

29th World Summit on

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, MINDFULNESS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

May 21-22, 2018 | New York, USA

Childhood in Africa: Health and wellness in body, mind, soul and spirit

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When viewed through the narrow lens of Western ideals, childhood in Africa is primarily characterized by poverty, poor nutrition, and low access to education. In much of the available literature, childhood in Africa is understood through reports of poverty and inadequate access to education. There is a tendency to skew the description of children toward low levels of well-being. The research is oversaturated with descriptions of poverty. Many researchers have documented overexposure to disease (i.e., AIDS), trauma and orphan hood, among other misfortunes. So pervasive are these images, suffering children have become an iconic representation of the whole of African life. Understanding the experiences of children need to be a focal point of research, rather than relying so heavily on the environments they function within to give information about them. Including positive aspects of their lives and looking at their experiences will aid in conceptualizing their well-being as more nuanced, rather than simply discussing their survival. In this presentation, we aim to broaden the conceptualization of Africa's children and their childhood experiences by elaborating on the building blocks of healthy child development and resilience, including how those experiences are discernible in Africa. Specifically, in this presentation we: review the status of children health and wellness Africa, describe the theory of health and holistic wellness, re-conceptualize African childhood based on a holistic wellness theory, present points of resiliency and protective factors, and discuss implications for future research, practitioners, and policy-makers. We propose how to move away from simplistic conceptualizations to a richer engagement with contexts that support African child development.

Biography

Waganesh A Zeleke is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling, Psychology, and Special Education at Duquesne University where she teaches different graduate level courses in the Master's and doctoral program. She is a licensed clinical Mental Health counselor and national certified counselor. Her clinical experience includes counseling and consultation services focusing on autism, child-family relationship development, post-traumatic stress disorder, parenting consultation, intercultural adoption, attachment, mental health issues among immigrant population, and child hood mental disorders in US and Africa. She has co-authored and authored more than 10 publications and chapter in topics related to children with special needs, clinical interviewing, autism, and family relational development, mental healthcare access and utilization of children with ASDs in Africa and USA.

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