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Children's narrative identity formation: Towards a childist narrative theology of praxis

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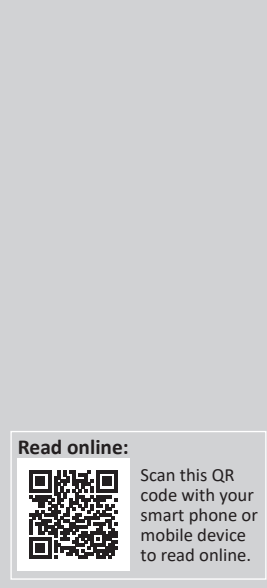**Corresponding author:**
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This article explores children's narrative identity formation and the impact of adult–child relationships on shaping a child's narrative. The formation of identity in all children is vulnerable to a culture of 'adultism', wherein the authority wielded by adults can potentially subject children to abuse and neglect. Consequently, adultism has the aptitude to hinder the constructive development of a life-affirming identity in children. The primary objective of this article is to develop a childist narrative theology of praxis methodology, aimed at raising consciousness and educating adults on both life-denying and life-giving ways of engaging in the process of children's narrative identity formation.

To achieve this goal, the methodology is developed by adapting Denise Ackermann's 'feminist theology of praxis' to focus specifically on children. The application of feminist theory principles is deemed relevant to the social standing of children as it aligns with the broader goal of liberating oppressed groups, whether women or children. Additionally, John Wall's work is employed to elucidate the terms 'childist' and 'childism' as interpretive frameworks. Positioned within the scientific domain of Practical Theology, this study seeks to transform conditions that impede human flourishing into opportunities for positive change.

The research objectives determine that a literature review will be suitable to gather essential information for the formulation of a childist narrative theology of praxis. This review, characterised as explorative and descriptive, is conducted within the field of Practical Theology.

Contribution: The significance of this study is underscored by its exploration and description of the pastoral functions of consciousness, awareness-raising, and education concerning adult–child relations. By scrutinising these pastoral functions, the emphasis is placed on the proactive, preventive, and universal aspects of pastoral care in the context of children, thereby contributing valuable insights to the discourse.

Keywords: adultism; childism; children; narrative identity formation; pastoral care; praxis.

Introduction

This article examines the role played by adults in shaping the narrative identity of children and is derived from an MTh project, entitled 'Children's narrative identity formation and Henri Nouwen's praxis of pastoral care' (Botha 2022).

Positive interactions between children and adults hold the potential to cultivate individuals who are self-assured and content, and who possess a strong sense of identity and purpose. Unfortunately, a significant number of adult–child relationships are stained by adultism, leading to children grappling with feelings of insecurity and fear, ultimately leading to an identity crisis. Adultism, understood as the oppression experienced by children and young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced or adult-tailored systems, is a pervasive issue (Fletcher 2015:3)

The dynamics within various contexts, including households, schools, churches, and communities, exert a substantial influence on the identity formation of children. Jeremy Roche highlights the propensity for children to be systematically silenced and rendered invisible by societal attitudes and practices (Roche 2004:270). All children are susceptible to a culture of adultism, often practised with good intentions under the assumption that children lack full rationality, wisdom, and the ability to discern their best interests. Unfortunately, adultism can manifest in severe forms, including instances of child abuse and neglect.

Consequently, it becomes essential to raise awareness about the harm inflicted on children. Within this context, pastoral care emerges as a prospective avenue for addressing these issues. However,

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

Malan Nel, in his recent publication, 'Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach' (2018), identifies pastoral care as the most neglected ministry concerning children and youth (Nel 2018:21). Nel asserts that a prevalent trend in pastoral youth ministry continues to be the adoption of a top-down approach. This could be attributed to a cultural perspective that views youth as less significant than adults (Nel 2018:340). Consequently, the prevalent issues faced by the youth today may not be adequately addressed. A suggested solution is to actively engage with the youth by seeking their input and listening to their perspectives (Nel 2018:340). A common belief is that while we aim to minister to the youth, we often neglect the opportunity for them to minister to us. Instances where youth contribute to the ministry are typically reactive rather than proactive in many churches (Nel 2018:340). Therefore, this article aims to shift the focus towards the proactive, preventative, and systemic responsibilities of pastoral care in dialogue with children and their adult caregivers. The goal lies in raising consciousness and awareness regarding the harm adultism can inflict on children, making this a crucial aspect of pastoral care. In the context of detrimental adult–child relationships, pastoral care assumes the roles of not only educating children and adults but also the role of advocacy and prophetic witness. As a result, this research endeavours to address the inclination in pastoral studies to emphasise reactive aftercare over proactive relational and community care, particularly concerning children and youth. Adults must be encouraged to actively engage with the children under their influence by seeking their input and listening to their stories and experiences.

This may be achieved by proposing a narrative approach to pastoral care based on the feminist theology of praxis developed by Ackermann. In her work, Ackermann defines feminist theology as a field generally concerned with exploring the identity of women, encompassing their lives, beliefs, hopes, stories, and experiences of both liberation and oppression (Ackermann 2006:225). Specifically, Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis delves into how women's narratives, encompassing hope, justice, grace, as well as experiences of oppression, evil, and sin, can be grounded and transformed by the Christian message. This narrative approach actively aids women in discovering their identities in Christ and transforming their stories.

Ganzevoort (2011:218) supports the effectiveness of narrative approaches, especially in empowering marginalised groups to find their voice. Frequently employed by feminist and postcolonial scholars, narrative methodologies play a crucial role in highlighting individual stories that challenge the dominant reasoning of oppressive societies (Ganzevoort 2011:218).

Truter and Kotzé (2005:979) advocate for a narrative approach to pastoral care, emphasising the essence of respecting individuals. This approach should accentuate a person's life-giving power and potential rather than dwelling on life-denying aspects. Individuals who have experienced oppression may struggle to recognise their own life-giving power, leading to a negative sense of identity. Revealing their identity in Christ necessitates treatment infused with respect, love, and inclusion (Truter & Kotzé 2005:979). Applying these principles to children within life-affirming adult–child relationships enables them to acknowledge their own life-giving power and potential.

This article seeks to develop a childist narrative theology of praxis methodology focused on raising awareness and providing education to adults regarding their pivotal role in the narrative identity formation of children. This methodology is informed by Denise Ackermann's (2006) 'feminist theology of praxis'. Feminist theory is applicable to the social position of children, considering their vulnerability to oppression. Arinder (2020:Chapter 8, Introductory section) states 'Feminist theory considers the lived experience of any person/people, not just women, with an emphasis on oppression'. Ackermann's methodology falls within a theological framework conducive to interdisciplinary work and the interpretation of experiences within societal contexts. It is therefore informative towards addressing the identity formation of children exposed to oppression and discrimination within their society based on age and because of adultism. The work of John Wall will also be explored to illuminate the theory of childism that forms an integral part of the proposed methodology (Wall 2019).

The research objective suggests that a literature review is suitable for gathering the necessary information to formulate a response to the research problem identified. An explorative and descriptive literature review is conducted, and the section on research methods and design will further elaborate on and motivate the chosen methodology.

Research methods and design

The purpose of this article is to develop a childist narrative theology of praxis methodology proposed for raising consciousness and educating adults on constructive and harmful ways of engaging in the narrative identity formation of children. The suggested methodology seeks to address and counter the harmful impact of adultism on children's identity development. Drawing inspiration from Denise Ackermann's (2006) 'feminist theology of praxis' methodology, the proposed childist approach adapts the feminist theory to focus on children's oppression. The justification for adopting Christian praxis as a strategy to assist in supporting children's narrative identity development is presented by Ackermann (2006:226). She states that the foundation of Christian praxis is to act as conduits of God's constructive intervention in the world, providing comfort to the downtrodden, and fostering resilient and hopeful communities (Ackermann 2006:226).

Christian praxis, according to Ackermann, involves actions aimed at altering oppressive conditions into opportunities for human flourishing (Chopp 1996:221). Narratives play a

essential role in Christian praxis, as emphasised by Ackermann (2006:231). This research, centred on children's narrative identity formation, prioritises the use of narratives within the theological praxis proposed in the study. Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis, known for proactively assisting women in realising their identities in Christ and reforming their stories, may serve as an informative framework for Christian praxis related to children and their narratives.

This study integrates Ackermann's praxis with John Wall's exploration of adultism and childism. Wall's work offers a perspective with which to challenge and deconstruct adultism, promoting inclusivity in research and societal perceptions to create a milieu where children can explore their identity and purpose (Wall 2019:1).

In this research, the term 'children' is approached as a relational concept, emphasising the interaction between children and adults in the narrative identity formation process rather than solely focusing on children within their biological developmental stages. De Beer and Yates (2019:1) warn against overemphasising biological developmental stages, as it can lead to dominant norms and stereotypes, portraying many children as inferior, deviant, or pathological.

To expound on the selected methodology, this article will delve deeper into the intricacies of Ackermann's methodology.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) (ethics number: NWU–00756–21–A7). The investigation falls within the low-risk category. While empirical data collection is not part of this study, the researcher diligently adhered to ethical guidelines set by the University in acquiring literary data. The literature was presented objectively, including discussions of opposing perspectives, ensuring a fair representation. Given the nature of being a literature study, there is minimal risk involved. The study maintained several ethical considerations:

- Upholding integrity was a paramount objective. The researcher consistently and truthfully reported all findings, avoiding any misrepresentation. Fabrication or falsification of information was strictly avoided.
- Ethical practices were strictly adhered to during the writing process, rejecting all forms of plagiarism. Proper referencing was employed to acknowledge all sources used in the study.
- The researcher ensured compliance with all ethical guidelines set by the North-West University concerning the acquisition of literary data.

Feminist theology of praxis

Within the realm of contextual theology, feminist theology stands out as a significant contributor to theological praxis. Its impact is notably seen in the reintroduction of respect and love for marginalised individuals, as highlighted by Truter and Kotzé (2005:980). According to Ackermann (2006:226),

feminist theology is characterised by its keen attention to women's lives, encompassing their stories, aspirations, faith, and experiences of both oppression and liberation. Positioned as a theology within the Christian context, feminist theology seeks to integrate women's lives into the broader narrative of God. Its objective is to articulate how the Christian faith shapes and influences women's encounters with hope, justice, and grace. Concurrently, it addresses the acknowledgment and comprehension of women's encounters with oppression, sin, and evil. Narrative, as elucidated by Ackermann (2006:231), serves as the lifeblood of feminist theology of praxis. In the pursuit of claiming identity and discovering sources of hope, the telling of stories becomes integral. This emphasis on narrative underscores the significance of storytelling in feminist theological practice, providing a means for individuals to share their experiences, shape their identities, and find inspiration for hope within the context of their faith.

Ackermann (2006) states:

> The act of telling the story assists the narrator in making sense of her or his experience in an often chaotic world. Whether the stories are revealing in shaping identities or whether they are making sense of situations that call for understanding, they should be heard in churches. (p. 231)

The next section will discuss the principles of Denise Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis.

The praxis of storytelling

Ackermann (2006:231–232) emphasises the necessity of hearing the stories of those experiencing suffering and discrimination to counteract silence, denials, and stigma. Within faith communities, it becomes crucial to provide a platform for the oppressed to share their stories, ensuring they are treated with respect and compassion (Ackermann 2006:231–232). The core of the feminist theology of praxis revolves around narratives – expressing one's experiences (Ackermann 2006:231–232). Ackermann provides an example of suffering by referring to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-positive women. Ackermann notes that these individuals are often labelled as victims, a status imposed upon them. By narrating their stories, they reclaim a different identity, moving beyond the victim status and gaining a sense of empowerment and worth (Ackermann 2006:231–232). The act of storytelling serves as a source of hope, enabling individuals to discover their potential and value in the midst of their suffering. Furthermore, sharing personal stories allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and undergo transformative identity shifts (Ackermann 2006:231–232).

Engaging in storytelling involves the praxis of intentional and empathetic listening. Simultaneously, the listener becomes an active participant in the conversation, influencing the process of change through their own narrative (Ackermann 2006:231–232).

The praxis of gender analysis

Ackermann (2006:232) employs gender analysis as a tool to comprehend and counteract the impact of stigma. She elucidates that traditional practices rooted in male-centred perspectives have, over centuries, discriminated against women and constrained both men and women to limited cultural identities (Ackermann 2006:232). These identities, laden with stigma, have marginalised their capabilities and societal roles. In communities where a sexist understanding of human nature prevails, the repercussions on the relationship between women and men are profound. Ackermann (2006:232) utilises gender analysis to explore the impact of HIV/AIDS on women, particularly those in impoverished rural areas. Within patriarchal settings where educational opportunities are limited, women often lack the authority and skills to negotiate safe sex practices, exacerbating the consequences of the pandemic (Ackermann 2006:233). For these women, infection results in rejection, abandonment, and exclusion from the community, triggering feelings of shame, guilt, and alienation.

The effects of gender discrimination extend beyond women's experiences of suffering because of HIV/AIDS. In Africa, gender discrimination gives rise to systems that erode the status of women and children, resulting in practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, and other harmful prenatal behaviours affecting both children and their mothers (Molla 2018:191). All of these aspects have a profound influence on the identity formation of women and children. It is clear, therefore, that gender discrimination also contributes to the maltreatment and neglect of children, a subject that will be further examined in the subsequent sections of this article.

The praxis of mutual relationship

Ackermann (1998) defines relationships as follows:

> What is meant by relationship? Although relationship is central to our being and to our well-being, it is difficult to define. It is easier to say what relationship is not: it is not alienation or apathy, isolation or separation. We are not made to live alone. Relationship is what connects us to one another like the strands of a web, spinning out in ever widening circles, fragile and easily damaged, yet filled with tensile strength. Relationships shape us as individuals and as members of our communities. In the words of ethicist Beverly Harrison, 'relationality is at the heart of all things'. (p. 17)

Ackermann (2006:233) emphasises that the core concept of a feminist theology of praxis is relationship. She underscores the importance of critically examining and analysing the historical manifestations of relationships to unveil power imbalances (Ackermann 2006:234). Our interconnectedness, according to Ackermann (2006:233), entails a responsibility towards each other. To sustain interdependent relationships, she argues that we must begin with individuality – our identity is moulded through interactions with others (Ackermann 2006:234). Despite our connections, independence is essential, and finding a balance between the need for relationships and acknowledging individuality is

crucial. Ackermann (2006:234) contends that our identity flourishes through loving and accepting relationships, highlighting the significance of nurturing personal growth through positive connections.

Without supportive relationships, the struggle to embrace our true selves becomes evident. Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis introduces a transformative paradigm for human relationships, as articulated by Margaret Farley (Ackermann 2006:234). This paradigm advocates for 'equality of power, mutuality of freedom and responsibility, love that is other-centred yet neither neglectful nor destructive of the self, and fidelity'.

Moreover, Ackermann (1998:18) posits that the quality of relationships is assessed through the lens of mutuality, which prioritises the feelings and needs of the other over egocentricity. Mutuality encompasses generosity, kindness, considerateness, forgiveness, and prioritising others ahead of ourselves (Ackermann 1998:18).

Body of Christ praxis

Ackermann (2006:236) elucidates that the Body of Christ, metaphorically representing the Christian community, consists of diverse limbs working in harmony as an integrated whole. The collaboration of these limbs is essential for the body to fulfil its intended purpose. When any limb faces shame, stigma, or even amputation, the body deviates from its destined form and loses its effective functioning (Ackermann 2006:236).

In our interactions with one another, Ackermann (2006:236) argues against the presence of stigma, shame, and judgment, urging a collective remembrance that Christ considers the Church as his bride. Drawing lessons from Christ, whose own flesh bore wounds, Ackermann underscores the importance of treating others with love. The parable of the Good Samaritan, as highlighted by Ackermann (2006:236), serves as a profound example of a loving relationship that fosters human flourishing. This parable teaches compassion for the afflicted and presents a vision of God's grace in action.

Rather than engaging in shaming and judgment of those in need, Ackermann (2006:236) advocates that the Church should strive to emulate and expedite the realisation of God's reign on earth, mirroring the compassion and grace exemplified by the teachings of Christ.

Embodied praxis

Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis highlights the intrinsic embodiment of human existence, where affliction, illness, and mortality manifest within the physical form (Ackermann 2006:238). The entirety of the human journey, including suffering, joy, recollections, aspirations, convictions, and expectations, is contained within the framework of our bodies (Ackermann 2006:238). Ackermann, acknowledging the church as a corporeal entity, advocates

for addressing factors that contribute to the mistreatment, exclusion, and sexual exploitation of women and children. She emphasises the necessity for tangible expressions of love and care, urging the church to embody these principles (Ackermann 2006:238–239). Paula Cooey, quoted by Ackermann (2006), highlights embodied struggles against various oppressions:

> Our share in the process of making up a Better World and making it real in the flesh begins with a mighty groan in protest against the violation of the body – its starvation, its malnutrition, its sexual and vocational exploitation, its imprisonment and torture, its murder and its use as a battleground for establishing the control over many by a few. For the body has served and still serves as a symbolic and actual focus for much that has been oppressive in patriarchy. (p. 239)

Ackermann emphasises the church's role in establishing a moral community, advocating for an evolution of conventional Christian moral teachings to effectively tackle societal challenges. She underscores the significance of regarding the human body as a sacred temple of the Holy Spirit in this process (Ackermann 2006:230–239).

Childist narrative theology of praxis

Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis principles, as outlined in her work, can serve as a foundation for a childist narrative theology of praxis. This childist approach aims to draw insights from the lived experiences of children, employing John Wall's concept of 'childism' as a hermeneutical lens to illuminate and guide the understanding of children's narratives (Ackermann 2006:230–239). The following section discusses the proposed childist narrative theology of praxis.

Narrative praxis – Children's stories

Ackermann (2006:231–232) emphasises the importance of narratives in the transformative journey of identity formation. Similar to adults, a child's capacity to construct a personal life story plays a crucial role in fostering autobiographical reasoning, narrative identity, self-regulation, and social problem-solving skills (Westbya & Culattab 2016:260). McAdams (2011) provides a comprehensive definition for the construct of narrative identity:

> Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life. The story is a selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going. (p. 99)

McAdams (2011:106) theorises that young children do not naturally formulate cohesive life stories that provide unity and purpose to their lives. However, even in their early years, they unconsciously gather experiences that will inform and shape their identities. Adolescence is a critical period for identity development, where individuals grapple with the crises between identity and identity confusion (Papalia &

Feldman 2011:440). Although younger children may also engage in this task, those who have faced challenging circumstances might be compelled to reflect on their lives sooner (Nye 2014:90). Children exposed to extreme forms of adultism experience fear, rejection, guilt, and sadness in their lived reality. When these children start reflecting on their lives during adolescence, their emerging stories may be dominated by negative experiences and challenges accumulated during childhood. Hence, it becomes crucial to assist children, even from a young age, in constructing life stories infused with hope and purpose.

Inspired by feminist praxis, a childist narrative theology of praxis should centre around storytelling, drawing a parallel with feminism's emphasis on women's stories to grasp their hopes and beliefs. The goal is to strive for the emancipation of children from oppression and prejudice. In a similar vein, childism directs attention to children's experiences, seeking to liberate them from the shackles of adultism and marginalisation (Wall 2007:52). While children may not articulate their stories as comprehensively as adults, Wall (2007:59) underscores the importance of childism research in rejecting adult assumptions, ensuring a perspective rooted in children's actual experiences and concerns. Wall (2010:79) delves into the concept of narrative expansion, emphasising that the narrative aim should be fully circular. Children need to learn not only what it means to live in time but also how to give meaning to time throughout their lives, from birth to death (Wall 2007:59).

Illustrating narrative expansion, Wall (2010:72–73) employs the story of Anne Frank, a Jewish girl who hid from the Nazis between ages 13 and 15. In her diary, Anne grapples with complex concepts like anti-Semitism and oppression. Over time, Anne develops a broader perspective, transcending self-image and family frustrations to contemplate the broader meaning of her situation. Anne's example showcases a child's ability to look beyond circumstances, highlighting the potential to guide children in expanding their life stories beyond unfortunate circumstances. Wall (2010) states:

> There is in fact never a time in human life when telling one's story becomes unproblematic. Each of us from birth to death is always already narrated by a vast, complex, and in many ways unfathomable history of evolution, historical era, culture, community, family, and much more. A child in a large city in China or in a remote village in Brazil is each the inheritor of diverse strands of culture, long and complex power struggles, particular and disputed family mores, changing economic realities, and diverse global dynamics. Such a history is always fragmented and distorted. It presents no one with a coherent story that is simply given to them… Children must struggle to interpret their complex surrounding worlds of meaning into their own particular narratives just as much as must adults. (p. 73)

The praxis of age-analysis

This childist narrative theology of praxis methodology proposed in this article seeks to address the identity formation of children exposed to oppression and discrimination within

their society based on age and because of adultism. It is therefore necessary to include a praxis of age-analysis.

Children, constituting a significant portion of the global population, roughly one-third, frequently encounter a treatment that regards them as immature versions of adults. Unfortunately, they are often perceived as the property of adults, not fully recognised as individuals with distinct rights of their own. Wall (2010:1) elucidates that discrimination against children is frequently rooted in their age, undermining their rights solely based on this criterion. He states (Wall 2010):

> Children are considered merely undeveloped adults, passive recipients of care, occupying a separate innocence, or, perhaps, in need of being civilized. Across diverse societies and cultures, and throughout history and today, serious questions of human being, purposes, and responsibilities have usually been considered chiefly from the point of view of adulthood. (p. 1)

Throughout the annals of history, adults have consistently held a superior status, with their opinions and rights often taking precedence. As Wall (2010:2) articulates, 'neglecting children diminishes the humanity of us all'. When children in a community face mistreatment, and their experiences and worth are disregarded, the intricate social fabric of that community is impoverished, compromising the potential for meaning within those relationships (Wall 2010:2). In this methodology, 'childism' will be employed in a manner akin to feminism. Just as feminism focuses on the narratives, challenges, aspirations, and experiences of women, childism seeks to redress the marginalisation of children, confront the pervasive culture of adultism, and scrutinise prevailing social norms that contribute to the oppression of children based on their age (Wall 2019:5).

The praxis of child gender-analysis

The application of gender analysis as a praxis holds relevance for a childist narrative theology of praxis, given the pivotal role gender plays in the identity formation of children. Gender considerations extend to instances of sexual abuse involving children. Young-Bruehl (2012:239), in her exploration of 'childism', suggests that in households where adultism (referred to as childism by Young-Bruehl) prevails, treating children as possessions to fulfil adult needs, specific roles are imposed upon them. These roles are inherently linked to their gender, exemplified by scenarios where a girl may be cast into the role of daddy's little mistress-wife, and a boy may assume the position of a little boyfriend-husband, catering to his mother's need for attention and support (Young-Bruehl 2012:239).

Sexual abuse within families encompasses instances of mother–son incest and more commonly, father–daughter incest. Occasionally, the adult–child relationships may also manifest in homosexual forms (Young-Bruehl 2012:239). In all instances of sexual abuse, gender emerges as a defining factor. The gender of a child invariably shapes adult–child

relationships, and the perception of gender within a household and broader community significantly impacts the identity formation of children.

The praxis of adult–child relationships

As emphasised by Ackermann (2006:234), the crux of identity formation lies in relationships. A child's identity flourishes when nurtured within loving and accepting connections. Conversely, an adult–child relationship marked by power abuse instils fear and guilt, distorting the child's sense of self (Rice 2013:introductory chapter, paragraph 23). Children subjected to abuse and neglect often bear life stories filled with emotions of fear, guilt, and alienation (Rice 2013:introductory chapter, paragraph 23).

In contrast to such destructive adultist relationships, Wall (2007:70) advocates for a childist approach that embodies Christian ethics of love. He envisions this approach as expansive, dynamic, and socially transformative, extending beyond mere private affection or public justice. It entails creating an increasingly inclusive human world, actively welcoming those who are vulnerable to oppression into society (Wall 2007:70). The adult–child relationship, within a childist framework, should reflect self-sacrificial love on the part of the adult, responding to the vulnerability and acute needs of the child while embracing their perspectives and experiences (Wall 2007:70). Wall (2007:70) highlights the rewarding aspect of such self-sacrifice as 'the remarkable return of love that children give back and the longer-term realisation of children's potential that will make a meaningful difference in their world'.

Feminist theology, as defined by Ackermann, in conversation with childism, as defined by Wall, provides foundational principles for a childist narrative theology of praxis:

- Adults must engage in self-reflection, critique, and analysis of relationships, considering power dynamics and human responsibility.
- Mutual interdependence is crucial, requiring both adults and children to actively contribute for the relationship to flourish. Young children must be guided towards mutual interdependence through the teaching and example of the adult.
- Relationality must involve a constructive division of power, characterised by expansiveness, dynamism, and social transformation. This constructive division of power must also be guided by the age of the child, allowing more power as the child matures.
- Mutuality serves as the touchstone for relationships, rooted in self-sacrificial love and a focus on the feelings and needs of the other. Adults must not only practise mutuality but also guide children away from egocentricity and towards generosity, kindness, considerateness and forgiveness, and placing others before ourselves.

Children, dependent on their parents and compelled to remain in the relationship, face challenges when dependency

lacks mutuality, potentially leading to an abuse of power. This imbalance may leave the child feeling helpless, fostering thoughts of insufficiency, fear, and guilt.

Body of Christ praxis – A childist perspective

As previously discussed, Ackermann (2006:236) elucidates the concept of the Body of Christ, emphasising its cohesive nature where each limb plays a distinct role in reflecting God's reign on earth. Believers operate as a society, with each member uniquely created by God in his image. The question arises: Do children receive genuine acknowledgment and are they valued as equal members within the Body of Christ? Nelson Mandela's poignant statement, 'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way they treat their children' (Mandela 1995), underscores the imperative of treating children with love, recognising their gifts, nurturing their potential, and acknowledging their contributions to society.

For adults to authentically embrace children as integral members of the Body of Christ, it becomes essential to comprehend the value of a child from a biblical perspective. Grobbelaar (2020) contributes significant insights in this regard, highlighting the emergence of 'Childist Theology'. He notes the recent shift among biblical scholars towards reading the Bible through the lens of children, taking childhood as a point of departure. Childist theology, rooted in feminist theory, draws parallels with feminist theology in its endeavour to provide a voice for a marginalised group – children (Grobbelaar 2020:2). Grobbelaar (2020:2) emphasises that children, often rendered silent and invisible by adult societal attitudes and practices, find representation through the childist theological approach.

Grobbelaar (2020) states:

> Childist theologians read the biblical texts in a child-centred way to give voice to the silent children of this world. A crucial factor in a childist reading of the Bible, as well as in doing child theology, is your theology of childhood. The critical question is 'how do I view children?' in other words, 'how do I see children, my hermeneutical lenses, through whom I read the Bible?' (p. 2)

Wall (2010:83) also promotes a childist perspective regarding religiosity, asserting that childhood serves as a countermeasure to religious fundamentalism. Instead of imposing predetermined narratives, Wall advocates for viewing children as 'images of the divine', possessing novel capacities for storytelling. In this perspective, religion transforms into an ever-unfolding narrative, where each child contributes a distinct story intertwining with others, collectively forming part of God's overarching narrative for children on earth (Wall 2010:83). Mahlangu (2016:4) echoes this sentiment, underscoring each child's unique design by God as a reservoir of potentiality. This perspective suggests that childhood becomes a crucial period for nurturing these inherent gifts and abilities, allowing children to unfold into the individuals that God intended them to be.

Embodied praxis – In the body of a child

From a child's perspective, the body holds significant importance as it serves as the initial point of contact with the world. Children embark on their embodied journey, undergoing growth, change, and the construction of meaning within their bodies over time (Wall 2010:75). The body, according to Wall (2010:75), is not a detached object but rather an integral part of a person's identity; it is always more than just a body and represents somebody's specific embodiment. Children's identities are intricately shaped by their experiences in their embodied reality.

In concurrence, Ackermann (2006:238) emphasises that our entire human experience is encapsulated within our bodies. Pain, pleasure, memories, dreams, beliefs, and hopes are all integral aspects of our bodily reality. Ackermann (2006:239) further asserts that the church has a responsibility to respond with embodied acts of love and care. This involves reaching out to children through various means such as consciousness-raising, increased awareness, education, advocacy, and prophetic witness. These actions are crucial for addressing potential harm to children, emphasising the importance of adults acknowledging and treating children in alignment with their God-given dignity.

Conclusion

To facilitate effective assistance in shaping the narrative identity of children, adults need to actively confront and overcome inclinations towards adultism and any discriminatory behaviours directed at children. Denise Ackermann's introduction of a feminist theology of praxis methodology, initially designed to combat discrimination against women, can effectively inform the fight against adultism directed at children. As a result, this article presented an elaborate exposition of Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis. The outlined diagram in Figure 1 encapsulates the foundational principles of feminist theology, as articulated by Ackermann (2006:230–239).

The core tenets of feminist theology served as the basis for developing a childist narrative theology of praxis, incorporating the concept of childism, as outlined by John Wall, as a guiding interpretive framework. Figure 2 outlines the foundational elements essential for constructing a childist narrative theology of praxis.

The valuable insights from feminist and childist studies were discussed and employed to critically assess how adult–child interactions impact the development of children's narrative identities. This examination led to the creation of a childist narrative theology of praxis, designed to raise awareness and educate adults about the diverse approaches, both detrimental and constructive, involved in moulding the narrative identities of children.
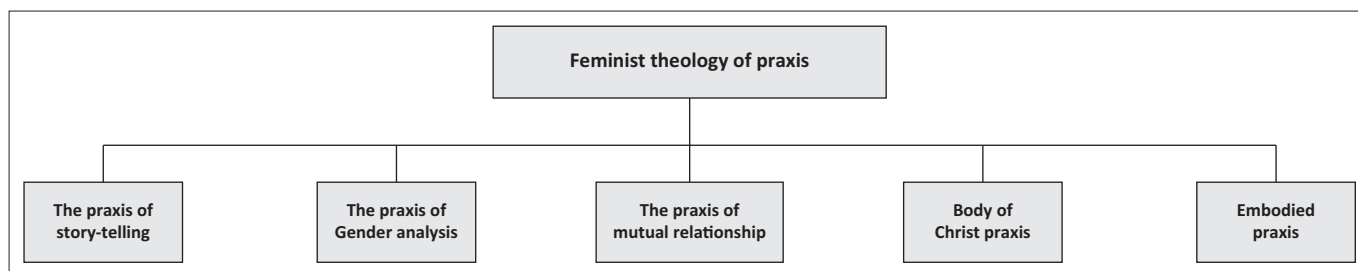
Source: Ackermann, D.M., 2006, 'From mere existence to tenacious endurance: Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a feminist theology of praxis', in I.A. Phiri & S. Nadar (eds.), *African women, religion and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, pp. 230–239, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg
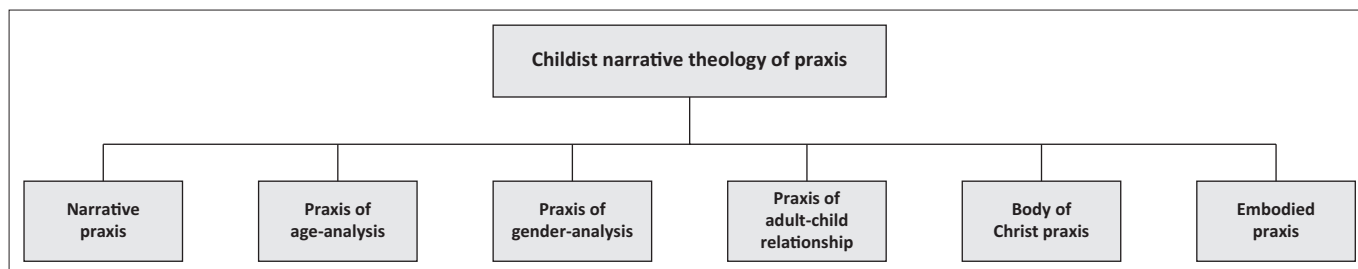
FIGURE 1: Feminist theology of praxis.

FIGURE 2: Childist narrative theology of praxis.

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Authors' contributions

J.G.B. was responsible for conceptualising the article. H.Y. and M.K. were the study leaders of the MTh research project and provided guidance with reviewing and editing the article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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