The psychologization of development: Westernization, individualization, and the universalization of human ways of being

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III. Adolfsson, J.S. & Moss, S. M. (2021). "Even the NGOs never talk about *ufiti* [Witchcraft]": A decolonial and feminist cultural psychological analysis of individualized development clashing with communal ways of being. *Human Arenas* (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00230-1

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Summary of thesis

Western psychology has, over the course of three decades, come to play a significant role in the implementation of global development agendas, especially centered on societies in the so-called 'Global South'. The individual focus that underpins many Western psychological theories and practices often clashes with many people's ways of organizing and experiencing the world. Paired with the principle of universality, which has a strong foothold within many established Euro-American psychological orientations, such an individual approach may lead to an ignorance of context and local realities, which in turn may have detrimental outcomes for the local beneficiaries of global development interventions. In this thesis, I examine the intersection of Western psychology and development theory and practice by focusing on how people on the recipient end of development programs understand and negotiate the 'development' implemented in their communities. By applying a cultural psychological framework, and by drawing on a multi-sited fieldwork conducted in rural and urban Malawi, I use the UN's global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on "gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" as a lens to explore this convergence. As such, this doctoral thesis aims to contribute to the manifold debate on the role of Western psychology theory and practice in global development implementation. The thesis brings together three peer-reviewed and one submitted article. The first (in *Theory & Psychology*) discusses how 'gender' as a concept is negotiated and understood as a 'method for development' amongst people in rural Malawi. The second article (in *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*) analyzes how rural Malawians make meaning of the overarching empowerment and development approach of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in their villages, and how they perceive the approaches as fitting with local contexts. The third article (in *Human Arenas*) explores the link between individualized development incentives and perceptions of *ufti* (the Chichewa term for what loosely translates as witchcraft in English)—and its gendered inclination. The fourth (submitted to *Frontiers in Psychology*) examines *if* and *how* global development practitioners and organizations working with local Malawians, make meaning of, and approach the phenomena of *ufiti*-related violence, and if not—why? Overall, I argue that dominant Western norms of self-actualization and individualism—promoted by many psychological orientations and development organizations—may be harmful practices for individuals and communities who experience life differently. My research thus contributes to explaining why development initiatives—despite the intention of development organizations to improve people's wellbeing—might be unsustainable.

Preface

At the fourth 'Women Deliver' (WD) Conference in Copenhagen in May 2016, women and girls were heralded as the future of global poverty reduction. This was the most extensive gathering on the health, rights, and wellbeing of women and girls in more than a decade, and one of the first major global conferences following the launch of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 Agenda in 2015. SDG 5's rather ambitious goal of achieving "gender equality and empower[ing] all women and girls" was echoed by keynote speakers as the way forward for women and girls—specifically in poor countries in the Global South. Besides the conference's obvious focus on women and girls, the message was profoundly concentrated on the win-win situation in investing in them. The starting remark made by WD's Chief Executive Officer, Katja Iversen (2016), was "When you invest in girls and women everybody wins. That is why we are here, we want to change business, and make it business as unusual." In an 'inspire interview' during the conference, the former president of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim (2016), followed up this appeal by stating that "investing in women … is in fact a very good investment, not just in terms of doing the right thing morally or ethically, but doing the right thing economically." Following this, and in line with the global development bodies, the former U.S Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (2016) made one of the closing addresses, ending her speech with, "Thank you all for all you have done to help us achieve gender equality once and for all around the world."

The overall economic and neoliberal lens on gender equality and women and girls' empowerment in terms of investment was blatantly revealed, based as it is on the underlying assumption of economic growth as the main reason for advocating for 50% of the world's population's rights and wellbeing. Moreover, these keynote remarks paternalistically—however implicitly—signaled that 'we' at the conference in the Scandinavian Global North, already were empowered and gender equal; now *we* should show *them* how it is done. Within the framework of the prevailing neoliberal hegemony, this morality makes sense. Neoliberal society relies on the individual's ability to independently manage and succeed (Rutherford, 2018). The rationale builds on the premise that labor and assets are flexible and that citizens must adapt to new and changing conditions. Ultimately, individuals are regarded as architects and entrepreneurs of their own future and faith (Madsen, 2014).

Half a year later I went on fieldwork to Malawi, and found the messaging from the Women Deliver conference echoed on billboards alongside the highways, reiterated by politicians in

the national media, and mainstreamed by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in rural villages across the country. “Nowadays we have gender”, research participants in two rural villages told my colleague and me. “Gender”, they said, had come to the villages from the outside with development organizations, “not very long ago.” The development organizations working in the community, our participants stated, had told them “you have to do gender.” Therefore, “nowadays”, the villagers explained that “gender” was done in the community through how women and men now doing the same type of work. Although our participants did not speak English, “gender” was not translated to Chichewa, the local language, but pronounced as *jenda*, emphasizing its external origin. Arguably, gender as a Western-informed idea could—as “you have to do gender” implies—be an externally imposed practice. This is further underscored by the fact that participants commonly perceived gender as a method to achieve development. However, while many expressed satisfaction over the “arrival of gender”, there were different opinions as to whether and to what extent “gender” as a method for development actually worked and was practiced equally between sexes. While the introduction of “gender” had made work that previously was understood as male-dominated possible for women, many women reported that men failed to do their full part in doing “gender”, especially so regarding female-dominated work like housework and parental responsibilities. This is not exceptional for rural Malawi. Loosened traditional gender roles have made formal labor more accessible for women worldwide, but the majority remain subjugated to structural and patriarchal inequality and oppression (Federici, 2018; Mies, 1998; Moane, 2011). Additionally, and importantly, what our Malawian participants taught my colleague and I was that “gender”, rather than being an individual essence—as many Western psychological orientations contend—was seen as a communal and moral choice; as something that, if communally undertaken, could move the whole society forward.

These anecdotes serve as an illustration of how global goals on development, and their associated buzzwords, enter and affect local arenas. They show how concepts can take on fundamentally different meanings in diverse cultures and contexts, demonstrating the power inherent in language, and the constructive, creative, and fluid characteristics of meaning-making. Of particular interest in this thesis, is the different meaning-making between individual-centered and communal-centered cultural contexts. Thus, the anecdotes accentuate that assumptions of universality and individuality, common within many Western

psychological perspectives, and adopted by the international development sphere, fit poorly within many people's ways of living.

1. Introduction

This doctoral thesis deals with how psychology, with its dominant position within Western culture, influences and affects people of non-Western cultures[1]. When Western psychological concepts travel into other areas of human life, they ultimately influence how people come to make sense of themselves and others. In particular, the individual focus that underpins many Western psychological theories and practices often clashes with many people's ways of organizing and experiencing the world. Paired with the principle of universality, that has a strong foothold within many established Euro-American psychological orientations, such an individual approach may lead to an ignorance of context and local realities. Western psychological theory and practice have, over the course of three decades, come to play a significant role in the implementation of global development agendas, especially centered on societies in the so- called 'Global South'. Focusing on the development industry[2] in Malawi I explore this generally, but also more specifically by using the UN's global development goal on "gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" as a lens through which I study this intersection. My overall research questions ask: how are gendered development approaches and practices informed by Western psychology experienced as fitting with Malawian lives? How do local 'beneficiaries', often women and girls, make sense of these approaches and practices? What implicit and explicit implications do Western psychological assumptions of universality and individuality that inform development policy and practice pose for local 'beneficiaries'? Prevalent throughout the analysis are the insistent questions; whose ways of being, seeing and feeling are prioritized and promoted in global development policies and programs? Whose interests are silenced, ignored, or even opposed and rejected?

[1] Western psychology and the echoes of European colonialism in the postcolonial world intersect many times in this thesis, as parallel movements that are uncomfortably related to each other. This juxtaposition is referred to as the relation between the *imaginary geographies (*Said, 1978) of the 'Global South', the 'Global North', the 'West' and the 'non-West'. Although I am aware of the problematic asymmetry that these conceptualizations evoke, these imaginary locations are, in this thesis, useful for pointing at the differences, unequal relations, and power hierarchies that were created by the Global North's imperialism and colonial dominance over countries and societies in the Global South. Thus, throughout the thesis, I generally use the terms "Euro-American", "the West", "Western", "non-Western" and the "Global South" as these are widely used when referring to inequalities that are systemized through imperialism and colonial activities and legacies (Burman, 2020).

[2] "The development industry involves international organisations, government departments, big international charities and social movements, who are all working to fight against the causes of poverty and inequality" (Our Economy, n.d., para. 1).

To answer these questions, I draw on interviews and focus group discussions from a multi-sited fieldwork conducted between September 2016 and December 2017 in rural and urban Malawi (as well as participating in the 2016 Women Deliver conference). As part of, and in line with, the larger research project 'NGOMA'[3], conducted at the Center for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo, I examine the transfer of gendered global policies approached through the actions of international NGOs (INGOs)[4].

The expansion of Western psychology has in recent decades become evident in how the discipline has penetrated arenas outside its traditional theoretical territory (Madsen, 2018; Watters, 2010). Transferring from its 'natural habitat' in universities, laboratories, and therapeutic settings, psychology in the later part of the 20th century started appearing in mass culture, in everyday media discourse, and in fields like politics, sport, and the economy, reinventing itself as a normal part of social reality (De Vos, 2012; Madsen, 2014). Scholars reviewing this process call this epistemological expansion a *psychologization* of society (De Vos, 2012; Parker, 2015). As psychologization does not connote a specific phenomenon, it is not a unanimous concept within the disciplines of psychology or the social sciences (De Vos, 2014). Nevertheless, psychologization is a central concept to the body of critical work observing the effect and conditionality of psychology on society (De Vos, 2014). Psychologization is defined as "the spreading of the discourse of psychology beyond its alleged disciplinary borders. In this way, psychologization is the (unintentional) overflow of psychological theories and practices to the fields of science, culture, and politics and/or to subjectivity itself." (De Vos, 2014, para. 2). As Madsen (2011) holds, psychologization occurs when something that previously was not a psychological matter is turned into a psychological matter. Accordingly, psychologization can be said to reflect the dominant role conventional Western psychological theory and practice plays in Western society at large (Madsen, 2020). However, although the psychologization of society naturally—given Western psychology's Euro-American origin—started in Western cultures, scholars hold that accelerating globalization has managed to "successfully" spread Western psychology to most

[3] Professor Sidsel Roalkvam, co-investigator, Katerini Storeng, at the University of Oslo, and senior researchers at the University of Malawi – Professor Blessings Chinsinga, Peter Mvula and Jospeh Chunga led this research project. Three PhD candidates from the University of Oslo carried out fieldwork in Malawi – Hanneke Pot, Maren Olene Kloster and me.

[4] Throughout the thesis and articles, I refer to both national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs). Participants generally say NGOs. However, I think it is important to note the international involvement in Malawi, and I therefore use INGOs when I refer to organizations I know are international, and use (I)NGOs when I am not sure of their origin.

places (De Vos, 2012; Madsen, 2018). Therefore, an important question becomes, if psychologization is all pervasive and ever-present, how do we find space for resistance and critique? (De Vos, 2014; Madsen & Brinkmann, 2011). Thus, psychologization risks turning into a self-reinforcing circular argument and the central question of psychologization becomes "how a critique of psychologization itself can keep free of it." (De Vos, 2014, para. 15). Yet, while Western society may, as several scholars note, be a lost cause when it comes to the omnipresent role of psychology, there are places, spaces, and people that remain outside the self-reinforcing circle of Western psychologization. In these places, dominant assumptions of Western psychology may not only be unfit, but also resisted and rejected. Therefore, although many have explored the psychologization of Western society, there is still a substantial need to explore the many territories outside the West that are laboring under psychologization (Howell, 2011; Klein, 2016). Scholars following this global development hold that many questions of *how*, *why,* and with *what* effects related to the psychologization of the world remain unanswered (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018; Klein & Mills, 2017; Madsen, 2018). In his book *Psychologisation in Times of Globalisation* De Vos (2012, p. 10) asserts, "If you want to know the human, don't study psychology, study psychologization." In this thesis, I contribute to this call and the inquiry of tracing the impact and implications of Western psychology by exploring the psychologization of development in Malawi. Particularly, I study how Western psychology's focus on individual self-actualization, agency, and empowerment has traveled into the global development sphere, and how development discourse and practice largely promote individualized approaches.

I argue that Malawi offers a context where many dominant conventional psychological assumptions about human behavior and attitudes seem out of place. Of particular interest in this thesis, is the Western psychology's extensive focus on the self as independent and abstracted from context. This assumption fits badly with Malawian society's (Bandawe, 2010) understanding of the self (as it does with many other sub-Saharan African societies' conceptions) (Ogbonnaya, 1994). The difference is, to be crudely simplistic, that while many Western psychological orientations tend to conceptualize the self as a self-contained and moral agent who autonomously controls their intentional actions and fate, people in many other places—like Malawi—tend to see the individual as interdependently connected with others (Adjei, 2019; Bandawe, 2010; Mkhize, 2004). As argued by Akomolafe (2012, p. 730) "in many other non-Western cultures, the idea of an individual as autonomous and 'rational' is the very description of abnormality." While this dichotomy is oversimplified—many people

in non-Western cultures as well as in Western cultures would disagree with this binary division—it does offer a continuum that serves as an important illustration of the plurality of ways people relate to others and themselves. Nevertheless, the idea of the rational autonomous self has, given the dominant position of many Western psychological orientations, become the prevailing presumption (Adams et al., 2019).

When I refer to "Western psychology", I am aware that this acts to reduce the wide spectra and many dimensions of the different orientations of psychology. Yet, from a Malawian and African perspective, psychology is commonly understood as Western psychology (see Bulhan, 2015; Nwoye, 2014; Ratele, 2019). This does not imply that the discipline is not practiced outside the West, or that it is always practiced *as in the West*, it rather means that the dominant premises for psychology have evolved out of Western understandings of the discipline(s). As Nwoye (2014, para. 1) asserts, "For the past 50 or 60 years, the professional study of psychology in Africa has been dominated by the Euro-American approaches." This observation made by many African psychologists is historically accurate; the scientific discipline of psychology emerged in late 19th century Europe, proceeding to the US in the early 20th century, and has since advanced on both sides of the Atlantic to become a significant academic field, as well as a clinical profession (Adjei, 2019; Madsen, 2014). Accordingly, 'psychology' is in this respect *Western psychology* (Gülerce, 2014; Ratele, 2019), and Africa has, due to its colonial and post-colonial relations with the West, been subject to Western psychologization (Nwoye, 2014). This Western belongingness is further underscored by the fact that psychology situated outside the West generally carries an adjective, like *African psychology*, accentuating its *non*-Western origin. Ratele (2019, p. 3) acknowledges this "situated" African psychology's inferiority to the dominant Western psychology:

> Today, to be clearly understood, we are still compelled to say African psychology … We live in the age of American psychology – the psychology of the United States of America (US) – and to lesser extent Western European psychology, taken as universal psychology.

The "universal" that Ratele refers to is the dominant assumption(s) within many Western psychological orientations that theories and practices are applicable to all humans regardless of their cultural and contextual setting. Whilst many sub-disciplines of psychology focus on cultural and contextual particularities, actively contesting the claims of universality (see Dhar, 2020; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Nwoye, 2013), there is still a prevailing tendency within

what is commonly referred to as *mainstream psychology*[5] to view the world through a one-dimensional and universal lens (Sullivan, 2019). Although, as Gülerce (2014) asserts, the idea of universalization is a "utopic" assumption that reduces diversity and cultural difference, it is not "culture-free"; it is grounded within conventional Western ideas of attitudes and behavior. As such, the universality-assumption is a cornerstone and catalyst in the psychologization of Western society, and of the rest of the world (Gülerce, 2014).

Since its establishment, psychology has developed theories, practices, and concepts primarily based on studies done with convenience samples from Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic settings (often referred to as WEIRD, see Henrich et al., 2010). That is, researchers found that about 80% of participants in behavioral science research were represented by "WEIRDos", only representing 12% of the population of the world (Azar, 2010; Jones, 2010). This skewed sampling is "not only unrepresentative of humans as a species, but on many measures they're outliers." (Azar, 2010, para 1). By using many examples, Henrich et al. (2010) demonstrate how research results that are based on limited WEIRD samples should be used carefully, in order not to assume their applicability to all humans everywhere. At the core of the WEIRD framework is the rather confined focus on the individual. This is reflected in how human characteristics such as selfhood, agency, morality, etc. are treated as abstracted from historical and cultural contexts (see Adjei, 2019; Gergen et al., 1996; Sullivan, 2019). This exclusive focus on individual attitudes and behavior has proven to be incompatible with how many people—in Western and non-Western contexts—experience and organize their lives (Mpofu, 2002; Muthukrishna et al., 2020; Schulz, et al., 2018). For instance, the application of WEIRD-standards to people in the non-WEIRD "majority world" (Kagitcibasi, 1996), LGTBQI+-populations[6], colored women and men, and marginalized white women and men in WEIRD settings, does not only often fail to grasp context-specific experiences, but may actually be harmful (Henrich et al., 2010; Sullivan,

[5] "Mainstream psychology is an approach to the science of mind accepted by the majority of psychologists and defined by ontological and epistemological qualities questioned by representatives of non-mainstream psychology." (Toomela, 2014, p. para. 2). Generally, "Contemporary [mainstream] psychology has progressively identified itself with the image of a nomothetic science" (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010, p. 821), i.e., "knowledge that is expressible in the form of *general laws* (*allgemeine Gesetze*), where "general" means *common to all*." (Lamiell, 2014, para. 15). "Whereas nomothetic concerns emphasize generality in behavioral lawfulness… idiographic concerns emphasize the uniqueness of the individual" (Nesselroade et al.,2007, p. 218). Accordingly, universality is often assumed within the nomothetic stance (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Psychological sub-disciplines that emphasizes idiographic concerns, e.g. cultural-, feminist-, critical- and decolonial psychology, are not seen as mainstream and do not adhere to the orientations that promote universality.

[6] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning and Intersex (LGTBQI+).

2019; Yakushko, 2020). When reproduced as dominant assumptions of what experiences *should be like,* they simultaneously make what *is not* experienced that way seem deviant (Gergen et al., 1996; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018), a deviance often referred to as the 'Othering' of individuals and groups (Chryssochoou, 2004).

With this thesis's focus on Malawi, I offer an insight to a non-WEIRD context, in which Western psychology, both in terms of general Western psychologization and clinical practitioners and institutional disciplines is—compared to other places—rather absent. Yet, people in rural areas of Malawi are often very familiar with many Western psychological norms and ideas, as these are massively promoted by INGOs implementing development in their communities. Many of these INGOs focus largely on interventions that campaign for individual "behavioral change" (Classen, 2013; Pot, 2019; Swidler & Watkins, 2017). Thus, instead of focusing on the societal and structural macro-level of development, individuals are considered agents of change. In this thesis, taking a decolonial feminist cultural psychological starting point, I explore how the prevailing individualized focus is understood by Malawians who practice a more communal way of living. Accordingly, this theoretical perspective focuses on people's contextually lived reality and meaning-making, allowing us to get at the particularities of being, seeing, feeling, and knowing.

The INGO focus on individuals as agents of behavioral change is not specific for rural Malawi. Research from across Africa, as well as other Global South countries, shows how individualized interventions promoting self-efficacy and self-actualization play a significant part in the global development industry (Adjei, 2015; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019). Neither is this international development focus a new endeavor. Since the 1990s, Western psychological expertise has become increasingly integrated in global development policy and practice (Burman, 2020; Fassin, 2008; Pupavac, 2004a, 2004c). This turn to psychology is, among other manifestations, reflected in the development agenda's greater focus on individualized behavior (Howell, 2011; Klein & Mills, 2017). An integration that Klein (2016, p. 39) and Howell (2011, p. 98) respectively identify as a Western "psychologisation of development interventions" and as development made into a "problem of the mind." That is, turning development into a personal and psychological, rather than a systemic and structural, matter (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019; Rutherford, 2018). Psychologized concepts centering on autonomous selves, like "self-regulation", "self-efficacy", "self-actualization", "agency", "resilience", "behavior change", "empowerment" and "nudging", are largely manifested in

development approaches targeting individualized behavior (see Adjei, 2015; Távara, 2019; Teichman & Zamir, 2019; Tornhill, 2016).

Mills (2014, p. 2) thoroughly illustrates the ways psychiatric and psychological terminology is repeated and distributed worldwide via global development interventions "through the work of NGOs." As detailed in the preface, this focus particularly centers on women and girls' empowerment, behavioral change, and self-actualization in the Global South, and is underpinned by the assumption that their individual economic progress will benefit us all in terms of global poverty reduction. Although the adoption of psychological knowledge in global development discourse and practice is widely articulated (De Vos, 2012; Rutherford, 2018), there is a substantial lack of critical work on the outcome and consequences of this adoption (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018), and many questions on how context specificity versus general claims are dealt with by development organizations are left unanswered. As stated by Klein (2016, p. 15),

> While critical psychology is a burgeoning field of academic inquiry, there has not been much research on the intersectionality of psychology and development studies beyond the notable exceptions of Burman (2008), Howell (2011), Fernando (2014), Mills (2014) and a few others.

This thesis contributes to this research gap at the meeting point between Western psychology and development policy and practice. Building on a body of critical work grappling with the psychologization of development, I provide an analysis of how international development practices informed by Western psychology clash with local Malawian ways of living. To the theorization of the 'developed individual', I also offer an analysis of how the context-abstracted gendered, and individualized focus of (I)NGOs in Malawi conflicts with communal ways of existing; how the (I)NGOs' lack of local grounding and knowledge may create difficulties and dilemmas for individuals and groups. The specifics of the context include values, norms, practices, and cosmologies. An aspect that became evident and relevant during my research was the Malawian supernatural and spiritual phenomena of *ufiti*. *Ufiti* is generally and vaguely translated as "witchcraft"[7] (Lwanda, 2005), and its malign characteristics largely jar with Western individualized development interventions. Within the *ufiti* universe, individualized behavior that enhances personal progress is seen as anti-social, selfish, greedy, and dangerous to society (Ferguson, 2006; Lwanda, 2005). Thus, *ufiti* is

[7] Conceptualizations of *Ufiti*/witchcraft are explained in more detail in Chapter three on the empirical context.

highly relevant for this study's focus on (I)NGOs promoting individualized development and progress.

Research on the direct impact of individualized development approaches on *ufiti*/witchcraft remains substantially underrepresented within psychology. Therefore, the four articles that this thesis builds on provide empirical-based analyses on how dominant Western ideas and standards of individualism and universalism conflict with communal and reciprocal values and norms, ultimately risking increasing—particularly gendered—*ufiti* accusations and assaults.

The belief in harmful magic, supernatural, and spiritual forces, is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and presents life-dangers for people (Ashforth, 2005; Mbiti, 1990). In Malawi, the malign forces of *ufiti* are the reality for the majority of the population (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). In addition to the risks associated with being accused of having used *ufiti*-spells on others, its malign character poses everyday challenges for people. Dying from car crashes, malaria, HIV/AIDS, being bewitched, paralyzed, and barren, are all strongly connected with *ufiti* forces (Lwanda, 2005; Mbiti, 1990). Like with other gendered inequalities, Malawian women and girls are amongst the groups most exposed and vulnerable to *ufiti*-related assaults (Chilimampunga, 2012; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). As in other places in sub-Saharan Africa, individualized behavior that expands personal unshared achievements and progress is generally understood as anti-social, selfish, and greedy, and is commonly perceived as *afiti*—i.e., as related to *ufiti* (Ferguson, 2006; Lwanda, 2005). Thus, the (I)NGOs' promotion of individualization makes achieving development a dangerous problem for the Malawian 'beneficiaries' of individualized development interventions. To pursue personal progress may put you in a position where you are perceived as having used forces of *ufiti* to prosper at the expense of others (Lwanda, 2005). To fail in this endeavor is to 'fail' at developing. However, to pursue development might mean that you become the target of others' suspicion, resentment, and *ufiti* accusations.

My entry point in this study was to use the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5—to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"—as a lens to explore how global gender policies are conceived and practiced by (I)NGOs and understood and practiced by the Malawian recipients of these policies. Very soon I realized that the permeating character of *ufiti* was impossible to escape; that development approaches targeting women and girls' empowerment and gender equality—if individualized—would pose difficulties and dilemmas for the recipients of these interventions. Thus, in this thesis, I argue that universalized

individualization is risky for many people who base their reality on other premises than Western ideals. I argue that promoting individuality may be dangerous for people who perceive the world as communal. Accordingly, it becomes crucial to ask how local 'beneficiaries' make sense of (I)NGO development approaches and practices, and to reflect on their potential implications. This context specificity is a necessary perspective for both psychology and developmental work, for interventions to be useful and valuable rather than conceivably detrimental for the 'beneficiaries'.

While some of the work that I summarize in the next chapter provides studies on lived experiences, more focus is needed on how the recipients of Westernized development give meaning to and resist the conditioned incentives that are brought into their lives by foreign actors. Additionally, and importantly, without local accounts of how psychology operates in this field, the focus on Western psychology's involvement in the development industry may paradoxically promote the voices of the Other without the Other being heard. Therefore, in this doctoral thesis I offer a context-based multi-sited study from Malawi that particularly centers on the lived experience of local participants who, in diverse ways, have encountered and/or approached the phenomena of Western informed development.

Organization of the thesis

In the following chapter, I provide an outline of previous research and the theoretical framework that this thesis builds on. Then, in Chapter two, I present the empirical context with an overview of historical and present Malawi, which is an extended version of the background sections given in the four articles. Thereafter in Chapter three, I present the methods and data material. The fourth chapter is devoted to reflections on positionality and the ethical considerations related to this project. Next, the fifth chapter gives a summary of the four articles. Finally, in Chapter six, I address and discuss the main contributions, and limitations, followed by reflections and suggestions for future research.

Table 1. The Articles

Articles (and co-authors)	Status	Journals
"Nowadays there is *gender*": "Doing" global gender equality in rural Malawi Co-author: Ole Jacob Madsen	Published	*Theory & Psychology*
Making meaning of empowerment and development in rural Malawi: International individualism meets local communalism Co-author: Sigrun Marie Moss	Accepted	*Journal of Social and Political Psychology*
"Even the NGOs never talk about *ufiti* [witchcraft]": a decolonial and feminist psychological analysis of individualized development clashing with communal ways of being Co-author: Sigrun Marie Moss	Published	*Human Arenas*
Decolonizing dominant Western assumptions: naturalizing fear of Malawian witchcraft and denaturalizing Western norms of individuality	Submitted	*Frontiers in Psychology*

2. Recent Research and Theoretical Framework

The first section of this chapter offers a summary of the influential theoretical and conceptual work of scholars who have explored the field of "the psychologization of development" that this doctoral thesis builds on. As noted by Klein (2016) in the introduction, the role of Western psychology in development policy and practice is sorely understudied. Therefore, the work that I draw on in this part provides a trajectory of the different historical and recent tendencies and motives behind Western psychology's move into the development sector. In the second section, I turn to psychological perspectives that offer tools to reveal, deconstruct, and counter Western based psychological assumptions—such as individualization—as context

specific and *un*-universal. Lastly, I deploy a decolonial feminist perspective to emphasize the gendered inclinations and implications of the study.

The Western psychologization move into global development

In the early 1990s Burman (2020, p. 25) "became increasingly concerned with the far-reaching role and functions of developmental psychological theorising outside its Euro-US contexts of initial elaboration." She argues that with the accelerated globalization of the '90s, dominant Western psychological models on childhood development were adopted and universalized by international development organizations working in Global South contexts. Drawing on post-developmental discourses to unpack and deconstruct numerous tacitly taken-for-granted interconnections that tie the 'developing world' with—particularly—development psychology, Burman shows how ideals of child development and international development are founded on the same principles of the Western 'developed' individual. Development psychology she argues, "functions as a slippery but pervasive resource within models of social and individual change" (Burman, 2020, p. 210). It is "slippery" because its assumptions of what development *is* and *ought to be* implicitly figure in political agendas and conceptual frameworks. This overflow of developmental psychological ideas and models has, through the paradigms' permeating nature, often done more damage than good (Burman, 2020). From Burman's perspective, this dilemma is visible in how the Western models that development interventions are molded on often are inappropriate and irrelevant to the cultural context; to the lives of the people who are the 'beneficiaries' of the interventions. The "obscuring of culture" Burman (2020, p. 98) asserts, may lead to unforeseen contradictory and even harmful consequences. For instance, she argues that "individualised, family-oriented explanations frequently function to exonerate state-neglect or deprivations" (Burman, 2020, p. 202).

Like Burman, De Vos (2012) also dates the international development turn in psychology to the 1990s, demonstrating how globalization has spread Western psychology to places, spaces, and people now faced with Western ways of being, seeing, and making sense of the world and themselves. However, for him, the psychologization of development started in the war-related humanitarian aid sector. By drawing on Pupavac's (2004b, 2004c) work, he notes that in the 1990s, this sector underwent a crisis after receiving criticism for provoking conflict and undermining local economies in war-ridden regions. This aid crisis "led to a demoralized humanitarianism", which by extension led to the turn to *psychosocial* models (Pupavac, 2004b, p. 497). The adoption of the psychosocial perspective can, as Pupavac (2004b, p. 497)

notes, be seen as an attempt to "bring back the human in the face of the bureaucratization of aid." She (2004b) holds that the first time that 'trauma' surpassed 'hunger' as the focus of international aid organizations was during the 1990s. Relatedly, De Vos (2021) notes that Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) used psychologists and psychiatrists for the first time after the 1988 Armenian earthquake. Accordingly, the role of psychology expanded into the humanitarian and development aid sphere. Furthermore, in the same vein, Fassin (2008, p. 532) locates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the historical moment when subjectivity was used to describe a humanitarian crisis:

> Where previously the language evoked in defending oppressed peoples was that of revolution, current usage favors the vocabulary of psychology to sensitize the world to their misfortune … Not so long ago we glorified the resistance of populations; we henceforth scrutinize the resilience of individuals.

Asking, "How does the introduction of humanitarian psychiatry, with its actors and its concepts, transform the experience of oppression and war?" Fassin (2008, p. 534) among others, notes that the terms "trauma" and "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) have increase in use. He links this to how the growing number of humanitarian psychologists and psychiatrists working in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have brought in psychological testimonies to the consequences of war. Seeing the two populations as the victims of violent situations, psychologists and psychiatrists use trauma and PTSD when speaking from their point of reference. However, Fassin asserts, applied to the entire population their trauma and PTSD testimonies often become too generic. When the 'trauma' concept is applied to the war victims' families, friends, classmates, neighbors, colleagues etc. "it expands the range of victims considerably … Potentially the entire Israeli population is susceptible to suffering from posttraumatic stress symptoms" (Fassin, 2008, p. 550).

Returning to De Vos (2012), for him, the psychologization of aid ultimately has come to replace signifiers like 'underdevelopment/development', 'economic' and 'social convergence', and 'exploitation' with psychosocial concepts like 'empowerment', 'resilience', 'self-efficacy', and 'capacity building'. Thus, the conceptualization of development has moved from the realm of political and economic theorization to the field of psychology. However, that does not mean that psychology is not connected with politics and economics. On the contrary, drawing on Foucault's (2008) concept of *biopolitics* (how political power is employed on entire populations, including all aspects of human life), De Vos argues that the psychologization of aid *must* be understood as *psychopolitics* driven by *psychoeconomic* factors. This political and economic focus has turned the current machinery

behind development aid into a "post-Fordist direct production of subjectivity and social relations" (De Vos, 2012, p. 115). What is supported by global donors and exported via (I)NGOs to the Global South, De Vos asserts, is no longer aid in terms of nutrition, blankets, and tents, but *Western ways of being*. The current development and humanitarian worker "does not dispense food packets but, rather, knowledge, knowledge which pretends to cover the field of being, the very ontological sphere." (De Vos, 2012, p. 113). This relates to the keynote remarks in the preface, insisting that women and girls in the Global South should be empowered by Western philanthropies and development organizations to change their behavior and thereby achieve economic progress. Before this change of technique that reconfigured what 'aid' and 'development' entail, recipients of aid were not supposed to do anything but receive material assistance in terms of necessities and shelter. Thus, while 'aid recipients' before the psychosocial turn still could 'be themselves', they are now empowered to change their behavior. Now, De Vos insists, 'beneficiaries' of aid must show the right attitude, cognitions, emotions, and aspirations, which as Classen (2013) demonstrates, is audited, and then ticked off by the aid/development organization that *enabled* their empowerment. His criticism of the psychologization of global aid and development goes deep; he demonstrates how the politics of psychosocial humanitarian aid is ultimately about *psychoeducation* or manipulation of the recipients' subjectivity. Accordingly, with development-aid becoming psychoeducation, great possibilities to surveil, and re-shape behavior and attitudes are placed in the hands of those with the "knowledge" and power to educate, i.e., development organizations (De Vos, 2012). I agree with De Vos. As seen in the preface, women and girls' empowerment and self-actualization is largely perceived through an economic and neoliberal lens. Also, as I will argue, participants in (I)NGO interventions are often instructed to undertake certain activities that may result in them becoming disempowered rather than empowered (see articles 1, 2 and 3).

In *Developing Minds,* drawing on her research in Mali, Klein (2016) links psychological interventions to the modernity agendas that grew out of the West's colonization of the South. Like De Vos (2012), she insists that it is crucial to investigate how Western psychological theories and practices are used as psychopolitics to achieve political goals. "Interventions from colonisation through to the neoliberal era," Klein argues "have always had a psychological dimension" (Klein, 2016, p. 43). The colonial powers, Klein asserts, controlled the colonized population by intervening in their subjectivities. The architects behind these interventions—i.e. the Western colonial powers—built their rationale on the hegemonic

assumption that the Western world was the raw model of the developed human (Klein, 2016). After WWII, development interventions were used in the West to build up the war-scarred states of Europe and to secure two fundamental elements. First, infrastructure, technology, capitalist integration, and democracy to secure peace in the West. Second, the modernization of the people by shaping subjectivities through conditioning individuals' behavior, aspirations, and worldviews (Klein, 2016). This prescription for development later became "an important blueprint for the West's modernizing mission for the Global South" (Klein, 2016, p. 45). In 1949, US President Harry Truman declared in his inauguration speech "we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" (Klein, 2016, p. 46). Aiming to speed up the modernization of the "underdeveloped" world Truman dubbed the US especially the prototype of the *moderns* and the savior of the *un-moderns*. Klein notes how Truman's focus on improving the Other to develop in accordance with Western standards, had a clear psychological dimension. He was not only addressing modernization as infrastructural and promising economic advancement but also drawing on a psychopolitical approach, calling for a *modernization of humans*. Truman emphasized that individual "self-help" was the way out of *unmodernity*. It is this remedy that Klein (2016, p. 47) links to the psychological sphere. "[B]y promoting the modern 'developed' psyche" the psyche that remains outside the narrow Western conceptualization of the modern is excluded. Over seven decades later, Klein notes that the world remains in this modernizing vision and mission. She shows how the psychological domain has become a sharpened frontier of international development practitioners' policy and practice. To her, the psychologization of recent development interventions is visible in the UN's 2015 World Development Report (WDR), with its specific focus on "behaviouralisation in development policy" (Klein, 2016, p. 58). Development interventions now adopt psychological knowledge in countless ways that buy into the neoliberal rationale. The *behaviouralisation* in the development discourse and practice, Klein (2016, p. 58) argues, is a way of creating "suitable neoliberal subjectivities" that adopt autonomous self-sufficient behavior in line with Western neoliberal norms. She criticizes this policy implementation for ignoring the structural economic level—for seeing people as means to economic development rather than as ends in themselves.

In *Decolonizing Global Mental Health* Mills (2014) tracks the Western psychologization of development in India. She looks at how "the psychological turn" in development has led to a diagnosis of "underdeveloped" Indian people. Mills notes how people who due to the

consequences of macro societal structures live in poverty and distress are diagnosed with Western psychological symptoms that are alien to their language and culture. Asking, "How are people brought into being through language, through the systems of classification that categorize and name them, through the act of being named?" Mills (2014, p. 74) accentuates that the power inherent in language brings psychologized individuals and groups into a "new being" defined by Western standards. To exemplify, she describes how the director of an NGO in Southern India explained to her that although their target group—distressed women—did not identify themselves as "depressed", the NGO did. Accordingly, 'depressed' was a condition placed on these women for others to make sense *of* and intervene *in* their lives, not for them subjectively to make sense of themselves. For the "depressed women" their "being" is, as Mills notes, transferred from the Global North, in English, not their local languages, and they are assigned a distant other's understanding of them. This type of subject formation she argues is reminiscent of how the colonial system's *identity violence* worked. Identity violence, she holds, operates on multiple dimensions—psychological, bodily, and symbolic—and fractures subjects' understandings of the self. Thus, along with De Vos and Klein, Mills also notes how "psychopolitics" overwhelms people's meaning-making. Ultimately, people, like the depressed women "come to think of themselves and act on themselves as though they are 'mentally ill'" (Mills, 2014, p. 76). The power of language that Mills addresses is important in my thesis in terms of how English as a colonial and elite language is transferred via (I)NOGs into local settings and gives new meaning to ways of experiencing the world (see specifically article I).

Barnes and Milanovic (2015) demonstrate how the psychologization of development in South Africa has created *psychological truths* concerning what being a good citizen means. Specifically, they trace the South African development discourse that "construct[s] a psychologized, self-actualized, socially compassionate subject whose (noble) goals are to contribute to South Africa's Development; but which ultimately serves to stifle calls for class resistance and structural change" (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015, p. 225). The profound social and economic inequality that many poor and black South Africans struggle with is a legacy of the oppressive systems of colonization and apartheid and is fundamentally structural. Yet, Barnes and Milovanovic (2015) argue that change for a better society is often put on the shoulders of the individuals who are suppressed. As psychologists working with people in impoverished communities, the authors note how they are often invited to construct interventions based on behavior-change and agency models to empower people who might

then protect themselves from the structural inequality they live under. Accordingly, rather than focusing on fixing the political inequalities that trap people in unhealthy environments, individual self-actualization and resilience are seen as drivers for development change. Barnes and Milovanovic see this focus on individual self-sufficiency and actualization as a psychologization of South African development. They further note how the status quo of class and race inequality is reproduced by the assumption that "more 'psychology' in poor 'communities'" is a solution that would "help South Africa heal from its historical traumas and improve their [South Africans'] mental health" (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015, p. 235). However, as Barnes and Milovanovic point out, there are few critical analyses of what psychology's role is, or if this role is even needed or asked for. Rather, they argue, the focus on individual behavior change, agency, and self-actualization could potentially hamper collective resistance to oppressive societal structures. For instance, poor South Africans' political class protests and actions are often inverted as individualized, criminal and backward, rather than seen as "meaningful resistance to a macro-economic structure" (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015, p. 225).

The notion of resistance that Barnes and Milovanovic bring up here is important. Scholarly work surveying the psychologization of development policy and practice generally tends to direct its criticism to Western psychological theories and models, exploring their links to oppressive neo-liberalization, globalization, universalization, and individualization. Although critical work acknowledges that claims of universalized individualization fit badly and are potentially dangerous for people who have other ways of experiencing the world, there is a shortage of studies that explore how the actual receivers of psychologized development interventions perceive this imposition. Thus, while the level of analysis commonly focuses on the characteristics of Western psychology, which make the psychologization of development possible in the first place, the practices that people undertake to navigate, negotiate, or resist this system, are generally less explored. This lack is probably a result of the limited empirical research on the subject. Accordingly, this thesis's multi-sited fieldwork contributes to the rather young research tradition on the psychologization of development (e.g. Barnes & Milovanovic 2015; Burman, 2020; De Vos, 2012, Klein, 2016; Mills, 2014), adding extensive empirical material from Malawi.

Considering the parallel history of Western psychology and Western imperialism, colonialism, globalization, and neo-liberalization (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018), and this thesis's Malawian context, I have found that the framework of decolonial cultural psychology as well

as decolonial feminist psychology offers a useful perspective to approach and analyze the various aspects involved in the psychologization and individualization of development. Particularly, I find these perspectives' focus on cultural context critical for understanding how local experiences are affected by the imposition of Western dominant assumptions of universalized individuality. In the following, I summarize the decolonial turn in psychology before I give an outline of decolonial cultural psychology and the theoretical concepts that the thesis draws on. Finally, I explain how a decolonial feminist approach has been important for understanding the gendered aspects of the study.

The decolonial turn

The decolonial turn in psychology is often attributed the Martinique-born political philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose critique of colonization and racism played a central part in the canon of decolonial theorization that followed the Second World War (WWII) (Eriksen, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Experiencing colonial oppression from the perspective of the colonized, both from his origin in the French Caribbean and from the barricades of WWII, and later French occupied Algeria's war of independence, Fanon saw oppression and racism as organically tied to colonialism (Eriksen, 2017). These wars made him brutally aware that the French noble motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité* did not apply to the people in the colonies (Funke, 2018). The Algerian psychiatric clinic that Fanon worked at was deeply segregated; the colonizing settlers and the native Algerian patients were separated in different wards, and treated very differently (Funke, 2018). The French psychiatrists in the clinic believed that North Africans lacked higher brain functioning and that they needed more physiological interventions (i.e., lobotomy and insulin coma) than normal therapy could offer (Funke, 2018). This dehumanization of the colonized, Fanon believed, was the colonial system's rationalization and justification for taking over the land and its people (Funke, 2018). For him, colonial "violence is built into structures and institutions" like academic disciplines and political doctrines and "produces a culture" and becomes a "cultural praxis" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 174 -175).

In his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* that came out in 1952, Fanon attempts to understand the psychology of colonialism; how it objectifies and dehumanizes, and gets into the very souls of the colonized. He argues that the colonial system is difficult to combat because of its insidious character. Its violence, racism, and hate become internalized in the colonized and create what he calls an *inferiority complex* (Fanon, 2008). When the presence

of colonial power, through culture and language, conditions and colors people's desires, aspirations, ideas, and dreams, it makes colonized people come to understand themselves as inferior, from the perspective of their oppressor. Fanon saw this colonization of the psyche as leading to self-hate. Thus, a liberation from, and destruction of, the colonial culture and system of thought was, for him, the only way to achieve true humanistic morals (Fanon, 2004). A decolonization of science, knowledge, subject, and object Fanon (2004) insisted, is essential to understand how thoughts, ethics, and values—permeated by colonial power and racism—appear as taken for granted ideals; and then to break free from them. As Maldonado-Torres (2017, p. 439) asserts:

> Fanon's cure of the colonized, but also of psychology, psychiatry, and the human sciences involves, not the application of specific methods, nor the understanding of tradition, but the cultivation of a decolonial attitude, which is profoundly epistemological as well as ethical, political, and aesthetic.

Fanon died in his thirties from leukemia, just after his book *The Wretched of the Earth* was released in 1961. In the foreword of the 2004 edition, Bhabha (p. xvi) cites Hall, dubbing the book the "Bible of decolonization." Calling out to an audience that he would never get to engage with, Fanon's (2004, p. 239) last sentence reads, "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man." Fanon did not live to see Algeria gain independence in 1962, or the fall of colonial rule in Africa and Asia, which marked the rest of the 1960s and 70s. Neither did he get to see succeeding generations answer his call for decolonization and the creation of a "new humanity."

There are many scholars who have been inspired by Fanon's decolonial mission. His criticism of the Western acquisition of knowledge, and the responsibility that he placed on Western academics to reflect on their part in the creation, sustenance, and consequences of colonization and racism (Pierce, 1985), still reverberates within social scientific disciplines. While the decolonization of psychological science is not a new project (see Bulhan, 1980; Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1994), non-Western approaches to psychology are still largely disregarded (Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Macleod et al., 2017; Makhubela, 2016). For Nwoye (2014), the truncation and marginalization of African psychology and the Western psychology's dominance in African universities is rooted in Europe's colonial involvement in the continent. However, as he asserts, the many scholars who have, and are, actively challenging the academic hegemony gives hope for a future where psychological perspectives from Africa and elsewhere are incorporated in a psychology that is no longer Western by

default. The decolonial perspective's focus on the presence of dominant external power structures on local realities is important in this thesis particularly in terms of how Western-informed and dominant ideas of individualized development shape how individuals and groups make sense of themselves and others.

Decolonial cultural psychology

Although approaches within cultural psychology vary, they generally articulate the notion of mind in cultural context as a foundation (Adams et al., 2012). Thus, psychological phenomena are understood as inherently dependent on context, where lifeworlds, and their discursive and practical dimensions are seen as reciprocally co-constituted by culture (Slunecko & Wieser, 2014, para. 6). Accordingly, psyche and culture are regarded as jointly co-constructive, as mutually making each other up (Shweder, 1990). Hence, what is regarded as justified, true and valid is socially and culturally constructed and deemed "social facts" (Shweder, 2006). For Shweder (1990), these social facts make up *intentional worlds*. Individuals involved in the same socio-cultural realities—the same intentional worlds—construct, give meaning to, and manifest conceptions that are social facts of 'reality' (Shweder, 1999). As such, culture offers "symbolic systems" (Mattingly et al., 2008, p. 12). These symbolic systems provide a "communal tool kit" from which collective meaning is made (p. 2). Thus, *meaning-making* is central to cultural psychology (Jerome & Bruner, 1990). "Meanings are all the ideas or notions that stimuli, responses, events, or objects imply, suggest, or signify to someone capable of being a meaning maker" (Shweder, 2008, p. 62). In essence, meaning-making in cultural psychology is the focus on "the *meaning* of actions, expressions, cultural artifacts, written or drawn documents, etc." (Slunecko & Wieser, 2014, para.7). Therefore, this perspective explains cultural diversity as qualities that are as rational and legitimate as any other. For instance, as Shweder (2006) notes, social facts related to "witchcraft" are not more or less ontologically rational or valid than that a "touchdown" is a "touchdown" in an American football game. Both phenomena are equally culturally embedded.

Using cultural psychology is an interdisciplinary activity as elements of other human sciences disciplines are often employed "for the analysis of sociocultural environments … in all their intentionality and particularity" (Shweder, 1990 p. 3). In this thesis I draw on decolonial concepts established outside the psychological domain, which are used by psychological scholars to grapple with still-existing racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies (Adams et al., 2018). With its emphasis on socio-cultural realities, cultural psychology offers a good

foundation for decolonial psychological perspectives and practices providing theoretical strategies for identifying and deconstructing oppressive power-relations, and promoting respect, tolerance, and cultural plurality (Adams et al.,2012).

Decolonial perspectives[8] within the social sciences explore how Western *Modernity* [9]was made possible through the imperial and colonial oppression of people and land, and the accumulation of power and wealth through the extraction of labor and resources (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018). Particularly important for my thesis is decolonial cultural psychology's aim to disclose patterns of Western individualism that operate as standard norms (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017). For example, scholars maintain that Western norms of modern individualism and *individualist mentalities* are the result of how colonial oppression enabled the colonizers to accumulate, to profit, to (self) expand, and to (self) actualize at the cost of the colonized Others (Adams et al.,2018). Moreover, decolonial theorists emphasize that the colonial oppression survived the formal end of direct colonial rule in that "knowledge formations and modern (individualist) ways of being that colonial power imposed on the world as a hegemonic standard", still stifle indigenous non-individualist ways of being (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017, p. 39; Watkins et al., 2018). For example, empirical studies demonstrate how the promotion of Western patterns and ideals of independent individualism and context-abstracted selfhoods may be dangerous for people in local realities where interdependent and context-embedded selfhoods are the norm. Pursuing individualized selfhood may, for example, weaken important interpersonal obligations which is particularly perilous for people with limited resources who live in interdependent societies (see for example Adams, 2005; Adams & Salter, 2007, p. 542).

Coloniality

While present Western involvement in Africa no longer enslaves or directly suppresses societies, the racial and ethnic categories constructed and sustained during the colonial era still condition *what* and *how* people think of themselves and others (Quijano, 2007). This type

[8] Decolonial theory overlaps with postcolonial theory in that they both criticize the power that colonizing rules asserted over colonized people and agree that the power-imbalance created in the colonial era still permeates the postcolonial world (Mignolo, 2007a). However, these schools were developed in different socio-historical settings. While decolonial theory aims at de-linking knowledge production from a Euro-US episteme, postcolonial theory focuses on academic transformation within academic institutions (Mignolo, 2007a).

[9] In decolonial theory the *modernity* concept refers to the joint history and relation between colonialism and the epistemological understanding of the Western world as modern. Modernity is thus intrinsically understood as tied to European colonization (see Mignolo, 2007a; Quijano, 2007).

of Othering and power over definition has been conceptualized as *coloniality of power, knowledge,* and *being* (see Grosfoguel, 2002; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2016; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Though these concepts are intimately linked to each other, they address different dimensions of *coloniality*. The first pillar, *coloniality of power* was coined by Quijano (2000), and identifies how social, racial, and political hierarchies established by the colonial power, resulted in stereotyping, and discriminating discourses that continuously mark the postcolonial world, and how these power processes, in turn, shaped the Western, modern, and capitalist world order. The group of Latin American scholars working on coloniality further developed the concepts of coloniality *of knowledge and being* (see Grosfoguel, 2002; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007a, 2007b). Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 110) state that coloniality of knowledge, "speaks directly to epistemological colonization whereby Euro-American techno-scientific knowledge managed to displace, discipline, destroy alternative knowledges it found outside the Euro-American zones (colonies) while at the same time appropriating what it considered useful to global imperial designs." For these scholars, coloniality of knowledge is important as it addresses the burdens of the colonization of African consciousness, its ways of knowing. The last pillar, coloniality of being, concerns the physical and psychological conditions of colonized people. *Being* is often defined by the dimensions of space, time, intersubjectivity and embodied subjectivity, i.e., the collective myths, prejudices, attitudes, structures, and beings of particular groups (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Thus, in accordance with Fanon's (Fanon, 2004, 2008) focus on colonial oppressions objectification, and the dehumanization of people's very subjectivity and soul, Maldonado-Torres (2017, p. 433) holds that such "ontological colonization" characterizes the coloniality of being.

Alongside the construction of ethnicity and race, Lugones (2007) maintains that the colonial system established constructions of gender that functioned to "destroy peoples, cosmologies and communities as the building ground for the 'civilized' West." (p. 186). In addition to the axis of power, knowledge and being, Lugones (2008) notes that coloniality also has inherent gendered dimensions where race and gender intersect. She asserts that gender is constructed "along racial lines" where the imposition of the "modern colonial gender system" (Lugones, 2008, p. 16) "was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of it" (p. 12). In line with Lugones, Mies (2014) maintains that patriarchal dominance was part of the colonial logic in which gendered, sexed, classed, and racialized individuals and groups were the modes of production and accumulation. Non-waged labor

performed by women, slaves, and peasants was the foundation and premise for the extension of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism (Federici, 2004; Mies, 2014). Within the prevailing capitalist paradigm, the gendered, sexed, classed, and racialized hierarchies largely remain. In this thesis, the gendered dimension of coloniality is important in terms of how the globalized neoliberal rationale has amplified the focus on raced and gendered accumulation. Which helps explain why, in the last decades, women from the Global South have been reinvented as a "major untapped entrepreneurship resource" (OECD, 2012, p. 135), and good "human capital investments" (Switzer, 2013, p. 347).

Another important element that Western imperialism, colonialism, and the continuation of coloniality is built on the principle of the *same*, a rationale within which the West can construct the non-Western other as not really the same (Mignolo, 2007a). With this logic, societies outside the West are represented as traveling on "the *same* historical trajectory, but further behind; their goals are the *same*, but not achieved to the same degree; their knowledge is subjected to the *same* justificatory procedures, but it is less developed" (Alcoff, 2007, p. 87). This framework takes for granted that people and societies of the non-Western hemisphere aspire to achieve the *same* things as the West, and that if other cultures' ways of being and thinking are not attuned to Western ideals of development, they are, by default, backward. Accordingly, the West is considered the point of reference which non-Western societies should emulate. Logically then, to impose Western standards is seen as a way of 'helping' them achieve the determined route of development.

Criticism of the coloniality school of thought accentuates that the coloniality concept fails to emphasize that pre-colonial societies—like Malawi (McCracken, 2012)—were just like their colonist counterparts, not harmonious and without social divisions before the colonial invasion (Vickers, 2020). Rather African societies were—like many others at the time—permeated with inter-societal power hierarchies and oppressive rulerships that enforced ethnic violence and domestic discrimination and slavery on their own and other people (McCracken, 2012; Vickers, 2020). Thus, this criticism foregrounds that the "colonial power versus colonized people binary" lacks nuance and risks glorifying the history of the pre-colonial world. It also highlights, as Vickers (2020) maintains, that the pathologies of capitalism, cultural prejudice and racism are not inherently 'Western' but have historically also existed

outside the 'West'[10]. However, while the European colonization of Africa, the transatlantic slave trade, the scramble for land, the capitalist superstructure, religious and civilizing mission etc., might not have introduced and installed power dynamics in the colonies, it interrupted social systems, enforced new power hierarchies, and cemented those already there[11]. The legacies of the European imperialism and colonization of Africa are complex, yet political theorists (Ferguson, 2006; Mbembe, 2001) and psychologists (Bulhan, 2015; Ratele, 2019) on Africa generally conclude that its negative impacts continuously manifest themselves in most aspects of everyday social, as well as political, life. As Mbembe (2001) notes, colonial powers operated with what he calls "meta-texts" of the colonized, that *inter alia* categorized and portrayed Africans as animals and beasts. I agree with Grosfoguel and Rodriguez (2018, p. 272) who, drawing on Fanon, assert that "building strong identities and epistemologies with strong metanarratives is necessary in the process of reconstruction and decolonization." Accordingly, the coloniality concept and its binaries serve as a metanarrative that is needed in the process of revealing and addressing the obscure structures of coloniality. Additionally, the coloniality concept is especially relevant for psychologist scholars who aim to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in psychological theory and practice.

To summarize, the explicit form of coloniality is prevalent in how power hierarchies and relations, installed by colonial oppression, still appear as natural facts (Adams et al., 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014). The more implicit form persists in how particular ways of being, seeing, and knowing, are promoted as more valid than others (Adams et al., 2018). These "more valid" ways are for instance "reflected in contemporary "development" policies … among other forms of social, economic, and political control" (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 1). In this account, decolonial cultural psychology is concerned with how patterns and cultures of coloniality operate as taken-for-granted truths. In this thesis, I particularly explore the coloniality imposed by the promotion of Western individualistic attitudes and behavior in Malawi. Moreover, I also study how coloniality is present when development organizations make meaning out of and negotiate the place of the Malawian supernatural and spiritual phenomena of *ufiti*.

[10] For example, as Vickers (2020, p. 182) asserts "Historical and anthropological scholarship on East Asia and other regions amply demonstrates that colonialist or neo-colonialist attitudes and strategies of domination are not and have never been a Western monopoly."

[11] See for example Rwanda, where the German and Belgian colonial rule did not invent or install the divide between Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa ethnicities, but deepened and intensified the already existing domestic conflict and power asymmetry by further discriminating against ethnic groups (Hintjens, 2001; Newbury, 1998; Nikuze, 2014).

A decolonial feminist perspective

As accentuated in the preface, the global development focus on the empowerment of women and girls in the Global South is often articulated as driven by economic motives. By empowering individual women and girls to fulfil their "full potential", they are presumed to become agents of change—entrepreneurs in their own lives (Care International, 2021; Tornhill, 2016). In using the UN's global policy on achieving "gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" as a lens through to engage with global development policies and practices in Malawi, a decolonial feminist psychological perspective has proved helpful. Except for the gendered processes, this perspective has also been valuable for tracing patterns and cultures of coloniality. Many scholars within this approach are critical of the international development industry's overwhelming focus on women and girls' individual empowerment (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019; Rutherford, 2018; Távara, 2019). Empirical studies that critically engage with this "empowerment paradox" note that female subjects in the Global South "are made visible for their capacity to embody development imperatives defined by neoliberal principles" (see Switzer et al., 2016, p. 36). That is not to say they are hostile to the focus on women and girls' *per se*, but are skeptical of the capitalist, objectifying and individualized stress on 'empowerment'.

The centering on individual efficacy and self-actualization is, as noted earlier, also prominent within many Western psychological orientations. Although the original psychological empowerment concept as defined by community psychologist Julian Rappaport (1987), was—unlike many psychological constructs—not restricted to individuals but rather focused on people in context, this has changed with time (Keys et al.,2017). For example, Peterson and Zimmerman (2004, p. 129) note, that while in theory, empowerment is regarded as a multilevel concept, "most empirical work has been limited to the individual level" with less focus on the challenges that societal systems and structures impose on individuals and communities. Criticism of this individualization has emerged both within and outside the field of psychology (Adjei, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Rutherford, 2018). Decolonial feminist psychologists and development scholars often claim that empowerment has been narrowed down to individual aspects in order to meet requests for neoliberal "one-size-fits-all" solutions for mainstreaming gender-equality approaches (Rutherford, 2018; Távara, 2019; Tornhill, 2016). These approaches focus on women's (often marginalized women from Global South contexts) agency and ability to single handedly extricate themselves from structural inequality, yet with little or no focus on the structural forces that keep them down (Cornwall

& Anyidoho, 2010; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019). This echoes the research above from South Africa (see pages 17-18). As Rutherford (2018) argues, a plausible outcome of this individualization is that people may be blamed for personally failing to achieve change within systems that structurally subjugate them. As a consequence, the flipside of being a "major untapped entrepreneurship resource" (OECD, 2012, p. 135), and good "human capital investments" (Switzer, 2013, p. 347), is that women who fall short of becoming personally empowered may, within the neoliberal individualized paradigm, be seen as failures (Tornhill, 2016). The individualization of empowerment's interlinking of psychological theory and development practice, is, in this thesis, treated as a fundamental part of the psychologization of development.

3. Empirical Context

The warm heart of Africa

Malawi is often called "the warm heart of Africa", in reference to its people's friendly and welcoming attitude. The small landlocked country is tucked in between Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique. With about 46% of its 19 million residents below the age of 15, Malawi is an incredibly young and densely populated state (OECD, n.d.; World Bank, 2021a). While the country has one of the fastest urbanization rates in the world (UN-Habitat, 2021), over 80% of Malawi's population still live in rural areas (World Bank, 2021a), largely lacking modern infrastructure. This makes the country a place where people are—by President Truman's standards—"unmodern".

Malawi offers a useful setting for studying the psychologization of development in Global South contexts. With its large presence of international development organizations implementing donor-funded programs the country has been termed a "donor darling" (Koch, 2007, p. 1) and referred to as having "a pandemic of NGOs" (Kloster, 2021, p. 1). Of particular relevance for this thesis is that many of these organizations specifically focus on gender equality and the empowerment of Malawian women and girls. Additionally, Malawi—its rural settings in particular—provides a context where communal norms and ideas are valued. Thus, in terms of my wish to study how the 'beneficiaries' of Western informed individualized approaches to development make sense of these incentives, Malawi is a fruitful place to start.

Malawi was colonized as a British protectorate in 1891, 32 years after Dr. Livingstone's 'discovery' visit to the area, which marks the beginning of British involvement in the region (McCracken, 2012). Like many countries in Africa, Malawi regained independence from its colonizers in the mid-1960s (Banik & Chinsinga, 2016). Over 70 years of colonial rule, left the country with cultural, social, religious, economic, political, and not least, racial, and gendered, repercussions that continuously manifest themselves in how uneducated, poor, gendered, rural, non-English speaking citizens and bilingual English-speaking, educated urban elites navigate in profoundly unequal contexts (Lwanda, 2005; McCracken, 2012). The 30 years of Kamuzu Banda's totalitarian and repressive one party-rule following independence in 1964 contributed to cementing this inequality (Chinsinga, 2002). Having lived outside of Africa for the major part of his life Banda's "attitude toward the majority of Malawians was often consistent with racist settler attitudes" manifested in his clear divide between rural and urban Malawi (Lwanda, 1993; Riley, 2012, p. 5). Banda reserved the small pockets of urban life for the cosmopolitan, educated elite (Riley, 2012), a vision demonstrated in 1988, when he stated:

> Cities were meant for civilized persons, and in that regard, people should be able to differentiate life in the city from that of the village by the way you look after the city. If you should be proud of the city don't bring village life into the city. (As cited in Jimu, 2005, p. 44).

This rhetoric unveils a conceptualization and dichotomy emanating from the political economy of the colonial era, where the urban elites and their rural counterparts were respectively seen as 'civilized' and 'uncivilized'; a politics Banda's government adopted (Lwanda, 2005; Riley, 2012). This split between city and village life is still obvious today in that "being urban in Malawi entails adopting, or at least mimicking, Western values and ways of life" (Riley & Dodson, 2016, p. 1057), while being rural, on the other hand, is associated with "traditional ways of life", and often demeaned as less educated and primitive (Lwanda, 2005; Riley, 2012).

Banda's totalitarian reign was also ruthless to his rivals, many of whom were imprisoned, tortured, murdered, or forced into exile (Chirambo, 2010; Mapanje, 2002). Coinciding with dominant changes in world politics in the early 1990s and the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, the religious and political diaspora and underground opposition mobilized pressure on Banda's rule, and in 1993, a referendum voted in favor of a multi-party system (Lwanda, 2006). While Banda had kept Malawi more or less closed to the outside world (Thornton et al., 2014), in 1994 the newly installed multiparty order opened for foreign companies and

international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), who in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa mushroomed in the country (Morfit, 2011; Swidler & Watkins, 2017). Impoverished Malawi was heavily affected by the deadly epidemic, and the number of external organizations and donors have ever since remained remarkably high (Morfit, 2011). Illustratively, the state has been referred to as having been "'cursed' by a culture of donor dependency" (Chanika et al., 2013, p. 96). The mix of dire poverty and dependence on external funding makes the country extremely vulnerable to foreign pressure; assistance often comes with conditions, and implicit and explicit expected outcomes. These incentives generally focus on individual empowerment, such as entrepreneurial and vocational skills (Johnson, 2018), increased micro-funding (Mwatsika, 2015), school attendance, and decreased birth rates (Kloster, 2020; Pot, 2019), all designed to empower individuals to self-actualize (Swidler, 2013).

To this day Malawi remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Most people live in rural areas without access to functioning infrastructure such as electricity, piped-water, tarmac roads, and nearby schools and hospitals (International Monetary Fund, 2017; National Statistical Office, 2019). The majority cook on wood and carry their water from communal wells, and most people work in subsidence farming, which is heavily dependent on stable rain seasons (Johnson, 2018). Houses are often made of mud bricks with grass-thatched roofs. In 2016, over half (51.5 %) of the population lived below the poverty line (World Bank, 2021a) and the general income of the total population was 1.90$ a day (World Bank, 2020b). Food prices compared to GDP are amongst the highest in the world (World Food Program, 2017).

For many Malawians everyday living is a continuous struggle to make ends meet, and women and girls are—as women and girls elsewhere—the most subjected to poverty and its consequences (Chiweza, 2005; Ngwira, 2010). As elsewhere, Malawian women do the chief part of unpaid labor (MacIntyre et al., 2013), and therefore they are heavily dependent on economic support from men (Verheijen, 2013). This patriarchal power asymmetry puts women in weak positions to influence political, social, and domestic decisions, and leaves them more vulnerable to patriarchal, sexual, and structural violence, and more exposed to HIV/AIDS (Anderson, 2015; MacIntyre et al., 2013). Moreover, women are also less likely to finish primary school as many drop out due to pregnancy or for economic reasons (National Statistical Office, 2008; National Statistical Office & DHS Program ICF, 2017).

In line with global development agendas, many of the international and national non-governmental organizations (I)NGOs that operate in Malawi have female-specific

development programs. Women-related development has been a focus of global agendas since the 1970s (Jackson & Pearson, 2005). Yet over the last two decades the UN has formulated a clear focus on women's development evident in the Millennium Development Goals and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals, specifically aimed to "achieve gender equality" and to "empower all women and girls" (UN, n.d.; UN, 2015). In Malawi these goals are reflected and manifested in the (I)NGOs' massive focus on women's and girls' empowerment, often related to vocational and life skills courses, micro-loans, entrepreneurship schemes, and educational efforts (Classen, 2013; Pot, 2019; Swidler & Watkins, 2017). At the core of this development idea is the assumption that individual women and girls who gain skills and education will break free from structural patriarchal injustice and poverty, and experience upwards mobility for themselves and their extended family (Federici, 2014; Hickel, 2014a). These programs seem to be largely implemented without attention being paid to local realities on the ground, as is explored by this thesis. Thus, the structural injustices are—as elsewhere—not a focus for programs of individual change (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; Hickel, 2014a).

Communal context

Scholars on and from sub-Saharan Africa often refer to the centrality of the principle of *Ubuntu* (Adjei, 2019; Bandawe, 2010; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Muwanga-Zake, 2009). This is a philosophical and communal humanistic essence that is "found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa" (Murithi, 2006, p. 26). *Ubuntu* is generally defined by the Zulu phrase "*umuntu ngamuntu ngabanty abanye*", meaning, "a person is a person through other *persons"* (Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2005, p. 148). The proverbs *lende kukankhana* ("One prospers with the help of others") and *mutu umodzi susenza denga* ("To successfully accomplish a task one needs the help of others") capture the Malawian *Ubuntu*-tradition. (Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2005, p. 149). The social moral of reciprocity is in stark contrast with Western unbridled individualism that emphasizes individuals' right to personal progress and property (Sagner & Mtati, 1999). As the Malawian scholar Lwanda (2005, p. 68) asserts, Western individualism becomes complicated in its insistence on being the universal blueprint for how people should live and act when employed in settings when this is a poor fit with local realities. Moreover, interdependence and reciprocity are vital values in a context where formal welfare systems and safety nets are meagre, and where people often rely on help from family, friends, and neighbors. The individual-focused development programs, which often promote self-efficacy, entrepreneurship, and individual empowerment, thus break with local

realities in that values and norms that foster community are set aside. Accordingly, people who pursue individual progress and prosperity over communal well-being break with social reciprocal morals and traditions, which in turn may disrupt loyal bonds and the sense of community and create resentment and enmity to the detriment of the person experiencing individual progress. However, relational tensions, disputes, and enmity are unavoidable in contexts that are characterized by interdependence; a system within which competition over limited resources compromises responsibilities to family and kin (Ashforth, 2005; Swidler & Watkins, 2017).

Adams et al., (2018) use Foster's (1965) concept of the *limited goods* worldview to illustrate how communal and individual centered ontologies differ in how people regard and value selfhood, as well as in their relations with others. People who live in a limited goods worldview tend to emphasize the fate of finiteness as associated with others' accumulation of goods, while people with the conception that the world has *un*-limited goods, on the other hand, tend to emphasize uninhibited individual progress, (self-)expansion, extraction of resources, and exploitation (Adams et al., 2018). In contrast, for people who see the world's goods as finite, uninhibited individual expansion and extraction comes at the direct cost of others' well-being, where, in a zero-sum game, someone's unshared gain becomes someone else's loss (Adams et al., 2018; Ashforth, 2005). Hence, in settings where resources *are* unquestionably limited, and poverty is directly linked to fear of famine and death, behaviors that enhance individual progress are often construed as anti-social, greedy, and selfish, and seen as dangerous for both individuals and communities. Such behavior is again associated with acts of *ufiti*/witchcraft[12]; people who act antisocially, greedily, and cruelly are regarded as having malign spirits (Layman, 2002). Consequently, the individual focus of development organizations is potentially dangerous for people to adopt, as they may be perceived as using malign forces to prosper at the expense of interrelated others.

Malawi's spiritual and supernatural context

Discourses on magic, witchcraft, and occult spiritual forces are widespread in sub-Saharan Africa—as in many other places (see Eves & Forsyth, 2015; Federici, 2018; Shweder, 2008; West, 2005). As Mbiti (1990, p. 195) explains, "Magic is generally considered under 'good

[12] Throughout the thesis, I use *ufiti* when referring to Malawian spiritual and supernatural phenomena that in English is vaguely translated as witchcraft. However, when I draw on other scholars to refer to the phenomena in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, I use witchcraft, as this is the conventional academic conceptualization of the phenomena.

magic' and 'evil magic'" and "Witchcraft is a term used more popularly and broadly, to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical power, generally in a secret fashion" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 199). Thus, while "good magic" entails positive spiritual experiences and understandings of the world, witchcraft is its harmful antithesis (Mbiti, 1990). The negative consequences of the Malawian supernatural and spiritual forces of *ufiti* were frequently brought up in relation to my research focus. Concerning my overarching research questions, perceptions, and expressions of *ufiti* are directly related to how development approaches and practices are understood by local 'beneficiaries' of these initiatives and interventions.

Malawian discourses on *ufiti* are—as elsewhere where witchcraft is prevalent—associated with evil forces (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997; Lwanda, 2005). Over 85% of Malawian household heads reported in 2012, that *ufiti* existed and was indeed increasing in their communities (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). The violence related to *ufiti* is described as physical, psychological, social, economic, and sexual, and perceived as just as real as other types of violence (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). Many who fear *ufiti*-based violence spend much time, effort, and assets on protecting themselves from the harm it causes (Lwanda, 2005; Mbiti, 1990). As with other gendered inequalities, Malawian women are—in common with women generally in sub-Saharan Africa—considerably more exposed and more vulnerable to both *ufiti* violence, and accusations of using *ufiti* forces—as well as suspected of being witches (Federici, 2018; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). Among the most prevalent motivations for *ufiti*-based violence found in literature are interpersonal mistrust, envy, and enmity caused by suspicion of others having used *ufiti* forces to progress unfairly and at the cost of others (Ashforth, 2005; Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Lwanda, 2005; West, 2005). These suspicions are again associated with people's inexplicable and sudden success, when "the accumulative process is not clear to observers" (Lwanda, 2005, p. 261)—namely, when people prosper with seemingly no effort (often in areas like farming, schooling, and businesses) (Lwanda, 2005; West, 2005). This is thus very relevant for (I)NGO programs which seek to promote individual empowerment and progress. Given *ufiti's* association with greed and uninhibited selfishness and personal success, a common protection is to either behave in a pro-social manner and share goods and progress (van Breugel, 2001), or to hide opportunities and affluence (Ashforth, 2005).

Colonial impact on *ufiti*

Lwanda (2005, p. 242) notes that many postcolonial studies describe the concept of Malawian *ufiti* as "variously religion, inherent evil, a psychological social phenomenon and something almost universally believed in the population." Yet, scholars on the African phenomena of witchcraft assert that rather than a system of beliefs, notions of witchcraft are to a greater degree plural, oral, and discursive constructs (Geschiere, 1997; Lwanda, 2005; Murrey, 2017). As MacGafferey, cited in Geschiere (1997, p. VIII) notes, "African beliefs in the occult are highly varied and may have nothing more in common than the word *witchcraft* applied to them by English-speakers." This is further problematized by Lwanda (2005), who argues that in their drive to civilize Africa, the European missionaries and colonial administrators failed to acknowledge that conceptualizations and dimensions of good and evil existed also in indigenous ontologies, however differently expressed to Christianity. In the same vein, van Breugel (2001, p. 230) insists:

> All these *ufiti* beliefs are but a reflection of the profound human experiences of evil, hatred, greed and envy, as the deepest causes of suffering … As belief in the Devil often grows in times of trouble … belief in *ufiti* increases in times of social stress.

Put simply, the malign force of Malawian *ufiti* could just as well have been interpreted, understood, and made equal with the dark forces of the Devil, so prominent in the Christianity of the missionaries and colonizers at the time. Instead, colonial administrators and missionaries generally condemned and stereotyped African spirituality and experiences of good and evil as irrational, uncivilized, and primitive "mumbo jumbo" (Tembo, 1993, p. 4). Accordingly, the belief in the Devil as a dark force was thus legitimate, while belief in the dark spirits of *ufiti* was not.

The dehumanization and savage-stereotypies of Africans served well as a rationale for the transatlantic slave trade; if Africans were not humans, they could be caught, treated, sold, and owned as cattle (Césaire, 2001; Davis, 2011). Likewise, the stereotyping and dehumanization of African ontologies also served a colonial purpose; if Africans were not humans, neither were their ways of thinking, feeling, seeing, and being, and therefore they needed to be civilized and ruled (Césaire, 2001; Roxburgh, 2017). In much the same vein, in recent times, many Western colonial and postcolonial scholars have suggested that the prevalence of African witchcraft would decrease and disappear with growing modernity (see Geschiere, 1997; Ivey & Myers, 2008a). However, a vast body of research has revealed that the prevalence of witchcraft has, on the contrary, increased with the modern world's accelerating

industrialization, globalization, capitalism, and neo-liberalization (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997; Hickel, 2014b; Smith, 2008; West, 2005). The intensified poverty, instability, and uncertainty that globalization and neoliberal modernity bring, build on the rationale that some individuals, countries, and continents indeed prosper at the expense of others, and often with devastating consequences for the Other. As McNamara (2015, p. 86) asserts, "Rural Malawians may understand themselves as both economically and mystically unable to compete with the West". This outline demonstrates, how, as noted earlier, unbridled individualism and selfishness that cause inequality, may, in a limited-goods worldview—in the absence of formal welfare-systems and safety nets—feed spiritual insecurity, interpersonal suspicion and resentment, envy, and enmity; reactions that ultimately may result in *ufiti* accusations and violence.

Today, Western psychological models generally fail to acknowledge the presence of African supernatural and spiritual forces in people's lives, and the stress related to it (Nwoye, 2013). This rejection is likely a result of how such forces generally have been treated by mainstream Western psychology. Ivey and Myers (2008b), Holdstock (2000) and Hund (2004) for instance all assert that Western psychological approaches have regarded African forces of spiritual and supernatural phenomena as symptoms of delusion, superstition, and mental illness. This assumption reveals an ignorance of local cosmologies, and in its most critical sense, implies that the majority of Malawians who see *ufiti* as a reality are suffering from some psychiatric condition. Thus, the lack of acknowledgment about people's lifeworlds may have detrimental consequences for the people in question. Moreover, this disregard is highly problematic as it promotes what Murrey (2017) refers to as *spiritual Othering.* Like coloniality, spiritual Othering is understood as a legacy and continuance of Eurocentric imperial and colonial knowledge production that marginalizes and stereotypes the Others' spiritual world as primitive and banal superstition.

Ufiti as power and resistance

Scholars of political science who focus on witchcraft as a power, center on "what witchcraft does in a society"; an analytic turn that emphasizes what witchcraft entails in different contexts without "constructing a hierarchy among diverse notions of reality" (Roxburgh, 2018, p. 134). Acts of witchcraft can be understood as the "extension of one being's will over another's against the latter wishes". Thus, like social, political, economic power, "witchcraft power gives one the exceptional ability to affect and act over another in the real world"

(Roxburgh, 2018, p. 134). As anyone can exert witchcraft power at the cost of others, it elicits an unrelenting threat that permeates the social fabric of many societies (Roxburgh, 2018). In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* Scott (1990) outlines how expressions of witchcraft can be interpreted as articulations of *hidden transcripts of resistance*, as witchcraft can be understood as a challenge to dominance and oppression. Likewise, Murrey (2015) demonstrates how supernatural and spiritual forces and discourses are used as instruments to resist dominant societal structures that promote uneven distribution. Her research from Cameroon highlights how the violence of capitalist exploitation and extraction along the Chad-Cameroon Oil Pipeline has increased alienation and inequality among local communities, escalating inter-relational mistrust and increasing witchcraft assaults. For Murrey (2015, p. 75), the aggravated witchcraft violence functions as "an epistemological framework to criticize illicit accumulation, inequality and dispossession". Relatedly, drawing on an extensive study conducted in Malawi, Lwanda (2005) holds that the majority of the respondents saw *ufiti* as a powerful tool for the rich elite to accumulate wealth at the cost of the poor. As such, expressions of *ufiti* have frequently been employed to negotiate power (Lwanda, 2005). In this sense, *ufiti* constitutes "a distinct form of 'local knowledge' about the operation of power" (West, 2005, p. 5), which as an epistemology functions as a critique and a form of continuous resistance to Western capitalism and modernity (Murrey, 2015).

The ways in which *ufiti* affects Malawian people ties into my overarching research focus. The development organizations' Western-informed assumptions and promotion of individuals as abstracted from context has explicit and implicit *ufiti*-related implications for their local 'beneficiaries' and particularly for women and girls, as they are more exposed and vulnerable to *ufiti*-based accusations and assaults.

4. Methodology and Data Generation

Approach

From a cultural psychological perspective, social phenomena and "worlds of meaning" are best explored in their "natural habitats", studying everyday practices and meaning-making (Slunecko & Wieser, 2014, para. 13). My decision to apply a qualitative approach reflects the thesis's research questions (see pages 3-4), aiming to achieve a holistic understanding of how Western informed development approaches and practices promoting universalized individuality are understood and negotiated by Malawians, and the 'beneficiaries' of these

initiatives. Given the direct connection between individualized attitudes and behavior and *ufiti*-related issues, I have also explored how development organizations understand and approach this connection. Qualitative psychological approaches are central for studying meaning-making in context, i.e., "social and psychological processes that involve the negotiation of meanings and interpretations among participants, including the researcher" (Willig, 2008, p. 158). As such, the qualitative research process is context-sensitive, exploratory, and flexible, generally describing context-based experiences and processes, engaging with rich and nuanced complexities, particularities, and diversities (Mason, 2002). Within the cultural psychological and social constructionist stance applied in this thesis, knowledge is seen as constructed, and as representations of people's realities rather than as an objective truth (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Willig, 2008). The results presented are often based on open-ended, semi-structured informal and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) (Slunecko & Wieser, 2014).

Data generation

According to Mason (2002, p. 52) in qualitative methodology, "It is more accurate to talk about generating data than collecting data", as qualitative research approaches generally reject the assumption that a researcher is a neutral "collector of information about the social world." The empirical results in the thesis are based on informal interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants in three different contexts in Malawi that took place over the 11 months I spent in the country over the course of one and a half years in 2016 and 2017 (see table 2). My Malawian colleague, interpreter, cultural guide, guardian, and good friend, Gertrude Finyiza, worked with me on the two first field settings (see table 2). Gertrude has worked with several international social scientists and on a broad range of topics since 2008. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in project management and is well trained in ethnographic research methods. She speaks both Chichewa (the national language) and Chiyao (one of the local languages) and has lived in several places in Malawi. In our work, Gertrude is the Malawian authority and contextual expert and cultural broker. However, I am responsible for the research (more information about ethical considerations regarding working with a research assistant is given in chapter four. See also Moss and Hajj's (2020) discussion and guidelines for working with research assistants).

A total of 50 participants were interviewed through informal interviews, Gertrude conducted these in Chichewa and Chiyao. Gertrude and I conducted a total of six in-depth interviews and

five FGDs in English/Chichewa and 24 in-depth interviews were conducted in English by me. Ages ranged from 18-65, most participants being between 25 and 50.[13] Participants in informal interviews were people working and living in a township on the fringes of Lilongwe, and the two rural villages in the district of Machinga where Gertrude and I conducted fieldwork. Participants in six in-depth interviews were from the rural villages and the interviews were conducted in Chichewa. Two in-depth interviews were conducted in English with national INGO-workers in Zomba (however, as their organizations' headquarters were in Lilongwe, I treat these interviews as part of the Lilongwe fieldwork). In Lilongwe four in-depth interviews were conducted in English with national INGO workers, five international INGO workers, two with a former national INGO worker, and three international donor organizations representatives, three health care workers, and five representatives of the public: academics, civil servants, and maintenance men/gardeners. The informal interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, in-depth interviews between 30 minutes and two hours, and FGDs between 45 minutes and one hour. An international INGO representative and a national former INGO representative were interviewed twice. These in-depth interviews were beneficial for establishing rapport and openness and enabled further discussions. Both participants functioned as key informants.

Table 2: Fieldwork

Area	Fieldwork	Method
Peri-urban township outside Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi (living and working with Gertrude)	September—November 2016 (3 months)	16 informal interviews (conducted by Gertrude)
Rural villages in the south of Malawi (living and working with Gertrude)	April—August 2017 (Gertrude was there for 5 months while I was there for 1,5 months)	34 informal interviews (conducted by Gertrude), six in-depth interviews and five FGDs (conducted by Gertrude and me)
Lilongwe (living and working alone in Lilongwe)	August—December 2017 (4 months)	24 in-depth interviews (conducted by me)

[13] Not all participants indicated their exact age, thus the exact mean is not available.

Doing fieldwork

Conducting fieldwork is an experience that is relatively unstructured as it does not follow a strict research design and depends on the researcher's flexibility. Uncontrolled things happened regularly during the 11 months I lived in Malawi and they necessitated the restructuring of plans. The initial fieldwork in the township outside Lilongwe was not planned beforehand; I was set to stay in a guesthouse in central Lilongwe for three weeks before finding a more permanent residence in the city-center. However, after one week, after visiting Gertrude's house in the township, we decided I would move there. This move proved invaluable. While the guesthouse was an arena where expatriates, executives, and tourists came and went, situated in an area of Lilongwe where electricity was stable due to its primacy to the presidential residence, central state institutions, business area, and INGO offices, the township was something else. Located at the outskirts of Lilongwe about 40 minutes to an hour and a half outside the city-center depending on the traffic, the area was advancing on former farmland; the tarmac road stopped along with the public transport at the local market, indicating the entrance to the township, and the power grid stopped about a kilometer from Gertrude's house. Although Gertrude's two solar panels kept the house in a dim light up to 8pm, after sunset at six, the rhythm of my days drastically changed. Instead of spending my initial fieldwork getting to know Malawi from a privileged position with electricity, running water and proximity to things as I knew them, I became absorbed with trying to understand the Malawian particularities of life from a position in that township. It was during this initial fieldwork that I came to learn about the supernatural Malawian phenomena of *ufiti*. Though I was aware of its existence, I was not at all aware of the power *ufiti* asserts on all aspects of many people's—and especially Malawian women's—everyday life. Wanting to get at the lived experiences and meaning-making of Malawian everyday realities, it was clear to me after this first fieldwork that I could not circumvent the permeating aspects of the phenomena of *ufiti*, which fundamentally changed the objective and the scope of my study.

Supportive information

Wanting to understand more about how forces of *ufiti* worked, Gertrude proposed that she would listen to the daily news program *Nkhani za m'maboma* ('news from the districts'), a popular program that frequently reported on *ufiti*-related matters happening in various places in Malawi. Gertrude would listen to the program every day for two months, translating the content to English. Although I have chosen not to include these radio reports in the data

material, they were crucial for my understanding of the direct role that forces of *ufiti* play in people's lives. Later, when conducting interviews and FGDs within the different field settings, participants would often report of similar happenings to those broadcast in the radio program. Studying a topic very unfamiliar to my own experiences of life, this resemblance gave me an understanding of the patterns and logics of *ufiti*, how some behaviors and attitudes are associated with *ufiti* while others are not. In addition, throughout the fieldwork I kept a journal, in order not to forget, but also to be able to go back in my notes as my experience and understanding evolved over time. This was particularly useful, as phenomena that I first had not understood or been oblivious to, appeared, with time, visible and understandable.

Sample

According to Mason (2002, p. 121) a "sample should provide meaningful empirical context"—illustrations or scenarios that furnish the data needed to address the research questions. What is meaningful and useful depends on how well the sample generates ideas and data that alters our understanding of our given research area and allows us "to develop an empirically and theoretically grounded argument about something in particular" (Mason, 2002, p. 121). The rationale for the sampling choices made in my research project is based on my participants' context and meaning-making of central topics like 'gender equality', 'empowerment', 'development', and '*ufiti*-related issues'. The project's different field settings and participant samples inform each other and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the research questions (see pages 3-4).

Township sample. The sampling of participants for informal interviews in the township was convenience-based. These participants were neither beneficiaries nor workers of (I)NGOs, as the purpose of this sample was to get a general insight into how Malawians understood concepts like 'gender', 'empowerment', 'development', and if—as Gertrude put it—"they were free to talk" about perceptions of '*ufiti'*. Gertrude conducted 16 informal interviews with six women and ten men over the course of two months. Participants in this sample were mostly approached in public spaces by Gertrude, and their occupations ranged from bike-taxi-drivers to construction workers, water-fetchers, shop-owners, and market vendors. Some were churchgoers. Only two women turned down the invitation to be interviewed. Ages ranged from 20 to 50 years, most participants being between 30 and 45.

Rural villages sample. This fieldwork was based on a strategic sampling strategy as I wanted to get an understanding of how rural Malawians experienced and made sense of (I)NGOs

working in their community. Especially, I wanted to understand if and how (I)NGOs' gendered development and empowerment approaches impacted on gendered roles and the occurrence of *ufiti*-related issues. Based on frequent reporting of prominent levels of (I)NGO involvement, as well as *ufiti*-related episodes in a certain region in the daily press and on the radio program Gertrude listened to, we decided that we would try out that area for our rural fieldwork. After receiving permission to conduct our study from the local authorities in this region, i.e., the district council and the Group Villages' Head (the head of the chiefs in that district), we rented a house in Zomba, the administrative center of the region, and the closest city to the two neighboring villages that we later conducted fieldwork in. Thus, Zomba provided a place with electricity, running water, hospitals, and grocery stores.

The district and villages were selected based on certain criteria: poor infrastructure, economic hardship, high levels of unplanned teenage pregnancies, teenage marriages, school dropouts, (I)NGO presence, and mixed religious and ethnic population (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). These villages were about a 40-minute car ride from our house. The same chief ran both villages, which together contained 34 households. After introducing the project and ourselves, we received the chief's permission to conduct our study. Gertrude worked each day in these villages for 14 weeks while I was back in Norway attending compulsory PhD-courses.

Participants in these villages primarily live off small-scale farming, piecework, trading, and small businesses. Families are large with up to eight children, and most households cook on wood and live in mud-brick houses with grass-tacked roofs. Only about 5% of the population has access to electricity (Energypedia, 2020; Chavula, n.d.). Many of our participants were illiterate and had never enrolled in, or had dropped out of, school. Most reported that they were not able to afford basic needs. The majority were Yao, an ethnic group that predominantly lives in the south of Malawi, and the rest were a mix of Lomwe, Ngoni, and Chewa. The community members either spoke the local language, Chiyao, and/or Chichewa (the national language), yet participants generally understood most of both languages.

The strategy was to conduct informal interviews with one participant from each of the 34 households. Paying attention to all households, Gertrude informed me, was an important approach in order not to stir up suspicion between them. Gertrude presented the project, informing the potential participants about our focus on (I)NGOs, development, empowerment, and gender equality. All who were contacted for an informal interview agreed to participate. This approach built a comprehensive overview of the villages. At the time of the study, the

chief informed us that there were 10 (I)NGOs working in the community. Six of these (I)NGOs reportedly worked with gendered development initiatives such as women and girls' empowerment and education. All participants had experiences of being beneficiaries of (I)NGO interventions. Out of the total 34 informal interviews that Gertrude conducted, 24 were with women. This was a deliberate sampling, as we primarily wanted to know how women, especially, viewed the (I)NGOs gender/development approaches. As women and girls, in line with the UN's global development goals, were the main focus of the (I)NGOs operating in this region, I saw it as particularly important to hear their meaning-making of these development incentives. Moreover, given that women are more exposed to *ufiti* accusations and assaults we wanted to hear their experiences and understandings of *ufiti*.

From these informal interviews, we did a purposive sampling of women and men we wanted to invite to the FGDs. All participants invited agreed to take part in them. Two FGDs were conducted with young mixed-gender adults—two with women over 30 and one with men over 30. All FGDs had between five and six contributors. The FGDs conducted in the rural village setting were with "homogenous" and "non-existing" groups (Willig, 2008), in the sense that participants were of a similar age, but were not a self-defined group beforehand. After the FGDs, one or two participants who had been active in the discussions were invited to be the subject of an in-depth interview. All who were asked agreed. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with three women and three men, aged between 18 and 50+. All participants worked as small-scale farmers or with various informal businesses.

With these different sample strategies, I hoped to get a cross-section that could illuminate similarities and differences between international, national, local, rural, women's and men's ways of experiencing and understanding individualized and gendered development/empowerment approaches as well as perceptions of *ufiti*—and its gendered dimensions.

Interview schedule

Gertrude did not follow a specific interview schedule with the informal interviews that she conducted in the township and the rural villages. Rather she would let the main topics—'development', '(I)NGOs', 'empowerment', 'gender-equality', 'gender-roles', and '*ufiti*'—evolve naturally. Thus, many of these informal interviews do not touch upon *all* topics, but rather focus on some areas that were of particular interest to the participant. These interviews often took place 'right there and then'; during the lunch break of a construction worker, on a

bike-taxi ride, by the communal well, at the market, outside a church. In the rural villages, Gertrude would often conduct these interviews while helping the participants with their daily tasks, such as joining them in the local market or helping with preparing meals. The interviews lasted from around 30 minutes to one hour.

For all in-depth interviews and FGDs, I started by re-introducing the research project, Gertrude (if she was attending and translating) and myself, reminding the participants that they could at any time withdraw from the interview and take back their consent. When conducting the informal interviews in the township and the villages, Gertrude also followed this routine. All in-depth interviews and the FGDs were open-ended and semi-structured. While the interviews and the FGDs in the rural villages generally lasted between 30 minutes to one hour, the interviews conducted in the last fieldwork in Lilongwe ranged from 30 minutes (which was not common) to up to two hours. Most interviews lasted about a little over one hour. All in-depth interviews and FGDs conducted in the rural villages were held in the community building. As with group dynamics in general, some questions and discussions engaged different individuals. The same semi-structured approach was used in all FGDs to keep the focus, but, with the different dynamics, the group discussions moved in various directions and varied widely. For the Lilongwe fieldwork, depending on the participants' wishes, interviews were conducted in cafés, hotel lobbies, restaurants, and the participants' offices and homes. Most INGO representatives were interviewed during work hours at their offices. All the FGDs and all except two in-depth interviews (following the wishes of the interviewees) were recorded; extensive notes were made for these.

In the rural villages, I asked questions in English, which Gertrude then translated to Chichewa and/or Chiyao. Gertrude and I transcribed the interviews collaboratively when at home. Participants were offered the chance to edit the transcript of their interview when it was possible and practical (many people in the rural villages were illiterate). The in-depth interviews and FGDs were conducted in a format that Burgess (1984, p. 102) calls "conversation with a purpose" and structured around key themes. These interview-conversations were highly flexible, which I found crucial both for allowing participants the possibility to go back and forth in their reasoning, and to bring up topics, associations, and connotations I was unaware of.

Analysis

The data material was analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis (TA) with an inductive approach (Terry et al., 2017). This framework entails that data are analyzed 'bottom up' and in a manner that allows for flexible and organic analysis that relies on a "detailed engagement with the data … the coding and theme development" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 20). TA is theoretically flexible, i.e., it is not tied to a particular theory and well suited for research on less studied social phenomena, like this thesis's focus on local, and non-Western people's perception of Western concepts of gender, empowerment, and individualization. It is important to stress, however, that TA is not 'atheoretical'. It needs to be theoretically founded, and researchers must be explicit about the theoretical positions they take (Terry et al., 2017, p. 21). I position myself within a social constructionist perspective, from which I see meaning as co-constructed, regarding participants' accounts and my readings of them as subjective. This positioning also means the analysis is latent, rather than lexical, i.e., identifying "*underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies"—that inform or shape the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

For each article, I read the informal, in-depth interviews and the FGD transcripts iteratively, and I conducted the analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. This entailed that, (1) Initial and open coding was conducted on all the material. The three different field-settings and the material were organized under different headings. (2) I first identified rather large codes like 'empowerment', 'gender', 'development', and '*ufiti*', which after reflecting on similarities and differences were structured into several new codes. (3) I then searched for themes, analyzing how different codes relate to or combine overarching themes such as "gender understood as men and women working together", and "empowerment understood as development". (4) I arranged themes into thematic clusters, where participants' accounts were highlighted as extracts that I could compare. (5) Then, I defined and organized the material under titles, and data that was regarded as irrelevant was categorized under "diverse" in order not to leave it out. (6). The last step was to report the results, which is represented in my four articles. Following this rather hierarchical six-step analysis was nevertheless a dynamic, iterative, and continuous process. It emphasized that the researcher moves backwards and forwards in the process and offered me the opportunity to evolve my analysis of themes over time as I travelled back and forth to the field.

Theoretical saturation is commonly regarded as a sign that the sampling and data generation can be ended (Willig, 2008). This is often said to be achieved when "no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge." (Willig, 20008, p. 37). Nevertheless, theoretical saturation is rather an aim to strive for than the actual reality (Willig, 2008). Thus, a pragmatic view on theoretical saturation is to consider it to be achieved when the researcher perceives similar examples and representations as repetitive (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In my research, saturation was treated as a goal, not as a given. Together the various field settings offered nuances and new dimensions on the research topics. Many stories of individualized development initiatives and *ufiti*-related violence corresponded both with participants' accounts and with reports from the radio programs and news articles. This triangulation between different data sets and supportive information does not imply that saturation was achieved, rather it means it was aspired to.

Evaluating research quality

How to ensure and evaluate quality in qualitative research and analysis has been an ever-going debate within and outside the academic field of psychology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mason, 2002; Seale, 1999; Valsiner, 2014). Some argue that quantitative terms, such as *validity* and *generalizability*, are applicable to qualitative research, while others maintain that these are incompatible with such work. Although there does not exist a general and universal agreement about different criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research there are guiding principles. Kvale (1995) for instance maintains that validity in qualitative inquiry is established through rigorous investigations, theorization, checking, and questioning. As such, striving for *reflexivity* is important, as it "ensures that the research process as a whole is scrutinized throughout, and that the researcher continuously reviews his or her own role in the research" (Willig, 2008, p. 16). *Ecological validity* is arguably the most relevant to qualitative research methods in general (see Braun & Clark, 2013; Willig, 2008), and to this study, as it implies the importance of the relation between the research and the context. With my multi-sited fieldwork, diverse sample, and the context informing all levels of the research, this study can be said to have strong ecological validity.

Regarding validity and quality in terms of how participants understood my questions in the rural villages, the fact that I was a Western researcher asking questions in elitist English (however translated to the local language(s)) likely affected how participants responded. However, the often unanimous answers to specific questions suggests that participants

generally understood the questions in a similar way. Moreover, in all research settings, the handling of language differences, translation and interpretation, means that some nuances have inevitably become misinterpreted or lost. Yet from my cultural psychological perspective, meaning-making is a product of how things are embedded, provided, represented, and reacted to in different narrative contexts (Shweder, 1990). As such, there is no 'real' and 'objective' meaning; rather meaning whenever and however it is produced is in itself "always open to transformation" (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 34).

Qualitative studies are commonly critiqued for lacking generalizability, but statistical generalizability is rarely the ambition or purpose of qualitative research. Rather my aim with this thesis has been to draw on my findings to theorize about the psychologization of development more broadly. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) assert, theorizing is essential for validating research findings. Theorizing on how Western norms of individualization, implemented by development organizations in non-Western contexts are understood by local 'beneficiaries' in Malawi, I hope to contribute to the growing field of academic research on this topic.

Another concept important in the qualitative research paradigm is *trustworthiness*. Williams and Morrow (2009, p. 577) suggest three main categories of trustworthiness that qualitative scholars need to address: "integrity of the data, balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, and clear communication of findings." In this thesis, the different research sites, ensuring "that the sample of participants includes diversity of demographics or viewpoints" helped increase the integrity (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 578). Additionally, the fact that that I delved into the viewpoints of employees of development organizations and their supposed 'beneficiaries', along with academics, and people from the general public, buttressed by supporting media material, worked as a type of affirmation that I was covering the general society discourse, as well as that of the INGOs and their beneficiaries. I consider this diversity to have added different and complementary experiences and understandings on how global development policies and initiatives affect the recipients. Additionally, the journal I kept throughout the fieldwork, my participation in the larger NGOMA research team on NGOs practices in Malawi, as well as the co-authoring with my supervisors have helped me to attune my perspectives, and experiences as separate from my participants' perspectives and experiences (Williams & Morrow, 2009). The last point, "clear communication of findings", is dependent on "the researcher's interpretative task of illustrating the meanings of participants in the context of their lives" (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 580). I believe that

my lengthy stay in various field settings together with Gertrude, our many valuable discussions, and my many and continuing contacts with local Malawians have made me more sensitive to Malawian social life and helped ensure that participants' experiences are not taken out of context. Nevertheless, at the same time, I believe that my account of my integration of specific perspectives adds transparency to my subjective position—that meaning is co-constructed and that data ultimately is generated by me.

5. Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Considering the potential ethical dilemmas posed by being a Western white researcher exploring Malawian experiences with Western informed development approaches, their effect on gender roles, and not least their repercussions on *ufiti*-related issues, I decided to devote a chapter to reflections on positionality.

Research ethics is made up of a complex set of standards, values and institutional schemes that guide the researcher in ethical reflection throughout the research project. The interaction between researcher and participant will inevitably affect the individuals and groups involved and the knowledge produced through the process. I have sought to be open and transparent about the rationale behind the decisions I have taken and the frameworks I have used. This chapter is an outline of the various ethical challenges and dilemmas I have grappled with throughout the research process.

Informed consent and confidentiality

Informed consent is a fundamental principle in social science research ethics. It entails that the researcher provides all research participants with adequate information about the research project, the purpose of conducting the research, the possible outcomes, and the potential consequences of participating. Participants should be informed before the project starts; be informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and their right to refuse the researcher permission to use the information (Norwegian centre for research data, 2021). Although this outline seems clear, it poses several challenges in practice (see Moss et al., 2019). How to know when adequate information is indeed adequate and enough? How may the information given affect the data generation?

Informed consent was handled differently depending on the context and participant in question. For the initial 16 informal interviews that Gertrude conducted in the township, she

presented the project in Chichewa (orally and in text), its objectives, the potential disadvantages, and benefits of participating and informed the participants about confidentiality, informed consent, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants signed the informed consent form; all were given Gertrude's phone number and were invited at any time to ask questions or withdraw their consent. None of the participants contacted Gertrude concerning research-related issues after the informal interviews.

For the fieldwork in the rural villages, usually Gertrude and I first met with the villages' chief, presenting our ethical clearances, introducing the research project and ourselves, and informing him orally and in print about the objectives and the possible advantages and disadvantages of participating in the study. The chief was also given Gertrude's mobile number and my business card and was invited to write or call at any time should there be any questions. The chief did not contact Gertrude or me before Gertrude started her fieldwork.

For the informal interviews that Gertrude conducted without me for the first 14 weeks, she distributed information about confidentiality and informed consent, and a one-page outline of the research project written in Chichewa, together with an oral presentation for those participants who could not read. All participants in the informal interviews signed the informed consent form. They were then given Gertrude's mobile number and invited to withdraw their consent or ask questions at any time. None of the participants contacted Gertrude regarding their participation during or after this fieldwork.

When I arrived, we again met with the chief who gave us permission to continue the study with in-depth interviews and FGDs. I presented the project for the participants in these interviews and FGDs orally, which Gertrude translated, and provided information about confidentiality, informed consent and a one-page project description in Chichewa. All participants signed the informed consent form and were given my business card and invited to write or call if they wanted to ask anything or to withdraw their consent. Neither Gertrude nor I was contacted after we exited the field.

For the in-depth interviews I conducted in Lilongwe, I presented the project orally and in text, and provided information on confidentiality and informed consent. All except two participants gave their informed consent in writing; these two wanted to participate in the study as they saw it as important but did not want to sign documents due to their professional role. Thus, they gave their oral consent. All participants were given my business card and were invited to

ask questions or withdraw their consent at any time. Two participants contacted me to discuss how *ufiti* works.

All participants in all research settings were informed that their accounts, their names, and other identifying aspects like names of their villages, their organization or workplace would be anonymized and kept fully confidential in the academic disseminations, throughout and after the project process. I also informed the participants that the identifying key would be destroyed after the project's end and that I would be the only one with access to that key. Participants across field settings did not generally question the research conditions. However, as noted above two participants did not sign the informed consent form, as for different reasons they said they did not, on principle, sign official documents from the state or elsewhere.

Ethical considerations regarding participation and research collaboration

Research implies people's participation is based on their willingness to give you their time. This could be because they consider the project interesting, that they can contribute with experiences and knowledge, or they might have the impression that there will be some short or long-term benefit from participating. In the rural villages where Gertrude and I conducted fieldwork, there is also the potential that social pressure played a part in people's readiness to participate. As the chief of the villages was, customarily, the first person we approached for permission to do research, his authority in the village and the fact that he informed the villagers about our arrival could have affected how the villagers perceived participation as voluntary. Given the consistent presence of (I)NGOs and the influx of white people and elite Malawians in the villages, there was also the possibility that participants would view us as related to (I)NGOs. Participating in (I)NGO programs in Malawi often entails some sort of material benefit. Thus, we had to establish our roles as researchers, and that potential benefits would concern dissemination of their experiences and knowledge in terms of research articles and debates on the topics discussed. On Gertrude's advice, we scheduled the FGDs and in-depth interviews for hours when people generally were back from farming, in order to as much as possible prevent participants losing work hours when taking part in interviews or FGDs. Yet, the time they spent participating in our study undoubtedly took time away from other purposes. To show our appreciation for their time we brought sodas, buns, and crackers for all in-depth interviews and FGDs. Nevertheless, we found that these were not eaten during the conversations but saved for later to be shared with the participants' families.

Positionality

The assumption that social science researchers can present an objective representation of social reality has been widely contested (Moses & Knutsen, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). Rather, personal characteristics and experiences influence how researchers understand social phenomena, which in turn influence what type of data they produce (Gergen, 2017). Therefore, personal characteristics and social processes always affect research results. These aspects should be treated and reflected upon as inevitable parts of the research process, and regarded as "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583), meaning that researchers must be "answerable for what we learn how to see." According to Teo and Febbraro (2003, p. 675):

> The time in which one lives, and the context that socializes human beings—for example, West or East, North or South, first or third world, developing or developed country, colonized or colonizing country, and so on—become socio-historical forms of intuition that inform and structure one's everyday experience as well as one's academic knowledge.

Given this perspective, the socio-historical form of intuition that I brought with me into the field that I have studied has inevitably affected how I perceive others and my own experiences. Being a WEIRD sample myself—a white, highly educated 36-year-old Swedish English-speaking woman and researcher—placed me in a position from where what I could do, see, feel, and know was colored by my intersectional background. This influenced what I found fascinating, good, and true and affected what questions I asked and how I understood and interpreted the answers. While positionality inevitably colors what participants felt about me, thought of me, and said to me, it also slanted how I perceived the participants and the material.

I agree with Haraway (1988) that subjectivity is inescapable. Therefore, the only way to pursue anything remotely "objective" is to be as open as possible about how one sees and understands the world. From my theoretical perspective, I do not aim to achieve "objectivity" but I believe transparency is important. My background in cultural studies and community- and cultural psychology, my political orientation as well as my gendered experiences influence where and how I look for answers. Thus, my interest in dominant mainstream psychological assumptions on individuality and spirituality, global gender policies, individualized development approaches, gendered *ufiti*-related violence, and Malawian meaning-making of these topics is—rather than being a random mix of me and the world—purely intentional. Although interviews, focus groups discussions and field encounters are entangled with diverse power relations, the researcher has a motive; they formulate the

questions and interpret the answers. However, regarding participants as experts in their area of life and their specific knowledge, I thought of myself as a curious learner with a privileged opportunity to familiarize myself with a world vastly different from my own.

The positionality of being a *mzunga*

In Malawi, I was often referred to as *azungo* or *mzunga* (transferred to English as, respectively, *white, wealthy European,* and *white wealthy European woman* (Paass, 2016)), terms that reflect a colonial past charged with associations of what white Europeans still represent for Malawians. I was daily made aware of these associations; how the historical context I come from, and the privilege I carry by being born with a white skin far away from Malawi, signals privilege, possibilities, and power. The fact that my monthly wage was more than a yearly income for most Malawians put me in a position where I could eat better, travel more safely, and pay for private health care; things most Malawians cannot. Moreover, the currency-difference also put me in a place where I could afford things that I could not purchase and do at home. As such, my presence in Malawi was a representation of the structural and systemic inequality that intricately connects micro- and macro- levels of the society and the world. Moreover, being a *mzunga* also affected my research in Malawi. As Brinkmann (2007) asserts, the position of researcher involves several power-dimensions. As a white, English speaking researcher, I emphasized in the conversations that the participants were the experts, and that I was glad and grateful to learn from them.

Gertrude's positionality

Gertrude's positionality as a research assistant is also important to reflect on (Moss & Hajj, 2020). As an educated English-speaking and middle-class woman, collaborating with a Western researcher, her positionality is also in many aspects entangled with power. Although Gertrude was born and raised in a rural village much like the communities that we engaged with, she is now educated (as one of the 1% Malawians who attend university each year (Sharra 2018)), which gives her possibilities and upward mobility that is unusual, especially for Malawian women. Nevertheless, her extensive experience with ethnographic fieldwork and knowledge of local costumes and traditions allowed her to easily attune to the villages' atmosphere, which, Gertrude noted, resembled life in her home village. We reflected on and discussed each day how villagers would perceive Gertrude's and my presence and engagement in the communities, and how that in turn would influence the way our research was perceived.

Working with a research assistant

As Wilson (2018, p. 349) notes, most Western scholars who conduct fieldwork in the Global South "would be incapable of conducting much of their research independently. To suggest otherwise is to replicate colonial behavior in the academy and in the field." Thus, it is important to acknowledge that both living with and working with Gertrude was crucial for my transition into, and understanding of, the Malawian cultural context. In the first two field settings, I was often dependent on Gertrude's assistance and guidance. Her role as my cultural guide surely saved me from breaking local norms and must have kept her on her toes. For instance, Gertrude would instruct me how to dress and conduct myself in different research contexts. Every day she taught me Chichewa greetings and useful gestures to show appreciation and respect. After leaving Malawi we have maintained weekly contact, and during the work with this thesis Gertrude has, on several occasions, informed me about aspects I have needed her help with. As such, Gertrude is a central person in this project.

Apart from the joys and obvious benefits of working with local experts, there are—as with all research and field-relations—risks associated with collaborating with local research assistants (Moss & Hajj, 2020). All the possible unforeseen and dangerous positions fieldwork might put you in as a researcher applies equally to the research collaborator. Yet, while the well-functioning Scandinavian safety-net that I was born into, and which in many ways follows me wherever I go, did not apply to Gertrude, she was often my safety-net.

Spiritual harm

As witchcraft is secretive by nature, it was not obvious how I might inadvertently fuel it. From experiences with working with research assistants and studying witchcraft in Ghana and Cameroon, Roxburgh (2019, p. 703) notes how complex and challenging it is to navigate "the ethical concerns of spiritual harm". While *ufiti*/witchcraft-related issues permeate the social fabric of Malawi, as well as many other societies, there is generally little consideration and discussion about the "responsibilities of the researcher towards the spiritual well-being of informants" in academic literature (Roxburgh, 2019, p. 705). I agree with Roxburgh (2019, p. 705), that the lack of guidance of spiritual safety and care in the ethics review, reveals an "epistemological bias" that promotes a worldview that ignores the complexity and dangers related to research on *ufiti*/witchcraft.

The risks of doing harm to your research participants and research collaborators are potentially larger when you work on a topic that you yourself do not perceive as a threat. This

proved challenging. While *ufiti*-related matters were something I was curious about, I had always to keep in mind that I was completely unaware of the potential risks I could evoke. Talking with Gertrude, she assured me that for her, *uftiti* was not taboo, that she did not believe in it, and that she was okay working with the topic. Yet, I was aware of the strong responsibility she felt for me, and that for her, refusing to work on a potentially dangerous topic would be a difficult work-ethical dilemma. This ethical dilemma was one of many that I did not resolve. Nevertheless, we constantly talked about how to avoid behavior and attitudes that potentially could rouse others' suspicions, mistrust, and envy.

When discussing how to treat the topic of *ufiti* regarding our participants, Gertrude noted that the best thing would be to let the topic emerge naturally—and be addressed by the participants themselves. Thus, I never straight out initiated conversations about *ufiti*. Rather, I would frame questions regarding topics that involved stressors of *ufiti*, such as breaking social norms, social injustice, and envy. Some participants in the rural villages were, "not free to talk" about *ufiti*, while others would spend the whole interview describing various aspects and dimensions of it. Although some participants treated risk assessment and protection against *ufiti* as a matter of "better safe than sorry", most were clear that *ufiti* did indeed affect their lives. Many reported that they themselves or someone that they knew had been *kulodweza* (bewitched), often with devastating and deadly outcomes. Nevertheless, on the last day of our stay in the rural villages, the chief thanked us for bringing *ufiti* up, saying that the topic was important, and that none of the (I)NGOs that had worked in the villages had talked about how it negatively affects development.

It is possible that my Western white status and academic position—together with my naïve approach to *ufiti*—may have offered our participants a space and opportunity to discuss and reflect over the topic in an informative way without it creating suspicion, because, contrary to what I had expected, many of the participants talked freely and lengthy about *ufiti*-related issues. That the chief thanked us explicitly for bringing up the topic, demonstrating that he valued the discussions.

Writing about *ufiti*

"the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger" (Foucault, 1984, p. 343).

Having hesitated to address witchcraft out of fear of "re-establishing Othering stereotypes and discourses", scholars have described how they often accidentally and involuntarily have

stumbled onto the topic (Murrey, 2017, p. 163). Throughout this project, *ufiti*, and the significant impact it has on individual's and communities' lives was, for me, not possible to circumvent, yet not fully possible to grasp. While reading, asking, and exploring the manifold aspects and nuances of *ufiti* it seemed not only impossible, but also inappropriate to suggest a definition.

As Murrey (2017) and Roxburgh (2018) assert, there are many reasons to avoid engaging in the topic of sub-Saharan African witchcraft. One important one is the reproduction of stereotypical imaginaries in academic discourse. The limited scope of academic work makes writing about witchcraft a problematic issue, as it risks simplifying and/or romanticizing the phenomena into more unnuanced images and concepts (Murrey, 2017). I agree with Murrey (2017) that the narrow, colonial, and archaic interpretations of *ufiti*/witchcraft are potentially harmful when reproduced in academic writing. Nevertheless, I do believe that ignoring *ufiti*/witchcraft in academic texts, especially when it impacts on the daily life of participants, may be even more harmful, as it might serve to further silence and marginalize the Others' ways of experiencing and understanding life. *Not* to address a phenomenon that is so prominent in many people's lives may signal that it is not taken seriously; that their reality is less real and therefore less represented.

Additionally, to avoid engaging in *ufiti*/witchcraft-related issues, or circumscribing the discourse by applying other terms than that of the national media, local academics, and in my case, my participants, would be to re-interpret the phenomena based on my own cultural context and references. Although my aim has not been to define Malawian *ufiti*, I do acknowledge that this thesis contributes to the large body of Western academic knowledge production about the Others' ways of understanding the supernatural and spiritual forces of particularly sub-Saharan African *ufiti*/witchcraft. Nevertheless, my ambition and aim has been to treat Malawian *ufiti* as part of the experienced expert knowledge of my participants; as subjective, contextual, plural, and fluid, but not any less real or any less true. Thus, I hope that this thesis serves primarily as an illustration of how *not* acknowledging local ways of experiencing and understanding life may not only be dangerous for the people living in that ignored reality, but may also, at the cost of the Others, further a promotion of dominant knowledge systems as more accurate. Such a demarcation defies the purpose of the (I)NGOs' interventions; disempowering rather than empowering the people they claim to work for.

6. The Four Articles

This chapter provides a summary of the four articles assembled in this thesis. Each article deals with aspects of global and local dynamics and interactions concerning the involvement of international development organizations with global gender policies in Malawi. The data from the various research sites together explore different dimensions of the same whole, and as such, the articles all speak to, and build on each other. In the first three articles, I draw extensively on data material from the rural villages: meeting with participants, negotiations, and meaning-making of globally informed development approaches. In the fourth and last article, I explore how international development organization representatives negotiate and understand Malawian expressions of *ufiti*.

Article I: "Nowadays we have gender": 'Doing' global gender equality in rural Malawi

Author: Johanna Sofia Adolfsson and Ole Jacob Madsen

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This first article was motivated by my initial encounter with Malawi in 2015. We were five Norwegian colleagues traveling in a car when we were stopped at a police roadblock. The police officer who approached us, lent down, inspected us before smilingly claiming, "There is no gender in this car!" As we were in fact five women, we asked what this meant, to which he repeated, "There is no gender in this car!" As having no gender seemed not to be a traffic crime, the police officer let us pass, however, the statement did not slip our minds. Continuing our journey, with this new information at hand, we kept discussing what "gender" could entail. While we did not settle on a definition, we were reminded of the fluidity of language—how concepts travel and take on new, different, and even contradictory meanings when contextually situated.

Later, in the fall of 2016, when I sat out to track the UN's global policy on achieving "gender equality" in Malawi, I decided that it was crucial to understand what 'gender' meant for Malawians. As (I)NGOs' focus on women and girls' gendered empowerment was heavily campaigned for in the country, and given the police officer's interpretation of "no gender", the concepts could potentially have taken on a different meaning than the Western psychologized concept. After having discussed my preliminary findings with my supervisor,

Ole Jacob Madsen, he suggested that Haslam's (2016) framework of *concept creep* could offer a fruitful approach to analyzing the material. "Concept creep" provides a theorization of how psychological concepts are engaged in a constant semantic meandering, how they undergo changes, and vertically and horizontally expand in meaning. In turn, this expansion has looping effects on how people come to regard themselves and others. For Haslam (2016, p. 2), it is particularly psychology's "negative" concepts, like 'abuse', 'bullying', and 'trauma' that are prone to conceptual change, and as he asserts "this semantic inflation is not widely appreciated by psychologists."

Following up Haslam's (2016) stated research gap, we found that for our Malawian research participants the concept of gender had—in contrast to the Western, psychologized and individualized conceptualization—taken on a different and wider meaning. For people in the rural villages where Gertrude and I conducted fieldwork, gender was generally framed as "not differentiating between men and women at work". Accordingly, gender was broadly understood and practiced as a development method that implied shared activity for generating communal goods. Thus, we found that in its Malawian sense, gender connotes a collective doing, dependent on communal participation and responsibilities. Although, in principle, gender was articulated as a common action, we discovered that the (I)NGOs' gender discourse and large focus on especially women and girls' placed focus and responsibility on individuals, implicitly penalizing them for not living up to global standards. Further, this focus also understates Malawian women's agency when navigating within a deeply unequal society. Moreover, we found that the individualized focus, and the pinning of expectations and responsibility on women and girls' shoulders, indirectly might justify men's increased independence, a finding that contradicts the UN's global development policy on achieving "gender equality and empower[ing] all women and girls." This then demonstrates what implicit and explicit implications the (I)NGOs' imposition of gendered development practices has had for the local 'beneficiaries' of these development interventions in terms of how gendered practices mandate new ways of arranging the society.

Analysis. The analysis was conducted using theoretical thematic analysis, where we constructed five recurrent themes that capture the contextual, complex, and at times conflicting conceptualizations of gender that our informants expressed. "Nowadays there is gender" was a recurrent notion among the participants that underscores how 'gender' has come into the society with external influences. "Women and gender" and "doing and not doing gender" were other categories that demonstrate how the concept is seen as an

undertaking associated with gendered norms. “There is no gender” was a category constructed based on the many accounts of the lack of ‘doing’ gender in the villages. Lastly, “gender and *ufiti*/witchcraft” show how gendered attitudes and behavior is intricately linked to supernatural and spiritual forces.

Main contributions. This first article provides two key contributions. First, the article offers an empirical and non-Western example of how psychologized concepts—like gender—are un-universal and non-essentialist. When the Western gender concept is implemented in the rural Malawian context, it takes on a meaning that is in line with how local participants experience their world. This change in meaning stresses that concepts like gender are not culture-free, neither in the West nor in Malawi, underscoring the need to revise and deconstruct Western assumptions of universality. Second, the article offers a contribution to Haslam’s (2016) theorizing on “concept creep”. While Haslam maintains that it is particularly psychology’s negative concepts that tend to undergo concept creep, we contribute with gender, a concept that is not, by definition, negative. Rather, we argue that gender, because of its applicability to all humans, is especially prone to conceptual change. Instead of focusing on negative concepts, we hold that psychology’s influence on other arenas, like the development industry, may be the reason ‘positive’ concepts like agency and empowerment have expanded in meaning and come to affect how individuals and groups make sense of themselves and others.

Article II: Making meaning of empowerment and development in rural Malawi: International individualism meets local communalism

Author: Johanna Sofia Adolfsson and Sigrun Marie Moss

Accepted by: The Journal of Social and Political Psychology

As with the ‘gender’ concept in the first article, my initial aim for this second article was to understand how the concept of ‘empowerment’, which is brought into many Malawian lives by global development organizations, is interpreted and understood locally. As previously mentioned, the empowerment concept has been widely criticized by both psychologists and development scholars for having been narrowed down to individual qualities. From accounts based on informal interviews, in-depth interviews and FGDs with participants in the two rural villages, we found that the empowerment concept was, contrary to the Western individualized notion, locally understood as a communal way of gaining agency and power.
However, while many participants had lots of thoughts of how their community could

progress, they had no power to influence the design of the development interventions. Thus, participants' values and wishes were not acknowledged by, or incorporated in, the (I)NGOs' approaches, which rather promoted individual empowerment. Participants noted that especially women and girls were singled out as beneficiaries of (I)NGO interventions, thus advancing some individuals and groups rather than the whole community. This focus on individual progress, participants said, could spark suspicion, resentment, envy, enmity, and in turn *ufiti* accusations and assaults. Consequently, instead of becoming empowered, individual 'beneficiaries' might become more exposed and vulnerable to social tensions and *ufiti* retributions. By extension, this individualized focus could disrupt the very social fabric of community life. Additionally, we argue that the ignorance of local ways of experiencing life undermines context-specific ways of resisting and navigating within racialized, classed, gendered, and spiritual societies. Thus, this shows how the intentional world and meaning-making of 'beneficiaries', promoting communal and reciprocal values, conflicts with Western norms of independent individualism and personal selves abstracted from context.

Analysis. Based on an inductive thematic analysis of informal and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we identified different themes and positions repeatedly brought up by the participants. Conceptualizations of "power" was a frequent theme, which participants linked to the empowerment concept used by the (I)NGOs operating in their villages. "Definitions of need" and "definitions of worthy recipients" were also important themes discussed by participants, which demonstrate the power that (I)NGOs assert in "who, when and how" people are helped. When discussing 'the context' in which participants negotiated 'communal life' and 'communality' in relation to (I)NGOs' individualized interventions and tendencies to "move only some forward". The study illustrates how our participants see empowerment as a communal gaining of power and agency that collides with (I)NGOs' individualist development and empowerment efforts.

Main contribution. The main contributions in this article regard individual and communal ways of living. First, by demonstrating how Western norms of individuality are incompatible with Malawian communal values, this article adds an empirical analysis that is rare within the work on the psychologization of development in general and Western psychology in particular. As such, we contribute to the critical debate about the dominant tendency, within both psychology and development theory and practice, to promote individual empowerment. Based on our Malawian participants' communal understanding, we hold that their perception of empowerment resembles the original conceptualization of community psychology,

emphasizing social and cultural context. Which, we argue, underscores that psychological orientations would benefit from recognizing that empowerment, as a communal way of gaining power and agency, may be more adequate and helpful for individuals and groups—in Malawi and elsewhere. Secondly, by applying a decolonial feminist psychological perspective, we contribute to ongoing decolonial discussions—within and outside the field of psychology—regarding the role of (I)NGO empowerment incentives in the lives of women and girls in the Global South. As such, we add the notion of individualized empowerment as a form of coloniality. When development organizations promote and impose empowerment ideals in terms of Western ways of seeing, being, and feeling, they simultaneously communicate that local ways of experiencing and organizing life are inaccurate and need correction. This type of patronage of the Others' ways of being and thinking, we argue, operates as coloniality camouflaged as philanthropic 'goodwill'.

Article III: "Even the NGOs never talk about *ufiti* [witchcraft]"*:* A decolonial and feminist cultural psychological analysis on individualized development interventions clashing with communal ways of being

Authors: Johanna Sofia Adolfsson and Sigrun Marie Moss

Accepted by: Human Arenas

Article III grew out of my wish to better understand the Malawian supernatural and malign forces of *ufiti*, its gendered inclinations, and its implications on Western informed individualized development approaches. In this article, we draw on all three field-settings, in an attempt to get at the full extent of the *ufiti* phenomena, exploring how expressions of *ufiti* are experienced similarly and differently across different Malawian social strata. We unpack the relation between individualized gendered empowerment/development and interpersonal suspicion, resentment, envy, and *ufiti* accusations and assaults. This relation, we argue, is—to a large extent—not acknowledged by (I)NGOs working in Malawi. The neglect of Malawian cosmology, we hold, is a case of spiritual Othering. As a result, this ignorance of local experiences may, when coupled with (I)NGOs individualized development initiatives, have negative ramifications for their 'beneficiaries'. In particular, our research participants reported that unshared individual progress was a breeding ground for others' suspicion, mistrust, envy, and, in the worst case, *ufiti*-based violence. However, the alleged ignorance of *ufiti*'s existence on the part of the (I)NGOs, potentially makes them blind to the possibility that their involvement in local relations could fuel it, and thereby worsen their 'beneficiaries'' lives.

Hence the individualized approach—exacerbated by a lack of contextual focus—may have unintended implications that risk inflicting explicit harm on the local 'beneficiaries'.

Analysis. Applying inductive thematic analysis, we focused on the connection between empowerment and *ufiti*. Generally, this was linked via people's envy of others' progress and success. We structured the analysis into two principal themes. We first looked at possible—however unintended—negative consequences of individualized empowerment approaches. Secondly, we considered the connection between *ufiti* and empowerment practices. We analyzed how our participants talked about navigating and adjusting their communalized ways of life to the more individualized approaches of the development organizations, and how envy of individual success was connected to *ufiti*.

Main contribution. The article highlights two key contributions. First, it demonstrates the necessity for developmental approaches and psychological approaches to actively include and engage with the Other's intentional worlds, particularly in intercultural collaborations. Second, the article demonstrates the need for psychology, at an overarching level, to acknowledge context to a greater extent. These two key contributions are particularly powerful as the article shows the negative consequences interventions and initiatives can have when local intentional worlds are not included in the intervention design, and context is disregarded. The participants show how efforts to empower individual girls and women leave them vulnerable to social disruption, disempowerment, and *ufiti* accusations and assaults. Adopting a decolonial and feminist cultural psychological approach can be a constructive avenue for both development approaches and psychological approaches in creating projects and interventions coordinated with local realities, and which thus avoid "individual development interventions clashing with communal ways of being".

Article IV: Decolonizing dominant Western assumptions: naturalizing fear of Malawian witchcraft and denaturalizing Western norms of individuality

Authors: Johanna Sofia Adolfsson

Submitted to: Frontiers in Psychology

While the three first articles mainly focus on local experiences and meaning-making of Western informed development in general, and individualized and gendered empowerment in particular, the fourth adds another piece of the puzzle. This article deals with how INGOs and donor agencies operating in Malawi do or do *not* approach the supernatural forces of *ufiti* in Malawian lives. Additionally, I explore to what extent these development organizations

acknowledge their potential role in the *ufiti* universe. Drawing on a decolonial cultural psychological framework, I apply strategies to reveal dominant Western patterns of coloniality promoted through the actions and '*in*-actions' of development organizations.

Although *ufiti*-based violence is part of everyday life in Malawi, and especially dangerous for women and girls, none of the INGO and donor agency representatives interviewed reported that their organization had any formal approaches to *ufiti* or the violence associated with it. Some explained that perceptions of *ufiti* were not taken seriously, and some stated that both their organization and their donors avoided the phenomena. One representative from a foreign donor agency laughed out loud, telling me that this was just superstitious beliefs. Thus, despite that *ufiti* potentially posing harmful consequences for their 'beneficiaries' these organizations, like many others (see Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Federici, 2018; Smith et al., 2017), ignore the actual reality of the majority of Malawians. Yet in 2017 when *ufiti*-based violence by vigilante mobs defending themselves from *Anamapopa* ("bloodsuckers" in English) endangered the safety of their employees, several INGOs—along with the UN, foreign embassies, and the American Peace Corps—took safety precautions, and some evacuated their staff from the affected regions. Thus, while failing to acknowledge the powerful impact of *ufiti* on Malawian lives, these INGOs simultaneously reacted to its physical and violent consequences. The double standard, I suggest, reveals attitudes of coloniality that promote and preserve colonial patterns of how 'reality' is to be understood; defining what counts as the correct way of experiencing the world. Furthermore, this ignorance of local ways of experiencing life also discloses that these organizations are indifferent to the possibility that their promotion of Western neoliberal and individualist ways of being—like singling out some 'beneficiaries' to progress over others—may incite interpersonal mistrust, jealousy, and *ufiti* assaults. Thus, this shows that Malawian ways of being, seeing and feeling are not prioritized by development organizations. Rather, by neglecting the local lived experiences and realities these organizations go a long way to demonstrating that Malawian ways of understanding the world are not only ignored but also rejected.

Analysis. Using thematic analysis, I structured the analysis in three themes, looking at development organizations' general understanding of, and approaches to, *ufiti*; if and how issues of *ufiti* were addressed in communication with global policy makers and donors; and how they navigated and discussed the upheaval of bloodsucker rumors and *ufiti* violence that shook Malawi at the time.

Main contribution. This paper's focus on development organization representatives' meaning-making on *ufiti*-related violence contributes with valuable insights of how Western dominant assumptions promote and privilege some cultural 'realities' and 'truths' over others. The article adds a critical perspective on how coloniality is also evident in terms of the spiritual and supernatural forces that affect peoples' everyday lives. It demonstrates the crucial need for psychologists and development actors to reflect on how their intervening in people's lives may have detrimental consequences when spiritual and supernatural aspects are not accounted for. The article also contributes with an important perspective on *ufiti*-violence and counter violence against *ufiti*-power as acts of resistance, illuminating how *ufiti* assaults and accusations, work as both explanatory models of, and resistance to, social inequality. Thus, as with the previous three articles, this article underscores the importance of acknowledging culture and context-specific meaning-making and practices.

7. Concluding Discussion

I started this synopsis with two anecdotes that capture the dynamic between global development initiatives on women's and girls' empowerment and gender equality, and the local Malawian setting. The point I wanted to illustrate was that meaning-making is fluid—that concepts and language serve no universal laws but are always bound by their context. The cultural frames of references and intentional worlds we are embedded in, and give meaning to how we perceive others, the world, and ourselves. These aspects are fundamental to all human interaction and have been particularly relevant during the work with this PhD project.

Writing this thesis, my ambition has primarily been to contribute to the quite limited body of work on the "Western psychologization of development". Albeit limited, the scholarly work that I draw on provides an extensive outline of *how* Western psychology has emerged onto the global development stage. The limitation rather concerns *what* implicit and explicit implications this transformation has had on the infinite number of societies in which Western psychologization impinges. Therefore, at an overarching level, and in line with my research questions (see pages 3-4), I have empirically explored how the Western psychology-informed framework on development implemented in Malawi is understood, and is seen as fitting with local lives and contexts. More specifically, I have looked at how research participants make sense of development approaches that are based on the principle of the individual empowerment of women and girls. Additionally, I have studied the possible implications of adopting the Westernized individualized development norms in local contexts, particularly

regarding the occurrence of *ufiti*-based violence, and explored how international development organizations operating in Malawi understand and engage with local realities of *ufiti*. Thus, this thesis also contributes to the ongoing debates on the role of Western development organizations in local societies in general, and its implications for the supernatural phenomena of *ufiti* in particular.

With my decolonial feminist cultural psychological framework and focus on lived realities, and the qualitative methodology and multi-sited fieldwork adopted in the project, I attempted to uncover how Western psychology informed international development practices were understood across different social strata as well as from the perspective of international development organizations. I believe this context-sensitive approach has enabled the generation of rich and nuanced data that has allowed me to explore my research questions in depth.

Based on my study I draw two main conclusions. First, dimensions of Western psychologization of development can reasonably be said to be present and active in Malawi. Established psychological ideas of the independent and context-abstracted individual and men and women's potential to self-actualize are heavily promoted by international development organizations operating in the country. Second, throughout the thesis, I have argued that individualized behaviors and attitudes do not only conflict with Malawian ways of valuing reciprocity and community but may be directly harmful for individuals and groups. This is especially so for the Malawian female population, who are among the groups that (I)NGOs focus the most on. Thus, I propose that critical awareness must be raised toward the role Western psychology plays in international development and hence in people's lives.

The Western psychologization of development in Malawi, as I have shown in this thesis and articles, is manifested, both implicitly and explicitly, in how individualized psychological concepts (i.e. 'behavior-change', 'self-actualization', 'self-efficacy', 'resilience', 'nudge') underpin development interventions. Participants in the rural villages, for example, witness that (I)NGOs working in their communities tell them to change their behavior both directly, i.e. "you have to do gender" and indirectly, i.e. implementing individualized interventions that conflict with their ways of organizing their lives. This preset and top-down approach demonstrates how power is used by development organizations—interventions are carried out *on* people rather than in collaboration *with* them. Thus, the particular meaning-making and intentional worlds of the people that (I)NGOs engage with are not acknowledged as important for the suitability or impact of their development interventions. This power asymmetry is

further revealed in how development initiatives actively ‘educate’ people to change their behavior and attitudes to adequately fit with Western norms. The rationale behind this “subject formation”, or “psychoeducation” as De Vos (2012) terms it, is, as scholars have argued, based on the tacitly taken-for-granted idea that Western development, modernity, and modern individualist mentalities are products of the Western psyche, and by default desirable. Thus, by universalizing Western behavior and attitudes, the world is assumed to develop in accordance with the prevailing modern Western norms, largely promoted by development policy and practice.

Furthermore, this dominant idea of what human development *should* entail is, I propose, also linked to Mignolo’s (2007a) aforementioned principle of the *same*, in which Malawi (and particularly its rural regions) is understood as unalterably lagging behind the West, as less developed, but hankering to achieve the *same* Western behavior, attitudes, aspirations, and norms. Accordingly, within this given order, it is assumed that the Western way of ‘developing’ is welcomed and wished for. This paternalistic assumption, I suggest, manifests as Western informed ‘psychological truths’ that form patterns and cultures of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. The epistemology of coloniality is, as noted earlier, based on the paradigm that the “‘past’ paradoxically exists in the ‘present’” (Alcoff, 2007, p. 87). This dynamic is particularly revealed in how colonial-like power inequality perpetually exists in the post-colonial world through the continued presence of discriminatory racialized, classed, sexed, and gendered hierarchies (Adams et al., 2018; Bulhan, 2015). Furthered by international development organizations, these power structures rationalize what represents the ‘right way’ of experiencing and organizing life. Accordingly, when encouraged to change their behaviors, aspirations, and attitudes in line with Western norms, people implicitly and explicitly are told that their ways of being, seeing, and feeling need correction—that their way of living is erroneous.

Moreover, Western ideas of the context-abstracted independent individual achieving self-actualization are the result of colonial exploitation and accumulation that facilitated independent selfhoods and individualist mentalities in the first place (Adams et al., 2018). As such, coloniality is profoundly inherent in Western practices of individualism. Thus, through a decolonial feminist cultural psychological lens, I hold that the (I)NGOs’ promotion of Western knowledge and being in Malawi is grounded in the coloniality of power, knowledge and being, particularly revealed in their obliviousness toward their ‘beneficiaries’’ meaning-making and ways of navigating in life. The (I)NGOs lack of willingness to acknowledge the

local cultural context while simultaneously placing conditions on aid by advocating Western development norms is deeply problematic. To be specific, this arrogance makes them ignorant of the fact that what they teach potentially poses a threat to the people they intend, and claim, to help.

As argued throughout this thesis, Malawian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to potential threats caused by the (I)NGOs' individualized focus on them. As demonstrated in article one, the individualized gender equality approaches abstract women and girls from their cultural and context-specific knowledge, experiences, and aspirations, thus failing to acknowledge the power and agency that women and girls already hold when maneuvering within a fundamentally unequal society. As such, this approach paradoxically places *more* responsibility on their shoulders, as social factors like structural poverty and patriarchy are minimized, which in turn strengthens the understanding of gendered inequality and reproductive responsibility as individual matters. Moreover, as part of communal societies that value interdependent reciprocity, women and girls who are individually empowered to achieve personal progress may, as highlighted in article two, become the target of others' suspicion, resentment, and envy. Ultimately, as the third article shows, women and girls may, due to their status as individual beneficiaries of (I)NGOs development incentives, become *more* exposed and vulnerable to *ufiti*-based accusations and assaults. And as a result of these recriminations, their social status within their communities may be affected, thus achieving the opposite of what the (I)NGOs claim to want. Individualized interventions may in the end disturb and disrupt loyal bonds and interdependent dynamics that are vital for community-based life and the well-being of people. As illustrated in the fourth article, this cultural blindness also makes development organizations disregard the agency, in terms of reciprocity, that people assert when navigating in an increasingly unequal world. In neglecting the existence and impact of *ufiti*-related violence, they also fail to see that *ufiti* assaults may be in response to, and acts of resistance against, harmful norms imposed on the local society. Thus, they fail to problematize their inherent part in the existence of *ufiti*; that the violence associated with it may be symptoms of a society that suffers from external dominance in terms of coloniality, neoliberalism, capitalism, and unburdened and exploitive individualism. This indifference to local ways and imposition of Western knowledge resembles what Fanon (2008, p. 90) wrote concerning the European colonizers' ignorance of local agency and knowledge:

> The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own.

Although Fanon wrote this in 1952, when African societies still were under direct European colonial rule, it remains important. When the formal colonization of Africa was over, the West's involvement and influence on the continent continued in new forms. Particularly, Western control over African states was sustained through the conditions attached to the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and not least the presence of international development actors (Ferguson, 2006; Moyo, 2009; Sakue-Collins, 2020). Thus, as Mbembe (2001, p. 237) notes, we may reflect on whether the new world order really is new, or just "the same theatre, the same mimetic, acting, with different actors and spectators, but with the same convulsions and the same insult?" This entails that coloniality and the obscure ways in which it works, must be reflected on. Whether we are development policy makers or practitioners, psychologists, philanthropists, activists, scholars, or others with interest(s) in intervening in others' lives, we must ask ourselves, with what motifs and incentives do we come? How, and for what and in whose cause do we intervene? Is the intervention wished for? If we aim to alter the everyday life and wellbeing of others, the fundamental premise needs to be that those others are consulted and collaborated with; that context-specific experiences, knowledges, aspirations, expertise, ways of organizing lives, and not least ways of expressing resistance, are the blueprint from which we together act. Accordingly, a focus on particularity and cultural context must be acknowledged as the safest and most humanist way not to inflict harm on others. This inevitably means that all assumptions of the universality of human behavior and attitudes must be rejected, as they inevitably fail to account for the particular.

While I have directed criticism at Western psychological theories and practices in this thesis, I agree with Klein (2016), that the parallel development of Western modernity and psychology has arguably produced useful knowledge about human behaviors and attitudes. However, I also agree with Klein that the dark side of Western modernity—and psychology as one of its products—has caused exploitation and oppression of people with other aspirations and ways of living. Thus, it becomes crucial for psychology, like all social sciences that produce knowledge based on Western assumptions, to self-reflectively scrutinize, trace and reveal historical and present patterns and cultures of oppression; to redefine, redress, and establish decolonial attitudes for a more humane future (Fanon, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2017).

Limitations

My study has various limitations. The qualitative design and convenience sampling in two of the three field contexts (while in the rural villages all households were interviewed) deters statistical generalization. Nevertheless, it was not my aim to generalize the findings to a broader population. For all field settings, I sought to recruit a diverse sample that provided a variation in background, gender, age, and social position, which rendered diverse experiences and perspectives. However, although I have given attention to how both men and women make sense of the prevailing female focus of (I)NGOs, I focused more on female participants, particularly in the rural villages where 24 of the 34 informal interviews that Gertrude conducted were with women. Thus, male participants are underrepresented in this sample. A more gender-balanced sample would have provided a more nuanced representation of how men make sense of the prevailing focus on women and girls. Nevertheless, at the same time, eliciting female voices in particular on these female focused approaches of the NGOs was important. Additionally, though conceptualizations of *ufiti, Ubuntu*, *mzunga, chitukuko* (development, in article two) and *kupatsa mphamvu* (empowerment, in article two) are used for situating and describing local knowledge, experiences, and aspirations, I could have used more context-specific concepts. As Baloyi and Ramose (2016, p. 14) underscore, "the rejection and exclusion of indigenous concepts and languages in psychology prevent the broadening of the landscape of psychological discourse beyond Western theoretical confinements." This is important and should be a guideline when we conduct research that aims to decolonize and extend the fundamentals of psychological science. In particular, this accentuates the power inherent in language, and stresses the importance of not assigning alien conceptualizations and classifications to individuals and groups (Mills, 2014). Finally, I believe the most important, and probably the most challenging limitation, with my PhD project is related to the structural power and privilege that comes with being a *mzunga*. As mentioned before, my *mzunga* positionality presumably influenced how participants in the in-depth interviews and FGDs responded. Although this possibly created demand characteristics, it is also conceivable that my naïve approach regarding what gender, empowerment, development, and *ufiti* entails in Malawi created a curious and relaxed ambience. Moreover, in hindsight, I see that I have not been reflective enough toward the manifold nuances and layers of colonial inclinations nested in my research. For instance, except for the general association to Western privileges, I was commonly perceived as untouchable by *ufiti*. Many of my Malawian participants told me that *azungos* could not be affected by it, and I never felt

any threat of negative *ufiti* forces. Now, while my nationality and skin-color protected me from harm, I see that I have profited academically from my participants' experiences of *ufiti*. This limitation concerns, as mentioned, the multilayered and complex expressions of *ufiti,* and the limited scope in academic writing, which makes documenting articulations of *ufiti* a complicated task that, in the worst-case scenario, due to lack of knowledge may result in spiritual Othering (Murrey, 2017; Roxburgh, 2019). This dilemma will always be a concern that demands careful attention. Still, I believe that it is arguably more harmful *not* to acknowledge how spiritual and supernatural phenomena affect people's lives, as ignorance of local ontologies and experiences sustains dominant perceptions of what counts as the *proper* way of experiencing the world. I believe that the decolonial and cultural psychological perspective adopted in this thesis offers useful tools for future work concerning these sensitive and complex phenomena.

Avenues for future research

Much work remains to be done regarding how Western psychology impacts on international development policy and practice, and not least in how its extension impinges on and affects people at the receiving end of the development chain. Based on my experiences throughout this PhD project I suggest several avenues for future research. First, although my overarching focus was to uncover the lived experiences and meaning-making of Western informed and gendered development practices, I do believe a larger focus on development organizations' meaning-making of their activities would have added important dimensions. As for now, these narratives are included in my fourth article, addressing how INGO and donor agency representatives make meaning of, and approach the Malawian phenomena of *ufiti*-related violence. However, much more research is needed—also on a global policy level—on *how* development organizations negotiate and justify their involvement in local societies, on if and how they reflect over the potential normativity and coloniality involved in their interventions, and how their actions and 'in-actions' (however unwittingly) may reproduce structural and systemic oppression. I find this dimension rather lacking in the "psychologization of development" literature. Hence, questions regarding who is targeted, with what and by whom, need more attention. Second, as 'beneficiary' accounts of Western and psychology informed interventions in non-Western contexts remain a substantially understudied field within psychology, there is a critical need for more studies that focus on the context and lived experiences of the people who are targeted by these agendas and interventions. Importantly, without local accounts of how psychology manifests within this field, such studies may

produce knowledge of the Other without the Other being heard. As outsiders involved in development programs or research projects, we need to acknowledge and understand the lifeworlds of the people with whom we wish to engage. This should entail a focus on how people navigate and resist the structural power inequality that the vertical and paternalistic ways in which INGOs operate reinforce. Thus, how might we acknowledge resistance? Third, and relatedly, the lack of understanding of *ufiti* as an articulation of resistance to the external imposition of normative development interventions reveals an ignorance of local cosmologies, norms, and practices that needs serious attention. Given that many Western psychological perspectives fail to acknowledge the role of spiritual and supernatural forces in many people's lives (Holdstock, 2000; Ivey & Meyers, 2008b; Nwoye, 2013), greater awareness of spiritual and supernatural context is crucial for future research. This is particularly important in order not to pathologize the many people who associate themselves with such phenomena. Such studies could, for example, critically engage with decolonial cultural psychological strategies of normalization and denaturalization (as demonstrated in articles three and four), which twist "the analytic lens to reveal typically obscured constructions of reality that underlie conventional wisdom" (Adams et al. , 2012, p. 52). Hence, this theoretical perspective helps to discern patterns and cultures of coloniality while simultaneously promoting interest in and understanding of experiences and knowledges in a broader sense than the hegemonic Western psychology. Ultimately, this framework reflects the ways that Western norms of being, seeing, and knowing are *just as un*-universal and culturally embedded as "those Others'". Thus, how do hegemonic ways of being obscure and suppress other ways of being? Finally, research that explores the potential benefits and pitfalls with community-based and informed interventions, focusing on societal rather than individual levels, would add valuable dimensions to the ongoing debates on the prevailing individualized focus of the development industry. This is especially important in terms of Western psychology's concurrent influence over development interventions, with its focus on the individual at the expense of community or societal questions. Accordingly, what does social and cultural context mean for the results of interventions?

Policy implications

Based on this study's findings I offer several policy implications. First, as shown throughout the thesis and articles, issues of power are a recurrent topic particularly in terms of who asserts power over whom, and in which way(s). As Klein (2016, p. 119) asserts "Because development interventions are about power, it is important to include analysis of the way

psychological knowledge and power interact within interventions, as this impacts how subjectivities are shaped." As seen particularly in articles one, two, and three, participants' understanding of development and empowerment as an expression of communal agency is not acknowledged by (I)NGOs, nor do they regard this understanding as valuable knowledge of their context. Thus, the vertical and conditioned shaping of subjectivities based on a Western informed individualized development agenda may lead to a sense of defeat and resignation over a lack of control over one's own life. In sum, this paradox demonstrates that development policy and practice disregard the complexity of social relations, and the power embedded in contexts; a matter that needs consideration when designing policies as well as developing theories. Second, another aspect of power, highlighted particularly in articles three and four, is the pervasive threat that *ufiti* represents. While most Malawians in some way or the other relate themselves to supernatural and spiritual phenomena, often fearing the forces of *ufiti,* we have seen that development organizations generally fail to acknowledge these forces. As this ignorance may lead to detrimental consequences for development 'beneficiaries', local experiences and cosmologies must be acknowledged and considered in policy design and implementation. Third, the neoliberal focus on gender equality promoted by global policy makers, philanthropists, and the development industry first and foremost objectifies women of the Global South as micro economic instruments and obscures the global and macro structural inequality that keeps them in poverty. More deceptively, the paternalistic notion galvanized by many development organizations signals that Western women have already largely achieved gender equality. This undermines the gendered and LHBTQI+ struggles that people from all geographies fight every day. Accordingly, policy makers and development organizations alike need to acknowledge the structural racialized, gendered, and classed levels of poverty and patriarchy that compromise and warp people's lives. And last of all, given the dominant influence of Western psychology on contemporary development policy and practice, the implications of this interconnection demands critical reflection from both fields.

8. Literature

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Papers

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Article

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"Nowadays there is *gender*": "Doing" global gender equality in rural Malawi

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Abstract

This article analyzes the intersection of psychology with global development policy and practice, reviewing how gender as a concept is negotiated and understood amongst men and women in rural Malawi. We argue that gender, considered from a psychological perspective, has been narrowed down to meet the standards of global policy actors. By empowering individuals to "self-actualize," policy implementers expect social and economic spin-off effects such as lower birth rates, higher education levels, and poverty reduction. The focus on individuals acts to obscure the broader structural power inequities, is especially prevalent in rural Malawi. To explain this, we use Haslam's idea of "concept creep," on how psychological concepts tend to affect other institutional traditions. The everyday understandings of gendered life described here show how gender is a fluid concept that shifts according to cultural, social, and ideological norms.

Keywords

concept creep, gender, global development policy, Malawi, sub-Saharan Africa

Psychological expertise is increasingly integrated in the global development context (Howell, 2011). This psychosocial paradigm shift is generally said to have originated in the 1990s (De Vos, 2012), motivated by what Pupavac (2004) calls the "crisis of legitimacy" in humanitarian aid and what Fassin (2008) characterizes as "the politics of suffering" in recognition of mental health issues such as PTSD in conflict areas.

The global aid sector was criticized for disrupting local economies and firing up conflicts in the regions where it operated, resulting in the demoralization of humanitarian organizations. Aid agencies were encouraged "to adopt psychosocial work" and to "bring back the human in the face of the bureaucratization of aid, foregrounding how people and

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communities personally experience disaster or conflict" (Pupavac, 2004, pp. 496–497). Since the 1990s, development donors and aid agencies have promoted the turn to "psychosocial programs" (Pupavac, 2004, p. 496), as reflected in a greater psychosocial focus on individual behavior (Howell, 2011). The incorporation of psychological concepts such as "agency," "empowerment," "behavioral change," "resilience," "self-efficacy," and "self-actualization" is evident in development policy and practice (De Vos, 2011; Klein & Ballon, 2018; Pupavac, 2004). The year 2015 marked a historic milestone in the recognition of mental health: the annual World Development Report of the World Bank had a specific focus on "Mind, Society and Behavior," and both the UN Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included mental health and well-being in their strategic plans (Izutsu et al., 2015). Psychological concepts and practices have come to play a key role in the construction and implementation of global development policies. However, the current embrace of psychological discourses and expertise within the field of development disciplines "remains largely undefined, untheorized and unproblematized" (Klein & Mills, 2017, p. 1991). This article focuses on how gender, here understood mainly as a psychological concept, pervades the global development discourse and is transferred, reconstructed, and manifested on local levels in rural Malawi, in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender is increasingly recognized as entailing multiple power relations; this approach has—unsurprisingly, "given the highly individualistic focus of psychology as a field" (Stewart, 2004, p. 522)—been little explored.

Here we note Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5): to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls as a main tool for eradicating global inequity. In Malawi, with its high rates of gender-based violence, child marriages, unintended teenage pregnancies, and girls dropping out of school, this policy is especially campaigned in its developmental context (Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare, 2013).

Background

In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations Millennium Summit Conference in New York with the wide-ranging vision of, among other goals, providing worldwide education and ending global poverty by 2015. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were derived from this campaign, all targeting different international development agendas. In announcing MDG3, gender equality and the empowerment of women became a top-priority development objective. This approach was nothing new as such: the "gender turn" had been employed by global development actors since the 1970s (Jackson & Pearson, 2005). However, the "Smart Economics" of the late 1990s intensified the joint effects of pairing gender equality with economic development (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). In the wake of the MDG3 agenda, international, state, and non-state organizations followed up by passing various motions supporting the approach (Chaaban & Cunningham, 2011; Temin & Levine, 2009). A new discursive field promoting agency, self-efficacy, and individual freedom emerged (Hickel, 2014). In 2009, the US-based Center for Global Development (Temin & Levine, 2009) issued the report "Start with a Girl: A New Agenda for Global Health," urging donors and civil society organizations to scale up their work on addressing girls' well-being—which, it was assumed, would serve to accelerate economic and social

development. Declarations like "Women and girls are one of the world's greatest untapped resources and a terrific return on investment" (Quinn, 2010, para. 13) and "Help empower women around the world to reach their full potential" ("Women's empowerment," 2017, para. 1) came to dominate the development discourse (Hickel, 2014; Switzer, Bent, & Endsley, 2016). In 2015, following up the MDGs, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, 2019), ensuring the previous strategy and adding a more ambitious, integrated, and extended list of goals and sub-targets. With SDG5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," the agenda further established the next 15 years of global focus on women and gender in development discourse and implementation. Many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) adopted programs specifically focused on women and girls ("Because I am a girl," 2017; Our story, 2018; Save the Children, 2019).

Several international organizations maintain that empowering women in the Global South is necessary to eradicate global poverty (Chaaban & Cunningham, 2011; UNICEF, 2015). However, critics, opposing the discontinuity between vision and ideology, fear that this approach ignores the structural drivers of poverty, such as poor public services, lack of infrastructure, "debt, tax evasion, labor exploitation, financial crisis and corruption in the global governance system" (Hickel, 2014, p. 1356), and ignores the social, political, and economic rights of women and girls (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Klein (2016) maintains that hollow slogans like "gender equality" and "empowerment" obscure the power processes of neoliberalism and colonialism. Further, Boyd (2016, p. 150) argues: "'gender equality' is being discursively instrumentalized as an expedient for development and together, re-instrumentalized as an alibi for economic growth". By turning the women of the Global South into "entrepreneurial subjects" (Koffman & Gill, 2013, p. 89), development agencies and NGOs hope they will serve as catalysts for economic growth (Calkin, 2016; Hickel, 2014), seeing them as the "means to development rather than as ends in and of themselves" (Moeller, 2014, p. 577). However, there have been few studies on how psychological expertise and concepts are applied in the field of global development (Klein & Mills, 2017). Further, although scholars and civil society organizations have questioned the discourse of "gender equality" and "empowerment" in the context of the global policy framework, they have "usually stopped short of reflection on how these concepts have acquired their meanings" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 399). In this study, we aim to improve this situation by focusing on psychological conceptions of gender, seeing empowerment as a tool to achieve gender equality.

The Malawian context

Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries. With more than 60% of its total health expenditure financed by donor aid (Chansa & Pattnaik, 2018) and a high presence of international NGOs, it has been called a "donor darling" (Koch, 2007, p. 1) and has experienced "NGO-mania" (Kloster, 2015). These organizations contextualize and display global development policies such as the SDG5 through campaigns, conferences, interventions, and the mass media. Impoverished rural Malawi provides an environment where many of these policies are carried out. This context also offers a setting that helps explain

how psychological concepts such as gender permeate broader development objectives, and how the concept is understood and contextualized locally.

Most of the participants in this study of two rural Malawian communities are of the ethnic Yao group, mainly Muslim, and living in the south of Malawi; some are a mix of Chewa, Ngoni, and Lomwe, generally adhering to Christianity. Yao communities follow a matrilineal marriage system, traditional in the southern regions, where rights to property are secured by daughters inheriting their mothers' land (Kishindo, 2004). Upon marriage, men move to the natal villages of their wives; in case of divorce, they are the ones who move, leaving the land and property to their wives (Verheijen, 2013). Nevertheless, as women are traditionally excluded from the labor market, they do the unpaid domestic work and thus have to rely on men for economic support (Verheijen, 2013).

On the national level, "gender equality" is established within the state constitution and "women's empowerment" is institutionalized. The Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (2013), as well as key funders, international NGOs, and the mass media all stress "empowerment" as imperative for enabling women and girls to get an education, engage in family planning, acquire agency, and achieve independence (Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare, 2013). In the Chichewa language, gender is translated as "not differentiating between men and women at work." And as Riley and Dodson (2016, p. 1050) point out, the term gender has developed "as a ChiChewa word in its own right, even appearing in a dictionary as 'jenda' with an annotation that it is originally an English word", translated as "gender equality." Thus, in Malawi gender is constructed as a practice people *do* to reduce gender inequity.[1]

Theoretical tool: Concept creep

Haslam (2016, p. 2) offers a useful framework—*concept creep*—for explaining the semantic changes that several psychological concepts have undergone, involving both vertical and horizontal expansions, where the altered meanings have "looping effects on how people make sense of themselves personally and collectively". In this process, concepts continue to refer to the original phenomena while they, quantitatively and qualitatively, are expanded to include a new range of additional phenomena. Based on Haslam's theoretical framework, we discuss gender as an instance of *concept creep.* The elastic meanings of gender as presented in this article may be understood as expanding, both vertically and horizontally, and include looping effects on individuals' self-understanding in the societal contexts where the concept is introduced.

Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted by the first author together with a research assistant, here referred to as "Mercy." Mercy has extensive research experience, and speaks both Chiyao and Chichewa, the major languages in the area. The fieldwork, conducted in the rural south of Malawi between April and August 2017, was based on informal interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with villagers. The normal ethical standards were followed: we acquired research permits, informed consent from participants, and maintained participants' anonymity.

Setting

The research site is a rural agricultural area with two neighboring villages. The district was selected and approved in collaboration with the local authorities, chosen on the basis of certain criteria: a mixed ethnic population, economic hardship, poor infrastructure, low school enrollment, high level of school drop-outs, early marriage, and unplanned teenage pregnancies (Population Reference Bureau, 2014)—all targeted by NGOs conducting gender-equality programs and interventions. Members of the community were informed of the research project by the village chiefs.

Participants

Most participants were from the Yao ethnic group; the remainder were a mix of Chewa, Ngoni, and Lomwe. Ages ranged from 18 to above 50: this allowed for political and societal changes such as law reforms, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, governmental and NGO interventions, to be seen through different life contexts. Participants live primarily off income from farming, small businesses, and piecework; households are large, with four to eight children; nine out of ten households cook over fires, and only 5% have access to electricity (Hivos People Unlimited, 2009). Most of our informants had never enrolled in primary school, or had dropped out. Further, most of them reported that they suffered from high levels of poverty and struggled to cover their basic needs—food, medicine, clothing, and school fees.

Data collection

Informal interviews, FGDs, and in-depth interviews were chosen, as these methods are generative for studying people's experiences and understandings of social phenomena within a given cultural context (Mason, 2002). In total, 34 informal interviews, 5 FGDs, and 6 in-depth interviews were conducted. For 14 weeks prior to the arrival of the first author, Mercy paid daily visits to the villages: this gave the community a chance to get informed and develop an understanding of us and the project. Mercy's interaction in everyday talks and tasks helped to create mutual trust between us and the communities, enabling us to work *within* the local context. We also hoped that this would lessen the possibility of our objectives being confused with the work of NGOs in the area. As each household was involved, the 34 informal interviews created a data foundation that informed us about a population who were led by the same chief and were targeted by the same NGOs. Because the NGOs' "gender equality" programs primarily target women and girls, the first author and Mercy agreed to focus on contacting female community members. Of the 34 informal interviews, 24 were conducted with women. These interviews were organic, intuitive, and dependent on aspects such as the availability and willingness of community members. Often Mercy helped out with daily duties while chatting about their everyday lives: there was no specific time structure. The intention was to engage with and acknowledge all households, and to build a sample based on informants who might later be interested in elaborating and sharing experiences and thoughts in dialogue with us. Participants were asked to participate in FGDs based on

information from the informal interviews and previous discussions with Mercy on topics that included experiences with development, gender, empowerment, NGOs, marriage, divorce, schooling, and dropping out of school. None of these topics or terms were explained or defined by us in advance.

The FGDs, as well as the informal and in-depth interviews, were guided by questions such as "what is development," "how do you understand gender," "is gender something you do or something you have," "can you explain the word empowerment," and "do you follow cultural practices." Here, "empowerment" and "cultural practices" served to trigger discussions on gender, as these topics are widely used in NGO interventions; however, they are not the object for analysis as such in this article. The FGDs were composed of male and female adults and young adults gathered separately. This dynamic was selected in order to encompass the nuances in individual experiences and understandings of gender and generations. The dividing of gender and age presumably reduced potential hierarchy effects between young adults and middle-aged men and women. Before starting the FGDs, we introduced the research project and ourselves. Participants joined voluntarily, and all were informed about the nature of the study, after which, they signed a consent form. We conducted two mixed-gender FGDs with young adults—three men and three women. The two women-only FGDs involved four and six participants; and one FGD was conducted with five men. Next, participants from each focus group were invited to take part in in-depth interviews, based on their experience and interest in the topics discussed. The six in-depth interviews involved three men and three women. All FGDs and in-depth interviews were scheduled in advance and were held in the local community building; all lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim in English. In the interviews and FGDs, the first author asked questions in English. These were translated into Chichewa and/or Chiyao by Mercy, who then wrote down the participants' replies. These were immediately translated into English for the first author, who then asked follow-up questions in English.

Analysis

We conducted a "theoretical" thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is both theoretically flexible and suited for research on under-studied topics such as local people's conceptions of the gendered development discourse and its impact on the social and relational context in their communities. Because of language and cultural differences, we found that this approach allowed us to code the material for explicit research questions such as "how do gender interventions change local perceptions and/or behaviour?" using a semantic level that centered on the broader meanings of the themes. The FGDs were situated in a context in which the participants had shared experiences of everyday life, so there was little variation in the level of reciprocal understanding about the themes. For example, most participants explained gender in noticeably similar ways and spoke of similar experiences regarding the impact of gender.

After thorough and repeated readings of the transcripts, all material was coded into NVivo 11 and organized under thematic titles. Relevant excerpts were gathered under

titles and sub-titles, and central themes (such as "the role of men/women," "doing/not doing gender") were identified and conceptualized. This thematic ranking was further moderated and reduced, to sharpen the focus. In the analysis below, we illustrate the themes with representative statements made by participants, to indicate the broader reoccurring patterns in the material. Pseudonyms are used for the names of quoted participants.

Patterns and themes

Generally, participants agreed that *gender* is part of development introduced by various international and national NGOs implementing programs in the villages. Most participants saw the shift to *gender* as related to work and daily practices previously tied to separate gendered roles, such as construction work, farming, cooking, washing, and cleaning. Of the initial 34 informal interviews, 30 generally defined *gender* as being a man and woman working together in activities like construction, farming, digging, cooking, and childcare. This understanding of *gender* was further confirmed in the FGDs and in-depth interviews. This quote from Ernest illustrates the *gender* message NGOs communicate to the village members: "Most of them say there should be no difference between men's work and women's work." Thus, *gender* could be understood as "not differentiating between men and women at work" and the Chichewan "jenda" translated as "gender equality."

Five recurrent themes and negotiations were identified: men and "nowadays there is *gender*"; women and *gender* nowadays; doing/not doing *gender*; "there is no *gender* in this village"; and *gender* and witchcraft." These themes capture the complex, contextual, and sometimes conflicting ideas about what *gender* can represent in everyday life in rural Malawi. However, these constructions of *gender* also illuminate and challenge the wider gender discourse outside rural Malawi which sees gender as universal, general, and individual. We hold that gender has undergone what Haslam (2016) calls "concept creep." Using accounts from village participants, we will show how gender has expanded horizontally and vertically, with qualitatively and quantitatively changed meanings of gender.

Men and "nowadays there is gender"

Although the vast majority of participants felt good about the concept of *gender*, indicating that it made life better, opinions varied as to whether and to what extent *gender* works. The following quotes show how male participants perceived *gender* as communicated by NGOs:

> *Blessings*: When NGOs come with some work in the village they speak of *gender*, saying that nowadays there is *gender* so let us all participate in this, or let's work together, men and women—so we started to understand.

> *Happy*: Maybe men were selfish, thinking "a woman cannot do this while I can," but the NGOs they have helped us to start to understand what *gender* is. We can say that it starts from the high level, and then comes to the low level, because it has come from you people [the first author/Mercy].

These men mention the encouragement from NGOs when bringing *gender* to the villages as being something new. Further, "the high level" and "you people" refers to the first author and Mercy, a white woman and an English-speaking Malawian woman. This notion stresses the characteristics of *gender* as coming from people who are different from them. In addition, *gender* is made to mean something that can be understood with help from others from outside the villages. Not doing *gender* is seen as egoistic—and it can be argued that selfishness is opposed to the African cosmological and philosophical principle of *Ubuntu* (Ashforth, 2005a; Gade, 2011; Holdstock, 2013; Venter, 2004). *Ubuntu* implies "a person is a person through other people" (Ashforth, 2005b, p. 85); the Malawian *uMunthu* is defined by Bandawe (2010) as, "I am because you are, and because you are, therefore I am" (p. 19). Further, "If a person acts selfish, rough and cruel he is said to possess bad spirits" (Layman, 2002, p. 30). Selfishness is culturally rejected as something disturbing and disruptive (Lwanda, 2004). To think of oneself first, and not think of others, finds scant approval in a culture where people, often due to poverty, must depend on the compassion and generosity of others (Swidler, 2013). These men see *gender* more as a perspective, a principle, a practice, and a way of living, desirable also for its moral aspects. Consequently, *gender* can be conceived as a *method* that can be thought and learned.

Women and gender nowadays

Women see *gender* as something extraneous and new, which they highlight with concrete examples of how *gender* has been opening up new ways of dealing with the mundane tasks of everyday life.

> *Tamanda:* If you see a man going to fetch water or if the women are talking about themselves they say, "there is *gender* nowadays."
> *Lindiwe:* Look at those women cutting down a tree—that is *gender*. Felling trees used to be work for men, but now even women can do it.
> *Dorothy:* In the past, there was some work that was especially for women, and some work for men—but when *gender* came, that's when we started working together.

Changes in the division of labor have shown these women that daily practices that used to be only for women/only for men have, with the onset of *gender*, become shared work that both men and women can do. *Gender* came, opening up new ways of living that these women appreciate.

Similarly, in one focus group:

> *First author:* What is the best thing about gender?
> *Alysha:* It helps you to know what you are doing and also where you are. Best of all, when you don't have money you can know that "ok I can do this on my own without paying [a man] to do it."
> *Fredah:* it [*gender*] is everywhere all over the world. Now people are realizing "oh! This is not only for men, we can do it, too," and so it is everywhere.
> *Olivia:* Other people think that some jobs are for men only, but that's not true, they are for both men and women. Building a bathroom, for example—if we get divorced we can do things like that on our own.

Women speak of *gender* as something we can be made aware of and can understand. They point out how "doing *gender*" makes them less vulnerable and more independent. This newfound agency is appreciated as being empowering and liberating.

Thus, according to these women, *gender* seems to have the intended effect of gender equality that policymakers and NGOs promote. On the whole, the general impression was that *gender* makes life easier.

Doing and not doing gender

According to West and Zimmerman (1987) gender is not something we are or have, but something we decide to do, repeatedly, again and again on an everyday basis. This in turn gives rise to the question, "can we ever *not* do gender?" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137).

In these villages, the concept of gender is in line with West and Zimmerman's (1987) view of being something we *do*.

> *Kennedy:* We have *gender* in the village, we do work together with women.
> *Ernest:* Even at school, they always put [pupils] together a boy and a girl, saying that "it is *gender*, you need to be doing *gender*."
> *Alysha:* You can even see men pounding maize meal like women do, so that's part of *gender*.

These statements illustrate the broad consensus among participants that *gender* is something one "does" that involves sharing responsibilities and work. *Gender* is for everyone, and can be "done" together. In other words, in these villages, *gender* is not seen as something we "do" alone, but is negotiated as a collective activity to benefit collective goods, such as time- and money-saving practices, help, care, and support with child raising. However, *gender* is also mentioned as something that is *not* done. Happy, a young male focus group participant, explains how *gender* is not done:

> Like here at the village, normally [NGOs] focus on girls only, not the boys. [The boys] don't get jealous, they just accept that is what the NGOs have decided. That is not part of *gender*, had it really been *gender* it could have been helping both men and women.

NGOs play a major role in the communication of global and national development policies. Women's equality, education for girls, and gender mainstreaming has long been a primary goal of the government and many international and national NGOs in Malawi. In the pursuit of gender equality, their interventions have often focused solely on women and girls, as highlighted in the quote above. Our participants see *gender* as a value that is supposed to benefit everyone, but, as Happy notes, the one-sided focus on girls "is not part of *gender*." He sees *gender* as a *common* interest, so excluding the one sex is "not *gender*." What he notes is the discrepancy between what NGOs *say*, promoting *gender*, and what NGOs actually *do*, focusing only on girls. Policy implementers and NGOs contradict themselves and create ambiguous meanings of what gender involves, by constructing gender categories that constrain and reinforce the unequal dichotomy they were designed to open up.

Failing to "do gender"

Men and women alike see *gender* and "doing *gender*" as benefitting both sexes. However, the greater focus on girls and school attendance may end up having negative effects on girls' self-esteem and their perceptions of themselves.

> *Fredah*: Mostly [NGOs] want [girls] to continue their studies so that they shouldn't get pregnant quickly, that's why they focus a lot on the girls.

Fredah went on to explain that women alone are seen as being responsible for their pregnancies, and many female participants report being deserted by their husbands and left with full responsibility for their children. When schoolgirls become pregnant, it often results in their dropping out of school in order to care for their child.

Gladys, a 19-year-old schoolgirl, further elaborates on why this is problematic:

> [Girls] feel they tried and failed . . . they get pregnant, and maybe sometimes they might just lack some food, sometimes they lack soap or body lotion and then they decide to drop out. They just stay in the village. It's the woman who has a problem, she's the one carrying the baby, while the man is just free, he does not have to do anything. Maybe that's why boys go to school but girls don't.

Participants speak of dropping out of school as signifying failure; "*just staying*" is a common expression amongst youth referring to their inability to get on with their lives (Classen, 2013). Mary, a 25-year-old single mother, describes this existential dilemma:

> I'd always been a good girl, very quiet, and had turned 25 without having a boyfriend. This was my first one. He just got me pregnant, ignored the responsibility. Because of the pregnancy, I was very weak and tired and failed to help my mother with selling her donuts at the market, so I did not have any success last year.

In the above excerpts, the obligations connected to *gender* cause a quandary. Because of governmental and NGO incentives, with their strong focus on keeping girls in school, becoming pregnant and dropping out are associated with failure. Informants report that there is now a law: if a girl gets pregnant and drops out, she or the parents will have to pay a fine to the village chief or local police. In a society where assets and money are scarce, a fine not only signals misconduct, it also has direct economic implications. With the pressure from society and various NGOs, the individual agency and behavior of girls become everybody's business. Additionally, with this focus, NGOs implicitly communicate that girls are responsible and accountable for their reproductive behavior. Thus, contradictory to the greater equality that gender interventions are intended to foster, girls who drop out of school may not only face a fine, but also be left with the stigma of failure. Moreover, this one-sided way of assigning gendered responsibilities like pregnancies onto women and girls legitimizes the irresponsible behavior of the men who abandon them with the sole responsibility of child-rearing. Accordingly, though "doing *gender*" is conceptualized as sharing duties, also linked to domestic chores, the unequal load of responsibility in terms of pregnancies and parenthood seem to benefit men's

individual freedom. Consequently, while men who fail to "do *gender*" face less responsibility, the absence of *gender* penalizes women.

"There is no gender in this village"

The previous section noted the dos and don'ts of *gender*. What, then, of the absence of *gender*? All focus groups stated that there was *gender* in the villages; however, in individual interviews, several women said there was "no *gender*" in their communities. This absence was explained in terms of the gendered division of labor, and lack of mutual respect and responsibility between the sexes in domestic work. As Elisa, a middle-aged woman, put it, "There is no *gender* in the village because there are specific jobs for women and for men."

When *gender* is perceived as something that one must "do" repeatedly in order to maintain and regulate the balance between the sexes, it is not difficult to understand the widely shared perception among participants that *gender* would disappear if they "stopped doing it"—if they stopped sharing work and responsibilities, *gender* would also stop. Naile explains:

> There is no *gender* in this community. If you get sick, it's usually your neighbor who takes care of you. The men just sleep—you can work together in the field, but when you come home they just look at you while you do the cooking. When a woman is sick, the men often run away, but if the husband is sick his wife is the one who takes care of him.

Here, Naile relates an experience familiar to many women: even when they fall ill, their husbands count on them to manage the household. She also notes the solidarity among women, where neighboring women help out. Naile concludes that the existence of *gender* cannot be explained by the presence of a few specific practices, such as allowing women access to arenas previously unavailable to them. If *gender* really existed, men would help their wives with the cooking after working in the field together *and* would show compassion when they are unwell.

Lindiwe, a newly divorced mother of three, says she did not "have *gender*" in her marriage, and she sheds light on the patriarchal structure that constitutes life for many Malawian women:

> Most of the men they just wake up and then sit down, without caring that maybe they have some kids, they just wake up and then maybe go to play Bawo-game, and then come back without thinking of their responsibilities.

Here, Lindiwe refers to how men do not feel responsibility for their children—a point made by many female participants—and to the gendered inequity many women experience with regard to household work. "Bawo" is a board game popular among both men and women in East Africa; thus, the imbalance she describes is the equation of free time versus responsibility and domestic work. Contradictory to the idea of *gender* as a method that focuses solely on the inclusion of women, we found wide agreement among participants that *gender* is connected to the inclusion or exclusion of women *and* men in work, household, responsibilities, etc. However, there is some dissonance in how men and

women perceive the private and the official *gender*. Men talk of *gender* as a good that they themselves and the community as a whole benefit from, and they say they realize that they can "help" in the household if the woman is away or if she is ill. Women also talk of *gender* as something good: but they acknowledge the lack of *gender* in the private sphere. They agree that women are now allowed, even welcomed, to do "men's work," and that women's inclusion in labor reduces work hours and streamlines productivity—but women are still responsible for the majority of domestic work. More porous gender roles enable shared work outside the household, but do not seem to apply to domestic work. On the whole, then, *gender* appears to benefit men more than women. This is a highly relevant point, as global gender-equality policies and NGO gender-promoting programs are designed to foster women's participation by reducing gendered practices.

Gender and witchcraft

In Malawi, as in many other African countries and cultures, many people believe in *Ufiti*, often translated as "witchcraft" (Holdstock, 2013; Leistner, 2014) or "sorcery" (Mbiti, 1990; Murrey, 2017). Witchcraft and "the sense of insecurity the term indicates permeates virtually every aspect of life" (Ashforth, 2018, p. 365). From birth to death, life is defined and confined by the permanent threat of spiritual insecurity, and the fear of witchcraft attacks compels people to take a whole range of precautions (Ashforth, 2005b). The Association for Secular Humanism, a Malawian NGO, defines witchcraft-related violence as "behavior that is intended to hurt or kill another person. Violence need not be physical. It may be economic, social, psychological or sexual" (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012, p. 8). Witchcraft has actual and critical consequences for people, and considerable time and effort go into circumventing witchcraft and protecting oneself from it (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011).

Several participants told us how traditional love potions and witchcraft explain why men do not help out with domestic chores. Many women regard the use of love potions as a justifiable way of getting their men to remain faithful and fulfill their role as fathers and husbands; men, however, often see this as a harmful act of witchcraft that violates their free will (Ashforth, 2018).

> *Kennedy:* Here, there is not *gender* like 100%. If people see a man doing the washing, [neighbors] would think that maybe the woman used some magical charms to get him to do it. But if the woman is away, then he can do the washing, because [neighbors] would understand that his wife was not there.
> *Fredah:* Other people [neighbors] can think that maybe you've used some love potion, to get your own husband to help you in the house.

These excerpts refer to the use of traditional love potions, generally said to be used to manipulate people to get them to perform various acts. The reasoning is that men can do women's work only under the influence of love medicines *or* if the woman is not around. The woman's role is to take care of the household; when a man takes part in daily housework, he is "helping out" or helping himself, rather than actually sharing the responsibility.

There are many ways to protect oneself from acts of witchcraft, but there are also many ways in which this protection can be broken. Sylvia explains how daily practices can be apportioned between the sexes in order to avoid witchcraft:

> Only farming, they [men and women] could farm together—but washing and cooking, no, they [men] say that is why they married you, so that you can manage the home. And otherwise, people believe that a man should not touch a cooking stick, because that would stop any protection he might have against [witchcraft attack] . . . the cooking stick washes it away. Also, if [neighbors] see your husband doing that, they think that you have used traditional medicine to get him to do household chores.

Sylvia points to the "organization" of marriage, how men expect their wives to do the household work. Further, she describes breaking gender norms as colliding and conflicting with witchcraft. Many everyday practices are related to protection from witchcraft attacks: where this belief is practiced, men are not supposed to do the cooking because of the impending threat of witchcraft spells. That means that if a woman gets her husband to help with cooking, she can be blamed for using love medicine on him, or for trying to get him to ruin his protection against witchcraft.

Discussion

In their article on gender and development discourses in relation to food security in urban Malawi, Riley and Dodson (2016) hold that discourses of gender illustrate how interventions aimed at fostering gender equality are inescapably intertwined with contextual knowledge. They maintain that the conception of "*gender*, including its spatial connotations as something exogenous to Malawi and specifically associated with urban life" (Riley & Dodson, 2016, p. 1057), derives from a mixture of colonial/postcolonial gender constructions, and today's global discourses of gender equality and human rights. Similar to our study, Riley and Dodson's participants report *gender* as being a new phenomenon that has come from the outside. For the majority, it brings positive social change, in which the rigid divisions between male and female duties and daily activities are relaxed somewhat. However, while men speak positively about greater gender egalitarianism in the public sphere, women note the reversion to traditional gender roles in the private sphere. Interestingly, Riley and Dodson's urban participants mention that lack of education and backwardness in rural villages might result in suspicions of men who perform female duties because of "love medicines."

Although the findings of our study share similarities with Riley and Dodson's (2016) urban research, the main differences remain important. Among their participants there was broad consensus on *gender* as a progressive civilized urban phenomenon linked to educational level, and thus assumed to be less prevalent in rural societies. However, the participants in our rural study report "doing *gender*" as part of everyday village life. Thus, it would appear, the meaning-making of gendered life is—if not directly, at least indirectly and abstractly—constitutive of people's lives, also in rural Malawi.

For reporting on the occurrence and extent of gender equality, "gender accounting" (Classen, 2013, p. 226) is an effective measure that reduces the complexity of "gender

equality" to an individual level that is countable and reportable (see also Shore & Wright, 2015). This method quantifies by simplifying "gender parameters" in a way that disregards the circumstantially defined strategies that men and women use to navigate a fundamentally unequal society. Such context-specific and often creative approaches to "gender inequality" are therefore missed because of ignorance or lack of contextual understanding (Classen, 2013). Data from our fieldwork support this insight: our analysis shows how gender is variously constructed to fit the context of these rural villages.

The rural Malawian practice of gender is positioned in the midst of a complex and dynamic process highly imbricated in historical, geographical, cultural, economic, and ideological contexts in which global, societal, and individual development is central. The complex characteristics of gender make interpretation and understanding of the concept circumstantial, creative, and sometimes contradictory, as seen in the various interviews and focus groups. In many ways the local use of *gender* exceeds the narrow account practiced by the state and NGOs operating in the villages.

Drawing on Haslam's (2016) theoretical account and our own analysis, we argue that the academic concept of gender has undergone a concept creep. Within the interrelationship of psychology, development theory and practice, and societal change, gender has expanded, vertically and horizontally, into new contexts, with looping effects on how individuals in rural Malawian villages "make sense of themselves personally and collectively" (Haslam, 2016, p. 2). Further, with regard to Haslam's (2016) framework, we contend that, even though gender per se is not seen as a particularly negative concept, this "concept creep" may indicate how and why the alteration of gender may entail negative effects.

Referring to the human rights movements that target inequality with regard to women and minorities, Haslam (2016) maintains that "concept creep" may be connected to broader cultural and societal shifts. Our study participants in rural Malawi note that *gender* came to their villages not long ago. This leads back to global development changes in general, and societal changes in Malawi more specifically. During Kamuzu Banda's more than 30 years of one-party rule, foreign organizations were basically not allowed to operate within the country. It was only with the end of his dictatorship in 1994 that Malawi opened its borders to international organizations (Thornton, Pierotti, Young-DeMarco, & Watkins, 2014), mainly for assistance with the rampant HIV epidemic; the number of operating NGOs has grown since then (Morfit, 2011). In Malawi's new democratic constitution, social, cultural, and economic rights were included under the "right to development"; and the "right to gender equality" was declared an explicit principle, recognized in several international treaties (Riley & Dodson, 2016). This was probably also a result of the mainstreaming of the "gender and development" movement in the 1990s in which global development policy and practice promoted "gender equality" as the new paradigm (Hickel, 2014). Gender came to Malawi and these villages due to societal changes; and, as the concept trickled down from the global to the national and local levels, its meaning changed—now referring both to the legal right to "gender equality," and to social ideas of how men and women could benefit by practicing it.

The most prominent conceptual change of gender has been *horizontal*. While gender has kept its original academic definition, the concept has spread horizontally from the psychological definition concerning gendered individuals, to the focus in development theory and policy on women's inclusion, and to the Chichewan concept of not

differentiating between men and women at work, referring to a specific "doing" in a specific place.

Gender as promoted by foreign and national NGOs in Malawi has been applied in a new context, as confirmed by our participants. They experience *gender* as a new way of living that has come mainly through the arrival of NGOs, and from people who are different from them. *Gender* is seen as something that enables men and women to share work and responsibility, and which pays off in collective goods like time-efficiency and saving money. With this qualitative stretch, gender has come to be associated with normative concepts such as "moral," "responsibility," and "agency," in turn connoting managerial concepts of "time," "money," "efficiency," and the like. We found that *gender* is regarded as a perspective, principle, practice, a way of living—not as an inherent, dichotomous human category. Unlike the original psychological concept, *gender* is here intuitively understood as a *collective incentive*.

The individualistic–collectivistic contrast is also evident in the *vertical* extension. Most of our study participants felt positively about *gender* and its "effects." Men generally appreciated the time-efficiency aspect, as did women, who also valued their newfound agency. However, the instrumental ways in which NGOs teach gender sometimes create ambiguous understandings, leading to contradictory consequences. In the villages, it is commonly said that *gender* now allows women into areas of work previously restricted to men—but women still bear the burden of most household work. With the inclusion of women, *gender* streamlines work previously done exclusively by men, meaning that women spend more time working, and men less. This is not specific to rural Malawi: around the world, most unpaid domestic labor is still done by women, reflecting both what is defined as "work" and their inferior social position. That is indeed the opposite of what NGOs argue they intend to achieve by promoting "gender equality." Further, unlike development theory and practice, where gender is seen as being closely related to the mainstreaming of "gender equality" and the inclusion of women, our rural Malawian participants understand *gender* as involving *both* sexes. When *gender* is regarded as a means to reach a common goal, the exclusion of either sex may be perceived as a lack of *gender*. The one-sided NGO focus on women may, instead of promoting "gender equality," lead to *not* practicing *gender*, as seen by the local population. "Not doing *gender*" is connected to irresponsible and selfish behavior, as generally stated by female participants with reference to men. This way of understanding gender extends the NGOs' narrow implementation of it, with new approaches to what men and women can do and expect from each other and from society. In FGDs in our study, both men and women expressed notions of gender egalitarianism, but privately, women stressed continued adherence to traditional gender roles. This might be explained by the wish to provide socially acceptable answers in line with development discourses. Also, as indicated in the analysis, *not* "doing *gender*" is regarded as egoistic, in turn making it difficult to accuse others openly of this. We see this as an example of *vertical* expansion, where NGO interventions result in indefinite and less stringent perceptions of what gender may or may not represent.

With the global policy pressure from world organizations and donors, NGOs commit to achieve "gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls." This pressure is placed on individual women and especially on girls, to not become pregnant, to

graduate from school, and to escape structural poverty. The individual behavior and agency of girls becomes a common interest. The heavy focus on school attendance is further extended on the local level, where participants report that girls who drop out of school must pay a fine to the local police, signaling their sole responsibility for such "misconduct." However, in a society where poverty is prevalent, with inefficient infrastructure and little access to electricity and other amenities, dropping out of school is often not a personal choice but a consequence of cultural, social, and economic problems. Girls who drop out "fail" to meet certain standards. Contradictory to "gender equality," these girls now face increased inequity, associated with their own individual behavior. Additionally, while the one-sided focus on girls' reproductive behavior implicitly furthers the idea of pregnancy as being the girl's responsibility, the bias in a way simultaneously rewards men who do not "do *gender*" by deserting their responsibility as fathers. Consequently, the individual focus on gender may indirectly justify male independence while assigning even more expectations and responsibility to women and girls already struggling to cope in a society permeated with inequity. The "doing" of *gender* also conflicts with cultural beliefs in witchcraft and traditional love medicine. As these components permeate almost every aspect of Malawian life, and as *gender* is connected to everyday life practices, *gender* will inevitably come into conflict with witchcraft and protection against witchcraft. Thus, "doing *gender*" is not only manifested in the mundane activities of ordinary life: it may also shed light on gendered differences connected to the supernatural aspects of life. Although the prevalence of witchcraft in Malawi and its harmful consequences have been thoroughly documented by many social anthropologists (see Ashforth, 2018; Englund, 2007), the village chief reported that none of the NGOs active in the communities we studied acknowledged witchcraft or tried to deal with it. Thus, in ignoring the well-documented fact that witchcraft is especially harmful for women and children (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011; Reis, 2013), these NGOs show their ignorance of local and contextual inequalities that further subordinate women and children.

According to Haslam (2016), the popularity of a concept may help to explain why it gains impact, creeps, and conquers new semantic fields. Concepts that appeal particularly to researchers and practitioners have a greater chance of spreading into new forms and contexts. Thus, the influence of psychology on adjacent disciplines and institutional practices may account for why gender, paired with concepts like empowerment, agency, and equality, has expanded rather than contracted. Further, definitions of concepts that describe humans and human activity are bound to be in constant change (Haslam, 2016). Gender, which is applicable to all humans in one way or another, may well be one of the most adopted, least stable, and most shifting concepts in operation. The wide range of scientific disciplines, international organizations, and development agencies that are involved in human activity, apply a range of interpretations of gender and gendered attributes into an infinite variety of places and spaces.

As researchers from Norway, one of the world's most gender-equal societies, we find it imperative to reflect upon our own positionality when engaging in settings where structural inequality permeates all aspects of life. These fundamentally diverse backgrounds and experiences pose limitations on *what* and *how* we can attempt to understand about life in rural Malawi in general and gendered life in particular. Despite the risk of

adopting a Western interpretative prerogative, we hope to be able to shed light on some of the issues that emerge when we talk of "others" and how the "others" may reflect our own taken-for-granted assumptions. This study has neither intended nor claimed to show how manhood and womanhood are understood in rural Malawi today: rather, we have sought to explain some of the contextual and non-universal characteristics of the "universal" concept of gender. Further ethnographical studies would enable a deeper description, fostering an understanding of the various ways in which gender is negotiated, and how individuals actually act in relation to gender.

Conclusion

Our analysis has shown how the idea of *gender* as collectively regulated in shared work and participation is far broader than the individual concept used in Western psychology. These portrayed constructions of *gender* and the account of "concept creep" regarding gender have relevance for the wider gender discourse beyond rural Malawi. Our participants' ideas of *gender* show how something generally defined as inherent, individual, and universal may experience concept creep, shifting its meaning to refer to a method involving cooperation that in turn results in collective goods. In the Chichewa language, gender is in itself a collective idea, referring to shared work and responsibility. However, in Malawi, as throughout the world, women's access to traditionally male-dominated spheres does not seem to lift the load of unpaid labor from their shoulders. Indeed, with gender-equality interventions centered on individual girls and women, the focus may entail backlash, with these girls and women being held responsible and accountable for their own education and reproductive behavior. Although the introduction of gender has brought some positive changes to these communities, its implementation has also had potentially negative implications for women—and that merits further investigation. Psychology as a discipline, and development policy and practice should critically review their inter-connectedness, acknowledging the non-universal and contextual characteristics of our social lives.

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Note

1. Like Riley and Dodson (2016) we use gender in italics to illustrate the distinct local associations the term has in the context of our interviews.

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II

Making Meaning of Empowerment and Development in Rural Malawi—International Individualism Meets Local Communalism

Empowerment is a prominent concept in psychology, and for decades, it has been a key term in global development policy, theory, and practice. However, in line with similar turns toward individualism in psychology, the prevalent understanding of the concept centers on individual capacity to change circumstances, with less focus on empowerment as a context-dependent or communal approach. In this article, adopting decolonial feminist psychology as a lens, we analyze how rural Malawians make meaning of the overarching empowerment and development approach of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in their villages, and how they perceive the approaches as fitting with local contexts. When development implementers largely ignore Malawi's communal lifestyle, individualized empowerment initiatives can lead to individual and communal disempowerment and distress. Given psychology's large influence on other arenas, and psychology's implication with the individualized gender-development-empowerment nexus, we argue that it is imperative to explore the effects and experiences of this empowerment approach in different contexts. A more context-appropriate understanding of empowerment—as with most other psychological concepts—is needed.

Keywords: Decolonial feminist psychology, Coloniality of empowerment, Global development gender policies, NGOs, sub-Saharan Africa

Making Meaning of Empowerment and Development in Rural Malawi

As a dominant discipline in modern society, psychological theory and method permeate and influence many domains, discourses, and practices (Madsen, 2014). Notable is the predominance of the concept of *empowerment.* For decades, 'women's empowerment' has been among the top policy goals of bodies such as the UN and the World Bank, as evident in the UN Global Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3) and the 2015 UN 2030 Agenda. The latter includes Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5): to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, 2020). This global policy's focus on women's empowerment has inspired large-scale developmental interventions designed to empower women to escape poverty, mainly through educational initiatives (Pincock, 2018). However, the contextual and communal aspects of empowerment theorized by some community psychologists (see Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Rappaport, 1987), is rarely debated or practiced by development actors (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; Klein & Ballon, 2018). Rather, the dominant focus on the individual, prevalent in many Western psychological traditions (Adjei, 2019), has come to play a substantial role in development policy, theory, and practice (Klein, 2016). This is particularly manifested in non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) general tendency to center implementation of empowerment on individuals' agency and capacity to change their own circumstances (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; Rutherford, 2018); and less on systemic alterations or communal interventions.

In Malawi, many NGOs especially target rural communities for women and girls' empowerment, with individualized activities such as entrepreneurship-, vocational skills training and education. Using fieldwork data from two rural Malawian communities, and adopting a decolonial feminist psychology lens, we ask, how villagers see the overarching approaches of the NGOs, and how they perceive the NGO approaches as fitting with local context. Our material indicates that communal, rather than individualistic, approaches to

empowerment in development interventions would be a better fit with the social realities in question. The aim is not to pass judgment on specific NGOs, nor do we discuss specific interventions. Instead we explore overarching aspects the villagers brought up regarding the NGOs (such as the objectives of the NGOs and how and whom they select as beneficiaries), aiming to engage in important discussions of empowerment and context. The material provides opportunities to analyze and question the lack of context sensitivity in psychology-informed development work. This article thus speaks to the calls for more "context appropriate" (Adjei, 2015) approaches and research on community empowerment (see Keys, McConnell, Motley, Liao, & McAuliff, 2017). In line with the decolonial feminist psychology stance, we emphasize our own positionality from the get go: Being white, female Scandinavian researchers writing about mainly western NGOs lack of context-sensitivity in development work in Malawi, we want to emphasize two aspects: First, that the project was conducted in close collaboration with Malawians (both research assistant, and through active discussions with counterparts at the University of Malawi Chancellor College). Second, that our presentation and analysis—despite our active engagement with the context—ultimately still will be influenced by our closeness to Scandinavian forests and fjords, rather than to the Malawian plains and highlands. The article should be read with this in mind.

The Coloniality of Development and Empowerment

Empowerment approaches focusing on marginalized individuals and groups' psychological, political, sociological, organizational, and economic wellbeing have often been valued for their focus on collective resistance and action against structural inequality and political oppression (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Rappaport, 1987). Particularly, empowerment has been fronted as a way for women to organize, gain power and control, and "to challenge and eliminate their own subordination" (Adjei, 2015, p. 62). However, critiques note that in practice, such collective approaches have lost ground within social psychological science

(Phillips, Adams, & Salter, 2015), and arguably also within community psychology (Keys et al., 2017). Feminists psychologists argue that the Western discourse of individualization has been distributed—in the name of empowerment—and promoted by international development actors as the standard model for global South women and girls' self-actualization, yet with no incentives for larger structural and political transformations (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019; Rutherford, 2018; Távara, 2019). Additionally, while designed for marginalized women, these women generally have little or nothing to say in how "their empowerment" is organized. Nevertheless, many would accept the aid as they are in need (Segalo, Manoff, & Fine, 2015). Moreover, post-colonial critique coming from global South writers, argue that NGOs' "aid" and "development" missioning is a camouflaged colonial project (Sauke-Collins, 2020; Shivji, 2007). Taking a decolonial feminist psychological approach, we thus position ourselves within the stance that the development enterprise promotion of interventions modeled on hegemonic Western norms of neoliberal individualism—like individualized and gendered empowerment interventions—are manifestations of *coloniality* (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018, p. 205). That is, when hegemonic Western ways of being, seeing and knowing are continuously reproduced and decreedas standard norms, and imposed on non-Western societies—often ex-colonies—at the expense of their ways of being, seeing and knowing (Grosfoguel, 2002; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). As such, decolonial feminist psychological approaches, as we adopt here, challenge "models of the self that emphasize individual empowerment and abstraction from the context" (Estrada-Villalta & Adams, 2018, p. 204). Stressing the importance of critical decolonial psychology theory and action-research Segalo and Fine (2020, p. 5) maintain, "Decoloniality as a theory, as epistemology, and as an approach assists us to make sense of challenges that continue to confront us as humanity as a result of coloniality."

In this paper, using decolonial feminist psychology as a lens, our objective is to illuminate the coloniality of the prevailing "individualized empowerment ideology". Looking at how Western (psychological) assumptions of development and individualism travel through NGOs in the language of "empowerment", we ask rural Malawians targeted by these development practices, how they make meaning of them.

The Malawian Context

Some 84% of Malawi's population of around 18 million live in rural areas (WHO, 2019) depending predominantly on subsistence farming (Anderson, 2015). In 2010, 50% of the population were living below the poverty line, with 25% defined as extremely poor, unable to cover their nutritional needs (IMF, 2017). Low economic security and its linkage to NGOs is described by Swidler and Watkins (2017, p. xv) as "In a world of dire scarcity, of urgent struggles simply to live, villagers rationally adapt themselves to virtually any program, however nonsensical, that holds out even a hope of material gain." This creates a patron–client relationship where the patron defines supply and demand, and the clients cannot question either.

Malawian women do the major part of unpaid labor (MacIntyre et al., 2013) and largely depend on men for economic support (Verheijen, 2013). This leaves women with little influence over domestic, social, and political decision-making (Anderson, 2015; MacIntyre et al., 2013). Women's subordinate role makes them more vulnerable to HIV infection, structural and sexual violence, and with less access to necessities, literacy, and higher education (Anderson, 2015; MacIntyre et al., 2013; National Statistical Office (NSO), 2008). Nearly one third of Malawian girls aged 15–19 have been or are pregnant (NSO Malawi and ICF, 2017), and one out of two quit school before completing primary education (UNESCO, 2013). Many NGOs concentrate—in line with the SDG5's global agenda—on empowerment as a way of equipping women and girls with tools for making "better choices"

and "achieving better lives" (Adolfsson & Madsen, 2019). NGO activities focus on behavior change training in vocational skills, cash transfer programs, HIV prevention, education, and family planning (Baird, Chirwa, McIntosh, & Özler, 2010; Watkins, 2013).

Scholars on Africa have noted how the Zulu *Ubuntu* expression "a person is a person through other persons" captures the communal African understanding of the self (Adjei, 2019; Baloyi & Ramose, 2016). Given the communal principle, the individual personhood is morally dependent on reciprocal relations with others, that obligate family and friends to share and support each other in times of hardship (Sagner & Mtati, 1999)—ideals essential in societies lacking formal security nets (Lwanda, 2005). This embedded inter-dependence and connectedness with the communal forms the very understanding of the self (Kurtis & Adams, 2015; Mkhize, 2004; Ogbonnaya, 1994).

Method

To explore how rural Malawian villagers saw the overarching approaches of the NGOs, and how such approaches were seen as fitting with local contexts, we conducted thirty-four informal interviews; five focus group discussions (FGDs) and six in-depth interviews in a rural district of southern Malawi. We collected the data between April and August 2017. The fieldwork was carried out by the first author together with "Hannah", an experienced Malawian cultural guide and research assistant with extensive fieldwork experience in ethnographic methods.

Location and population

The research was conducted in two neighboring rural villages selected in collaboration with the local authorities. The people live primarily from informal trade, piecework, and small-scale farming. Many participants were illiterate. Many reported having to struggle to cover their basic needs. One chief oversaw both villages. According to the chief, there were ten NGOs operating in the villages at the time of our study, with projects

ranging from deforestation and agriculture, to cash transfer and savings/loans, orphanages, empowering girls, school attendance and household development (including training in family planning, food storage, long-term planning). Informants emphasized that most projects focused on teenage pregnancies and female empowerment through vocational training and education.

To avoid our project being confused with the NGOs operating in the area, Hannah based herself in the villages 14 weeks before the first author arrived. This enabled villagers to learn about our project and us as researchers. Hannah visited all households in both villages and conducted informal interviews only after establishing rapport. Visiting all the households—Hannah informed us—was important for not stirring up suspicions between households or villages. Hannah's stay and the first author's arrival were cleared with the chief; and their roles as researchers and the study's focus on NGOs development and empowerment approaches was presented to him and to the villagers. Hannah spent her days in the villages but lived elsewhere. When the first author arrived, Hannah and she shared accommodation in a nearby town, for three months, over two periods in 2017.

Sampling

Hannah's daily interaction with the community during the initial 14 weeks allowed her to reach out to all 34 households. At least one person from each family was interviewed. As the NGOs empowerment programs generally target women and girls—and us being particularly interested in hearing their voices—24 of the 34 informal interviews Hannah conducted were with female community members. All participants were aged 18 to 50 and above (after which they were not interested in specifying age), and worked as small-scale farmers, and with various informal business.

Interview Schedule

All interviews were conducted in Chichewa (national language) and/or the local

language Chiyao (villagers understood some or most of both languages). All interviews centered on topics concerning women's and girls' empowerment, development, individualized interventions, individual success, jealousy, cultural practices, and witchcraft. All participants had reflections and definitions of what "development" meant to them. Most participants were also familiar with the concept of "empowerment".

First, Hanna conducted the 34 informal interviews. Rather than scheduled in beforehand, these were often done in an organic way, and often while Hannah participated in the villagers' daily tasks. Hannah took notes during the interviews, later written up at home. Each interview lasted around an hour. From these 34 informal interviews, the first author and Hannah selected a sample of participants who they thought would be interested in participating in FGDs, based on their experiences and reflections on the discussed themes. We conducted five FGDs: two FGDs with four and six female participants respectively, age-span 30 to 50 and above in both groups; two FGDs with mixed-gender young adults with three women and three men in each; and finally, five men aged 30 to 50 and above in the last FGD. Our intention was to be able to grasp the nuances of experiences across gender and generations (see McLafferty, 2004).

Subsequently, we invited a diverse sample of FGD? participants to participate in in-depth interviews. We conducted six in-depth interviews with three women and three men. All in-depth interviews and FGDs were held in the villages' shared community house, all lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and tape-recorded, with participants' consent. The questions were asked in English by the first author, and then translated by Hannah into Chichewa and/or Chiyao. Hannah wrote down the answers, immediately translating them into English. The first author followed up with questions in English, and so forth.

Ethical and Methodological Challenges and Author Positionality

Research permits were granted by the National Commission for Science and

Technology in Malawi (NCST); the local District Council, the village authorities, as well as by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The main challenges concerned the fieldwork setting. Referred to (by participants) as an *mzunga* (directly transferred as *white wealthy European woman* (Pass, 2016)), the first author and Hannah (an educated English-speaking middle-class Malawian) could be associated with people working for NGOs. Thus, it was important that they established their positions as researchers, and to make clear what the study would entail and not. Hannah's lengthy stay in the villages before the first author's arrival proved helpful to avoid such role confusion. Yet, even though making explicit their researcher-roles, villagers asked them to bring forward their wishes to the NGOs. This reveals how whiteness, the English language and elitism are powerfully associated with NGOs, and intrinsically rooted in historical colonial oppression, stressing the importance of reflecting over the effect of coloniality in intercultural meetings. Therefore, that Hannah could immerse herself in the setting for a lengthy period and collect much of the data, was important for establishing rapport. Her ability to also engage with participants in the local languages was crucial. This underscores the necessity (and joys) of working with local colleagues (Moss & Hajj, 2020) and across race/nationality/class/global North and South power lines in development and in research (Segalo & Fine, 2020).

In writing up the research, both authors (being Scandinavian) acknowledge being far removed from the context. While both of us have lived and worked in different areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and have worked with colonial processes and decolonial stances, we acknowledge that we are embedded in our cultural context, which colors and structures how and what we see, feel, and think about the world. Therefore, this qualitative study and the analysis we present should be read as a subjective and constructed piece, and therefore one of many ways of seeing and interpreting social phenomena.

Analysis and Results

We analyzed the data using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), positioned within a social constructionist stance (Burr, 2015), where we see the accounts as subjective, but valid. The co-construction of meaning, by the various positionings in the villages and larger Malawi, as well as the co-construction of meaning by NGOs and donors within the larger neo-liberal lens, make such a stance a valuable approach for our project, as it holds that "the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific" (Burr, 2015, p. 4). In such we also acknowledge the positioning and co-construction of meaning that takes place between the participants and the research team as well.

Both authors coded the material after in-depth and iterative readings, identifying recurrent topics and negotiations of specific relevance to the research topic. Interestingly, most participants mentioned the discrepancies between the positions of the villagers and the approaches of the NGOs. This led us to focus on the following: How do the participants talk about the approaches of the NGOs implementing development interventions in their villages? How do participants see the NGOs ways of operating as fitting with their settings? We read the material specifically for this, and constructed themes that we reworked through our discussions. We divide the analysis into two main themes. Theme I centers on power, as many of the participants reflected on their limited power to define their own realities vis a vis the NGO approaches. Theme II focuses on context. Here the participants directly and indirectly problematized NGO approaches (though not their presence), linked to how the villagers live their lives and the, at times, missing overlap between their context and the NGO approaches. The interview extracts are either recurrent topics brought up by many participants, or else demonstrate nuances and disagreements within the material. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Theme I: Power

When discussing the NGOs' overarching approaches, most participants brought up topics related to power. Who gets to decide what the projects entail? Who gets to decide who the beneficiaries of a project should be? Many of the participants talked of these decision-making processes as unclear, complex, and sometimes unjust, offering little agency to the villagers themselves. This can be linked to resistance. Participants express frustration over these processes, which may be regarded as what Scott (1990) calls *hidden transcripts* of resistance. Namely, subordinate groups' acts and expressions that represent "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (p. xii). In Chichewa, empowerment translates to *kupatsa mphamvu:* the gaining of power (Pass, 2016). When asked about "empowerment," participants generally linked this to power. Buseje, an older woman in one of our FGDs for example said that empowerment is having the right to speak out. When discussing empowerment related to the NGOs, it was particularly two topics that the participants brought up as issues they would have liked more room to speak out on: definitions of needs, and definitions of worthy recipients.

Subtheme 1.1. Definitions of Need

In Malawi, NGO projects are often designed according to pre-defined measures and demands from the donor (Swidler & Watkins, 2017). Participants often mentioned that their needs and wishes for local projects often were different from those implemented by NGOs. Many participants discussed what they would have asked for if they had been able to influence processes prior to project implementation—in line with their definition of empowerment as involving the gaining of power. In the male FGD, Tambo explained his visions:

> If I'd been involved with an NGO I'd have focused on good health in the community, made sure people have things like proper water, proper food and proper health care…that we have enough medicine in the hospitals, maybe enough food at home.

Here the focus is on tangible projects. Peter, in the same FGD, wanted other NGOs to come to the villages in addition to the ones there already, hoping that: "maybe they'd have projects that dealt with the people's needs." This indicates that the many NGOs that were currently involved in the village were not seen to be dealing with the actual needs of people. Similarly, interviewing Fanny, she said: "We want projects that can meet our needs, like something that can provide daily income." When asked if the villagers benefit from the NGOs, Liza explained: "We just accept, because the NGOs come to us and we can't choose the projects that we want." One of the most outspoken participants, Fatima, said: "If there was an NGO that focused on women by giving them loans, that would have been better, because then we have small businesses, and could contribute to village banking." Again, this quote shows sentiments of wanting and needing other approaches from the NGOs. Fatima emphasized the gendered aspects of one NGO's cash-transfer intervention:

> The money we receive from [name of international NGO] … When men are involved, they don't share the money with their wives, they share it with their girlfriends. There have been many secret marriages because of the money from [name of international NGO], and many pregnancies, because men have money to give these girls. But when we women receive the money, we go directly and buy food without letting our husbands know.

In explaining how the money from this NGO became a means for married men to engage in clandestine sexual relationships, Fatima did not blame the NGO for distributing the money to men. Instead, she blamed the men for their irresponsible behavior. Fatima wished for initiatives that could enable women to have control, and emphasized how "we women", in contrast to their husbands, spend the money sensibly rather than recklessly. This is particularly interesting as the NGO in question, like most NGOs in the area, advocates for women's empowerment. Fatima argued this initiative was yielding the opposite outcome.

These excerpts indicate dreams and wishes as to what NGOs could achieve for the villagers. There were also definitions of empowerment that reflected a relatively passive stance in terms of needs. Edson, an older man in the male FGD, explained empowerment as a process of "telling people to do what they are supposed to do, but not forcing them." This may indicate the power asymmetry the participants have experienced from the NGOs, where they are frequently instructed as to "what they are supposed to do." Empowerment then becomes gaining the power *not* to be forced to do what you are supposed to.

It is clear from the participants' accounts that they know what would make a difference in their lives, however "external aid often comes with predetermined directives that do not include Malawian perspectives or priorities" (MacIntyre et al., 2013, p. 105). This uneven power dynamic is evident in our data. Overall, wanting more agency in defining the needs of the community was prevalent in the interviews. Participants describe a process where their needs are not necessarily in accord with the projects established to improve the local situation, even resulting in unintended and contradictory outcomes. In terms of the overarching approaches of the NGOs, the participants also discussed which villagers should receive help.

Subtheme 1.2. Definitions of Worthy Recipients

Participants link empowerment to gaining power, but when it came to who was benefiting from the projects; accounts indicate stronger expressions of disempowerment than noted above. In the communal setting, participants spoke of the unequal division of goods. Based on the NGOs' pre-determined parameters (e.g., on gender, age, poverty level), people are included or excluded from projects. The premises for inclusion in a project are often not transparently explained, or the reasons might seem arbitrary to the villagers. Patience sees the selection process of who gets to benefit from an NGO project as random: "Those who are lucky, they're the ones who are very happy. They are lucky to be involved in those projects."

Where all households live in extreme poverty (IMF Country Report, 2017), the NGOs base their decisions on standards that the villagers would not necessarily agree with. The uneven distribution from the NGOs seemed to create resentment. Idah spoke bitterly of one of the NGOs operating in the villages:

> I don't get chickens or goats, because the NGO doesn't give to everybody, they themselves choose who to give to—and that's corruption, the same person gets goats, chickens, and seeds, while others, they don't get anything.

Participants expressed frustration over this uneven approach. This resonates with Swidler and Watkins (2017) research on NGOs misunderstandings of the Malawian context, where Western ideals of individualism clash with local ideals of reciprocity and communality. Some participants emphasized that goods are divided based on needs—these were mostly people who had received goods themselves. In discussions of empowerment, there was a focus on how the NGOs were there mainly for women and girls—particularly linked to education. Female participants generally agreed that this is important, but several of the men considered it unfair that the needs of women and girls were deemed more important than other groups. Tambo, father of three, in the male FGD, explained:

> They [NGOs] always empower girls so that they should finish secondary school, they [the girls] should not get pregnant while they are studying. The NGOs always say that 'if you teach a girl child that means you have educated the world.'

This recital of such NGO rationales was common. A few men, however, did agree with this focus. Chiso, father of five children, said: "The NGOs mostly consider the girls. Of course, they make sure that everybody is educated, but they make sure that the girls come first." When asked if this were a good thing, Chiso said: "Yes, it is. If you help a girl child that means you help the world." Similarly, young men in the mixed-gender FGD expressed

concern over the uneven targeting of boys and girls. Kennedy for example said the NGOs' particular focus on the girls goes against gender equality where both sexes should be given equal opportunities. For these participants, it seemed unfair that the women were given advantages. It also seemed to tie into this notion that everyone should be helped equally. Kennedy for example thought the best solution would be to involve everybody in the NGO projects to "move [forward] together." This is interesting, while NGOs are campaigning gendered development policies like "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.", advocating for equal opportunities between the sexes in this communal setting, they contradict themselves by focusing solely on some.

For NGOs operating at the rural level in Malawi, the local chiefs play an imperative role, as "they are the locus of village governance and possessors of much power. Simply to get an NGO project started, the chief has to approve" (Swidler & Watkins, 2017, p. 210). The chief is customarily included in the selection of recipients of NGO interventions (Swidler & Watkins, 2017), with the NGOs asking him for information on the various households (Swidler, 2013). Many of our respondents expressed frustration with the chief, often blaming him for the uneven distribution of goods. Idah held that receiving help from an NGO depends on your relationship with the chief: "The village chief decides who'll take part in the projects. We can be registered but at the end of the day, the chief will cross out our names and put in the names of people he knows." Idah expresses a lack of influence—the non-gaining of power—concerning who will benefit from NGO projects. The chief himself expressed the dilemma of being caught between NGO project designs and his role as the village head:

> NGOs come in and choose some target families, but the people don't understand. They may think that I'm the one who is greedy, that I'm the one who has chosen those people, they get jealous, and say that some are being targeted while others are not.

Violet agreed: "People they don't understand, they always think it is the chief's decisions." The NGOs' uneven and individualized distribution can lead others to see the recipients or the chief as greedy and selfish—behavior contrary to the ideal of reciprocal community life (Ferguson, 2006). Thus, the premises set by NGOs and their ignorance of local power-dynamics provide the chief with a position that potentially may stir up frustration and tension in the community. As the authority and credibility associated with chieftaincy is crucial for the village stability and sense of community (Ferguson, 2006), both the chief's authority and the community's well-being might be at stake if his credibility is questioned. Charles said the NGOs should handle the process themselves: "The NGOs go through the chiefs, and the chiefs decide who gets what. But if the NGOs themselves had come to our households, they'd have been able to see themselves how we live and how they can help us." If the NGOs were more closely involved, they would thus, according to Charles, see *who* needs help and *what* people need.

There are elements of disempowerment in this first theme. Several participants expressed resentment at the lack of agency and transparency in these processes, and saw the NGOs overarching approach as lacking when it came to granting power to the villagers. Returning to Scott (1990), the frustration of the NGOs and the chief's power, expressed as corrupt and ignorant, can be interpreted as hidden transcripts of resistance. Here, accounts show how villagers are unhappy with how allocation of goods is managed.

Theme II. The Context

Psychology as a discipline has been widely criticized for making too little of context (see Akomolafe, 2012; Mkhize, 2004). Similarly, in the international development sector, actors and agencies have often been regarded as promoting generic 'one size fits all' solutions to complex issues, which critics argue leaves context outside the broader picture (Adjei, 2015; Manuh & Anyidoho, 2015). Contextual fit was something the participants brought up

frequently, as they expressed that the NGO initiatives lacked understanding for their way of living. This theme is divided into two subthemes: Communal life and negotiating communality with 'moving some forward'.

Subtheme 2.1. Communal Life

Participants generally talked about their setting as *one of everyone*, constantly using the pronouns "we", "us." Interconnectedness with others, such as village, extended family, peers, and neighbors, is particularly pivotal in communities that lack formal security systems. The reciprocal relations that people engage in safeguard them. The emphasis on the communal structure of their lives was often referred to in the interviews when discussing the NGOs overarching approaches. The participants for example linked their communal lives to their concept of development. The term for "development" is *chitukuko* in Chichewa, (Paass, 2016), and across the interviews and FDGs, there was a shared, general understanding of development, as being related to community and unity, with everyone moving forward together. Asking participants in one of the mixed-gender FGDs what development means, Chisisi, a young man, told us "Development is about developing our households and it is also something that people do together." Alysha adding that "Maybe people in the community working together is part of development." Asked about development and the NGOs, the women in one FGD agreed that projects that did not include the whole village were not part of development. Sarah, a middle-aged woman, explained: "About the NGOs …we can't say that they are part of development, no… development is supposed to involve everybody." Here, the NGOs (Western) assumptions of individualism are up against local assumptions of communality. While promoting "development", the individualized focus of NGOs undermines their own role as development actors in these villages.

One project frequently held up as an example of development was the NGO funded construction of the community building. The villagers were proud of this building which they

used daily for activities ranging from Madrasa and nursery school to village meetings and as shelter from bad? weather. Other often-mentioned examples of development included the well, the maize mill, the shared livestock house, and the orphanage. These communal structures were frequently contrasted with NGOs individualized interventions, which brings us to the next subtheme: where participants struggle with making sense of why only *some* are moved forward.

Subtheme 2.2. Moving some Forward

Participants emphasized the importance of everyone moving forward *together*, which was their core definition of development. However, this clashes with most NGO projects—that, according to our participants, mostly focus on "moving *some* forward." In one of the mixed-gender FGDs, Leonard told us: "All I can say is that the NGOs, they shouldn't focus only on some… when NGOs organize training, they shouldn't focus on adults only, while the youth are left out." This communal approach could be based on the general understanding of personhood, where life begins, centers and ends in communal life—often described as typical of African societies (Nwoye, 2015), where "individuality emerges and expresses itself communally" (Ogbonnaya, 1994, p. 79). While participants frequently mentioned this "moving forward together", many supported the view that those in greatest need should get more help (yet which, they added, was often not the case). Mostly however, participants wanted the allocated help distributed equally. Violet explained that people want communal approaches. When asked what happens when NGOs give help to only a few families, she said: "People don't accept this. They don't understand it, and ask: "why only these people, rather than focusing on everybody?"

Moving only *some* forward, particularly when the selection process seems random and unfair, can lead to frictions. Many participants said that uneven distribution caused jealousy. Leonard, a young man in one of the mixed-gender FGDs, put it this way: "What

happens in the village is that we always have jealousy, because for example, the NGOs can bring handouts but then it's not enough. If only the handouts could reach everyone, then there'd be no jealousy here." Leonard contrasted the NGO development approach with the villagers' communal and reciprocal way of understanding and living life, noting the negative consequences this had for social relations. Similarly, Mishal, a young woman in the same FGD, explained how development interventions in one village could fuel jealousy *between* the villages:

> If, for example, an NGO comes, it would be good to focus on both villages, so that one village would not be jealous of the other. If it is only one village, the other village would be jealous… But [one specific international NGO] covered the whole district, so there was no jealousy at all, because they reached everywhere.

When the principles of communality and reciprocity that Malawian society revolves around, are challenged by NGOs promoting individual progress, the local reciprocal bonds and social fabric may suffer. It was clear that jealousy is a very serious matter, stirring up resentment and threatening the social order. Yvonne explained that some could take their resentment and jealousy even further:

> Others even think of using *ufiti* [witchcraft] because of jealousy, like "OK, that household is being targeted by the NGOs, while ours not, we are not getting anything. Why this household only?" That's when people start being jealous and may also turn to *ufiti*.

In Malawi, as elsewhere, people may relate themselves and their social world in connection to spiritual dimensions, such as *ufiti,* often manifested in practices closely linked to the communal life (Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Lwanda, 2005; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). Standard psychological models have generally considered such beliefs as related to pathological

delusion, irrationality, or superstition (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, & Ordóñez, 2018; Makhubela, 2016; Tembo, 1993). Yet, the fear of enemies and intrapersonal violence—such as envy, resentment and *ufiti*-assaults—Adams et al. (2018, p. 19) assert, "is not a paranoid delusion, but instead reflects an accurate understanding of life in a fixed system of embedded interdependence." According to Scott (1990, p. 144), articulations of *ufiti* can also be seen as expressions of hidden transcripts of resistance, as "Witchcraft is in many respects the classical resort of vulnerable subordinate groups who have little or no safe, open opportunity to challenge a form of domination that angers them." Relatedly, in Lwanda's (2005, p. 262) research in Malawi, *ufiti* was linked to "corruption of normative taboos and conflicts amongst resources, personal need and communal order". In line with this, and the views expressed by many participants, Chiso, explained: "If you are selfish, that's when the *ufiti* comes" (see Adolfsson & Moss, 2021).

Combined, these two themes on power and context, speak to how Western individualization, so predominant in today's psychology and global development approaches, in this Malawian setting comes up against local communalism. The NGOs pre-set, top-down approach thus has the potential to contribute less to both development and empowerment. The individualized focus of the NGOs is complicated by sub-themes of the power theme above: participants feel they have no influence over what projects are chosen and carried out, nor can they influence the selection of beneficiaries. Viewing development as *everyone* moving forward together is rooted in values of communality, but also in the fact that everyone is desperately poor. When participants in one of the mixed-gender FGDs were asked if it would be better if NGOs focused on everyone, giving a little to all instead of more to some, the unison answer was "Yes!" The overarching approaches of most NGOs operating in the area thereby do not fit with local ideas of development or empowerment. The approach and process would need to involve *everyone* moving forward together for the participants to

see many of these NGO projects as development, and for the villagers to be allowed more agency for there to be real empowerment. To empower women and girls is important—everywhere—but that needs to include asking them what they have to say in *how* their empowerment is organized, as well as taking contextual sensitivity seriously.

Discussion

Participants in our study saw empowerment as a communal way of gaining power and agency. Similarly, development was connected to moving the whole community forward. While it was widely held that the NGOs focused more on women and girls, the main concern expressed was not the gendered division, but the uneven targeting in general. Participants' accounts illustrate the collision between the communal and the individual, and the lack of agency. Empowerment as negotiated and understood by the villagers, in many ways reflects the community-based notions of the concept and speaks volumes to the emphasis on the importance of *social context*. The communal conception, we hold, is related to the reciprocal value, which serves as the social glue and security net in many societies. Participants' accounts emphasized this logic of sharing; however, precisely this essential interdependency is not recognized by the NGOs' way of distributing individualized support.

The participants also called for more agency in influencing what projects should focus on for all to benefit and were generally unhappy with their lack of control in what was, for them, a random wheel of fortune. Their criticism of the NGOs approaches may be regarded as resistance. While participants said they were pleased with the NGOs being there, many criticized how they operate. Our findings indicate that, whereas the villagers had many thoughts as to how their community would best develop, the NGOs' pre-set, top–down approach could potentially disturb power dynamics and interdependence among individuals, and the community. The apparent unpredictability of NGOs approaches was in participants' accounts paired with little or no control over *if, when, what*, *whom* and *how* new projects

might be set up to improve lives. Rather than the expected effect of empowerment and development, this may result in lack of agency, and disempowerment. In sum, this prompts the question: when somebody else has defined your problems and their solutions, is it then empowerment?

Empowerment, we hold, depends on the understanding and practice being informed by the local reality in which it is implemented. In the light of our informants' understanding of empowerment as connected with power, and development as moving forward together, we argue, in accordance with Estrada-Villalta and Adams (2018) that collective cooperation and participation towards common interests and goals are crucial aspects of community empowerment. Our analysis shows that individualized approaches may fuel suspicion, resentment, envy, and enmity among community members and between communities. Consequently, NGO interventions that follow an individualized logic may even spark "envy that may lead to accusations of witchcraft [*ufiti*] of those who are seen to benefit unjustly" (Watkins, 2013, p. 204).

We—alongside others—are critical to how empowerment has become related mainly to internal qualities, as this approach redirects the responsibility for social and structural change to an individual level that may serve the very same status quo from which people—here women in particular—are supposedly empowered to break free from (Rutherford, 2018; Távara, 2019). Women and girls are part of the community they live in, and as our analysis has shown—NGOs singling them—or any other social strata out—rocks the community balance, a balance that is often communally perceived as more important than achieving measures set from afar and above. Rural Malawian women are generally—and traditionally—considered subordinate to their husbands and their role as breadwinners and household heads (Anderson, 2015). Thus, the NGOs large focus on their empowerment and development rightly reflect the gendered inequality. Nevertheless, NGOs individualized development

approaches abstract women and girls from their cultural and context specific knowledges and experiences. These interventions may thus undermine their ways of coping with a racialized, classed, and gendered society, and can lead to negative consequences for the "empowered" individual. Even though women most often are the main beneficiaries of NGOs individualized and gendered empowerment programs, they may also be the most vulnerable to the consequences of such individualized approaches. While the focus on women is meant to alter their position, the intended progress that the empowerment programs facilitate may make them the target of others envy, resentment and *ufiti*. Within psychology, increased attention to communal approaches to empowerment is therefore crucial.

When development practitioners such as NGOs, implement theory and practice *on* "targeted" people rather than in collaboration *with* and informed *by* them, they not only ignore their "beneficiaries" lived experiences and knowledges, but also promote and reinforce dominant (often Western) assumptions of what counts as the "best and right way of doing things". This way of intervening may result in an erosion of local values and norms and can lead to a disruption of community life. From a decolonial feminist stance, we argue that this imposing of Western individualized development and empowerment norms in terms of being, feeling, and knowing represent coloniality, embedded in and/or disguised as philanthropic "good will". This is echoed in criticism against psychology, where "the imposition of our own systems of knowledge upon other cultures and notions" has led to accusations against psychology of being imperialist in our attitudes "toward other cultures and has colonized them, supplanting their indigenous ways of thinking with western ideas" (Burr, 2015, p. 4). A serious turn is thus called for in both psychological and development practices, to incorporate context sensitivity and decolonial approaches. Many critical, decolonial and feminist perspectives in psychology reveal and challenge how primarily Western psychologized theories, practices and concepts are exported to places and spaces outside the psychological

field and affect individuals and groups (see Adolfsson & Madsen, 2019; Bhatia & Priya, 2018; Dhar, 2020; Dirth & Adams, 2019; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019). For further and future studies, we emphasize the need for researchers as well as activists and development practitioners to "take seriously knowledges embedded in communities" and the proactive methods of resistance and community-empowerment, and work *with* people—not *on* them (Segalo & Fine, 2020, p. 8). As Fine and Torre (2016, p. 194) insist, for development initiatives to really be of benefit, they must honor and go in "intentional dialog with local experience/expertise"; be participatory and led by the local groups; attend to the local dynamics of power; address structural as well as social and psychological issues; and be self-consciously anti-racist/elitist and anti-colonizing.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has several limitations. First, the sample is small as well as non-representative, thus precluding statistical generalizations. However, that was not our aim, as we wanted to elicit rural Malawian views on empowerment and development. Such studies are rare and can contribute insights from a type of sample seldom represented in psychology. Second, getting rural Malawians' views on typical Western approaches, as represented by the NGOs, could be complicated by the first author's and Hannah's privileged positionalities as respectively an *mzunga* and an educated, middleclass Malawian. As before mentioned, despite having made explicit roles and objectives, participants asked them to communicate their needs and wishes to NGOs, which illustrates the power asymmetry inherent in race and class, and the imperative need to reflect over intersectionality and positionality.

The need for further studies on how individualized development/ empowerment approaches may increase envy, enmity and *ufiti* is critical. Second, empowerment is not the only psychology concept to have travelled into development practice and theory. Concepts like resilience, self-efficacy, self-actualization, and nudging, are also largely adopted by the

development sector (see De Vos, 2012; Galárraga et al., 2018; Klein, 2016). Given psychology's implication with development approaches, more community based and informed research on the use of psychology within these contexts is necessary, as it can have large-scale consequences for the "beneficiaries" on the ground.

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III

Human Arenas
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ARENA OF DEVELOPMENT

"Even the NGOs Never Talk About *Ufiti* [Witchcraft]": a Decolonial and Feminist Cultural Psychological Analysis of Individualized Development Clashing with Communal Ways of Being

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Abstract

Conducting a multi-sited psychology study on how Malawian participants perceive Western-oriented non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) gendered development approaches, it became apparent that perceptions of *ufiti* (the Malawian term for what loosely translates as witchcraft in English)—and its gendered inclination—was highly relevant. As in many parts of the world, people in Malawi may relate themselves and their social world in connection to spiritual and supernatural dimensions, manifested in practices and discourses often closely linked to communal norms and values. Many international NGOs in Malawi run individualized development initiatives, often particularly focusing on women and girls' personal empowerment. When local communal ways of experiencing and knowing are not taken account for in the NGOs' interventions, this indiviualized approach can spur interpersonal resentment, and in worst-case *ufiti* assaults. This article explores the link between individualized development incentives and perceptions of *ufiti*. Using decolonial and feminist cultural psychology as a lens, we ask how the individualized focus of the NGOs plays out in Malawi, and what negative and unintended consequences individualized interventions can lead to. Our results indicate the need for contextually grounded and informed development approaches, to avoid that effort to empower individual women and girls lead to their disempowerment, social disruption, and *ufiti* accusations and assaults. The article speaks to the need for decolonial and feminist cultural psychological approaches that consider subjective *intentional worlds*.

Keywords Decolonial feminist cultural psychology · Coloniality · Individualized gendered development · Spiritual othering · *Ufiti* · "Witchcraft"

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Cultural psychologist Shweder (1990, p. 1) talks about *intentional worlds*, i.e., how "psyche and culture…require each other…and jointly make each other up." What is regarded as justified, valid, and true is socially and culturally constructed and decided on as "social facts" (Shweder, 2006). Accordingly, individuals involved in the same socio-cultural realities construct, make meaning of and manifest particular conceptions, which are social facts of "reality" (Shweder, 2006). Looking at two sets of intentional worlds (with extensive variation), the Malawian and that of many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Malawi, these have a different overarching starting point: communalism and individualism, respectively.

Development practitioners must acknowledge and incorporate the specific intentional worlds of the cultural context, if not, they risk inflicting unintended ramifications on recipients of their interventions. Malawian participants in our study spoke of the individualized focus of most NGOs as "moving some individuals in the community forward rather than all," which often broke with their communal ways of life (see Adolfsson & Moss, 2021). The breeches, our participants told us, often resulted in suspicion, interpersonal resentment, enmity, and envy, which they again on the other hand linked to perceptions and articulations of *ufiti*. *Ufiti* is commonly translated to what English missionaries, colonial administrators, and Western academics rather ambiguously termed "witchcraft" (Lwanda, 2005; Mbiti, 1990; Tembo, 1993). The pervasiveness of Malawian *ufiti* articulations and beliefs is well documented; the immense fear of enmity, accusations, and assaults related to it permeates the social fabric and everyday life of many (Ashforth, 2015; Englund, 1996, 2007; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). An extensive survey conducted both in rural and urban Malawi revealed that 87% of the interviewed household heads stated *ufiti* was present and increasing in their societies (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). The violence resulting from *ufiti* is considered just as real and harmful as other forms of assaults and is directly linked to matters of life and death (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). As with other inequalities, Malawian women are among the groups most exposed of *ufiti*-based violence (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). Women are also the key targets for many individualized empowerment initiatives in Malawi, making them potentially even more exposed to unintended, negative ramifications of NGO interventions.

Generally, when talking to participants involved in NGO activities they are glad for the support. They do however question elements of the interventions—in terms of their organization and fit with the local communities (see Adolfsson & Madsen, 2020; Adolfsson & Moss, 2021). Many participants in our study link NGO interventions, which typically focus on some in the community rather than all, to jealousy. Many also link jealousy to perceptions of *ufiti*. They do however not link the two; very few of the participants say outright that the NGOs development initiatives like individualized gendered empowerment approaches, directly lead to *ufiti* accusations and assaults. Based on our analysis, we make the connection between these two. Based on a multi-sited fieldwork in Malawi (2016/2017), we use decolonial and feminist cultural psychology as a lens, asking how the individualized focus of the NGOs plays out in Malawi, and what unintended negative consequences the interventions can lead to. We agree with many of the participants that the NGOs interventions can have positive outputs. However, our material serves a powerful illustration of how limited awareness—or ignorance—of people's cultural context and intentional world may end up disempowering and marginalizing the very same individuals and groups that these NGOs seek to empower. Our aim with this article is to encourage psychologists as well as global development practitioners to include and engage with the specific contexts and intentional worlds in which we intervene, to avoid unintended negative consequences of our actions.

Decolonial and Feminist Cultural Psychology

A decolonial and feminist cultural psychology framework provides tools to challenge dominant assumptions that reinforces classed, racialized, and gendered status quos by encouraging tolerance and acknowledging Others' as well as our own ways of being, seeing and knowing as equally embedded in culture (Adams et al., 2015). That is; while "a weed is a weed is a weed" (Shweder, 1990, p. 2) in some cultural contexts, it is not in others, and what is regarded as good, true, effective, and fascinating in life, should also be regarded as equally un-fixed and un-universal. Yet, dominant Western assumptions of what counts as good and true are continuously largely promoted as standard norms (see Adjei, 2019; Bulhan, 2015; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Nwoye, 2017). This bias not only preserves and premises hegemonic knowledge production but also has physical and psychological consequences for people, in terms of pathologization and marginalization of their ways of being (see Davar, 2020; Dhar, 2020; Nwoye, 2013). Thus, an important objective of a decolonial and feminist cultural psychological perspective is to challenge such dominant assumptions, and to illuminate and promote alternate—and equally real—ways of understanding human ways of living in and making meaning of the world (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; Kurtis & Adams, 2013). A particularly important aspect in terms of our study, is decolonial perspectives' aim to reveal patterns of *coloniality* that promote Western individualism (Adams et al., 2017). Coloniality and Western individualism is understood as both products and sources of imperial and colonial exploitation and violence (Adams et al., 2017). By enabling accumulation, expansion, social- and economic development, personal growth and self-actualization, Euro-American colonialism and its patriarchal power structures have perpetually shaped and promoted Western understandings of gendered individual selfhoods, while disregarding other ways of being (Bulhan, 2015; Mies, 2014). Coloniality is thus a continuation of colonial and patriarchal ways of understanding and seeing the Other. As such, Western individualism and the practicing of individual selfhoods are inherent parts of the matrix that decolonial theorists call the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (see Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). To decolonize coloniality Adams et al. (2015, p. 228) suggest a denaturalization approach; "turning the analytic lens" to "re-think the ways of being that masquerade as natural standards" in many Western psychological perspectives. Drawing on these concepts and approaches, and especially concerning the coloniality inherent in Western individualism, and our Malawian participants' accounts of NGOs individualized and gendered development initiatives, we wish to illuminate how dominant assumptions of individualism—here promoted by international NGOs—are inconsistent with and potentially dangerous for people who experience and organize their worlds in other ways.

The Phenomena of *Ufiti*

In rural Malawi—as many places elsewhere—people often rely on communal and reciprocal responsibilities and social norms of equality which make up the social glue that protect them from the harmful effects of poverty (Ferguson, 2006; Lwanda, 2005). Anti-social, selfish, and greedy behavior is, on the other hand, understood as vicious acts of *ufiti* and seen as directly conflicting with communal norms and therefore directly dangerous for the wellbeing and existence of individuals and groups (Ferguson, 2006; Golooba-Mutebi, 2005). Growing social inequality is often seen as results of greed and

selfishness, fueling suspicions of people having used *ufiti* to unjustly progress and profit at the cost of others (Lwanda, 2005). This in turn, fuels social tensions, enmity, and in extension; *ufiti*-related accusations and assaults (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). As such, *ufiti* accusations and assaults may be understood as a response to, and acts of resistance and protection against the pervading threat of *ufiti*-based violence (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005).

The most common types of *ufiti* accusations are linked to people being accused for having used *ufiti* and magic forces to harm others (Lwanda, 2005). Individuals accused and assaulted for having used *ufiti*-spells on others face physical, social, psychological, economic, and sexual—violence in terms of beatings, social exclusion, psychological trauma, impoverishment, and sexual abuse (see Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). As elsewhere—and as with most gendered inequalities—women are among the most exposed to the harmful consequences of *ufiti*—especially in terms of being blamed for being the source of it (Federici, 2018; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). This is particularly interesting regarding many NGOs' heavy focus on women and girls' individual empowerment. Given that successful individuals—and especially women—are more likely to be charged of having used *ufiti* to progress at the expense of others (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005; Leistner, 2014), individualized development initiatives increasing inequality may (however unintentionally) also increase women and girls exposition to *ufiti*-based violence. Despite the documented link between individualized development initiatives and increased perceptions of *ufiti* (see Leistner, 2014; Smith, 2008), Chilimampunga and Thindwa (2012, p. 77) maintain, "Very few NGOs are involved in the witchcraft [*ufiti*] problem." Talking to the chief of the two rural villages in which we conducted fieldwork, he confirmed this, telling us "*ufiti* is still here … even the NGOs never talk about *ufiti*."

Ufiti and Psychology

While *ufiti* is characterized as a spiritual, supernatural, social, and psychological phenomena (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012), African scholars warn that particularly Western psychological perspectives fail to acknowledge the central role of spirituality, the supernatural, and "the impact of other forces" in African everyday life (see Nwoye, 2015, p. 99; Ogbonnaya, 1994; Ratele, 2017). For instance, Holdstock (2000) maintains that dominant Western psychological approaches have regarded these "other" forces, like *ufiti* beliefs as symptoms of mental illness, delusion, and/or superstition. Furthermore, scholars hold that dominant psychological approaches based on assumptions of context-free individual agency, self-expansion, and actualization, largely conflict with African perceptions of agency, morality, community, and the self (Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Mkhize, 2004). When the self and its belongingness is experienced as "relationally connected to others in a network of embedded interdependence" (Adjei, 2019, p. 490), strives for individual independency and selves that are abstracted from context, may result in social ruptures and communal disharmony (Adams et al., 2017). As such, unburdened individualism is in direct conflict with communal norms and morals of reciprocity (Sagner & Mtati, 1999). Accordingly, practicing individuality and self-actualization may result in detrimental consequences for people.

Spiritual Othering

The Kenyan Anglican priest and professor of theology Mbiti (1990) states,

> Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment will, no doubt, know something about this mystical power which often is experienced, or manifests itself, in form of magic, divination, witchcraft and mysterious phenomena that seem to defy even immediate scientific explanations (p. 191). … In popular usage the term 'witchcraft' is employed to designate the harmful employment of mystical power in all its different manifestations (p. 199).

Beliefs in the supernatural and spiritual are not restricted to Africa (see Makhubela, 2016), rather the perception of spiritual entities like angels, demons, and Satan is a world phenomenon (Ivey & Myers, 2008). Yet, when applied to Africa and Africans, the larger part of Eurocentric literature on "witchcraft" have perpetually ignored, belittled, and distorted African experiences of spirituality and the supernatural (Mbiti, 1990; Murrey, 2017). By reinforcing racist perceptions of ""ignorance," "backwardness," "dark continent," "primitive," "uncivilized," "superstitious," "undeveloped"" (Tembo, 1993, p. 1), further manifest prejudiced and humiliating simplifications of African understanding of life (Ferguson, 2006; Mbembe, 2001; Mbiti, 1990). The racialized Othering of African ontologies and its grim consequences could as the Malawian scholar Lwanda (2005, p. 241) states, have been prevented:

> Put simply, *ufiti* in its classical form equates to the devil. Had Christian missionaries accepted that ATRs [African Traditional Religions] had concepts of good (God) and bad (evil/devil), the whole subsequent discourse in which missionaries saw all ATRs as 'pagan' or 'heathen' devil worship would have been avoided

However, as Murrey (2017, p. 158) maintains, *spiritual Othering* functioned as the "ideological orientation(s) and moral framework(s) for enslavement, colonialism and imperialism" profoundly connected with both the construction and conception of racial hierarchies, patriarchy, and the argument of the civilization-mission. While Malawi—like other African states—now longer are formally colonized, coloniality remains, among others in how hegemonic Eurocentric understandings of how forces of spirituality and the supernatural are to be interpreted and understood.

Contextual Background

Malawi, often referred to as "the warm heart of Africa," is a small landlocked country in the east sub-Saharan region. The former British protectorate gained its independence in 1964 and followed by 30 years of dictatorship the country instituted democracy in 1994 (Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2005). Malawi's colonial past, post-colonial present, and social and geographical context has left the country poor, rural and largely dependent on foreign aid (Swidler & Watkins, 2017). As Lwanda (2006, p. 527) asserts, "Colonial grants have been replaced by postcolonial loans and grants, creating a debt-burdened donor-dependent state." About 85% of the population live in the "very rural" where basic infrastructure such as clean water, electricity, hospitals, nearby schools, and roads are largely missing (Edriss & Chiunda, 2017; IMF, 2017; NSO, 2019). Although poverty strikes the whole society, women are hit the hardest (Anderson, 2015).

Women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence and sexual insecurity; they have less access to food, medicine, water, education, and upward mobility (Anderson, 2015; Johnson, 2018).

The Malawian state has, for decades, tried to improve development and reduce poverty by focusing extensively on empowerment of women and girls (Classen, 2013; The Ministry of Gender, 2013). In the wake of the implementation of global UN gendered agendas (such as the Millennium Development Goal 3 and the Sustainable Development Goal 5), the focus on Malawian women and girls' gender equality and empowerment have further increased (UNDP, 2016), fronted by an endless number of NGOs. These initiatives are often focused on individual empowerment, like women and girls' education (Pot, 2019), entrepreneurial life-skill courses and vocational training (Johnson, 2018), designed to "empower people to achieve their goals for themselves" (Swidler, 2013, p. 684).

Methodological Framework and Fieldwork Context

The data for this article is based on three field-settings: a peri-urban township in the capital Lilongwe, two rural villages in a southern Malawian district, and urban Lilongwe. The data material is primarily based on informal interviews, focus group discussions (hereafter abbreviated as FGDs) and in-depth interviews. The first author collected much of the data material with help from a Malawian research collaborator "Wanda". Her extensive experience with ethnographic fieldwork, translation, and transcription proved invaluable. Wanda speaks Chichewa and Chiyao, the major languages in our research sites. The fieldwork was conducted over an 11 months research stay divided in three periods, between September 2016 and December 2017. In total 55 informal interviews, 30 in-depth interviews and 5 FGDs were conducted.

Research Sites and Data Collection

The Township

Initially having little knowledge of the phenomena of *ufiti*, the first author became aware of its pervasive character during her first fieldwork, in a township outside the capital (hereafter referred to as "the township"). Living in the township together with Wanda, she learned how much of everyday matters were intricately related to peoples' fear of *ufiti*-based violence. While her preliminary research purpose was to study how NGO approaches on "women and girls' empowerment and gender equality" was understood by Malawians as well as the NGOs working in the country, the emerging matter of people's fear of *ufiti* accusations and assaults further implicated this issue. When discussing potential ways of learning more about the *ufiti* universe, Wanda suggested that she could listen to and record the daily and nationally broadcasted news program *Nkhani za m'maboma* ("news from the districts"), which frequently reported on *ufiti*-related incidents. Accordingly, every evening for two months, Wanda listened to the program, transcribed, and translated this content from Chichewa to English. These reports together with national newspapers and everyday discussions with Wanda, neighbors, bike-taxi drivers, water-fetchers, construction workers, venders and others formed the first author's initial data, and her understanding of *ufiti* and its consequences. This data was only used to inform the first author, however, many stories

later showed to resemble the data gathered by Wanda and her in their following fieldworks. Additionally, Wanda conducted 16 informal interviews in the township with respectively ten men and six women. As these informants were not directly involved in NGO-initiatives Wanda presented the study as a study on gender equality, empowerment, and perceptions of *ufiti*. After participants gave their consent, the interviews often took place whilst Wanda participated in the interviewee's daily duties. These interviews generally lasted 30–60 min and focused on topics regarding "development," "gender-equality," "empowerment," "gender-roles," "*ufiti*." Wanda took notes there and then, which she afterwards revised and translated.

The Rural Villages

The second fieldwork was conducted in a rural district in the south of Malawi (hereafter referred to as "the rural villages"). Frequent reports on *ufiti*-related incidents in this region were reported in the media, and in addition, the district was highly targeted by NGOs with women and girls' empowerment-approaches. Thus, this fieldwork was conducted to get at people's lived experiences with NGO interventions and the phenomena of *ufiti*. We selected the specific research site (and organizing the required permissions for research) in cooperation with regional authorities and the Traditional Authority (hereafter called "the chief") of the two neighboring villages in question. As the head of both villages, the chief informed the community members of the research project.Villagers generally live off small-scale farming and piecework; they cook on wood and have little or no access to electricity. Families are generally large with up to eight children. Few of the participants had finished school and some had never enrolled. The majority struggled to cover necessities like food, clothes, medicine, and school fees. The participants were between 18 and 50+, and 24 women and 10 men. Participants reported that many NGOs had projects in the villages, and significantly, for our study, they reported that most NGO projects targeted women, especially young women, and girls' school attendance. The people in these villages had first-hand experiences with NGO-initiatives. Again, it is important to emphasize that the participants at large are happy with the NGOs being present in Malawi and want more—not less—assistance. In line with this, the project sought to get at participants' experiences of NGOs and did not invoke a positive nor negative/critical view of the NGOs in our discussions and data collection.

Being an *mzunga*—directly translated as wealthy, white European woman (Paass, 2016)—the first author and Wanda (an educated English speaking Malawian) had to establish trust, and ensure that the research project was not mistaken for one of the many NGO-initiatives in the area. Wanda suggested that she would work in the villages (yet living elsewhere) and visit village households daily for 14 weeks, prior to the arrival of the first author. These daily visits gave Wanda the possibility to introduce herself, the project, and us and bit by bit accustom the community members to the intention of the study and to place it apart from the NGOs operating in the area. Wanda conducted 34 informal interviews with one representative from every household in the two villages. The participants were informed of the study's overarching objective as research on their understanding of "NGOs," "development," "gender equality," "empowerment," and "cultural practices" ("cultural practices" was introduced as an encouragement and a way to get to talk about specific cultural contextual articulations and discourses—such as perceptions of *ufiti*). All participants asked said yes to participate. As an experienced and skilled research assistant trained in ethnographic methods, Wanda's approach was not guided by a specific interview

schedule, but rather based on natural context, in which the topics and concepts described above were evolved and discussed organically. By simply staying in the community over time, observation becomes part of everyday life involvements, and informs the study of the holistic as well as the particularities of the communities. Wanda took extensive notes, transcribed these in Chichewa, and then translated them to English.

On the arrival of the first author, a sample of participants from the informal interviews were invited to partake in one of five FGDs. Two FDGs were conducted with only women, two with mixed-gender young adults and one with only men. All FGDs had five to six participants. After each FGD, one or two particularly active participants were invited to an in-depth interview in which we elaborated more thoroughly on the discussed topics. The interviews and FGDs were open-ended, semi-structured, and guided by questions related to "development," "gender-equality," "empowerment," "marriage and divorce," "schooling and dropping out of school," "NGOs," "cultural practices," "perceptions of *ufiti*." All concepts—except *ufiti*—are widely used by NGOs conveying empowerment approaches, and therefore worked as encouragement for the discussions. All participants asked to be interviewed agreed. Six such in-depth interviews were conducted, with three men, three women, aged between 18 and 50+. All FGDs and in-depth interviews were conducted in the community building and lasted between 30 min and 1 h. All were recorded and transcribed directly after, in a collaborative effort by Wanda and the first author.

Urban Lilongwe

Based on the experiences from earlier research sites, the first author used the urban/Lilongwe fieldwork to build a more thorough understanding of the intersection of development policy and practice, regarding gender-equality and empowerment initiatives (individualized) development approaches and perceptions of *ufiti*. By interviewing civil servants, health workers, international and national NGO workers, foreign donor agency representatives, taxi- and tuk-tuk drivers, gardeners and others, this last fieldwork added how urban working class, educated elite- and middle class Malawians as well as international development workers understand and negotiate the presence of *ufiti*. None-of the participants in this fieldwork stated that they were beneficiaries of NGO-interventions. 24 interviews were conducted. Participants were invited to interviews through snowballing via mutual friends, and via mail. Age of participants varied from 20 to 60 years. The first author alone did all interviews in this fieldwork in English. She presented the research project as a study of NGOs work with gender-equality and women and girls' empowerment in Malawi. Interviews lasted between 30 min and two hours. The semi-structured open-ended interview guide for this fieldwork draws on the same topics and concepts as before described. In addition to earlier fieldworks, here, the first author had the possibility to ask NGO-representatives directly about their understanding of perceptions and fear of *ufiti.*

Ethical and Methodological Considerations

The National Commission granted ethical clearance and research permits for Science and Technology in Malawi (NCST). A research permit was also ensured from Norway. Informed consent and anonymity were ensured. All participants were informed of the study's objective.

The fieldwork settings presented the main challenges for the first author. Being an *mzunga*, a word fraught with colonial connotations, made her presence—especially in the township and the rural villages—a symbol of money and privilege, and as such, a symbol of colonial oppression and coloniality. A positionality that probably affects what and how people have shared information with her, and how and what she has experienced and understood different contexts. These aspects ultimately also challenge our meaning-making of the data. Thus, our analysis should be read as our co-constructed interpretations of social, spiritual, and supernatural phenomena in rural and urban Malawi. Yet, Wanda's experience with ethnographic fieldwork, her knowledge of social norms and cultural codes, her large network as well as her warm personality proved key. Underscoring the value of collaborating with local colleagues, and the importance of their expertise in getting access to situated knowledge (Moss & Hajj, 2020; Segalo & Fine, 2020).

Analysis and Results

All data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where we position ourselves within a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2015). Thus, we regard our participants' accounts as subjective, nevertheless valid. We see meaning as co-constructed by the diverse positioning in the three fieldworks, together with the co-construction of meaning by global policymakers, international donors, NGOs, and Malawian media within the wider development discourse. This stance is a valuable framework, insisting, "the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific" (Burr, 2015, p. 4). Thus, we also acknowledge the co-construction of meaning and positioning that occurs between the participants, Wanda, and us as authors.

The material was repeatedly and thoroughly read and coded by both authors. While reviewing the data we categorized codes and patterns and constructed themes based on recurrent topics, concepts, and discussions significant to our research questions; asking how the NGOs individualized development approaches plays out in Malawi and what unintended negative consequences the interventions can have. When reading the material we came to focus on the consequences of individualized development approaches on the one hand, and perceptions of *ufiti* on the other, and we were interested in the link between these. In most of the data, this seemed connected via jealousy. We thus started looking specifically for instances of individualism, communalism, and consequences of this clash. We divided the analysis into two main themes. First, individual development meets communalism. This seeks to establish the first part of the link, namely that individualized initiatives can lead to interpersonal resentment and jealousy. The second theme we have constructed is perceptions of *ufiti*, and NGOs individualized approaches. Exploring the second part of this two-step link between individualized initiatives and articulations of *ufiti*, focuses on how jealousy can lead to *ufiti* beliefs, and speaks to the focus of the paper, both on how the individualized focus of the NGOs plays out for our participants, and what unintended, negative consequences the interventions can lead to. The coloniality of individualism and spiritual Othering, which ignores the Other's ways of being and seeing the world is evident here.

Theme 1: Individualized Development Approaches Meets Communalism

This first theme relates to the unintended consequences of individualized—and often gendered—development approaches, and we have divided this into two subthemes: individual development, namely "Moving some forward" and "Jealousy."

Subtheme 1.1. Moving Some Forward

The rationale for individualized and gendered development initiatives such as women's empowerment is based on the assumption that empowerment incentives work as a means to reduce poverty by promoting self-sufficiency, self-actualization, and female entrepreneurship (Adjei, 2015; Rutherford, 2018). In the rural villages, this rationale frequently collides with communal values. Whilst participants in these villages define development as "moving forward together"; the NGOs operating there, on the other hand, are singling out specific beneficiaries, which participants understand as only "moving some forward" (see Adolfsson & Moss, 2021). Asale, a mother of four from the rural villages, expressed frustration over the NGOs creating inequalities. She talked about one specific NGO donating potato seeds, saying, "Mostly the local NGO workers only donate to the ones that they know so it does not reach all, had it been that it went through the chief, maybe then everybody would have received." Here the singling out of a few beneficiaries stands as contrary to everybody receiving. This sentiment was echoed throughout the conversations in the rural villages. When NGOs target certain people in a community for individual development (give money for school fees, enlist participants for vocational-skills training), this is often perceived as unfair advantages, which can create suspicion and interpersonal tension.

Women and girls are often especially focused on by the NGOs, which was mentioned frequently in the interviews. Bomani, a father of five boys and three girls from the rural villages, listed the six NGOs that at the time were targeting girls' school attendance, explaining, "this [NGO] are sending girls to school, they send teen mothers back to school" and "this [another NGO] are paying school fees for all the girls but not the boys." Talking to young adults in one of the mixed-gender FGDs in the rural villages, Tambo told us "here in the village, the NGOs normally focus on girls only, while boys are not being focused on. It is the NGOs' decision to just focus on girls." Bomani and Tambo does not say whether it is good or bad to focus only on girls. However, participants in one of the young adult FGDs told us "it is the decision of the NGOs to just focus on girls", explaining that the boys who are not being focused on, and therefore do not go to school "they do some piecework, and others they just walk around and start smoking *chamba* [locally grown marijuana]." The participants in this FGD thought it would be best to focus on both girls and boys, women and men. Even though many of the women in the villages supported the focus on the girls (see Adolfsson & Moss, 2021), the "NGOs' decisions" may have a large impact over people's lives, as some of their decisions may be seen to increase inequalities.

There are however ways of experiencing individual prosperity without that being problematic. This, several participants across the field settings explained, depends on whether the progress or prosperity is "sudden" and/or "inexplicable" or not. Melody, a 19-year-old girl from the rural villages, among the few young adult participants still attending secondary school, told us that after graduating she wanted to become a teacher. When asked if people can become jealous of those attending school, Melody said yes, however, telling us that this would not happen with her "because those who dropped out, they know that I have

suffered to finish school, so they can't be jealous." This account resonates with Lwanda's (2005) analysis on how explicable and transparent advancement is understood as a fair way of prospering that seldom sparks jealousy. Melody's hard work and the sacrifices involved in her schooling allows the community to see the effort she has put in, and the reasons for her progress are thus understandable.

Subtheme 1.2. Jealousy

As seen above, individual success that is perceived as "sudden," "inexplicable," and "non-earned" is directly conflicting with Malawian reciprocal and communal norms, and pursuing individual success may spark interpersonal tension, and jealousy. As Edward, a father of five from the rural villages explained when asked how people see individualized focused NGO interventions only benefiting some:

> People can be jealous, but still it is the law of the NGO, that maybe the village has a 1000 people, but the NGO only wants to give to 20. It is a matter of getting the people to understand … but still, the jealousy can be there.

The "law of the NGO" referred to here, relates to the NGOs' focus on helping certain individuals (e.g., mothers; girls; orphans). Edward's reflection is in line with what Piot (2010) and Classen (2013) note, NGOs interventions are seldom community based, rather specific individuals are chosen as they are defined as "as worthier" recipients. However, what qualifies as "worthy" may not necessarily make sense locally (see Adolfsson & Moss, 2021). In addition, the help may not reach the "worthiest." For instance, Melina, a young single parent of three small children living in the rural villages, explains:

> Mostly when the NGO money come, the NGOs always say that it should reach the people who are poor, the needy, the orphans', but because there is a lot of corruption in this village, you find that the money does not get to the ones who are supposed to receive them.

When asked if this corruption and unfair allocation of NGO money could lead to jealousy Melina answered that "Yes there can be jealousy because people can be surprised that 'Okay, many were invited to the NGO meeting but then only two or three received money.'" Here, the non-transparent and unequal distribution of NGO allocations is understood as unfair, and directly linked to sparking jealousy.

Some participants also brought up stories of overcoming NGOs' unequal practices. For example, Olivia, a Malawian former NGO-program director we met in Lilongwe, told us that one of the NGOs she had worked for had distributed maize bags, cooking oil and beans, to a designated number of households in a rural village. Upon checking in with the village Olivia explained, "The village chief had re-collected all the food, divided the lot in smaller portions and re-distributed it evenly to all households." Asking Olivia why the chief did this, she explained "Everybody has to get something!" noting that the chief only wanted to prevent jealousy from rising between households. While some would call this way of circumventing "the laws of the NGO" as creative (Swidler & Watkins, 2017), it may also be interpreted as hidden transcripts of resistance (Scott, 1990). That is, when subordinated groups and individuals criticize and resist the dominant, in this case the NGOs' preset design, by reorganizing behind their back.

In this first theme, it is clear from the participants' accounts that the individualized and unequal focus of the NGOs contrasts with their intentional world and communal ways of

life. That individualized interventions fuel interpersonal resentment and jealousy in the villages is a very critical issue that NGOs need to take seriously. When NGOs' "laws" are inconsistent with the social facts of the villagers; what they count as good, true, and effective, (exemplified by the chief redistributed the food) NGOs not only ignore their "beneficiaries'" intentional world, they also actively promote their own individualistic ways of being, seeing and knowing that largely conflict with local values. In extension, such conflict can disrupt and damage the communal ways and vital norms of reciprocity, which tie the social fabric together.

Theme 2: *Ufiti* and NGOs Individualized Approaches

From the previous theme, the participants emphasize that "sudden" and "inexplicable" individual prosperity can lead to resentment and jealousy. The participants frequently also say that jealousy can lead to *ufiti* accusations and assaults. Apparent from these accounts is the discrepancy between the context where perceptions of *ufiti* is prevalent and prominent in local lives, and the near complete disregard of such supernatural beliefs and expressions by the NGOs (as evident from the interview with the chief of the rural villages). As emphasized before, participants rarely explicitly link the NGOs individualized development initiatives and the phenomena of *ufiti*. However, as seen above, on the one hand, the participants frequently link individualized development and jealousy, and on the other, they emphasize the link between jealousy and *ufiti*. This theme is divided into three subthemes: individual development as a possible cause of *ufiti*; *ufiti* and women; and avoiding *ufiti.*

Subtheme 2.1. Individual Development as Possible Causes of *Ufiti* Assaults

Across our data, participants tell us about *ufiti* and jealousy, often caused by individualized empowerment incentives. Often, these perceptions of *ufiti* are linked to school practices. Education and the possibilities that it enables are not available to all, as poorer families often do not have the possibility to pay for the school-fees and related school costs for all their children. Education is also a key activity sponsored in individualized and gendered development initiatives like empowerment approaches, making this an arena where inequality is very visible. The following quotes negotiate the relation between education, jealousy, and perceptions of *ufiti*. Chimango, a young man from the rural villages, talked about the consequences that may befall you if you manage to enroll higher education:

> What happens is that others are not happy, they become jealous … during school exams you don't see anything on the questionnaire, you just sleep … when you are in class you don't see what the teacher has written on the chalkboard. Then you realize that something is wrong, that maybe you have been bewitched by someone in your home village … because this jealousy happens when you have reached a certain level, when you are rich and different from them … that is when the jealousy comes.

Like many of our participants, Chimango illustrates how being at a "higher level" than the fellow community members can put you at risk of *kulodzedwa* (being bewitched). Relatedly, we asked Melina, also from the rural villages, if people in the community would be jealous if her kids get higher education resulting in good jobs. She confirmed this:

> Because of illiteracy, that is why people can be jealous of the child, because the child is successful, and it is making the parents successful … so because of that others can even kill [through *ufiti* spells] the parents or the child, because of jealousy.

Likewise, Lynda, an educated single woman in her thirties from the township, told us:

> In 2001 back in my village, when I was studying with a friend behind our house, I found a plastic bag covered with soil and wrapped around charms, my friend screamed and my mother came and told us not to touch it. The village elders opened it and said it was strong charms, they said that the one who put it there did not want us not to succeed in school and that instead we should be dozing off during the lessons. We got scared and stopped using that place for studying.

When talking to Roshin, a young woman from the rural villages, she explained:

> In this area, most of the youth, if they get educated, they leave to find a job in town. After moving, they start getting sick more often, while when they come back to the village they start feeling okay again. The witches are jealous because they have completed their studies. So, it is part of *ufiti*, because the witches make them ill, so they have to come back to the village and live the same life as everyone else is living.

Roshin's note on "having to live the same life as the others in the villages," corresponds with many of our participants' explanations on how *ufiti* works, as in "the witches are not happy when you are developed," "they want everyone to be at the same level." Many participants reiterated these stories of how people who made it to town had to return to their rural village after falling ill. Relatedly, Tanya, a single parent of a toddler, living in the rural villages, said she dropped out of school because she could not see what the teacher wrote on the blackboard, while outside of the school she could see properly. Tanya said she believed that someone in the villages had bewitched her. Now, she told us she worked with her mum, baking, and selling donuts at the nearby market.

As most NGO gendered empowerment work focuses on education, these findings show the potential link between such initiatives and *ufiti* accusations and assaults, and how the initiatives can worsen the situation for the individual in question rather than empower them. The findings also resonate with Lwanda's (2006, p. 262) qualitative and quantitative survey among Malawian secondary school students, which showed that "students may experience *ufiti* as the "jealousy" of their peers who are unable to get education." Similarly, Swidler and Watkins (2017, p. 111) recount one of their Malawian informants explaining: "people will use witchcraft [*ufiti*] against you if you go to get education … this really happens. People with education will die in car accidents because someone cursed them." Because education is connected to development, and development—partly because of how NGO interventions often are designed—can result in individual progress, people who are "lucky" to be selected to partake in the NGO projects may simultaneously become more at risk.

Subtheme 2.2. *Ufiti* and Women

While anyone can be threatened by, and exposed to *ufiti* accusations and assaults, women are the most affected (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012; Mgbako & Glenn, 2011), they are also the main target of NGOs individualized empowerment approaches (Rutherford, 2018). This is also emphasized in our study. Generally, across field settings, socio-economic status, gender, and age, participants note that women are more exposed and more vulnerable to *ufiti*

assaults. As Kamoto, a construction worker from the township put it "when witches see that a woman is successful, they cause death in her family, by bewitching the children." Susanna, a young single woman from the rural villages also explained how jealousy hits successful women:

> Sometimes when people see that you are not lacking anything that's when they start being jealous. Most of the time they become jealous when they see you with a man, because they think like "when she is with that man definitely, she will become successful" … *ufiti* is part of that jealousy

Here, Susanna's account shows how being with a successful man may put a woman in risk of becoming bewitched. Weston, a 26-year-old married father of two, who worked as a gardener for *mzungu* (translated as a wealthy white European man) in Lilongwe, said that his wife had been bewitched just months after giving birth to their first kid. Weston explained how the *ufiti*-curse had affected his wife "Last year my wife was bewitched, and it was so strange to me, because it was like madness … she did not care, she had a three months baby but she did not care, she just went away." When asked why he thought his wife had been cursed he explained, "people saw me working for *mzungu*, thinking, "This guy he is working for *mzungu*! Maybe he gets a lot of money.'" Weston was sure one of their neighbors had cursed his wife out of jealousy of him working for an *mzungu*,

> Because she was doing well, you see? Like, the neighbors thought that "ah, she goes to the market and buys chicken whereas us we just get cabbage" you see? "She gets tea whereas us we just get porridge" you see?

Though Weston earned the household's money working for an *mzungu*, his wife was the one targeted by *ufiti* assaults. These excerpts link women's vulnerability of *ufiti* assaults to being associated with successful men. In general, Malawian women largely rely on their husbands for economic support, thus his success becomes hers. A success that is more dangerous for her than for him. Several of the participants also talked about women gaining any sort of advantages being the easy target of *ufi*ti forces. Amos, another young man working as a gardener for an *mzungo* in Lilongwe, explained:

> In rural areas the girls are not educated, so if you as a young girl goes to school, people become jealous like "oh, why this one? Why is she special?" So they become jealous, and they can kill [using *ufiti* spells] her. Especially those girls in rural villages, they are scared.

As seen in many of the accounts, "the rural" is often pointed out as particularly strongly linked to *ufiti* assaults. As 85% of Malawi's population live in rural areas, family and kin tightly connect most people also in urban areas to "the rural." Therefore, the fear of *ufiti* does not necessarily disappear when moving to town, rather, the modern lifestyle connoted with "the urban" and the higher living standard, may make you more targeted. When talking to Pearl, a nurse originally from southern rural Malawi now living in a city, she told us "I was bewitched because people saw that I am now a nurse and I am now able to take care of myself." Pearl had suffered from paralysis in one of her legs, and as many of our participants, she reported that conventional school medicine had not cured her; instead, she had consulted a traditional healer, and told us that had helped.

In most of these quotes, particularly women and girls are targeted by *ufiti*-based violence, either because they are seen to benefit from being with successful men, or for creating their own success. This analysis shows how gender is powerfully linked to perceptions of *ufiti*, how being a woman makes you acutely more exposed, and more in need

to maneuver *ufiti*-based violence. The analysis also shows the power inherent in being an *mzungu*, and the power inherent in working for an *mzungu*. Revealing how money, power, race, nationality, and whiteness is fundamentally associated with the inequality deeply rooted in colonial oppression.

Subtheme 2.3. Avoiding *Ufiti*

For people who deal with the unpredicted threat of *ufiti*-based violence the danger is real. Especially participants from the rural villages were very worried about *ufiti* assaults, many feared for their children, and many expressed concerns for going out nighttime. As Blessings explained: "here in the village you can't walk at night, even the beer drinkers are scared. Everybody is at home after 6 pm." Dyman, an 18-year-old man also from the rural villages, told us, "During the night, I am scared to go out to pee, because that's the time when you can meet a witch." Accordingly, avoiding *ufiti* is crucial, and remains an important part of many people's lives. Many are forced to spend time, effort and money protecting themselves against it (Ashforth, 2015; Mbiti, 1990). There are different ways of protection; one manifest way is to share the benefits of the opportunities you receive, as Edward, from the rural villages explains:

> If you help others with what you get, you can't get bewitched, nothing can happen to you. People can be jealous, for example if you have bought a car, but if there is a need in the village, maybe someone is sick, then they know that they can go to you for help.

Here, Edward notes that sharing and emphasizing the communal worth of your benefits—like driving someone ill to the hospital—will protect you from *ufiti* assaults. Relatedly, Lukas, a young Malawian NGO worker we met while we conducted fieldwork in the rural villages, told us how the chief in his home village, who for many years had scared him with his jealousy of his education, English-speaking skills, and progress, now, had turned around and become friendly:

> You know what? Surprisingly the chief now even comes to chat with my family! Why? You know what? Every NGO that comes to the village they look for someone who is a bit educated and the chief is proud that I can talk to the NGOs, getting the village involved in different NGO activities.

Here, being the broker between the villages' chief and the NGOs, Lukas has made his education and English-language skills into something the village needs, something beneficial to all. Several participants brought up this notion of being able to help others with your education. Yet, many participants said it is not easy to escape *ufiti* assaults, and again, this concerns women more than men. Several participants talked about hiding prosperity as a way of avoiding *ufiti*-based violence. Lynda, who for many years had saved up money while working for international researchers and finally built her own house in the township, told us she was happy that the house was understood as belonging to a man, explaining,

> Mostly people say that you are a prostitute and that you are benefiting from men, very few understand that it is your effort leading you to be successful. They become jealous, and they can bewitch you. Especially those people from your home village, when they come for a visit, and find that you are successful, they start being jealous, and bewitch you. So successful women when they go to their home village, they pretend they are not successful.

For Lynda, the fact her house was not understood as hers protected her from others gossip, suspicions, resentment, envy, and *ufiti* accusations and assaults. This is in line with several scholars' work on *ufiti* assaults and gender-relations. Dolan (2002, p. 644) argues that *ufiti* accusations against women are "associated with women transcending the boundaries of appropriate social behavior and hence, challenging their ascribed position within the social hierarchy." Given this premise, Malawian women—like women elsewhere—who aspire to rock the patriarchal status quo continuously hit the normative glass ceiling, often with backlashing effects that compromise their lives (Beard, 2017; Faludi, 1991). This in turn makes it safer for women to hide their success. In much the same way, Leistner (2014, p. 70) note that "The fear of arousing jealousy and being accused of *ufiti* causes people to avoid doing anything that will make them stand out by being uncommonly successful or fortunate." This thus entails that fear of jealousy and *ufiti* assaults may be an active hindrance to buying into the logic of individualized development/empowerment, as well as the breach this may represent with communally oriented lives. Relatedly, Prince, a bike-taxi driver from the township explained to us why women in rural areas avoid progress:

> In rural areas, … if they see a woman with great ambitions, they bewitch her. Because of this, most people in rural areas don't bother to build good houses for the fear of being attacked by *ufiti*

Here, Prince echoes the previous sentiments that the witches do not like women with ambitions. This fear of becoming the target of others' jealousy and related *ufiti*-accusations allegedly makes—particularly rural Malawian women—hesitant to pursue and show individual advancements.

In this second theme, the participants have shown different consequences that may follow from pursuing and practicing the type of individual progress and development that NGOs promote. This link between individualism and jealousy on the one hand, and between jealousy and *ufiti* on the other, may have critical consequences for the NGOs' "beneficiaries." Through the decolonial and feminist cultural psychological lens our analysis speaks to the coloniality inherent in dominant assumptions of being that operate as natural standards (Adams et al., 2015). In this analysis, particularly women and girls are affected by Western standards of individuality and self-actualization, clashing with their communal intentional world. The women and girls NGOs in Malawi aim to empower are—as most women and girls elsewhere—stuck in a patriarchal system that relentlessly pulls them down. Therefore, the NGOs ignorance of women and girls' social facts and norms that maneuver and navigate by, may on the contrary disempower them by making them more exposed to patriarchal dominance and *ufiti*-accusations and assaults. Ultimately, when NGOs ignore the intentional worlds of their "beneficiaries", they may in line with their individualistic logic, see Malawian women and girls who avoid individual progress as failing to become empowered and developed.

Discussion

In realities where the fear of supernatural forces like *ufiti* permeate all levels of life; where prosocial behavior, communal values, and reciprocal norms and obligations protect people from both poverty- and *ufiti*-related dangers; where independent individual progress, expansion, and unshared prosperity are associated with asocial, selfish, greedy behavior, and directly linked to harmful acts of *ufiti*; then, pursuing and practicing such

behavior is perceived as both immoral and dangerous for individuals and communities. Thus, when NGOs promote individualized development, singling out and "empowering" specific people to seek individual self-actualization and progress they risk doing so in opposition with peoples' understandings of their social facts and intentional world. This interfering is particularly dangerous for women and girls, as they are more exposed to *ufiti* accusations and assaults.

The link between individualized gendered development/empowerment, and resentment, jealousy, and perceptions of *ufiti*, as unpacked in this article, is not recognized, or incorporated in the work of many NGOs operating in Malawi (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). Presumably because the role of spirituality, *ufiti* and the occult is largely avoided in development programming (Smith et al., 2017). This neglect of the Others cosmology, we argue, is a matter of spiritual Othering; a heritage and continuance of colonial Eurocentric knowledge production, in which the Others' spiritual ontologies are marginalized, ignored, and/or written off as backward and "non-real." We argue that the NGOs' spiritual Othering of the Malawian phenomena of *ufiti*, is, coupled with their pre-set and vertical way of implementing individualized development are manifestations of coloniality, which is highly problematic for the NGOs "beneficiaries." Furthermore, as the individualistic paradigm is so prominent within many conventional Euro-American psychological orientations, and given the fact that many of their theories and practices disregard and/or pathologizes African experiences of spirituality, many serve as promoters of coloniality of individualism and spirituality.

Returning to Shweder's (1990) intentional worlds and his metaphor of the "weed" it becomes crucial to recognize and act on the fact that a dandelion may be a weed in some places but not in others. This entails that what is regarded as justified, valid, and true, is socially and culturally constructed and decided (Shweder, 1990), which should be a fundamental aspect in all intercultural collaboration, as development practitioners and psychologists. Nevertheless, our argument also goes further than that. Where developmental approaches and psychology needs to be mindful of different intentional worlds particularly in intercultural collaborations, there is also a need within the broader spectra of psychology to a much larger extent to acknowledge both current and historical contexts (see for example Sullivan, 2020). By applying a denaturalization-strategy (see Adams et al., 2015), unburdened individualism dismantles as manifestations of Western coloniality, and as an inversion of communal norms and morals of reciprocity that may be dangerous for individuals and groups. As such, pursuing and practicing Western individualism is not familiar for many people in many places, and should not be treated and promoted as a universal "natural," neither by development practitioners nor by psychologists.

We echo Burr and Dick (2017, p. 66) social constructionist stance that "the social context in which we live is not just a set of important variables to be taken into consideration when trying to understand behavior. Without the social realm people as we know them would not exist at all; we become human by virtue of taking part in social life." The communal way of life in Malawi may thus also reflect life elsewhere to larger extents than psychology as a general discipline recognizes. Along with Burr and Dick (2017, p. 66) we criticize the focus on individualism over social embeddedness in many established psychological disciplines, and their individualistic focus that "celebrates and privileges the unique, self-contained person." The fields of global development and psychology should, we argue, move towards meaningful engagement with contexts and intentional worlds in their general workings, to a whole other level than the ones these fields are currently engaging in.

Limitations of the Study

The study has important limitations that we want to emphasize. First, in two of the three field settings, we recruited a convenience sample (in the rural villages however, we interviewed all households). Efforts were made to reach a diverse sample, with variations in age, gender, positions, and backgrounds, making the stances and experiences varied. That conceptualizations of *ufiti* came up so frequently across this broad sample is interesting and resonates with the previous finding that 87% of household heads in Malawi reported that *ufiti* is present in their communities (Chilimampunga & Thindwa, 2012). Second, for some of the participants—particularly the older ones in the rural villages—the topic of *ufiti* was often avoided, so getting them to engage in discussions of perceptions of *ufiti* and its consequences was sometimes difficult. Wanda's long-term relationship building with participants in the rural villages proved very helpful. Third, with the entire colonial, race, and class connotations inherent in being an *mzunga*, the first author's presence in especially the township and rural villages proved challenging and probably affected what participants have shared with us, and in turn how we have interpreted the material. Wanda's lengthy stay both in the township and in the rural villages prior to the first author arrival proved invaluable for establishing report, trust and understanding of the project, and stresses the imperative need, as well as joys of collaborating across class/race/nationality and global South and North power structures in research and in development practices. Lastly, depending on translations warrants discussions of what may be lost in translation. Still, Wanda enabled access and sensitivity to the context that would otherwise not have been possible.

Future Studies

In our study, we have explored the participants' accounts of perceptions of *ufiti* and individualized development/empowerment, but future studies could conduct deep ethnographic research over time to get at *ufiti* practices. It would also be interesting to engage more extensively with the "universalist" individualized approaches of the NGOs and donors, getting at their narratives of how they see context and culture. A decolonial, feminist, and cultural psychology lens would be a valuable approach for both research directions.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval Research permits were granted by the National Commission for Science and Technology in Malawi (NCST); the local District Council, the village authorities, as well as by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Consent to Participate All participants in this study have read and signed consent to participate. The study is approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), who "ensure that data about people and society can be collected, stored and shared, both safely and legally."

Consent for Publication All participants in this study have read and signed consent to participate, and been informed that the material will be used for publications.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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