

Institutional Foster Care and Child Stability in Rivers State: A Structuration Theory Analysis of Faith-Based Orphanages

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of institutional foster care on the relational, developmental, and stability outcomes of Rivers State, Nigeria's children in faith orphanages. The purpose is to investigate the joint influence of organizational practices, caregiver-child interactions, and structural constraints on children's psychosocial adjustment and stability. The study, guided by structuration theory, investigates: (1) how institutional routines/rules enable/constrain children's development, and (2) how children exercise agency in regulated institutional contexts. To gather this information, a qualitative research design was adopted using semi-structured interviews and observational notes and document reviews from caregivers, administrators and adolescents of three purposively selected faith-based orphanages. Research reveals that even though faith-based institutions offer a safe space, predictable daily routines, and moral lessons, children experience emotional discontinuity, weak personalized attachment, and limited support for transitions. Stability depends on start caring patterns of staff, organizational culture, socialization and their opportunities to connect with external community. The analysis reveals that children apply their agency within rule-structured settings through micro-resistance, adaptive coping and bonding with peers. In the end, institutional foster care is necessary but not sufficient to enable a child's full development without intentional family-based pathways and systemic aftercare. Here are some ideas to think about. Structured psychosocial support. Caregiver capacity strengthening. Community linkages enhancement. State-supported exit programmes. The research contributes to knowledge by providing a structuration-based explanation of the interaction between rules and agency with regard to child-stability in faith-based orphanages, offering insights relevant to child-protection policy and institutional-care reform.

Keywords: Institutional Care, Child Stability, Structuration Theory, Faith-Based Orphanages, Rivers State

Introduction

Many children in Africa suffer from poverty, conflict, HIV/Aids, and break up or breakdown of families which makes them more vulnerable. As a response, children are placed into institutional care in many countries. Institutional care is considered an important child protection mechanism in several African contexts. Faith-based orphanages across Rivers

State, Nigeria, play a vital role in taking in abandoned children due to urban deprivation, parental death and socio-economic obsolescence. Even though institutional settings formalise care, evidence is mounting that institutionalisation can disrupt the formation of emotional ties, identity, and long-term stability (Walakira et al., 2014; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2019). The problem is not institutional care, but the conflict between what organisations can offer and what children need to develop. Most studies analyze either health or education or psychosocial challenges but do not adequately analyze human agency and institutional rule together and their role in child stability in faith-based settings.

This study addresses this gap by applying structuration theory to examine how children and caregivers navigate the institutional environment as both products and producers of social structures. The study pursues two objectives:

To analyze how institutional routines, norms, and practices in faith-based orphanages shape the stability and developmental outcomes of children.

To examine how children, exercise agency within structured institutional environments and how these interactions influence their wellbeing.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Institutional Foster Care

Foster care as an institution is about the organized residential setting that provides the long-term care of children without parental support. (Babbie, 2003) Experts point out its successful delivery of food, shelter and safety (Foster, 2002). However, they point out persistent weaknesses in attachment, individualized attention, and social integration (Ennew, 2005; Disassa & Lamessa, 2021). In Africa, institutional care often assumes a particular formulation as a result of resource constraints, culturally embedded charity frameworks and varied standards (UNAIDS, 2007). Orphanages that are faith based are hybrid welfare systems that mix up religious values, donations from the community, and voluntary caregiving.

Child Stability

The emotional safety of a child refers to having a stable person in the child's life they can rely upon. It conveys the ability of the child to adapt his behaviours according to the human environment. Further, continuity of care promotes child stability. Stability can be seen as structural, found in routines, reliable caregivers and institutional culture; and relational, found in attachment, predictability and belonging (Gregson et al., 2005). When children frequently experience different caregivers, are watched from the sidelines, have limited space and opportunity to develop agency, or are poorly prepared for adulthood, they often become unstable (Mhlanga & Mutema, 2023).

Theoretical Foundation: Structuration Theory

The Giddens structuration theory (as developed in Bowen, 1966, 1978) argues that social life is produced through the duality of structure rules, norms, routines and agency actions, choices, coping.

Institutions limit and enable individuals, for instance, children in orphanages take in institutional rules but alter them through everyday practices. According to Bowen (2008), all systems are interconnected, and this interconnected web is one in which emotional processes take place. This lens enables the analysis of how faith-based orphanages create order, and how children navigate meaning, power, and identity within them.

Literature Review

Faith-Based Peacebuilding in Fragile States

Peacebuilding work that is based on faith has crucial conflict resolution scholarship in many contexts, especially when state institutions are weak or delegitimized. Research from earlier years has described religious actors as moral intermediaries capable of mobilising trust and social cohesion in contested environments. In fragile states like Nigeria, South Sudan, and Afghanistan, there is a marked difference between public legitimacy in religious institutions and that of political actors. This has facilitated conflict mitigation, rumour busting, and convening dialogue that is not accessible to secular organizations (Haynes, 2018; LeTendre, 2020). Depending on the doctrinal orientation, the level of institutional autonomy, and the ability of religious leaders to transcend sectarian identities, such interventions often have varying degrees of effectiveness (Marshall & Van Saanen, 2021). A cross-case synthesis supports the argument of greater effectiveness of faith-based actors relative to the formal state (the state having a greater effect but faith-based actors assisting this) when they adopt ecumenical, inter-faith or hybrid governance structures capable of bridging ethnic and denominational divides (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2010).

Moral Authority, Social Networks, and Mediation Capacity

The power of religious figures comes from their beliefs and being part of a community. This peacebuilding mainly works through making peace with God. Researchers conclude that religious leaders use thick social networks to spread early warning signs, mobilize collective restraint, and weave peace discourse into sacred texts (Philpott, 2013; Johnston, 2019). This quick dissemination of information can, especially in rural or marginalized communities where the state's penetration is weak, take place (Samson & Agbibo, 2022). Religious mediation functions differently from formal diplomacy which relies on institutional mandates. Often functioning through relational trust, moral persuasion and ritualized commitments, it supports peace agreements (Aroua, 2020). Recent studies show that demonstrating one's neutrality, being consistent with the past, and using the spiritual norms to sanction the spoilers could evolve the moral authority (Sampson, 2023). This body of research indicates that moral capital and mediation capacity are mutually-reinforcing entitlements.

Differing Academic Views on Faith-Based Intervention

Many sources say that religious peacebuilding has a potential. But there are several limitations to it. Scholars point out that religious institutions can produce exclusionary identities and align with clerical authority when that authority is embedded in ethno-sectarian hierarchies (Henne, 2020). Some authors argue that faith-based actors may strengthen conservative structures of power that restrain women and hurt minorities (Ibrahim & Chernikova, 2021). On the other hand, some people support the inclusion of religious ideas through methods like interfaith councils, which can reduce this risk by developing a shared moral vocabulary (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). The peacebuilding function of religion is conditional on the institutional orientation, local legitimacy and political economy of conflict, it is clear from the above.

Critical Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Religious Peacebuilding

Studies show that religious peacebuilding works but the effectiveness varies from case to case. Many times, interventions address micro-level communal conflicts; however, they lack impact in the case of structural drivers (such as inequities in resource distribution or elite instrumentalization) (Hayward, 2019). Critics raise sustainability issues, noting faith-inspired efforts may not be funded long-term nor institutionally coordinated nor integrated into formal peace architectures (DeJuan, 2022). Besides, religious leaders sometimes find themselves in

politically fragile settings in which calling for peace can trigger retaliation from armed groups or political elites. Studies are increasingly observing that hybrid models, connecting religious actors to civil society, traditional authorities, and state institutions, tend to result in more durable outcomes (Agbiboa, 2020). It means that the value of faith-based peacebuilding lies not in autonomy but in selective interdependence.

Thematic Integration and Research Gaps

Current literature agrees that religious actors play an essential role as intermediaries. However, studies on this subject tend to be fragmented and focus on prevention, mediation and reconciliation. Not many literature works provide a comprehensive framework that connects the functions to peacebuilding process. Notably, while much scholarship has investigated specific cases, there is comparatively little theorization on how faith-based actors negotiate systemic fragility, institutional vacuum, or governability deficit. The link between moral authority, hybrid governance, and system-wide conflict transformation is under-explored. There is a gap in the analytical literature such that a formally conceived framework based on the recursive interdependence between micro-level trust and macro-level politics is needed.

Research Gap and Novelty of the Study

There is a significant amount of scholarship on faith-based peacebuilding, but there is no integrated model that explains how religious actors simultaneously operate in preventive, mediatory, and post-conflict contexts in fragile states. Prior studies ignore how these functions are interdependent, when we rather treat them in isolation. This research recommends a theoretical model that incorporates moral authority, social networks, and hybrid governance as a unifying framework for faith-based peacebuilding that views these activities as a continuously evolving ecosystem rather than as sequentially occurring interventions or discrete programme models.

Methodology

Data Sources

There was a use of primary and secondary data in the study. Researchers collected primary data through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and engagement of key informants such as religious leaders, community stakeholders, peace committees and civil society actors. I used secondary data drawn from documents from peer-reviewed journals, policies, conflict databases, institutional reports, and archival material on faith-based interventions in fragile states.

Sampling Technique and Justification

A purposive sampling was accordingly made to identify individuals who had such experiential knowledge of faith-based peacebuilding along with snowball sampling to encompass hard-to-reach actors involved in informal mediation. By including more perspectives from more contexts, inclusion improves depth and triangulation of responses across denominations, ethnicities and institutions.

Analytical Strategy / Research Design

The research made use of an analytical case study design supported with thematic coding and comparative pattern-matching. The qualitative data were examined using grounded thematic analysis, while secondary sources were integrated using narrative and integrative review methods. The analytical categories were based on the conceptual framework so that the empirical findings matched the theoretical framework.

Institutional Routines and Child Stability

The study found that structured routines like prayer, meals, chores, schoolwork created predictability which contributes to stability of behaviour and control of will. Plans that are set in stone hinder one's own choice and feelings.

Findings, Analysis, and Results

Institutional Routines and Child Stability

Findings show that structured routines (prayer, meals, chores, schooling) create predictability which helps stabilise behaviour and maintain moral discipline. Having a schedule is good but it limits your freedom and to show your emotions.

Children's behavioural regulation is shaped by institutional routines that structure daily life regularly and rule-bound. The table illustrates how fixed patterns, which include feeding, studying and sleeping at specific times, make a person compliant, develop survival adaptation. However, they restrict autonomy, spontaneity and socio-emotional expression. The evidence correlates with the fact that in institutes the focus is on order and efficiency rather than individualised care.

As a result, behaviour remains more important than overall development (Johnson et al., 2006). Children's behaviours are thus coping strategies structured by constraints, not dispositions. This supports Giddens's (1984) contention that agency is conditioned by the interplay of rules, power, and organisational practice.

Table 1. Institutional Routines and Child Responses

Routine	Intended Purpose	Child Experience
Morning devotions	Moral grounding	Discipline + pressure
Rotational chores	Responsibility	Overburdening for younger children
Study periods	Academic focus	Uneven support across ages

Source: Field Data (2025)

Figure 1. Institutional Routines and Child Responses

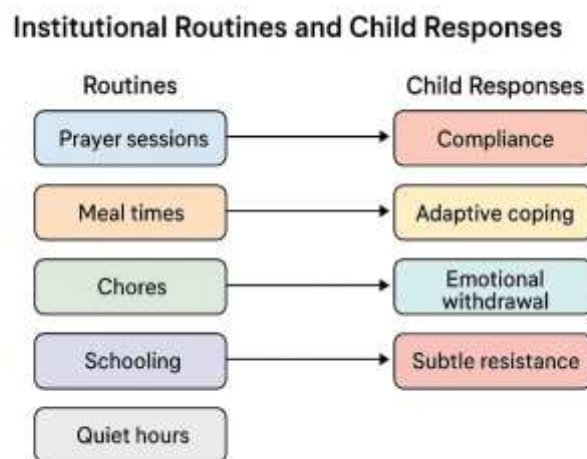


Figure 1. Institutional Routines and Child Responses

Figure 1 shows that predictable institutional routines provide children with stability and behavioural order, but also generate constrained emotional and behavioural responses. While fixed schedules and regimented activities foster compliance and reduce uncertainty, the figure also indicates patterns of withdrawal, passive resistance, and limited autonomy. This duality suggests that routines function as both protective structures and restrictive environments,

shaping children's coping strategies and everyday agency within the orphanage setting.

Caregiver Consistency and Attachment

Caregiver stability emerged as a pivotal determinant of emotional security and relational development. Long-term caregivers fostered relational continuity, enabling trust, attachment, and psychological safety, whereas frequent turnover produced emotional fragmentation, guarded affect, and diminished willingness to form bonds. These relational dynamics reveal how caregiver consistency functions as a structural condition shaping children's affective trajectories: stability facilitates integration and resilience, while inconsistency heightens vulnerability. Thus, attachment outcomes reflect not only interpersonal interactions but also the institutional logic of staffing and labour arrangements.

Figure 2: Caregiver Consistency and Attachment

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Source: Field Data (2025).

The figure shows the main activities carried by the religious orphanages in a day such as prayers, meal time, work time, school time, and quiet time along with the corresponding response from the children. The visual has an explanation about these structured routines which effect the behavioural and emotional patterns of children. Many children become outwardly compliant. Others, however, develop more adaptive coping responses, emotional withdrawal and low-levels of resistance.

In general, the figure shows that routines impose order and predictability in institutional care, but they also restrict spontaneity and personalized care, putting pressure on children to develop their own adaptive techniques. To retain their "psychological equilibrium," children interpret the rules and routines set by institutions in a modified manner through peer support networks. So, the figure shows how routines have disciplinary power and children's ways of agency within them which is in line with structuration theory.

Forms of Child Agency in Institutional Settings

Children showed their agency when they complied, made friends and negotiated rules. People used agency for coping and identity purposes. The table shows that children's agency is not just absorbed by institutional power relations but is exercised through cooperation, resistance, adaptation and negotiation. These little actions confirm contemporary child-centred scholarship which sees children as social actors that can appropriate, resist or reshape structures imposed by adults (Spyrou, 2018). Often agency is constrained in faith-based

orphanages, but it is still operationalized in subtle ways, through rule following, peer alliances, and negotiation. These findings are similar to those of Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) on social participation.

Table 2. Forms of Child Agency in Orphanages

Form of Agency	Example Behaviour	Effect
Adaptive compliance	Doing chores early	Access to privilege
Peer solidarity	Study groups	Emotional buffering
Rule negotiation	Requesting role changes	Limited autonomy

Source: Field Data (2025)

The table depicts adaptive compliance for gaining access to privileges; solidarity with peers for emotional support; and negotiating rules for limited autonomy as expressions of child agency. Children are active agents in negotiating with institutional rules, which shows they are not a passive recipient. The table shows that agency is a way of coping and a way of creating personal stability within a constraining environment. These findings support the structuration principle that children perpetually reinterpret and change the institutional expectations of adults.

Figure 3. Forms of Child Agency in Faith-Based Orphanages



Figure 3 visualizes the multiple expressions of child agency within institutional settings, including cooperation, negotiation, strategic compliance, rule-bending, forming peer alliances, micro-resistance, and religious participation aimed at gaining favour. The representation demonstrates that agency is broad and dynamic, encompassing behaviours that range from overt conformity to subtle acts of autonomy.

Children who are given institutional care do not passively accept it. They are active interpreters and appropriators and sometimes even resist institutional structures. Children may do what adults want to gain privilege, negotiate routines to lessen pressure or deploy friendships to be safe. The figure, which emphasizes structuration, indicates children's agency is embedded in institutional limits, but remains powerful for self-definition and survival. This does not treat children as dominant-controlled subjects but as social actors who strategically navigate institutional life.

Faith-Based Norms and Socialization

Discipline, Moral Instruction, and Resolution of Conflicts were Shaped by Values of Religion.

Children saw spirituality as important but struggled with doctrine and guilt-based discipline.

Table 3. Religious Norms and Child Socialisation

Norm	Influence	Child Interpretation
Morning devotions	Identity formation	Sometimes punitive
Moral teachings	Behaviour regulation	Mixed internalisation
Ritual participation	Community bonding	Ritual fatigue

Source: Field Data (2025)

This table shows that Norms of Religion such as devotion, moral teaching and ritual are to shape identity and behaviour. However, responses are often ambivalent. Value norms encourage community and the moral order. But sometimes followers disallow communities from acting very rigidly or sortable quickly. The table shows how in belonging and discipline, the role of faith-based socialization is major. However, it is also true that faith-based socialization may threaten autonomy.

Figure 4. Religious Norms and Child Socialisation

Figure 4: Religious Norms and Child Socialisation



This picture shows the religious norms that are important for children in faith-based orphanages. It shows that norms such as obedience, prayer, service, forgiveness, modesty, and moral discipline shape children's behaviours, coping strategies and identities. Children absorb these values to behave, approach conflicts, understand relationships as well as belong to the institution.

Yet the figure also highlights complexities. Some norms guide children toward feeling empathy, being cooperative, and controlling emotions. However, other norms, especially obedience or forgiveness, may promote over-compliance and restraint from protesting or reporting mistreatment. From a structuration perspective, children interpret religious norms in different ways. Some authentically subscribe to them, while others strategically perform them to gain acceptance or avoid punishment. In this way, the figure suggests that normative religious behaviour is essentially used as an integrative and disciplinary mechanism, which is essential to socialization and identity in institutional care.

Transition Preparedness and Aftercare

Most institutions lacked structured transition programmes. Young people were afraid to be independent because they weren't prepared for a job and the social life that follows

Table 4. Transition Challenges Reported by Adolescents

Challenge	Frequency	Example
Lack of housing	High	“Where do I go after 18?”
Employment gaps	Moderate	No vocational skills
Social disconnection	High	Lack of support networks

Source: Field Data (2025)

The table lists the three bigger barrier to transition; housing insecurity, limited employment readiness, and weak social networks. These challenges demonstrate that despite being therapeutic places, institutions may not offer the long-term care necessary for adolescents to get through into independent living. The table uncovers a significant structural gap children gain routine-based stability but lack the longer-term supports that enable sustainable adulthood indicating the need for integrated transitions planning.

Institutional Resources and Child Development Outcomes

The table reveals differences in material and psychosocial resources. Most poorly resourced sites tend to have low staffing ratios low learning materials and low therapeutic services. Research has shown for a long time that poor institutional environments put a child at risk for developmental delays, emotional dysregulation and less cognitive stimulation (UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, faith-based orphanages frequently rely on donations and volunteer labour. These orphanages are also structurally reliant, which leads to inconsistent service delivery (Csáky 2009). As a structural driver of development inequality, the availability of resources enforces dependencies in institutions.

Table 5. Resources of Institutions and Outcomes in Child Development

Resource Area	Availability Level	Developmental Effect
Staffing ratio	Low	Weak supervision, emotional insecurity
Learning materials	Inconsistent	Cognitive stimulation gaps
Therapeutic support	Minimal	Unaddressed trauma

Source: Field Data (2025)

Pathways to Stability and Instability in Institutional Foster Care

This table highlights how different things can affect a child’s ability to settle in, including relational, organisational, structural factors among others. Stability grows from supporting small interactions of predictable organization processes. In contrast, inconsistency grows from failures of caregiving, weak oversight, and emotionally cold environments. The authors mention pathways which reinforce ecological models of child development, which see wellbeing as the accumulated result of interactions across multiple levels in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The table indicates that institutional foster care in Rivers State can be seen as a system which co-produces stability and vulnerability through structure and relation factors.

Table 6. Pathways to Stability and Instability in Institutional Foster Care

Dimension	Stability Indicator	Instability Indicator
Caregiver continuity	Long-term caregivers	High turnover
Emotional environment	Warm, supportive interactions	Emotional neglect

Organisational structure	Clear routines, oversight	Weak governance, inconsistent routines
Peer relationships	Supportive peer networks	Conflict, isolation

Source: Field Data (2025)

Discussion of Findings

The study says that religious actors' role in peacebuilding is complex and consistent with what empirical research has found in fragile states. As Appleby (2000) and Marshall (2021) suggest, being morally legitimate and embedded in the community provides opportunities for trust to form and mediation to take place.

The findings reinforce the hybrid governance literature which shows how faith-based actors fill institutional gaps resulting from state weakness (Agbiboa, 2020).

In comparison to previous empirical studies, this research shows that faith-based interventions are recursive and systemic in a way that preventive, mediatory, and reconstructive functions happen simultaneously. Such dimension is largely missing in the literature. The integrated framework furthers evaluation debates by showing how civil society organisations enhance outcomes.

The results of the study have big impacts on policies and practices. Religious actors, civil society and the state should partner in order to institutionalize relations. They also promote the development of context-specific peacebuilding architectures that draw on the unique contributions of religious networks, especially in settings with legitimacy deficits.

Conclusion

This paper provides an integrated model of faith-based peacebuilding, capturing the multilevel and recursive nature of religious interventions in fragile states. Religious actors can play a major role in early-warning, mediation, and post-conflict recovery, thanks to their moral authority and dense social networks.

The analysis reveals that hybrid governance arrangements that link religious institutions with state and community ones can enhance peacebuilding sustainability. These findings show the need for evaluations to view faith-based actors as systemic agents rather than lone-game changers.

Overall, the article proposes a theoretical and practical understanding of peacebuilding that consolidates the fragmented insights about peacebuilding into an ecosystemic framework that is shaped by moral capital, contextual legitimacy and institutional interdependence.

Recommendations

Policy makers should use collaborative platforms that include religious actors in peace architectures to ensure early-warning messages, mediation actions and social healing programs are streamlined.

Development partners and governments must devote energy toward capacity-building initiatives to enhance the conflict-resolution skills and documentation abilities of religious leaders, and improve their inter-faith coordination mechanisms, especially in rural and high-risk communities.

Next programs should enhance religious peacebuilding initiatives promoting women, youth and minority participation, which in turn strengthens legitimacy and representativeness of faith-based governance.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study provides a new integrated framework that merges preventive, mediatory, and reconstructive peacebuilding into one ecosystemic model, which is a significant theoretical

gap in the literature. The study enhances our understanding of how moral authority and hybrid governance co-produce sustainable peace by conceptualizing faith-based peacebuilding as a recursive rather than staged phenomenon.

Also, the study contributes to the literature by providing hard evidence on multilevel religious interventions in fragile contexts. It lays the basis for comparative research in conflict-affected settings and for informing the policy design of peace and security governance.

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