker, 2004; Titeca, 2010). The LRA/new Acholi practiced their version of social harmony, just like home, upheld by a spiritual body *via* Kony (see Behrend,

[9]Interview 27: 25 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 4 years, Omiya Anyima, Kitgum district, 23 November 2012.
[10]Interview 31: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 6 years, Kitgum town, Kitgum district, 19 November 2012.
[11]Interview 40: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 6 years, Lukung, Lamwo district, 10 February 2013.

1999; Van Acker, 2004). While their settlements in south Sudan and social life mirrored old Acholi, the rebellion developed their own moral codes that every member lived by Titeca (2010), Baines (2017), and Porter (2019). Interviews show that upon arrival in the LRA settlements, newly abducted persons were subjected to rituals to cleanse them of any potential polluting spirits and witchcraft from the old and inferior Acholi state. LRA/new Acholi social harmony transgressors were punished, sometimes by death (Titeca, 2010; Baines, 2017; Porter, 2019).

Similarly, at home, people coined the term *olumolum*—derived from *Lum*—to refer to people that had entered the bush to wage a rebellion against the Government. Over the years, the *olumolum* came to mean "people who live in the bush"—as in the case of the LRA rebels—suggesting they were polluted, mentally unsound, criminals, with a "bush mentality." Thus, returning from the rebellion and the bush, home communities perceived children parented by the LRA members and born in the bush as now possessing a lower moral status in a society where people, nature, and the spiritual world determine moral standing. The never-abducted persons saw them as potential polluters of the social body. Therefore, I found the bush an essential concept linked together with the LRA and the polluting spirits.

Having *olumolum* ("people of the bush"—LRA combatants and abductees) as their natal parents and being conceived in the bush is one of the main sources of stigma for LRA children in Acholi region. Being born in the bush "qualifies" them as *olumolum*. Indeed, I found that these children were described and referred to in conversations as *olumolum*, denoting they were also "people of the bush." Two mothers stated:

> My child faces severe stigmatization from the community. When referring to him, people use negative descriptions ranging from 'born in the bush' to 'rebel'. These descriptions affect our children and us.[12]

> I have not heard any forms of segregation toward my children in my family. However, some people in the outside community use a stigmatizing language. When referring to the children, they always use phrases like, 'children she returned with from the bush'. As their mother, I do not feel at ease when I hear such statements.[13]

Interviews suggest that these children in the Acholi area have two parallel worlds—the bush world and the "normal" world. Although they may have complete access to the normal world and live close to never abducted people, they are nevertheless conceptualized as inhabiting the unknown, polluted and feared bush world. And because of this background, they are singled out and labeled as different, strange, or even dangerous. They are "othered" and deemed as of lower status when others know their history. Many find themselves isolated from society and discredited by the unaccepting host communities. Mothers interviewed for this study reported that locals viewed their children through the prism of their birth in the bush. Their character is understood as "bush-like." They are teased, scorned, and stigmatized about this background.

Secondly, association with the rebellion. Beyond being born in the bush, interviews show that these children's association with the LRA rebellion is also a source of their stigmatization. Locals in Acholi communities call them "Kony," "Kony's children" or "rebels," claiming that they are "wild" and potentially future "criminals." Locals blame them for the hated practices of their fathers, assuming that they are "useless" like Kony and his militiamen, who are perceived as useless fathers that inflicted uncountable pain on their society and with no remorse. The boys are viewed as having inherited their fathers' wild and criminal behavior and are thus more commonly stereotyped as "criminals," "uncivilized" and "untamed," placing them outside the social harmony. As one mother put it, "I do not have any bad feelings toward my child because I am the mother. But other people stigmatize him a lot, saying his father is a rebel and that he will have no future use to the community."[14] Another shared this sad story: "I abandoned my marriage after only 8 months because I could not stand bad statements and treatment directed at my children and me. People used to say that if my boys grow up, with the bush mentality inherited from their father, they will break the man's [step father] home."[15] This interviewee's marital community perceived her children as a source of danger and fear. Locals feared them because rebel men fathered the children, with some believing the children inherited their fathers' characters and were prone to being violent in the stepfather's home and community.

Similarly, compared to their peers not born in the LRA, these children are viewed as more stubborn and uncontrollable, with girls understood to have inherited their mothers' perceived "weak points." Step-fathers, in particular, were reported to use insulting words like "stupid," "senseless," "bush mentality/behavior," or "unsound mind" in relation to them and their mothers. This language highlights the difference and distance between these children and the local population, reinforcing their exclusion from mainstream society. It underlines local awareness of their social origins. It shows how the children are seen as inferior or of lower status, posing a danger to the local social order and its accompanying harmony.

Thirdly, illegitimacy at birth. Backgrounds of being born in the bush and association with the rebellion are key sources of stigmatization in northern Uganda. However, I found that children born in the LRA face persistent stigmatization mainly due to the "illegitimacy" of their birth circumstances. Being born out of wedlock sees them negatively perceived and devalued, while having an unknown father makes this even worse.

Interviews show that patriarchy and patrilineality fundamentally influence these children's contested identities and citizenship in northern Uganda. Indeed, Acholi society is

[12]Interview 9: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

[13]Interview 29: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 7 years, Omiya Anyima, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

[14]Interview 9: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012. Interview, Mother 9, Amida, Kitgum district, October 2012.

[15]Interview 30: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 6 years, Kitgum town, Kitgum district. Omiya Anyima, Kitgum district, 8 November 2012.

organized along patriarchal, patrilineal, and interdependent clan lines. Paternal lineage membership determines access to social identity, belonging and status, ultimately deciding access to resources, particularly land. Families resist raising children that are not of their lineage/clan.

Nyom (marriage) plays a crucial role in unifying lineages/clans and ensuring social integration in Acholi culture (Finnström, 2008; Baines and Rosenoff-Gauvin, 2014; Kiconco, 2021a). Customary marriages are completed with the payment of bridewealth, which cements the contract between the girl and boy's families/clans. When the groom's clan pays its *tongo keny* (bridewealth), the move establishes reproductive and productive rights in the woman's family. The married woman joins and becomes part of her husband's family/clan, while the children born of the union become part of their father's clan and lineage. Where the levied *tongo keny* has not been paid in full, the relationship is not recognized, any resultant children are viewed as illicit, and ultimately they belong to their mother's clan and lineage. This is such a socially undesirable outcome that a process exists, called "*luk pa latin*," whereby the paternal family pays a customary fine for the care taken to raise the child in order to affiliate it to its father's lineage. Although deeply affected by war, displacement, and the accompanying crises of social reproduction, these customs remain crucial to Acholi social order and, therefore, individual psychological wellbeing (Kiconco, 2021a).

When an LRA father pays *tongo keny* to the woman's family/clan, he can secure a sanctioned marriage. Similarly, he claims custodianship if he pays compensation to the mother's clan for the child. I will give an example to elaborate on this process and experience. Lamunu (pseudonym) was one of the two women in the sample that lived with their LRA husbands and children. Abducted at 14 for 10 years, Lamunu escaped the rebellion without informing her rebel husband and returned home with their three children. Some months later, the government forces captured and rescued the man. Upon homecoming, he traced Lamunu and the children to engage her clan in *tongo keny* (bridewealth) and *luk* (fines for the children). The move would officially seek Lamunu's hand in marriage and realign their children's lineage. Lamunu reported, "Our home communities are close to each other, so it was not difficult for him to trace us."[16]

Working with his clan elders, the husband negotiated and paid *lim akumu* for Lamunu and *luk* that Lamunu's clan levied on the man's clan for children that arose from the LRA forced marriage (locally considered illicit sex). Lamunu reported using the money he received as part of the DDR resettlement package to clear these fines and cultural expectations: "He received 250,000 Ugandan Shillings from Uganda Amnesty Commission to start life back home. He spent some of it to meet *lim akumu* and *luk* obligations."[17] I met Lamunu's family in 2013, 8 years after returning home. They now had a fourth child, born out of legitimate marriage, and did not pay *luk*.

The facts highlighted in this story reveal that Lamunu and her husband saw marriage and kinship as reintegration strategies. They understood that an Acholi girl giving birth without being legally married runs contrary to Acholi custom and is perceived as a threat to the institution of marriage. Locals would view their children as products of practices that violated customary norms of sex, gender, kinship, marriage and patriarchy. Their presence in home communities would consequentially be interpreted as disrupting and threatening Acholi social order and social harmony. Therefore, they knowledgeably evoked and engaged with the social processes of *tongo keny* and *luk* to kick-start their reintegration into society. Lamunu and her husband saw engaging with these customs as a solid strategy to make their relationship acceptable in society, ultimately supporting their children's integration.

Indeed, the experience brought their clans into a social relationship in which they transferred their children's lineage affiliation from maternal to paternal family/clan. It was only after this process that the man could claim their children. They both understood that if they started living together without initiating and experiencing marriage and kinship customs to make their union official and pay child compensation, the move would further transgress social harmony (increase tensions) between the two clans. Thus, the action neutralized existing tensions induced by their bush experience, forced marriage and children born out of this relationship.

Interviews suggest that the never-abducted men who marry formerly abducted women and wish to take on custodianship of their LRA children can also evoke the *luk* custom. Indeed, "Akello (pseudonym) stays with me here [marital home]. Initially, she was with my relatives. But when I shared about her with my husband, he agreed to pay *luk* to my relative who was taking care of her and brought her home here. She is with us, and he decided to take care of her and support her education." Similarly, "I pray that my husband will continue to accept and support my children. Because this is the only place they know and call home. Even in future, it will be their only home. All my plans depend on what we agree on with my husband. If he remains peaceful and agrees to my hopes of fathering them [paying *luk*], I will be very relieved."[18]

During fieldwork, this stringent cultural process of child affiliation was prevalent in Acholi society. Another woman revealed that she escaped with two children, leaving their father in the LRA. His family wanted to take the children from the maternal clan illegally (without paying *luk*). However, her family involved the police in blocking the move: "I came back from the bush with two children. But the [LRA] man's family tried stealing one child, but we were quick to report this to police, and they stopped them."[19]

[16]Interview 15: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 7 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

[17]Interview 58: 36 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 10 years, Gulu town, 6 February 2013.

[18]Interview 36: 27 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 7 years, Lukung, Lamwo district, 7 January 2013.

[19]Interview 24: 32 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 6 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 17 November 2012.

In this research, fewer children with established paternal ties stood in contrast with the experiences of most children with no paternal links and relations. These children in the sample struggled to cope with unknown paternal identities. Mothers expressed concerns as asked whether they worried about their children growing up not knowing their birth fathers. Three women reflected on the events:

> He used to come and stay with us [marital home] some time ago. He came here to ask for educational materials, books, pens and school uniforms. But when my husband began abusing and calling him 'rebel child' and persisted after I had asked him to cease, the boy decided on his own to stop coming here.[20]

> I worry about the future of my son. Commonly, boys will grow up and look for their paternal homes, even when you deny them information about their homes. Even for Okello, I hope that if people continue to stigmatize and tell him about his roots, perhaps he might get interested in tracing his paternal home.[21]

> People stigmatize and talk about it [fatherhood] to him. That makes me angry and anxious. I constantly worry that this issue will be a big concern when he grows older. If he were a girl, at least it would have been better. I had wanted to tell him that his father died, but he is still too young to understand. For now, he calls my elder brother his father.[22]

These examples suggest that when children grow older and develop a sense of self and a need for social acceptance and belonging, they might become sensitive to stigmatization and emotional abuse from the community. They will reinvent themselves as they enter teenage years and adulthood, asking questions about their paternal roots and origins and seeking true meaningful identity.

While it appears as though the most pervasive stigmatization is similar for boys and girls, some perspectives suggest a gendered element in the experience and realities. Indeed, "If he were a girl, at least it would have been better."[23] The Acholi experience proposes that gender plays a role in how integration evolves in northern Uganda, particularly in the long term. Some mothers felt that male children faced a severe predicament because they could not survive outside maternal clans. They were bound to be rejected, marginalized and stigmatized for the rest of their lives. On the other hand, mothers felt marriage offered a solid path to leave the maternal clan and enter a new clan (husband's clan), where they could access land and other resources (Kiconco, 2021b). They would eventually escape rejection and stigmatization from maternal clan members.

Consultations show that for Acholi children, knowing and belonging to their paternal family/clan is critical in their social belonging, protection, and provision. By contrast, children with no paternal lineage are viewed as lower status and treated accordingly. Unfortunately, this necessarily applies to most children fathered by the LRA men, whose fathers never paid *tongo keny* and are largely absent from their children's lives. These children typically exist as social others who are illegitimate within the Acholi order of things and social harmony. So much so that some mothers reported being criticized for exiting the LRA with their children. In the words of one, "my relatives bluntly told me that I should have left the child with the LRA since the father was not around [still with rebels] to take care of the child, so coming home with the child was useless. That, moreover, this would only bring more problems for my return home. This hurt me a lot."[24] Similarly, "I am constantly told that I should not bother raising a child of no father."[25]

"As a mother, you cannot stay with a child who does not know their father or paternal home. The child needs to know their father's home."[26] As Lamunus's case shows, it is socially possible for the LRA father or his family/clan to claim custodianship of a child through *luk* negotiations. However, this has rarely been pursued by families, clans, and child protection institutions, largely because doing so may be challenging and require comprehensive coordination among families, clans, and the wider community. Recent experience shows mothers most often initiate child tracing after children request to learn their paternal identity. Some children themselves initiate other cases. A smaller number of cases are initiated by LRA returned fathers or by the paternal clan (see, e.g., Baines and Oliveira, 2020; Tinashe et al., 2020). As such, in the present sample, only 11 children knew their paternal families at the time of fieldwork.[27] This suggests that most children in the sample attempted to integrate into their maternal clan systems, unable to rely on their paternal kinship networks for support.

Acholi experience shows that knowing and connecting with paternal kin expands integration space for these children in northern Uganda. At the very least, this would address their inability to access the most crucial resource, land. In the Acholi region, the land is customarily owned, with male children expected to inherit it from their fathers to establish their own families and farming livelihoods. Having no relationship with their biological fathers, these children lack inheritance rights and claims to land. This leaves them vulnerable and at the mercy of their maternal kin and stepfathers, which is necessarily uncertain

[20]Interview 25: 28 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 10 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 20 November 2012.

[21]Interview 3: 28 years old, abducted at the age of 10 for eight 10 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 6 November 2012.

[22]Interview 25: 28 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 10 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 20 November 2012.

[23]Interview 25: 28 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 10 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 20 November 2012.

[24]Interview 12: 23 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 6 years, Kitgum town, Kitgum District, 5 November 2012.

[25]Interview 9: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

[26]Interview 39: 35 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 7 years, Gulu town, 9 February 2012.

[27]Six lived with their mothers and fathers after the two mothers had exited the LRA and been joined by the LRA fathers, who paid the customary bridewealth for the mothers and the *luk* for each of the children. Two other children had joined their fathers. One belonged to a mother who returned with two children by the same LRA father, but the father took only one after paying *luk*. The mother was in a new relationship. The second child lived with the maternal grandparents because the father was yet to pay the second *luk*. Two final stayed with their mothers, but their fathers often visited. One mother exited the LRA with three children by two combatants: his paternal family (grandparents) had taken one, and the other two lived with maternal grandparents, with no knowledge of their paternal family.

given the stigma they face due to their socially unorthodox. Consider these two experiences:

> I plan to have a place for my children and me to call home. Even if we are living at my aunt's home, in the future, as human beings, people will get tired of my children and expect them to find their places. I have to plan for them before they become adults by finding a piece of land and constructing a house. If I find a Good Samaritan to rent their land, we can grow some food.[28]

> My marital home is experiencing land issues involving the children I returned with from the bush. What will happen if they continue to reject and deny them access to land? I do not have any power to avoid that. I am only waiting to see what the future has in store for them. I do not have anyone to help me look after them. Where will I put them? Will they find help when the LRA has been fully demolished?[29]

Reuniting with their paternal families does not mean these children are guaranteed the safety of belonging and land accessibility. Indeed, they will still have to maneuver amidst the land wrangles engulfing most of the Acholi region (Joireman, 2018). But paternal lineage networks will at least offer them the basis of the safety net that most vulnerable children in Uganda rely on to survive.

INTERVENTION, DE-CENTRING CHILDREN AND EXACERBATION OF INTEGRATION COMPLEXITIES

How to ensure reintegration for girls abducted and forced into marriages? How to integrate the children born of their unions, with or without their fathers? These are the questions faced by many organizations working in northern Uganda during and after the war. Unfortunately, my data show that there are several problems plaguing what they do. This section shows that rehabilitation and reintegration agencies failed to mitigate the Acholi above socio-cultural issues. At times, the biases within their approaches even made things worse.

The first issue with the mainstream approach to protection and reintegration concerns the conception of childhood predominant within intervening agencies. Consultations show that neither childhood nor adulthood is reducible to biological age in the Acholi region. Adolescence is considered the phase between the ages of 10 and 18. *Orobo* ("youth"/"young-persons") are people between the ages of 15 and 30. But particularly in rural areas, a girl becomes a woman upon experiencing menstrual cycles, developing breasts, or being sexually active. Therefore, girls between 12 and 16 are typically seen as ready for marriage and bearing children. A girl becomes a woman *as soon as* she marries or gets pregnant, even if this occurs at age 12 or 13. Therefore, though still young in biological age, a pregnant girl will begin self-identifying as *Dako matidi* ("young mother/woman/wife"). Thus, marriage and motherhood—not age—are the pathways to womanhood and adulthood in this context (p'Bitek, 1986; Dolan, 2005: 282; Finnström, 2008: 235).

By contrast, for rehabilitation agencies, children and childhood are biological phenomena, and each implies an inability to consent to sexual activity or resulting pregnancy. As such, agencies constructed all females returning from LRA captivity as "child mothers." Reports show that "the majority of those classified as 'child mothers' at reception centers [were] over the age of 18" (Allen and Schomerus, 2006: 24), so they were adults in both the Western and Acholi sense of that term. Yet agencies aimed at reproducing "children" in line with Western standards—innocent, helpless, vulnerable, dependent, in need of rescue, etc.—no doubt in part because this is what played with donor sympathies. However, agencies treated these young women as children: "they [staff] cared for us but treated us as children even when some of us already had children."[30] This limited the cultural appropriateness of agency interventions and ultimately alienated many.

Furthermore, the focus on "mothers-as-children" meant that their children were de-centered in the design and implementation of programmes, limiting the quality of their support. Yet, children's suffering has implications for mothers' reintegration. The interviews suggest that mothers cannot fully reintegrate if their children do not experience meaningful integration. Indeed, "the stigmatization of our children greatly affects us because we did not choose to be abducted and give birth to them with the rebels. It was not our wish, and the negative treatment from the community give us [mothers] much pain."[31]

Therefore, in the initial days, more needed to be done to change attitudes in northern Uganda that viewed these children as "other," resultantly keeping them at the periphery of mainstream society. As I examined the integration process in the Acholi region, I asked whether child protection agencies that sought to help and support mothers did more harm than good in terms of their children. I recognize that mothers experienced more vulnerabilities and needs when they initially left the LRA. However, infantilizing and turning them into a focus of concern complicated their home status, position and situation. Notably, the move invisibilised their children. So, in developing this argument in this section, I am not unjustly criticizing child protection agencies nor trivializing the challenges they faced trying to return these mothers to their home communities. Rather, the objective is to demonstrate that infantilizing mothers/women were counterproductive to their children's integration.

Experiences of stigmatization reveal that international institutions overlooked or ignored the purported social disorder associated with being born in the bush/rebellion and its influence on integration. Critical aspects of social disharmony related to these children's status and background were not acknowledged and appropriately addressed. Failure to consider

[28]Interview 32: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Kitgum town, 14 November 2012.

[29]Interview 13: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 9 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

[30]Interview 18: 21 years old, abducted at the age of 13 for 8 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 October 2012.

[31]Interview 9: 31 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Amida, Kitgum district, 13 November 2012.

such concerns also meant overlooking broader cultural norms, gender ideologies and patriarchal tendencies, signifying that international institutions approached children's experiences as taking place in a vacuum. Yet, the integration processes evolved in social and cultural frameworks affected and changed by the protracted war. Accordingly, institutions needed to pay close attention to local culture, patriarchy and gender constructions and their shaping of daily lives to make sense of how integration would evolve and affect the children.

Beyond such primary difficulties, the exceptionalism inherent to the targeted focus on returning "child mothers" contributed to their children's stigmatization. This happened for a number of reasons. First, the preference for the initial phase of integration taking place in centers run by foreign agencies as opposed to within community settings gave the impression to many communities that they were seen as unable to offer appropriate support to these children. This bred resentment among many locals, worsened by how reintegration agencies advocated for mothers and children, voicing their concerns to criticize the public for not protecting them. The Western approach to childhood and womanhood highlighted alienated people through its implicit disregard for local understandings. At the same time, the sole focus on child mothers and their children vexed people by ignoring the parallels between their difficulties and those of the wider region. In Allen and Schomerus' words, "so many adolescent girls in northern Uganda [were] living vulnerable and impoverished lives, and [were] likely to end up becoming pregnant at a very early age" (2006: 24). Provision of support and opportunities in a manner that did not address the needs of these other vulnerable populations, therefore, made returnee mothers and children stand out in a way that entrenched resentment against them, thus exclusion from mainstream society.[32]

Agencies pursued the "child mother" policy for legal reasons and moral reasons of responsibility and accountability. But in their attempt to restore "lost childhoods," they prioritized returning women who were now mothers to the communities they left before they became mothers. The move de-centered their children, consequentially keeping them invisible and condemning them to a lower status. This flew in the face of the local customs outlined above and overlooked the reality that their mothers' families and communities would not automatically accept some children. Consequently, both children and their returning mothers faced stigma, preventing meaningful (re)integration.

The unintended experience of de-centring children seemed to have influenced many mothers against tracing fathers or paternal families upon homecoming. I found that the identity of their children's father was not an issue for some mothers in the sample, a perspective they seemed to have adopted from organizations. Protection agencies sometimes discouraged continuing relationships with LRA combatants or tracing paternal families in the early days of return. Consider this experience:

> I did not attempt to do anything like that [tracing for paternal family] because we were advised by [rehabilitation agency] that there was no need to do that since we suffered in the bush carrying and delivering them [children]. They were our consolations and blessings that God had given us and that we should never let their fathers' relatives know. Even about the mere fact that the children were related to them and had come back home with us.[33]

Following the Acholi naming custom, male LRA combatants named their children after themselves or their families/clans. Male children were named after their fathers' brothers or uncles and some girls after their paternal grandmothers. It is possible that this was viewed as a way of eventually identifying the child in the future. Indeed, had the father's family members wanted to trace the child, these names would have been crucial. As such, agencies advised mothers to rename their children. Some agencies even went as far as to interfere with details that could have helped fathers or their lineages identify and trace their children. In some cases, agencies came up with new names themselves:

> While in captivity, he was named Binaisa Samuel Arwai [a pseudonym] after his father, Arwai. But when we were at [agency], the name Arwai was deleted from his name. The management advised me that the name Arwai would make people stigmatize him in the village. So I decided to stop calling him Arwai.[34]

Since they acted as the critical broker reintroducing returnees to civil society and preparing them for community-based reintegration, agencies held a hierarchal position in northern Uganda. Besides offering support, there was an opportunity to advocate for these children's social visibility and customary rights pertaining to paternal descent and in line with local custom. Instead, they sponsored interventions that contributed to the predicament around identity and social belonging facing these children.

Although paternal family/clan reunions may help with reconciliation and redress, northern Uganda has not focused on this. The focus and target of reintegration agencies and programmes remain to return and keep LRA combatants in their home communities. In addition, the emphasis on mothers continues to drive the reintegration intervention. This is done with the perception that "empowering" mothers will improve the wellbeing of their children. But, this approach leaves many gaps. Many mothers stipulate the desire re-marry with non-LRA men, leaving their children with maternal grandparents or/and relatives (Kiconco, 2021a). Some mothers do not have immediate relations alive or willing to take on their children. With these children unable to join their mothers in new marriages/relationships, they are left at the mercy of extended relatives or stranded with well-wishers.

The article should not suggest that all formerly abducted women desire to reunite with their LRA husbands or their families and clans. In fact, some women in the sample resented

[32]There were some efforts to incorporate both formerly abducted mothers and other war-affected young mothers in the same communities in research and rehabilitation projects (see for example SWAY, 2006; McKay et al., 2010).

[33]Interview 25: 28 years old, abducted at the age of 12 for 10 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 20 November 2012.

[34]Interview 16: 26 years old, abducted at the age of 11 for 8 years, Omiya nyima, Kitgum district, 15 November 2012.

the LRA men/husbands because their union was an experience of rape, forced marriage and forced pregnancy, which they saw as having ended with their return home. Many were in new relationships with never-abducted men. The forced marriage trauma continued to inform these women's perspectives on their children born in the LRA and their integration back home. Many saw raising the children by themselves or with the help of maternal clans as a superior strategy compared to tracing for their fathers or paternal kin.

Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that it is compulsory for children fathered by the LRA fathers to know their paternal families to integrate into northern Uganda communities. However, we assume this is likely from what has been explained above about the Acholi social order. Furthermore, from a fundamental material standpoint, mothers facing severe impoverishment need the support they could receive from biological fathers and paternal relatives to integrate their children meaningfully. Thus, "If Dominic [Ongwen] would come back, he and I could join hands and raise our two children," stated one of Ongwen's former forced wives who appeals for his forgiveness. Indeed, confronting though it may be to some, she pleaded for reconciliation and not the prosecution of such LRA fathers.[35]

CONCLUSION

In this article, I interpret integration in northern Uganda as fundamentally a social process that features dynamic interactions between the children born in the LRA captivity and host communities. The ultimate goal is to establish and maintain social and kinship relationships to support life post-LRA. It is not something that children can do on their own, as integration involves the negotiation of social identities and the configuration of social status and positions. The key issue that shapes integration is whether these children can establish and maintain decent relationships with kin and host communities, resulting in social inclusion. I arrived at this interpretation by attending to children and their lived experiences and realities of integration told *via* interviews with their formerly abducted mothers. It was my experience that mothers understand their children's integration challenges, particularly their lack of a paternal identity, which influence their access to resources, particularly the land with clan affiliation.

A key objective of my study was to examine the significant sources of stigmatization among the children born in the LRA as they attempt to integrate into northern Uganda communities. Their backgrounds of being born in the bush, association with the LRA and illegitimacy at birth emerged as the key sources of their stigmatization. Everyday stigmatization mediates integration experiences among the LRA captivity children in the Acholi region. Stigmatization is a challenge that consistently undercuts their aspirations for recovery and integration. Stigmatization takes different forms and serves multiple functions. The exclusion and alienation of the children by the never-abducted population constitute perhaps the single most difficult hindrance to meaningful integration. Stigmatization arising from culture and patriarchy adversely affect opportunities for developing and nurturing meaningful social relationships. Social participation is severely compromised, reducing hope and prospects significantly among these children. The factors leading to their stigmatization are unique, as they challenge the common belief that integration is a critical, necessary and durable post-conflict solution.

Social orders can have paradoxical effects, providing an environment that protects sections of a community while isolating others. In their daily experiences, the LRA children in this research contended with negative stereotypes and prejudices that extended to their attempts to form essential and useful networks with the never-abducted population that could benefit them. From their experience, it would seem that significant and productive integration for this category of children in northern Uganda is a challenging prospect. Their experience proposes that the cultural environment is not always entirely conducive to successful integration for children born in rebel groups. Stigmatization heavily rooted in the collective culture can steadily push them further away and into the margins of society.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Birmingham. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

[35] An interview with Mail & Guardian. Retrieved from: https://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-16-uganda-the-thin-line-between-victim-and-perpetrator.

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"They Now Know That They Are Children of War": Forcibly Abducted Mothers and Fathers Balancing Disclosure and Silencing to Their Children Born of War in Northern Uganda

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In recent years, scholars have emphasized the need for a relational understanding of the impact of collective violence pointing to the myriad interconnections between individual and communal experiences and consequences. These interconnections are particularly strong in the (re)integration of formerly abducted children and youth, and their children born of war, since various social, relational and cultural processes play a key role in their wellbeing and healing. One example is the way in which trauma communication is shaped by culture and context, and intersects at the level of the individual and the collective. In this paper, we will explore how forcibly abducted mothers and fathers in post-conflict Northern Uganda perceive the trauma communication about the context in which their children born in forced captivity were conceived. Case study research was used to understand the dynamic trajectories of this trauma communication, placing parents' experiences within broader life histories, and the social and relational context. Repeated interviews were performed with six mothers and four fathers who became parents in forced captivity with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Central in the participants' stories is their agency in the careful, individual choice "to be silent" or "not to be silent" toward their children, family and community members. However, these choices are shaped—and often restricted—by the relational and cultural context. A dynamic interplay of several factors, such as the age of the child, the emotional impact of disclosure, a lack of resources and support in the upbringing of children, identity and belonging, and perceived or potential future stigmatization are explored in this paper. Trauma communication can be seen as a socially negotiated choice, interacting in a complex dialectic relationship between silencing, disclosing, forgetting and remembering. As such, the study revealed important insights into post-conflict healing and reintegration in the day-to-day lives of formerly abducted children and youth, and their children born of war, on an individual and collective level.

Keywords: children born of war, trauma communication, post-trauma healing, armed conflict, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Various scholars have emphasized the need for a relational understanding of the impact of collective violence, pointing to the myriad interconnections between individual and communal experiences and consequences (Derluyn et al., 2013; Kevers, 2017; De Haene et al., 2018; De Haene and Rousseau, 2020). This understanding is supported by a range of research pointing to the importance of social relationships and networks, and the larger social fabric during and after collective violence (Vindevogel et al., 2014; De Nutte et al., 2017). Consequently, research and practice need to broaden their focus beyond the individual toward addressing the impact of collective violence onto the social and communal level (Barber, 2013a,b; Derluyn et al., 2015; Vindevogel, 2017). Healing must be located in its social context, acknowledging the far-reaching and long-term impact of collective violence, and emphasizing the need to study post-conflict contexts and focus on reconciliation processes (Derluyn et al., 2013; Shanahan and Veale, 2015).

Interconnections between individual and communal worlds seem to be particularly strong in the rehabilitation and reintegration of formerly abducted children and youth, and their children born of war, since various social processes play a key role in their wellbeing and healing (Song et al., 2014; Stewart, 2017; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018; Allen et al., 2020; Macdonald and Kerali, 2020). One example is the way in which trauma communication is shaped by culture[1] and context (Fivush, 2010; Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic, 2012), and intersects at the level of the individual and the collective (Elsass, 2001; Eastmond, 2007; Kevers, 2017; De Haene et al., 2018, 2020).

Trauma communication has been highlighted as a central dynamic and mediating factor in children's and families' adjustment and wellbeing following collective violence (Kevers, 2017; De Haene and Rousseau, 2020). Based on Dalgaard et al. (2016, p. 71), we define trauma communication as "the way in which parents talk to their children [, their families and community members] about their traumatic experiences from the past" and, more specifically, about the context of forced abduction and captivity in which their child(ren) is/are born.

In this paper, we will explore how forcibly abducted mothers and fathers in post-conflict Northern Uganda perceive the trauma communication about the context in which their children born in forced captivity were conceived.

In this introduction, we shall first elaborate on trauma communication in the aftermath of collective violence. Then we will explore the context of collective violence that resulted out of the armed conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. Third, we will focus on the context of forced marriage and parenthood within the LRA, before reflecting on the interconnections between gender and collective violence. We shall conclude with an outline of the specific research questions and gaps in the current literature that will guide the exploration of the topic at hand. The introduction shall be followed by an exploration of the methods of this study.

Trauma Communication in the Aftermath of Collective Violence

In studies and (clinical) practice on trauma communication, several scholars have complicated the interconnections between disclosure, silencing, forgetting and remembering (Fivush, 2010; Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic, 2012; Kevers, 2017; Dalgaard et al., 2019).

Verbalization and disclosure, and their presumed healing effects, have known a long history (Shaw, 2007). In various strands of clinical trauma care, recounting traumatic experiences is perceived to be a central mechanism of recovery for survivors, as verbalization and revisiting of traumatic memories are linked to improved emotional healing (Measham and Rousseau, 2010; De Haene et al., 2012). Here, trauma narration is used to enable a coherent and meaningful integration of the traumatic memories in order to heal (Almqvist and Broberg, 1997; Kevers et al., 2016; De Haene et al., 2018, 2020). In addition, strongly framed within narrative research among Holocaust survivors, verbalization connected to remembering became imperative "so that it will not happen again" (Shaw, 2007, p. 193), effectuating a "conspiracy of silence" as its main risk (McKinney, 2007; Dalgaard et al., 2016, 2019). Silencing or forgetting of traumatic experiences are, by consequence, seen as less adaptive for the individual and the broader context (De Haene et al., 2012; Dalgaard et al., 2016; Kevers, 2017).

However, throughout research and practice, the protective effects of silencing and forgetting were explored on the level of the individual, family and wider community. Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic (2012, p. 505) conceptualized silence as "being more than the absence of speech; rather, it is a form of social communication that is as rich and multifaceted as speech and narration." Simultaneously, scholars have pointed out that open disclosure of parental trauma can lead to increased mental health problems in children, especially when they also experience high levels of war-related stress (Dalgaard et al., 2016, 2019). Within the broader context and culture in which the reintegration of formerly abducted persons and their children unfolds, various examples have highlighted the potential healing and restorative nature of silencing and forgetting (Song and De Jong, 2013; Alipanga, 2015; Justice Reconciliation Project, 2015; Apio, 2016; Mukasa, 2017; Stewart, 2017). It is important to note, however, Fivush (2010)'s distinction between "being silent" as a deliberate choice and "being silenced" as imposed.

Within the caregiver-child relationship, the concept of "modulated disclosure" following collective violence has been connected to children's positive adaptation, mental health and development (Rousseau and Measham, 2007; Measham and Rousseau, 2010; Dalgaard and Montgomery, 2015). The manner, timing and content of trauma communication have been brought to the fore, that is, to carefully consider what aspects of the traumatic events should be disclosed, how and when. In this regard, the child's developmental status, his/her level of exposure to traumatic events, the family situation and the cultural meaning

[1]Throughout this paper, culture is conceptualized as "socially-constructed and socially-shared ways-of-being-and-doing" (Theron and Liebenberg, 2015, p. 32). In this way, we subscribe to a dynamic perspective on culture, forever in flux and change.

of trauma communication have been emphasized (Rousseau and Drapeau, 1998; Dalgaard and Montgomery, 2015; Dalgaard et al., 2019). Caregivers assume the "role of gatekeepers of the past for the sake of their children's wellbeing" (Rousseau and Measham, 2007, p. 282), balancing between sharing enough information to make sense of children's experiences and protecting them from getting overwhelmed.

Importantly, trauma communication is shaped by culture and context (Fivush, 2010; Dalgaard and Montgomery, 2015; Kevers, 2017). In the same vein, notwithstanding the influence of Western perspectives (Pain et al., 2020), scholars have indicated the context-specificity of the meaning of trauma, what is considered traumatic, and how people heal and cope with trauma (Rousseau and Drapeau, 1998; Diab et al., 2015; Kevers et al., 2016).

Moving beyond a dichotomous understanding, we will illustrate how disclosure and silencing in the aftermath of collective violence are interacting in a complex dialectic relationship (Fivush, 2010; Measham and Rousseau, 2010; De Haene et al., 2012, 2018, 2020; Kevers et al., 2016). Scholars have related this dynamic to the back-and-forth alternation between forgetting, remembering, distancing and appropriation of traumatic experiences and memories (Rousseau et al., 2001; Kevers, 2017).

Context of Collective Violence and Forced Parenthood in Northern Uganda

Over 20 armed groups have tried to gain power since Yoweri K. Museveni's army overthrew the Ugandan government in 1986 (Dolan and Hovil, 2006; Dolan, 2011). The collective violence resulting out of the armed conflict between the Ugandan Government, led by President Museveni, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has by far received the greatest attention. The LRA organized major massacres, killing and maiming many, and abducted thousands of children and youth to serve as child soldiers in a variety of roles (Annan et al., 2008). About 90 percent of the Northern Ugandan population was forced into internally displacement camps by the Ugandan government where they experienced a lack of adequate security and protection, food, water, sanitation, livelihood and educational opportunities, medical care, and overcrowding (Finnström, 2008; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2011; Blackmore, 2020). Many people still experience the economic, physical, psychological, and social consequences of the collective violence up to this day (Mazurana et al., 2019; Amanela et al., 2020).

Within the context of forced abduction, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) set up a highly organized and controlled system of forced marriages and parenthood (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Watye Ki Gen et al., 2013; Baines, 2017; Atim et al., 2018b). In this paper, we define forced marriages as the "forced imposition of the status of marriage" (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008, p. 15), that is, without consent of the persons involved and their families. Simultaneously drawing on and transgressing Acholi conjugal practices (Porter, 2015; Apio, 2016; Aijazi and Baines, 2017; Baines, 2017; Madhani and Baines, 2020), forced marriage became one of the LRA's defining and critical features (Watye Ki Gen et al., 2013; Apio, 2016). Annan et al. (2009) estimated that about one out of four abducted females became forced wives in LRA captivity.

Orchestrated by the top leadership of the LRA (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Aijazi et al., 2019; Denov and Drumbl, 2020), the practice of forced marriage served several purposes: (1) it was part and parcel of the LRA's "political project of nation-building" (Baines, 2014, p. 407), "a way of reproducing—literally giving birth to—the nation" of "morally pure" Acholi (ibid, p. 406); (2) forced marriages were meant to create dependencies between abducted children/youth and the LRA, and amongst abducted children/youth themselves (Kramer, 2012; Aijazi and Baines, 2017); and (3) it was implemented as a system of renumeration and privilege, a "surrogate payment system in the absence of distributable material goods" (Kramer, 2012, p. 28). Notwithstanding noted exceptions (Aijazi et al., 2019), sexual relations were only permitted within the construct of forced marriage (Annan et al., 2009; Baines, 2014). Considering the purposeful implementation of forced marriage and parenthood, children were perceived as a status symbol within the LRA (Denov and Lakor, 2017).

It has been estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 children were born in forced captivity (Annan et al., 2008; Stewart, 2017). While Apio (2007) noted that a majority of mothers "emphasized that life was even worse when one became a mother" and "parenting in the confines of the LRA enclaves was a most difficult experience" (p. 100), research has also pointed to the protective and meaning-making aspect of becoming a parent in forced captivity. In fieldwork with mothers and fathers who became parents in forced captivity, it was revealed that "men draw meaning, rootedness, identity and ontological stability from their children" (Aijazi and Baines, 2017, p. 16) and mothers "say that the love of their child is what kept them going during the harsh times with the LRA" (Watye Ki Gen et al., 2013, p. 20). Research among children born in captivity also found that, notwithstanding the violence they endured, they felt valued and accepted within the LRA, expressing a feeling of belonging and being cared for (Justice Reconciliation Project, 2015; Denov and Lakor, 2017; Denov and Piolanti, 2020).

Recently, scholars have started to explore the impact and continuation of post-captivity forced marriages for women and men, and the lives of children born of war (Aijazi and Baines, 2017; Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018; Stewart, 2017; Oliveira and Baines, 2020; Suarez and Baines, 2021). Many accounts have related challenges in reintegration to rejection, discrimination and/or stigmatization connected to forced marriage and parenthood (Denov and Lakor, 2017; Stewart, 2017). In particular, women's gender-specific roles as forced wives and mothers have hampered their own and their children's return and (re)integration (Baines, 2011), resulting into difficulties in post-conflict lives, marriages and parenthood (Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018b; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018; Oliveira and Baines, 2020).

Interconnections Between Gender and Collective Violence

Given that this paper combines data out of interviews performed with both mothers and fathers who became parents in forced abduction, it is key to highlight the differential impact

of collective violence, military conscription and post-conflict settings onto gender (Saferworld., 2014; Reinke, 2016; UN General Assembly Security Council, 2021).

Within the context of Northern Uganda, scholars have emphasized the role gender plays in abduction, initiation and roles within the LRA (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Baines, 2011), and reintegration experiences connected to poverty, family and community acceptance, marriage and parenting (Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018b; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018).

Notwithstanding conflicting findings, many scholars have stated that women and girls experience more difficulties during reintegration into their communities (Veale and Stavrou, 2007; Kohrt et al., 2015). Various reasons contribute to this finding, namely (1) the girls' and women's experiences of rejection, discrimination and/or stigmatization given their specific roles (e.g., forced women and mothers) within the armed forces (Annan et al., 2008; Muldoon et al., 2014), which are often complicated by the prevailing patriarchal values (Kiconco, 2015; Kohrt et al., 2015; Porter, 2015), (2) the mismatch between girls' and women's needs, and the reintegration programmes, leading to only a few of them to go through such official processes (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Muldoon et al., 2014), and (3) the specific physical and psychological challenges experienced by girls and women during and after abduction (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Mukasa, 2017; UN General Assembly Security Council, 2021).

In addition, in many post-conflict societies women and girls shoulder the burden of care though they have less access to, for example, economic resources such as property and land (Reinke, 2016; Whyte and Acio, 2017; Atim et al., 2018a; Khasalamwa-Mwandha, 2018).

To conclude, this paper will elaborate on how forcibly abducted mothers and fathers in post-conflict Northern Uganda perceive the trauma communication about the context in which their children born in forced captivity were conceived. The following research questions will support the exploration of the topic at hand:

1. Which coping strategies do parents use in communicating to their children about the context in which they were born?
2. How do parents conceptualize the choice regarding trauma communication toward their children?
3. Which cultural and contextual factors influence the parents' trajectories on trauma communication toward their children?

As such, our study addresses the need for more research on the underlying factors and processes of trauma communication within families and among non-Western war-affected populations (Dalgaard and Montgomery, 2015; Kevers, 2017; Dalgaard et al., 2019).

METHODS

This paper draws upon a study on the meaning of upbringing in the context of (past) collective violence, in particular in the context of the armed conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. Throughout the interviews with one of the participating groups, namely the forcibly abducted youth who became parents in captivity, trauma communication came to the fore as a key consideration in the upbringing of their children.

Gaining Access

A careful process was conducted in order to gain access to the research context and participants. First, permission to carry out the research from the ethical review boards of Ghent University and the Republic of Uganda were obtained, as well as consent from several government offices in Kitgum District. This was followed by informative meetings about the study in every Sub-County (i.e., Mucwini, Lagoro, and Omiya-Anyima) in which officials, representatives, potential participants and all interested others were invited. During these meetings, a participant mobilizer was appointed who "brokered" the initial relationship between the research team and potential participants. Importantly, given the need to protect the privacy of the target group (see further), six participants were selected using snowball sampling (Robinson, 2014; Kiconco, 2019).

Participants and Data Collection

Repeated interviews were performed with six mothers and four fathers who became parents in forced captivity with the LRA, aged between 26 and 38 years old at the first interview. The participants were abducted when they were between 11 and 16 years old, and spent between 5 and 12 years in forced captivity. They became first-time parents when they were between 15 and 20 years old, with the majority having had two children while in captivity. None of the participants had children together. All their children were currently either living with their biological parent (i.e., individual participant and his/her new partner and children), their extended family (e.g., maternal or paternal grandparent or great-grandparent) or former "partner" from forced captivity.

A semi-structured interview guide was used that was piloted during fieldwork performed in 2014. The guide included divergent topics regarding the upbringing of children. The participants were asked about their own upbringing, their experiences as a caregiver during and after the context of forced captivity, and how they perceived upbringing in future.

During the interviews, the first author was supported by research assistants who provided interpretation between Luo/Acholi and English. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in English by an independent transcriber who was not present during the interviews.

Given the often complex and rich experiences during and after forced captivity, we decided to follow-up our participants during a period of about 2 years (July 2014 to July 2016) for two mothers, as we were able to meet them during the pilot, and 1 year (March 2015 to July 2016) for the other mothers and fathers. Overall, we did at least four recorded interviews with each of the participants.

The second and third interview provided a chance to ask the participants for clarification and elaboration on the previous interviews, and to answer any questions they might have on the research (cf. informed consent as an iterative process MacKenzie et al., 2007).

The fourth interview provided an opportunity for an individual member check. Member checking, a "process in which collected data is "played back" to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions" (Cho and Trent, 2006, p. 322), was applied as a potential strategy to address the power imbalances between the research team and the participants. Member checking has been described to have a 2-fold objective (Goldblatt et al., 2011). First, from a methodological standpoint, it serves to minimize misinterpretations of the narratives shared by participants (ibid). Second, from an ethical stance, it can be seen as a way to increase active participation of respondents by giving them more control on the way their accounts are represented (Koelsch, 2013). In addition, it also served as a valuable opportunity to "wrap up" the various interviews, listen to participants' experiences on the research process itself and thank them for journeying together. The member checks were carefully prepared to include broad themes that were touched upon by each individual participant, giving them the opportunity to make additions, deletions or adjustments to the information they had shared in previous interviews. The reactions to the member check varied. Some participants perceived it as a chance to clarify and add on to their stories. Others were hesitant to engage with the information that they had shared earlier as it was too sensitive, or they interpreted the member check as a way to rectify "errors" in their stories.

Data Analysis

Case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2006), supported by NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2015), was used to understand the dynamic trajectories of disclosure, silencing, forgetting and remembering while placing experiences within broader life histories, social and relational context, and time (Ames, 2007; Fassin et al., 2008; Kohrt et al., 2015). Case study research was chosen because of its bottom-up approach and, consequently, a close linkage with the empirical data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The findings resulting out of the within-case analysis were accumulated and merged into cross-case clusters. These clusters were polished and connected to the research questions, leading to several assertions. The final assertions were revised against each other and the data.

Ethical and Methodological Reflections

Research with participants who experienced traumatic events as a result of collective violence is fraught with methodological and ethical challenges (De Haene et al., 2010). Throughout the whole research process, the team reflected upon various methodological and ethical challenges associated with gaining access to the research context, collaboration with research brokers, autonomy, agency and vulnerability of participants, narration, power and privilege, and completing the data collection (for a detailed account, see De Nutte, *under review*).

Provision of Emotional Support to Participants: Co-construction of Trauma Communication in the Research Relationship

Since we asked participants to recount potentially traumatic experiences and mental health and psychosocial support services are scarce within the area, we wanted to make sure that we were able to provide the necessary emotional support during and after the interviews and in between fieldwork periods. Four out of five research assistants were recruited because they had expertise as counselors to provide psychosocial support to the participants.

Throughout the course of data collection, multiple psychosocial services were offered to five participants (i.e., four mothers and one father). It was clarified to the participants that partaking in psychosocial services did not in any way influence their participation in the research and that all what was shared during these sessions was kept confidential between the participant and the research assistant. Generally, the first session of psychosocial support was offered to the participants immediately after the interview as it could have touched upon sensitive information and/or the participant seemed uncomfortable or in distress. In two instances (i.e., one mother and one father), the interview was stopped and immediate support was given. If certain issues that required more time and space were touched upon, another appointment was made at a later time in consultation with the participant. The sessions varied in length and included the participant's spouse and/or other family members in three instances. The latter was necessary as some of our participants experienced urgent challenges in their relationships with others, some of which will be laid out in this paper.

It is important to note that the research process and team could have had an influence onto the trajectories of trauma communication of our participants.

The research assistants' double role as both interpreter and counselor sometimes shaped the course of the interviews. In one instance, during transcription, it became apparent that one of them put emphasis on the presumed healing effects of trauma narration (see supra). In some instances where participants chose not to expand on certain interview questions, the research assistant encouraged them to verbalize their stories by telling them "it would be good for you to talk about this' and 'it will make you feel better." This could have potentially put pressure on participants to speak despite their wish to be silent in order to protect themselves and others around them. This also speaks to the tension between implementing certain data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups that entail a verbalization of experiences and thoughts, and preferred modes of trauma narration within the research relationship.

The influence of the research process onto parents' trajectories was also apparent in two other examples. After the second interview, one of the mothers (C., 28 years old) started living together again with her child she conceived in the LRA because of the psychosocial support that was provided to her and her new husband. One father (D., 33 years old) also shared during the third interview that he recently disclosed how he became a

parent in forced captivity to his son after he started to reflect upon the issue as a result of the questions he was asked during the interviews.

We assess that offering psychosocial support during, after and in between the interviews supported participants to reflect on several emotional and social concerns, and deepened the relationship between the participant and the research team. However, the sessions often couldn't provide a sufficient answer to the various other needs that most participants experienced (e.g., lack of material/financial means, medical issues, relationships with the broader community) and, consequently, they proved to be complicating the phasing out of the data collection and field work.

In what follows, we will first elaborate on the main assertions on trauma communication among mothers and fathers about the context in which their children born in forced captivity were conceived. Afterwards, we shall discuss the findings of this paper before concluding with key reflections on the research design and process.

RESULTS

Throughout the within-case and cross-case analysis, it became apparent that our participants' trajectories on trauma communication included both elements of disclosure, silencing, or modes in between that came together in a dynamic interplay that could change over time.

Central in the participants' stories is their agency regarding the careful, individual choice "to be silent" or "not to be silent" (Fivush, 2010) toward their children:

> 'I told him about where his father is, but I haven't told him where I gave birth to him from.' (C., mother, 28 years old, fourth interview)
>
> 'I didn't tell them because in the past when I told them they were still young but now they are big … I'm not repeating it because I don't want them to know where they were born.' (M., father, 30 years old, fourth interview)

However, notwithstanding the perceived importance of the parents' choice to disclose or silence, in all instances they were shaped—and often restricted—by their social and relational context. Our participants' choices were repeatedly renegotiated within their broader context and culture. In the next sections, we shall highlight several key factors in the parents' trauma communication toward their children, including (1) the age of the child, (2) the emotional impact of disclosure on the child and parent, (3) a lack of resources and support in the children's upbringing, (4) identity and belonging, and (5) perceived (potential) stigmatization of the child and parent.

Children's Age

Parents asserted that their child had to be old enough to understand the context in which they were born. If participants felt their child was too young or "not knowledgeable," they would rather silence as young children "didn't understand" (M., father, 30 years old, fourth interview) if they would receive information about the context in which they were born:

> 'For the boy, I haven't told him everything how we started living, how I got him, because he's even still young and cannot be told that thing.' (C., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

On average, upon escape from the LRA, the children who were born in forced captivity were 2 years and 2 months old[2]. Consequently, many of these children didn't remember their time with the LRA:

> 'There's nothing that reminds that child of the things that happened from the bush because I came with him when he still didn't know anything at all. So right now he's studying where there's nothing that disturbs him like nightmares about things that happened in the bush.' (D., father, 33 years old, second interview)
>
> 'They don't ask. They have all forgotten. They don't know and that issue is not talked about.' (M., father, 30 years old, fourth interview)

Disclosure was most appropriate to older children (i.e., more "knowledgeable," "clever," or "aware of their body") as they would be better able to understand what was being conveyed:

> 'I want to tell her … When she becomes mature, I will tell her, when she now knows herself, when she's a bit big.' (E., mother, 26 years old, third interview)

At the time of the interviews, the children who were deemed of age were often the ones who were older when leaving captivity and did have some memories from their time with the LRA:

> 'It was the child that would ask that 'mother where are we? Here we are running' … I could tell her 'we are in the bush. Tomorrow we shall go back home' … She now stays but sometimes she frightens at night crying when she's dreaming.' (E., mother, 26 years old, third interview)

Linking the appropriateness of disclosure to age sometimes resulted in various trajectories of disclosure and silencing within the same family when children conceived from forced captivity had varying ages:

> 'For the boy who I moved with and came back with when he was already knowledgeable. He knows. But the one I produced from here asked me that 'where's our father?" (G., mother, 26 years old, first interview).

Emotional Impact of Disclosure

Parents who were afraid that disclosure would have a negative emotional impact on their child would often follow a trajectory of silencing:

[2]The youngest children were born at the reception and rehabilitation centers and the oldest child was seven years old. The majority of the children were less than two years old upon escape.

'I shouldn't tell him because if I tell him I think he won't feel well.' (C., mother, 28 years old, third interview)

These accounts also were linked to the emotional struggle of the parents themselves and the inability to express the meaningless of experiences of forced captivity:

'I cannot tell and exhaust all the conditions of the bush, there are certain things that happened which were very, very painful but I didn't tell them. They cannot be told … I haven't told him that 'you were abducted or born in the rebel's captivity' because it is still difficult.' (C., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

Through silencing, parents tried to be protective of themselves and their children, as not to get overwhelmed by emotions when narrating about these traumatic experiences. Connected to this, forgetting was perceived as a coping—even survival—strategy to manage past experiences and move on with one's life:

'Right now I am back, I am no longer thinking about those things that this is what I did in the past. I am forgetting them and I am living freely.' (E., mother, 26 years old, third interview)

Lack of Resources and Support

A lack of resources and support in the upbringing of children, such as food, clothes, school fees and land, led to various trajectories of silencing and disclosure. Some of our participants opted for current silencing as the lack of support was manageable at a time when children were still young and required less resources. However, connecting the idea of appropriateness of disclosure toward children of a certain age (see supra), the increasing demand of resources when children grow older and the unavailability of certain support figures in future, made all of our participants to emphasize the need for future disclosure:

'When I had just come back, there were some little support that I would get but nowadays there's a difficulty … The difference is that the child has now become big. The means of taking care of him, it is also bad if you don't take a child to school. That is the only difficulty I'm facing.' (C., mother, 28 years old, third interview)

'It is important because if they don't know and in the future my grandmother isn't there and the issue of land may become trouble and so there won't be a place where they are supposed to stay. So they are supposed to know.' (E., mother, 28 years old, third interview)

Some participants connected the lack of resources as an obstacle to forget what happened to them in forced captivity:

'For us to forget, we should be supported with the problems that press us, like clothes, beddings and other things that we can use to raise children, like money. Because if we are still in problems like this … it makes us to still recall the things that happened in the past. (M., father, 30 years old, second interview)

As a way of accessing resources in the upbringing of their children, some mothers indicated that they have or would want to reconnect with their "partner" with whom they had stayed in forced captivity:

'I asked him that 'you, do you have any interest on the child? The child knows that this time is for study. If you know that this child we got during the war and it wasn't my will, the child should be well. You are also present and even in the past my father went and shared with your parents. Why don't you get time, you come and see how the child is growing?' Then he said for him, he didn't refuse the child.' (C., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

Participant: 'Definitely I will have to go there.'

Interviewer: 'Then do you think there's any way you should be helped so that you know the home of those people? Or you feel it is of no importance for now?'

Participant: 'For now, it is not yet bad, but maybe in the future, when the children have grown, when there's trouble now, that's when it will be necessary.' (E., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

For the participating fathers who were living with their child(ren) born in captivity, this connection between the lack of resources in the upbringing of children and the wish to connect with the mother or the maternal clan of their child born in forced captivity wasn't found, probably because the father's side is deemed responsible for the child's upbringing in Acholi.

Importantly, reconnecting with their forced "husband" or "wife" was framed within customary Acholi practices on marriage and childbirth. Certain payments, such as *luk*, to amend transgressions and align the lineage of the child with the paternal clan have to be paid to the mother's family (Porter, 2015, 2019; Madhani and Baines, 2020):

'My mother is saying that if the child is to go, they don't give the child randomly. If he wants the child, then the people from his home should know first. Because it is better if they come with a letter and they share and finish every issue and you don't just steal a child. If you want to get the child, everyone should know. So, I, the mother of the child wants the father to take the child because that is a boy. Since I am now somewhere else his growing up becomes difficult without a father.' (C., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

However, our participants noted several challenges in reconnecting with their child's maternal or paternal clan. First, not all parents received (correct) information about the whereabouts of their forced partner's family or the family had relocated after staying in the internally displaced people's camps for several years, resulting into an inability to reconnect:

'I didn't take her to her mother's home, because I don't know where it is.' (O., father, 30 years old, third interview)

'He used to say [village] but his village or whatever wasn't there. I don't know. Because that one is good, if I knew the people from their home, they would have known me also. Since he's no longer there and if there was some knowledge, since I feel I cannot raise these children and if there's any means at their home, I could tell my children to go there.' (G., mother, 26 years old, second interview)

Second, not all fathers were able to pay the necessary customary fines as they lacked resources. When first approaching the maternal clan in a wish to support his "wife" and child from forced captivity, one father stated:

> 'The people from our home said they wanted to see that woman. So when we went there, I went with my uncle, he was still alive, and we saw her from their home there. After we had seen her, their people didn't allow her to come with us. They said that this issue was of the bush and not of home. If we wanted the child and the mother, we should first pay, but money wasn't there.' (M., father, 30 years old, second interview)

At the same time, and again most prominent among the mothers in this study, was the feeling that they didn't want to reconnect with the biological father of their child(ren). In addition, the mothers' choice to reconnect or not to reconnect was often influenced by her family:

> 'My husband that was given to me was saying that when that child becomes mature, he should take him to their home in [village]. So we were arguing with him, because I didn't want the child to be taken there, but he was saying that the child should be taken to their home or I should also go and stay at their home in [village], but I also didn't want. And so there was no good relationship because of the issue of child.' (J., mother, 30 years old, second interview)
>
> *Interviewer:* 'Did you know where the father of the first child is?'
>
> *Participant:* 'Yes.'
>
> *Interviewer:* 'Is he alive?'
>
> *Participant:* 'Yes, he's in [village].'
>
> *Interviewer:* 'He's come back?'
>
> *Participant:* 'It was said that he's back but I didn't confirm it.'
>
> *Interviewer:* 'What does your grandfather say about that issue?'
>
> *Participant:* 'They don't say anything. They say the child won't go anywhere. She will stay at home here with them.' (E., mother, 26 years old, second interview)

However, we hypothesize that because of a pressing need for resources when children born in forced captivity grow older (e.g., school fees and land), combined with a lack of such support in their upbringing, some mothers and/or their families might feel more inclined than others to reconnect with their forced "husband" and his family.

Identity and Belonging

Connected to the tendency to reconnect with the child's biological mother or father, is the importance of identity and belonging. "Knowing one's home" (Justice Reconciliation Project, 2015, p. 15), that is, the paternal village and clan, is a key component of identity and belonging in Acholi. This assertion was mostly highlighted by the fathers who believed it was important for a child to know his/her "real" identity:

> 'I was telling him so that he can also know who he really is. It doesn't mean that if I tell him, I'm just segregating him from the other children. But I saw that it can be important for him to have the knowledge on who he is.' (D., father, 33 years old, third interview)

Perceived (Potential) Stigmatization of Child and Parent

Rejection, discrimination and/or stigmatization of the child and/or the parent by family and community members (both current perceived stigmatization as the fear of future stigmatization of the child) led to various trajectories on silencing and disclosure. On the one hand, perceived stigmatization led to disclosure as parents wanted to provide an explanatory framework for the child to understand why they were treated differently:

> 'At one point when they were staying in the village, the children of our neighbors in that area were insulting the child … 'You go to your father. Your father is there burning fire in the bush. Your father is in the bush'. So the child came and told me those things.' (C., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

One of the mothers accompanied disclosing about the context in which her child was born with an advice on how to cope with insults:

> 'The reason why I now tell him is because of the insults from people where people insult him when he goes to play or at the brook… like these people talk and then he comes and asks me. He says 'mother what was happening in the past? People say that I came back from the bush with you' and so I tell him because right now he's becoming clever. I told him that 'even if someone insults you like that, do not worry, because if you look around in Acholi here, in each of these houses that you see, at least one person was also abducted from there by the rebels. You just keep quiet even if someone insults you. Do not fight on them, do not insult them. Just come home. Come and tell me so that if I can go and talk to the parent, then I will go and talk or to the person who insulted you'. So sometimes he tells me that he gets angry when he's told those things because that wasn't our choice also. So I tell him not to worry about those issues. I always tell him.' (J., mother, 30 years old, second interview)

On the other hand, some parents decided to silence as they didn't want to overburden their child emotionally (see supra) or out of fear that separation, discrimination and/or stigmatization might be initiated if the child, and their environment, were to know:

> 'I was thinking that it is not very important to tell them because when I start telling them it may sometimes bring separation among them, like for the other one whose mother is not here, the one whose mother died. And so I saw that I shouldn't tell them, even for the other one, if you go there, that child knows that the mother is the one I am with, he doesn't know the mother who died … If she tells the child that this one was from the bush, it may sometimes bring confusion. That's why I didn't even tell her anything, because I feel that for people to have one heart it is difficult.' (D., father, 33 years old, second interview)
>
> 'The reason why I don't want to tell her, it will make her fellows insult her with it, that 'for you, your father is not here. You were

born randomly from the bush you don't know where your father is'. So I feel I shouldn't tell her. Let her stay the way she is.' (G., mother, 28 years old, third interview)

However, these protective strategies were not always possible to uphold as all mothers at some point during data collection were separated from their child(ren) born in forced captivity because they were not accepted by the mothers' new partner and/or his family. Consequently, many children were living with their maternal grandparents or great-grandparents. The following quote describes how G.'s current husband didn't accept her children born in forced captivity, forcing her to send them to live with their grandmother who isn't able to fully take care of them because of her old age:

'The reason why I said that is because there's no proper understanding in the house and also I have three children with him [her new husband] there, and the way we are staying, there's no marriage between us yet. But it is better than the other one. If there was a good relationship, the children which I came back with, we would be taking care of them together with him. But the children were separated from me … I took the children to my mother and she's also very weak, I go and visit them. When it reaches time for work like this, my mother cannot now even dig. She cannot do anything and so I should dig from here and then I should also go and do for them something there definitely … Those children are the ones I suffered with so much, that they shouldn't now suffer. I should now stay together with them.' (G., 26 years old, first interview)

Furthermore, stigmatization of the child and/or the parent by family and community members posed a threat to the parent's choice to decide on his or her own terms if, when and how to disclose:

'I was thinking I shouldn't tell the child that he was born from the bush, but because of gossips from people, it will be known eventually … There are people who know me, but it is only me who knows what I went through … If the child I produced gets to know that he was produced from the bush, he can have many thoughts and so I think that even though I will have to tell him, he will now be big and he will have heard about it from out. Because even though I now think not to tell him, he will definitely hear about it from people telling him.' (C., mother, 28 years old, third interview)

All our participants' stories that referred to rejection, separation, discrimination and stigmatization were narrated against the importance of unity, respect and living in harmony with others. By emphasizing a clear need for parents and their children to be part of the community, they inscribed themselves as a valuable part of the social fabric:

'The start to unity is staying with people in a certain area as friends. And to add to that, for you to stay with people together in harmony, it needs exhibition of a good life to people. So this is how I am living with people in the village or area.' (D., father, 33 years old, second interview)

'The lesson that I have memorized very well is the issue of respecting people and doing things you have been told without disobeying the elders. That is what I sued until I came back from the bush. Up to now I am still following it like that and it is that I am telling my children. But my mother is the one who is topping up with others.' (G., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

In addition, forgetting was also perceived as a resource to enhance reconciliation, increase acceptance and reintegration into the community. One father stated that:

'I just want to live with people together, so that I get an easy life, so that there can be some change like it is there now. That is the advice I want from people. Because it is people who give advice and remove worries from the heart and makes one forget. Because I am now an orphan. If I don't do like that, if I don't stay with people, then I won't forget. Yes, I stay with people all the time and that makes people to give me good advice and makes me to forget.' (M., father, 30 years old, second interview)

The potential healing effect of forgetting was also reflected in the lessons that were passed on to our participants in the reception and rehabilitation centers when they returned from forced captivity:

'We stayed very well in [the rehabilitation center], because we were being made to forget all the things that had happened in the past. Sometimes we would be made to play also so that you forget about the things that passed … Until when my time for coming back home reached, I was discharged from there and brought home together with that child. They were cautioning us that when we come back home, we shouldn't worry about the things that are passed because, when you think about it, it will remind you about the many things that happened. And that there will be many talks by people in the villages and so you are supposed to be a person who is courageous and patient.' (J., mother, 30 years old, second interview)

It is important to note that not all children and parents experienced rejection, discrimination or stigmatization, or that these experiences were only apparent in some relationships with family and community members:

'Where I escaped and stayed, the people gave me a welcome, they gave clothes, they gave me shoes and they gave me small things like cooking oil and other small things. They welcomed me well.' (M., father, 30 years old, second interview)

In several instances where our participants followed a trajectory of silencing toward their children born in forced captivity, other family members were appointed as their designated "biological" mother or father. This coping strategy was meant to create a sense of identity and belonging, and deflect (potential) stigmatization of the child, and, by consequence, the parent and his or her family:

'They don't ask. They call my brother that 'their father'.' (E., mother, 28 years old, second interview)

> 'He calls her the way the children of that woman call her.' (D., father, 33 years old, third interview)

However, for one mother this proved to be challenging as the person she appointed as her children's biological father passed away:

> 'I used to point at the uncle. They used to know their uncle as their father, but now he's dead and there's no one now that I can start pointing to that 'your father is there' and yet they knew this one. For those children I can't now tell them they have three fathers. I start pointing that 'this one is your father, that one is also your father and the other one is also your father'. It is not possible.' (G., mother, 26 years old, first interview)

DISCUSSION

This paper explored how mothers and fathers who became parents in forced captivity with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) perceived the trauma communication about the context in which their children born in forced captivity were conceived. In all the parents' stories, elements of disclosure, silencing or modes in between were brought to the fore. A complex dialectic relationship (Fivush, 2010; Measham and Rousseau, 2010; De Haene et al., 2012; Kevers et al., 2016) was apparent as our participants moved between the two, making evident a plurality of experiences, coping strategies and meaning-making processes that could change over time.

A dynamic interplay of several factors, such as the parent's own choice, the age of the child, the emotional impact of disclosure, a lack of resources and support in the upbringing of children, identity and belonging, and perceived or possible future stigmatization were discussed in depth. This paper thus underlines the conceptualization of trauma communication as including socially negotiated choices and reciprocal processes (Shaw, 2007; Fivush, 2010; Kevers et al., 2016).

Conceptualization of Parents' Choice in Trauma Communication

Considering narratives of war-affected populations as situational, positional and relational (Sigona, 2014) implies the need to recognize the agency of forcibly abducted mothers, fathers and their children, and their acts as political agents (Baines, 2015, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Atim et al., 2018b; Denov and Cadieux Van Vliet, 2020). Our participants felt very strongly that the choice to disclose or silence the context in which their children were born had to be left to them. They also created their own narrative within their social and relational context, and the web of existing dominant cultural narratives on reintegration, healing, reconciliation and justice. Our study thus aligns with research that has equally emphasized the focus on agency among various groups of war-affected populations. Consequently, it is important for researchers and practitioners to respect and protect the privacy and identities of these parents and their children (Kohrt et al., 2015; Opiyo, 2015; Shanahan and Veale, 2015; Stewart, 2017; Rodriguez Di Eugenio and Baines, 2021).

Although the agency of our participants is clearly framed within the culture and broader context in which they live, it is key that these parents do have the freedom to make this choice—not "to be silenced" (Fivush, 2010), which would jeopardize their agency.

Influence of Cultural and Contextual Factors on Trauma Communication

In all accounts, parental choice and decision-making processes in trauma communication were shaped—and often restricted—by their social and relational context. Our participants' choices were repeatedly renegotiated within their broader context and culture.

First, the *age of the child* was deemed important. Parents emphasized that their child had to be old enough to understand the context in which they were born. Since many children returned from forced captivity when they were quite young, many parents preferred to silence. However, some parents did disclose to children who had some memories of their time with the LRA. These stories relate to the concept of "modulated disclosure" (Rousseau and Drapeau, 1998; Rousseau and Measham, 2007; Measham and Rousseau, 2010) since our participants take into account the child's developmental status and exposure to traumatic memories when considering the timing and manner of trauma communication.

Second, the perceived negative *emotional impact of disclosure* on both parents and children led to trajectories of silencing as a protective strategy. Based on an autoethnographic study, Peter Rober noted that his "grandfather's silence was protective and meant to spare himself, as well as his loved ones, from the pain and fear of his past" as a survivor of the Holocaust (Rober and Rosenblatt, 2015, p. 8). This finding has come to the fore in much research on trauma communication within families and communities (Almqvist and Broberg, 1997; Eastmond, 2016; Kevers, 2017), also among forcibly abducted mothers (Mukasa, 2017). In addition, forgetting was perceived as a coping—even survival—strategy to manage past experiences and moving on with one's life (Rousseau and Measham, 2007; Alipanga, 2015; Eastmond, 2016; Stewart, 2017). Trauma has also been linked to the fragmentation of memory and the inability of expression and narration (Eastmond, 2007; De Haene et al., 2012), as was apparent in one mother's inability to express the meaningless of her experiences of forced captivity.

Third, *lack of resources and support* in the upbringing of children born in forced captivity led to various trajectories of silencing and disclosure. Research among children born of war and their families in Northern Uganda and other contexts has pointed to a higher exposure to poverty, material deprivation and a general lack of support if compared to the general war-affected population (Justice Reconciliation Project, 2015; Ladisch, 2015; Opiyo, 2015; Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018; Stewart, 2017; Mochmann and Skjelsbæk, 2018). At a time when children were still young and required less resources, various participants opted for current silencing. However, the parents indicated a need for future disclosure when the demand of resources and support (e.g., school fees, land) would increase. Customary "marriages are patrilocal, a woman marries into her husband's

clan" (Madhani and Baines, 2020, p. 3) and, consequently, her children belong to and are supported by the man's wider family and clan (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Porter, 2015; Apio, 2016; Mutsonziwa et al., 2020). Consequently, as a way of accessing more resources, some mothers indicated that they have or would consider reconnecting with their "partner" with whom they stayed in forced captivity. When exploring forced marriages among forcibly abducted children and youth who returned from forced captivity, scholars have pointed to the complex, conflicting emotions that "partners" hold toward one another (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008; Watye Ki Gen et al., 2013; Denov and Drumbl, 2020). Especially studies on forced marriages highlighted that the vast majority (e.g., 98% in a study performed by Annan et al., 2008) of the mothers did not wish to be reconnected with the child's biological father. However, more recent studies have indicated that biological parents and clans do reconnect to support children born of war (Mutsonziwa et al., 2020; Oliveira and Baines, 2020; Baines and Oliveira, 2021) as they seek to "transform relations of violence into relations of care" (Rodriguez Di Eugenio and Baines, 2021, p. 341). We hypothesize that these differences in research outcomes could be connected to the increased need of resources and support when children born in forced captivity grow older, combined with the importance of belonging and identity for children born of war (see further).

Fourth, especially the fathers included in this study highlighted the importance of *identity and belonging* of their children born in forced captivity. Ethnographic research has explored the importance of the paternal home in Acholi, providing accountability, identity, embeddedness in wider social spaces and, by consequence, various material and social resources in the upbringing of children (Mergelsberg, 2012). Consequently, children who did not know their biological fathers don't or have less access to crucial resources for belonging, marriage, and land access and inheritance (Opiyo, 2015; Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018; Mutsonziwa et al., 2020; Baines and Oliveira, 2021). However, in her research among children born of war in Northern Uganda, Stewart (2017) found that "the children challenge the boundaries of their positionalities to negotiate a partial, or limited, belonging" (p. 17) as they "refuse to accept their exclusion" (p. 179). The same also seems to be the case for mothers (and fathers) who became parents in forced captivity (Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018).

Fifth, *rejection, discrimination and/or stigmatization* of the child and/or the parent by family and community members led to various trajectories on silencing and disclosure. Stigmatization has mostly been explored as a factor hampering the (re)integration of forcibly married women and their children (Baines, 2011; Apio, 2016; Atim et al., 2018b; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018). In our study, either the parents disclosed as they wanted to provide an explanatory framework for the child as to why they were treated differently, or they silenced as they wanted to create a "protective capsule" [Apio, 2016 in Apio, 2016, p. 222] for their children as not to overburden their child emotionally (see supra) or out of fear that separation, discrimination and/or stigmatization might be initiated if the child, and their environment, were to know. Children born out of wedlock, be it within the context of forced captivity or another relationship, are often not or less supported and cared for within new marriages and relationships (Annan et al., 2009; Opiyo, 2015; Stewart, 2017; Atim et al., 2018b). Importantly, all our participants' stories that referred to rejection, separation, discrimination and stigmatization were narrated against the importance of unity, respect and living in harmony within their families and communities. Supported by the lessons our participants received in the reception and rehabilitation centers, forgetting was brought to the fore as instrumental in reweaving oneself into the social fabric and enhancing reconciliation (Alipanga, 2015; Stewart, 2017). It's important to note that 'many people, however, were unable to reach this Archimedean point of forgetting through the direction of memory' (Shaw, 2007, p. 196) as, for example, some participants stated that they weren't able to forget what happened to them in forced captivity due to a lack of resources and support in their current lives (see supra).

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This paper provided some important insights resulting out of various strengths connected to the research design, target groups and transparency about the research process.

First, trauma communication appeared to be a significant issue in the daily lives of mothers and fathers who were coerced into partnerships and conceiving children within the LRA, and provided an example of the long-term and complex impact of forced marriages and parenthood in post-conflict Northern Uganda (Kramer, 2012; The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen, 2016; Denov and Drumbl, 2020).

Second, doing multiple interviews with our participants over a period of time provided everyone involved to build trust and discuss certain topics in-depth. Following up on our participants also enabled us to have an idea of their living situations and surroundings. We came to realize that this living situation could indeed quickly change over time. For example, during data collection, three mothers started a new relationship and moved to their new partner's village, three mothers became pregnant, and one mother and two fathers welcomed a new child into their families.

Third, an important contribution of this study was the inclusion of the perspective of fathers, which has been lacking in research on forced marriages within the LRA (Apio, 2016; Aijazi et al., 2019; Denov and Cadieux Van Vliet, 2020; Denov and Drumbl, 2020; Mutsonziwa et al., 2020; Oliveira and Baines, 2020), and, more generally, in research and practice regarding the upbringing of children during and after collective violence (Wieling et al., 2015; El-Khani et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2017; Mehus et al., 2018). When laying out the findings of our study, the gender-specific experiences and difficulties in the trajectories of trauma communication were highlighted. For example, especially mothers connected a lack of resources with a tendency to reconnect with the biological father of their child(ren) born in forced captivity, and all of them narrated about their poor current marriages and a consequential separation from their children born in forced captivity at some point during data collection. Fathers, on the other hand, placed much more emphasis on the need of the child to know his or her "real" identity. These findings indeed reflect the previously stated influence of gender

onto experiences during and after collective violence and forced abduction (Baines, 2011; Apio, 2016; Mukasa, 2017; Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018).

Fourth, by revealing the impact of our research process and team onto the trajectories of our participants, we wanted to highlight the ethical and methodological consequences of a co-construction of disclosure, silencing, forgetting and remembering in the research relationship. Such considerations are key within research on trauma communication (Kevers, 2017).

Since we prioritized to have multiple interviews over a period of time, our research only included a small sample of 10 participants. In addition, six of them were recruited through snowball sampling, which could have affected the representation of the target group (Jacobson and Landau, 2003).

The positionality of the research team, including European scholars and Ugandan research assistants who had a background in providing emotional support, also continuously influenced the research (see England, 1994; De Nutte, under review), including the recruitment of participants, informed consent processes, how participants and research brokers engaged with the research, etc.

Lastly, this study did not include the perspectives of children born in forced captivity themselves (Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018; Stewart, 2017; Denov and Piolanti, 2020). The children's viewpoints could enhance the exploration and depth of the presented research assertions. However, including children born of war also needs to be approached with caution as to respect their parents' trajectories of trauma communication (see supra).

CONCLUSION

Post-conflict healing and reintegration of formerly abducted children and youth, and their children born of war, can be regarded as complex and ongoing processes, which play out at the level of the individual, family and community (Betancourt, 2012; Derluyn et al., 2013, 2015) and take place in a "changed and changing social landscape" (Veale and Stavrou, 2003, p. 42). It thus remains important to focus on the social fabric of communities during and after collective violence (Barber, 2013b; Derluyn et al., 2013) and simultaneously consider conflict and post-conflict factors (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010; Betancourt, 2012) that could impact the daily lives of war-affected populations.

This paper unraveled the various individual and collective aspects of trauma communication (Elsass, 2001; Eastmond, 2007; Kevers, 2017) in the context of reintegration and reconciliation after forced abduction, marriage and parenthood in Northern Uganda. Trauma communication appeared to include socially negotiated choices and reciprocal processes, and our study explored a dynamic interplay of several factors, such as the age of the child, the emotional impact of disclosure, a lack of resources in the upbringing of children, identity and belonging, and perceived or possible future stigmatization. At the same time, reflecting on the centrality of the parents' own choice, our paper highlighted the need to provide sufficient attention to the individual trajectories on trauma communication and healing (Measham and Rousseau, 2010; Kevers et al., 2016).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors are not able to make the raw data supporting the conclusions of this article available given the inability to properly anonymize the interviews. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to leen.denutte@ugent.be.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by (1) Ghent University and (2) Republic of Uganda. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LDN, LDH, and ID contributed to the study design. LDN performed the field work, organized the database, performed the data analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the revision of the manuscript and approved the submitted version.

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"I Grew Up Longing to Be What I Wasn't": Mixed-Methods Analysis of Amerasians' Experiences in the United States and Vietnam

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The Vietnam War left a legacy of mostly mixed-race children fathered by American (or other foreign) soldiers and born to Vietnamese mothers. These Vietnamese Amerasian children often had difficulties integrating into their post-conflict societies due to stigmatisation, and they were typically economically severely disadvantaged. This paper compares experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam with those who emigrated to the US as part of various departure programs since the end of the war in 1975. We used SenseMaker®, a mixed-methods data collection tool, to collect 377 narratives from 286 unique participants living in Vietnam and in the US exploring experiences of Amerasians in both countries. These narratives were then self-interpreted by the study participants using a questionnaire that generated a quantitative dataset. In this paper we analyse the self-coded perceptions quantitatively to determine patterns, specifically with view to investigating where experiences of Amerasians living in the US differ statistically from those living in Vietnam. This is complemented with a qualitative analysis of the accompanying narratives. Vietnamese respondents indicated more frequently that experiences were affected by economic circumstances than their US counterparts, and their identified negative experiences were significantly more strongly linked to poverty. Furthermore, Vietnamese respondents relayed that their desire to explore their biological roots was more prominent than US based participants, and they indicated more strongly than US counterparts that their biological parentage impacted their identity. In contrast, US respondents felt that their parentage impacted their physical and mental health in addition to impacting their identity, and they more strongly linked negative experiences in their narratives to their ethnicity.

Keywords: Amerasians, children born of war, Vietnam war, stigma, discrimination, mixed-methods, SenseMaker®

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INTRODUCTION

When foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 (Aljazeera, 2021; Brockell, 2021), images of desperate civilians seeking safe passage out of Kabul in the final days and hours of American/Western protection from a regime that was feared by many not least because of their association with the United States (US)-led coalition in the country, the scenes at the airport were reminiscent of the widely-publicized images of the fall of Saigon almost half a century earlier

(BBC, 2021; Guardian, 2021). When foreign troops withdrew from Vietnam in April 1975 after years of engagement and conflict, the soldiers not only left behind a war-torn country; they left behind people with whom they had formed personal and sometimes intimate relationships, a large number of which had resulted in children being born (McKelvey, 1999).

Locally referred to as *Bui Doi*, Dust of Life[1] (Taylor, 1988; US General Accounting Office, 1994, 1–3), the American GI-children, born to Vietnamese women, are among the many groups of children born of war (CBOW), children fathered by foreign soldiers and born to local mothers (Lee et al., 2021, 14–16).

That CBOW have often been exposed to significant childhood and life-long adversities, have frequently experienced discrimination and stigmatisation, and display above average mental and physical ill health, has been well established in recent research (Carpenter, 2007; Glaesmer, 2012; Seto, 2013; Lee, 2017). It is reasonable to assume that hardships experienced by CBOW are particularly pronounced where the end of a given conflict does not present the end of the animosity between the former enemies. The Vietnam War, or the American War as it is often referred to in Vietnam (Rosen, 2015) had been an ideological as much as a military or political conflict. The US Government expected those ideological and political divisions to persist for years to come and therefore association with the ideological foe, the US, was expected to be disadvantageous, if not outright dangerous for those directly linked to the US, among others those visibly linked to American GIs – first and foremost GI children born to local Vietnamese women. Based on this risk assessment, towards the end of the war the US evacuated Vietnamese-Amerasians, as part of the so-called Operation Babylift, a government-backed initiative in which several thousand young children were brought to America, Canada and Europe (The United States Agency for International Development, 1975). This was followed by further waves of migration from Vietnam to the US, as part of the Orderly Departure Programme of 1979 (Kumin, 2008) and the Amerasian Immigration Act (Amerasian Immigration Act, 1982).

By far the most significant migration in terms of numbers, was the so-called Amerasian Homecoming Act of 22 December 1987, which allowed Amerasians (defined as children of American citizens born between January 1, 1962, and January 1, 1976) and their relatives to apply for immigration to the US. Approximately 25,000 Amerasians and between 60,000 to 70,000 of their relatives had immigrated to the U.S. under the Amerasian Homecoming Act by 2009 (Lee, 2015; lii), and it is estimated that the number of Vietnamese Amerasians who have remained in Vietnam is in the region of 400–500 only (Lind, 2016).

Understanding the life courses of Vietnamese Amerasians will enhance our understanding of the challenges of mixed-race children born of war being raised in post-conflict settings where the end of a war does not bring the end of hostilities between the former enemies. Some publications, often of biographical or autobiographical nature, have thrown light on the living conditions of Vietnamese Amerasians (DeBonis, 1994; Bass, 1996; Hayslip, 2003; Yarborough, 2006; Sachs, 2010); and in the 1990s research relating to psychosocial outcomes and mental health pathologies of Vietnamese Amerasians (Felsman, 1989; McKelvey et al., 1992; McKelvey and Webb, 1993, 1995, 1996; Bernak and Chung, 1997) raised awareness of the health challenges faced by those residing in the US. But no comprehensive data has been collected about experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam, about their mental and physical health outcomes or socio-economic circumstances. Most of our knowledge about such experiences in Vietnam is based on records of Amerasians who migrated to the U.S. (Valverde, 1992; Long, 1997; Yarborough, 2006; Lamb, 2009). Notwithstanding the possible selection bias of Vietnamese Amerasians who migrated to the US, according to a 1994 post-migration survey, more than 70% of Amerasians interviewed reported experiences of discrimination in Vietnam, including difficulty in accessing schooling, negative attitudes by teachers, grade discrimination and persistent offensive teasing by peers (US General Accounting Office, 1994, 71). Similarly, post-migration reporting focussed on the discrimination in Vietnam and the contrasting greater opportunities for Amerasians in the U.S. (Taylor, 1988; Valverde, 1992; Gaines, 1995a,b; Sachs, 2010). Yet, autobiographical writing and further research suggest that integration into the father's home country for those who migrated later in life was also challenging. Among the difficulties encountered were the lack of acceptance of Amerasians among the Vietnamese communities in the US, as well as experiences of racism encountered in the United States more generally, the disappointments of not being able to locate biological fathers and their families as well as significant economic hardships after resettling in a foreign country, exacerbated by educational and linguistic disadvantages (DeBonis, 1994; Bass, 1996; Yarborough, 2006, chapters 7-9, Ranard and Gilzow, 1989, 1-3).

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of the experiences of Vietnamese Amerasians in both the US and Vietnam. To achieve this we used SenseMaker®, a mixed-methods quantitative-qualitative data collection tool, to collect narratives about experiences of being a Vietnamese American in both the US and Vietnam; the collected storeys were then self-interpreted by study participants to "make sense" of the shared experiences (Brown, 2006; Kellas and Trees, 2006). This paper identifies statistically significant differences in the quantitative data collected in Vietnam and the US and analyses them drawing on the accompanying qualitative data.

METHODS

Sensemaker

Sensemaker is a mixed-methods data collection software and research tool developed by Cognitive Edge (2017). Its narrative-based approach involves the collection, in response to their choice of open-ended prompting questions, of short narratives related to a particular phenomenon (here the experiences of Vietnamese Amerasians). These narratives generate qualitative

[1] *Bui Doi* is a generic term used in Vietnamese for those living at the margins of society; it is not limited to Amerasian children of the Vietnam War. See McKelvey (1999) p. 5.

data in the form storeys collected as audio or text files. Following this recording, participants are asked to self-interpret their narratives by responding to a series of pre-defined questions relating to the shared experiences, which are quantitatively coded. Based on complexity theory (Turner and Barker, 2019), SenseMaker uses pattern recognition to understand people's experiences in complex, ambiguous and dynamic situations by identifying common themes. As participants interpret their own narratives using a series of pre-defined questions, the researchers' interpretation bias is reduced. Collectively, the participants' self-interpreted narratives present a nuanced picture of the investigated phenomenon (Girl Hub, 2014).

Research Partners

Our cross-sectional, mixed qualitative-quantitative two-country study was conducted in 2017 (Lee and Bartels, 2019). Data collection in Vietnam occurred in April and May in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Social Sciences & Humanities at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. Further, the research was facilitated by the Vietnam chapter of *Amerasians Without Borders,* a U.S.-based non-profit organisation of Vietnamese Amerasians who support Amerasians, among others through facilitation of DNA tests to support immigration into the US Data collection in the U.S. occurred from February to July of the same year in collaboration with the US chapter of *Amerasians Without Borders.*

Participant Recruitment

Individuals from the age of 11 were eligible to participate. To capture a wide range of perspectives about the life experiences of Amerasians, we targeted a variety of participant subgroups for recruitment. These subgroups included Amerasians themselves, mothers and spouses of Amerasians, biological fathers and stepfathers of Amerasians, adoptive parents of Amerasians, children of Amerasians, other relatives of Amerasians, and community members in locations where Amerasians lived at the time of interview.

Interview sites in both countries were chosen purposively based on existing data about where Amerasians were thought to be living. In Vietnam, the selected locations were Ho Chi Minh City, Dak Lak, Quy Nhon, and Da Nang. In each of these four study locations, *Amerasians Without Borders* organised group meetings. Members and their relatives were invited to a designated location to meet with the interview team. The study was introduced to potential participants, and after consenting to participation, Amerasians and their families were asked to privately share a storey about the experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam and to then interpret the storey by completing the SenseMaker survey. The shared experiences could be a first-person storey or a storey about an Amerasian family member.

In the U.S., face-to-face interviews were conducted in San Jose California, Portland Oregon, Santa Ana California and Chicago Illinois. Interviews were pre-arranged through contacts within the *Amerasians Without Borders* social network, and interviewers travelled to each of the four study locations to meet participants. Interviews in Chicago were arranged to coincide with the *Amerasians Without Borders* annual meeting in July 2017. In addition to face-to-face interviews, a link to the browser-survey offered in the U.S. was posted on Facebook and Twitter by *Amerasians Without Borders,* and it was emailed to their members.

Furthermore, in the U.S., data collection was supported by *Operation Reunite*[2], an organisation which aims to raise awareness of the Vietnam War and to provide support to Vietnamese war babies who had been internationally adopted in the U.S. (and other countries like the U.K., France and Australia) among others through Operation Babylift. Information about the study was shared through the organisation's social media platforms and those platforms were used to distribute the browser link to Amerasian children who had immigrated to the U.S.

Survey Instrument

The SenseMaker survey was drafted by the authors iteratively in collaboration with an experienced narrative capture consultant and was reviewed by Vietnamese and Amerasian partners. After selecting one of two open-ended prompting questions and sharing a storey about the life experiences of an Amerasian in Vietnam or in the US, participants were asked to interpret the Amerasian's experience by plotting their perspectives between three variables (triads) or by using sliders (dyads). Subsequently, multiple-choice questions were used to collect demographic data and to help contextualise the shared storey (e.g., emotional tone of the storey, how often do the events in storey happen, who was the storey about, etc.).

The survey was drafted in English, translated to Vietnamese, and then back translated by an independent translator in order to resolve any discrepancies. The Vietnamese and English versions of the survey were uploaded to the Cognitive Edge secure server for use in Vietnam and the US, respectively. Both surveys were reviewed for errors and corrections were made prior to initiation of data collection.

In both countries, data was collected using the SenseMaker app on iPad Mini 4's; in the US, in addition a browser version of the survey was made available. This browser survey, which was identical to that on the SenseMaker app, was circulated through various social networking platforms of *Amerasians Without Borders* and *Operation Reunite.*

Data Collection Process

In Vietnam, the data collection team comprised eight interviewers from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Social Sciences & Humanities at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. Members of the team were two faculty members and six graduate students. Immediately prior to data collection, all interviewers participated in a two-day training workshop on narrative capture research ethics, use of an iPad, how to approach participants and obtain informed consent, specific survey questions with multiple role-playing sessions, data management, adverse events, and program

[2]For details about Operation Reunite see http://www.adoptedvietnamese.org/avi-community/other-vn-adoptee-orphan-groups/operation-reunite/. Accessed August 9, 2017.

referrals. In Vietnam, all data was collected on the SenseMaker app using iPad Mini 4's. Collected data was stored on the iPad until it was possible to connect to the Internet, at which time it was uploaded to Cognitive Edge's secure server. During the upload process, data was automatically deleted from the tablet.

In the U.S., two interviewers identified through *Amerasians Without Borders* collected data. Both self-identified as Amerasian. Prior to data collection they received individual training on the above topics. During data collection at the *Amerasians Without Borders* annual meeting in Chicago, they were supported by three additional fully trained interviewers, including a faculty member, a student, and a volunteer (female and male respectively). The browser survey used in the U.S. was posted on Facebook and Twitter by *Amerasians Without Borders*. Participants completed the survey independently and uploaded the data directly to the Cognitive Edge secure server.

At each of the interview locations, potential participants were identified through the social networks of *Amerasians Without Borders*. Interviewers introduced the study using a script, and when an individual expressed interest in participating, the interviewer and participant chose a private location for completion of the survey. Participants were asked to tell a storey about the experiences of an Amerasian based on their choice of one of two storey prompts. Shared storeys were audio-recorded on tablets and participants then responded to a series of pre-defined questions. If the participant was uncomfortable having their voice recorded, the interviewer listened to the participant's storey and subsequently recorded the storey in their own voice on behalf of and in the presence of the participant. On completion of the survey, participants were asked if they would like to share a second storey. Several participants shared more than one storey; therefore the number of shared storeys exceeds the number of unique participants. Data collection in Vietnam was overseen by a graduate student who reviewed uploaded data on a weekly basis and performed quality assurance cheques.

Ethical Considerations

All interviews were conducted confidentially, and no identifying information was recorded; therefore the data were anonymous from the start. Participants were asked specifically not to use actual names or any other identifying information when relating their storeys. In cases where such identifying information was recorded, the name or other identifying information was not transcribed. In the face-to-face interviews, informed consent was explained to the participant prior to the interview in either Vietnamese (in Vietnam) or English (in the U.S.); consent was indicated by tapping a consent box on the handheld tablet. In the browser version, the same information was provided prior to entering the survey. Participants read the explanations of informed consent in English and clicked the consent box to indicate their willingness to participate. Only upon giving consent could a participant commence the survey. No monetary or other compensation was offered but expenses incurred to travel to the interview were reimbursed and refreshments or a light meal were provided. The University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Board approved this study protocol (Ethical Approval **ERN_15-1430**).

Analysis

SenseMaker data were exported to Tableau (V.2020.4) where collective plots (with all participants' responses on the same figure) were analysed visually to identify data patterns such as clusters of responses in one extreme or another, outliers, and so on (Cognitive Edge, 2017). Triad and dyad data were disaggregated based on whether the data had been provided by a participant in Vietnam or the US.

Where, based on visual inspection, the pattern of responses appeared to differ between both groups, triad and dyad questions were selected for statistical analysis. For the dyad data, graphically generated as histograms and presented below as violin plots, SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics V.26.0.0.0) was used to analyse the collective areas under the bars for each subgroup with the Kruskal-Wallis H test and $\chi 2$ tests to determine if the bar areas were statistically different between groups (Webster and Carroll, 2014; Webster, 2015). Dyad distributions of responses are presented as violin plots to illustrate the different response patterns, with an asterisk indicating the overall mean for each sub-group.

For the triad data, R Scripts (R V.3.4.0) was used to generate geometric means for both the Vietnamese and US subgroups. R Scripts was also used to generate 95% confidence intervals, which are presented as confidence ellipses around the geometric means (DeLong, 2016a,b). Two geometric means were deemed statistically different if their 95% confidence ellipses did not overlap.

After patterns of perspectives were identified in the quantitative data, accompanying narratives were reviewed to facilitate interpretation of the statistical findings. A series of representative quotes were then chosen for inclusion to illustrate the main quantitative results.

Participants' responses on the storey interpretation (i.e., triads dyads) generate quantitative data in the form of plots, where clusters reveal widely held perspectives on particular issues. If a sufficiently large volume of self-interpreted storeys is captured, SenseMaker helps to ascertain patterns across various subgroups offering insights into mainstream, alternative and diverse perspectives on a topic of interest. These quantitative data are contextualised and interpreted in conjunction with the accompanying narratives, thereby offering a rich mixed methods analysis. The results presented here are focused on the implementation of the research in both Vietnam and the U.S. among three different cohorts of Amerasians[3]. Quantitative and qualitative data will be presented separately.

RESULTS

A total 319 self-interpreted storeys were collected from 231 unique participants in Vietnam and 58 storeys were collected from 55 unique participants in the U.S.

[3]For the purposes of this paper, "Amerasian" refers specifically to Vietnamese Amerasians born to Vietnamese mothers and GI-fathers during the Vietnam War.

TABLE 1 | Study population and narrative characteristics disaggregated by location.

	Total (% of *n* = 377)		Vietnam (% of *n* = 319)		U.S. (% of *n* = 58)	
Sex						
Female	210	55.70	171	53.61	39	67.24
Male	160	42.44	141	44.20	19	32.76
Prefer not to say	7	1.86	7	2.19	0	0
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
Marital status						
Single/never married	37	9.81	31	9.72	6	10.34
Married/Living with partner	275	72.94	243	76.18	32	55.17
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	60	15.91	42	13.17	18	31.03
Prefer not to say	5	1.33	3	0.94	2	3.45
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
Level of formal education						
None	76	20.16	67	21.00	9	15.52
Primary school	133	35.28	127	39.82	6	10.35
Secondary school	92	24.40	81	25.39	11	18.96
Post-secondary	73	19.37	44	13.80	29	50.00
Other/Prefer not to say	3	0.80	0	0	3	5.17
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
Who narrative was about						
Me	250	66.31	204	63.95	46	79.31
Family member	66	17.51	59	18.50	7	12.07
My parent	24	6.37	23	7.21	1	1.72
Someone else I know	22	5.84	18	5.64	4	6.90
My child	14	3.71	14	4.39	0	0
Prefer not to say	1	0.27	1	0.31	0	0
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
How often situation occurred						
Very rarely	40	10.61	34	10.66	6	10.34
Occasionally	66	17.51	59	18.50	7	12.07
Regularly	163	43.24	142	44.51	21	36.21
Very frequently	74	19.63	53	16.61	21	36.21
Not sure	34	9.02	31	9.72	3	5.17
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
Emotional tone of narrative						
Very negative	46	12.20	36	11.29	10	17.24
Negative	80	21.22	68	21.32	12	20.69
Neutral	117	31.03	102	31.97	15	25.86
Positive	76	20.16	72	22.57	4	6.90
Strongly positive	47	12.47	34	10.66	13	22.41
Not sure	11	2.92	7	2.19	4	6.90
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100
Active in Amerasian support groups						
Never	41	10.88	26	8.15	15	25.86
Rarely	106	28.12	95	29.78	11	18.97
Sometimes	101	26.79	93	29.15	8	13.79
Frequently	117	31.03	97	30.41	20	34.48
Prefer not to say	12	3.18	8	2.51	4	6.90
Total	377	100	319	100	58	100

Sample sizes are for the number of interpreted narratives (rather than unique participants).
Participants were also asked about their annual household income. In Vietnam, 73.36% of participants (n = 234) responded that their household income was 5 million Vietnamese dong or less per year (approximately $220 USD using today's currency conversion). In the U.S., 51.72% of participants (n = 30) preferred not to answer the income question while another 13.79% indicated an annual household income of greater than $100,000 USD (n = 8). A quarter of U.S.-based participants responded that their annual household income was between $50,000 and $100,000 USD (n = 15) and 8.61% noted a household income of $50,000 or less (n = 5).

Demographics

A total of 319 participants were recruited in Vietnam from 231 unique participants and 58 in the U.S. from 55 unique participants. Overall, a majority of participants identified as female (55.70%), were married or living with a partner (72.94%) and shared a narrative about themselves (66.31%). Over half of all participants either had no formal education or had completed only primary school (55.44%). There was a roughly equal split of positive (32.63%) and negative (33.42%) narratives, and almost a third of participants were frequently active in Amerasian support groups (31.03%). Further demographic details are provided in **Table 1** disaggregated by participants' location.

When asked what was responsible for negative experiences in the shared narratives, participants in both Vietnam and U.S. indicated that poverty was a strong contributing factor in comparison to ill health and stigma. As shown in **Figure 1**, this was particularly true for Vietnam participants with their responses being statistically different from those of U.S. participants.

Ethnicity

Self-interpreted narratives from Amerasians in Vietnam and the United States indicated the importance of both their ethnicity, understood as a sense of personal belonging, and their racial provenance, visible in their distinct physical appearances that, due to socially-constructed processes, led to those individuals being considered as a separate group in a given context.

The first presented triad asked participants to consider whether the experiences shared in the storey were affected by (i) domestic arrangements, (ii) ethnicity, or (iii) economic circumstances. As visualised in **Figure 2**, the geometric mean for all respondents was predominantly in the direction of ethnicity, approximately equidistant from economic circumstances and domestic arrangements. When disaggregated by location of data collection, respondents from the US indicated that Amerasian experiences were more strongly about ethnicity than those narrated and interpreted by Vietnam-based participants.

While Amerasians in both countries were visibly different to the majority population, with regard to their racial background, Amerasians living in the US more often associated their negative experiences directly with their appearance as a mixed-race person, even if this association in many cases related to experiences of their childhood and youth in Vietnam.

> *With this getting line position, I knew that my friends differentiated between me and them because I am an Amerasian. My skin colour was different from theirs. Then when in class, no matter how good I was doing, I didn't get fair treatment from the teachers as well as by other classmates, especially those whose parents were communists.*
> NarrID1003; female, in the US, married, completed secondary school.

Likewise, it was this appearance and the association with ethnicity and "mixed blood" that Amerasians residing in the US remembered vividly even when those experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination happened in their youth in Vietnam. One Amerasian surveyed in the US recalled being falsely accused of stealing as a child in Vietnam, when she picked up a piece of fabric that she believed had been thrown away by a neighbour.

> *I thought it was thrown away. But when the neighbour saw this, she accused me of stealing her fabric, "you the little stealer." She shouted at me "Didn't you mom teach you? She who bore you but didn't know how to teach you. She who bore you the Amerasian with mixed up blood didn't know how to teach you, huh? You who have different types of blood."*
> NarrID1012; female, in the US, single, completed post-secondary education.

In both narratives above, the narrators associated ethnicity not merely with their own sense of belonging (or lack thereof) to a particular culture or tradition, but they felt strongly about the impact of their physical appearances or their "mixed up blood" in the construction of their "not belonging".

Ethnicity, however, was felt to be a burden even when it was not associated with discrimination and stigma. Being visibly different singled Amerasians out and participants reported feeling isolated as a result. One participant, who had been transracially adopted at the end of the war, described how this inner conflict was only resolved when visiting her native Vietnam two decades after being adopted in the US.

> *I grew up longing to be what I wasn't and had no connexion to anyone like me (Asian mixed race Vietnamese short). I internalised self-hatred and struggled to feel good about myself. When I finally returned to Viet Nam in 1996 I felt I had finally come home. I felt at ease and as though I had found my people. I finally felt good enough and whole.*
> NarrID 1500; female, in the US, married, completed post-secondary education.

Exploring Biological Roots

A dyad question asked to what degree the events in the shared narrative influenced the participant to want to explore his/her biological roots. The results are illustrated in **Figure 3** and show that Vietnam participants were more likely to indicate a strong desire to explore their biological roots.

Many Amerasians knew very little about their biological fathers and multiple participants described how families had destroyed letters, photos and other potentially identifying items to avoid persecution in post-war Vietnam for having been associated with the American enemy. Loss of such letters and photos often proved detrimental when Amerasians were applying for immigration to the US as evidence of parentage no longer existed.

> *My mom told me that after he had gone back to his fatherland in 1970 he still sent us a stipend. Unfortunately, afraid of troubles, she burned all stuffs even letters related to my dad after the war… during the interview, they asked for our supportive evidence of which we had nothing. All burned. Since then, I was really disappointed because I am an Amerasian for real but they didn't accept it… But the thing is I just want to search for my roots.*

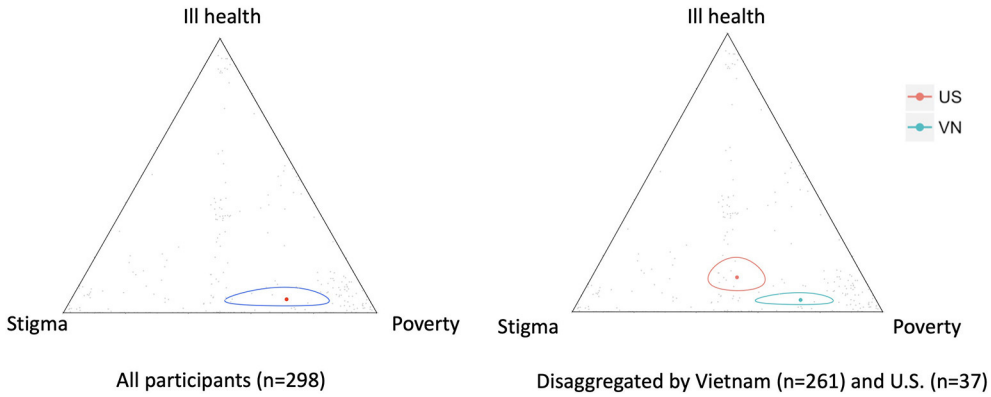

FIGURE 1 | Triad asking about links to negative experiences shared in participants' narratives. The overall geometric mean is provided on the left with individual geometric means for Vietnam and the U.S. provided on the right. Responses were statistically different between the two countries as demonstrated by the non-overlapping 95% confidence ellipses, with participants in Vietnam indicating that negative experiences were more closely linked with poverty.

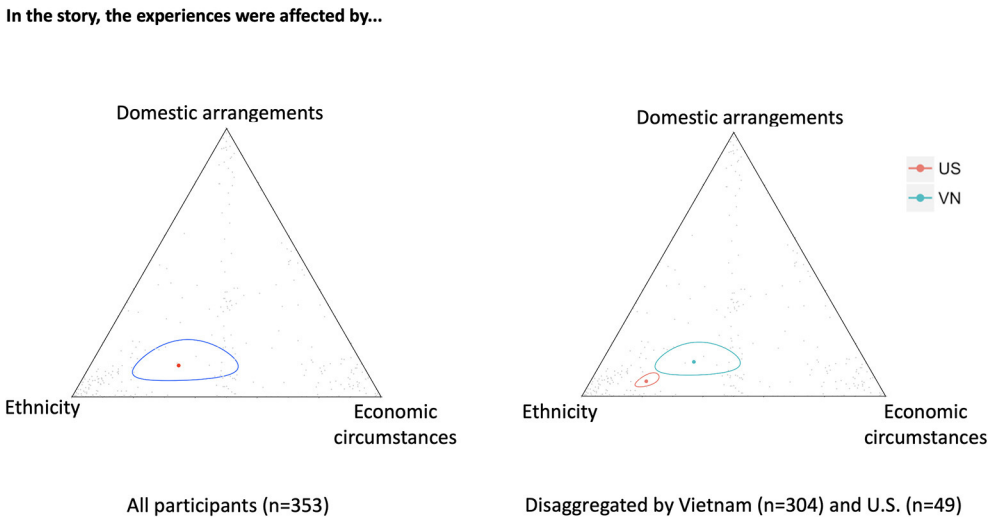

FIGURE 2 | Triad asking about what affected the experiences in the shared narrative. The overall geometric mean is provided on the left with individual geometric means for Vietnam and the U.S. provided on the right. Responses were statistically different between the two countries as demonstrated by the non-overlapping 95% confidence ellipses, with participants in the US indicating that negative experiences were more closely linked with ethnicity.

NarrID54; female in Bến Tre, married and without formal education.

Not knowing their fathers had a profound psychological impact on many Amerasians, with many participants describing life dissatisfaction, sadness, frustration, and abandonment. The following man attributed his sadness to not knowing his biological family.

> *… people say that having a family satisfies us, and there would be no unhappiness, no difficulties in life. In my case, the fact about family and the fact that I have no father, there is a connexion between them. In the society, when a person has a family, he is happier. I don't have a family, so I'm not happy.*
> NarrID16; male in Ninh Thuận, married with some primary school education.

Some participants also described a sense of abandonment by their fathers and in other cases, felt unloved because of being abandoned, which resulted in a strong desire to be reunited with their fathers. For example, a male participant in Dak Lak explained, "*For Amerasians, the most aspiration is to go to their fatherland. They seem lost in this living environment.*

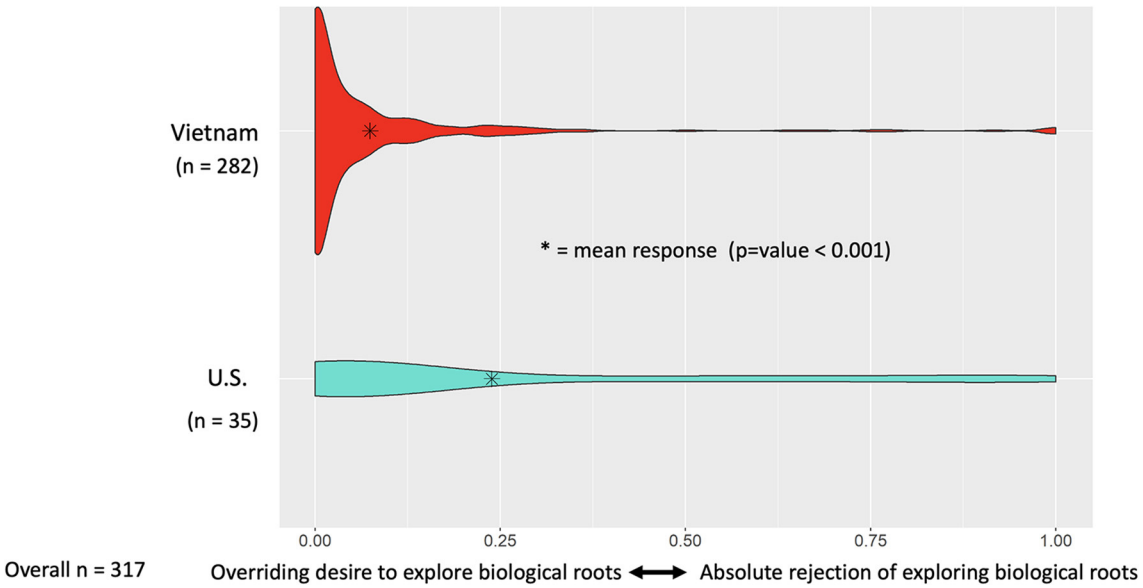

FIGURE 3 | Dyad asking how events in the shared narrative influenced desire to explore one's biological roots. Dyad asking how the events in the storey influenced the participants' desire to explore their biological roots. Asterisks indicate the overall mean for each sub-group and highlight that Vietnam participants indicated a stronger desire to explore their biological roots ($p < 0.001$).

They often suffer abandonment, discrimination and lack of love." (NarrID219)

In addition to wanting to know their biological origins, some participants believed that finding their fathers would provide opportunities to live a better life in the U.S., as this female participant reported, "*I do not have a father, so I have to work hard a whole day without any supports. I wish I could meet my father in the United States so that he can take care of me and give me a better life."* (NarrID163)

The desire for a better life was also extended by Amerasians to their children with some explicitly stating that they wanted to reunite with their biological fathers to make life easier for their children. One male participant shared, "*I heartily wish I could go to America to reunite with my father so that my children's lives would be better. For me, I do not have any wish for myself."* (NarrID77)

Yet other participants were clear that their desire to be reunited with their fathers was focused on emotions and on feeling loved, as the following participant explained.

> *I hope that because we Amerasians are all grown up now, we are not young anymore, so we just want to find our fathers so that we have some love. It's fine that they don't even have to take us with them. We don't need it anyway. We've already been through hardship. What we need is to find our relatives.*
> NarrID317, male in Ho Chi Minh City, married with some primary school education.

This participant acknowledged the challenges he has faced as an Amerasian in Vietnam but was not looking for a higher quality of life or for an easier life. For him, it was about emotional needs. Other participants were also explicit in stating that their desire to know their father was not motivated by wanting financial support or a better life but instead was about knowing ones' roots and origins. The following participant shared her perspective that all Amerasians have the same desire to trace their biological roots.

> *. . . I have been dying to meet my father. I never wish that my father would change my life or make me better-off when I meet him. I am not afraid of working, and thus I do not necessarily want to go to some other places [go to the US]. This is my aspiration. No matter how miserable Amerasian people like me were, we wish we could find out our biological fathers. We all have the same thoughts; we want to trace our origins.*
> NarrID65; male in Bình Duong, married and had completed primary school.

Identity

Participants asked about the degree to which biological parentage had impacted economic wellbeing, identity, and physical or mental health. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, the focus was predominantly on identity especially in Vietnam.

Some participants expressed a sense of not knowing who they are because of not knowing their biological parents. The following participant was fortunate to have had a loving adoptive family but as an adult, he was left with questions about his identity.

> *I do not know who I am. My mother left me to a nanny. In the liberation year of Vietnam, the nanny was afraid of having an*

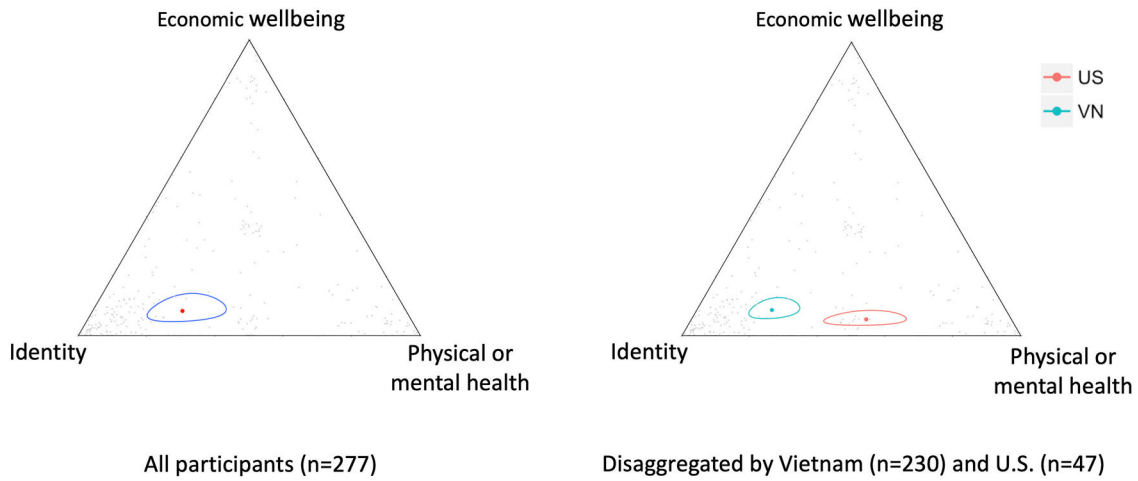

FIGURE 4 | Triad asking about the impacts of biological parentage. The overall geometric mean is provided on the left with individual geometric means for Vietnam and the U.S. provided on the right. Responses were statistically different between the two countries as demonstrated by the non-overlapping 95% confidence ellipses, with participants in Vietnam indicating more strongly that biological parentage impacted their identity.

> *Amerasian child in her family, so she gave me to a man whom I called uncle [X]… Although I am an adopted child, I was loved by my family members very much. They loved me as their own children because they raised me since I was a baby. I had no difficulties living with my adopted family. My life was easy… My nanny gave me to uncle [X] and he raised me ever since. I don't know who I am.*
> NarrID299; male in Dong Nai, single and completed primary education.

Not knowing one's biological parents had practical implications for some Amerasians when it came to inheritance and land rights. The following female participant could not inherit property because she was "just an adopted daughter."

> *She was the youngest child in her adopted family but she did not get any inheritance such as house, agricultural land and the like because she was just an adopted daughter.*
> NarrID314; female in Bình Thuận, married with some secondary school education.

The importance in Vietnamese society of knowing one's roots and identity was clear. One female participant recalled that whenever she tried to attend school her neighbours and classmates would say, "*Don't allow her to go to school. She is an Amerasian. We don't know her roots.*" (NarrID165) Another participant shared his experience that without a father, he was looked down upon in Vietnamese society and was presumed to have not been raised properly.

> *I wish I could find my biological parents. If someone does not have parents, they will be looked down by surrounding people. Although no one wants a life like me, I still accept it because there is no choice for me. They often say that I do not have a father, it means that I was not brought up very well. They also call me "Amerasian". The reason of quitting school up was that I was called Amerasian or a fatherless child by my classmates, and thus I was so upset and decided to give up my schooling.*
> NarrID249; married male in Da Nang, married and without any formal education.

For Amerasians who did not know their mothers or their fathers, the sense of missing identity was often compounded.

> *I wish I can find and meet my father or mother. I have been living with my adopted mother since I was one month old. So, I do not know where my mother is to find her. I heard that my father was a soldier. He was stationed in Long Binh, Dong Nai province. I wish I could find my father in the future.*
> NarrID284; male in Da Nang, married and without formal education.

For Amerasians who did not know either parent, it was usually exceedingly difficult to provide the documentation necessarily to apply for immigration to the U.S. The following participant describes his experience with the application process.

> *They asked me to give evidence about my mother with a picture. I answered that I did not have all these things. How could I have such a thing. I just don't have any photos of my blood parents. I just know that I am a Kinh orphan… They just needed my mother's photos, my father's photos and these are exactly what I don't have.*

NarrID136; male in Dak Lak, married and without formal education.

Stigma Due to Being Mixed Race

Participants in both Vietnam and the U.S. spoke about stigmatising attitudes and behaviours experienced due to being Amerasian. One triad question asked participants about influences on interactions with the environment and most participants responded strongly towards being of mixed race, as shown in **Figure 5**. This trend towards mixed race was particularly strong in Vietnam.

Some Amerasians reported that discrimination based on being mixed race started within the family and from the time of birth. One participant in Da Nang explained the reaction to her own birth, "*After I was born, my grandma wanted to give me away because I was an Amerasian, but mom rejected; as the result, she was expelled out of her house."* (NarrID260). Another participant explained the circumstances into which Amerasians were born in Long Thanh.

> *And as you've already known, here in Long Thanh, if people gave birth to Amerasians they would throw them into trash. Yeah, I knew one case when someone gave birth to an Amerasian, they threw it away in a trash bin and a woman picked the child then raised it. That's how it normally goes.*
> NarrID210; female in Dồng Nai, single and completed primary school education.

Amerasians experienced emotional abuse because of being mixed race and having an American father. One male participant reported that people called him "mixed race person" rather than use his real name, "*I am an Amerasian. Nobody knows what my name is. People call me 'Lai' (literally, mixed race person) instead of my name."* (NarrID214) Another participant experienced physical abuse because of being mixed race.

> *In the past, I only had my mother, and lived with my stepfather. However, they did not love me and called me Amerasian. They even beat me ruthlessly.*
> NarrID256; female in Quàng Nam, widowed and without formal education.

Stigma and discrimination based on having American paternal ancestry significantly impeded the ability of most Amerasians to attend school. A female participant described her experience of being forced out of school.

> *Other kids kept calling me "the American imperialist" and prevented me from studying. They hit me every time I came to school… You see, the dream of my whole life was to have a chance to go to school, but see what I got? Discrimination prevented me from pursuing my dream.*
> NarrID113; female in Dak Lak, widowed and without formal education.

A discrimination hierarchy was evident with more extreme stigmatising attitudes and behaviours directed towardss Amerasians who had Black fathers. The following participant shares her mother's experience as an Amerasian with a Black father.

> *Everyone in my neighbourhood has known mom for a long time. They knew she was a Negro. Some played with her, others despised. It would be better if she were a white skin half-blooded; the Vietnamese always have that kind of discrimination against the dark ones. There were many people who despised and hated my mom in the village. They sometimes expelled her. Even my family and my relatives hated her. They said she had black skin, she was a hybrid, why didn't she go to America.*
> NarrID164; male in Dak Lak, some post-secondary school education.

Ongoing stigma and discrimination resulting from being mixed race naturally impacted the mental health and wellbeing of many Amerasians and some participants reported feeling suicidal and having had suicide attempts.

> *In general, my life is so hard, so difficult. Others treated me like nothing. They called me that Amerasian, this Amerasian and so on. I was miserable. I felt miserable with my life. I wanted to commit suicide sometimes. I tried committing suicide once by taking pills, but one Korean found and took me to the hospital. Otherwise, I would have died many times.*
> NarrID119; female in Gia Lai, married with no formal education.

Narratives about stigma occasionally ended with participants aspiring to be reunited with their fathers as a way of removing themselves from the stigmatising environment. The following participant seemed to indicate that he saw two potential routes to end the suffering experienced due to being mixed race: suicide or being reunited with his father.

> *… he has also been discriminated against by other people, thinking he is a foreigner or the like… Sometimes he feels depressed. When he returns home after work he cries and wants to commit suicide sometimes. I gave him a lot of advice, but he said that if his search for his father results in failure, he would rather overdose himself to death than live in Vietnam.*
> NarrID129; female in Dồng Nai, married with some secondary school education.

Many Amerasians were married, and an earlier analysis suggested that having happy marriages and families of their own was often a source of strength and satisfaction for Amerasians in Vietnam (Ho et al., 2019). However, the current analysis illustrates how discrimination around being Amerasian mixed race sometimes made it more difficult to find a partner. One male participant reported, "*I have an Amerasian wife. When we got married, I heard many bad comments from my neighbours regarding her. They told me I shouldn't marry her, a Negro Amerasian."* (NarrID148) In the following narrative, another participant describes her mother's reaction when she got engaged to an Amerasian man.

> *My mother called and said "I banned you from dating him! If you do, then get out of my house." "He is an Amerasian, living with him*

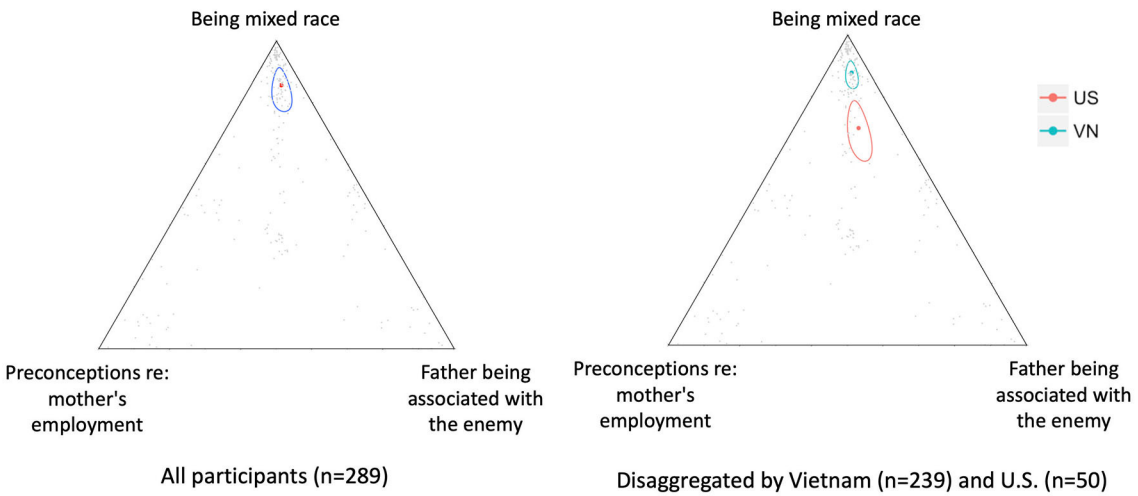

FIGURE 5 | Triad asking what most influenced interactions with the environment. The overall geometric mean is provided on the left with individual geometric means for Vietnam and the U.S. provided on the right. Responses were statistically different between the two countries as demonstrated by the non-overlapping 95% confidence ellipses, with participants in Vietnam indicating more strongly that interactions with the environment were influenced by being mixed race.

> *and nobody will give you any respect! You want to live with him? Go with him then. Don't even think about coming home!"*
> NarrID130; female in Dồng Nai, married with some secondary school education.

Several Amerasians noted that while stigma and discrimination were severe in their early lives, after the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act allowed Amerasian children and their relatives to apply to immigrate to the U.S., there was generally more acceptance of Amerasians. A male participant in Quy Nhon reflected on this change in his life, "*when there was a departure program for Amerasians, that was when I started to fit in the life with the Vietnamese*" (NarrID143). Another participant similarly described how he became valued in society after the Homecoming Act.

> *It was very difficult to live in a country where people discriminated against us. I felt like I was a prisoner. People used discriminating words when talking to me… After the Amerasian program, I realised that my life had changed a lot. People in my society turned to value me… No one dishonoured me because I was an Amerasian. My life has become comfortable.*
> NarrID142; male in Quy Nhon, divorced and completed secondary school education.

Children of Amerasians were also seemingly affected by discrimination based on being mixed race and having American ancestry. One male participant reported the following situation for an Amerasian he knew, "*Now he has three children, all having formal education but none of them are able to get a job in government organisations due to his origin. So yeah, his origin does affect his descendants.*" (NarrID147) Another participant explained what happened when her son was applying for military school in Vietnam.

> *I asked the uncle if my son had any chance to enter that military school. He said no because they would cheque and conclude that his background is not good. I asked him how come. He said it was because of my son's father. My son's father was an Amerasian, so his background was bad.*
> NarrID232; female in Khánh Hòa, married and completed secondary school.

Subjective vs. Objective

A dyad question asked participants to comment on whether the shared experience was about subjective feelings or about objective facts. As **Figure 6** demonstrates, participants surveyed in the US more frequently interpreted their storeys as being about subjective feelings than those surveyed in Vietnam.

A common sentiment expressed by Amerasians in the US was the feeling to be unwanted.

> *… at that time I felt unwanted, I felt bad about myself, because the way I looked made my brother not wanting to have me around. … Things have changed a lot now, my brother's not the same person like he was, but that piece of it, how he made me feel, about myself I don't think I could forget.*
> NarrID 1050; female, in the US, single, never married, completed post-secondary education.

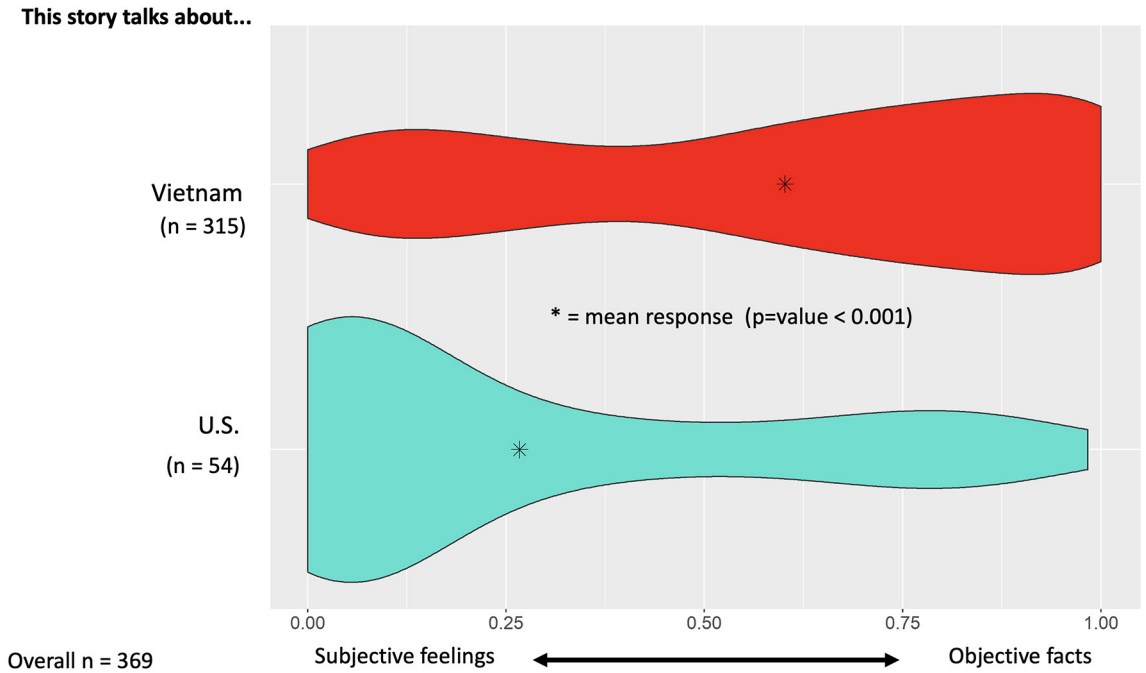

FIGURE 6 | Dyad asking whether the storey was about subjective feelings or objective facts. The storey talks about. Participants surveyed in the US more frequently signified the storeys as being about subjective feelings than those surveyed in Vietnam. Asterisks indicate the overall mean for each sub-group and highlight that Vietnam participants indicated a stronger desire to explore their biological roots ($p < 0.001$).

Another theme prominent particularly among Amerasians who had been transracially adopted at a young age and had never known their roots, culture, language or birth country, was the subjective feeling of not belonging and of feeling like an outsider.

> *I was transracially adopted into a white tall blue-eyed family in a predominantly white community in California. I grew up longing to be what I wasn't and had no connexion to anyone like me (Asian mixed race Vietnamese short).*
> NarrID 1500; female, in the US, married, completed post-secondary education.

> *I wasn't liked much. I didn't like me either. . . . I was ashamed of who I was when really deep inside I had no clue who I truly was. And still to this day not knowing what exactly happened or who are my parents do I have siblings etc etc.....eats me up in side. It's a deep void that will probably never be filled. (57)*
> NarrID 1507; female, in the US, divorced/separated, some secondary school.

DISCUSSION

The study's primary goal was to characterise differences in the perceptions of Amerasians in Vietnam and the United States about those issues that had most affected their lives. Significant differences were found in the following areas: poverty, ethnicity, the desire to explore one's biological roots, one's sense of identity, and the stigma associated with being of mixed race. These differences are all linked, directly or indirectly, to having foreign, typically non-Asian fathers, who abandoned them and their mothers in a country where their fathers were perceived as the enemy (McKelvey, 1999). Consistent with the literature (Valverde, 1992, 147; McKelvey, 1999, 47-51; Yarborough, 2006, 46) participants of African-American parentage faced very significant additional challenges and hardships. Amerasians were not only mixed-race, which was stigmatised in Vietnam, but were also left without a knowledge of their fathers' backgrounds, or ethnicity, which is central to a sense of identity and belonging. In Vietnam, the father is the key to an individual's future, bestowing not only a name, but also a sense of connexion to the present and the past and, often, opportunities for a more productive and prosperous life. In reviewing the narratives, the concepts of ethnicity, biological roots, identity, and mixed race are frequently intermingled and difficult to tease apart. Key to them all, however, was the participants' sense of being different and not belonging.

Poverty was a dominant theme for Amerasians in both Vietnam and the US. Among respondents in the US the poverty theme, however, was present less frequently as the overriding concern of the narratives than among Amerasians in Vietnam, and it appears from their narratives that their concerns about poverty were linked chiefly to their experiences while still in Vietnam. This can be explained by the fact that, as evidenced in the demographic data, significantly more respondents in the

US completed secondary and post-secondary education, which would have enhanced their chances of securing higher paying jobs and thus their chances to escape from the trap of poverty that many of their counterparts who remained in Vietnam found themselves in still at the time of the interviews.

Ethnicity outweighed domestic arrangements and economic circumstances as a factor featuring prominently in the participants' narratives. Based on the narratives, ethnicity was associated with being of mixed-race and so the results of both will be considered here. Interestingly, Amerasians in the US reported ethnicity as significantly more important to their narratives than those in Vietnam. The opposite is true for valuation of being of mixed-race, where Amerasians in Vietnam reported significantly more difficulties. This finding, while counter-intuitive on the surface, can be explained for both subgroups of Vietnamese Amerasians, those adopted in the United States at the end of the War in the mid 1970s and those who immigrated to America following the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Narratives of adoptees who had grown up in America often without childhood contact to their birth country and little or no exposure to its language, culture and traditions, indicated the importance of ethnicity and of "reuniting" with their country of origin; this is consistent with recent research on coping strategies of Vietnamese adoptees and their strategies of family migrations (Varzally, 2017). For Amerasians who migrated to the United States in adolescence, the relative prominence of considerations of ethnicity may be explained by what Thomas (2021, 217), calls racialisation of Amerasians into American and Asian categories once they arrived in the United States.

The narratives of Amerasians both in Vietnam and in the United States reflect how powerful "looking different" to the majority population was in affecting Amerasians' lives. This is supported by prior reports of Amerasians' experiences (Felsman, 1989; Valverde, 1992; McKelvey, 1999). The desire to explore one's biological roots was an important feature identified in the narratives of both groups of Amerasians, but significantly greater for those still in Vietnam. This desire is understandable for people who do not know their fathers and, in many cases, also do not know their mothers. The destruction of photos, letters, and other documents after the end of the war out of fear that they might lead to punitive actions by the victors, left many with no concrete connexion to their past (McKelvey, 1999; Yarborough, 2006, 198). A sense of family is of central importance to people in Vietnam, who practise ancestor veneration and frequently have altars as centrepieces in their homes with photos of the deceased prominently displayed. There was a hope among those still in Vietnam, that if one were able to travel to the land of one's father, one might identify and connect with the father and his family. In some cases, it was hoped that this connexion might also lead to material wellbeing.

Akin to the desire to know one's biological roots was the importance of identity. In the narrative about the impact of biological parentage, identity outweighed economic wellbeing and physical or mental health. At the core of identity is having a sense of who one is. This is derived from family and connexion to a specific cultural tradition. It is also shaped by the reactions of others to oneself. There is no "Amerasian" family tradition in Vietnam, where most are members of the majority Kinh people, and being Amerasian and looking different than everyone else, branded one as being an outsider of diminished value. The importance of identity was weighted more heavily by participants in Vietnam than those in the United States, where one might justifiably argue that it was the home of one's father and that he had served in the nation's military.

One's interactions with the environment were strongly weighted towards being mixed race, especially in Vietnam, outpacing the mother's employment or the father's association with the enemy. This was especially true for those with darker skin, which is stigmatized in Vietnam (470-473). Our data supports the phenomenon reported in the literature, namely that stigmatisation of Amerasians was amplified for those of African American parentage.

The study's major limitation is the marked underrepresentation of Amerasians in the US. While the study was well publicised, especially through the organisation *Amerasians Without Borders*, there was a perception that the study organisers included "Communists." This was related to the participation in the study by a university in Ho Chi Minh City. Participation by Amerasians in Vietnam was, on the other hand, very strong and likely represented a large minority of the Amerasians still living there.

The qualitative data points to significant and sustained adversities experienced by Vietnamese Amerasians of African-American parentage. While such discrimination has been reported anecdotally, a systematic intersectional analysis of Vietnamerican discrimination experiences both in the United States and in Vietnam remains an important research gap.

The study also has several notable strengths. To the best of our knowledge, it is the only direct comparative analysis to examine the experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam in relation to those of Amerasians who immigrated to the US. Furthermore, the use of SenseMaker, as a mixed-methods narrative capture tool, offered several advantages, such as open-ended storey prompts, which allowed participants to determine which experiences were most important to share. SenseMaker also allowed participants to interpret their own experiences and in doing so, reduced interpretation bias.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: doi: 10.25500/eData.bham.00000242.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Birmingham Ethical Review Board (ERN_15-1430). The patients/participants

provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Loneliness and lack of belonging as paramount theme in identity descriptions of Children Born of War

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Objective: Children Born of War (CBOW) are an international and timeless phenomenon that exists in every country involved in war or armed conflict. Nevertheless, little is known on a systematic level about those children, who are typically fathered by a foreign or enemy soldier and born to a local mother. In particular, the identity issues that CBOW often report have remained largely uninvestigated. In the current qualitative study we began filling this gap in the scientific literature by asking how CBOW construct their identity in self-descriptions.

Method: We utilized thematic content analysis of $N = 122$ German CBOWs' answers to an open-ended questionnaire item asking how they see themselves and their identity in the context of being a CBOW.

Results: We identified five key themes in CBOW' identity accounts. Loneliness and lack of belonging appeared as a paramount aspect of their self-descriptions next to narratives about belonging and positive relationship. On a less interpersonal basis, we found fighting and surviving and searching for truth and completion overarching aspects of their identities. There were also few accounts growing up unaffected by the fact of being born a CBOW. Although all themes portray different perspectives, they all (but the last one) clearly indicate the impeded circumstances under which CBOW had to grow up.

Conclusions: Integrating our findings with existing interdisciplinary literature regarding identity, we discuss implications for future research and clinical and political practice.

KEYWORDS

Children Born of War, hidden populations, vulnerable populations, conflict, identity, thematic analysis

Introduction

In the presence and aftermath of armed conflict, there has always been contact between armed troops and civilians from superficial to intimate; and from these contacts children have been born. These children are so-called Children Born of War (CBOW)—typically born to local mothers and foreign soldier fathers. Their existence is a worldwide

and timeless, yet widely ignored reality—to the detriment of those individuals and their communities.

German Occupation Children (GOC), of which we will report in this article, are a subgroup of the worldwide population of CBOW. An estimated number of 400.000 GOC were born at the end of World War II (WWII) and the following ten and more years to a German mother and were fathered by a member of one of the four allied military forces (from Great Britain, Soviet Union, France, and USA) that occupied Germany in 1945 (Stelzl-Marx and Satjukow, 2015). The relationships of their parents ranged from intimate love relationships to mutual businesslike relationships to systematic rapes. GOC share some experiences with all the other children, who were born and raised during that difficult post-war period. Some developmental conditions such as economic hardship, missing or emotionally absent fathers and hard-working single mothers were oftentimes similar irrespective of having a German father or a father belonging to foreign military. After all, about 25% of children had a father who did not return from the war (Radebold, 2008). Nevertheless, GOC have shown to represent a population with specific experiences. They are at a significantly higher risk to suffer from mental disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), major depression or somatoform syndrome and show a higher prevalence of traumatic events (e.g., sexual abuse, neglect, and physical violence) and child maltreatment (Kaiser et al., 2015b; Glaesmer et al., 2017). They are also more likely—even decades later—to display insecure attachment in their current relationships (Kaiser et al., 2016). Furthermore, societal attitudes toward children who were born out of wedlock and their mothers were generally negative and this stigma was perpetuated by being a child born from a foreign soldier who had left the country and was still considered the enemy in many minds (Satjukow, 2011). A further and striking difference that might be at the core of many other of the above-mentioned problems was that their biological fathers were not only missing in person or being emotionally absent, but that there were no narratives about them, no stories or photos that portrayed a father that a child could relate to, i.e., identify with or distance itself from. No proof of existence. The vast majority of mothers and other family members remained silent about the biological father and asking questions about him was oftentimes an unspoken taboo irrespective of the background of their parents' relationship (Mitreuter et al., 2019). This conspiracy of silence has been reported as a widespread and omnipresent phenomenon in the context of CBOW (Ericsson and Ellingsen, 2005; Øland, 2005; Schmitz-Köster, 2005; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Stelzl-Marx, 2015; Koegeler-Abdi, 2021). The uncertainty about their biological origin is a persisting topic that challenges their wellbeing (Lee, 2017) and leaves many with an impaired sense of belonging (Ericsson and Ellingsen, 2005; Øland, 2005; Provost and Denov, 2020).

Identity issues are a widely reported problem amongst CBOW (e.g., Glaesmer et al., 2012) and at the same time remain a largely unresolved and diffuse topic. There has been some recent quantitative and descriptive research (Stelzl-Marx, 2015; Mitreuter et al., 2019) as well as reports from testimonies (Øland, 2005; Schmitz-Köster, 2005) that showed that almost all CBOW set out on an often impossible search for their biological fathers after they had been told the truth about their biological origin. Locating their fathers implied for many to feel more complete and at peace with themselves (Mitreuter et al., 2019). The results of this research can therefore serve as an indicator of how important finding and knowing their biological father is for an integrated identity and their wellbeing. However, the topic of identity issues in CBOW is still a scientifically new and complex phenomenon with no standardized and valid assessment instruments and there is still much to learn. It is for example unclear, how CBOW construct their identities and which core themes make up their identity descriptions. There has been a recent study by Schwartz (2020), who analyzed the construction of identity from a couple of narratives by German GOC, whose mothers were raped by Soviet soldiers at the end of WWII. The author found that the construction of a meaningful self and of an acceptable image of the father was crucial to the participants. However, her analysis was of a deductive nature and was guided by theories of trauma and definitions of resilience by LaCapra (2001). We were interested to see what themes we could extract following an inductive analysis and focusing on a bigger sample that included GOC from all types of parental relationships and all paternal ethnicities.

The current study

To gain a deeper insight into what identity issues mean for GOC, we utilized a qualitative and inductive approach to assessing and understanding potential identity issues. We therefore analyzed the answers to an open-ended questionnaire item asking GOC about how they would describe their identity in the context of being a CBOW. We were primarily interested in the underlying main themes that we could extract from their accounts to improve our understanding of the nature of their identity issues.

Procedure and participants

We collected a sample of GOC ($N = 131$) within the project "Occupation children: Identity development, stigma experience, and psychosocial consequences growing up as a German Occupation Child." Participants were recruited *via* press releases, various national and international networks (e.g., www.childrenbornofwar.org; www.bowin.eu), and online-platforms for occupation children and children born of war in

general (e.g., www.gitrace.org; www.coeurssansfrontiers.com). Within these calls, we invited potential participants to contact our research group to learn more about the project and to leave their contact details. Inclusion criteria were being born after 1940 to a German mother, being fathered by a soldier of one of the foreign occupation forces, and being able to understand and read the German language. Questionnaires, a study information sheet, and consent forms were subsequently sent to GOC *via* postal mail. One hundred eighty-four questionnaires were sent out and 164 were returned of which 9 had to be excluded because they did not fit the definition of "occupation children." The participation rate was hence 88.6%, corrected for neutral drop-outs. We excluded another nine outliers with respect to age. Seventeen participants did not respond to the item subject to analysis or gave answers that we could not decipher leaving 131 valid cases (and a response rate of 89.73%), which were born between 1945 and 1966. Sixty-three percentage of the sample were female with a mean age of 63.4 (SD = 5.7) years. Seventy-one GOC have a US American father, 33 have a French (or French-Algerian/-Moroccan/-Corsican) father, 32 have a Soviet father, and 6 have a British father. Of those 131 GOC, 14 are not sure about their fathers' origin and another 4 do not know their father's origin. More information about the methodological approach, sample characteristics, and background of the original study are provided in Kaiser et al. (2015a). The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the Medical Department of the University of Leipzig.

Study design

CBOW are hidden populations, which are difficult to access and whose specific experiences are not accounted for by established instruments (Mochmann, 2013). For this reason, we acted two-fold to assess the topic identity within our larger questionnaire study: We adopted an existing questionnaire developed by Mochmann and Larsen (2008), who investigated children born of Wehrmacht soldiers in Norway and Denmark; And we applied a participatory approach to develop and amend questions and items that—amongst other topics—address aspects of identity (e.g., search for father, questions about origin, background of procreation, and feelings of shame, pride, and belonging) of GOC. The questionnaire, i.e., data corpus was mainly a tool intended to gain quantitative data, but for the current study, our data set consists of the answers to one open-ended question: "How do you see yourself when you think of your identity? Which specificities do you think result from being a German Occupation Child?" Participants were provided with one DINA-4 page to write down their answers and some extended this space onto the last empty pages of the questionnaire or added sheets of paper themselves. The answers ranged from 5 words to 1,714 words.

Data analysis

Taking a constructionist and inductive approach and aiming at a rich description of the whole data set, i.e., all accounts to our posed question, the analytical process was comprised of five overlapping iterative phases in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006) outline for thematic analysis. We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2021). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading the accounts. Second, we generated initial codes from the text by summarizing and deconstructing it into identifiable units of meaning. The same unit of text could be included in more than one category or code. Although we had some knowledge about identity theories prior and at the time of the analysis (e.g., narrative identity theory McAdams and McLean, 2013), we tried to approach the data with an open mindset and in an inductive manner in an attempt to generate codes and themes from the text that might not have been represented by existing theories. Thus, in the next phase we identified themes and overarching categories that would organize a body of codes. We then went back and forth between potential themes to scrutinize them for consistency and representativeness of their codes and to collate them where possible into a higher-order theme.

Interpretation and validity

The current study availed itself of an interpretative and constructionist perspective. We perceived our findings as one of many possible interpretations of the data (Lincoln et al., 2011). Utilizing an interpretative phenomenological approach, we were aiming at identifying what the participants themselves were revealing in their accounts, in order to give voice to their authentic testimony regarding their specific experiences. Thus, throughout the analysis, we maintained a hermeneutics of faith (Josselson, 2004) and accepted the participants' accounts at face value. We evaluated our conceptualizations and interpretations by using the following validity criteria: (a) Sources of interpretation were exclusively actual pieces of data and existing theories only served as a tool for explanation. (b) Interpretations that were considered valid may not contradict each other in any way. Finally, all accounts were compared to gain a holistic understanding in line with the aim of our study and our research question.

Results

The analysis led to the identification of five recurring themes (see Figure 1) indicating how heterogeneous the detailed experiences of growing up as a GOC are. However, the thickness of some themes over others clearly demonstrates the overall

FIGURE 1
Developed thematic map, showing five main themes, and associated subthemes.

hardship and in particular loneliness and isolation, from which the majority of GOC had suffered when growing up in post WW II Germany. In the following section, we shall elaborate on each theme as it unfolds to further understand how these experiences relate to each other. All quotes were translated from German by the first author and confirmed as loyal to the original German wording by the second author.

"No one who cared for me my whole life"—loneliness and lack of belonging

From previous reports and testimonies in which many CBOW describe their suffering from being discriminated against or being the unloved and odd one out within their family or wider social environment, we expected that we would see related topics within our data. However, we were surprised by the many ways and the frequency, in which topics referring to deep (existential) loneliness were reported. The identified theme of "Loneliness and Lack of Belonging" was by far the thickest and most substantial of all. We saw this theme conveyed through a multitude of subthemes, with the most dominant one speaking of a lack of belonging or lack of emotional bonds and attachment figures.

Lack of emotional bonds and sense of belonging

Agathe and Christine described how their life-long sense of not belonging within their families, but also in a wide social context have influenced their self-esteem and wellbeing:

> *"I never felt like I belonged within my family. I never belonged anywhere. I still have this feeling today, at work, with friends—even if it is not true (anymore). I have suffered from a strong loss of trust because everyone lied to me throughout my whole childhood. [. . .] I was in analytical therapy for many years and could reappraise and incorporate a lot through transference of relationship with my therapist. This has helped me, but 'the wound of the unloved one' remains" (ID 47, father member of the US American army).*

> *"Today, I see myself as a content woman. But I had to work for it my whole life and went through very difficult times [. . .] because I was always on the edge, I never belonged. [. . .]. [During childhood] my mother visited me every 2 months. I adored her but she was emotionally unattainable for me and stayed this way until her death in 2007. I had no self-esteem, never voiced any needs. I lived merely passively. I was a good student, but secondary school was out of question. When I think back, my childhood appears gray, joyless, and filled with fear" (ID 34, father member of the US American army).*

Although it is not typical for GOC to have grown up without their mothers according to our data, the sense of detachment and alienation from the family is widely reported. A lack of parental tenderness and love was doubtlessly also conditioned by post-wartime and the shortage of time and existential threat that it posed to many parents who had to work hard to survive and supply for their children. But what GOC describe has a deep level of existential loneliness to it:

> *"Today, I feel uprooted with respect to my identity, but also free. The price of that freedom is the lack of a sense of belonging in a profound way. I rarely tie myself to people and if I do it is temporary. Because of the knowledge that my biological father was a soldier in the US-army I have mixed feelings about this country. It provides a repelling attraction" (ID 144, father member of the US American army).*

The feeling of being uprooted or in free fall, not being held by anyone and not being able to relate to anyone was something we often saw in the data and shows how isolated GOC felt growing up. This uprooting also seems to be associated with the attachment issues in later life that have been reported by Kaiser et al. (2016). Feeling a "repelling attraction" toward the father, or the home country of the father showcases the inner conflict and disruption with themselves and their identity. It seems to reflect their constant search for belonging but at the same time fear of not being able to belong to the father after all and maybe in this connection losing hope of ever being able to really belong.

Conspiracy of silence

Another highly pervasive subtheme emerging from the identity descriptions is the topic of silence. The taboo surrounding their origin and the truth about their conception is something widely reported that at the same time is experienced as extremely aversive and harmful for a healthy identity development and the development of trustful relationships within and later also outside the family:

> *"The whole kinship of mother has kept silent!! All my life I haven't had anyone I could relate to, no father, no siblings. Mother still does not want anything to do with me, apparently because I remind her of 1952. She cannot handle it, but also does not want to talk about it. I would still like to search my father but mother won't tell me his name" (ID 30, father member of the French army).*
>
> *"The family put a heavy cloak of silence over my origin. If relatives were upset with me, they were dropping allusions: 'You are not who you think you are"' (ID 40, father member of the Soviet Army).*

Hans and Richard were kept in the dark. Other GOC also report of a dark spot, a dark hole that cannot be filled because their origin was treated a taboo in their social environments. If ones origin is unspeakable and taboo, these GOC might have felt like a taboo themselves and something to be ashamed of. But also keeping silent themselves was experienced as aversive and isolating and turning toward more openly speaking about one's own past and biological origin seemed to be associated with relief and healing:

> *"In the past: intense shame, fear of being discovered and bullied subsequently, because people spoke disparagingly about other illegitimate children. [. . .] As a consequence: great silence, hushing up—I forged my life story to avoid becoming 'noted' which led to long periods of depression. Today I can speak openly about who I am. I know who I am and I tell it to everyone" (ID 8, father member of the Soviet Army).*

Otherness and discrimination

GOC tend to suffer from multiple stigmata often leading them to feel devalued, rejected and isolated. In post-war Germany, for example, it was still heavily frowned upon to be born out of wedlock, which was the case for almost all GOC born after WWII, such as Peter describes:

> *"I have always felt like a 2nd class human, because I was in addition [to being a child of a foreign soldier] born out of wedlock. That also made me an outcast" (ID 12, father member of the British army).*

In addition, they were born as the children of foreign soldiers, who still were considered the occupying enemies in many people's minds. Beyond all that, many had visible features that made them look different from their peers, which oftentimes subjected them to racist treatment like John reports:

> *"As a child, people often asked me to show my teeth or asked whether they could touch on my hair. Total strangers asked me that. In kindergarten, I was supposed to play burned bread [. . .]. Very often people told me they didn't have a problem with People of Colour. On my graduation ball no girl wanted to dance with me although I was at least the most handsome (just joking). No matter the occasion; searching for*

> *a job, going to a club, getting to know girls etc.—I always had an oppressive feeling due to my skin colour. Sometimes I even felt strange to myself" (ID 151, father member of the US American army).*

This kind of othering and racist treatment thwarted their need for belonging and isolated them not only from others, but also led to alienation from themselves.

Deficient satisfaction of needs by attachment figures and state

Another subtheme contributing to GOC' loneliness and lack of belonging was what we called "Deficient satisfaction of needs by attachment figures and state":

> *"We [occupation children] never looked for connection or contact amongst each other. We never really had the chance to, which I greatly regret. There were no contact persons we could talk to about our woes and sorrows. No one ever talked to me personally; everything was decided over my head. We were without rights and left with nothing. Outcasts" (ID 61, father member of the US American army).*

There were no advocates for their needs and rights and no cohesion and solidarity amongst occupation children even if in some cases they were known to each other or suspected others to be just like them. In GOC life stories, we also found a high prevalence of them being sexually abused as children (Mitreuter, 2021). It seems as if the isolation and a consequential vulnerability of GOC was recognized and exploited by the perpetrators. The following quote about a mother who did not take any action against the sexual abuse of her son is exemplary for the lacking protection that many GOC experienced, be it by primary caregivers or the state:

> *"Back where I lived as a child, there was a catholic congregation. Four brethren and one Father administered one courtyard. The Father had a habit of touching and "playing" with some of our penises. My mother took no action against it, because she worked in the monastery's household and would have lost her job. Another mother reported the case and the Father was transferred as a result" (ID 44, father member of the Soviet Army).*

"Mother gave everything she could"—belonging and positive relationship

In contrast to the previous theme, there were some accounts with a clear emphasis on belonging and positive relationship, although the impedimental circumstances under which most CBOW grew up often shone through nonetheless. Belonging and relationship comprised subthemes such as "feeling loved and satisfaction of needs as a child," "acceptance and transparency," "identification with biological father and feeling united," and "gratitude, reconciliation, and reparation".

Feeling loved and satisfaction of needs as a child

One of the strongest indicators that we saw connected to a feeling of belonging and positive relationship was the feeling of being loved and that fundamental needs were satisfied as a child. We found this to be a major theme in CBOW's identity descriptions:

> *"My grandmother mourned two sons, who did not return from the Eastern front. Despite this, she loved me and she was my closest ally until her death" (ID 18, father member of the Soviet army).*
>
> *"My mother did everything for my happy childhood. I'm sure she suffered very much herself. There were people, who tried to take advantage of this: The Soviet intelligence service wanted to take me so that they did not have to pay any more alimony. Interrogations, recruitment for espionage etc. Therefore, my mother declared my father unknown"(ID 58, father member of the Soviet army).*

Gustav, the son of a Soviet soldier, reports being loved by his grandmother until her death even though both of her sons had died at the hands of Soviet soldiers. Many accounts suggest that it often seemed to suffice for an overall positive account to have had one person, who provided a reliably loving relationship for them to feel wanted and loved. This person was mostly either the mother or grandmother. These reports tell of protection like above where a mother protected and therefore concealed the origin of her child at the risk of being discovered and punished. They tell of continuous loving relationship free from spite and violence and support to develop their own abilities and talents (within financial possibility).

Acceptance and transparency

Acceptance and transparency means that the truth about their biological origin and their conception was known and accepted at least by the mother and/or grandparents, but also by the step-father if applicable and wider social environment such as teachers and classmates. Transparency refers to GOC growing up knowing all they could potentially know from their mothers or other primary caregivers about their conception and true biological origin and that there was no taboo to speak of their biological fathers or to ask questions. These accounts were rare, but the following is an example:

> "I've always known everything but before I turned 25 I still didn't really talk about my origin to anyone outside the family, simply because I was never asked. I lived in an intact and loving family. In 1981, I visited my father and his family in Kiev together with my husband, my two sons, and my half-brother [. . .]. We were lovingly welcomed and taken in with much leniency and acceptance" (ID 14, father member of the Soviet army).

Identification with biological father and feeling united

Many GOC report of always having felt wrong within their own family or different from all the other family members and rejected by society. As displayed in the following quote, it seemed to be of great importance to GOCs' feeling of self-worth and healthy identity to see their fathers in a positive light and to feel connected to them or the culture of their home countries:

> *"Personally, I don't see myself as an occupation child, but the child of a LIBERATOR! [. . .] I see myself as a survivalist; freethinker, fighter and I like to confront prejudiced people. I can be proud and I am proud of my origin and let everyone know about it" (ID 63, father member of the US American army).*

Some report being relieved not to be all German, but for example half-French or half-American. It seems like the need to belong is so strong that many feel connected to someone like their biological father or to the culture of a country even if they do not know them at all and have not seen them or been there even once in their lives.

Few CBOW have had the chance to locate or even meet their biological fathers and if so, getting to know or meeting them in person was not always experienced as positive (see Mitreuter et al., 2019). However, given finding and meeting him or his remaining family members was overall positively experienced, it often had the chance to become a deeply positive turning point in their lives:

> *"[. . .] My youngest daughter found [my half-brother] on Facebook. Ever since, we all frequently chat and mail each other, we exchange photos back and forth. We all immediately became Facebook friends. It is wonderful—and both families have the same marvelous feeling that we are finally a family. I cannot describe the warm-heartedness that comes across via the Facebook pages. It is as if I had longed for it my whole life. I received photographs of my father and the—for me most important information—that he had wanted to return back to my mother in Germany and get in touch with her. However, he was stopped by the authorities for reasons that we all know now—but, had it worked, I now wouldn't have this astounding brother in Israel" (ID 19, father member of the US American army).*
>
> *"Daddy will come to visit me! [. . .] Praise the Lord for showing me my father. We love each other very much and have been very affectionate with each other. My joy is immense. Here in France [where I moved to], many GI-Babies search for their father in the US. I have found my own roots. That heals all wounds. My self-esteem is restored (ID 62, father member of the US American army).*

Uniting with the biological father or members of his family in case of his decease like it was the case for these two GOC provided them not only with joy, but a deep sense of—maybe even long-needed—belonging and connection.

Gratitude, reconciliation, and reparation

We found that expressions of gratitude and mentioning of reconciliation and reparation in CBOW' identity descriptions were strongly linked to a feeling of belonging and the reporting of positive and meaningful relationship.

> "I particularly admire my mother, how she mastered life, how much she put everyone's needs before her own, had to live a very modest life (disability pensioner after a head surgery) and how she paved my way into school and vocation. She supported me and made the impossible possible" (ID 80, father member of the French army).

This GOC experienced it as "the impossible" to have grown up as a happy child and to receive the full love and support from a resilient mother. A mother who herself had to suffer much being despised by her own father and part of the society surrounding her and being scorned for having had intimate contact to a foreign soldier and to have his child. Through this love and support this GOC found a way into a life well-integrated into society. This is definitely a life course that is rarely told amongst GOC. More common are the reports of a difficult childhood and youth that took a turn to the better due to recovery, healing, with reconciliation, and reparation:

> *"On the whole, I can say that I had more positive than negative experiences. And the most negative things, I experienced during my youth, approximately [. . .] until my daughter was born! From that moment on, I had a goal: To lead my children onto the right path from the beginning—based on my personal experiences. And this worked out wonderfully" (ID 33, father member of the US American army).*

This GOC tells of experiencing difficulties during childhood and youth with many people "still living in the 3rd Reich mentally" (ID 33, father member of the US American army) and discriminating against her for being a person of color. Her self-description speaks of a sense of identity and meaning through being a successful mother by bringing up happy children. Becoming the creator of a new and intact family appears to be an important act of reparation and healing for those who managed to do so.

"Against all negative prognoses"—fighters and survivalists

In contrast to the first two themes, "Fighters and Survivalists" comprises statements, which pronounce GOCs' own inner achievement and agency and focus more on the self rather than a relationship dimension. Common ground was the hardship, which they had been exposed to in clear contrast to the "Unaffected" reports following later.

> *"I am a fighter. I discovered abilities within me, which I never thought I had and I've grown more confident" (ID 5, father member of the US American army).*
>
> *"I see myself as a survivor. Despite all tribulations, violence, and danger I was exposed to, I did not end up in a psychiatric hospital and never clashed with the law. I could adjust to every new situation in my life and assert myself" (ID 4, father member of the Soviet army).*

These accounts convey the sense of being a survivor vs. the sense of being a victim or scapegoat, which is more commonly found within the "Loneliness and Lack of Belonging" theme. They convey defiance and pride in mastering the difficult circumstances on their own and show some degree of resilience. There was often a clear development from negative to positive circumstances and outcomes, in particular based on own accomplishment:

> *"I felt only 50% complete. [. . .] Since I managed to prove my identity using DNA analysis and found the American part of my genetics, I am 100% complete and like to tell it to others. I finally started believing in myself and finally have self-esteem. I only really started being alive in 2012" (ID 29, father member of the US American army).*

Like above, the fighting aspect was often accentuated by expressions such as "others were proven wrong," "having proven it to others," "I made it," "I worked hard for my happiness," "I fought through," "against all odds," and "against all negative prognoses".

"Aching to see father only once"—searching for truth and completion

The theme of "Searching for Truth and Completion" is somewhat related to the theme of "Loneliness und Lack of Belonging," but we also considered it original and in part independent from it. Searching did not necessarily evolve from feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging, but often also from a seemingly deep and existentially driven curiosity to know more about one's second biological half and thereby to trace and prolong one's own biography into the past *via* the line of the own biological parents.

> *"I was searching for my identity for a long time, sometimes desperately. As a child, I always felt incomplete—something was missing. I couldn't accept my step-father" (ID 16, father member of the French army).*
>
> *"I am an addict. Was my father one, too? From the maternal side, there are no connections to addiction. What did my father do for a living? According to unconfirmed reports, he was supposed to be working as a pharmacist. Was he successful? How was he? Honorary offices? Success? Many questions that are waiting for an answer to this day" (ID 121, father member of the French army).*

The need to find out more about their unknown other biological half seems to be a universal need as almost all GOC indicated a wish to find or at least learn more about their fathers. It seems almost as if knowing the father did not only offer identification, but almost a kind of verification of the self. Finding their fathers seems to be linked to achieving a sense of an integrated identity and a positive life resolution for some GOC. And the opposite seems to hold for those like Gerd, who cannot mirror themselves in their fathers and hence do not receive that kind of confirmation of themselves:

> *"I wish I had met my biological father or at least knew who he was. Until this day, I can neither find peace within myself nor the peace to deal with not knowing" (ID 37, father member of the US American army).*

However, there were also accounts, in which we found searching and longing to rather revolve around a sense of "Loneliness and Lack of Belonging" like in Gustav's account:

> *"Relationships and friendships have always fallen apart after some time. There is no continuation in my life. I feel like I am always searching, restless. . . (I move approximately every 5 years for example)" (ID 35, father member of the US American army).*

"Growing up sheltered and unsuspectingly"—unaffected

Some accounts entailed several co-existing themes. The "Unaffected" shared descriptions of "Belonging and Positive Relationship," but there was no "despite being a GOC" in their words, because sometimes they were unknowing of the fact but unsuspectingly at the same time. These participants were very few, but they all reported their identity not having been affected at all by being a GOC. Others grew up not knowing about being a GOC and at the same time not feeling any different to the others in their surroundings like Hans' account suggests:

> *"Due to learning about the particularity [of being a GOC] quite late, I grew up unselfconsciously—from my point of view. [. . .] Additionally, the conditions of the former GDR [German Democratic Republic] accommodated me. [. . .] I met the requirements: good grades, good conduct, stemming from humble homes" (ID 9, father member of the Soviet army).*

Other "Unaffected" GOC pronounced that difficulties in their lives did not originate from being born a GOC, but merely from the economic hardship of that time if they had experienced any difficulties at all. Others described being popular and well-adjusted from childhood on just like Theresa:

> *"As a child, my advantage was that I looked quite cute. I was always treated nicely by everyone. I was invited to other children's birthday parties, even from families which were out of our "reach" such as the daughter of the clockmaker foreman, both daughters of the car workshop owner, a medical officer of health. . . maybe (how I learned later) it was because my mother had insinuated that she had been raped. Maybe the town's reaction was an act of pity" (ID 9, father member of the Soviet army).*

Even though Theresa suspects being treated differently, in fact more favorably, due to potentially being born from the rape of a Soviet soldier, she still seemed to have lived a sheltered life as a child.

Discussion

In the context of every armed conflict, children are born, who are fathered by the foreign or enemy soldiers and born to local mothers. These children tend to grow up under hindering circumstances both in society and within their families and often report suffering from identity issues amongst others. To better understand what their identity issues mean and how they construct their identities, this study explored the open-ended answers of ($N = 131$) German Occupation Children to a question about how they saw themselves and their identity in the context of being an occupation child.

"Loneliness and Lack of Belonging" appeared to be a most relevant theme when the occupation children thought about their own identity. We found that a conspiracy of silence around their biological origin and an often reported lack of emotional bonds to primary caregivers as well as a feeling of not belonging anywhere greatly contributed to this loneliness. Many GOC reported being discriminated against and being made outsiders, often when they visibly differed from the majority society, which we saw connected to feelings of loneliness as well. These two topics of "conspiracy of silence" and "discrimination and stigmatization" have been widely found in other reports and research on CBOW (Ericsson and Ellingsen, 2005; Øland, 2005; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Stelzl-Marx, 2015; Provost and Denov, 2020; Koegeler-Abdi, 2021). Last, they reported not only a lack of positive and stable emotional bonds but also a deficient satisfaction of their needs as children and adolescents by their primary caregivers but also the state, which seemed to fail in its responsibility to provide for and protect them as a vulnerable minority as well as supporting them to locate their fathers.

As a counter pole, there were also reports that conveyed a "Feeling of Belonging and Positive Relationship," in which GOC felt accepted or loved by at least one primary caregiver (often a grandmother if not biological mother). Feeling accepted seemed to go in hand with their family being honest and transparent about their biological origin. How important it is for children to be told the truth about their biological origin has already been widely investigated and found in the context of child adoption and so-called donor offspring studies (see for example Freeman and Golombok, 2012; Golombok et al., 2013; Freeman, 2015; Ilioi et al., 2017). There is one recent study by Koegeler-Abdi (2021), who conducted a qualitative analysis of testimonies and interviews with Danish CBOW and attempted to theorize the functions of secrecy within families. The author found that secrecy was not only a root cause for identity crises amongst CBOW, but also a potential resource for resilience. According to Koegeler-Abdi, secrets worked like storage vessels with a protective function, which could keep a secret until it was ready and safe to be let out and processed. Some of the CBOW in her study showed understanding and appreciation of their mothers' secrecy. We found this very interesting, especially as it is something we could not replicate for our data set. There was no single instance, in which family secrecy was reported to have felt fair or helpful. It would be interesting to analyze in the future under which conditions secrecy might feel protective and productive (for instance within a stable family with loving relationships) and in which it did not. The two rather oppositional themes of loneliness on one and belonging on the other side did not necessarily exclude one another within an individual account as there were some reporting being lonely as a child, adolescent or young adult but healing and finding reconciliation later in life when

for example they built their own loving family, underwent successful psychotherapy or united with their father. However, these two themes do have in common that they are opposite poles on a continuum that is of social nature. The following two themes, as different as they are, are rather rooted in a deeply personal domain:

"Fighters and Survivalists" comprises statements focusing on personal achievement and growth despite the hardship rather than focusing on the interpersonal domain. Reports revolved around personal strength and mastery that helped these individuals to gain control over their own lives "against all odds." This theme could potentially be associated to the concept of resilience (Herrman et al., 2011), post-traumatic growth (Linley and Joseph, 2004) or the concept of agency (McAdams and McLean, 2013), a concept within narrative identity theory that shows the degree to which participants are able to assert control over their own lives or influence others in their environment, which is often shown through acts of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement or status.

"Searching for Truth and Completion" represented the seemingly fundamental need to know about ones biological origins. Of particular interest seem to be similarities in personality, appearance, and talents (Mitreuter et al., 2019). A preliminary analysis of life story interviews (Mitreuter, 2021) found how closely linked finding their fathers is to achieving a sense of an integrated identity and a positive life resolution for many GOC. Interestingly, it often seemed to be more relevant to simply know about the father, who he was and where or whether he still lived than being in actual contact with him (Mitreuter et al., 2019). This finding is in line with our argument that the theme "Searching for Truth and Completion" has a deeply personal and existential meaning rather than a social one. That it is more about the self than the connectedness. This fact is also in accordance with studies of McAdams and McLean (2013), who found that a gap in the continuity of the biography is threatening an integrated identity and hence an individual's wellbeing.

As a fifth theme we identified accounts, in which identity descriptions seemed unaffected by the fact that they were GOC often because they were unaware of the fact but had no reason to suspect any different either. These accounts were few and often, but not always involved statements about belonging and positive relationships, which is why we considered it a separate theme in our analysis.

Strengths, limitations, and further research

Our study does not only substantiate the current state of the field and offer more weight due to its systematic approach and sample size, but it also adds new analytical insights as even more widely found topics such as a conspiracy of silence or a pervasive discrimination and stigmatization of CBOW and their mothers had not yet been put into a broader context of identity. This study contributed to a deeper insight into the plurality of identity aspects specifically relevant to CBOW and generated a first systematic overview of these aspects, their interrelatedness, and potential connection with psychological theories on trauma or narrative identity.

Despite the benefits and importance of the current study, it is also limited in several ways. First and foremost, it is not a representative study in the target group as CBOW qualify as hidden populations. We reached out for participants publicly, who then reacted if they were interested. The sample is hence self-selective and the entire population is unknown, which makes it impossible to conduct a representative study. Second, our data is of cross-sectional nature and the participants answered the item in retrospect, which makes our data subject to potential bias of retrospective self-report. The data is only a reflection of the current status when interviewed. We acknowledge that identity and identity construction are dynamic processes that would highly benefit from a life-course perspective. Although we could gather some information on within-individual development of identity over time, these measurements still remained cross-sectional, which clearly poses a limitation in understanding a time sensitive and dynamic phenomenon such as identity. Third, even if CBOW worldwide share many specific experiences, our data might not be generalizable to other CBOW populations due to specificities of each population such as culture, the type of war or the degree of hostilities between the parties for example. Other studies might yield other results, which is why further studies in other CBOW populations are much needed. Future research could focus more on systematic analyses and possibly standardization of instruments to allow for cross-cultural comparisons. Fourth, at the same time, we feel that there is still need for open and qualitative research in these populations, especially if a phenomenon as complex and scientifically new as identity in CBOW is being investigated. The given written material within the quantitative questionnaires was in many cases short or warranted more context as they were given. So in some cases our analyses stayed descriptive whereas a life story interview for example would have allowed for more in-depth interpretation of a person's account. We asked for identity "in the context of being a child born of war." This means that some other aspects or areas of identity could have been neglected and underreported. We hence suggest the analysis of life story interviews for a more complete understanding of CBOW identity.

Implications for clinical and political practice

Despite the limitations, our study can serve as a cornerstone in improving our understanding of CBOW and their unique biographies together with previous and future research. It can inform political practice as such that it is vital for children born of war to be able to access their biological family members and to get support for example in forms of networks who help bring them together with family members but also other CBOW (like some already exist in Germany or France) to foster a feeling of belonging and shared lived experiences. A prerequisite for this is that the existence of CBOW must enter the public discourses internationally in a de-stigmatizing way. We plead for an international children's right to know about their biological origins and to facilitate them locating their biological parents. Considering the deleterious ramifications associated with loneliness (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010), we advocate that clinicians be aware of its existence in addition to and irrespective of mental health symptoms.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon request, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committees of Leipzig University (415-12-17122012). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SM designed the study, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. HG and MK collected the data and supervised analyzing the data and writing the manuscript. PK assisted in collecting the data. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Resilience among Children Born of War in northern Uganda

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The literature on children born of conflict-related sexual violence, or Children Born of War (CBOW) is dominated by accounts and perceptions of suffering and risks that they experience both during and after armed conflict. In contrast, this article focusses on nuanced experiences of CBOW after suffering adversities. The study applies the culturally sensitive revised 17-item Children and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-R) to 35 CBOW conveniently sampled from a population of those born to former forced wives of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and another population born between 1993 and 2006 as a result of sexual violence perpetrated by cattle raiders in northern Uganda. Following the analysis of the CYRM-R scores, eight participants representing different quartiles, different scores on the relational/caretaker and personal resilience sub scales were identified to take part in a subsequent semi-structured interview process. The aim was to examine how CBOW in northern Uganda demonstrate resilience, the factors that influence their resilience experiences, and what it means for the broader concept of integration. Overall, CBOW are not merely stuck in their problems; past and present. Rather, findings indicate CBOW are confronting the realities of their birth statuses, and making the best use of their resources and those within the wider environment to adapt and overcome difficulties.

KEYWORDS

resilience, Children Born of War, northern Uganda, integration, conflict-related sexual violence

Introduction

Whereas, the field of youth and adolescents affected by armed conflict has started registering theoretical and empirical studies on the concept of resilience (e.g., Cortes and Buchanan, 2007; Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Baum et al., 2013; Zuilkowski et al., 2016), there is very little resilience research relating to Children Born of War CBOW. Rather, existing literature on the subject of CBOW (e.g., Carpenter, 2007, 2010; Ladisch, 2015; Apio, 2016; Lee et al., 2021), primarily deals with trauma-centered research focusing on negative impacts of violence, stigma and discrimination experienced in post conflict zones. This approach limits attention on other dimensions of the experiences of CBOW leaving out many aspects of their wellbeing. As Zuilkowski et al. (2016) observed bad experiences associated with armed conflicts do not mean the people are "doomed to suffer the consequences interminably" (p. 65). This article contributes to a fuller appreciation of the complexity of post-conflict experiences by exploring resilience in CBOW and the factors that might shape and influence expressions of resilience, given their respective contexts in Lango, northern Uganda.

The article applies the understanding of resilience as "the qualities of both the individual and the individual's environment that potentiate positive development" (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011, p. 127). To this end, resilience can be located "in the interactions between individuals and their wider social ecologies" (Clark, 2021, p. 1). Theron (2019), on her part presses further, by arguing that resilience is co-facilitated by individuals and the systems of which the individuals are a part (p. 327; see also Theron et al., 2021). In other words, the wider material and socio-cultural environment is just as important as the individual in the production of resilience. Important to note is that constant variations in the social-ecological environments, including availability of resources and differences in power relations between individuals and groups, reflect on the nature of resilience, rendering it a "dynamic and fluid process" (Henshall et al., 2020, p. 3,598), see also Bottrell (2009).

The complex, unstable and "fluid" nature of resilience the literature speaks about is further reflected in the lack of a "universally accepted methodology for operationalizing and measuring resilience empirically" (Alessi et al., 2020, p. 570). See also Christophe et al. (2020, p. 2), with different measures developed over the years to measure different things. Some of them are culturally sensitive, and demonstrate resilience by measuring the levels of interaction between individuals and their material and social cultural environments. One such scale of measurement, is the measure applied in this study; the abridged version of the Child and Youth Resilience Measure developed by the Resilience Research Centre (2018)—referred to as the Child and Youth Resilience Measure—Revised (CYRM-R). The measure is comprehensively presented in the methods section.

Subsequent sections of this article review the existing scholarship regarding CBOW and resilience, including the relatively sparse body of literature, and provide an overview of the case study and background of the conflicts linked to the participants. This is followed by a summary of the methodology the study used. The article then presents and discusses the results and reflections from the CYRM-R dataset and the associated qualitative interviews.

Resilience: Adversity and positive outcomes

Scholars have associated stressful experiences such as illnesses, loss of loved one, serious accidents, wars and associated ills with negative outcomes (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008). Often cited is that these stressful experiences can lead to behavioral, psychological and emotional outcomes that are negative (e.g., Aldwin, 1994). Commonly cited are negative outcomes like Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), depression, distress, all of which are well-addressed in the literature (e.g., see Masten et al., 1999; Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2001; Bostock et al., 2009; Aburn et al., 2016). But there has also emerged a great debate about positive outcomes in the aftermath of adversity. These "positive outcomes" have been referred to variously, including as: "Post traumatic growth, stress-related growth, benefit-finding, perceived benefits, thriving, positive by-products, positive psychological changes, flourishing, positive adjustment, positive adaptation" (see: Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004; Ramos et al., 2016). In this article, these "positive outcomes" are referred to as resilience.

The last two decades have seen a major shift in the understanding of resilience. Instead of earlier ideas that centered resilience on individual psychological traits, which influenced "an individual's ability to 'bounce back' or return to a normal state following adversity" (Hoegl and Hartmann, 2021, p. 456), the definitions have now embraced social ecological approaches that position resilience as a process or outcome co-facilitated by individuals and the systems or social ecologies of which the individuals are a part (Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2011; Wright and Masten, 2015; Theron, 2019, p. 327). In other words, resilience is now understood as resulting from the interrelation and interconnections between individuals and their wider environments. This means that resources available in the wider environment such as family and community support, access to health resources and economic opportunities are central for victims-survivors' coping and adaptation.

A social-ecological environment can therefore be viewed as a melting pot of resilience resources (rather than an empty space), with individuals as part of the embedded material and social-cultural factors that are constantly interacting. This further suggests that resilience as a process or outcome depends on more factors than those that lie within the individual. Rather, both the intra-and inter-personal factors within the wider social ecology are crucial in co-facilitating production of, or hindering resilience. These include familial, communal and societal factors (Roper, 2019). These factors have been linked to variations in how individuals demonstrate resilience, with some more resilient in a given situation than others (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011, p. 127). Often cited, particularly with respect to children and youth, are temperament, gender, physical health, age, developmental stage, sense of humor, self-esteem, locus of control, family support, parental discipline, spirituality, communal support, intelligence, coping techniques, psychological state, sense of direction or mission, adaptive distancing, androgynous sex roles and realistic appraisal of the environment (Green et al., 1981; Werner and Smith, 1992; McAdam-Crisp, 2006, p. 463). Moreover, studies already offer that social support and family harmony are major factors that shape self-esteem in adolescents (e.g., Han and Kim, 2006), further underscoring the importance of the social-ecology in the shaping of resilience (see also Ungar, 2011; Clark, 2021). In other words, a social-ecological approach to resilience, which this article applies, enables a holistic understanding of the contributing factors of an outcome. It offers a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic interplay among

individuals, groups, and their socio-physical environments (Stokols, 1996, p. 283).

Resilience studies in the field of armed conflict

The literature on resilience in people affected by war and armed conflict have gained traction in the last decade (e.g., McAdam-Crisp, 2006; Klasen et al., 2010; Ferrari and Fernando, 2013; Zuilkowski et al., 2016; Dixon, 2018; Clark, 2021). However, the focus has largely been on former child combatants, survivors of sexual violence, and survivors of genocide with minimal focus on CBOW. More accurately, an online search of resilience-related literature revealed a handful of sources on CBOW, including Schwartz (2020)'s literary work on children born during WW II in Europe; a recent study of CBOW in Bosnia, Rwanda and northern Uganda in which the authors argue for the use of survivor-centered approach to, among others, broaden "the remit of the victim category beyond primary harm, to consider structural and cultural harm" (Alessia et al., 2021, p. 342). Another explores how post conflict initiatives helped "children born in captivity" in northern Uganda overcome extreme adversity and hardship by "engaging with youth within multiple, interactive environments rather than targeting solely the individual" (Dixon, 2018, p. v), and yet another (Meaghan and Denov, 2021) focuses on the experiences of children born of genocidal rape in Rwanda, arguing for "greater recognition of the shared or relational nature of resilience" (p. 1).

Whereas, these sources demonstrate growing interest in the field, they do so from different understandings of the idea of resilience, which in itself, is a contextually sensitive concept. Thus, the idea of resilience as applied by Schwartz (2020) on CBOW in Europe during WW II was different from that studied by Meaghan and Denov (2021) in Rwanda, and Dixon (2018) and Alessia et al. (2021), in northern Uganda. It has been questioned whether the meaning of the term resilience as applied by scholars and practitioners working on and within post-conflict communities differs from the understanding of the term by the local populations to which they are applied (e.g. Allen et al., 2021; Bimeny et al., 2021). The current article takes note of this, by focusing on CBOW living in Lango society, and whose births were linked to different conflicts. It further draws on studies that view children (including children of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence) as "crucial protective resources for those around them" (Clark, 2021, p. 4), to re-focus attention on CBOW as co-creators of resilience within the social ecology. As the literature notes, until recently, most of the information about these children was embedded within narratives and discourses that explained the resilience of their mothers (e.g., Smith, 2005; Veale et al., 2013). This may be due to dominant approaches that consider protection and understanding of children as being linked to the protection and understanding of their mothers.

Of interest in the current article are questions about how familial attachments and communal connections work for the resilience of a group (CBOW) globally associated with stigma, rejection, and discrimination. These questions are further occasioned by findings in studies of non-CBOW categories which emphasized the role of family, community and other societal factors. For example, resilience scholars offer that a youth's coping ability may be enhanced by an attachment to his/her guardian (e.g., McAdam-Crisp, 2006, p. 466). Others like Garbarino (1995) argued that youth can cope with the stress of social upheaval if they retain strong positive attachments to their families, and if parents continue to project a sense of stability, permanence, and competence to their children (p. 44). Additionally, suggested that a strong bond between caregiver and the child, social support from teachers and peers, and a shared sense of values are important. Moreover, Kirschenbaum (2017), studying children in the Soviet Union during WWII, stressed the "importance of social supports and cultural resources in collective efforts to manage the trauma of war" (p. 538). Families, and the attachment to guardians and support of teachers cited above are some of the contextual (social-cultural) and individual factors that influence whether youth will overcome barriers and "resume positive life trajectories, or struggle to reintegrate into their families and communities" (Zuilkowski et al., 2016). These contextual and individual factors have been referred to in various resilience studies as protective factors that enhance resilience (e.g., Peltonen et al., 2014). Peltonen et al. actually examined resilience levels and protective factors of Palestinian students attending school during war and found that children with high resilience levels had better friendships compared to the traumatized group with low resilience levels. Applied to CBOW: What bonds and relationships exist? Would such bonds and relationships have similar impacts? In other words, this article contributes to exploring how CBOW in northern Uganda express resilience, the factors that influence their resilience experiences, and what insights into resilience mean for the broader concept of integration.

The case study: Conflicts and CBOW in northern Uganda

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in northern Uganda lasted from 1987 to 2008, and was the single most violent conflict in Uganda's post-independence history (e.g., Jeffery, 2011, p. 84–86; Refugee Law Project, 2014, p. 149–153; Opio, 2015; Allen et al., 2020, p. 663–683). The conflict was characterized by gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity including; plundering property, abduction of thousands of children and young adults, maiming of civilians

and massacres (Refugee Law Project, 2014; Opio, 2015, p. 151–152). Whereas, Acholiland and its immediate border communities were at the epicenter of the conflict, the war gradually ate up large chunks of northern Uganda, to cover West Nile, Lango, and Teso in eastern Uganda. "Two million people in the Acholi sub region, 200,000 people in the Teso (eastern Uganda) sub region, 41,000 people in West Nile and 33% of the population in the Lango sub region were displaced due to the conflict" (Refugee Law Project, 2014, p. 133).

At least 60,000 civilians were abducted between 1986 and 2008, including at least one in three adolescent boys and one in six adolescent girls (Carlson and Mazurana, 2008, p. 4, 16). Once abducted, the individual would undergo "a well-designed process of brutalization" including forcing them under "threats of death and torture to take part in beatings and killings of children who collapse under the burden of the workload, who disobey orders, or who attempt to escape" (Akhavan, 2005, p. 406, see also p. 283). As part of indoctrination, abducted people were specifically forced to commit atrocities often on their own families and communities so they would find it hard to leave the LRA (Pham et al., 2009, p. 9–23). As documented in several accounts (e.g., Akello et al., 2006, p. 229; Stout, 2013, p. 27), atrocities associated with the LRA made it hard for ex-combatants to reintegrate in their pre-war communities once they left the LRA.

At least 10,000 of the abducted girls and young women became forced wives and had children out of their experiences between 1998 and 2004 (Akello, 2013, p. 149–156).[1] Scholars argue that the LRA used forced marriage for various purposes, besides sexual services, with "wives" typically performing domestic roles, cooking and washing for their LRA "husbands," and giving birth to and raising children (e.g., Carlson and Mazurana, 2008, p. 45; Baines, 2014, p. 405). But sexual violence perpetrated by the LRA also targeted civilians during raids in northern Uganda (e.g., Ojiambo, 2005, p. 10; Pham et al., 2007, p. 18; Arieff, 2010, p. 7).

Scholars argue that the marriage-like relationships that Kony nurtured in his movement contradicted the local norms and institutions regulating sex, marriage and motherhood in peacetime northern Ugandan communities, many of which became the return communities of the women and their children (e.g., Apio, 2016, p. 174). Returning mothers and their children faced a lot of stigma and found it more difficult to reintegrate compared to other ex-combatants (e.g., Carlson and Mazurana, 2008, p. 5; Buss et al., 2014, p. 75; Apio, 2016, p. 178). In other words, stigma has been central in determining the experience and extent of reintegration of survivors and their children (Buss et al., 2014, p. 75; Opio, 2015; Akullo, 2019). Mothers with children were isolated from the rest of society because of the biological association of the children with the LRA (Esuruku, 2011, p. 30; Buss et al., 2014, p. 45). Most of these women were "shunned by their families and labeled as 'bush women' by their communities", forcing them to abandon their homes to live in the suburbs of Gulu where many earned a living as prostitutes or alcohol brewers (Esuruku, 2011, p. 30).

Beyond the LRA's abductions and sexual violence, northern Uganda has also been the scene of a less publicized non-state conflict of cattle rustling since 1987 (e.g., Refugee Law Project, 2014, p. 145; ICPALD, 2019).[2] Whereas studies have focused on the millions of herds of cattle lost to raids, and subsequent disarmament processes, accounts of gross human rights violation on victim communities across the region have rarely been documented. Sexual violence remains a casualty in this regard. Recent studies however suggests that countless children and women were raped, abducted, and sometimes killed (e.g., Seymour et al., 2022). Whereas many were kept for short periods of time during the course of the raids, some were taken into Karamoja and assimilated into families against their will, and later forced to "marry." Although their case is not well-known in the field of conflict-related sexual violence, their experiences of stigma, and discrimination, among others, have started appearing in studies (Akello et al., 2006; Mukasa, 2017). Available literature indicates that besides the long term consequences of the sexual violence suffered (such as fistula, bullet wounds, stigma and rejection) survivors also grappled to raise children they had as a result of sexual violence. For example, a recent study identified a 45-year-old woman who had escaped from a forced marriage with her 5 out of 6 children (the eldest had reportedly joined a group of raiders and was absent at the time of her escape) back to her natal family in Otuke district in east Lango in 2012. She had been abducted as a child in 1987. A recent research impact intervention based on a documentary ("The Wound is Where The Light Enters")[3] also included children linked to cattle raids in Lango.

Central to the understanding of the experiences of CBOW (and particularly those linked to the LRA) is the local argument by Lango elders that abduction and forced marriage contradicted Lango's jural rules of attaining motherhood and affiliation of a woman's offspring (Apio, 2016). Affiliation status determined the residential options and access to cultural, social and economic resources associated with either of the biological

1 See also: Ongwen Case. https://www.icc-cpi.int/uganda/ongwen.

2 Cattle raiding by rustlers from Karamoja led to the loss of millions of herds of cattle, with the human costs including killings, abduction, rape and forced marriages of children and women from Acholi, and Lango into Karamoja. Abductees have often found their way back into their old communities even after years of being held hostage, and many return with pregnancies or children of their own.

3 Dheeraj Akolkar (Vardo films). "The Wound is Where The Light Enters." Available from: https://www.chibow.org/single-post/the-wound-is-where-the-light-enters-wins-at-the-ahrc-research-in-film-awards-2021 (accessed on 28 March, 2022).

parents. For example, at the time of the study, the largely patriarchal Lango still affiliated offspring of a married woman to her husband's as long as the offspring was conceived within the marriage (even if the pater was different). Offspring of women conceived before or after a divorce would still affiliate to the mother's patriclan. Affiliation of male children opened doors for these children to automatically benefit from patrilineal assets—such as land and livestock, were the child male. In return, his labor, achievements and losses would be associated with the patriline to which he/she was affiliated. Where, she or he accused of causing death to a person from another patriclan, then the responsibility for meeting blood compensation would fall on the membership of her/his patriclan. Such provisions and liabilities raised the stakes for CBOW, considering the extent of "damage" their fathers were associated with in the social-cultural environment—e.g., abduction, forced marriage, killings and displacement of entire communities, and for the cattle raiders; violent cattle and other livestock raids, and forceful affiliation of abductees as family members in Karamoja, forced scarification and other bodily tribal markings on abductees, forced marriage, and impregnation.

By applying a social-ecological approach to resilience therefore, the study directly targeted the status of CBOW affiliation, how they performed in terms of resilience and what resources mediated their performances.

Methodology

The study applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures in a two-phased fieldwork approach. In the first phase, the author administered a questionnaire comprising of demographic section and the culturally sensitive revised 17-item Children and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-R) (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011; Liebenberg et al., 2012). The aim was to obtain scores and measure resilience in CBOW. In the second phase, the author drew on the results from the analysis of the CYRM-R scores to identify eight participants to take part in a subsequent semi-structured interview. The eight participants represented different quartiles and had different scores on the relational/caretaker and personal resilience sub scales. This section provides a summary of description about the study instruments, sampling of study participants, study procedure, and how the analysis was conducted.

Study instruments

The mixed methods study, implemented in two phases, involved the application of a questionnaire and an interview guide; all specifically tailored to suit the context and the aim of the study.

Phase 1: The questionnaire

The questionnaire had two sections. The first section was made up of questions aimed at generating demographic information. These included; age/year of birth, sex/gender, marital status, having a child(ren), ethnicity, education level, employment/profession, and who was the head of household. The second section comprised of the CYRM-R scale. The CYRM-R is a self-report measure of social-ecological resilience suitable for use with individuals aged 10–23 (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011), but it can be applied to older adults depending on a researcher's assessment of the abilities of respondents (Resilience Research Centre, 2018, p. 23). The CYRM-R measure, made up of two subscales, typically consists of 17 items and can be scored on a 3-point Likert scale. The subscales are; personal resilience (10 items), which considers intrapersonal and interpersonal items; and caregiver/relational resilience (seven items), which relates to characteristics linked to the important relationships shared with a primary caregiver, a partner or family (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011). These subscales are however linked as they both rely on individual wider social environment to influence their resilience. All of the 17 items on the measure are positively worded, and the analysis relies on simple summary of responses. This 3-point version is scored using options of "No" (1), "Sometimes" (2), and "Yes" (3).

The CYRM-R measure enables individuals to easily comprehend items and give scores based on their own reflections. This was particularly appropriate because the study sample was part of a population various studies have described as one of the most neglected and marginalized in northern Uganda, and globally (Carpenter, 2007; Apio, 2016; Lee et al., 2021). In addition, respondents were drawn from locations deep in rural northern Uganda (Otuke and Oyam districts) with low levels of literacy (UBOS, 2014). For reliability, the questionnaire was translated and back translated into Lango (Luo), the local language widely spoken by the local population in the study sites.

Phase II: Semi-structured interviews

The interview stage drew on the suggested questions for "contextualizing measures" (see: CYRM and ARM User Manual 2.2, page 8; Resilience Research Centre, 2018), to generate an interview guide for the study. The questions were:

- What do I need to know to grow up well here?
- How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?
- What does it mean to you, your family and your community when bad things happen?
- What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
- What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?

- What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?
- What do you and others you know do to keep healthy? (Mentally, physically, emotionally, or spiritually)

The interviews were audio-recorded, and a consent form was used with options for seeking consent of a guardian in case of a minor, or if an adult participant asked a witness to observe the informed consent process. The informed consent forms were based on the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) format, and translated (and back translated) into Lango. The study was approved by the northern Ugandan-based Lacor Hospital Research Ethics Committee (LHIREC) (Ref. no: 0189/08/2021).

Sampling

The study conveniently sampled 35 CBOW, aged 15–28 years. This sample was identified through contacts with female survivors of CRSV who were known to the community based paralegals associated with the local NGO Facilitation for Peace and Development (FAPAD) based in Lira. 20 of the CBOW were drawn from Otuke district in east Lango, at the border with east Acholi and Karamojong, and were all fathered by cattle raiders. 15 other participants, all fathered by the LRA were drawn from Oyam district, in North West Lango at the border with west Acholi. The youngest (CBOW) participant in this study was born in 2006 and the oldest in 1993 (15–28 years old). The study thus involved respondents who were technically not yet adults (15–18 years), raising ethical issues regarding consent. For those whose ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old, the study designed an additional consent form for their parents or guardians. Additional provisions on the respondents' consent form (irrespective of the age range) included the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the completion of the questionnaire as well as during the interview phase. None of the 35 respondents in the study lived or had contact with their birth fathers or birth fathers' relatives.

Administering the questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered with the help of two local research assistants conversant with the language and geographical context from September to October 2021. To ensure that the varying levels of participants' literacy was taken into consideration, the research assistants read the questionnaire out aloud to each participant in a quiet and secure location of his/her choice. The research assistants each worked individually with the respondents to ensure they understood each of the 17 items in the CYRM-R measure, but also to comply with the minimal ethical standards for researching persons associated with sexual violence—a sensitive subject, particularly in contexts where studies associate conflict-related sexual violence with high levels of stigma (e.g., Carpenter, 2007; Apio, 2016; Lee et al., 2021). On average, each questionnaire took ∼20 min to complete compared to the standard average of 5–10 min advised by the Resilience Research Centre (2018). This was attributed to the demographic questions/items added to the CYRM-R scale.

Semi-structured interview

The author conducted four interviews, and one of the research assistants who had taken part in administering the questionnaire conducted the remaining four interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in Lango (a Luo dialect widely spoken in the study location) and audio-recorded upon taking consent of the participants. The interview recordings were then transcribed, and translated into English for further analysis.

Analysis

Analysis of data happened in two phases. In the first phase, the focus was on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and how each of them performed on the CYRM-R scale. Total scores for each participant ($N = 35$) for all 17 items were calculated, against the standard minimum score of 17 and maximum score of 51 (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011). Consequently the analysis considered comparing CBOW who posted high scores to low scorers, by placing overall scores into quartiles from lowest to highest in order to identify eight participants from different quartiles to take part in a qualitative investigation for potential reasons for these differences (see Table 1 for a summary of demographic information for the eight participants).

The second phase focused on the responses generated during the semi-structured interviews. First, the audio responses were transcribed and translated into English. The author then manually coded the responses and analyzed emerging patterns to support, by triangulation (Gretchen et al., 1985, p. 633; Dawadi et al., 2021, p. 28), the findings related to the CYRM-R scores above. All of the respondents were anonymized. Pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants in the presentation and discussion of study findings.

Results

The following are the findings of the analysis of the scores posted by 35 respondents on the CYRM-R scale, and the semi-structured interviews with eight participants (two female and six male) whose scores represented different quartiles on the CYRM- R scale.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of eight CBOW who took part in the qualitative study.

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Marital status	Household head	Conflict-link(s)
Agwa	Lango	Male	21	Married	Mother	Cattle raid
Ojok	Lango	Male	23	Married	Self	Cattle raid
Olinga	Lango	Male	21	Single	Maternal uncle	Cattle raid
Odongo	Lango	Male	24	Married	Mother	Cattle raid
Omodo	Lango	Male	17	Single	Stepfather	LRA
Bony	Lango	Male	22	Single	Mother	LRA
Akello	Lango	Female	17	Single	Stepfather	LRA
Akao	Lango	Female	17	Single	Maternal uncle	LRA

TABLE 2 Demographic characteristics of CBOW who took part in the study.

	n
Gender	
Females	10 (28.6%)
Males	25 (71.4%)
Marital status	
Single	26 (74.3%)
Married	7 (20%)
Divorced/separated	2 (5.7%)
Head of household	
Mother	19 (54.3%)
Stepfather	4 (11.4%)
Maternal grandparents	3 (8.6%)
Own household	3 (8.6%)
Maternal uncle	6 (17.1%)
Ethnicity	
Lango	34 (97.1%)
Acholi	1 (2.9%)
Birth status	
Linked to cattle raids	20 (57%)
Linked to LRA	15 (43%)

Demographics

The mean age of respondents was 19.69. Majority of them were males (71.4%, *n*: 25) compared to females (29.6%, *n*: 10). Of these, 57% (*n*: 20) had their births linked to cattle raids, while 43% (*n*: 15) were linked to LRA sexual violence. 1 (2.9%) respondent identified with the Acholi ethnicity, while 34 (97.1%) respondents identified with Lango ethnicity (see Table 2 for a summary of the demographic characteristics of CBOW who took part in the study).

At the time of the study, majority of the respondents were single (74.3%, *n*: 26), followed by those that were married (20%, *n*: 7), and those that had separated or divorced (5.7%, *n*: 2). Out of the 35 respondents in the study, 54.3% (*n*: 19) lived in households headed by their mothers, while 17.1% lived in their mothers' brother's households. The remaining respondents either lived in households headed by a stepfather (11.4%, *n*: 4), maternal grandparents (8.6%, *n*: 3), or own household as married men (8.6%, *n*: 3).

The overall total, means and standard deviations in resilience scores were calculated. As regards resilience overall scores, the lowest on the CYRM-R scale was 28, which was well above the standard minimum overall score of 17, and the highest was 48 compared to the standard maximum overall score of 51. The results showed a total overall average resilience score of 38.31 (SD = 5.098). In addition, participants aged 19 and above had higher resilience scores ($M = 21.38$, SD = 1.360) compared to those aged 15–18 years old ($M = 17.19$, SD = 1.360). Those whose birth were linked to cattle raids had higher resilience scores ($M = 39.35$, SD = 5.194) compared to respondents whose births were linked to the LRA ($M = 36.93$, SD = 4.788). As regards sex, individual male participants indicated more positive association with resilience enhancing factors on the CYRM-R scale compared to female respondents. That is; on average male respondents answered "sometimes" to the 17 items (which are considered in this study as resilience enhancing factors for CBOW) compared to female respondents who on average provided the answer "no."

CBOW's understanding of resilience

Whereas, the study applied a standardized measure of resilience (CYRM-R), it was important for it to put into perspective what the participants meant by resilience—and to further project that meaning onto their respective CYRM-R scores. The study did this by asking participants to describe people who grow up well in spite of suffering adversity. Some of their responses included the following;

> …people who grow up well here even when they face problems are known by their good relationship with other people, and the extent to which they support each other. They are known as God-fearing people (interview with Omodo, 21 January 2022).

Olinga (20 January, 2022), on his part stated that:

> …they are courageous and strong because they have gone through many challenges but still managed to handle life in a way that makes them continue surviving."

Another, Ojok, explained that:

> "they are people with strong blood, because they survived the hardship while in the bush" (20 January, 2022).

By referring to good social relationship, and support networks that individuals draw on, participants underscored the importance of connections and community in their understanding of resilience. However, they also drew attention to the importance of personal attributes such as faith or belief, bravery and strength, among others. Important to note is that their responses were not necessarily worded in the same way local population explained resilience, but were descriptive and rooted in their individual everyday experiences of how the local social-cultural environment interacted with each of them. This is crucial because another study that targeted non-CBOW survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (also linked to the LRA and cattle raids) in the same locality (some of whom were mothers of the CBOW who participated in the study for this current article) reported heavy use of metaphors to refer to resilience.[4] For example, the older non-CBOW generations used "roc"—a term denoting the processes of ecdysis that refers to the shedding of old skin in arthropods (e.g., Cheong et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019), and the fallowing of arable land (as explained by Lango elders in that study) to sum up the dominant meaning of what they understood as resilience. As a survivor in that particular study (with non-CBOW) stated; "the life we are living now that the war is no longer here is, I can say, a life that has 'roc' {renewed}. We have peace. We sleep in the house. We dig {the land}. We do things that we can because there is now no war. We rest, and that's why I say life has 'roc' [renewed]."[5]

Although the current article did not explore the nuanced meaning of resilience among CBOW any further, the descriptive as opposed to metaphoric language used by the older non-CBOW generations could be explained by the extent of socialization of CBOW in the Lango social-cultural environment. In other words, CBOW may not have been able to readily comprehend nuanced languages of their new contextual environments because either they had spent longer periods growing up outside of Lango (e.g., in Karamoja or in the LRA), or were still young at the time of the study, or both.

Co-creating resilience in different sub contexts

The results showed that individual CYRM-R items contributed differently to the overall scores, even where respondents had same scores. For example, four respondents, each with total scores of 36, which is also one of two modes, did not always draw uniform scores from the same items. On the contrary, there was a mix of contributions across all the 17 items that make the CYRM-R. The difference in how CBOW score similar items suggests that access to and interactions with resilience-supportive (or protective) factors in their respective environments differ for every CBOW and that different factors contribute differently in the co-creation of resilience. This suggestion also mirrors the different experiences CBOW had, depending on whether one's birth was linked to the LRA or to the cattle raiding conflicts.

As the results above showed, participants whose birth were linked to cattle raiding-related sexual violence had higher resilience scores compared to those whose births were linked to LRA sexual violence. The skewedness of the results in favor of participants in Otuke/linked to cattle rustling, majority of whom are male ($n = 18$), is also reflected in the results on sex above, where male participants performed better compared to female participants (majority of whom were linked to the LRA and hailed from Oyam). Whereas the analysis could not determine the reasons for this variation, participants in the cattle raiding conflict were older in ages compared to those associated with the LRA. And, as the results further showed, those aged 19 years and older (15 of whom were linked to cattle raids and only 5 to the LRA) showed higher resilience levels compared to those aged 15–18 years (11 of whom were linked to the LRA and only 4 to the cattle raids). Moreover, there can be a possibility of resilience factors at different levels of the social-cultural environment behaving differently in Otuke compared to Oyam, even though both districts are located in Lango; and how CBOW linked to the LRA are perceived and "accepted" compared to those linked to cattle raids. These differences are important in mediating how resilience can be understood in different (sub) contexts associated with CBOW, and for the design of integration policies and programmes.

Variations were further emphasized by all eight interviewees. For example, interviewees identified how family and community differentially related with them as important factors in their lives. Within the family, most CBOW identified mothers as particularly significant, while others associated more with grandparents. Some relied more on other members of their mothers' extended families, particularly mothers' brothers, their agnates and their children. Relationships with stepfathers were also singled out as significant.

Often, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, participants spoke about their birth fathers when referring to stigma and denial of right to critical resilience resources

4 Fieldwork notes for the CSRS study in northern Uganda, September 2019 to August 2020.

5 Participant UG-EOA-44 (CSRS study), Kilak county, Pader district in northern Uganda, 19 February 2019.

like land—an important resource controlled by male elders of respective patriclans in Lango. The absence of fathers who could have guaranteed, by affiliation, their access to such resources suggested that birth fathers were an important (but missing) resource that could have enhanced the co-creation of their resilience.

Often, the prevailing social-cultural environment shaped the nature of bonds associated with CBOW. For example, when asked how his life was growing up, 21-year old male participant Olinga who had an overall score of 45 (second highest) on the CYRM-R scale stated, among other things:

> Life did not start well for me, because I was rejected by my relatives when I returned from captivity. Many of them were scared of me due to my being a male child. They thought my existence would bring land wrangles among the family members since there were already many boys at home.

Interviewees also identified factors in both the immediate and broader community they lived in as significant in their lives. These included peers and friends, school community (students and teachers), mother's patrilineage and religious leaders. These were sometimes labeled as supportive and sometimes as non-supportive, demonstrating how resilience factors may work differently at different times and for different CBOW. The significance of these bonds and relationships was demonstrated by how interviewees apportioned their experiences of access and denial to familial and communal resources they perceived as important in enhancing their livelihoods. For example, 17-year-old female participant Akello who was one of the three respondents with the second highest overall CYRM-R score of 45, explained the role her teachers played in her life;

> While at school, my life was made difficult by some students. They would backbite me and laugh at my being born {a CBOW}. When I reported this to my teachers, they encouraged me and asked me to ignore those bad words. Often, the teachers gave them a punishment so they could stop disturbing me in school.

Studies already showed that stigma directed at CBOW often stem from their perceived birth status, and interacts with already existing intersectional issues such as gender, disabilities, local cultural jural rules and practices, and poverty to continuously diminish opportunities for integration (e.g., Apio, 2016; Denov and Lakor, 2017; Neenan, 2017; Ruseishvili, 2021). The significance of familial and communal bonds and relationships to resilience in CBOW is explored further in the section on relational factors below.

Further analysis suggests that all eight participants interviewed found personal agency, which they variously stated came in form of skills, a positive mind, a peace of mind, spirituality and being industrious, essential in helping CBOW define, access and interact with these familial and communal bonds and relationships in a mutually beneficial way. In this way, CBOW and their wider environments are seen co-creating or co-facilitating prospects of integration.[6] For example, 20-year-old Agwa, a male participant in Otuke, explained that his mother gave birth to him and his younger brother during her captivity in Karamoja. But upon escaping, she resettled them in her parents' homestead at Otuke. He further explained that upon the death of his widowed grandmother, members of his mother's patriclan (mother's brothers), expelled him, his brother and his mother from the land. He added that it was his industriousness that gave him a new home:

> A good Samaritan who owned a farm in the community came to our rescue and we are now living on his land. We normally work for him for free, like farming, selling his animals, and visiting his children in school so he can continue providing shelter for us.

Another, 17-year-old male participant Omodo who lived with his mother, stepfather and their two children in Oyam, and had the second lowest overall score on the CYRM-R scale at 29, explained that he started his own rice-growing farm on a wetland and was looking forward to accumulating capital to start a better life elsewhere. He added that the wetland was a resource nobody owned, compared to his stepfather's land, which he had no chance accessing or ever owning.

Another, 23-year-old male participant Ojok explained that he undertook a joint brick-making business with two friends for a number of years and used the money to solve his family's needs and pay his school fees. He further stated he bought a piece of land to move his mother and brother upon their grandparents' death when his mother's brothers sent them away from the family land. Not only was Ojok able to put his industriousness to good use, but he did it in concert with youth from his local community. Together with them, Ojok transformed his agency into a means of breaking down boundaries that separated him as a CBOW, and other youth in his community. In other words, his example demonstrated that CBOW were able to co-construct important connections and relationships within their own communities to enhance their wellbeing.

These examples show the important role CBOW's agency play in their own integration. The concept of resilience enables CBOW to demonstrate their role in co-creating their own integration in their wider environments. Further, the examples suggest that individual CBOWs depend on their own material and social-cultural environment to reinforce resilience. Subsequent discussions of the analysis will therefore draw

6 Already resilience scholar Theron et al. (2021) who has studied resilience in adolescents in southern Africa argue that Resilience is co-facilitated by individuals and their wider material and social-cultural environment, and that neither can do it alone.

on personal and relational aspects of CBOW's experiences to elaborate on findings for their full effects.

Relational factors

In this study, and based on inputs from interviewees, the concept of family included mother, mother's natal family members, stepfathers, and, in the case of an interviewee who was married or had a partner, his or her own marital family. The local extended family notion sometimes incorporated members of a mother's entire patriclan. For example, some male interviewees singled members of their mothers' patriclans as being responsible for denying them right to land. However, interviewees also often spoke about important connections and relationships with the material and wider social-cultural environment with which they interacted. But the significance of mothers in CBOW lives in particular, often positioned mothers as common denominators in how interviewees viewed and positioned themselves within the prevailing social-cultural environment. The analysis has therefore taken into consideration these contextual issues in defining aspects of relational resilience for CBOW in this study.

Further analysis suggests that respondents relate differently with resilience "enhancing" or "protective" resources within their respective social-ecological environment. An average CBOW has stronger resilience-supportive bonds within the familial environment compared to bonds with other entities in the wider community. Generally, interviewees identified and associated mothers, mother's natal families, and mother's marital family as important reference points within their respective families. These reference points are where bonds forged can work to co-create resilience in CBOW. Weakened or ruptured bonds can limit, interrupt, suspend or prevent interactions and relationships that are enabling for resilience in CBOW.

The nature of relationship and how a CBOW interacted with the household head, was important in determining the extent of available resources CBOW had at their disposal. Important was that the "available resources" for households headed by mothers were extremely limited at the backdrop of a largely patriarchal community that relied majorly on customary land for its economic wellbeing, and this affected the extent of resilience resources participants could drew from. For example, participant Ojok who scored lowest at the overall CYRM-R scale level, stated that his mother was thrown out by her brothers when his grandparents died, interrupting the lives of Ojok and his family. Ojok, his mother and his brother were only able to resume their lives when they located another piece of land, which was barely enough to meet their farming needs (interview with Ojok, 14 November 2021).

Co-creating resilience in CBOW

Further analysis of the individual items on the CYRM-R scale returned a mean score of 3.0 for the item "Getting an education is important to me," followed by a mean score of 2.77 for the item "I know how to behave/act in different situations…" These findings not only correlate with other studies that identify access to education as an important priority for CBOW, as expressed by mothers (e.g., Janine Clark, 2021, p. 1,080), but add voice to interviewees' responses which suggested getting an education changed their lives. For example, interviewee Olinga (with second highest score of 45) who was at a teachers' training institute stated that not only had people in his community offered him a leadership role, but he was able to apply to become a head teacher at a primary school (interview with Olinga, 20 January 2022). Importantly, interviewees associated vocational skills and knowledge with more opportunities to improve on their economic wellbeing. For example 21 year old Agwa stated;

> I had a friend called [] who taught me how to weld and I was earning small amount of money from it…with the little [skill] I learnt in welding, I took my mother's advice to move to Lira and I took an additional course to advance my skills. I now have a certificate in metal fabrication and I work in a better place (interview with Agwa, 19 January 2022).

However, majority (six interviewees) stated they were either still in primary school or had dropped out. Lack of school fees was often cited.

The importance of Agwa's experience was not only shown in the skills he had gained and put to use, but how he acquired it. By referring to a friend as the source of his training in welding, Agwa demonstrated the importance of connections and relationships with resources in his wider environment and how they helped him to co-produce and utilize skills to enhance his wellbeing.

On another note, lowest scores on the CYRM-R scale were for the item "My friends stand by me when times are hard," followed by "I am treated fairly in my community." Importantly, these scores (as with overall CYRM-R scores cited above) correlate with interviewees' perception of how they related with other people in their communities. A common denominator most cited was stigma, an important resilience-diminishing factor which differentially influenced the lives of interviewees.

Whereas all eight interviewees complained about stigma linked to their birth, each of them identified and perceived it differently. Some stated that they experienced stigma differently from different individuals within their respective families, while others associated it with different people in their wider communities. Still, most interviewees experienced stigma from within their families, neighborhoods and schools. These differences in perceived stigma from within families, neighborhoods and communities more broadly demonstrate complex layers of factors that interact with each other to define the wellbeing of a CBOW. Moreover, they also demonstrated clarity on the bonds that CBOW perceived as important in their integration.

For example, 17-year-old Akello whose birth was linked to the LRA cited stigma as defining her relationship with members of her community. She stated;

> My life has not been good in the community. Majority of community members abuse me that I am the product of Kony {LRA leader} and that because of that, I do not deserve to stay in my village. Others say I am fatherless and this makes me feel so sad (interview with Akello, 22 January 2022).

Another, 17-year-old male participant Omodo, whose birth was also linked to the LRA sexual violence, and had a total score of 29 (second lowest), complained about on-going stigma, stating:

> In the community, they treat me bad like I am not one of them. Some of them tell me to my face that I do not belong to that place and that I should look for my home. Sometimes, I hear them whispering that my stepfather is not my real father, and that I am a bastard. This makes me feel out of place and I begin regretting why I was born (interview with Omodo, 21 January 2022).

The narrative about stigma was not any different for interviewees whose births were linked to cattle rustling. For example, 21-year-old Agwa (whose younger brother was also fathered by a cattle rustler) elaborated their experiences, which can be associated with most CBOW. He stated:

> In the village, we also face a lot of stigma from both relatives and community members. For example, when my brother and I are walking around the village, people point at us while saying "those are children of the Karamojong," and this makes us feel out of place. But there is nothing we can do.

For participant Ojok, stigma was felt all around. He stated,

> "I and my brother are called 'ogwangogwang' [wild cats] by our mother's relatives and other people in the community where we live. They keep saying we are a waste of resources because it is just a matter of time before we steal all of the cows and head back to Karamoja" (interview with Ojok, 20 January 2022).[7]

On her part, 17-year-old Female participant Akao, whose birth was linked to the LRA sexual violence and had PR score of 19, emphasized that stigma was likely to remain in her life. She stated, "...even if you grow up well, removing that name [stigma] from the minds of people is very difficult" (interview with Akao on 14 November 2021). With such a high score Akao, who found being referred to as "Kony's child" stigmatizing, on the one hand, demonstrated the complexity of associating resilience with CBOW who continue living in their mothers' natal families and communities—particularly those that experienced the conflicts. On the other hand, her example showed that whereas CBOW continue to experience adversity, they are not stuck in it.

These testimonies further demonstrate just how complex, and intricately linked to the wider social-cultural environment, CBOW's perceptions of their personal resources were, both as children and as young adults in northern Uganda. Whereas, perceived stigma indicated the extent of disconnections and ruptures in bonds and relationships CBOW had with individuals in their wider environments, at another level stigma clarified who was available to support the co-facilitation of resilience in CBOW. This was especially pronounced where such individuals also had control over resources perceived by CBOW as important in their lives, such as land, money for school fees and emotional support. These individuals were important in the unlocking of such resources. The health or strength of bonds was felt in the extent to which those bonds were essential in facilitating protection or access to protective resources for CBOW. For example, interviewee Omodo stated that his most debilitating experience was the refusal of his stepfather to meet the cost of his education, which forced him to drop out of school. Omodo further stated that he had come to terms with the possibility that his stepfather would not allow him access to his lands. As such Omodo stated he was investing in rice growing on a swampy patch of land that belonged to no one in particular with the aim of accumulating funds to start a new life elsewhere. Bonds of kinship and community were therefore important in either enhancing or diminishing resilience in CBOW. By linking perceptions of stigma to the nature and health of bonds of kinship and communal relationships, CBOW demonstrated that factors associated with their personal resilience did not always act independently. In other words the factors linked to individual CBOW agency and those linked to relationships tend to interact with each other to enhance or diminish resilience in CBOW, suggesting they were best addressed concurrently for the benefit of CBOW.

Legacies of harms on protective factors

Interviews suggested that bonds and relationships in the wider environments were more often than not also struggling with the effects of harms suffered during conflict, which tend to impact on how they relate with CBOW. For example, interviewees identified relatives who were themselves struggling with stigma and rejection, alcohol abuse, poverty and therefore inability to meet basic needs at home. For example, 24-year-old Odongo whose birth was linked to cattle rustling stated that, "My mother was always weak, and I keep thinking it was the effect of the alcohol she abused. She simply took too much alcohol and it was bad for us" (interview with Odongo, 20 January 2022). This example shows how CBOW's experiences of resilience-influencing factors are linked to other people and in the broader social ecology.

7 The cattle rustling activities in northern Uganda is associated with groups from the Karamoja region.

Interviewees also demonstrated how harms they suffered during armed conflict, not necessarily linked to their birth, influence their experiences of resilience. These included abduction, physical and mental health-related issues. For example, 24-year old Odongo whose birth was linked to the sexual violence associated with cattle rustling, complained about a chronic health problem he sustained when he was abducted in childhood by the LRA. He states:

> Another problem that I am going through is severe pain in my foot. There is something which keeps growing inside my foot, and I do not understand what it is. It started when I roamed the bush as a child abducted by the LRA. At times when it grows big and protrudes, I can cut it with a razorblade, and sometimes I limp or walk like a lame person. I feel I need to get an operation so that I can walk well but I do not have the money to go to the hospital (interview with Odongo, 22 January, 2022).

Odongo's complaint of a crippling chronic foot pain has significant implications for the contribution of both his personal resilience (as it affects his mobility and involvement in physical activities at home and in the community), and relational resilience as physical disability is often a source of stigma and rejection in most rural communities in Lango (e.g., HRW, 2010). Moreover, Odongo also complained about stigma linked to his birth, and a mother who abused alcohol. His, like for many other CBOW, was therefore a constellation of resilience-challenging factors linked to his war experiences, and layers of other everyday social-cultural and contextual factors.

Still, within the same conflict, participants had different experiences, often influenced by a number of other factors such as gender, age, marital status of mother before and after abduction, absence or presence of maternal grandparents, etc. Important to note is that the two conflicts happened in communities that have similar social-cultural contexts - with varying degrees of patriarchal under/overtones. In some cases the CBOW mothers were sexually abused by both LRA and cattle raiders. Also, in one of the cases, a CBOW whose birth was linked to sexual violence during cattle raids was abducted by the LRA for a period of time. Whereas there are differences even within same group, the study did not dig further. Rather the study aimed at assessing whether CBOW demonstrate resilience to begin a debate on what might explain the findings. This was therefore a limited study.

Conclusion

The scores on the CYRM-R scale demonstrated by the respondents showed that CBOW were not merely stuck in their problems, past and present. The scores demonstrated variation in resilience; with some participants demonstrating high levels of resilience in the face of significant adversities. The findings indicate CBOW were confronting the realities of their birth status, and making the best use of their resources and those within their wider environments to adapt and overcome difficulties.

Interviewees further showed the extent of resilience enhancing resources available, what these resources were, where they were located, and how harms suffered compromised their roles in co-producing resilience in CBOW in northern Uganda. Participants identified having supportive connections with family—with mothers being the most accessible, and other people in the community, acquiring skills to engage in economic activities, supportive school environment, having a positive mind, and spirituality as important resilience-enhancing factors for CBOW.

This however did not mean that commonly known experiences of CBOW such as stigma and rejection had altogether disappeared. On the contrary, interviewees suggested that they still suffered stigma, rejection, health problems, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities, among others.

Limitations of the study

The empirical results reported herein should be considered in the light of some conceptual, contextual and methodological limitations. First, whereas other studies have demonstrated that the CYRM-R has good psychometric properties, the current study did not evaluate reliability and consistency extensively due to limitations of time, and the study objectives. The study however noted the assumptions inherent in some of the items. Specifically, the statements "Friends stand by me when times are hard," and "I feel that I belong at my school" assume that all of the targeted young people will have friends, and will be in school respectively. The current study applied all the 17 CYRM-R measures even when such statements did not apply. To ensure a robust outcome, the author used a mixed methods approach, which enabled a set of qualitative interviews with some of the respondents to complement and enrich the discussions of the findings regarding the CYRM-R. Thus, triangulation of data from the CYRM-R scores and the interviews supported and strengthened observations and discussions. Future investigations on validity and consistency of the measure for CBOW in different contexts and with larger samples can contribute in enriching the field.

Second, the CYRM-R is a standardized culturally sensitive measure. However, it does not have a Luo-version, for the language group (Lango) that participated in the study. The author translated the tool herself. In the absence of piloting the translated version, and to ensure some level of accuracy, the author had it back translated by an independent local Luo (Lango) speaker.

Third, whereas the study had set out to involve an equal number of male and female, female participants proved more difficult to recruit than male. Local contacts attributed this to stigma and early marriage. Families were prone to concealing their female CBOW's identity to increase future marriage prospects. Accordingly, the sample showed a skewed representation of the sexes, with males taking the larger share ($n = 25$) compared to females ($n = 10$).

Because the generalizability of convenience samples is unclear, the conclusions derived from the study sample may be biased, i.e., sample estimates may not be reflective of true effects among the larger CBOW population, as the sample may not accurately reflect the CBOW more generally.

Additional explorations to compare resilience in CBOW and non-CBOW, and the relationship between intergenerational harms and resilience (mothers of CBOW, CBOW and the children of CBOW), and how gender may influence resilience in CBOW in different contexts are recommended.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by LHIREC—Lacor Hospital Research Ethics Committee (Gulu, Uganda), accredited by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Born between war and peace: Situating peacekeeper-fathered children in research on children born of war

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In the last two decades, academic research has made significant progress exploring the life courses of so-called "children born of war" (CBOW). Similarly, the unintended consequences of peacekeeping operations, including the experiences of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, and children born of these interactions, have received preliminary academic attention. This paper compares peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) to other CBOW to determine how these two groups relate to one another. We draw on research conducted in two peacekeeping contexts where personnel have been accused of fathering and abandoning children (Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo) to empirically situate PKFC within the category of CBOW. We introduce 5,388 micro-narratives from Haitian and Congolese community members (Haiti $n = 2{,}541$, DRC $= 2{,}858$) and 113 qualitative interviews with mothers/grandmothers of PKFC (Haiti $n = 18$, DRC $n = 60$) and PKFC (DRC $n = 35$) to investigate how PKFC fit in the CBOW paradigm. Our findings demonstrate that many of the multi-level adversities faced by PKFC resemble those of the broader reference group. Given their shared developmental needs and experiences of exclusion, we conclude that PKFC constitute CBOW and ought to be included in conceptualisations pertaining to them. Acknowledging PKFC as CBOW offers new opportunities for policy development to (a) enhance protection and support of all CBOW and (b) remind states of their commitments to uphold the rights of all children.

KEYWORDS

children born of war, peacekeeper-fathered children, United Nations, peacekeeping, sexual abuse, children's rights, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Introduction

> My father left my mother while she was pregnant, and my mother gave birth to me when he had already left. I don't talk to him now. When I see other children with their fathers, I feel bad. I feel hurt when I see MONUSCO agents passing by because other children have their fathers, but I don't have mine [. . .] People call me "daughter of a bitch." When they do, I feel hurt and shocked about it. I do feel like I belong here, but people talk so much. They say that they will chase me because I am a foreigner [. . .] I would like to tell him[father] to think about me wherever he is. He needs to know that he left me in DR Congo. I am suffering. He should know that I don't have a family. If my mother dies, who will raise me? (Mado[1], 10–15 years old).

Since the 1990s, widespread reports implicating United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of local populations have raised concerns regarding the work of the UN and the effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs). Related to these allegations, journalists brought the issue of paternity claims resulting from SEA to public attention (Powell, 2001). Due to the socio-economic and political insecurity in regions where missions operate, peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC)—like Mado—are often conceived within unequal economic, power, and gender relations that are further reflected in the children's circumstances growing up.

Mado's father, a Uruguayan peacekeeper accused of perpetrating SEA during his deployment in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), left the UN-mission in Beni before Mado was born. Mado's mother, a Congolese civilian who started exchanging sexual services in return for daily goods as a minor, has been deeply affected by the socio-economic consequences of her pregnancy. To provide Mado with food, clothes and provisional shelter, she continues to engage in transactional sex with peacekeepers. Since she has yet to receive any support from the father or his military, she is unable to meet Mado's more long-term needs including her education.

The above snapshot highlights the complex relationships PKFC have with their families and communities. Affiliated with a force deployed to serve and protect civilians, Mado describes the far-reaching implications of being conceived through SEA, including the stigma associated with her identity. She relates her experience with ostracization and exclusion both to her mother's status in society (she is called the "daughter of a bitch") and her father's foreign background (she is chased for being a "foreigner"). Set apart from local children by her parentage, limited familial network and access to resources, she draws comparisons to her peers, who have relationships with their fathers, and live in better financial situations. Her comments suggest that she attributes her adverse conditions to her father's absence and longs to be reunited with him in order to improve her circumstances. In communicating her adversities on multiple interacting levels (identity issues, lack of care and protection, socio-economic discrimination), Mado's story draws parallels to the difficult position of children born of war (CBOW) globally.

The emergence of CBOW as a field of academic interest has led to a small but growing body of work that conceptualizes the lives of individuals who are born as a result of sexual relations between a soldier (member of a warring faction, paramilitary group, rebel or any other person directly participating in warfare) and a community member (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). The theoretical framing of CBOW includes children fathered by peacekeeping forces, therefore, it has often been assumed that PKFC's context of conception and related needs mirror those of other CBOW groups. However, the life courses of PKFC are vastly under-studied and little is known regarding how their childhood and adolescence experiences compare to those described in the CBOW literature (Carpenter, 2007; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010). Despite recent advances in understanding their unique connection to post-conflict communities (Vahedi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2020, 2022a,b), to date, neither the UN, civil society organizations nor academia have investigated how PKFC are situated amongst those more traditionally recognized as CBOW (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021).

As a comparatively recent phenomenon, there appears to be a disconnect between the categorization of PKFC in different streams of academic literature and policy engagement. While CBOW scholars have considered PKFC part of the CBOW paradigm, in the peacekeeping literature the terminology has not been applied consistently. This discrepancy is illustrated in UN policies which argue that PKFC's needs are better reflected in protocols for victims of peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA than CBOW, referring to children like Mado as "children born of SEA" (UN General Assembly, 2022). This framing is common in writings on SEA, arguably denying PKFC their own identity and limiting those born of consensual sexual relations their rights to support. While employing a policy-oriented perspective that focuses on procedural gaps in providing victims of SEA with assistance is essential in shaping more appropriate responses to PKFC wellbeing, considering them secondary victims of exploitation/abuse may limit the focus on them as a category of war-affected populations with distinct needs and rights (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; Blau, 2016). Hence, there is a gap between the theoretical understanding of PKFC in the CBOW literature on the one side, and the political understanding of "children born of SEA" in peacekeeping on the other. This article addresses this gap and advances the categorization of

1 Mado, a pseudonym, participated in semi-structured interviews in the DRC in 2018.

PKFC by introducing empirical evidence on their life courses that informs broader conceptual questions regarding how PKFC should be recognized and protected through international legal mechanisms and regulations. Based on original research from Haiti (2017) and the DRC (2018) we empirically situate PKFC in the CBOW literature and describe how they fit into the current nomenclatura and broader CBOW category.

Literature review

Peacekeeper-fathered children

Sexual relations between peacekeepers and beneficiaries of assistance are prohibited by the UN's zero tolerance policy (UN Secretariat, 2003); however, such relations have repeatedly resulted in children being conceived between members of UN peacekeeping forces and local women and girls (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; Lee and Bartels, 2019). PKFC may be conceived through comparatively consensual relationships, including dating and long-term partnerships, through transactional interactions, or through sexually abusive acts, including rape or sexual abuse of a child[2]. Given that peacekeeping occurs in a context of armed conflict and insecurity, scholars have queried the degree to which individuals can give free and informed consent to engage in sexual relations with peacekeepers, arguing that most sexual interactions in these contexts are exploitative (Burke, 2014; Mudgway, 2017). Others have argued that positioning all sexual interactions between peacekeepers and locals as exploitative denies women's agency and oversimplifies the complicated relations all humans navigate in making decisions about sex (Simić, 2013).

While the issue of sexual misconduct by peacekeepers has attracted significant academic attention, the children born as a result have not. Preliminary evidence suggests that local populations in areas of UNPK deployment have coined terms referring to children fathered by peacekeepers that draw on the social, cultural, and political context of their conception (e.g., "ECOMOG babies," "little MINUSTAHS," "blue helmet babies") (Olonisakin and Aning, 1999; Myers et al., 2004; Vahedi et al., 2022). Journalists and researchers have sometimes adopted the expression "peace-babies" to describe children fathered by peacekeepers (e.g., Higate and Henry, 2004; Rudén and Utas, 2009; Simić, 2013). Since this constitutes a euphemistic label that runs the risk of obscuring the potentially violent circumstances of their conception and later developmental needs, we introduce the expression "peacekeeper-fathered children" to provide a more neutral term that minimizes research and presentation bias. The abbreviation "PKFC" is used to refer to all individuals who are fathered by a member of a UNPK force (military, police or civilian) and born to a local mother, irrespective of their age[3] or the circumstances of their conception.

Due to the lack of reliable data and extreme magnitude of underreporting of peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA (Grady, 2016), no scholar to date has attempted to estimate the global population of PKFC. While there is limited systematic research on PKFC, a review of the literature (academic and gray) shows that their existence is not a rarity. From a report by the Geneva Institute for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, an estimated 25,000 PKFC were conceived during the UN's transitional authority in Cambodia, and 6,600 PKFC born in the aftermath of the UN observer mission in Liberia (Bastick et al., 2007). The number of children fathered by peacekeepers during the "ECOMOG Baby Boom" in West Africa has been estimated to range from 25,000 (Cooper, 1998; Grieg, 2001) to 250,000 (Muawuya Zakariah Adam Gombe, 2010; p. 1). Reportedly, in Liberia, sexual relations between peacekeepers and local civilians were so widespread that several NGOs and orphanages were established to cope with the struggles of the abandoned mothers and children (Gaylor, 2001; Rumble and Mehta, 2007). Similar situations were reported from Kosovo where radio advertisements raised awareness regarding the negative consequences of having children with peacekeepers, indicating that the matter was of a significant scale during the Yugoslav wars (Grieg, 2001). In Sierra Leone, mothers of PKFC with foreign fathers are said to have lined the route to the airport when previous contingents left, begging peacekeepers for money to raise their children (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Journalistic and academic research from Haiti and the DRC further demonstrates the high numbers and high needs of PKFC in numerous contexts (Sieff, 2016; McVeigh, 2017; Vahedi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2022a).

In line with these mission-specific examples, researchers have suggested that the number of PKFC conceived during individual UN missions is likely between several hundreds to thousands (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; O'Neill, 2019). While the DRC and Haiti missions are among the first that have received sustained attention regarding the births of PKFC, children fathered and deserted by peacekeepers likely exist in many, if not all, countries that have hosted PKOs (Duffy, 2019). This brief review of the literature suggests that (a) PKFC are a significant population of global importance across different geopolitical contexts, (b) PKFC are underreported and under researched; as such, very little is known regarding their life courses. Since both the numbers and realities of the children remain, to a large

2 The Department of Peace Operations, in line with the rest of the UN system and following the principle established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, considers a child to be any person under the age of 18 regardless of the age of majority in their home state.

3 PKFC represent people at varying periods of life, from infants, to children, adolescents and adults depending on the years of operation the PKO. Hence, the term 'children' does not refer to the natural vulnerabilities of childhood specified in international human rights frameworks but instead describes PKFC as offspring of peacekeepers.

extent, subject of speculation, scholars have voiced the urgency of empirical research that situates PKFC in the literature on war-affected children (Rumble and Mehta, 2007).

Children born of war

Children fathered by peacekeeping forces and born to local mothers are considered part of a global group of children called CBOW (Carpenter, 2007; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010). The term CBOW refers to four broad categories of children: (1) children of enemy soldiers, (2) children of occupation forces, (3) children of child soldiers and (4) children of peacekeeping forces (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). In the mid-1990s, academics and journalists started exploring the life courses of children born of international armed conflict (e.g., children born during the two World Wars, post-war occupations, the Vietnam War and the Balkan War), creating awareness of their situations in different contexts and temporal periods (Bass, 1996; McKelvey, 1999; Grieg, 2001). Recent developments in the field draw attention to the lived experiences of children born of internal conflict, focusing predominantly on children born of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)[4] including children born to mothers forcibly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (Apio, 2016; Denov and Cadieux Van Vliet, 2020; Baines and Oliveira, 2021), children born of forced marriage and rape by Boko Haram fighters (Matfess, 2017), and children born as a result of genocidal rape in Rwanda (Banyanga et al., 2017; Denov and Lakor, 2018; Baines and Oliveira, 2021).

Despite growing data around CBOW and the challenges they face, who constitutes and does not constitute a CBOW is an ongoing matter of debate. Furthermore, numerous recognized populations of CBOW remain neglected from academic research (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). Exemplary of this omission are PKFC, who, despite being considered one of the four main subgroups of CBOW, have been almost entirely unexplored. Thus, there is limited evidence that the social and economic impact of PKFC's heritage resembles that of children fathered by occupation or enemy forces. It has sometimes been argued that including PKFC in the definition of CBOW may be unhelpful in driving policy agendas forward since their context of conception differs in that (a) PKFC may be born of more nuanced and less overtly violent sexual relations than other groups of CBOW (such as those born of genocidal rape), and (b) PKFC are fathered by individuals from a force employed to serve and protect the local population and thus, there may not be the same level of enmity toward them in comparison to occupation contexts (Lee, 2017; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). Hence, there is some uncertainty as to whether the experiences of PKFC are covered by broader conceptualisations pertaining to CBOW.

4 While CBOW are not limited to children conceived through sexual violence, recent academic and policy attention has largely focused on them. The United Kingdom (UK)'s 2021 'Call to Action' to ensure the rights and wellbeing of children born of CRSV is one such example.

Present paper

PKFC are comparatively understudied and are often excluded from international policy engagement on CBOW. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Haiti (2017) and the DRC (2018), this article addresses substantial knowledge gaps surrounding their life courses, and for the first time, empirically situates them within the category of CBOW. Since CBOW are defined by vulnerabilities which they do not share with other war-affected populations (Delić et al., 2017), we understand PKFC to comprise CBOW if they share these vulnerabilities. To describe the lived experiences of CBOW along with how PKFC's lived experiences may conform to or deviate from, we have consulted previously reported challenges for CBOW. More specifically, we have synthesized the available multi-disciplinary literature published over the past two decades using the socio-ecological model that was introduced by Lee and Glaesmer (2021). This integrated model was used as a heuristic tool to compare and contrast the vulnerabilities of PKFC and CBOW at the micro, meso, exo, and macro level, offering multi-level insights into how PKFC are situated vis-a-vis CBOW and thus should best be defined and categorized. We will use this model to study the circumstances of PKFC and evidence similarities and differences in their characteristics, addressing broader conceptual questions regarding their place within global regulatory systems and frameworks.

Methods

We draw on case studies from two post-colonial states that have hosted peacekeeping operations, Haiti and the DRC, to analyse to what extent the childhood/adolescence social and economic adversity among PKFC mirrors that experienced by CBOW in other contexts. Peacekeeping personnel in Haiti and the DRC are amongst those most often implicated in misconduct and thus these missions represent key cases with regards to the consequences of SEA. Since UN policy has often been developed in response to waves of allegations, many of which originated from Haiti and the DRC, these cases also represent landmarks for SEA programming. The duration of both missions (Haiti [MINUSTAH] 2004–2017; DRC [MONUC/MONUSCO] 1999–2022), the large size of deployed troops, and the scope of accusations would

suggest that there are a significant number of PKFC in both countries[5].

The research is grounded in field work conducted in partnership with local community-based organizations in Haiti (2017) and eastern DRC (2018) to increase the visibility of SEA victims and their children (Appendix A). Employing a comparative case study design with a predominantly qualitative approach (Gerring, 2004; Thomas, 2021), data were collected using SenseMaker® (Cognitive Edge, no date accessed 2022), a tablet-based software, and in-depth interviews. SenseMaker, a mixed-methods, narrative-capture app, was used by Haitian and Congolese participants to audio record short narratives about interactions between peacekeepers and local women and girls. These short narratives are referred to as micronarratives[6] since they are often brief, only 2–3 minutes in length. SenseMaker then asks participants to interpret the experience shared in the micronarrative by responding to a series of pre-defined interpretation questions. Ten UN bases in Haiti and six UN bases in eastern DRC were chosen and local community members were recruited from within an ∼30 km perimeter of each base. Participants were approached in public spaces such as markets, shops, bus stops, parks and so on. In both Haiti and DRC, a team of local research assistants from partner organizations facilitated the SenseMaker interviews after completing a five-day training. In Haiti, all data were collected in Haitian Kreyòl and in DRC data were collected in the participants' choice of Lingala or Swahili. Using this approach, a convenience sample of 2,541 Haitian and 2,858 Congolese community members shared and interpreted micronarratives about interactions between peacekeepers and local women and girls in areas of UNPK deployments. In collecting a large number of narratives about peacekeeper-civilian relations (positive and negative), the SenseMaker survey gathered perspectives from host community members who witnessed or experienced SEA-related pregnancies. Out of the completed community surveys, one in ten participants in Haiti ($n = 265$) and two out of five participants in the DRC ($n = 1{,}182$) referenced PKFC in the micro-narratives they shared. Female community members who disclosed raising a PKFC in the SenseMaker survey were invited to take part in a qualitative follow-up interview. This approach to sampling enabled the interviewing of mothers/grandmothers of PKFC (Haiti $n = 18$, DRC $n = 60$) who then functioned as gatekeepers to the interviewing of PKFC (DRC $n = 35$[7]).

Shedding light on a previously unexplored phenomenon, the study was explorative and descriptive in nature, designed to provide a first account of the experiences of women raising PKFC who were fathered and abandoned by peacekeepers. Since victims of SEA and children are considered vulnerable groups, interviewing them required circumventing a range of ethical and methodological difficulties. To break down traditional power hierarchies between researcher and participant and reduce the risk of the research inducing negative psychosocial outcomes, information was collected in a participant-oriented manner with open-ended questions that put the participant in control of the information shared (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Bell, 2001; Mertus, 2004). In order to include PKFC in the research in an ethical way, we employed age-appropriate interview methods with participatory elements and visual research (see Wagner et al., 2022c). More specifically, a family drawing exercise and photo-elicitation task were used to facilitate a discussion about PKFC's background without explicitly mentioning their heritage or exposing their context of conception. This enabled PKFC to be in control of the information shared and minimized the risk of disclosing previously unknown information. The risk of the study introducing psychological distress, victimization or stigma were further mitigated by collecting de-identified data, interviewing participants in private and keeping the nature and title of the interview open and general (study on peacekeeper-civilian interactions). The authors further set up a referral system for psychosocial and legal support *via* the local partner organisations.

All qualitative interview guides were self-constructed with topic questions and prompts addressing, inter alia, PKFC's place within their families, communities, cultures and political structures. Assuming that many of the fundamental matters around CBOW would serve as a starting point to studying the life courses of PKFC, we consulted existing case studies and theoretically guided assumptions on the life courses of CBOW to identify potential areas of hardship for PKFC and situate them within the broader context of CBOW research. Based on the multi-level adversities faced by CBOW, we investigated whether the experiences of PKFC, as explained by the children themselves and/or their mothers/caregivers, resemble those of CBOW by assessing their identity, relationships, needs and rights.

The interviews were analysed qualitatively, using a mixture of thematic and phenomenological approaches[8]. Triangulating

5 Between 2010 and 2022, the UN misconduct tracking system recorded 38 Haitian victims and 121 Congolese victims who raised paternity claims as a result of SEA (Conduct in UN Field Missions, no date). These numbers are considered under representations because of the barriers victims face in filing complaints, and have been criticised for being subject to significant fluctuations due to changes in policies, reporting, and taxonomies (Simić, 2015; Grady, 2016; Wagner et al., 2022a).

6 A short story in relation to an open-ended prompt.

7 See limitations section for a discussion of why PKFC were not interviewed in Haiti.

8 The present paper includes findings from previously published analyses that discuss specific aspects of PKFC's experiences in Haiti or the DRC. In order to compare PKFC's experiences in both countries and relate them to those of CBOW, this paper offers an overview of their previously identified challenges. Where more information concerning individual findings or their analysis is desired, the reader should refer to the original papers cited throughout.

TABLE 1 Challenges identified for peacekeeper-fathered children vs. other groups of CBOW.

	CBOW literature	PKFC research
Micro-Level	CBOW's lack of knowledge about their background negatively impacts their sense of self and familial relationships.	PKFC, like other CBOW, struggle with the taboo of their ancestry and query their identity due to their fathers' absence and lack of patrilineal family connections.
Meso-Level	Many CBOW experience marginalised social identities and frequent stigmatisation within their families and communities.	Likewise, stigma and discrimination present a common challenge for PKFC that can result in social separation and outsider status relative to families and communities.
Exo-Level	CBOW's experiences vary depending on the socio-cultural context, history and normative framework they are embedded in.	The level of hardship PKFC experience differs based on which traits they possess and how these traits are perceived locally.
Macro-Level	CBOW have legal and political needs that are not adequately enacted by policies.	Like all CBOW, PKFC have a right to recognition, support and full citizenship that is not being realised.

findings with the wider cross-sectional SenseMaker study helped check for inconsistencies and researcher biases during the interpretation and write-up stages.

Results

Through this research, we have identified several aspects of PKFC's heritage that translate into concerns on the micro-individual, meso-social, exo-cultural, and macro-policy level. Table 1 presents an overview of our key findings with regards to how PKFC are situated within the CBOW literature. Below, we will discuss what is known about the experiences of CBOW on each level before describing our results in relation to the literature.

Micro-level: Individual and family

On the micro-level, we explore PKFC's self-concept and sense of familial identity, discussing potential areas of hardship that were informed by the literature. Most CBOW grow up with a conspiracy of silence around their fathers that fuels their need to ascertain their roots throughout their lives (Mitreuter et al., 2019; Provost and Denov, 2020; Vahedi et al., 2020). The secrecy (family denial, lack of official discourse or information) around their origin can raise the feeling that their very existence is wrong or "taboo," a notion that is a root cause for the identity crisis that some CBOW experience (Koegeler-Abdi, 2021). The psychological impact of negative discourses concerning their existence can cause internalised stigma, shame, and anxiety (Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018). Children born of asymmetrical sexual relations like rape might develop an insecure bond with their mothers, for whom their conception is a painful memory (Van Ee and Kleber, 2012; Woolner et al., 2019). In some contexts, dysfunctional relationships with their maternal clans and kinship groups have been found to push CBOW into social isolation, as they long for a sense of self and acceptance (Meckel et al., 2016). A fragmented concept of family can contribute to adverse developmental trajectories and has been found to put CBOW at a higher risk of developing mental health issues, childhood trauma and somatization (Hucklenbroich et al., 2014; Glaesmer et al., 2017). Drawing on these insights, we have investigated whether PKFC's familial relationships are defined by similar feelings of "otherness" and exclusion.

In line with the literature, our analysis reveals that PKFC experience numerous challenges due to their fathers' abandonment and lack of patrilineal family connections, leading them to question fundamental aspects of their identity and belonging. Mothers of PKFC and other primary caregivers (i.e., maternal grandmothers) were often responsible for disclosing sensitive information about biological origins or navigating PKFC's queries about their identity (Vahedi et al., 2020).

> Now I have this child, and he is always questioning me about his father. He would like to know his dad. But unfortunately, I cannot give… I cannot find… I only give him a little explanation as much as he can understand based on his age. And I hope, God willing, if I am still alive when he gets older I will be able to give him more details. Since he cannot understand much as of yet, I can't explain everything, I just told him that his dad was a soldier who came to work around here (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti).

PKFC's lack of knowledge about their provenance makes forming a coherent self-concept difficult. The majority of participants reported that PKFC had little to no information about their fathers and received no financial support from them, which held negative implications for their self-esteem and prospects of becoming valued members of society. Unsettled by their incomplete biographies, PKFC engaged in wishful thinking regarding their relationships with their unknown fathers: "I wish I could see him. I wish I could live a good and happy life" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). Derived from comparisons with peers whose fathers contributed to their wellbeing and who lived in

better financial situations, PKFC saw searching for their fathers as imperative to securing their future (Wagner et al., 2022c). We found that in the DRC, divergence between the learned "ideal of family" and subjective life experience resulted in cognitive tension which was resolved through a situational attribution of neglect. PKFC attributed their fathers' lack of involvement in their lives to circumstances outside of their control (e.g., redeployment). This prevented negative self-attribution and thus, functioned as a defence mechanism for their self-esteem. In assuming that their fathers could not get in touch with them and were hindered in their provision of support, PKFC were able to maintain an identity as "good children" who are worthy of love and attention (Wagner et al., 2022c). This narrative increased the value of searching for fathers and made finding them a major priority.

Due to the peacekeepers' abandonment, mothers of PKFC were often solely responsible for child caring responsibilities and raised their children in settings of extreme socio-economic deprivation. In communities where many lacked essential goods for survival, financial hardship was both a key factor explaining women and girls perceived "desire" to have sexual relations with peacekeepers and a central consequence of peacekeeper fathers' abandonment (Lee and Bartels, 2019; Vahedi et al., 2020).

> About my past, here is what happened. I used to live in a bad situation, in the sense that my parents couldn't take care of me, help me with my needs. That's what led me to have a relationship with a MINUSTAH… I ended up having a baby with him. Once the baby was born, he left me, and hasn't taken care of us. I am the only one doing all I can to take care of the child. I haven't even graduated high school, [because I got pregnant] when I was in "segonde" [equivalent to 10th grade] (Mother, 25-30, Tabarre/Haiti).

Peacekeepers who negated their paternal obligations increased the economic and social vulnerability of mothers, leaving their children to grow up in unfavourable circumstances: "The child is living in these circumstances… which may affect her psychologically, giving her problems later in life. She would like to live well, but I cannot afford to give her that life" (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti). Many PKFC hoped that their fathers would return to alleviate their hardship: "I am worried a lot, I am not stable enough to live such a life. Therefore, I often wonder where my father is by saying "father, where are you? Come take me" (PKFC, 10–15, Kisangani/DRC). Absent fathers remained paramount in PKFC's lives and were sometimes depicted as "saviours" who would come to "rescue me [PKFC] from poverty" or "free me [them] from suffering" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). While the search for peacekeeper fathers was predominantly motivated by PKFC's need for support, being reunited with their fathers was also anticipated to enable improved integration into local communities, and exploration of paternal roots and personal identity. The certainty many PKFC voiced that their fathers were looking for them is illustrated in this comment from an adolescent PKFC in Kisangani: "Who sent you? Maybe you are the one he [father] sent in order to take me. Are you my helper?" Despite an all-consuming desire to locate peacekeepers, the possibilities of contact were minimal, and no PKFC in Haiti or the DRC were actively in touch with their fathers at the time of data collection.

Consequently, PKFC were often brought up by single mothers or close relatives like maternal grandparents or aunts and uncles. Their lack of support from paternal families and clans compounded a sense of illegitimacy and compromised PKFC's chances of sustainable livelihoods. Paternal abandonment also contributed to the feminization of poverty given that their mothers, who reported experiencing adverse socio-economic conditions, were PKFC's primary providers. Although increasingly reliant on their mothers and maternal families, some PKFC received limited care from maternal kin networks, causing them to compare themselves to orphans (Wagner et al., 2022c). Related to their "orphan identity" and lack of material possessions, PKFC expressed an intimate need for care, security, and love: "My father died. My mother is living somewhere else. I am like an orphan… I am suffering here" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). We found that the circumstances surrounding PKFC's conception complicated maternal attachment and occasionally led to abandonment, rejection, or neglect of the PKFC.

> The first child was brought to me when he was one year and two months old. I took care of him while facing many difficulties. Later, the child's mom came back with a second kid she had made with a South-African. I wondered what to do, to leave the kids or give them to somebody else but I decided that I couldn't throw them away. The case hurt my heart, I felt like someone had to allow them to grow. […] If their father comes back, I will give him the kids without hesitating. I am so sick and tired from supporting them. My daughter, the mother of these children, shows no interest in them. She is wandering here and there after having been spoiled by MONUSCO men. If she had been married legally, maybe she would have been able to assist me. (Grandmother, 40–45, Bukavu/DRC).

Interestingly, Congolese stepfathers occasionally alienated PKFC from the family unit and denied them access to available household resources while Haitian stepfathers were found to be more accepting of the PKFC.

> When my child realised that he wasn't treated fairly or the same as the other children, he stepped forward and wanted me to assure him whether the man with whom I was living was actually his father. I decided to tell him the truth and apologised for all the misfortune and for keeping a child with such a trauma (Mother, 40–45, Bukavu/DRC).

Some Haitian mothers explained that stepfathers viewed their PKFC favourably due to their lighter skin phenotypes. In situations wherein the PKFC is positively perceived by the stepfather, the mother and PKFC may be part of a blended family.

> I found another man, we got together, and he told me that he loves my child and that he looks like a white man from a foreign country, that he really looks like an actor… I have conceived two other children because he thought that I would have such a beautiful child just like the first child I conceived with the MINUSTAH (Mother, age unknown, Tabarre/Haiti).

Meso-level: Community and environmental

On the meso-level, we consider the social status of PKFC to determine whether experiences of stigma and discrimination present a common challenge in their upbringing. Stigma is theorised as a process whereby human differences become socially visible, stereotyped as negative, thereby resulting in the separation of stigmatised persons as outsiders relative to the community and justifying poor treatment that culminates in status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). This process of stigmatisation explains how and why CBOW and PKFC face adversity throughout the life course. Documentation of CBOW across contexts suggests that they often face maltreatment, stigma and discrimination by their communities (Stewart, 2015; Wagner et al., 2020). The marginalisation of CBOW typically originates from preconceptions about their fathers (based on their role as perpetrators or foreign soldiers) or attitudes towards their mothers (based on them engaging in extra-marital sexual relations and having a child out of wedlock) (Apio, 2007; Mukamana and Brysiewicz, 2008). Where their fathers are perceived as aggressors, CBOW might be understood as a symbolic extension of their violent practices as soldiers or perpetrators (Mukangendo, 2007; Liebling et al., 2012; Mukasa, 2017). This can result in them experiencing an inner tension regarding how to position themselves towards their fathers on the one side and their mothers and communities on the other (Weitsman, 2008; Hamel, 2016; Sanchez Parra, 2018). The significant impact of their outsider status is exemplified in Denov and Lakor's (2017) observation that CBOW in Northern Uganda experienced their stigmatised identities in the post-war period as more debilitating than life in captivity during the war. In contexts where their mothers are stigmatised, CBOW might experience a lack of support from their clans and communities, resulting in economic difficulty (Mukamana and Brysiewicz, 2008; Bland, 2019). Drawing on the stigmatising experiences of other groups of CBOW, we look at whether PKFC's background produces equally marginalised social identities.

In line with the literature, our analysis uncovered the often-challenging relationships of PKFC with their communities, showing that their differential treatment within families continued outside the home. PKFC in Haiti and the DRC experienced frequent stereotyping and ostracising by peers, neighbours, and other community members (Wagner et al., 2020; Vahedi et al., 2022). Reasons set out for the perceived stigma and discrimination were multifactorial and most individuals carried a combination of "labels" that made salient the foreign origins of PKFC or their connection to UN peacekeeping (Link and Phelan, 2001). For example, Haitian-born PKFC were labelled as "child of the MINUSTAH," "little MINUSTAH," or more simply "MINUSTAH" (Vahedi et al., 2022). PKFC interviewed in the DRC named fatherlessness, poverty, racial prejudice, as well as their "illegitimate conception" as contributing factors for their stigmatisation. PKFC reported being humiliated or ridiculed on the grounds of not being Congolese, being "white" or "foreign," or otherwise singled out for their ethnic heritage. A large majority reiterated being told to "go to their fathers" or "follow their dads" in order to find relief from familial and socio-economic hardship. Since the inability to uncover paternal roots reduces clan privilege and PKFC's chances of acceptance, comments about fatherlessness were linked to the absence of a male role model and head of household. In both Haiti and the DRC, stigma was manifested in a range of experiences; from teasing and bullying to overt discrimination, abuse, and neglect. These findings support the representation of PKFC as an "out-group" in their community. Severe social stigma exerted influence over PKFC's ability to form meaningful relationships and forced some into isolation and loneliness. In Haiti, some mothers noted that social exclusion may have impacted their child's development and learning abilities (Vahedi et al., 2022):

> "He will never grow up normal at all because wherever he goes he will have the label "here is the child of the MINUSTHA who did not take care of him." … That can impact his learning ability and when the child becomes older that can make it uncomfortable for him to stay in the area." (Mother, 20–25, Hince/Haiti).

In the DRC, PKFC were found to have internalised society's perceptions of them which interfered with healthy self-esteem and identity construction. Internalised stigma, or self-stigma, led some participants to perceive themselves as burdens on their mothers and households to whom the stigma extended (Wagner et al., 2020). In this way, persistent stigma provoked low mood or symptoms of mental health disorders, as the following example shows:

> She [mother] never talks to me in a friendly way. She says I have no value at all for I'm not like her other children. When she says that, I feel like it's better to take a knife, stab myself and die once and for all (PKFC, 10–15, Bunia/DRC)

Social challenges were found to be exacerbated by economic deprivation, a condition that worsened when family support was withdrawn. Thus, the loss of social status and financial insecurity mutually reinforced one another:

> My family's reaction…since they didn't approve of my relationship with the MINUSTAH [officer]. They abandoned me and kicked me out [of the house] to the point where even the community where I live was against me…they were after me….because they were trying to start a war with MINUSTAH. (Mother, 25–30, Taberre/Haiti)

Since in Haiti and the DRC social status is linked to the availability of financial means, mothers were looked down upon for not securing alimony payments from former partners. They reiterated that there was a hierarchy amongst PKFC families with mothers and PKFC who were receiving support at the top and those who did not secure benefits at the bottom.

> Many mock me and laugh at me. Some do because unlike me they were lucky enough to get money, plots of land or houses from their MONUSCO boyfriends. They say I am miserable and cursed for not having been offered such things by my South-African husband. (Mother, 25–30, Bukavu/DRC)

Parallels in the stigma experiences of mothers and children suggested a bidirectional transmission of stigma between generations that negatively affected the mother-child relationship and caused feelings of guilt and shame among PKFC. This is reflected in insults directed towards PKFC like "daughter/son of a bitch," "bastard" or "illegitimate," which portray the children as the products of rape, sex-work, or a parental relationship that otherwise conflicted with social norms. The socio-economic burden of raising a child without a male partner, and raising a PKFC in particular, rendered some Congolese mothers unmarriable and lowered their social status in the eyes of the community.

> When people learn that you were once friends with a guy from MONUSCO they start despising you and saying ill of you. It is not easy to find another boy or man friend if you have been deceived by one of them. So many people told me to abort so I wouldn't be called the mother of a MONUSCO child. They said I would never find another one to love me if I kept the pregnancy (Mother, 35–40, Kalemi/DRC).

Similarly, in Haiti, mothers and PKFC also experienced reduced social status, exemplified by public humiliation from community members due to the mothers' perceived promiscuity: "But you know [noisy] neighbours, they would say that "this girl is promiscuous, she had a child with the white men, she slept with the white men" (Mother, age unknown, Tabarre/Haiti). Some women found themselves in a downward spiral of further social rejection when extreme poverty led them to (re)engage in sex-work to meet their child's basic needs. While children occasionally understood their stigma to reside in their conception and their mother's social circumstances, mothers reported that the societal treatment of their children was aggravating to their own social standing. In several cases, these dynamics had a bearing on the mother-child relationship and adversely affected the bond between PKFC and their mothers.

Exo-level: society and culture

On the exo-level, we explore the socio-cultural dynamics in which PKFC's experiences are embedded. The literature on CBOW shows that cultural and religious beliefs can cause children born of atypical sexual relations to be marginalised if their resulting identity is non-conforming with dominant views on class, race, and kinship. In many post-conflict environments, the mere existence of CBOW contradicts the normative framework of the communities they are born into since having a child out of wedlock or fraternising with the enemy is seen as illegitimate or traitorous (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Satjukow, 2011; Kiconco, 2022). In patrilineal and patriarchal societies where the father's identity is the building block of belonging and status, their unknown paternal origin has been found to leave CBOW with an impaired sense of place in society, making them feel like they do not belong to the culture they grow up (Apio, 2016; Sanchez Parra, 2018). In postcolonial states, the biracial background of CBOW may be linked to oppression, especially if their fathers' involvement in the conflict is seen as part of a neo-colonial project (Razack, 2000; Higate and Henry, 2004; Henry, 2013). Drawing on CBOW's experiences of social exclusion, we establish whether PKFC's societal perception is dependent on how their identity relates to the history of conflict and inequality in the areas where they live. As part of this assessment, we look at whether critical deviance in structural categories and identity-forming traits between PKFC affects how they are situated in socio-cultural and historical narratives.

Expanding on findings in the literature, our analysis revealed differences in the societal perception of PKFC that seem to arise from variance in their presumed affiliation with UN forces. Occasionally, community members projected prejudice against peacekeepers onto the children by portraying them as conceited, privileged, or violent; personality traits that were linked to the perceived role of peacekeepers in the local conflicts. While most PKFC were severely marginalised, heavy stigmatisation did not affect all; some PKFC were granted opportunities and respect due to their heritage. We examined the relevant mechanisms behind social status to explain what caused this societal perception. In the DRC, participants' varying references to race suggested status differences for PKFC based on their fathers'

ethnic origin and troop contributing country (Wagner et al., 2022b). PKFC whose fathers were from central African countries were less often confronted with stereotyping and prejudice because their group membership as PKFC was less salient, and they assimilated more easily into the local culture. Physical features that evidently identified PKFC with their fathers' lineage made them an easier target for racial stigmatisation and conveyed more potential for societal rejection.

> He is a child just like others, but the others still tease him saying he's a white South-African but walking around like a poor local child. They call him a south-African son, a boy with an unknown father (Mother, 35–40, Bukavu/DRC).

Our research shows that community members in host states had a distinct understanding of "whiteness" that predicted bi-racial youth—who were often defaulted to the "white" category—to possess different behavioural characteristics than black children. Those with foreign looks were expected to abide by societal norms associated with their social group membership that seemed to originate from the historical legacy of colonialism and stereotypical assumptions of the white elite. Families and communities placed social role expectations upon bi-racial PKFC that resembled race-based social hierarchies.

> She behaves like white people. Whenever I buy something for her siblings, she wants to have it. I often meet with other women who are in the same situation. Whenever we meet, we cry together because we think about how hard it is to raise that kind of children. White children and black children are very different; the white one wants to sleep well, eat well and live in a given comfort. That lifestyle is difficult to provide. (Mother, age unknown, Bunia/DRC).

While most assumptions had negative connotations, it was also voiced that having a "beautiful, mixed-race children" could improve one's circumstances (Community member, age unknown, Saint Marc/Haiti), lead to financial benefits or even "salvation," as a mother in Bukavu described: "The child indeed is white, so he might be my salvation one day… Many people like him and give him 5 dollars or 10, especially when we walk around the airport. People are happy to call him a white boy." In line with that, some PKFC were proud of their skin colour and conceptualised their "whiteness" to be a marker of difference vis-a-vis their community that they wanted to reinforce by seeking out contact points with their father's culture:

> She knows that her dad is not Haitian, and she always says [that] she herself is not Haitian or she's "white"—you know her language skills are not fully developed to say that she is not Haitian, but she says she's not Haiti. She says her dad's name is [x], here is where he lives. That means in her mind, she always thinks she is not Haitian (Mother, 25–30, Port Salut/Haiti).

Our findings highlighted that achieving "white" privilege (being bi-racial, "white" presenting and relatively wealthy) led to an elevated social status while failing to achieve "white" privilege (being bi-racial, "white" presenting, and poor) led to stronger social stigmatisation. In Haiti, community members perceived mothers as "willful" agents who "desired" to conceive children with MINUSTAH peacekeepers for the purpose of upward social mobility (through alimony, remittances, opportunities for emigration, employment prospects, or marriage, etc); an attitude which may be reflective of Haiti's legacy of French colonialism and colourism following the Haitian revolution (Dupuy, 2014; Hossein, 2015; Marius, 2022). However, in the case of single motherhood due to the peacekeeper's abandonment, upward social mobility did not occur and thus both the mother and child experienced social stigma:

> "People in the neighbourhood, the neighbours, they gossip… They sometimes talk, and say well, I went and made a white man get me pregnant and so and so [as if she did that on purpose … Some people talk and say, well, you went and got pregnant by a MINUSTAH (soldier) and, you are going to be eating shit with this child…I suffer a lot of setbacks with the child. They sometimes humiliate me, (and say) a lot of other things that I can't repeat. I suffer humiliation, deception (fighting back tears) from people." (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti)].

If PKFC's anticipated living standard contrasted with reality, they became a target for societal rejection (see "white-poverty stigma" in Wagner et al., 2022b). Hence, physical features that clearly identified PKFC as "foreign" amplified status differences with respect to participants' socioeconomic status. This shows that stigmatisation for PKFC does not occur universally but is mediated by different factors that increase participants' vulnerability to exclusion, such as minority racial identification and financial hardship. Based on our analysis, bi-racial background accentuated PKFC's socio-economic status and created within-group differences among PKFC. Overall, our findings on the exo-level demonstrate the role of context in shaping PKFC's social identities. In highlighting PKFC's status differences, we demonstrate that the societal perception of children is dependent on geopolitical, cultural, and historical influences. While some of their traits were more salient in Haiti or the DRC, there were similarities in their societal perception that seemed to originate from the countries shared postcolonial history. For example, social constructions of "whiteness" informed by white supremacy and colourism can influence the social status and wellbeing of PKFC who experience considerable economic disadvantage.

The prevalence of SEA and PKFC in both Haiti and the DRC has diminished the perceived legitimacy of the peacekeeping missions (Kovatch, 2016; Vahedi et al., 2021). Community derived Sensemaker data from the DRC shows a general distrust of MONUSCO peacekeepers, with wellknown instances of SEA

and abandoned children provided as evidence that peacekeepers are not serious about fulfilling their mandate, increasing rather than decreasing insecurity:

> "Monusco doesn't care with conflicts, its concern is its presence in the country where it's easy to loot and plunder minerals in most conflict areas[…] Some children that they abandoned have no chance to know their birth fathers[…] Sexual abuse was recurrent at Monusco. Many local girls became pregnant, had children after dating with Monusco agents, simply because they met with them when they needed water. So Monusco made the Democratic Republic of Congo become a Republic of disorders and conflicts." (Male, 35–44, Kalemie/DRC).

CBOW have been accused of decreasing social cohesion and putting communities at risk (Tasker et al., 2020). The same charges were not directly shared by PKFC in this research, but it is possible that association with an increasingly unpopular peacekeeping mission may further reduce the social status of PKFC beyond the stigma they already experience.

Analysis uncovered a further breakdown in trust between mothers and the peacekeeping mission when reports were not properly followed-up on or supports forthcoming:

> "I reported this problem to his officials, and they promised that they would relay this information to whom it might concern. They listened to us, and seemed to sympathize with us… All the ladies who had children with their employees were requested to meet quite often in order to collect our pleas… However, whenever we showed up for the meeting, it was always put off again until we got discouraged and dropped it." (Mother, 25–30, Bukavu/DRC).

This decrease in institutional trust may reduce the likelihood that women report future offenses and undermines the status of the mission. In this way, we see the impact of PKFC and the lack of support provisioning as extending the social impacts of PKFC beyond individuals and families and into the larger community, to the detriment of peacekeeping missions and the United Nations more broadly.

Macro-level: Policy and rights

On the macro-level, we consider broader political structures, and conceptual questions regarding how PKFC's rights are applied in international legal frameworks and support programmes, determining their political needs and the effectiveness of current policies to enforce their rights. The literature on CBOW shows that environmental influences—expressed through economic hierarchies, political structures, and bilateral relations between the father's and mother's home states—often marginalise CBOW and manifest themselves in laws that intentionally or unintentionally cause material and educational inequities for them, either through explicit discrimination or through their omission. Prior research demonstrates that CBOW across contexts experience social, economic, and political exclusion and barriers to effective participation (Daniel-Wrabetz, 2007; Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Stewart, 2017). In addition to the insecurity that all children in conflict face, CBOW might be exposed to additional rights violations, such as their right to education, family, identity, nationality, physical security, protection from stigma and even survival (UN General Assembly, 1989; Carpenter, 2007; Delić et al., 2017). Related to the status of their economically insecure mothers, CBOW might be deprived of food and other essential goods such as clothing and adequate shelter (Carpenter, 2007; Stewart, 2017). Their often-ambiguous legal status may prevent them from accessing social services, personal data and national identity documents (Akello, 2013; Gill, 2019). Local and international actors may contest their citizenship or deny them access to records about their parents, should such records even exist (Carpenter, 2007). Challenges in birth registration due to discriminatory citizenship laws have been documented in numerous contexts including Uganda, Rwanda, Liberia, and the DRC (Neenan, 2018; Denov and Kahn, 2019; Tasker et al., 2020). These rights violations might become increasingly visible as CBOW enter adolescence and struggle with their lack of access to resources and opportunities. Drawing on these insights, we investigate how PKFC's marginalisation individually and in their communities interact with political ideologies that cause inequities for CBOW globally.

In line with the literature, we found that PKFC grapple with political visibility, (inter)national legislation and rights enforcement, and face barriers to accessing the care and support they require and are legally entitled to. Of the mothers interviewed, most described their PKFC's limited access to food, shelter, healthcare, or other essential goods, a theme that was often referred to as "suffering": "I don't have the means; she needs to go to school, she needs to eat. You need to buy her clothes, and you don't have the means to do that.… the MINUSTAH [soldier] didn't find me with children—he came in, gave me a child, left me all alone with that child (Mother, 25–30, Port Salut/Haiti). The interviews demonstrated that UN support programmes for victims of SEA did not reach burdened families (Vahedi et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2022a). In Haiti and the DRC, most participants received no assistance from the UN or peacekeeper fathers. Without that support, many mothers found it impossible to adequately cater to the welfare of PKFC. Community members expressed disappointment in MINUSTAH/MONUSCO and the UN's lack of accountability with respect to the abandoned PKFC, mentioning "MINUSTAH does not value these children" and that "it's as if no one is there to support these children" (Community member, male, 18–24 years old, St Marc, Haiti). As a result, the majority of PKFC

were resource deprived, unable to pursue their education, and in desperate need of safeguarding.

> About me? Let me tell you that I never go to school. I have no good clothes… When I think of the deep poverty, I'm in, I feel much despair. I'm dressed poorly. I have no body lotion, not even the local palm oil or soap to wash my face. I have no food. My life is non-sense. Hard life conditions. It's too harsh, too bad actually. Nothing changes for the good ever. My family goes through much pain to find the amount of food we need daily. Sometimes, when we get about 1,000 Congolese Francs [0.5 USD], we thank God for it, but we never get full or satiated with the little food we have. On many occasions, we go to bed without having eaten anything. I have no shoes, not flip-flops either. You can see that what I am wearing is completely torn apart (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC).

Similar sentiments were shared in Haiti, wherein mothers wondered what the future of their PKFC would hold in the absence of support: "If we receive no help to raise them, they could become hooligans hurting the community" (Mother, 20–25, Tabarre/Haiti). Many participants who were aware of the existence of PKFC spoke of their unmet material needs and the implication poverty would have on their life courses.

> It is not a good idea for the white man to have a child and leave him behind… that not only puts the mother in trouble, but the child is also in trouble. I can say that this child is now hopeless… I live in Port-Salut and I can tell you that I myself know at least six kids that are living under these conditions. They were fathered by these people and then they left, but the kids are here going through hardships. (Male community member, 35–44, Port Salut/Haiti).

This illustrates that PKFC whose needs are presumed to be closely connected to those of their mothers have vulnerabilities of their own. Many experienced a violation of their right to education, equal opportunity, self-actualisation, non-discrimination, and a standard of living that properly supports their development. PKFC whose fathers' identities are unknown were unlikely to be legally recognized within their state. In the context of eastern DRC, this may restrict their chances to social security, economic rights and civic participation, cause problems with access to healthcare and social services, and increase child protection risks (e.g., child labour, child marriage, trafficking, exploitation, and conscription into the armed forces) (The Fund for Global Human Rights, 2017). While there was a consensus that PKFC needed support, SenseMaker narratives from the DRC revealed some ambivalence in community members' perceptions of mothers of PKFC. While most community members expressed empathy toward the mother and anger at the MONUSCO, some participants demonstrated a belief that women who have sex with foreign peacekeepers should be grateful for any support they receive:

> He pays the rent for her; he provides her with everything she needs, worthy things, but later, she offended him, attributed the pregnancy to him and charged him with $5,000 USD. Do you think he left his country and his family to DR Congo in order to help Congolese? He might have in his country his wife and children. You should be grateful to him for his modest financial support (Female community member, 35–44, Goma/DRC).

Participants mentioned the difficulties in trying to secure support legally given the fathers are not Haitian/Congolese and had returned to their country of origin. While most mothers expressed little engagement with UN policy on SEA and systematic child support, those who did considered UN pathways for assistance abstract measures with no positive impact on the structural inequalities they were facing and pointed out that obstacles in UN protocols (e.g., corruption, gap in legal authority) prevented them from securing financial support or other benefits for their children through official channels (Wagner et al., 2022a).

Discussion

In this paper, we have consulted the existing body of work on CBOW to compare and contrast the life courses of PKFC. Drawing on the perspectives of PKFC, their mothers/grandmothers and community members in PKO-host communities in DRC and Haiti, we have tested the theoretical assumption that PKFC's challenges mirror those described in the CBOW literature. To understand whether PKFC's adversities parallel those of children fathered by occupation, enemy forces or child soldiers, we have applied a socio-ecological model that—informed by prior research on those groups—assessed the children's positions within their families, communities, societal and political structures. By presenting the first empirical evaluation of PKFC's assigned group membership as CBOW, we have integrated two previously separate streams of literature (on CBOW and UNPK/SEA).

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the micro-level, our research explored whether PKFC's identity is impacted by a lack of knowledge about their fathers, fewer attachment figures and meaningful relationships. Research with CBOW in various contexts has shown that learning about their conception plays an important role for the identity formation and development of CBOW (Glaesmer et al., 2012; Mitreuter et al., 2019). Our findings show that PKFC, like other CBOW, are often faced with silence about their fathers and struggle with the taboo of their ancestry. The missing

knowledge about their heritage affects their sense of self and leaves them with an impaired feeling of belonging and purpose. Previous research has found that missing information about their past can push CBOW to fill in the gaps in their biographies by making up stories about their parents; a practice that encourages the demonisation or idealisation of absent fathers (Lee, 2017). Reproducing this, we found that PKFC from the DRC assumed that their fathers wanted to care for them but were hindered in fulfilling parental responsibilities; a form of idealisation that was supported by peacekeepers being part of a benevolent force employed to offer help and assistance. PKFC who attribute their abandonment to circumstances outside of their fathers' control were more ready to forgive their fathers for their absence. In consequence, they may have less tension-filled relationships with them than children fathered by enemy or occupation soldiers. Considering a circumstantial attribution of neglect as a mechanism to preserve self-esteem and hope might help explain children's urge to find absent fathers in other settings (Wagner et al., 2022c). It appears that for PKFC in the DRC (where paternal orphans struggle with the financial implication of limited paternal care), wishful thinking becomes a way of coping with adversity and almost takes a religious place in the children's outlook on life. Our research shows that PKFC families' determination to search for absent fathers is an attempt to improve their financial circumstances. This suggests that the desire of PKFC to reunite with absent fathers may be particularly strong for those who grow up in contexts of extreme poverty (Wagner et al., 2022c).

Following prior research, our findings show that disruptions in family patterns, increased levels of poverty and the breakdown of community structures during conflict, political instability, and natural disasters inform women's/girls' vulnerability to conceiving PKFC. In line with case studies on post-WWII-Germany and the Bosnian War of the 1990s that delineate the complex intergenerational consequences of sexual violence (Roupetz et al., 2021), our research shows that the psychological burden of mothers that results from giving birth to a child through volatile social and environmental circumstances impacts parenting attitudes and acceptance of the CBOW by their clan and kinship groups. As a result of their perceived illegitimate conception and unconventional family life, some mothers and PKFC face prejudice and rejection from maternal families. PKFC in our study were occasionally raised by grandmothers or close relatives rather than biological mothers which may reflect the lack of maternal attachment documented for other CBOW. While some PKFC in the DRC reported that their mothers' attitudes towards them were characterised by ambivalence or neglect, others reflected on a sense of solidarity, emotional availability, and closeness to their mothers. Supporting pre-existing literature, we conclude that many of the family and identity-related challenges PKFC experience resemble those of CBOW in other geopolitical and historical contexts (Carpenter, 2007; Baines and Oliveira, 2021).

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the meso-level, our research explored whether PKFC's identity is impacted by frequent stereotyping and marginalised social identities. Stigma in the context of CBOW refers to individuals being labelled as deviant for possessing traits that clash with locally accepted values or for lacking a recognised identity (Bergmans, 2017). Our research demonstrates that PKFC, like CBOW, are at an increased risk of marginalisation at the hands of families and communities. Since their parentage sets them apart from the rest of the societies within which they are raised, PKFC experience neglect, abuse, abandonment, violence, and a general lack of protection. The sources of their stigmatisation (being conceived in a union that is not sanctioned or legitimised by local customs, growing up without their fathers, being visibly interethnic and disproportionately poor) represent common challenges in the upbringing of many CBOW (Kiconco, 2015; Tasker et al., 2020). Based on previous research, certain attitudes, and experiences PKFC encountered were expected to vary based on the context of the host country and the positionality of peacekeepers. For instance, it has previously been hypothesized that PKFC's background might less readily lead to societal rejection, given that the reputation of peacekeepers is not inherently negative (Lee, 2017). We found that although, in theory, peacekeepers represent a neutral force that is deployed to serve and protect the local population, they were largely perceived as occupiers or colonial powers. These perceptions may be particularly relevant to PKO deployed to post-colonial settings with a longstanding history of foreign intervention. Further, in the DRC, community members expressed anger at peacekeepers' perceived corruption, inability or unwillingness to end conflicts, and for increasing rather than decreasing insecurity (Bartels et al., 2021). In Haiti, peacekeepers were associated with the outbreak of cholera and with the exploitation and abuse of children (Lee and Bartels, 2019; King et al., 2020; Fraulin et al., 2021; Bartels et al., 2022). Hence, PKFC did not escape the difficulties that other CBOW face for their connection to outside intervenors accused of committing wrongdoing. On the contrary, mothers described the damage to their reputation to be particularly severe due to their association with the UN and the peacekeeper fathers' abandonment; thus, cultural expectations and family code seemed to oppose relationships with UNPK staff in similar ways that are reported by other groups of CBOW regarding reservations against their fathers. We conclude that based on their father's involvement in UNPK, PKFC are rarely met with a more tolerant attitude by their communities than other CBOW.

Relatedly, it has sometimes been predicted that PKFC may face less risk of abuse and neglect than other CBOW, since their fathers are less readily condemned as perpetrators of overt violence (Lee, 2017). However, in both Haiti and the DRC, peacekeepers were perceived as perpetrators of additional

insecurity for women and children when they conceived children and subsequently abandoned them. It is important here to emphasise the context women were living in. As discussed in the results, almost all women interviewed in this research were living in poverty, with limited social mobility and few formal supports. Some had been displaced and all lived through ongoing conflict-related stressors. It is not necessary to position all encounters described in the interviews as directly violent to critically consider how strategic agency may be enacted to increase women's ability to survive. This does not negate the exploitative circumstances in which these encounters occur, instead calling for a consideration of violence and exploitation as nuanced, and simultaneously interpersonal and structural (Baines, 2015; Bunting et al., 2021; Stallone, 2021). Our findings suggest that the UN classification of SEA does not serve to determine differences in the experiences of PKFC who appear to suffer adversity irrespective of the nature of their parents' sexual relations. Instead of being a clear function of their mother's coercion, PKFC's challenges appeared to be mediated by other factors. For example, we found that many of PKFC's difficulties were compounded by poverty, therefore, PKFC were found to face more severe challenges if their mother's vulnerability to SEA was related to poverty. Confirming the experiences of CBOW in the literature, we conclude that experiences of stigma and discrimination present a common challenge in the upbringing of PKFC.

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the exo-level, our research explored whether PKFC's circumstances challenge the social norms, attitudes, and ideologies in post-conflict societies and whether differences in their identity-forming characteristics lead to a varying degree of cultural discrimination. We found that the "rules" attached to post-colonial societies excluded PKFC with foreign status and lack of resources from opportunities that are traditionally afforded to children. In line with previous research conducted in Germany and Austria that showed CBOW to have different experiences depending on which nationality their father represented during the occupation (Stelzl-Marx and Satjukow, 2015), our research reflects on PKFC as a racially heterogeneous group. The diversity of troop contributing countries and the differences in the social construction of "whiteness" within host countries means that PKFC have a range of physical phenotypes that translate to diverging experiences of stigmatisation and privilege. In Haiti and the DRC, PKFC with lighter skin phenotypes were perceived as having a dominant racial identity that historically constituted a privileged social status. Due to their economic deprivation, PKFC non-etheless belonged to a lower social class, resulting in a conflicting social role. We found an expectation for PKFC who were white presenting to have a higher living standard, a narrative that might be shaped by peacekeepers being in control of desirable resources. In focusing on identity-forming characteristics that contribute to a more or less privileged social identity, our analysis shows the value in deconstructing binaries of universal suffering for CBOW and analyse the variability within and between subgroups. While PKFC's experiences on the exo-level are comparable to those of CBOW in other contexts, we have shown that socio-cultural context determines individual trajectories based on how CBOW's identity-forming characteristics are perceived locally.

In situating PKFC's circumstances within the political structures that marginalise CBOW in other settings, we have addressed their challenges on the macro-level. We found that lack of political recognition both domestically and internationally has frustrated PKFC's ability to fully participate in their communities and have their rights secured. Challenges with birth registration limit children's ability to enrol in school, hold certain jobs, attend university, or participate fully in political life. The problem applies equally to PKFC as other CBOW and, indeed, in contexts such as Liberia that require the child to be born in the country to a father of the same nationality in order for children to be registered as full citizens (UNHCR, no date, "Stateless in Liberia"), many CBOW are excluded.

Challenges in obtaining child support payments from the peacekeeper fathers violate the rights of PKFC, as guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Children have a right to proper "maintenance" from their parents as outlined in Article 18 of the CRC, which further states that both parents have an equal obligation to the child. In instances where the child's parents are unable to provide a standard of living that properly supports their development, Article 27 requires state parties to provide for the child's care. As discussed in earlier sections of this paper, mothers of PKFC often struggle with economic hardship and deep poverty, receiving little to no support from either the child's father or the state. This is true of many CBOW. The CRC is the most widely ratified convention in UN history, and yet few states have effectively provided for CBOW, including PKFC. PKFC are in a unique position when compared to other CBOW in that their fathers are more easily identifiable and registered members of a national military, police force, or civilian deployment. Whether the experiences of PKFC in accessing support resemble those of other groups of CBOW depends in large part on whether they were fathered by a soldier, a fact that determines their recourse to justice and alimony. PKFC who are fathered by civilian staff can resort to civilian legislation to make paternity claims while PKFC fathered by uniformed staff need to go through the respective military channels and work around the immunity militaries are typically afforded (Freedman, 2018; Ferstman, 2020; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). The logistical challenges are many, and the cost and effort of pursuing these claims are often prohibitive. Supporting findings from the literature, we have demonstrated that PKFC like other CBOW have needs for recognition, support and full citizenship that are currently not being realised.

Policy considerations

Academic writing on SEA and policy reporting has often considered PKFC an extension of their mother's victimisation and thus, discourse regarding their rights is normally embedded in discussions about UN programming, e.g., the UN assistance protocol for victims of SEA specifies that with regards to "children born of SEA," assistance aims to "enable the guardian/caretaker to address their children's relevant medical, psychosocial, legal and material needs" (ECHA/ECPS UN and NGO Task Force on Protection from SEA, 2009; p. 8). Given the inefficient support structures for victims demonstrated in this research, addressing PKFC's right to support in SEA policies needs to be seen critically. For PKFC to no longer be secondary considerations in the framings of humanitarian and international law, reporting and research need to treat them as independent subjects about whom there is a need of a deeper understanding. Based on the high rates of unaddressed needs present in this research, we argue that PKFC deserve to be a category of their own in institutional discourse so that they can find representation in policy and practice. Refocusing discussions about PKFC away from SEA and towards CBOW may foster policy changes that advocate for their rights and create a more comprehensive and sustainable solution to their adversities. This paper shows that the existence of PKFC cross-culturally has public health, psychosocial, economic, and politico-legal implications that resemble those of CBOW. Given their similarities on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level, PKFC should be considered CBOW—a global population of vulnerable children that is recognized in international politics and deserves specific treatment and attention.

The legal scaffolding to better support all CBOW, including PKFC, is in place through the CRC as well as regional instruments enshrining children's[9] rights, such as the Organization of African Unity's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. With resolution 2,467, the UN Security Council recognised CBOW as war-affected populations (UN Security Council, 2019). Further attention to the unmet needs of CBOW and their mothers was galvanized through the UN General Assembly, 2022 report "Women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in conflict and children born of sexual violence in conflict." However, the UNSG specifically distinguishes PKFC from children born of CRSV[10] in this report. Considerations of PKFC are limited in these documents and it is unclear on what basis the UNSG decided to differentiate between these groups of vulnerable young people who face similar challenges. Many of the challenges and difficulties the UNSG describes, including lack of access to education, community stigma, maternal trauma, limited citizenship rights, equally apply to PKFC, as demonstrated herein. A key distinction between CBOW and PKFC, from the UNSG report, is in differentiating SEA from CRSV. However, the Deschamps et al., 2015 report wellestablished this is a false distinction, highlighting the high numbers of rapes, including gang rapes, and child sexual abuse perpetrated by peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. UNICEF argues that it is unhelpful to divide vulnerable young people into distinct categories and that this often increases rather than decreases stigma (Michels and Sematumba, no date accessed 2020). While the circumstances of their conception vary and are not always explicitly violent, our research shows that the experiences of PKFC and other CBOW are similar enough to warrant their inclusion in CBOW to better have their needs met and rights enacted.

We recommend three concrete areas for policy developments and reform that will better support PKFC as a category of CBOW: Paternity testing and child support payments should be required at the T/PCC level with UN backing and support, the UN should advocate for more inclusive citizenship laws, and legal accountability and a rights-based approach must be fully implemented and expanded at the community and international level.

Increased political will at the UN and within T/PCCs is needed to ensure that children are duly supported by their fathers. The UN has no obligation or authority to directly compensate mothers of PKFC or order child support payments (Wagner et al., 2022a). It can, however, provide interim assistance and play an increased role in encouraging Member States, who exercise jurisdiction over child support claims, to increase child support accessibility to mothers. Given the high and unmet needs of PKFC demonstrated, our research impresses upon implicated parties the legal obligation to facilitate child support claims. The UN has increasingly employed a "name and shame" approach to SEA, with the country of origin of alleged perpetrators published and openly accessible. A similar approach should be taken in regard to child support claims wherein women and children who have been unsupported by the men they claim to have fathered their children are assisted in filing complaints that feed into a central database.

9 While CBOW and PKFC as categories may refer to people at any life stage, we argue that protections and securement of their rights should be enacted as soon as they are born and are especially crucial during early development. We therefore draw largely on children's rights in this section, rather than human rights more broadly.

10 Given the joint emphasis on children born of sexual violence in international political and academic fora, we primarily consider violent contexts of conception in our discussions of CBOW. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, by positioning PKFC in relation to CBOCRSV we are better able to compare the contexts of violence and exploitation that PKFC were conceived through and continue to live in. Secondly, we avoid the possible rebuttal that would position PKFC as CBOW but differentiate them from CBOCRSV, the group best positioned to receive enhanced supports and resources.

We have established that PKFC are rarely recognized and supported by their biological fathers. PKFC and other CBOW are further disenfranchised through discriminatory citizenship laws that prevent or seriously complicate their birth registrations. In the DRC, for example, both parents' names must be listed for a child to be legally registered (Global Human Rights, 2017); this is obviously not possible in many cases of rape or sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated by armed actors. In Liberia, children born outside the country to non-Liberian fathers must endure a lengthy and expensive process to become citizens; this was an important issue for Liberian CBOW in refugee camps (Tasker et al., 2020). Difficulties or barriers to birth registration can have serious impacts on CBOW's political participation, access to higher education, employment, and international travel. It further sets CBOW apart from their communities and peers, sometimes aggravating feelings of isolation and ostracism (Tasker et al., 2020). While birth registration and citizenship laws are the purview of each country, the UN can and should support PKFC and other CBOW to obtain birth certificates and full citizenship wherever possible and advocate for repeal of discriminatory laws. This is also an opportunity for bilateral advocacy from countries aiming to uphold feminist values in their foreign policy, such as Canada.

If the UN and member states better recognize and enact their ethical obligation to support PKFC through a justice-oriented approach, the same could be extended to all CBOW. Hence, PKFC could be central to advancing political agendas for CBOW. As established, needs are common, and there may be limited value in distinguishing between sub-categories. Progressive policy and programmatic developments could ensure that all CBOW are better supported, advocacy around inclusive citizenship will benefit all CBOW, and stronger legal mechanisms to ensure rights are not violated would improve the life course of all young people born of war.

Limitations

Despite drawing from large qualitative samples, participants were selected purposely, and the research is not representative of PKFC and their mothers in Haiti/DRC or elsewhere. Since the presented analyses are culturally sensitive, the findings are further limited in their generalisability. However, host countries of PKOs are often structurally similar with regards to socio-economic challenges, political fragility, and gender norms and thus the results are expected to make valuable contributions to other peacekeeping settings. The paper requires some additional methodological comments. First, due to the sensitive nature of the research and different groups being accommodated in different countries at different times, unique survey instruments had to be developed which resulted in occasional missing data. Some of the differences in participants' experiences may be due to who was included in the interviews and what they were comfortable sharing with the research team[11]. Moreover, it is important to note that only Congolese PKFC were interviewed due to the necessary research infrastructure (psychological support and child-appropriate interviewing) not being set up in Haiti. Second, the evidenced similarities/differences in the experiences of PKFC and other CBOW are based on cross-sectional qualitative analysis, not statistical inferences or longitudinal research. Future studies should consider conducting systematic comparisons between different groups of CBOW to determine a more powerful conclusion and causation between the children's circumstances of conception and later challenges in life. Third, the analysis was conducted by a group of female Global-North based academics with inherent bias regarding the discussed cultural norms. Although local experts, researchers and translators were consulted along the way, nuances of participants' narratives might not always have been appreciated fully.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that PKFC are CBOW who are connected to conflict in a unique way. Although the UN has a direct obligation to support PKFC, it currently excludes them from consideration as or alongside CBOW and PKFC's needs are not being properly met. This has a significant impact on the lives of PKFC who often grow up in extremely difficult situations, fighting exclusion at multiple interacting levels. Given that reparations for PKFC currently do not exist, specific measures are needed to transform their life courses. If the UN makes progress in conceptualising programming for PKFC, this may become a blueprint for CBOW support in other contexts. The outlined policy considerations have laid the foundation for action that addresses their challenges and helps to achieve sustainable change for CBOW globally.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham (protocol ERN_16-0950; ERN_18-0083; ERN_17-1715), Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board

11 Gender socialisation and local cultural norms might determine that victims of SEA in Haiti/DRC are more hesitant and less used to talking publicly or sharing personal experiences surrounding culturally sensitive topics like sexual violence and abortion.

(protocol 6020398; 6019042), and the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES001/DP-SK/119PM/2018). Written informed consent from the participants' legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

SL was the lead investigator of the Haiti study. SB the principal investigator of the DRC study. KW conceptualised the paper and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. HT and LV contributed sections to the subsequent drafts of the manuscript. All authors were involved in the conception, implementation, data collection, analysis of the research, read, edited, and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Appendix A

Community partner roles and contributions

Community partner	Role/contribution
Commission of Women Victims for Victims (KOFAVIV)	Haitian grassroots association that works to combat gender-based violence and reduce feminised poverty. Their work has focused on sexual abuse by military and paramilitary groups, and they were instrumental in informing the research questions, facilitating access and data collection and advising on cultural and ethical considerations.
Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI)	Based in Port-au-Prince Haiti, BAI has helped victims prosecute human rights cases, has trained Haitian lawyers and has spoken out on human rights abuses and justice issues in Haiti since 1995. Since February 2004, BAI has received most of its financial support from the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH). Mario Joseph, human rights and criminal lawyer, has co-managed or managed BAI since 1996. In conjunction with IJDH, BAI initiated and runs the Haiti Rape Accountability and Prevention Project (RAPP) to respond to the epidemic of rapes against poor women and girls in Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. RAPP provides individual victims of sexual assault the legal services they need to obtain justice and compensation. At the same time, the organization works with allies in Haiti and abroad to transform the underlying social context that renders poor Haitian women vulnerable to assault and exploitation.
Institute of Social Work and Social Science (ETS)	An internationally supported educational institution located in Haiti that was founded in 2011 to provide undergraduate social work and social science training in both theory and practice. A Haitian Creole program is offered for student who wish to complete intensive coursework in Haitian Creole and also for researchers and development workers who wish to learn Creole while working in Haiti. Courses are designed to introduce students to social work and practice while developing essential skills.
The Multidisciplinary Association for Research and Advocacy in the Kivus by United Junior Academics (MARAKUJA)	A multidisciplinary non-profit association for research across conflict-affected provinces and weakly-institutionalised environments in eastern DRC (Network of 100+ researchers; based in Goma). The implementation of the DRC research was devolved by MARAKUJA, who was contracted to employ fieldworkers, oversee logistics and administrative issues. The managing director of MARAKUJA also advised on security-related aspects, such as how far outside the city centres recruitment sites could be extended safely.
La Solidarité Féminine Pour La Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI)	A female-led nongovernmental organisation that promotes women's rights across DRC: safety, security, education, health, equality, and justice (Network of 50+ activists and social workers; eastern base in Beni). SOFEPADI was instrumental in informing a research design that was sensitive to the local culture. Further, as a women's rights organisation, they had the necessary contacts to set up a comprehensive referral system for participants in need of psychological, social or legal services and provided resources and support to study participants.

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How a study on lived experiences impacted German occupation children – A mixed-method long-term approach

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Objective: Research on the impact study participation has on participants has shown that, even though they may find it stressful during participation, overall, they appear to benefit personally and emerge with a positive cost-benefit-balance. In 2013, the first psychological study on German occupation children (GOC), a potentially vulnerable and hidden study population, was conducted, after which respondents shared a high volume of positive feedback. In the context of a follow-up survey, the impact of study participation on participants was investigated to determine the causes of this distinctly positive outcome.

Methods: Mixed-methods approach using the standardized Reactions to Research Participation Questionnaire (RRPQ) as well as open-ended questions on expectations toward participation, and changes due to participation in dealing with GOC background and in personal life. Analyses included $N = 65$ participants (mean age 68.92, 40% men) and were carried out with descriptive measures for RRPQ and inductive content analysis for open-ended questions.

Results: Participants specified six motives for participation besides answering the standardized form; 46.2% ($n = 30$) saw their expectations met. Although participation was related to negative emotions during participation, participants' overall experience was positive; 89.2% ($n = 58$) stated an inclination to participate again. 52.3% ($n = 34$) reported participation had helped develop new ways of dealing with their GOC experiences; five contributing factors were observed. Changes in private life were reported by 24.6% ($n = 16$); three aspects were identified. The vast majority (81.5%; $n = 53$) stated, following participation, they were able to disclose their GOC background to others. Participants placed emphasis on four aspects of this experience.

Conclusion: Although study participation was described as emotionally challenging during participation, participants felt that the overall impact it had on them was positive. The study was the first of its kind and thus presented an opportunity for a previously hidden population to step out of the dark, simultaneously gaining insight that helped them better understand themselves as GOC, and thereby increase their capacity for self-acceptance. Participants

also benefitted from learning about the study's findings and connecting with other GOC through activities that ensued. In conclusion, results suggest that vulnerable and/or hidden populations benefit from specific attention to their lived experiences even at higher age.

KEYWORDS

impact of research participation, German occupation children, lived experiences, hidden/vulnerable populations, long-term approach, personal benefits, mixed-methods approach, children born of war

Introduction

The area of research that is focused on research impact investigates the consequences study participation can have for study subjects. In the past, studies in this area had centered around participating trauma survivors for a large part. This interest was primarily sparked by immense concerns of international research boards and ethics committees that conducting research on sensitive respondents might endanger or possibly re-traumatize them, due to supposed diminished autonomy and vulnerability. According to Newman et al. (2006) these concerns had limited the research on trauma related areas of interest for years, preventing traumatized individuals from participating, yet they were based on subjective assessments, measures and biased opinions, vulnerable to common decision making errors, such as common sense and under utilization of base rate information. Fortunately, a growing body of research on respective populations indicates that while a minority of trauma research participants recalls the initial research process as being stressful or challenging, the majority would participate again, have no regrets regarding their participation, and view research as personally beneficial (e.g., Brabin and Berah, 1995; Walker et al., 1997; Newman et al., 1999, 2001; Dyregrov et al., 2000; Ruzek and Zatzick, 2000; Disch, 2001; Dutton et al., 2002; Kassam-Adams and Newman, 2002, 2005; Newman and Kaloupek, 2004; Hebenstreit and DePrince, 2012; van der Velden et al., 2013; Lawyer et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2021), suggesting that talking to trauma survivors might be more beneficial and therapeutically valuable rather than risky or harmful (Bassa, 2011);–provided that the research complies with common ethical principles and respects human rights (Hebenstreit and DePrince, 2012). These results have paved the way for eye-to-eye encounters with trauma survivors in research. Aside from concerns about the resilience of trauma survivors, costs of participation, as in emotional distress, are not unique experiences in trauma research, but also found in other research populations, where a small percentage of participants reports distress (e.g., Legerski and Bunnel, 2010; van der Velden et al., 2013). The limited research on long-term effects of participation also suggests few long-term negative effects (Martin et al., 1999; Galea et al., 2005 cited in Newman et al., 1999; Legerski and Bunnel, 2010). Instead results point toward an increase of affect positive appraisals over time (Newman et al., 2006; Legerski and Bunnel, 2010). In this regard, Kilpatrick (2004) cautioned that, "we should consider the ethics of not conducting important research", since research is needed in order to determine risks for symptom development, developmental pathways and possible interventions. Therefore, a balance between the responsibility toward participants and the responsibility toward society is needed (Newman et al., 2006).

The core principles of ethical research are laid down in the Helsinki Declaration, which, though not a legally binding instrument under international law, is nevertheless regarded as the global standard for the development of legislation and regulations (World Medical Association, 2013). The key ethical principle in research is to balance the aim of "gaining knowledge" with the responsibilities to "do no harm" and "to ensure that the research does not in any way perpetuate or aggravate the specific circumstances that have put a participant at the center of the researcher's interest"(Galeziowski et al., 2021, p. 37). Another core value is the "gain for participants", as in the benefit participants may experience from participating.

Occupation children

At the end of World War II (WWII) and thereafter, approximately 400,000 children were born to German women fathered by soldiers of the four occupying forces (Britain, France, USA, Soviet Union) (Satjukow and Stelzl-Marx, 2015, p. 12). These are called "children born of occupation" or "occupation children" in research and represent one category of children born of war (CBOW) (Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). The term "child" in CBOW is used to express the generational connection of a person as the "descendant of biological parents." In a similar sense, the term "born of war" expresses the imperative connection between the existence of the person and the context of war—outside of which the person would not have been conceived. Several archival and case studies conducted by historical and social scientists have described the hardships German occupation children (GOC) faced, especially pertaining to their being "born out of wedlock" as a "child of the enemy" into a defeated and chastened former

National Socialist society, where losing the war, did not however necessarily result in a change of mindset. Those studies' results hint at a disrupted sense of belonging, and emotional as well as mental distress among many in this population (Ericsson and Simonsen, 2005; Mochmann et al., 2009; Satjukow, 2009, 2011; Stelzl-Marx, 2009; Virgili, 2009; Lee, 2011; Satjukow and Stelzl-Marx, 2015). Based on these reports of difficult developmental conditions and hardship, we define GOC a potentially vulnerable group.

GOC study, results, and further studies

The first psychological study on GOC was conducted in 2013 and focused on three main aspects: identity development, stigmatization/discrimination, and child maltreatment (Glaesmer et al., 2012). It aimed at investigating the psychosocial consequences of growing up as GOC in a post-WWII societal context. *Via* press release and contact with platforms/networks of occupation children, 164 people were recruited, of which 146 were included in the analyses (mean age 63.4, 63.0% women). Since CBOW are difficult to reach, and their population size is small and can only be estimated, they constitute what is termed a "hidden population". These populations cannot be investigated solely by standardized instruments, rather they also require the use of a participative research approach that involves tailor-making instruments capable of capturing their lived experiences (Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). Participative research enhances chances of acceptance and compliance among the target population (Brendel, 2002). Therefore, an instrument for GOC was developed that consists of two parts. The first was self-developed for capturing experiences specific to this group of CBOW as deduced from literature and a participative process involving occupation children and experienced researchers in this field. The second part consisted of standardized psychometric instruments designed to assess current mental distress and traumatic childhood experiences (among others) (Kaiser et al., 2015a). Findings were compared with a representative birth-cohort-matched sample (BCMS) from the German general population (where available). In summary, the study results show that GOC resemble a subpopulation of the general German population with very specific developmental conditions (Kaiser et al., 2015a; Kaiser, 2017). According to the theoretical framework relevant to the study of the psychosocial effects of growing up as a CBOW (Glaesmer et al., 2012; Kaiser, 2017), findings show that GOC's developmental conditions (post-WWII social environment with resentment, single mothers, financial hardship, change of primary caregivers) made them vulnerable to child maltreatment (Glaesmer et al., 2017), high impact traumatic events (Kaiser et al., 2015b), inconsistent attachment experiences (Kaiser et al., 2016), and experiences of stigma and discrimination (Assmann et al., 2015). Moreover, experiences of child maltreatment, high-impact traumatic events, and inconsistent attachment were associated with current psychological distress (depression, somatization, PTSD), underscoring their long-term effects (Glaesmer et al., 2017). Once the data had been analyzed, all former participants, as well as other interested parties, were informed about the study results in a newsletter sent by mail.

In a further step, the GOC questionnaire was translated to investigate other CBOW populations, namely occupation children in Austria (AOC), "Wehrmacht children" in Norway, and children born of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s as part of the Yugoslav Wars.

In a descriptive analysis of quantitative questionnaire data from GOC and AOC, the impact that secrecy around the subject of those participants' origins/fathers has had on them was analyzed (Mitreuter et al., 2019). For obvious reasons, many occupation children were not told the truth about their origins/fathers until adulthood, and the older the people were when they were informed, the more painful the realization was. After learning the truth about their origins, most set out to find their father, hoping in particular to identify commonalities (in personality and physical appearance) with them. Both AOC and GOC reported similar experiences.

Previous work in a follow-up interview study (Chibow.org, 2019) addressed how occupation children born of sexual violence (CBSV) experienced their relationship with their mothers. Roupetz et al. (2022) were able to show that CBSV report a great diversity of experiences and that this had a lifelong impact on them. Based on CBSV's descriptions of their past and present relationships with their mothers, three broad groupings could be identified: conflictual relationships, an absent parent, and positive upbringings. Positioned along three axes of relationality, the participants' perception of their relationships with their mothers fell into categories of patterns of interaction that emerged: accountability and agency vs. exoneration and victimhood of the mother; accountability and agency vs. exoneration and victimhood of the child; longing vs. detachment.

Distelblüten

A non-scientific, but very congenial and touching result of the GOC study was the foundation of a network for GOC whose fathers were deployed for the Soviet Army. Today they call themselves "Russenkinder" or "Distelblüten" (engl. "Russian children" or "thistle blossoms"), maintain a website (https://www.russenkinder-distelblueten.de/english/), and have an annual meeting in Leipzig, Germany. Out of this network a literary collection of life stories has been published, and readings are held regularly, sometimes even abroad (Behlau, 2015).

During the recruitment stage of the initial project named "Occupation Children: Identity Development, Stigma Experiences, and Psychosocial Consequences of Growing up as a 'German Occupation Child'" (Kaiser, 2017) it became

evident that some GOC (German occupation children) had not dealt with their origins/past before that point. Some reported that they had previously believed their experience to be an isolated one. Others reported years of searching and finding or not finding their father, and described the impact those efforts had had on their lives. After the survey was conducted, many participants spontaneously followed up with phone calls, emails, and letters to add more detail to their story. Topics they commonly brought up were: their relationship with their mother, longing for their father, the path of and sometimes struggle for personal development, tensions related to integration efforts, and the ways they were burdened by their life story. In some cases, people described having a strong sense that they needed to make something of their life and be successful in some way. Simultaneously, many also described how, despite having achieved that, they still felt subject to emotional impairments such as burnout, depression, mood swings, and distrust, responses that correspond with the results of the survey. Some gave feedback expressing thanks to the researchers for having finally taken up this topic, along with hope that more justice and visibility will result. Others reported that their participation had initiated intensive reflection processes, which led them to a better understanding of their mothers and a more coherent comprehension of their own biographies. For others, participating in the study prompted them to search for their father (again) or to write down their life story.

Research interest

The intense feedback of former participants led to the idea of empirically investigating the long-term impact of study participation on GOC. Our initial study on GOC was the first of its kind; following it, our aim shifted to examining the effects study participation had on the respondents and learning about the root causes of the reported positive and strong effects.

Thus the present study was conceived to explore the following questions:

What reasons led GOC to participate in the initial study?
What initial reactions do participants report regarding study participation?
What expectations did GOC have of study participation and were these fulfilled?
Would participants participate again?
What changes did participants notice in dealing with their GOC background as a result of study participation?
What changes did participants notice in their personal life as a result of study participation?
What experiences have participants had if they exchanged with others about their GOC background or went public (as a result of study participation)?

Materials and methods

To investigate the root causes of the reported positive observations following study participation, the study attempted an overall equal-status pragmatist mixed research approach (Johnson, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017).

Instruments

In adherence to the study questions a two-part survey was designed comprised of: Part (I) a questionnaire (RRPQ, Newman et al., 2001) measuring respondents' quantitative, standardized reactions to research participation, translated into German in accordance with state of the art standards (Bracken and Barona, 1991; International Test Commission, 2005). Part (II) was developed in a participative process and piloted in cooperation with GOC and colleagues from the field that involved discussing quantitative and qualitative questions about expectations, research impact, remaining questions, and GOC's wishes. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical Faculty of Leipzig University.

Part I: Reactions to research participation questionnaire (RRPQ)

The RRPQ (Newman et al., 2001) is a two-part standardized instrument comprised of nine items for ranking the top three reasons for study participation and a 23-item scale assessing participants' reactions to research participation on five subscales: general attitudes about personal satisfaction (participation; four items), personal benefits gained from participation (personal benefits; four items), emotions experienced during the protocol (emotional reaction; four items), perceived drawbacks of the study (perceived drawbacks; six items), and global appraisal of the research protocol (global evaluation; five items). Each subscale gets scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Means were calculated for each subscale, whereby higher scores indicate more positive reactions to the research experience. The RRPQ has good reliability and validity (Kassam-Adams and Newman, 2002; DePrince and Chu, 2008; Schwerdtfeger, 2009).

Part II: Self-developed instrument

This instrument focused on seven main topics: (1) Expectations of study participation in respondents own words (three items); (2) readiness to participate again (three items); (3) changes due to participation in dealing with own GOC background (three items); (4) changes due to participation in private life (five items); (5) experiences in exchange with others about GOC background and going public (after study participation); (6) topics/questions still relevant today (three items); and (7) wishes for occupation children (three items).

TABLE 1 Socio-demographic characteristics, ($N = 65$).

	N/ %
Gender	
Male	26/40.0
Female	39/60.0
Age	
(mean/SD)	68.91/6.3
Birth cohorts	
1945–1951	48/73.8
1952–1958	6/9.2
1959–1966	11/16.9
Partnership	
Living with partner	40/61.5
Not living with partner	25/38.5
Education	
Obligatory graduation	10/15.4
Abitur[a]	2/3.1
Vocational training degree	14/21.5
Professional school degree	13/20.0
University degree	21/32.3
Employment	
Employed	17/26.2
Retirement	44/67.7
Unemployed	4/6.2

[a]German university entrance qualification.

A mix of open-ended and quantitative questions was designed for each topic; each section consisting of superordinate and refining subordinate questions. The first five topics were relevant to the research questions presented and will be analyzed below. The exact wording of the questions will be introduced at the beginning of each results section. The complete questionnaire is available online as supplement 1 (Kaiser and Glaesmer, 2022).

Participants

In 2017 the questionnaire was sent to all $N = 146$ participants in the initial study. Ten envelopes were returned due to failed delivery attempts (five addressees unknown, two deceased, three no interest). Of the 67 returned questionnaires, two were missing written consent and thus were excluded (44.8% response rate). Overall $N = 65$ (mean age 68.91, 40% male) response sets were included in the analyses. The sociodemographic sample characteristics are displayed in Table 1. The biological father of participants had served in the US army in 49.2% ($n = 32$) of cases, while 20% ($n = 13$) were the offspring of a member of the French Army, 24.6% ($n = 16$) of the Red Army, and 3.1.% ($n = 2$) of the British Army. 3.1% ($n = 2$) did not know their procreator's origin. The majority stated they were conceived by voluntary sexual activity (78.5%; $n = 51$), 7.7% ($n = 5$) were conceived by rape, and 12.3% ($n = 8$) did not know their procreational background.

Analyses

Quantitative analyses

Quantitative analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 for Windows were conducted to obtain mean scores and frequencies for the RRPQ according to instructions in the RRPQ original version (Newman et al., 2001), as well as for sociodemographic values and quantitative measures of the self-developed instrument.

Qualitative analyses

The qualitative analysis of the responses to the self-developed, open-ended questions of the questionnaire was conducted by means of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010, p. 601). Since our initial study on GOC was the first of its kind (on CBOW in general) and the experiences of CBOW are very specific, an explorative design was the best choice to learn about the root causes of the observed positive and strong effects reported by the participants after participation [Mayring, 2014, p. 12, 79]. The qualitative analysis thus followed a summative approach, aiming to find conclusions about key statements, aggregated to more abstract inductive levels (Mayring, 2010, p. 602). Relating to the step model of inductive category development (see Figure 1; Mayring, 2014, p. 80) a criterion of definition was formulated derived from GOC's personal post-participation feedback. Accordingly, the qualitative analyses focused on the following topics: (1) expectations in own words; (2) changes due to study participation in dealing with GOC background; (3) changes due to study participation in personal life; (4) experiences in exchange with others about GOC background and going public (after study participation). Under application of this criterion the data was read and preliminary categories were derived in a step by step process. This process is reflexive, categories are revised and reduced to main categories; their reliability is inquired. The data set of statements to the above mentioned four open-ended questions served as material for analysis.

Sometimes a statement was related to another question of the questionnaire and was then reassigned to the respective section. Please refer to Kaiser and Glaesmer (2022) for the final category system with example quotes (supplement 2), as well as the analysis table with the corresponding quotes (supplement 3). An overview of the top, main and subcategories is shown in Table 2. The original language of the material was German. The data was coded by the first author and, according to the step model, checked for intra-coder reliability by re-visiting parts of the material after 10–50% of material. Inter-coder reliability was checked by the second author, coding material selectively.

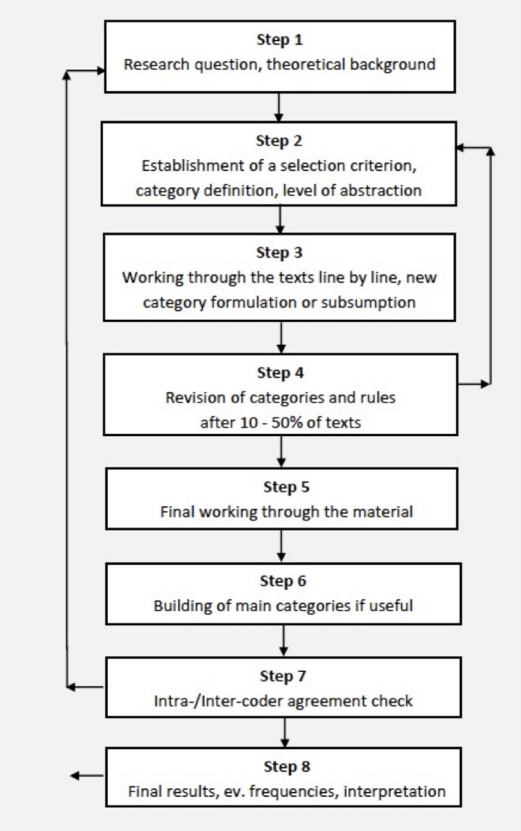

FIGURE 1
Steps of inductive category development (Mayring, 2014, p. 80).

Quotes were translated by the first author and an English native speaker independently, then discussed and finally consented for best fit.

Results

Part I: RRPQ

Reasons for participation

According to the RRPQ, leading motivators for participation were: curiosity (73.8%; $n = 48$), the wish to help oneself (53.8%; $n = 35$), the feeling that participation was necessary (53.8%; $n = 33$), and the wish to help others (47.7%; $n = 31$). Thirteen participants mentioned an additional topic (other, 20%, $n = 13$), namely, to support research on the topic. Further responses on the list were: "I didn't want to say no" (12.3%, $n = 8$), and "I thought it might improve my access to health care" (9.2%, $n = 6$). Multiple answers were possible.

Impact of research

According to four of the five scales of the RRPQ, participants' experiences with study participation were positive and above average ratings. Scales were rated from 1 to 5 and assessed: general attitudes about personal satisfaction (participation; mean/SD = 4.25/0.49); personal benefits gained from participation (personal benefits; mean/SD = 3.94/0.75);

TABLE 2 Final category system.

Top categories	Main categories	Subcategories
Reasons for participation	(1) Wish to disclose	Break with taboo of topic
		Raise awareness of lived experiences
		Share lived experiences
		Unburdening
		Speak personal truth
	(2) Wish to understand	Compare with other GOC
		Self-awareness
	(3) Wish to contribute	Contribute to reconnaissance movement
		(Contribute to) knowledge gain/ support research
		Help other GOC
	(4) Wish to receive help in search for father	
	(5) Wish to connect with other GOC	
	(6) Curiosity	
Changes in dealing with GOC background	(1) Feeling seen (in light of lived experiences)	
	(2) Reflection processes leading to deeper understanding	
	(3) Destigmatization of origins	
	(4) Sense of belonging to a group	
	(5) Renewed search for father/ origin	
Changes in personal life	(1) More openness in the family to the topic	
	(2) Changes in attachment to immediate family/ family of origin (parents)	
	(3) Changes in close relationships	
Experiences with exchange about GOC background	(1) Meaning of exchange for participant's own self-image/self-esteem	
	(2) Meaning of exchange with other GOC	
	(3) Motivation to go public	
	(4) Reactions	

perceived drawbacks of the study (perceived drawbacks; mean/SD = 4.54/0.37); and global appraisal of the research protocol (global evaluation; mean/SD = 4.53/0.37). In general, the higher the scores, the more positive the reactions were to the research. On the "emotional reaction" scale, describing emotions experienced during the protocol (emotional reaction; mean/SD = 2.89/0.98), participants gave their experience below average ratings indicating a rather negative emotional experience during participation.

Part II: Self-developed part

Expectations

"Were your expectations met?"

Almost half of all participants, 46.2% ($n = 30$), said their expectations were fully met; 33.8% ($n = 22$) reported this to be partially the case; and 9.2% ($n = 6$) said their experience of participating did not meet their expectations.

"Can you briefly describe in your own words what your expectations were for participation in the study?"

When asked to express their motivation to take part in their own words, participants stated a variety of different expectations that are described below and supported by representative quotes. Six different main categories were identified: (1) wish to disclose; (2) wish to understand; (3) wish to contribute; (4) wish to receive help in search for father; (5) wish to connect with other GOC; and (6) curiosity. Some participants stated they had no expectations but further explained what their reasons for participation were. The first three main categories contain further subcategories, explicated in each of the following sections.

Wish to disclose

The wish to disclose spoke out from many texts and was presented with finely nuanced differences. Sometimes the desire to share was linked to the intention to break the taboo around the topic of one's own origin or seen as an opportunity to tell their personal truth. Others wanted to raise awareness for their lived experiences or to simply share them with others. For some, participation was a way to unburden themselves.

Break with taboo of topic: Participants described wanting to participate in order to (finally) overcome the stigma of their origin and to break the taboo around the topic.

"[…] To draw attention to what was denied and kept silent. To personally meet people with the background of experience of being a child of occupation. […] To be an object of this investigation and still be a subject." ID46

"Participation in the study was very important to me, because these problems of the "Russian children" were never talked about (in the GDR[1])." ID154

Raise awareness of lived experiences: Participants aim to bring light into the darkness, and draw attention to themselves and their experiences. By participating they hope to raise visibility of the topic in public.

"First and foremost, I wanted to help shed some light on the subject, i.e. I wanted to support the scientific work. The consequences of the war are intensively studied in the media, but not the psychological side. In my opinion, this is neglected. Just as there was a silence in my family about who my father was, my producer, better said. This carries through into 'big' politics." ID16

Participation is also seen as a chance to contribute to a reappraisal of history, their life story, and to pass on their legacy.

"The subject of occupation children had exclusively negative connotations at the time of my birth and adolescence. Their raison d'être was denied by different parts of the population. In many cases, even by their own mothers. Even their procreators felt no obligation and were supported in this by the military services of the occupying powers, who sometimes also forcibly prevented them from claiming their children. These omnipresent rejections have shaped this generation. I do not want this part of history to be simply forgotten. That is my expectation of this study." ID45

Share lived experiences: Participants describe participation as a possibility to share lived experiences.

"[…] But came to participate without any fixed expectation. I hoped to share my thoughts, feelings, and my experiences. I knew that many people shared my fate, each in their own way." ID88

Unburdening: Participation was described as a means of unburdening through having a context within which one's life story could be dealt with without shame. The precondition for this purpose is understood to be having someone who is genuinely interested, listens, and believes.

"I wanted to be heard for once. I wanted to be understood. I wanted to unburden myself by opening up without fear of being made to look like a liar." ID62

Speak their personal truth: Participation was also seen as an opportunity to finally speak one's truth, and thereby challenge the established generally accepted view (in the family). Participants want to feel seen with their burden and know that it is recognized. To do this, they want to be able to tell their

1 GDR stands for German Democratic Republic.

story, an act that, for them, is predicated on being heard and taken seriously.

> *"For once in my life I had the opportunity to write or say everything about how I felt as a child, student, adolescent, and to some extent as an adult with this past. The subject was taboo in the family. Even today, my mother's point of view is considered correct. She denies me having problems with it." ID98*

> *"I didn't have any expectations. It was only important to me that I was allowed to tell my story, and to people I was sure would take me seriously, maybe that was my expectation. That I'd be taken seriously." ID175*

Wish to understand

For some participants, participation was also motivated by the hope of finding out something about themselves, their own origins, in order to better understand. This intention was also expressed by the desire to be able to compare themselves with other GOC.

Compare with other GOC: Another reason for participation was described as an interest in learning more about other GOC for purposes of comparison and alignment, for example, regarding how others deal with their past, their experiences, and their current condition.

> *"Since I felt I was alone with my fate before, I wanted to know if there were others with similar experiences and feelings." ID8*

> *"That many others who participated would become a kind of witness to my own story with their accounts, as well as the feeling of not being alone in this." ID131*

Self-awareness: Participants also voiced the hope that study participation could help them gain insight into their life story and could also be beneficial to processing their lived experiences.

> *"I hoped to get answers to questions that had been unspoken since I was a kid. Why the bad relationship with my mother, why am I mostly a loner, etc." ID53*

> *"My expectation was to get clarity about myself again, while supporting scientific research in the field." ID144*

Wish to contribute

Furthermore, participation offered the opportunity to make a personal, societal contribution, and thus be connected to something larger. This contribution could be the connotation of participation as helping other GOCs or as enriching public knowledge through the support of research.

(Contribute to) knowledge gain/support research: Participants stated their participation was motivated by a desire to promote knowledge growth and/or to gain more knowledge themselves.

> *"More information for society! But also information for affected persons to cope better." ID30*

> *"1) That as many as possible participate. 2) That the results are presented publicly. 3) New knowledge is gained." ID40*

Contribute to enlightenment movement: Participation can also be seen as being part of a peaceful movement.

> *"[…] To be part of a peace initiative, to live understanding and bridge building. […]" ID46*

Help other GOC: Participants want to help other GOC find their fathers, give them hope for it, or encourage them to disclose their heritage and contribute to the reappraisal of the past for the benefit of other GOC.

> *"Helping others to go more public. To be open with the past. To stand by who you are. Talking about it with those around you, associations, friends." ID68*

> *"To help other occupation children, who have not yet come out, with my experiences." ID153*

Wish to receive help in search for father

Others hoped to find out more about their father by participating, or that they might receive assistance in finding their father, for example, *via* access to contact addresses or perhaps archives.

> *"[…] My expectation was actually that I could possibly, through this study, gather clues about my father, origin, date of birth […]." ID75*

> *"My expectation was to find my father - to better understand the time back then." ID116*

Wish to connect with other GOC

A further motivator was the hope of meeting other GOC.

> *"[…] Getting to know people with the experience background of an occupation child personally. […]" ID46*

> *"[…] To meet others with similar fates; […]" ID153*

Curiosity

Finally pure curiosity was also a motive for participation.

> *"When filling out the questionnaire, I had no expectations. I assumed it was for research purposes only and didn't expect to get any feedback. At the same time, I had tried to get other contacts, but received no response […] actually, I was just curious, with no expectations." ID18*

> *"I was curious. A mixture of curious and anxious feelings. I reveal a lot and show my vulnerable sides. On the other hand, it's useful for others affected to shed light on the story." ID64*

Further participation

"Would you participate again?"

When asked if they would participate again, the majority (89.2%; $n = 58$) stated they would be very likely to: 72.3% ($n = 47$) answered "yes, definitely", 16.9% ($n = 11$) "probably yes". Only 4.6% ($n = 3$) would most likely not participate again: "probably not" 3.1 ($n = 2$), "definitely not" 1.5 ($n = 1$).

Changes due to study participation in dealing with the GOC background

"Has participation in the study changed anything about how you deal with being an occupation child today?"

In this section of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they had noticed any changes they may have experienced due to participating in the study. This was done via: (a) a binary question; (b) a request to rate these changes on a scale of 1 (negative) to 10 (positive); (c) a request to describe those changes in their own words.

Half of the participants stated that they had noticed changes in how they deal with their GOC background as a consequence of study participation (52.3%; $n = 34$). Changes were perceived to be rather positive (MW 7.85/SD 2.35, MIN = 0, MAX = 10; $n = 37$).

The changes participants described in their own words were coded into five main categories: (1) feeling seen; (2) reflection processes led to deeper understanding; (3) destigmatization of own origin; (4) sense of belonging to a group; and (5) renewed search for the father/origin. When breaking the categories further down, it seemed that, to a certain degree, some categories built on each other in terms of content.

Feeling seen (in light of lived experiences)

Overall, participants considered it a positive thing that someone took on the topic and showed a genuine interest in their story. They particularly emphasized that it had been an important experience for them to not be treated with inhibition or judgement.

"No one has been derogatory or amused or dismissed my story as if it was all not so bad." ID 175

"Questions were asked or situations were addressed that I personally could not share or discuss with anyone before." ID 184

Reflection processes leading to deeper understanding

Dealing with the topic set in motion reflection processes, which in part led to participants reassessing their own life story and thus gaining a deeper understanding of their own behavior/emotions, and by extension a greater sense of self-assurance.

"A change in self-awareness, at times, I can better categorize feelings/behaviors because I am more aware of the connection to my biography." ID 11

"I believe that, among other things, participation has enabled me to further process and integrate my life story and thus at least gain more distance from it. So things have been put into perspective a little bit." ID 41

Destigmatization of origins

Participants described experiencing a more positive sense of self and satisfaction overall after study participation. This aspect entailed participants developing a more self-accepting approach to their origins, thereby making it possible to destigmatize those origins.This flowed out of participants being able to talk and deal more openly with their own life story.

"I could never talk about the subject without trepidation although my family and acquaintances knew "everything." After the study and our Leipzig meetings, dealing with the topic feels relaxed and low-pressure for me. We talk about it more often and my family is very interested." ID 88

"[. . .] the flaw that I knew how to hide outwardly well has also dissolved inwardly afterwards." (ID 162)

Sense of belonging to a group

Participants reported that due to the researchers communicating the results of the study with them they were able to see the larger picture of the entire GOC situation. They talked about how they are now able to classify themselves and their biography within this group, and emphasized their sense of belonging to a group. This experience offered participants the chance to compare their shared fate and recognize parallels. This aspect in particular, of no longer being alone with their own life story and getting in touch with other GOC for the first time, was described by many as novel and satisfying.

"A year before the study started, I found my father and I know how important the topic can be in the minds of those affected. I feel more like an "equal among equals" after the study, and meet other people more impartially; enjoy listening to other biographies." ID 29

"Your study results from (date) confirm that there are still many occupation children who are searching. You somehow feel like you belong to this group and would like to contribute your experiences as well." ID 117

Apparently, learning about the situation of other GOC via the study results had a strong self-affirming effect for participants, and seems to have made a decisive contribution to the positive development and re-evaluation processes many participants described undergoing.

Renewed search for father/origin

In addition to the reflection processes about the past and the enriched knowledge about the fate of others, for some, study participation triggered a (renewed) search for their biological father and/or the desire to learn more about their origin.

> *"Unlike others, I began for the first time to deal intensively with my story of origin, the circumstances surround it, concomitants, etc. Since I didn't know anyone of the same origin and hadn't had any negative experiences, this had not been much of an issue in my life up to that point, especially not in the society of the GDR[2]. The subject of occupation children only became an issue as a result of my participation. Since then it's occupied me daily!" ID 18*

> *"Answering the questions helped me systematically examine my own thoughts and feelings as well as my life story, and furthermore motivated me to research the identity of my biological parents." ID 144*

Changes due to study participation regarding personal life

> *"Has anything changed in your personal life (e.g., family life, home environment) as a result of participating?"*

This section addressed changes in personal life catalyzed by study participation. Participants were asked about changes they had observed with: (a) a binary question; (b) a request to rate those changes on a scale of 1 (negative) to 10 (positive); (c) a request to further explore the nature and extent of those changes in their own words.

One quarter (24.6%; $n = 16$) reported changes in their private life due to study participation, changes that were deemed positive developments (MW 7.05/SD 2.64, MIN = 1, MAX = 10; $n = 22$).

Responses to this question dealt with issues that fell into three main categories: (1) more openness in the family to the topic; (2) changes in attachment to immediate family and family of origin (parents); (3) changes in close relationships.

More openness in the family to the topic

After participation some participants experienced more openness in their family.

> *"Within the family it was a difficult subject, everything has become more relaxed." ID 82*

> *"Approaching the topic needed a lot of tact in the family (German family). But suddenly the aunts who were still alive could talk about it more openly." ID 184*

Changes in attachment to immediate family/family of origin (parents)

For others, their own reflection stemming from their participation led to changes in attachment to family members.

> *"Interaction with my parents has become even more important to me and the need to visit my family in England even more intense, as well as, unfortunately, the pain of separation when I leave there again." ID 85*

> *"I have more confidence and can hold my own. With my sister I shared many memories from our childhood and since then we get along well and are closer than ever." ID 166*

Changes in close relationships

For some, addressing the topic also seems to have led to changes in close relationships, such as breakups or relationship clarification.

> *"I think it wasn't the study. It was the whole process. My shame is gone, my husband is gone. I was so happy and full about finding [my father[3]], there was nothing else for me. It was such a longing before, that I plunged in." ID 64*

> *"So-called friendships drifted apart, there was a distance. My marriage that was ailing ultimately ended in divorce." ID 68*

A careful hypothesis here is that, in taking up the topic, some GOC may have experienced a legitimization of addressing the topic intensively, which led to a new clarity or a greater awareness of their own existential core and identity, and thereby empowered them to prioritize within or even end unstable relationships.

In sum, these statements are to be seen in connection with the processes described in the previous section. By reevaluating one's own origins and experiencing a sense of belonging within a group, a basis for a new sense of identity and new self-confidence can emerge. This may have given participants the courage to open up.

Experiences in exchange with others about GOC background and going public (After study participation)

> *"Were you able to speak to others about your GOC background or did you go public? If so, what experiences have you had with it?"*

2 GDR stands for German Democratic Republic.

3 Author's comment.

This part of the questionnaire resembles a subsection of the section on changes in dealing with being an occupation child and concerns disclosure regarding their GOC background.

The vast majority of participants (81.5%; $n = 53$) stated they were able to disclose their GOC background to others or went public following study participation.

The answers to these questions particularly emphasized the impact of disclosure and exchange. Participants' statements regarding their experiences were sorted into four main categories: (1) meaning of exchange for participants' self-image/self-esteem; (2) meaning of exchange with other GOC; (3) motivation to go public; (4) reactions. The fourth category delineates three different types of reactions: mixed, positive, negative, of which the first two were predominant.

Meaning of exchange for participants' self-image/self-esteem

Participants emphasized the positive effect of disclosure on their self-image/self-worth. They reported receiving recognition and compassion when disclosing; and they felt pride through talking about their origins with others.

"A lot of positive feedback, high regard, and recognition came from important personalities. This was very good for my self-esteem." ID 8

"Very good experience! Sympathy, exchange of opinions, interest from media, and my pride solidified!" ID 63

"For many it was an unknown story, the subject of occupation children, in general. However, I gained personal recognition." ID 184

Meaning of exchange with other GOC

The other, apparently very important, aspect of participation seems to be the connection it facilitated with other GOC. The following statements refer to the meetings held by the "Distelblüten" (thistle blossoms) group. In such a group, participants feel they can be a part of the lives of others, feel understood, and secure. Connecting to other GOC (for the first time) is also associated with arriving at oneself.

"The evaluation of the study has brought some satisfaction. A wonderful "family" has been found, the group around [Distelblüten initiators]. I can participate in the lives of other Russian children, can speak freely and feel secure in the group. And maybe my search will be successful, I will report about it later - whether successful or not…?" ID 88

"The outcome statistics didn't show me much, but the personal contact with affected people did. Without participation in the study, these connections would not have been possible." ID 8

According to these testimonies on experiences with disclosure, contact with other GOC seems to have had a self-affirming effect, an element that is related to having a sense of belonging and thereby helps strengthen a person's identity. This aspect is also resembled here:

"There was a change in attitude toward life toward the positive, no more depressive thoughts. New-found good connections, conversations - worldwide." ID 8

"I could only "give free rein" to thoughts and feelings at our second meeting in Leipzig. It felt like an arrival." ID 88

These testimonies illustrate how powerful and empowering the experiences of speaking up and coming out are, as well as being in connection with people with shared background and experiences. It is possible that the experience of exchanging about their shared GOC background had a positive reinforcing effect on participants' self-esteem - a result of positive reflection processes initiated during study participation and continued by learning of the results and networking with other GOCs.

Motivation to go public

Some participants felt motivated to share their story with the public, e.g. by publishing their biography/book on the topic, giving talks, or participating in interviews.

"It has always been talked about [in my family][4]. However, rarely. Writing about my life story and origins did the family, above all, the children, a service. I organize readings of the book I helped to write. I have become more 'aware' of my origins. Positive. Proud? Close. In one case, an aunt made negative and derogatory comments about my mother after reading about me in the local press. There are positive reactions from other relatives and acquaintances. I'm intentionally going public." ID 18

"Am more confident about this. Have given talks and made an effort to formulate something." ID 46

"At my age, you get thoughtful. You gave me the right push to actually publish my book, i.e. my autobiography. Thank you for that. My participation has made me courageous, has made me strong!" ID 62

Reactions

Generally, participants reported very different reactions to disclosures of their background or talking openly about the GOC topic.

Mixed reactions

"Open-mindedness to shirking." ID 42

4 Author's comment.

Positive reactions

Positive reactions to participants' disclosures were perceived as relieving, beneficial, and inspiring.

> *"Positive! I was amazed at the response the telling of one's own fate can elicit, even to the point of sympathy." ID 29*

> *"Since participating in the study, I have mustered the courage more often to talk to others about my background, and to my relief, everyone has responded positively." ID 166*

Negative reactions

Negative reactions were described as depressing, disappointing, and discouraging.

> *"In personal conversations, I have found that others can hardly comprehend the impact that rape, even more so by an occupying soldier, can have on the personal development of the resulting child." ID 81*

> *"Only or mostly bad experiences. Depressing. Questions like: 'Why are you doing this? You've always been fine. No reaction at all." ID 121*

Discussion

Following a study on the psychosocial consequences of growing up as an occupation child in post-WWII Germany, many participants shared personal feedback on the study, including descriptions of positive developments they experienced later on due to their participation. The results of this initial study showed the potential long-term impact of unfavorable developmental conditions, as well as stressful to potentially traumatic experiences for many but not all participants (Kaiser, 2017). The aim of the present study from 2017 was to explore which aspects of participating in the 2013 study influenced GOC respondents' positive feedback and the positive developments in their personal lives so many of them reported. Furthermore, we were interested in learning what benefits participants derived from the initial study and what conclusions can be drawn for future studies on CBOW and other potentially vulnerable/ sensitive and/or hidden populations. Lastly, since there was a time span of more than 3 years, between the initial study in 2013 and the present study, it can be understood as an investigation of a long-term participation impact. Our initial study was the first in the field to use a psychological approach on GOC. The present study revealed that, although respondents found it emotionally challenging to participate in the survey of the initial study itself, they also observed that the mid- and long-term impacts of taking part in the study were positive overall. According to the RRPQ, leading motivators for participation were: curiosity, the wish to help oneself, feeling that participation was necessary, wanting to help others, and a desire to support research on the topic. These findings were mirrored when the participants were asked to explain their expectations of the experience in their own words. Six different motivations were identified including: (1) wish to disclose (break with taboo of topic, raise awareness of lived experiences, share lived experiences, unburden themselves), tell their own truth), (2) the wish to understand (compare with other GOC, increase self-awareness), (3) the wish to contribute (contribute to enlightenment movement, (contribute to) knowledge gain/support research, help other GOC), (4) the wish to receive help in search for father, (5) wish to connect with other GOC, and (6) curiosity. Almost half the participants saw their expectations met and the majority said they would participate again. With regard to possible changes experienced resulting from participating in the study, half of the participants stated that they had noticed changes in how they deal with their GOC background, and that those changes had been predominantly positive. Five different categories of change following study participation were identified: (1) Feeling seen; (2) reflection processes leading to deeper understanding; (3) destigmatization of origins; (4) sense of belonging to a group; (5) feeling prompted to renew their search for their father/origin. One quarter reported experiencing changes for the better in their private life due to study participation. Three main areas of change were identified: (1) More openness in the family to the topic; (2) changes in attachment to immediate family/family of origin (parents), (3) changes in close relationships. The vast majority of participants stated they were able to disclose their GOC background to others or went public following study participation. Four aspects were especially emphasized by participants: (1) meaning of exchange for the person's self-image/self-esteem; (2) meaning of exchange with other GOC; (3) motivation to go public; and (4) reactions (to disclosure).

Our study showed that people who grew up as GOC predominantly benefited from the attention they received as part of the process of participating in the study (interest in their life story, removal of taboos, acknowledgment of specific living conditions and associated challenges, having their say, being seen). This phenomenon has been described as the participants' "genuine need to 'have their voices heard'", and has been reported of other CBOW populations as well (e.g., Lee and Bartels, 2019a). Moreover, our findings are in line with studies on risks and benefits in (trauma) research participation, stating that despite a possible negative emotional reaction during the study protocol, the majority reported beneficial aspects resulting from participation. Reported benefits were such as finding it useful to reflect on and think about experiences, even if painful (Dyregrov et al., 2000); gain new insight, find it generally helpful to be able to talk about experiences, and that participation clarified past memories

(Carlson et al., 2003). Another study reported increased self-esteem, the feeling of self-empowerment and validation, as well as continued positive changes following research participation (Disch, 2001). Parallels to these statements are found in our results as main effects of participation reported by our respondents were their new-found sense of community with other GOC, social acknowledgment, and increased levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem. Participants said that filling out the questionnaire facilitated reflection processes that deepened their understanding of themselves, and that they felt better understood by others in the context of their GOC experiences. It seems that for some, a long-held desire for a sense of belonging was met through activities that took place in the wake of the study, including communication pertaining to the study results and opportunities to exchange with other GOC. GOC were able to compare their lived experiences with those of other GOC, and thus felt affirmed in their own perceptions and feelings. To gain this benefit, even at a later stage of life, appears to be a deeply empowering experience.

In addition to the similarities in benefits with other research populations another notable aspect of our study results is, that the participants' evaluation of the experience was more positive than has been the case among the populations presented by Newman et al. (2001; individuals with PTSD, trauma experience, unaffected) in the RRPQ validation study. It does appear that in the present case, the participants' gain outweighed the costs, whereas in former studies there seemed to be an equipoise between costs and benefits for participants. With this clearly positive evaluation, our study results contribute to the conclusion, that obviously people in general, whether "unburdened" or carrying a "hidden" burden (e.g., traumatized individuals, people with PTSD), stand to benefit from the attention they receive and being heard while participating in a study.

Another interesting finding concerns recurring questions participants have lived with regarding their identity (e.g., lack of information about their origin, their father, the relationship between their mother and father, and by extension, themselves) accompanied by a strong urge to fill in these gaps in their knowledge. These needs are reflected in the expectations participants had toward study participation. Participants reported feeling a need to tell their story, be heard, and be taken seriously. They wanted to unload their emotional burden and break the taboo surrounding their origins. As far as the desire for belonging described by so many of the respondents is concerned, this aspect of the GOC experience can be seen as an expression of the universal and fundamental human need to feel one has a right to exist and is welcome in the world, to be seen in the context of one's lived experiences, and to being able to locate and understand one's self.

Similar questions, needs and aspirations have been described for other CBOW populations as well (Schretter et al., 2021, p. 60) and may be explained by similar specific developmental conditions that influence CBOW growing up and impede healthy development, leaving these individuals with similar existential topics to deal with in their lives (lack of opportunities, need for understanding, desire for belonging and being accepted). Furthermore, research on adopted and sperm donor children clearly showed that knowledge of one's origins is central to identity development (Turner and Coyle, 2000), as is the perception and appraisal of children by their social surroundings and society (von Korff and Grotevant, 2011).

To properly explain the positive impact of our study on GOC, it is important to understand their situation in Germany before the study took place. Our project was the first psychological investigation ever conducted on this population and many had lived their lives with little awareness of other GOC or opportunity to talk openly about their background. Suddenly researchers were present who were interested in their life story, consistently approached them with an interested and open attitude, and reliably responded to their concerns and questions. Those who desired it were also provided information in support of their search for their fathers. During the recruitment stage, they were given time to speak about their experiences, fears, and concerns on the phone or *via* email. After data analysis, results were shared with all involved *via* a newsletter that reported the main findings in laymen's terms. In addition, the entire study protocol was developed in collaboration with GOC and experts to ensure close alignment with their lived experiences. Support groups for GOC sired by American and French soldiers already existed before the 2013 study was conducted. As this was not the case for descendants of Red Army soldiers, the researchers initiated and assisted the formation of a network, who then held their inaugural meeting in Leipzig. At the time of the initial study, in 2013, various media outlets were addressing the topic of GOC simultaneously. There were interviews with researchers and GOC were asked for interviews. Reports on the subject were broadcast by radio and television. Those GOC, who had been nearly invisible with their backgrounds before and had previously only revealed themselves to people in their immediate social environment, if at all, now became socially visible. They spoke out for themselves, published autobiographies, connected with other GOC, and renewed their efforts to identify and locate their fathers. The visibility and the possibilities of exchange with people who grew up under similar, very specific developmental conditions was satisfying and reassuring for them. They describe experiencing a new sense of feeling accepted and complete. A subject that, for many, had never really found a place in their lives now suddenly became part of their identity and thereby had a self-empowering effect. The reactions participants shared after completing the study clearly show that the participants experienced acceptance and empowerment through participating in the study, effects which resulted from disclosing their personal truth, and receiving genuine interest and attention along with increased visibility and social acknowledgment.

As shown above, the positive experiences during as well as in the development in the wake of study participation contrast with the previous life reality of many GOC. In connection with the results of the initial study, which reported adverse experiences in childhood and adolescence, e.g., in the form of child abuse and maltreatment, as well as experiences of stigmatization and discrimination, the initial situation is reminiscent in aspects of feelings of isolation, of being unconnected, of not being heard and perceived, as described in the concepts of experienced injustice. There are various theories on this, but two seem to be closest to these experiences: *testimonial injustice*, as one aspect of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007), and *ethical loneliness* (Stauffer, 2015). *Epistemic injustice* focuses on discrimination, which refers to the systematic disadvantage of individuals in terms of their personal knowledge. "*Testimonial injustice* is present when negative stereotypes result in individuals being denied both credibility and epistemic capacity due to prejudice" (Kavemann et al., 2022, p. 140). The result may be a *credibility deficit*, which leads to the less powerful social groups having to fight to be heard (Fricker, 2007, p. 17). The concept of *ethical loneliness* has parallels to this. It is the condition of people who have been wronged by other people or political structures, but whose testimony is neither properly heard nor listened to by the surrounding world. This experience deepens the feeling of "ethical solitude" and the sense of homelessness and distrust in the world (Urquiza-Haas, 2018, p. 115). The introduced findings from both GOC studies suggest that these two concepts of experienced injustice could also be considered for GOC.

In addition to all these positive accounts regarding study participation, there were also negative statements regarding the initial study that should be mentioned here. During recruitment, for example, there were messages on the study answering machine advising against carrying out the study at all, saying that history should be put to rest. After study participation, there were participants who expressed disappointment because their hopes of finding their father through participation were not fulfilled, e.g.:

> *"If one wants to help the occupation children appropriate references must be published, so that this circle of persons finds out where they can turn. This is fundamentally lacking." ID23*

Others would have liked to see political pressure on the occupying powers to locate the fathers and/or open the archives for occupation children as a result of participation and were disappointed that this pressure has not yet been apparent, e.g.:

> *"The first 4 (from the previous question)*[5] *are certainly fulfilled, but also because society is more open. I can't even begin to identify any political pressure!" ID2*

One person said that, in addition to scientific findings, s/he would have liked to see practice-oriented recommendations:

> *"I had hoped that practice-oriented recommendations would have emerged in addition to scientific findings." ID23*

Some participants hinted that the results were incomplete and voiced reservation, e.g.:

> *"The transmission of the study results in full would be nice; The construction of an internet forum to exchange with and "find each other", which could potentially have resulted from the study, is missing. What will change as a result of the study, will such minorities be heard from anymore?" ID29*

Furthermore, there was disappointment about failed contact attempts to get in touch with other GOCs:

> *"My personal story has been placed in its historical context. I have learned (also through subsequent reading) that other children of the occupation have developed similar experiences, feelings, and behavior and thus I no longer feel so alone and isolated. Attempts to contact e.g. [GI trace coordinator for Germany/ Austria] have come to nothing: am I not a child of the occupation accepted as such, since I was born "only" in 1961? I would like to have contacts with other GI children! This expectation has not been met." ID41*

Conclusion

In line with numerous other studies reflecting on participation impact on populations with differing degrees of potential vulnerability, we have learned that by participating in a study that touches on personally meaningful topics, and learning about the results, experiencing oneself as part of a group, and thereby fulfilling the desire to belong and to be accepted, people have the opportunity to reflect in new ways about themselves, their life stories, and the larger context of their lives — even if not all expectations of study participation can be met. In addition, participants' testimonies clearly showed that the benefits reverberate over a period of several years. An impressive example of the reverberating process, which can also occur with a delay, is demonstrated by this email from a former study participant, which may be published here with kind permission:

> *"I have only now become aware of this in such a complex way. We children of the occupation are only a part of it. I am grateful that I was able to gain this knowledge, albeit late. And, dear Marie, I am grateful that back in 2013, in May, I received a call from you with the offer to participate in the study. That was the beginning of getting to know so many people with such different fates, all in the late search for self-discovery and their identity. I see the entire generation of war children [CBOW] with different eyes and different emotions than I have in my entire life so far, even though I have not lived "behind the moon." I have always been politically open and have read a lot. But it has only been in the last few years that the topic of*

5 Author's comment.

children born of war has been given space in research and in literature." (ID18; October, 2019)

This statement and our findings clearly show that research can do much more than collect data and generate knowledge. It can be community-building, identity-strengthening, and ultimately also life-changing. The sometimes difficult path of researching hidden populations is worthwhile. For participants, beyond the significance of feeling heard the opportunity to be actively involved in the study process and have personal contact with research staff appears to further enhance the empowering effect of the whole experience. In addition to this, an attitude of fairness by researchers toward participants also appears to be beneficial — having the opportunity to give and take in respectful cooperation. For future studies on potentially vulnerable/sensitive and/or hidden populations, the following best practices can be recommended as gleaned from this work: (1) Cooperation of researchers and study subjects established through a participative research approach to ensure the instrument used is tailored to the specific circumstances of the study population; (2) Personal support of the study subjects during recruitment and (3) embedding the survey in a close-knit network of research staff, thereby contributing to much greater compliance; (4) Communication of the study results to the former participants in the form of a newsletter; (5) Facilitating networking among the participants — when applicable, especially if the study is the first of its kind and therefore the starting point for empowerment for a specific population; (6) Discussion of the study results with contemporary witnesses, in order to interpret them correctly/not to overlook any aspects; (7) Attitude of respect, openness, and appreciation toward study participants underlying the entire study process.

Limitations and further research

The results of the study presented should be viewed in light of the following limitations. First, self-selection bias is inherent to this study format. Less than half (44.52%) of the initial study participants took part in this follow-up survey, and even the participants of the initial study were self-selected. It remains unclear what impact study participation had on the non-responders. It could be that participation was very disappointing or stressful for them, or that more positive turns in their lives occurred, or that participation did not matter to them. However, if one compares the participants with the non-responders with respect to some core characteristics assessed in the initial study, there are no significant differences with regard to parameters such as age, gender, procreation background, army for which the biological father was deployed, experiences of stigma, experiences of child abuse, or current psychological distress [for more details please refer to Kaiser and Glaesmer (2022); supplement 4]. Another aspect concerns the completeness of the available data. Because we used a self-completion questionnaire, the participants were free to either answer the open-ended questions or not. Therefore, the aspects highlighted by the analysis do not reflect the opinions of all participants. These could be more positive or more negative or raise completely different topics that could not be covered by the analysis of the available data. Furthermore, the analysis of written answers must always be seen against the background of the wording of the questions. Aspects that emerged by chance, such as the motivation to participate to be part of an enlightenment movement, may well be more widespread among the respondents than they appear to be based on a single recorded statement, since there were no questions that specifically addressed this. Additionally, the analysis is based on information provided in writing in response to a questions posed in a self-completion format. Accordingly, there are several conceivable points at which misunderstandings could have occurred. On the one hand, it is possible that participants did not understand the questions in their entirety. On the other hand, it is possible that what was written, was understood differently by the authors in the analysis than what was originally intended by the participant. In contrast to an interview, an anonymous questionnaire does not offer the possibility to ask clarifying questions in the case of ambiguous statements.

Despite these limitations, the results of our study on the impact of research participation provide rich insights into beneficial effects of study participation and reasons why initial participation in the study might have elicited such positive feedback. Thus, researchers should be encouraged to continue research to give voices to potentially vulnerable/sensitive and/or hidden populations, enabling them to tell their story, and/or should not refrain from conducting studies on lived experiences on populations of higher age as well. Looking at the GOC in particular, their identity questions as well as the positive twists related to sense of belonging, social recognition, and self-esteem stand out. Therefore, future research should address experiences of injustice, as well as the aspect of disclosure in the lives of GOC, in order to gain deeper insight into the dynamics of these experiences. Interesting questions would be: Are the specific experiences of GOC reflected in the concepts of ethical loneliness or testimonial injustice? How did GOC experience the knowledge of their occupation child background? How did they cope with this knowledge? What impact did this knowledge have on their subsequent lives as well as on their evaluation of their previous lives?

Regardless of the benefits that study participation may have for individuals from a potentially vulnerable/sensitive and/or hidden population, it is important at this point to reiterate the importance of cultural sensitivity as an ethical principle in research. When conducting research it must be acknowledged that the social preconditions under which a candidate CBOW population currently lives dictate the level of access researchers have to them and influence CBOW's freedom to pursue their interests. Questions to be considered in advance are, for

example, whether it might be shameful or even dangerous to identify as a CBOW, to network with other CBOW, or to cooperate with researchers? What social consequences might be associated with study participation? How are CBOW seen and recognized in their respective societies? Is there an intrinsic need to get in touch with other CBOW, or questions about one's identity/ origin?

Following are some examples of countries struggling to come to terms with their past. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the 1990s, about 20,000 to 50,000 girls, women, and men were exposed to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV; e.g., Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly - Resolution 993, 1993). "Until now, there is little public acknowledgment of committed war crimes. The deliberate political denial will create great obstacles for peace, reconciliation and social stability in the region, because this way of dealing with the past not only denies memories and experiences of victims during the war, it also channels memories in the establishment of a main narrative, which creates the respective historical background of one 'national truth'. {…} This social-political desire of silencing the past has an impact on women witnesses, facing re-traumatization in post-war Bosnian society" (Gödl, 2013, p. 9). While the psychological, physical, and social consequences of CSRV for the victims has been investigated during the last decade, "the issue of children as 'secondary war victims' was still behind a wall of silence" (Gödl, 2013, p. 8). The issue was not addressed in the public debate on children's rights or in academia until the first psychological study was conducted in 2016 (Roupetz et al., 2021, p.127; Carpenter, 2010; Delić et al., 2017). Furthermore, in 2015, the former children of war (now young adults) have founded a network led by Ajna Jusić that was initiated by neuropsychiatrist Amra Delić (Forgotten Children of War Association, www.zdr.org.ba/). Members of the network see themselves as bridge builders to advance reconciliation in the country and to fight for equal rights and respect (www.trtworld.com; Chibow.org, 2019; Jusić, 2019; trtworld.com, 2019; Forgotten War Children Association, 2021).

The above-mentioned aspects to consider before planning research surely apply to other potentially vulnerable/sensitive and/or hidden populations in a similar way, as well as for reappraisal processes around sensitive issues in general. Poland provides a vivid example of this in its handling of the WWII issue. Although research has been conducted concerning the reappraisal of Poland's involvement in WWII, the Polish government seems eager to subdue any activity deviating from their view of history. According to Paweł Machcewicz, the former director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, the controversy around the museum depicts the convergence of history, remembrance, and politics. It is a two-fold controversy about WWII: "On the one hand, it concerns the museum, and on the other it is a controversy over the so-called Holocaust Act of 2018 as an attempt to block and punish testimony and research that might show Poland as complicit in the persecution and killing of Jews" (Golanska and Bittner, 2019). Obviously, nations just like individuals need time to be able to touch old wounds, clean them, and make them available for (public) healing and debate.

According to the Hamburg Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kriegsursachenforschung (AKUF; Hamburg working group on the causes of war) there were 29 wars/armed conflicts in 25 countries in 2020 (AKUF, 2020). Each of these countries is different in terms of the nature of their conflicts and how they deal with CBOW. It is now recognized that the living conditions of CBOW are specific and often precarious, and that this population is often highly distressed (e.g., Mochmann, 2008; Lee, 2017; Lee and Bartels, 2019a,b, p. 54; Roupetz et al., 2021, p. 130; Seto, 2013; Wagner et al., 2020). That said, we hope that future studies will have similar positive resonance with participants from CBOW populations in a greater variety of contexts and initiate positive developments in their lives—and we are eager to see future studies that will investigate this.

In summary, besides adding to the body of scientific knowledge, our study showed that participating in a study that addresses relevant and personal issues may have benefits on self-esteem, attachment and social acknowledgment for participants, which in turn may have the potential to initiate or resume reflection processes and enhance personal development. With a view to increasing life-expectancy, the study results additionally highlight the potential benefits of disclosure in later life, even regarding long-past (and long-lasting) problems. Benefits that may be meaningful for years to come. Therefore, more research on (older adult) potentially vulnerable/sensitive and/or hidden populations as well as older adults in general is therefore to be encouraged, provided it adheres to ethical guidelines, as it can make an important contribution not only to the understanding of the populations itself, but also to their lives.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of the Medical Faculty, Leipzig University (No. 415-12-17122012). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MK: person in charge of the initial study and the follow-up study presented here: responsible for preparation

of questionnaire, recruitment of participants, conduction the study, data entry and cleaning, data analysis, and preparation of publication. HG: supervision of all study processes, co-analyst for qualitative data, supervision, and correction of publication. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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"Collateral damage" of occupation? Social and political responses to nonmarital children of Allied soldiers and Austrian women after the Second World War

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Thousands of so-called *occupation children* were born to Allied soldiers and Austrian women in sexual relations after the end of the Second World War. Their experiences correspond to the experiences of *occupation children* in Germany and, more general, to the experiences of Children Born of War, i.e., children born after sexual contact between local women and foreign/enemy soldiers in conflict and post-conflict situations, regardless of the time of birth and the geopolitical context. Now, more than 75 years after the end of the war, we have studied the changes in the social and political handling of *occupation children* in Austria over the past decades, using official sources such as newspaper reports, and including biographical interviews conducted with British *occupation children* in the 2010s. Three phases were identified into which the handling of *occupation children* can be divided: The post-war years, in which these children were perceived as an (economic) burden; the phase of *occupation children* growing up and becoming adults, in which they were hardly addressed in public; and the period since the 1990s, in which they have experienced increased media, family, and public interest, which can be attributed to their efforts to make their life stories heard, to the academic research into their living and socialization conditions, and to the formation of networks. The study complements other research on *occupation children* in Germany and Austria, highlighting the significant differences in the discourse on U.S. American, British, Soviet, and French *occupation children*, especially between *white* and Black *occupation children*, and addressing the differences in Austria compared to Germany. The article argues that challenges and opportunities in the integration of these children have been tied to changes in social values and morals as well as to collective processes of coming to terms with the war and post-war period.

KEYWORDS

occupation children, Children Born of War, World War II, post-war period, Austria

Introduction

Brigitte Rupp is one of thousands of so-called *occupation children* in Austria, i.e., children conceived in sexual relations between members of the Allied forces and Austrian women after the Second World War. Her mother worked as a server for the British troops in the Palais Goess-Sarau in Graz in the summer of 1945.[1] There she met a British officer, and they began a relationship, despite the fraternization ban that prohibited any kind of private contact between British servicemen and so-called ex-enemy aliens.[2] Shortly after Rupp had been born in June 1946, her British father left his stationing in Graz and was transferred to Vienna, from where he returned to Great Britain in 1949. Most nonmarital children of Allied soldiers and Austrian women, including Brigitte R., grew up without their fathers, who had left their places of stationing before or after the children were born. Some Allied soldiers never learned about the children they had fathered while stationed in Austria.

The interest in her parents' relationship and the desire to get to know her British father accompanied Rupp for decades: That "has always come in waves. In between, of course, real life happens."[3] At the age of almost fifty, she wrote a letter to her father without knowing his address, in which she confronted him with having evaded responsibility for his nonmarital child in Austria. The letter contained the following lines: "Have you ever thought about what will happen to me—your daughter? Have you thought about whether my mother—this beautiful, naïve young woman, will survive the years after 1948 with me? Did you worry whether I would at least get a good stepfather? [...] We [*occupation children*] are not just the obligatory flotsam and jetsam of a war, but children who have a longing to be able to give their father a face and a history, we are fathers and mothers with the sad certainty that we were not worth a dime to our fathers".[4] Rupp then turned to the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard* to publish the letter, which appeared titled "Give us a face and a story," amid commemorative events marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe.

Around the same time, since the end of the 20th century, Austrian and German scholars have been increasingly researching the history of *occupation children*. In their studies, they use this term to refer to nonmarital children of Allied soldiers and women from the occupation zones. It does not include children from Allied–Austrian and Allied–German marriages, which the authorities allowed from 1946 in the British zone (Knowles, 2019; Schretter, 2022a) and in the US zone (Shukert and Smith Scibetta, 1988, pp. 123–182; Schmidlechner, 1998); in the French zone, the military authorities made it difficult for Allied and German or Austrian women to marry (Hudemann, 2006; Satjukow and Gries, 2015, pp. 113–115), and Austrian–Soviet and German–Soviet marriages were permitted de jure from 1953 onward, but remained the exception (Stelzl-Marx, 2005, p. 423, Satjukow, 2008, pp. 285–291). Maltschnig (2015, p. 236) explained this not only semantic distinction using the example of the offspring of US soldiers and Austrian women, emphasizing "that a purely legal definition can only inadequately describe the phenomenon. Having a 'local' mother and an occupying soldier as parents did not automatically produce experiences of discrimination; rather, it was the circumstances of growing up that counted." Most studies on *occupation children* since the 1990s have focused on their childhood experiences in Germany and Austria, and the varying degrees of discrimination they suffered due to their status as nonmarital children and the nationality and ethnicity of their fathers. While British (Satjukow, 2015a; Schmidlechner, 2015), French (Huber, 1997, pp. 186–189, 2015; Gries, 2015), Soviet (Stelzl-Marx, 2009, 2015a,b; Satjukow, 2015b, 2016), and US (Bauer, 1998b; Lee, 2011) *occupation children* recall carefree and sheltered childhood years, others recall their specific social status, while neglect and abuse marked the childhood of others. In general, children of Black[5] GIs (Bauer, 2001; Fehrenbach, 2001, 2005; Lemke Muniz de Faria, 2002, 2003, 2005; Hakenesch, 2016,

1 In this article, unless otherwise stated, the terms mother and father refer to the children's biological parents. Many *occupation children* had, temporarily or permanently, social parents that were invested in their upbringing and education, such as stepparents or foster parents, or they were given to adoptive parents.

2 The gendered term fraternization is a misnomer, as it clearly had a heterosexual connotation and referred mainly to relationships of soldiers with women from the occupation zones. The strict regulations of the British (Stieber, 2005; Smith, 2009, pp. 327–333) and the US American (Bauer, 1998b; Goedde, 1999, 2003; Höhn, 2002) military government differed from those of the French military leadership, which did not perceive fraternization as a threat to the occupation effort (Eisterer, 1993; Huber, 1997; Glöckner, 2018). Like the French, the Soviet military government also did not impose an official fraternization ban on its soldiers. Sexual intercourse between army personnel and non-Soviet women was frowned upon, but the Soviet administration tolerated low-key love affairs. At the same time, guilty verdicts were handed down for female spies who allegedly used "pillow talk" with Soviet soldiers on behalf of Western intelligence services to gain secret information or to persuade Soviet army members to desert (Satjukow, 2008; Stelzl-Marx, 2012).

3 Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War (hereinafter: BIK), interview with Brigitte Rupp, conducted by B. Stelzl-Marx, 28 January 2013, transcript, p. 4. All interviews cited in this article are part of the collection of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on the Consequences of War, Graz–Vienna–Raabs. To increase readability, this paper includes interview quotes from polished versions of the full-verbatim transcripts.

4 "Gebt uns ein Gesicht und eine Geschichte," by B. Rupp, in Der Standard, 26 April 1995, p. 27.

5 In this paper, the capitalization considers the discussions regarding appropriate usage of the terms Black and *white* and emphasizes that these terms are not only a description of the ostensible color of the skin, but also as social constructs and categories.

2022; Malanda, 2016, 2021; Rohrbach and Wahl, 2019; Bauer and Rohrbach, 2021) and French soldiers from the Maghreb (Lechhab, 2007, 2009) were more discriminated against and marginalized than *white* children, due to racial prejudice. On the basis of psychological findings, especially in relation to *occupation children* in Germany, challenging living conditions in childhood represented risk factors also for mental and physical health in adulthood (Kaiser et al., 2015a,b; Kaiser and Glaesmer, 2016; Glaesmer et al., 2017; Mitreuter et al., 2019; Mitreuter, 2022). For example, psychologists found that *occupation children* in Germany had a more insecure attachment style in adulthood than the general population (Kaiser et al., 2016). Although research on *occupation children* has so far been conducted principally in the fields of history and cultural studies, as well as in psychology, the history of education has also examined the pedagogical discourse on these children in the post-war period and how the children dealt with the conditions of their upbringing (Guerrini, 2019; Kleinau, 2015a,b, 2016, 2021a,b; Kleinau and Mochmann, 2016; Kleinau and Schmid, 2016a,b, 2017, 2019, 2020; Schmid and Kleinau, 2018) and, recently, how the existing research literature analyses and interprets "fatherlessness" of *occupation children* (Schmid, 2022).[6] More generally, according to existing research, the lived experiences of *occupation children* were found to be similar to those of other children conceived by foreign/enemy soldiers and local women during and after the Second World War (Mochmann et al., 2009). Researchers counted *occupation children* as Children Born of War (CBOW), i.e., children born after sexual contact between "local" women and "foreign" soldiers in conflict and post-conflict situations, regardless of the time of birth and the geopolitical context, whose common features are their perceived association with the enemy and the resulting exposure to risk in various spheres of their lives, as well as violation of their rights in post-conflict societies (Lee, 2017; Mochmann, 2017).

The following article adds to the growing body of research on *occupation children*, firstly, by exploring the specific status accorded to them in the two post-war decades. Secondly, drawing on press reports and the experiences of Brigitte Rupp and other *occupation children*, the article looks at developments from the 1960s, when *occupation children* became adults, to the 1990s, when they increasingly came in the focus of public attention. The article, thirdly, analyzes the handling of *occupation children* since the 2000s. This includes the attention paid to the topic by academia and the media, as well as the establishment of networks. According to Brigitte Rupp, *occupation children* were long perceived as "collateral damage"[7] of the Allied occupation, which is why she says she felt "rejection and disdain," at least "subliminally".[8] This article on the social and political handling of *occupation children* includes the story of Rupp and other firsthand accounts that give a nuanced glimpse into the interiority of their experiences.

Research methodology

The starting point for this article was an interview with Brigitte Rupp conducted in Austria in 2013. A second interview with Rupp was conducted in 2016. We link the research on the social and political handling of *occupation children* in Austria since the end of the Second World War through the analysis of official documents, such as meetings of the Austrian and Federal Councils, as well as newspapers, to Rupp's story.

In addition to interviews with Rupp, the article draws on interviews with 16 British *occupation children* conducted from 2013 and analyzed from 2015 to 2018 as part of a research project within the International Training Network Children Born of War—Past Present Future (www.chibow.org). Interview participants were recruited through a media campaign initiated by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War and through word-of-mouth. Most interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. While some *occupation children* are known to the public by name and Rupp consented to the use of her full name, to ensure confidentiality, the names of all other interviewees were anonymized in this article. The use of only interviews with British *occupation children* is a limitation of this study. To address the experiences of the Soviet, US, and French *occupation children*, we rely on the available studies, which are extensive for the first two groups and less exhaustive for the latter.

Economic considerations and moral attitudes

After the end of the Second World War, Austria, like Germany, was divided into four zones under the control of the United States of America, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The Allies granted Austria full independence in 1955, after it committed itself to perpetual neutrality, and the last occupation soldiers left that same year. The exact number of children born between 1945 and 1955 through sexual contact between Allied soldiers and Austrian women is unclear. The relationships from which they were born covered the whole spectrum from long-term consensual partnerships to sexualized violence (Satjukow and Stelzl-Marx, 2015, p. 11).

6 The latest publication on the topic in the field of educational sciences, written by Flavia Guerrini (University of Innsbruck), entitled "Vom Feind ein Kind. Nachkommen alliierter Soldaten erzählen" (Mandelbaum Verlag) was not yet available at the time of completion of this article and is expected to appear in late 2022.

7 BIK, interview with Brigitte Rupp, conducted by L. Schretter, 21 June 2016, transcript, p. 15.

8 BIK, interview with Brigitte Rupp, conducted by L. Schretter, 21 June 2016, transcript, p. 13.

During Allied occupation of Austria between 1945 and 1955 and beyond, it was primarily economic considerations that brought *occupation children* the special attention of the Austrian authorities. These children, like all nonmarital children, had the same citizenship as their mothers and were wards of the district youth welfare agencies, which assessed the children's housing and care. Only on application, and if it was in the best interests of the child, was an individual guardian to be appointed instead of the youth welfare agency. Single mothers had to deal with welfare officers until their children were of age, and the child welfare agencies also collected alimony from their wards' fathers, as far as they were known, and, if necessary, tried to enforce payments through the courts (Berzkovics, 2006, p. 42–44, for West Germany, see Buske, 2004).[9] In the case of *occupation children*, however, there was no possibility of holding the fathers financially responsible. Since members of the Allied forces were not subject to Austrian jurisdiction, welfare agencies had to contribute financial assistance if fathers did not pay voluntary alimony and mothers, or maternal grandparents were not able to provide for their children. The Allied powers did not assume any responsibility for the children conceived by occupation soldiers in Austrian and Germany; an exception was France, where alimony claims could not be brought against soldiers during the occupation period; however, according to French law the children received the citizenship of the fathers following an acknowledgment of paternity and were, thus, considered French (Satjukow and Gries, 2015, p. 122f). At least 1,500 French *occupation children*, *Les Enfants d'État*, were "repatriated" from Germany alone to France, while most grew up in Germany and Austria (Gries, 2015; Huber, 2015).

While living conditions in the post-war period were generally characterized by scarcity and they were perceived as "children of the enemy," many *occupation children* report having grown up in particularly precarious economic circumstances. The degree to which their mothers managed to make ends meet in post-war society depended, among other things, on whether they could rely on the support of those close to them, especially their families. "My mother always told me that she faced disadvantages. She did not get any alimony. I was a child who was under guardianship of the youth welfare agency, and she struggled to survive,"[10] one British *occupation child* recalls. A vanishingly small proportion of the mothers received voluntary alimony payments from the fathers of their children. Rupp, for example, later learned that her mother's attempts to contact the British officer to obtain alimony were unsuccessful; in fact, none of the interviewed British *occupation children* recall having received financial support from their fathers during their childhood years.

The livelihood of the mothers of *occupation children* and the budgetary burden imposed on the Austrian authorities was the subject of political debates and media coverage. For the province of Salzburg, which was under US administration, for example, it was reported in 1953 that "even small communities had to pay for 35 or more children of occupation personnel".[11] Two years later, in a debate of the Austrian National Council, concerning the province of Salzburg, "the public duty of care for those *occupation children* whose foreign fathers had hitherto paid voluntary alimony which will now for the most part cease to exist" was considered a "crisis-aggravating moment," and "mothers will have limited ability to care for the children, who number in the thousands."[12] When the later Austrian Federal President Theodor Körner, at the time mayor of Vienna and member of the National Council for the Social Democratic Party, publicly advocated financial investment in *occupation children* in 1948, this was an exception in the post-war discourse. He stated that all nonmarital children of Allied soldiers in Vienna would "one day become good Viennese people, they will all speak Viennese and think Viennese. I simply mean to say that a city must spend a lot of money if it wants to be socially progressive."[13] Although the Austrian authorities tried to relieve their budgets by negotiating with the Allied forces over the payment of alimony, demanding that the number of *occupation children* be determined, and making children an economic and human rights issue, these efforts were largely unsuccessful (Rohrbach, 2021, p. 40–42; Schretter, 2022b). Instead, some of these children were placed with adoptive parents in European countries, South America, or the US (Rohrbach, 2021, p. 42).

In western Germany, attempts to oblige members of the Allied powers to pay alimony also had insignificant effect. It was not until 1952 that the "General Treaty" stipulated that German courts could sue members of the Allied armed forces for alimony payments, but only if the defendants were in Germany. This limited the number of claims that had a chance of success from the outset. In addition, this provision only came into force in 1955, when the Allied Statute of Occupation ended, and only applied to children born after that year. *Occupation children*,

9 Unlike in West Germany, mothers in the Soviet occupation zone and in the German Democratic Republic were entitled to parental custody themselves; this was only allowed to be suspended in exceptional cases by the appointment of a guardian. There was also no provision for fathers to pay alimony for their nonmarital children. (Satjukow and Gries, 2015, p. 184–187).

10 BIK, interview with Robert S., conducted by L. Schretter, 31 January 2018, transcript, p. 11.

11 Die Besatzungskinder, in: Neue Zeit, 14 November 1953, 2.

12 72nd Session of the National Council of the Republic of Austria, Stenographic Minutes, 30 June 1955, F. Stüber, p. 3323.

13 74th Session of the National Council of the Republic of Austria, Stenographic Minutes, 21 January 1948, T. Körner, p. 2136.

therefore, did not benefit from this rule (Tibelius, 2016a, p. 237f; Tibelius, 2016b, p. 105–109). In Austria, at a Federal Council meeting in 1960, the wish was expressed that many more countries would sign and ratify an international convention on the mutual recognition of alimony claims, as Austria has done, and the speaker referred to the "various members of the occupation, whether they were French or Russian or whatever nationality, that also left behind children out of wedlock. Federal Council! I do not want to single out any nation, because I am convinced that Austrian soldiers and German soldiers abroad also left behind children (Laughter). The victims were always the mothers, who then had to continue to provide for the livelihood of the children, for whom there were then no fathers. I think this is a quite natural phenomenon. I think there has hardly been a war where one side or the other has not left something behind in this or that state (Resounding laughter)."[14]

In addition to financial expenses, which the Austrian authorities saw as a burden, the problem of *occupation children* was linked to moral attitudes. In Austria, as in Germany, relationships between local women and military personnel were a highly emotional point of discussion. Women who had maintained relationships with Allied soldiers were the target of hostility and sometimes even physical assault. They ran the risk of sweeping criticism and were called "prostitutes," "chocolate girls," "French whores," *Russenflitscherl,* and *Amifrüchtchen* (John, 1996; Biddiscombe, 2004). Austrian women who did sex work for Allied soldiers were particularly condemned, and psychiatry in post-war Austria dealt with *Soldatenbräuten* "whom acquaintance with soldiers of foreign occupying powers has led down the path of prostitution and who have not understood how to find their way back to normal social order" (Hoff and Ringel, 1952, p. 140).

Behind verbal and physical attacks was an image of women that associated female sexuality with shamelessness and obscenity. While premarital sex and nonmarital children were considered shameful anyway, relationships between Austrian women and Allied soldiers were interpreted as a loss of the "hereditary property rights" of former *Wehrmacht* soldiers to "their women" (Bauer, 1998a, p. 48). Mattl (1987, p. 363) sums up gender relations in post-war Austria as follows: "The war was not over in 1945. It continued in the hinterland. No longer as a war between armies, nor as a war between classes, but as a war between the genders." Especially in the first post-war years, Allied–Austrian relationships were viewed ambivalently and criticized as an act of disloyalty, but financial support for the mothers of *occupation children* was also later questioned, as their mothers represented a group that the authorities treated with suspicion. This became evident in April 1952, when a conference organized by politics dealt with so-called *occupation brides*. A reference to the situation in Germany intended to illustrate the extent of the "problem;" there were apparently about 40,000 children in western Germany alone, "who cannot be maintained by their mothers and whose fathers, being outside the German laws, refuse to fulfill any alimentation obligations."[15] The conference and subsequent reactions used financial expenses for *occupation children* as an argument to take strict action against Austrian women who offered sexual services to Allied soldiers. The women, referred to as "menaces," were to be denounced and arrested.[16] In the US zone, sex work indeed reached exceptional dimensions, with female "camp followers" from across Austria pouring into the neighborhoods of US military quarters; however, women who had given birth to *occupation children* were equated with women who did sex work, had Allied soldiers as clients, and were condemned outright without any prior examination of the emotional depth of their relationships with Allied soldiers (Bauer, 2021, p. 95f).

Apart from reports, which pointed to the alleged misconduct of the mothers and to the financial aspect of the "problem," there was no broad public debate in Austria, unlike in western Germany, about these children and their integration into society. By contrast, existing research suggests that *occupation children* in western Germany received enormous attention. They set in motion "essential sociopsychological and political negotiation processes" during the first two decades after the war and became "veritable media for their families, for their immediate communities in their everyday lives, and for the two developing post-war societies," thereby "enabling unimagined cultural transfers" and becoming "catalysts of a new liberality and a renewed openness to the world" (Satjukow and Gries, 2015, p. 14).

Economic considerations and national moral feelings of resentment toward private relationships with Allied soldiers had an impact on the handling of all *occupation children* in Austria. Yet, children of Black soldiers in Austria, as in western Germany, were treated differently from *white occupation children*. In western Germany, there was a broad debate about around 5,000 Black children (Lemke Muniz de Faria, 2002, 2003, 2005), which was also reflected in the educational discourse (Campt and Grosse, 1994; Kleinau and Schmid, 2020; Kleinau, 2021a,b). The 1952 film *Toxi*, one of the very few commercial films to deal explicitly with the problem of "race" in post-fascist Germany, sought to generate "understanding" for Black *occupation children* and depicted international adoption to the

14 160th Session of the Federal Council of the Republic of Austria, Stenographic Minutes, 13 May 1960, A. Obermayr, p. 3761.

15 Besatzungsbräute, in: Neue Zeit, 25 May 1952, p. 2.

16 Das Private und das Öffentliche, by W. Benndorf, in Neue Zeit, 18 May 1952, p. 2. See also the following coverage of the conference: Salzburgs Kampf gegen die "Fräuleins," in: Neue Zeit, 22 April 1952, p. 4; Keine gesetzlichen Handhaben gegen Ami- "Bräute," in: Neue Zeit, 23 April 1952, p. 2; Kampfansage an die "Fräuleins," in: Neue Zeit, 24 April 1952, p. 5; Privates, Öffentliches, Besatzungsbräute, in: Neue Zeit, 7 June 1952, p. 3.

US as a solution for these children. The film was one of the "popular discourse milestones" (Condit-Shreshta, 2021, p. 20), and the name *Toxi* became widely used in German media when referring to the social circumstances of Black children (Fehrenbach, 2005, p. 136f, Brauerhoch, 2015). In contrast, the fate of the ∼350–400 Black *occupation children* in Austria was decided exclusively by the welfare offices in the US zone, as well as by the provincial governments (Rohrbach, 2021, p. 45).

Apart from the question in the first post-war years of the extent to which the fathers of *occupation children* could be held financially responsible, few media reports assumed that the integration of children of Black GIs into Austrian post-war society would require significant effort. These media reports critically commented that these children had to fear racist discrimination and suffer "with their mothers from the consequences of cheap blanket judgements that mold them from the outset into people of inferior character."[17] Media reports themselves also contained racist clichés and discriminatory terminology. The extent to which press reports deploring the ostracism of children of Black GIs encouraged precisely this behavior is illustrated in an article about the "coffee-brown Lizzi from Linz."[18] Especially when they reached school age and, thus, stepped out of the family into the public sphere, special consideration was to be given to the children of Black GIs. Society would now face "a racial problem with a strong social slant."[19] Recent research into children of Black GIs revealed that, until 1955, in Austria, as in Germany, international adoptions of both *white* and Black *occupation children* had been handled with the support of international aid programs and private initiatives, through referrals from Austrian and foreign nongovernmental organizations, and because of requests from foreign couples directly to youth welfare offices. Through adoption, welfare agencies relieved themselves of the cost of supporting these children and their mothers. The legal adoption market ended in the US administered parts of Vienna and in the province of Upper Austria, but not for Black children in the US administered province of Salzburg, a policy, as Rohrbach (2021, p. 38) points out, "that was both racist and directed against members of the lower classes. The mothers of the Black GI children often came from rural backgrounds, from working-class families, and/or from economically and socially disadvantaged segments of society." Unlike *white occupation children*, these children were particularly stereotyped as different and "foreign." Still, in 1965, the conscription of Black *occupation children* into the Austrian army was even worth a newspaper story.[20]

17 Sie wären viel lieber weiß, in: Kleine Zeitung. Supplement, 16 April 1950, p. 13.

18 Besatzungskinder—ein Weltproblem, by G. Srncik, in: Arbeiter-Zeitung, 3 November 1955, p. 5.

19 Neger-Gettos sind keine Lösung, in: Die bunte Kleine, 30 April 1960, p. 1.

Coming of age and adulthood

After completing their education, *occupation children* started their own families, went into gainful employment and were busy in the household and raising children. As we see from the interviews with *white* British *occupation children*, their social environment did not address their origins as nonmarital children of Allied soldiers, whether out of ignorance or out of a lack of interest or consideration. Brigitte Rupp's mother, who provided all the information she knew about the British officer, was an exception, while silence about the mothers' relations with Allied soldiers persisted in most other families of the British *occupation children* interviewed. "It was always like a kind of wall. I could not find out anything,"[21] a British *occupation child* in Austria reported on the family's silence about her father. "It was always just bits and pieces. I had to find out a lot of things myself,"[22] said another about the fragmentary knowledge of his birth as the child of a British soldier and an Austrian woman.

A taboo prevailed in their social and family environment, but the adult *occupation children* were, unlike in the post-war years, no longer seen as a financial burden for the public. In 1970, member of the National Council Hans Kerstnig pointed out, quite to the contrary, that the financial burden for *occupation children* themselves due to the lack of alimony payments from their birth fathers.[23] In the media, the adult *occupation children* were mentioned in reports that were not about the origin of their fathers, but which referred to the latter briefly, as in the case of Jack Unterweger, who was the focus of public interest from the late 1980s onward and whose origins as the son of a GI were discussed in passing. A report published in connection with the book launch of his autobiography said, "Someone who is born as an *occupation child*, raised by foster parents and in homes, grows up with criminal offenses and is sentenced to life in prison as a 24-year-old, what can a person like that do with his life? Jack Unterweger (convicted of murder and robbery) gives an answer to this question—a lot."[24] The biography of the best-known Austrian serial killer of the Second Republic began with his birth as the nonmarital son of an Austrian woman and a GI. Following a decision of the welfare agency, he grew up for 6 years in the care of his grandfather.[25]

20 Farbige Schützen, in: Kleine Zeitung, 14 December 1965, p. 2.

21 BIK, interview with Leonore O., conducted by L. Gruber, 19 February 2013, transcript, p. 5.

22 BIK, interview with Josef N., conducted by. L. Schretter, 28 November 2017, transcript, p. 15.

23 16th Session of the National Council of the Republic of Austria, Stenographic Minutes, H. Kerstnig, 29 and 30 October 1970, p. 947.

24 Lebenssinn, in Neue Zeit, 8 November 1988, p. 31.

25 Spuren in die Kindheit, by B. Melichar, in: Kleine Zeitung, 11 April 1994, p. 9.

As far as press reports can be surveyed, only few *occupation children* in Austria received extensive and prolonged media attention in early adulthood, but not because of their origins as the offspring of Allied soldiers. Best-known in Austria was Helmut Köglberger. Raised by his grandmother and aunt in Upper Austria as the son of a Black GI and an Austrian woman, he began a career as a professional soccer player in 1962. Starting in 1965, Köglberger played on the Austrian national soccer team and wore the captain's armband (Wahl et al., 2016, p. 159). In his retirement, Köglberger, who had repeatedly been the target of racist sentiments in the media and on the soccer field during his active career, received recognition for his athletic achievements. In an interview, he reported not knowing his father's name or picture.[26] When Köglberger passed away in 2018, obituaries were equally devoted to his career as a soccer player, his involvement with a soccer academy in Kenya, and his biography as a son of an Allied soldier.[27] As acceptance of *occupation children* grew in the years leading up to his death, Köglberger collaborated closely with researchers and contributed to network-building: "Köglberger was the most visible among them, and a role model for many of our other interviewees. He was the one who had made it."[28]

More generally, although politics and society did not broadly discuss *occupation children* more than two decades after the end of the war, against the backdrop of global political developments, an interested Austrian public knew of CBOW who were born in other regions. Mention was made of the "American occupation children" in South Korea [. . .] who would be called names such as "Trigge" (polluted), "Yank", or "Eyenokko" "(round-eyed)".[29] The Austrian *Arbeiter-Zeitung* had already given an article from November 1955 the title, "Occupation Children—A Global Problem," explaining that, "Wherever foreign soldiers—as allies or as conquerors—establish relations with the population of a country, illegitimate children are born. It was so in the time of the Roman legions, and it is not likely to change for a long time."[30] However, as can be seen from the below example from an Austrian newspaper, the focus may have remained on Germany rather than Austria when comparing the experiences of *occupation children* with CBOW internationally. Referring to children of US fathers and Vietnamese mothers born during the Vietnam War, who in the following decades were marginalized likewise in Vietnam and in the US and denied a national identity (Thomas, 2021), an Austrian daily newspaper reported in 1967 that "no real 'occupation child problem' existed there yet—as it did, for example, in the early postwar years in Germany. Most Vietnamese families are even crazy about children—illegitimate children are not a disgrace."[31]

From the 1990s, at the earliest, *occupation children* as an exceptional group among the post-war generation became of interest to the Austrian public at large. Since the mid-1980s, an increasingly critical approach to Austria's Nazi past may have also changed perspectives on the Austrian post-war period, on the role of the Allied troops stationed in Austria until 1955 as both *liberators* from Nazi terror and *occupiers,* and thus, on *occupation children*.[32]

At the same time, tolerance toward nonmarital children grew, who increasingly became the rule rather than the exception. Until the 1970s, it had been common in Austria to distinguish between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children, and disparaging terms such as "Bastard" or "Bankert" (the child conceived on the maidservant's bunk, not in the marital bed of the head of the house) have been considered contemptuous and inappropriate since the last quarter of the 20th century (Kytir and Münz, 1986). As society opened toward nonmarital children, "patchwork" families, and single parents, the self-confidence of *occupation children* may also have strengthened. Interviewed British *occupation children* reported having asked unpleasant questions about their "roots" within their families. Now, they sought to obtain information openly, rather than secretly, about the relationship between their biological parents and the identities of their unknown fathers. The legal situation reflected society's openness to nonmarital children; in Austria, the 1989 Child and Family Law Amendment Act meant the end of legal official guardianship. From then on, custody of a nonmarital child was, with few exceptions, the sole responsibility of the mother.

26 Auf der Suche nach dem Schatten. Interview mit Helmut Köglberger, by U. Kastler, in: Salzburger Nachrichten. Magazin, 9 May 2015, p. 4.

27 Besatzungskind, Teamkapitän, Mensch, by P. Bauer, in Der Standard, 24 September 2018, Besatzungskinder: Überlebenskünstler und Gezeichnete, by A. Grancy, in Die Presse, 28 September 2018.

28 Es ist steil bergauf gegangen, by P. Rohrbach, in ballesterer, 21 August 2018.

29 "Rundaugen" haben es schwer, by E. Adams, in: Kleine Zeitung, 7 August 1941, p. 32.

30 Besatzungskinder—ein Weltproblem, by G. Srncik: in: Arbeiter-Zeitung, 3 November 1955, p. 5.

31 US-Besatzungskinder nun in Vietnam, by D. Southerland, in: Neue Zeit, 23 August 1967, p. 10.

32 The abandonment of the so-called victim thesis, a widespread pattern of argumentation after the war that caused the collective memory to suppress complicity in the crimes of the Nazis, and according to which the state of Austria had been the first victim of Nazi aggression policy followed the Waldheim Affair in 1986. Kurt Waldheim (1918–2007) was Austria's Foreign Minister from 1968 to 1970, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1972 to 1981, and Federal President of Austria from 1986 to 1992. After Waldheim ran for the office of Austrian president for the second time in 1986, conflicting and hesitant information about his role as an officer in the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War triggered national and international criticism. As president-elect, the US placed him on the "watch list", a list of people who are not citizens of the US and whose entry is undesirable. In Austria, the "Waldheim Affair" led to a more intensive examination of the involvement of Austrians in Nazi crimes and how Austria dealt with the Nazi era.

When Brigitte Rupp wrote and published her letter to her father in 1995, she hoped for reactions from politics, academia, and other *occupation children*. The motivation for the letter was "a political awareness of how much history is concealed, covered up, falsely conveyed," as well as an attempt to counter the cliché of *occupation brides*. Added to this was anger at her father and the desire to find and get to know him. "It was everything all together."[33]

Rupp had already taken the first steps of establishing contact with her father as a teenager when she called him in Great Britain, but he denied his paternity in this telephone call. When she was in her mid-twenties, she tried unsuccessfully to contact him. Research through the British Army and the National Archives also came to nothing. In retrospect, Rupp believes that she always started looking again when there were caesuras in her own biography, such as the divorce from her first husband. Upon publishing the letter in 1995, the hoped-for reactions failed to materialize, despite a now generally more critical approach to Austria's war and post-war memory. Rupp remembers receiving hardly any answers from other *occupation children* or from representatives of politics and academia. Internationally, the letter was also met with little interest. Rupp approached British newspapers, such as the Guardian, the Independent, and the Daily Harold, to publish the letter and assist in the search for the father, but to no avail. Only in 2011, when a feature on *occupation children* aired on a popular Austrian TV news magazine, she started to search again and was able, with the support of a historical archive, to find out that her father had died in 2007, and she managed to establish contact with her half-siblings in New Zealand and Great Britain.[34]

Rupp was one of the first *occupation children* in Austria to appear to the public. The publication of the letter to her unknown father in 1995 can be seen as a form of empowerment, i.e., an expression of "the capacity of individuals, groups, and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives" (Adams, 2008, p. 17). Years later, after her retirement, Rupp, together with researchers, organized a public reading of autobiographical texts by *occupation children* under the title "Enough Silence" and, thus, initiated networking.[35]

Challenges and opportunities in the integration of CBOW depend on personal developments and changing needs depending on the phase of life but are also intricately linked to changing values and morals in society, as well as to processes of collective coming to terms with past war, conflict, and post-conflict situations. In Austria, nonmarital birth was no longer seen as a "flaw" at the end of the 20th century. In addition, especially those generations who had not lived through the war and post-war period re-evaluated the years 1945 to 1955 from a critical distance. Public interest in *occupation children* continues unabated; when newspaper articles, radio reports, and press releases appeared more frequently in the recent past, these were partly based on academic studies and conferences that examined the topic from the perspectives of contemporary history, psychology, and cultural studies. TV documentaries and accompanying reporting, as well as feature films such as *Kleine Große Stimme*, which deals with the offspring of Black GIs in the style of a 1950s *Heimat* film and was first broadcast in 2015, focus on the discrimination and ostracism suffered by *occupation children*.[36]

Toward a sense of belonging

More than 75 years after the end of the war, *occupation children* in Austria articulate themselves in public forums. Three factors determined the process from taboo to recognition: the efforts of *occupation children* to make their life stories heard, the academic study of their living and socialization conditions, and the establishment of networks. Media coverage has been both the motor and the result of the initiatives of individual *occupation children*, researchers, and networks.

Occupation children report growing up believing that there were no descendants of Allied soldiers other than themselves; of the 17 British *occupation children* interviewed, almost half reported not knowing any others until adulthood. Richard S. recalls, "I never heard or never learned that any other child also had a British occupation soldier as a father. That was unique to me."[37] Maria S. also did not know that "there were so many. I thought to myself, I am completely alone in having had this happen to me."[38] Maria S.'s statement illustrates the feeling of having been alone with this "fate." The situation was different in places where there had been a greater number of Allied soldiers for a lengthy period, and the birth of an *occupation child* was, therefore, not an exception. Hermann B. reported that, at school, "we were always a bit excluded. We did not really notice that as

33 BIK, Brigitte Rupp, interview on 21 June 2016, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 15.

34 Nach 30 Jahren. Grazerin forschte Schwester aus, in: Heute.at, 13 January 2013, n.p.

35 The lecture "Genug geschwiegen. Österreichische Besatzungskinder schreiben über ihre Geschichte" (Enough silence. Austrian children of the occupation write about their history) took place in co-organization and with the participation of Brigitte Rupp on 2 July 2014 in the Graz City Hall.

36 Kleine Grosse Stimme, by Murnberger, W., Script: Henning R., Mona Film, and Tivoli Film (ORF, ARD). Vienna, 2015.

37 BIK, Richard S., interview on 31 January 2018, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 3.

38 BIK, Maria S., interview on 29 November 2016, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 20.

children. It was not so bad because I was not the only one with a father from over there."[39]

These interviews also suggest that *occupation children* only began to engage more intensively with their memories of childhood and youth in advanced adulthood; the looming limits of their lifetimes encouraged them to confront the problematic parts of their biography in a new way, and to participate in research studies. This is also true for *occupation children* fathered by Soviet (Stelzl-Marx, 2015b) and French soldiers (Huber, 2015, p. 374–378) and GIs (Bauer, 2015), as well as for CBOW who were born in other contexts during and after the Second World War. As an example, consider the children conceived by German soldiers in Denmark. Due to the silence about their origins, both in private and in public life, many of these children grew up with identity problems and vague feelings of guilt, which affected their psychological well-being. In adulthood, the feeling of having certainty about one's origins after years of secrecy became stronger, which eventually led to the founding of the *Danske KrigsBørns Forening*, the Danish War Child Association, in 1996 (Øland, 2005). The British *occupation child* Leonore O. sees the reflection on childhood like the search for a father as rooted in her advanced age: "Now everyone has finished their job or retired. Now you have time again. It is like this: when you get older, you regress. Now we are all in a regression phase."[40] In addition, both mothers and fathers of the *occupation children* are at a very advanced age or have already died. There are no more opportunities to clarify the open questions of one's own biography in conversations with the parents or older relatives. Since there are no state institutions for the specific concerns of the *occupation children* on an institutional level either in Austria or in Germany, the only option usually left is to seek support on one's own initiative or by means of networks.

Autobiographical texts published by *occupation children* in the recent past (Lechhab, 2005; Dupuis, 2015; Schwarzkopf and Mader, 2016) are signs of the ongoing popularization of *occupation children's* biographies and emblematic of the popularity of the topic. So far, texts have been self-published, published by small publishing houses, or included in anthologies (Baur-Timmerbrink, 2015; Behlau, 2015; Satjukow and Stelzl-Marx, 2015, p. 411–493). Like *Kriegskinder* (war children),[41] the self-reflective and publicized examination of life stories indicates not only a "new" interest in this aspect of contemporary history, but also a need to reflect on their childhood. "I could not ask anyone, not my 'parents', aunt, grandma. Everyone was silent. So, I did not ask any more either. For me, nevertheless, the question remained as a driving force: did my life arise from the love between my mother and my father or was it only blows against my mother that gave me life? Or how were things really?" (Habura, 2015, p. 473), wrote the son of a British soldier in Germany about his struggle with the open questions about the relationship between his parents.

Research and the media have a vital role to play in raising public awareness about *occupation children*. At the same time, research studies have given reason to deal with aspects of family histories that had been kept secret. As a case in point, Helen W. reports that she felt motivated by an article in an Austrian news magazine to deal with the experiences of her childhood and youth and, with support from researchers, to devote herself to the search for her British father.[42]

After a study on the academic handling of "mixed-race" children in Germany after 1945 (Campt and Grosse, 1994), at the turn of the millennium, Bauer (1998b) was the first in Austria to deal with the narratives of US *occupation children* in her study "Welcome Ami Go Home." In 2004, against the backdrop of the upcoming 60th anniversary of the end of the war, Austrian historian Renate Huber arranged contact between the Austrian national public service broadcaster and a French *occupation child* who traveled to Morocco to meet family members on her father's side; "what she had longed for so long, namely, an entirely reconciled view of her own history" (Huber, 2015, p. 376). The five-part documentary *Die Alliierten in Österreich* [The Allies in Austria] followed, which also referred to *occupation children*, produced in 2005. Their childhood experiences continued to be of scholarly and public interest, regardless of whether, in retrospect, they described the conditions in which they grew up as sheltered, precarious, or "normal." "When one understands that one's own life story is not infrequently given another reading from a systemic perspective, this brings relief. This process also has to do with making things visible. Discourses shift, are adapted to changing circumstances, allow for new interpretations" (Huber, 2015, p. 378).

Researchers and the public alike produce and reproduce the discourse on *occupation children*. In contrast to the

39 BIK, Hermann B., interview on 30 January 2018, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 3.

40 BIK, Leonore O., interview on 18 November 2016, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 21.

41 The term *Kriegskinder* (war children), sometimes also *Trümmerkinder* (rubble children) in connection with the Second World War, refers in Austria and Germany to all persons who experienced the war and its consequences as children, and includes, depending on the definition, the birth cohorts from the late 1920s to 1945 or beyond. (Seegers and Reulecke, 2009). *Kriegsenkel* (war grandchildren) refers to their children. Sabine Bode refers to the cohorts born between 1946 and 1960 as *Nachkriegskinder* (post-war children) (Bode, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011). In contrast to the term *Kriegskinder*, the term *Besatzungskinder* (*occupation children*) has come to refer to people who were fathered by Allied soldiers and women from the occupation zones after the war. At the same time, the term *Wehrmachtskinder* (Wehrmacht children) has become established for those children born during the war in European territories occupied by German troops who had a "local" woman as their mother and a member of the occupying forces as their father (Drolshagen, 2005; Kleinau and Mochmann, 2015).

42 BIK, Helen W., interview on 12 May 2018, conducted by L. Schretter. Post-interview minutes.

contemporary discourse in the post-war years, studies since the 1990s have addressed the consequences of discrimination and stigmatization of *occupation children*, as well as their search for their fathers; studies on children of Black GIs notably dealt with the academic and public handling of these children in the post-war period. Of relevance for the discourse in Austria was a conference in 2012, at which not only was the state of research on *occupation children* in Germany and Austria at that time presented, but *occupation children* themselves also had their say at the conference and in the subsequent publication (Satjukow and Stelzl-Marx, 2015).[43] It is also worth mentioning a questionnaire study on the psychosocial conditions, experiences of prejudice, and identity development with over 100 participants in Austria, which represented the first empirical studies on the psychosocial consequences of growing up as an *occupation child* and for which participation was called for *via* the media (on the research model and the predecessor study in Germany see Glaesmer et al., 2012). Particularly relevant to the Austrian discourse of the recent past was the exhibition *SchwarzÖsterreich. Die Kinder afroamerikanischer Besatzungssoldaten* (Black Austria: The Children of African American Occupation Soldiers), which members of the research project "Lost in Administration" on children of Black GIs presented in Vienna in 2016. The exhibition attracted widespread media coverage, not least due to the cooperation with the magazine "Fresh—Black Austrian Lifestyle," which linked the history of the first Black generation of the post-war period with that of the current Black population in Austria (Wahl et al., 2016).

The interest in *occupation children* can have a positive effect in individual terms, as they receive, sometimes unexpectedly, attention and recognition in their social and family environment. In addition to the scholarly exploration of their life stories, it is of particular concern to them that their voices are heard, and their stories are inscribed into collective memory. However, there can also be disadvantages when *occupation children* see their family and life stories misrepresented, not only by academia but also by the media or teachers who are looking for "authentic" voices for their lessons on post-war history. Brigitte Rupp recalls being visited unannounced by a school class in the inn which she ran, and being asked to talk about her childhood after she had addressed the media with her life story.[44] Some *occupation children*, like Brigitte Rupp, as mentioned, nevertheless or precisely because of this, organize talks on their own initiative about their biography and its historical context; others do not feel the need to get in touch with others or to tell their life story in public or semipublic spaces.

In parallel to academic conferences and studies, networks of *occupation children* have emerged since the end of the 1990s, often in the context of mutual support services, to search for their fathers, to exchange information about their living conditions in childhood, or both. These networks are a platform to reflect upon emotions and attitudes toward one's own life story. Network meetings in the context of conferences are likely to have contributed to a sense of togetherness as well as a sense of belonging. This contrasts with the late 1940s to 1960s, when these children were seen as an outgroup from an implied majority society (Stelzl-Marx, 2016). More general, studies on CBOW can sometimes contribute to empowerment, as researchers in the research network "Children Born of War—Past Present Future" emphasized recently (Glaesmer et al., 2021, p. 8).

First networks of *occupation children* were founded when they were in advanced adulthood. One prerequisite for this was that they became aware that information about unknown aspects of their own family histories would become increasingly difficult to obtain as time went on and without mutual support. On a macro-societal level, the increasingly critical and reflective approach to the war and post-war period and the more open handling of nonmarital children also strengthened the self-confidence of *occupation children*. Networks in both Austria and Germany include the *Distelblüten* association and the *Russenkinder* network for Soviet *occupation children*, the *Cœurs sans Frontières/Herzen ohne Grenzen* network, in which also children of *Wehrmacht* soldiers in France and children of French prisoners of war, forced laborers, and soldiers are active, and the online platform "GI Trace," which supports in the search for the US and sometimes also British fathers. Ute Baur-Timmerbrink (2015, p. 24), who has been volunteering for "GI Trace" since 2003, reported that, "Every search is a new balancing act between hope and disappointment. Often, wounds are reopened that time has patched up." In addition to the informal *Wurzelkinder* roundtable meeting for Soviet *occupation children* in Austria, initiated by the *occupation child* Reinhard Heninger in 2008 (Stelzl-Marx, 2015a, p. 134), and the "Moroccan Association in German-speaking Countries" based in Feldkirch, which became a contact address for the offspring of Moroccan soldiers in Austria from 1999 onward (Lechhab, 2009, p. 124), today, the association *Abgängig-Vermisst* also provides support in the search for former Allied soldiers. To date, a network for British *occupation children* does not exist either in Germany or in Austria.

One consequence of networking is its influence on individual memories and narratives. The life-story narratives collected for academic studies are not spontaneous and uninfluenced reports of individual experiences. As a case in point, the next statement illustrates how networking and mutual exchange influences the evaluation of one's own past. One *occupation child* remembers their first encounter with others as

43 The same year, Satjukow and Gries (2015) published the first monograph on the topic in Germany. A year later, Kleinau and Mochmann (2016) published an anthology which, in addition to *Wehrmacht* children, contained several contributions on *occupation children*.

44 BIK, Brigitte Rupp, interview on 21 June 2016, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 13f.

follows: "I was so horrified by what the others told me that I said, 'I think I'm in the wrong place here.' Because I only fared well."[45]

Moreover, the attention received from academia, the public, and the press stimulates discussions on how *occupation children* see themselves. This is exemplified by the discussion of how the offspring of Allied soldiers and Austrian women are referred to, a fundamental issue for dealing with the topic.

When and in what context the term *occupation children* was first used for children resulting from sexual contacts between Austrian or German women and members of the Allied forces between 1945 and 1955 is unclear, but it was passed down from as early as the post-war period.[46] The very term makes it clear that, although these children were Austrian or German citizens, they were not considered part of society, but defined by the national origin of their fathers. Today, descendants of Allied soldiers identify with the term and use it as an empowering self-definition, such as Ofner (2015), who entitled an autobiographical text "I am a British Occupation Child". Ute Baur-Timmerbrink (2015) gave her collection of life stories the title "We Occupation Children." Others strictly reject the designation. Dupuis (2015), p. 83 spoke of herself as *Befreiungskind* (liberation child) who was born following a love affair between her Austrian mother and a Soviet soldier: "I would rather use the term 'liberation children'. However, many people do not want to hear of it, and 'occupation children' has become naturalized." The preference for the designation *liberation children*, articulated with media attention not least in a joint appearance by Dupuis and three other daughters of Soviet soldiers in an Austrian TV documentary, reflects an effort to interpret one's origins as the child of an Allied soldier in a positive light vis-à-vis oneself, one's social and family environment, and the public. This juxtaposition of *liberation child/occupation child* is also based on the question of whether the Allied powers of the Soviet Union, US, Great Britain, and France were liberators, occupiers, or both. Thus, the term *occupation children* may be common within academia but does not necessarily reflect individual life experiences, self-definitions, or social and familial assessments of a historical era.[47]

Conclusion

Occupation children were for a long time excluded from the collective memory of Austria's Second Republic. In the period after the Second World War, *occupation children* were considered a financial burden for the public. Since members of the Allied armed forces were not subject to Austrian jurisdiction, welfare agencies had to provide financial support when single mothers were unable to care for their children. In their social and family environment, some *occupation children* experienced exclusion; however, due to racist prejudices, children of Black GIs were discriminated against more than *white occupation children*. Only since the 1990s has more attention been paid to *occupation children* in academia and the media; a critical examination of Austria's National Socialist past could have changed the view of the Austrian post-war period and of *occupation children*. Furthermore, the opening of society toward nonmarital children, mixed families, and changed family structures might have strengthened the self-confidence of *occupation children*. While social and family differences conditioned divergent biographies until late adulthood, they began to deal more intensively with their memories of childhood and youth on the micro-individual level, not least because their parents were of advanced age and the possibilities to answer open questions about family history dwindled. These developments led to the founding of networks. In the meantime, several *occupation children* participate equally in research, exhibitions, and events on the topic; not least through this, they influence whether and to what extent they have a share in the collective memory of the post-war period.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committees of Graz University (GZ 39/56/63 ex 2015/16). The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LS and BS-M contributed to conception and design of the study. LS wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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45 BIK, Leonore O., interview on 18 November 2016, conducted by L. Schretter, transcript, p. 28.

46 Die Besatzungskinder, in: Neue Zeit, 14 November 1953, p. 2.

47 Besatzungskinder—die lange Suche nach den eigenen Wurzeln, by C. Feurstein, in Thema ORF2, 26 March 2018. For Germany, the publication "Children of Liberation" about children of Black GIs and German women is an example of those who distance themselves from the term *occupation children* (Kraft, 2020).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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