

## W. Wessels

Dr. W. Wessels, Department of Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State.

E-mail: wesselgp@ufs.ac.za

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3709-6363>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v41i2.13>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

*Acta Theologica* 2021  
41(2):214-217

Date received:  
1 November 2021

Date published:  
15 December 2021

# BOOK REVIEW

## *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa: Some ethical perspectives*

Grobbelaar, J. & Jones, C. (Eds), (Stellenbosch, African Sun Media, Sun Press, 2020), 328pp. Price: R375 (hardcopy); R300 (e-book), ISBN: 978-1-928480-94-5, e-ISBN: 978-1-928480-95-2. [orders@africansunmedia.co.za](mailto:orders@africansunmedia.co.za) / +27 21 201 0071

The introduction of *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* concludes with a reformulation of the Belhar confession. I quote part of the second bullet:

We believe that the church must stand by children in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice done to children (p .32).

Herein lies, to my mind, the central theme of *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa*.

From this central theme, children's vulnerabilities in South Africa are interrogated from a wide variety of spaces in which South African children find themselves. Selina Palm examines violence against children. Jan Grobbelaar and Chris Jones interrogate corporal punishment. Hanzline Davids contemplates LGBTIQ+-parented families. Leana Oliver, Lian-Marie Drotsky, and Jaco Louw consider Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Chris Jones reflects on male initiation. Elisabet le Roux considers child marriages. Henry Mbaya works on children and racism. Krige Siebrits contemplates support grants. Louis Fourie interrogates digital spaces.



Published by the UFS  
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons  
With Attribution (CC-BY)



I must mention three points of appreciation for *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa*. First, the central theme is of utmost importance. Secondly, a broad spectrum of the lived experience of children is covered from an interdisciplinary approach. Thirdly, much care is taken to thoroughly interrogate the contextual realities through the usage of statistical data.

Regarding the first point, *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* showcases a keen awareness of the necessity to focus on a subject matter that is both supremely important and where thorough ethical contemplation is lacking. After all, a society that is not acutely aware of its children and the challenges they face is not interested in its future. At the same time, children are indeed easily overlooked, as they do not have the resources and skills to speak up for themselves.

Secondly, regarding the subject matter and the fact that it contemplates ethical realities, *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* is excellent in its interdisciplinary approach. The contributors are experts in various disciplines such as theology, occupational therapy, future studies, ethics, human rights, community development, and economics. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa*, thus, endeavours to bridge the divide between the public and academic enclaves in which we too often find ourselves, towards contemplation for the well-being of children in our country. This is exceptionally laudable.

Thirdly, there is a strong impetus of exceptional, contextual analysis through the usage of statistical data regarding the reality of children in South Africa. This leads the reader into a better and more nuanced understanding of the reality of the South African context. The statistical data showcases the thorough research in *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* and the *gravitas* of the subject matter.

This being said, *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* is not without its shortcomings. To my mind, three points of concern must be considered: representation, responsibility, and agency towards well-being. All three of these points are deeply intertwined in the epistemological underpinnings of *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa*.

In my reading of *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa*, it became clear from the onset that critical theory is the epistemological point of departure. Critical theories have become exceptionally central in current South African (and global) academic endeavours. As such, it is not surprising that *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* privileges such an epistemology. However, because of critical theories' unique position in academic circles as sacrosanct, many blind spots remain unnamed and uninterrogated.

First, on the matter of representation, *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* fails to take cognisance of the possible mishaps of speaking on behalf of the other. Notwithstanding the importance of the conversation on various acts and spaces that impede children's well-being, there seems to be a fine line between standing up for children's well-being and representing children in one's own image, with one's own agenda, dreams, and ideology.

Palm's chapter, entitled *Seen but not heard? Engaging the mechanisms of faith to end violence against children*,<sup>1</sup> is particularly guilty of the latter. She locates her epistemological presumption as "child liberation theologies" (p. 35) and locates violence against children in

South Africa's violent colonial and apartheid history [which] has left a legacy of a culture of violence still being meted out in homes and schools to women, boys and girls (p. 38).

Even though Palm claims that women are most frequently "perpetrators of early home violence against children" (p. 41), this phenomenon is to be found within "patriarchal attitudes, [as] men are allowed to punish women and then women punish children" (p. 42).

Indeed, we cannot disregard the reality of our colonial and apartheid past, nor the myriad ways it transpires in the present. However, the simplicity whereby critical theorists underscore power relations without cognisance of a more comprehensive understanding of human behaviour under wretched conditions leaves much to be desired. Such conditions may include psychological disorders, the influence of poverty, the lack of meaning, fatigue, immaturity, and malformation of personality traits, to name but a few. When Palm represents children as merely the victims of power abuse, deep-seated human behaviour and psychology realities are undermined and ignored to fit within her ideological frame of reference. Would it be a step too far to claim that she merely represents children in the image of her thinking? That being said, her proposals for a theology that places more emphasis on the dignity of children, both with regard to the participation of children and God as a child (pp. 58-60), are significant contributions.

---

1 A similar trend on representation is observed in the chapter of Davids, *Reconceiving child theology from a queer theological perspective: for LGBTIQ+-parented families*. However, two disparities are worth mentioning. First, the focal image of representing the vulnerability of children within LGBTIQ+-parented families lies in how gender diversity is excluded and denied from the framework of power structures within patriarchy (pp. 102-104). Secondly, Davids conceptualises power as both a negative and positive force, which when "[c]hildren [are] moved from the theological margins ... to the centre" becomes a power for change (p. 106). The question must be asked as to whether children are genuine agents of this movement of power, or is it those who represent their plight?

This brings me to the second point, responsibility. Critical theories have tended towards political frameworks that locate responsibility within a conceptualisation that social consciousness needs to change before the individual's well-being can be realised. In this conceptualisation, the individual is often portrayed as a victim who cannot take any responsibility for the self. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* is no exception. In every chapter, responsibility regarding the well-being of children is located within the confines of those who are viewed as influential role players in the societal psyche, be it spiritual leaders, political leaders, or lawmakers. The problem with this conceptualisation of the well-being of the individual is twofold. First, when framing a person as a victim, agency is abdicated. Secondly, when the possibility of well-being is only viable once societal consciousness is ideal, we find ourselves in pursuit of the impossible. Therefore, an unasked question is left lingering: Where should responsibility be located to realistically bring forth the most viable conditions for the well-being of children in South Africa?

This brings me to the final concern, agency towards well-being with regard to children themselves. One of the most astounding lacunae in *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* is the lack of contemplation on education. From the age of five, the space where children find themselves most often is the educational space. To my mind, the educational space is the most viable space for considering developmental frameworks of consciousness, agency, and formation of children. This being said, the South African educational system is in dire straits and will have a long-lasting impact on the well-being of our children in the future. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* makes no mention of the necessity to improve the educational system towards the possibility that children can become active agents for their well-being. The current trends in education dampen the potential of children to grow in their understanding of the reality in which they find themselves and the formation of a consciousness that can transcend the societal evils they face. This is true in a myriad of deficiencies in the educational system: personality formation, expectations of excellence, and sufficient learning, to name a few. I would propose that education is the most viable route towards radically improving the well-being of children – an insight that is unfortunately overlooked. On the other hand, a flawed educational system will fail both our children nowadays and forthcoming generations in perpetuity.

Overall, *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa* is an essential interlocutor for ethical contemplation on the well-being of children, notwithstanding its apparent insufficiencies.