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"WE ARE IN A POSITION OF POWER": FRONT-LINE WORKERS' EXPERIENCES AT THE INTERSECTION OF CHILD WELFARE AND IMMIGRATION

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Article abstract

This article focuses on the compounding systemic issues that children and families face when involved with immigration and child welfare. Fourteen semi-structured interviews and one focus group (six participants) were conducted with service providers working in social service sectors related to immigration and child welfare who deliver services in Ontario, Canada. Front-line workers' perspectives were analyzed through a descriptive phenomenological study, revealing how their perceptions of complex trauma histories, systemic oppression, and power dynamics influenced refugees' experiences and fears regarding the child welfare system. The study emphasizes the need for an anti-oppressive, trauma-informed approach and specialized services for refugee children and families. Conceptualizations of structural social work and trauma-informed practice are drawn on to guide the analysis.

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Abstract: This article focuses on the compounding systemic issues that children and families face when involved with immigration and child

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Danielle Ungara, RSW, (she/elle) is grateful to be on Treaty 13 land. Danielle's professional experience spans two decades and includes social work, leadership, and program management across various sectors, including in pediatric healthcare and on the board of a mental health agency. Danielle currently co-manages the Child Welfare Immigration Centre of Excellence, which offers services across Ontario, operates an international consultation centre, and engages in training and research nationally. Danielle is an inclusive leader of integrity and believes in furthering social justice outcomes and equity through service excellence, policy reform, and research.

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welfare. Fourteen semi-structured interviews and one focus group (six participants) were conducted with service providers working in social service sectors related to immigration and child welfare who deliver services in Ontario, Canada. Front-line workers' perspectives were analyzed through a descriptive phenomenological study, revealing how their perceptions of complex trauma histories, systemic oppression, and power dynamics influenced refugees' experiences and fears regarding the child welfare system. The study emphasizes the need for an anti-oppressive, trauma-informed approach and specialized services for refugee children and families. Conceptualizations of structural social work and trauma-informed practice are drawn on to guide the analysis.

Keywords: Child welfare, refugees, phenomenology, structural social work, trauma-informed practice

Abrégé : Cet article se concentre sur les problèmes systémiques aggravants auxquels les enfants et les familles sont confrontés lorsqu'ils sont impliqués dans l'immigration et la protection de l'enfance. Quatorze entretiens semi-structurés et un groupe de discussion (six participants) ont été menés avec des prestataires de services travaillant dans les secteurs des services sociaux liés à l'immigration et à la protection de l'enfance qui ont fourni des services en Ontario, au Canada. Les points de vue des travailleurs de première ligne ont été analysés dans le cadre d'une étude phénoménologique descriptive, révélant comment leurs perceptions des antécédents de traumatismes complexes, de l'oppression systémique et des dynamiques de pouvoir ont influencé les expériences et les craintes des réfugiés à l'égard du système de protection de l'enfance. L'étude souligne la nécessité d'une approche anti-oppressive et tenant compte des traumatismes et de services spécialisés pour les enfants et les familles réfugiés. Les conceptualisations du travail social structurel et la pratique tenant compte des traumatismes sont utilisées pour guider l'analyse.

Mots-clés : protection de l'enfance, réfugiés, phénoménologie, travail social structurel, pratique tenant compte des traumatismes

A GROWING TREND IN CANADIAN CHILD WELFARE involves children and families concurrently navigating child welfare and immigration systems (Ungara, 2023). This study uses descriptive phenomenological analysis to capture front-line workers' (social workers, settlement workers, social service workers, among others) experiences working with children and families at the intersections of child welfare and immigration to understand the compounding systemic issues that children and families face when involved with both systems. While incorporating existing literature on the experiences of children and families who have publicly shared their experiences, this study also engages with front-line workers, as

we recognize the need for internal change to mitigate power imbalances and address systemic issues. Front-line workers are in positions of power, and we recognize the actuality of how power and authority influence child welfare and immigration processes. Yet children and families experience compounding systemic challenges at the same time as they navigate the power dynamics inherent within systems governing child welfare and immigration. Their experiences drive the need for change.

Throughout the discussions of the intersection of immigration and child welfare, participants spoke extensively of refugee families and children, and noted their distinctiveness from immigrants who are not refugees. Policies and research have highlighted that conflating immigrants and refugees can be "dangerous and detrimental to refugee protection" (Feller, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, to capture the nuanced approaches needed to build trauma-informed systems for refugees and children, the article is guided by the following research question: how do front-line workers interact with refugee children (under age 18) and families in Ontario, Canada? We will first outline the context of refugees arriving and living in Canada and the experiences of refugee children and families in the Ontario child welfare system, where our interviews took place. Subsequently, we focus on our theoretical understanding informed by structural social work (SSW) and trauma-informed practice (TIP), and on our methodological approach. We present the perspectives of front-line workers, followed by our analysis and recommendations for supporting a trauma-informed system.

Context of Refugee Children in Canada

By the end of 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2023). Of all forcibly displaced persons worldwide, 42% are under 18 (UNHCR, 2021). Canada has an international reputation as a humanitarian and compassionate haven for refugees — a reputation which the government emphasizes (Parada et al., 2021). Of those forcibly displaced, 94,000 individuals registered for asylum in Canada in 2022 — triple the amount in 2021 (UNHCR, 2023). Every person, including every child, who wants to enter Canada under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act must be examined at a port of entry, so that immigration officers can determine whether they are admissible to Canada. Therefore, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) has a substantial role in the initial stages of the asylum-seeking process (GC, 2021a). CBSA (or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) officials determine if the asylum-seeker is eligible to make a claim under the definition of Convention refugee or a person in need of protection (GC, 2021b). While the Canadian government states that CBSA officers are "keeping Canadians safe" (GC, 2021a, p. 1), CBSA officers have been critiqued for

having the power to deny or delay access to services for asylum seekers (Atak et al., 2019).

While specific racial demographics of the refugees in Canada cannot be extracted from the public statistics by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB, 2023), the majority of refugee claims in Canada come from Eastern Europe, South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Based on the available data on global migration trends, we expect most refugee children in Canada to be racialized, considering that the overall migrant population is predominantly racialized (Statistics Canada, 2017). Contextualizing refugees' experiences with the immigration and child welfare systems requires considering the impact of racialization, given Canada's colonial legacy, systemic racism, and institutional power (Ma, 2021).

Refugee Children within Canada's Child Welfare System

Understanding the colonial legacy of Canada's child welfare systems is foundational when examining refugee families and children's experiences (Ma, 2021). Social workers were bystanders in and perpetrators of the historic systematic assimilationist and genocidal policies against Indigenous People, leading to mistrust that impedes meaningful participation in services (Leckey et al., 2021). The violence of the Canadian settler state intended to subjugate and oppress Indigenous People to destroy their mind, body, spirit, and humanity; one of the ways this violence was enacted was by children being "systematically removed from … reserves and forced to assimilate" (Kundouqk & Qwul'sih'yah'maht, 2015, p. 35). The foundational violence interwoven into the child welfare system remains systemically embedded; the OHRC (2018) reported that Indigenous, Black, and Latin American families are disproportionately involved with the Ontario child welfare system (Fallon et al., 2021).

Child welfare is perceived as a contemporary manifestation of colonialism, particularly in communities where systemic racism, race-based discrimination, and racial profiling persist (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021; Bonnie et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2023; OHRC, 2017; Strega & Esquao, 2015). Profiling may involve positioning racialized migrant parents as unfit due to misconceptions about socially or legally unacceptable parenting practices in their country of origin (Hadfield et al., 2017; Ma, 2021). Despite efforts to train and educate front-line workers on the dynamics of child protection and immigration (Ungara, 2023), there remains insufficient understanding of immigration laws and policies within child welfare systems. Limited capacity to assist children and families in managing the complexities of migration and settlement can lead to inaccurate assessments which disregard the challenges that families face during resettlement (Dettlaff, 2012). Refugee parents may

have "escaped war, persecution and perhaps death to bring their children to a safe place" (Dumbrill, 2009, p. 146), but despite efforts to provide safety for their children, the Ontario child welfare system may intervene over parenting concerns (Dettlaff, 2012; Dumbrill, 2009), reflecting the system's narrow mandate, as the system only intervenes after parents' resources to care for their children are exhausted (Maiter & Leslie, 2014).

Child welfare agencies can facilitate a connection with the immigration system if a child or family has migration-related needs; additionally, CBSA contacts child welfare if a child has child protection needs (i.e., unaccompanied or separated children at the port of entry) (GC, 2019). During the migration process, accidental separations may occur when fleeing danger or if the parents disappear or are killed (ICRC, 2004; Montgomery & Shermarke, 2001). The contradicting normative paradigms in both child welfare and immigration are exemplified in how the system assesses the 'eligibility' of unaccompanied or separated children for refugee protection: one perspective sees them as inherently rule-breaking, while another recognizes them as vulnerable children entitled to state support and protection (Ali et al., 2003).

Theoretical Framework

In this article, we draw on concepts from structural social work (SSW) theory and trauma-informed practice (TIP) to discuss the participants' experiences working with children and families at the intersections of child welfare and immigration. These two frameworks help contextualize how power differentials, structural oppression and historical influences shape the interactions between refugee children and families and front-line workers in child welfare and immigration systems. TIP provides a conceptual lens to recognize the impact of child welfare and immigration practices on people who have experienced trauma, guiding the development of a trauma-informed system.

Structural Social Work (SSW) Theory

The data for this study was analyzed using SSW to understand how child welfare and immigration systems interact and subsequently impact the individual (Carrillo & O'Grady, 2018; Hemingway et al., 2010; Murray & Hick, 2010). We used a structural analysis to interpret what the front-line workers shared, and found that the results of our analysis emphasized the power imbalances and systemic issues caused by personal – structural linkages. Whereas neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility and causes people to blame themselves (Brown & MacDonald, 2020), SSW reveals the impact of social and political dimensions on unequal relationships where "the system is viewed as faulty" (Mullaly, 1997, p. 119) and posits societal transformation occurs through focusing on person – structure linkages (Murray & Hick, 2010; Weinberg, 2008).

SSW theorists perceive the impact of structural oppression on individual self-determination, emphasizing the systemic structures that perpetuate power imbalances or privileges and that also benefit certain groups at the expense of others, attributing social problems to the differential control of resources and power inherent in societal structures (Carniol & Del Valle, 2010; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

SSW recognizes the transformative potential of addressing social, economic, and political systems to alleviate adverse effects on individuals and families, prioritizing structural changes rather than pathologizing those affected (Hemingway et al., 2010; Mullaly, 2007; Murray & Hick, 2010). Anti-oppressive practice at the structural level involves actively confronting and dismantling underlying structural inequalities and biases to promote equitable services for families (Adams et al., 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mattsson, 2014; Strega & Esquao, 2015).

Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP)

TIP complements the theoretical framework by offering an approach to reimagining systems to become anti-oppressive and trauma-informed. TIP facilitates our analysis of front-line workers' responses by using a trauma lens to understand their recognition of or responsiveness to people who may have experienced trauma (Atwool, 2019). Trauma-informed principles such as safety, trustworthiness, choice, and empowerment will be helpful for all refugees, regardless of their specific experiences (Blanch, 2008). However, the main objective of TIP is not to address past trauma through specific interventions, but rather to establish a safe environment or system (Blanch, 2008; Knight, 2014; Sakamoto & Couto, 2017). The approach defaults to acknowledging the possibility of past trauma and encourages the system to promote healthy relationship-building without forcing clients to disclose past experiences (Knight, 2014).

Using TIP as a sensitizing concept, this study recognizes that, because of trauma's non-linear psychosocial and emotional impacts, the onus lies with workers — supported by the system — to foster relationships through culturally safe client engagement that acknowledges the influence of trauma on perceptions of violence, safety, and trauma responses (i.e., idioms of distress) (Blanch, 2008; Knight, 2014; Levenson, 2017). Using this framework, we examine how worker interactions can be strengthened to facilitate this process. We draw insights from front-line workers' experiences and identify potential gaps in their interactions with clients navigating two systems.

Methodology

The present study is a subset of a collaboration between the Rights for Children and Youth Partnership (RCYP) and the Child Welfare

Immigration Centre of Excellence (CWICE), which was approved by Toronto Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Board (2017–099). The collaboration explored children and youths' experiences when involved in the immigration and child welfare system in Ontario. This article focuses on the perspectives of front-line workers in Ontario. We define a 'front-line worker' as someone who directly works with family and children in the provision of services related to settlement or child welfare (e.g., housing or legal services). Front-line workers spoke to the necessity of understanding the distinct needs of immigrant and refugee children and youth; therefore, the present article focuses on the themes specific to refugee families and children. We ask: how do refugee children (under age 18) and families interact with child welfare workers in Ontario, Canada?

This study uses a qualitative phenomenology design to understand the front-line experience of the intersection between child welfare and immigration. Qualitative research, focused on behaviours through human perceptions and beliefs, seeks answers from the "broader social context rather than isolating the subject of study" (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999, p. 372). Further, qualitative methods are inductive and designed to study a particular phenomenon in-depth to understand better the universal (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). Phenomenology was selected for its ability to expose collective experience and facilitate open-ended questions in data collection and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crowther et al., 2017). The semi-structured interview process, complementary to a phenomenological design, allows participants to share stories that implicitly and explicitly convey information about their interpretations of their experiences and the broader context in which those experiences are embedded (Fraser & Macdougall, 2017).

Participants

Interviews were conducted with fourteen front-line workers; nine participants worked in social services sectors (housing, outreach, settlement, legal), and five participants worked in child welfare. CBSA officers were invited to participate in the research, but did not express interest. We sought to understand the phenomenon in focus instead of generalizing the findings. After analyzing the first fourteen interviews, six existing participants agreed to a follow-up focus group for clarifications and member checking. All participants provided verbal consent. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. The two collaborating organizations circulated a poster with their professional networks; interested individuals in the social service sectors working with children or families involved in Ontario's child welfare and immigration systems were encouraged to contact the research team. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling

by leveraging initial participants' networks to identify and refer others (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Pseudonyms are used, and any identifying information is altered to mitigate potential risks and protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Data Collection

Data collection took place from January to August 2021. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. Participants described details of their work, client situations or circumstances, and collaboration with external agencies. They were asked open-ended questions regarding different institutions or systems involved in their work, their knowledge of the systems, and any outcomes from the interactions with the respective structures. Following an initial analysis, a focus group was organized with participants from different sectors to better understand the points of contact. Due to COVID-19, all interviews and the focus group were conducted virtually through Zoom software and were audio-recorded on a separate device.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, read multiple times, and analyzed using NVivo software. Team members listened to the audio recordings to complete a global first reading; this process elicited a focus on refugee families, as participants spoke heavily on the topic and noted the importance of distinguishing them as a group and identifying their particular needs. Researchers coded and solidified themes focusing on refugee families and children. All authors actively discussed emerging themes and data interpretations, maintaining a reflective journal documenting the data explicitation. The aggregated, thematized data was collectively assessed by all authors to form a composite summary, transforming participants' expressions into "scientific discourse supporting the research" (Sadala & Adorno, 2002 p. 289).

Findings

The following section examines front-line workers' interactions with refugee children and families and their perceptions of how refugee children and families experience the immigration and child welfare systems in Ontario, Canada. Major themes identified by the workers were perceptions of the child welfare system, indicators of refugee children's fear of the immigration system, and the importance of relationship-building skills. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Perceptions of the Child Welfare System

The interviewed workers perceived that child welfare may be viewed negatively by refugee children and families. While these negative perceptions of the child welfare system were disheartening to participants, the accounts also substantiated the legitimacy of such concerns, as they conveyed instances in which children and families had encountered adverse experiences within the system. Often, disparities in power and resources shaped the interactions between the child welfare system and refugee children and families.

Denise identified as an immigrant woman but acknowledged she is in a "position of power" when interacting with children and families involved in child welfare and immigration.

> Sometimes your experience in your home country, you might have fled that country because of political issues and people are afraid of the police; they are afraid of people who are in a position of power. And although child welfare workers, we're not wearing a uniform, we are in a position of power. It's hard for children — for anybody to connect. (Denise, child welfare worker)

Denise emphasizes the challenges that children and families face in forming connections within a framework shaped by power dynamics and considers the impact of their past experiences on interactions with child welfare workers. Drawing a parallel with the fear of authority figures, she acknowledges her substantial power despite the absence of overt symbols.

The fear of authority figures aligns with the perception that workers noted in refugee communities that the primary purpose of the child welfare system is to remove children from the care of their parents. Ken felt that the prevailing narrative impacted refugees' judgement of child welfare agencies but similarly acknowledged that refugees' histories may contribute to this notion.

> The other thing that I think continues to be a challenge with the families and the children we work with is just the stigma with [child welfare agency], especially for newcomer and immigrant communities who have had a lot of negative experiences … I think people still hear [child welfare], and they get really scared … [there is] a lot of fear there and a lot of stigma. (Ken, settlement worker)

Heather also spoke of the "stigma" within refugee communities and similarly identified it as a barrier that prevents families from seeking assistance.

> I think probably, as you know, there's a lot of stigma in all communities, but particularly newcomer communities, around child welfare, which prevents people from reaching out and accessing support because their

> main narrative is "they're going to take away my kids." (Heather, settlement worker)

Heather suggests that the power dynamics and structural issues in child welfare contribute to negative perceptions, given the system's authority to bring children into provincial or territorial guardianship. Heather hoped that child welfare services could be "seen as an ally and a support and a resource versus something to be afraid of." Similarly, Lisa highlighted the negative opinions about the child welfare system, suggesting there are "myths," as the primary purpose of these systems is to support families.

> It's getting rid of the myths behind the agencies. Even though they are controlling agencies, they are here to support for the benefit of the child or the benefit of the family. And the fear is based on myths within the system, to say these — the negative persona of these agencies. (Lisa, family support worker)

Lisa's statement reflects an effort to reframe the role of child welfare agencies from one solely focused on control and enforcement to one that also provides support. However, this dual role creates tension within the system, as it can be challenging for families to reconcile the perception of control with the notion of support. Heather describes a case indicating this tension, where the outcome contradicts the goal of keeping children with their families and suggests a gap in providing adequate support.

> The children were taken into foster care … It resulted in their biggest fear … My understanding is the goal of [child welfare] is not to keep kids in care; it's to keep families reunited. I believe that they have systems and programs and supports in place to see that happen, like working with the parents, but for some reason, it didn't happen in this case. (Heather, settlement worker)

Heather's narrative highlights families' challenges in reconciling control with support. In contrast, Eva highlighted a situation in which child welfare was not involved, and refugee children went to a shelter. This potentially exacerbated their trauma associated with precarity and resettlement, further compounding their distress when separated from their families. Additionally, the shelter staff lacked the expertise to facilitate family reunification.

> Some of the youth shelters, I'm sure you know, are rather rough. And for refugee youth, it's a pretty big, frightening kind of experience. And so [these children] arrived at that other shelter. They're quite traumatized at it, because of all the roughness. So, the youth worker ended up calling [me] to ask for advice on how to do the refugee process … Then [the children] said, "Oh, please, can you help us? We're terrified here. Can you help get us out of here?" (Eva, social services worker)

The perceptions of the child welfare system among refugee children and families are shaped by negative experiences, stigma, and a prevailing narrative that the system's primary goal is to remove children from parental care. The interviewed workers highlight the challenges arising from power imbalances, structural issues, and the dual role of child welfare agencies as both controllers and supporters. Despite efforts by workers to reframe the role of child welfare, tensions persist, as evidenced by cases in which outcomes contradict the stated goal of family preservation.

Refugee Children's Fear in the Immigration System

The interviewed workers highlighted the added complexities when an adult is not present in a child's life, discussing how such situations impact both child welfare and immigration systems concerning children's asylum-seeking journeys. These themes were significant as children's interactions at the port of entry were a key convergence point between the two systems. The workers' accounts emphasize the need for trauma-informed approaches, recognizing the profound impact of fear on refugee children.

Sophia, a settlement worker, shared an instance in which a CBSA officer interviewed an unaccompanied child without another adult present. Sophia said the child expressed fear of giving the real names of the pursuers, fearing they might find him: "he was absolutely terrified. [His pursuers] were wanting to kill him … he was so afraid they were going to follow him to Canada and find him." The child's interaction with the CBSA officer was fraught with potential intimidation, exposing a twofold fear: the child hesitated to disclose information due to fear of the CBSA officer while simultaneously reflecting the broader context of (dis)trust within the circumstances prompting the child to seek asylum.

Kimberly clarified that, if a minor identifies themselves at the port of entry as unaccompanied or separated, a child welfare worker should be immediately called, but she believed this does not always happen.

> I've noticed a difference in how soon [child welfare] is called. Some youth are interviewed at the airport alone, and that interview is, at times, used for them a year or two later in their hearing. They should be asked with another caring adult present to look out for their best interest … One youth I worked with was questioned multiple times over a period of six hours all by himself, very afraid. He said when he went back for follow-up interviews, and there was a [child welfare worker] there who said, "No, you can't ask a youth this question. I'm going to override it," and [so he] had someone advocating for him. (Kimberly, social services worker)

Kimberly referenced that children's fearful responses to questions may affect the information they provide, potentially impacting the credibility and reliability of their statements in subsequent legal proceedings related to their immigration status. However, Kimberly emphasizes a positive intersection of the systems when a child welfare worker intervenes to advocate for the child's rights.

Jacqueline likewise highlights the impact of fear on the information that children provide during their initial interactions with CBSA.

> Sometimes, because a kid is scared, because they're on the run, because they're so afraid of mentioning certain bits, the story of the airport isn't the full story. Or [it] doesn't match what a month or two later, sitting with a lawyer really carefully going through it — those discrepancies are sometimes held against them in a hearing. But it's really just because they were so scared and probably shouldn't have made those statements at the beginning. (Jacqueline, social service worker)

Abigail expands on these implications and agrees about the past traumatic experiences of unaccompanied minors, but also the potential trauma of both the asylum-seeking process and the point of arrival in Canada at the port of entry.

> It can be an extremely traumatic experience for unaccompanied minors. Even if they're teens, they are in a foreign country; they're on their own — they're fleeing from something. We don't necessarily know what yet. (Abigail, immigration lawyer)

The workers' statements reflect children's complex and often distressing circumstances when seeking asylum. The convergence of child welfare and immigration systems at the port of entry emerged as a critical point of intersection that lacks trauma-informed approaches. The workers collectively indicated the need for compassionate and understanding systemic practices that consider the trauma that refugee children face when fleeing unknown threats and arriving in a foreign country where their first interactions are burdened by intimidation.

Importance of Relationship-Building Skills

The interview responses suggest that trust-building and meaningful connections were a concern for several workers. Relationship-building skills, such as promoting effective communication, trust, and collaboration, serve as the connection between child welfare professionals and refugee children and families. However, these trauma-informed principles are absent at the systemic level, impeding their potential impact.

Lisa shared interpersonal skills which she thinks are essential for working with families at the intersections of child welfare and immigration systems.

> You have to ensure cultural sensitivity or sensitivity to groups. It's the way that you approach things … Empathy is key because even the way that you ask the question — the questions that you ask are very key. It's building that relationship of trust … There has to be a personal component as well. (Lisa, family support worker)

The significance of relationship-building skills becomes more apparent when considering the impact of worker continuity on connecting with refugee children and families, as emphasized by Denise.

> If you keep changing workers, then I mean — if I was a child, and they keep changing workers, I would feel like maybe, "I'm not important enough that everybody leaves," and then somebody new comes back. But for them, if you actually want to be able to understand their needs, you need to be able to connect with them, right? And to connect with them, you need to have worker continuity. (Denise, child welfare worker)

Refugee children and families, already navigating destabilization from migration, face additional distress when confronted with worker discontinuity. Constant changes, referenced by Denise, may exacerbate their sense of instability and hinder the establishment of secure and supportive relationships within the child welfare system.

The impact of worker discontinuity on refugee children's sense of instability aligns with Mina's perspective that time and effort are required to establish trustworthy connections within the systems. She also shared her understanding of why families resist child welfare services and suggested that relationship-building was essential to counter the resistance.

> Many families want — they don't want to work with us. Sometimes they say, "You're going to try to take my child away"; "We don't want you to come into our home." I'm very transparent, because I also put myself into the situation. If someone's going to come in and question my parenting, I'm not going to be very happy. However, we have reasons that the child might be at risk, so I want to come in and help you so that risk becomes lower, and we can work together to make sure that your children are safe with your support and with your collaboration. But it takes a lot of time to build that relationship. (Mina, child welfare worker)

Mina illustrates the challenges of systemic authority overshadowing interpersonal collaboration, as the child welfare worker is positioned as the authority figure with the most expertise, assuming that safety will be

achieved through their intervention in the child welfare system, which has the mandated power to intervene.

Eileen provides further insights into the nuanced power dynamics inherent to child welfare systems, giving an example of the primary concern revolving around immigration issues rather than direct child abuse or harm risks.

> In child protection, everything's set and guided, and you're just going through it. You're doing it to get the best outcome and you have so much room to play with — to problem-solve, investigate, research; I use so many skills. We can get creative [in] how we actually do this work. (Eileen, child welfare worker)

Notable differences emerge when child welfare workers support immigration-related concerns, shifting from the overpowering framework of addressing child abuse or harm risks. Melissa exemplifies this when describing her actionable steps to ensure the client is the focus of the interaction.

> We're working alongside that person. We would be looking at things like, what is the voice of the child or the client? What do they want to see happen with their immigration status? Do they want to stay in Canada? … Are they on a pathway? Do they already have a plan? Either they've submitted documentation or they're waiting for a decision. Or are they still gathering something, or maybe, in some situations, they don't have any representation. And so, we need to help them … get a lawyer who can give them advice about their unique circumstance and what's the best next step. (Melissa, child welfare worker)

Melissa describes the increased autonomy and participatory involvement in decision-making afforded to children and families involved with the child welfare system for immigration support — this contrasts with cases where immediate child safety is the primary focus. Thus, families are allowed more space to articulate their perspectives and actively collaborate in shaping their trajectory.

Tiffany also discusses relationship-building and the role of multi-agency collaboration, particularly to supplement the limited immigration knowledge in child welfare.

> We can contact [agency]; they have all the wealth, knowledge and experience and can help navigate us through that process. Not only us but the children and family. And they can definitely develop that relationship because that's their area of expertise … In my situation, we were very much a team effort. We worked cooperatively together. (Tiffany, child welfare worker)

When reflecting on the efficacy of institutional practices and the subsequent systems that respond to refugee children and families, Tamara

brings attention to the collaborative efforts necessary to navigate child welfare and immigration processes, noting the unique influence child welfare workers with specialized immigration knowledge can have to advocate for refugees within these systems.

> I have observed child welfare workers with specialized immigration knowledge be incredible allies to individuals and families navigating the Canadian immigration system. Many times, it is these professionals who have power and are uniquely positioned to breathe humanity into the immigration system … the system responds well to their advocacy, showing me that immigration officials may be unable to fully recognize, consider, and honour a refugee's distinct identity, experiences, and situation. (Tamara, child welfare worker)

Nevertheless, the need for workers to bring humanity into the system, rather than the presence of refugee children and families themselves, suggests that the system lacks a fundamental understanding of refugees' unique life experiences. Tamara brings attention to the existing structures' unforgiving nature and limited responsiveness, which highlights the need for systemic change to build a more compassionate, trauma-informed system.

Discussion

This study, grounded in SSW theory and TIP, aimed to identify current gaps by capturing front-line workers' experiences interacting with refugee children and families involved with the immigration and child welfare systems. The findings indicate that workers observed a persistent negative perception and fear amongst refugee children and families towards the systems and their institutional process. This fear is legitimate, as the structure of the child welfare system may be inherently traumatic and usually unwelcome and intrusive; it carries the potential threat of children being removed from their parents (Atwool, 2019). Due to this fear, refugees are unlikely to trust systems interacting with child welfare services. The interviewed workers spoke about a desire to mitigate the daunting nature of interactions with the immigration and child welfare system by using relationship-building skills. However, these skills must be combined with anti-oppressive, trauma-informed systemic change.

The fear experienced by refugee children and families during interactions with authority figures aligns with literature on complex trauma histories, contributing to a lack of trust in authority figures (Crea et al., 2018; Lee & Weng, 2019; Montgomery & Shermarke, 2001). Also aligned with the literature is racialized migrant children and families' reasonable mistrust of Canadian government systems (Dumbrill, 2009; Lee & Weng, 2019). The distrust of Canada's systems extends beyond child welfare and immigration; Dumbrill's (2009) study revealed refugee

parents' concern over a contradiction in the state's response to the unhoused involving harassment, prompting them to question the state's commitment to lifelong well-being.

The front-line workers expressed that families' negative associations between child welfare and provincial or territorial out-of-home care in Canada hindered their effective collaboration with refugee children and families. However, placing children in provincial or territorial out-of-home care is depicted as the family's "biggest fear," revealing the inherent power in the child welfare system, in which child welfare agencies can exert authority over the decision to separate children from their families. Recognizing these fears as valid is essential, given the colonial legacy and ongoing systemically embedded violence in Canada's systems. Interviewees noted that a stigma surrounds the child welfare system and that system agents can perpetuate the victim-blaming paradigm, which places the burden of trust on families and disregards the need for the system to address the factors contributing to these negative perceptions. Consequently, the present child welfare model — which may activate fears of authority and of family separation — does not consider the experiences of people without Canadian citizenship, including refugees. Children and families, particularly those with unresolved immigration status, may fear that any engagement with child welfare could result in their status being disclosed to immigration authorities or could provide the child welfare system with additional justifications for removing their children. Additionally, child welfare workers are often unequipped to help families resolve migratory issues. This presents a challenge for workers practicing outside their knowledge and for parents who feel unable to trust someone who does not fully comprehend their situation. Child welfare workers might struggle to keep up with the changing demographics across Canada and frequency with which they will work with refugees and immigrants.

Recognizing the limitations, distrust and harm caused by the system, workers at the intersections of these two systems often empathized with their clients and were mindful of relationship-building. The largely involuntary involvement of child welfare services contributes to families' resistance to services (Ferguson et al., 2021), which contrasts with the voluntary nature of child welfare due to immigration needs; therefore, utilizing anti-oppressive, trauma-informed approaches with children and families requiring immigration support may increase the accessibility of child welfare services. Consistent with existing literature, their clients must perceive them as trustworthy for interactions with workers to yield the most favourable outcomes (Dumbrill, 2009; Healy, 2017). While workers outlined safety, trust and collaboration, these trauma-informed principles are not integrated into the broader systemic structures of child welfare and immigration policies, procedures, and frameworks, limiting their potential impact. Simultaneously, while workers readily criticized the system, there was a notable lack of critical reflexivity among them. The

cyclical nature of the personal – structural linkages cannot be overlooked entirely; workers must also acknowledge their positionality and their biases' potential to perpetuate systemic oppression and unintentionally harm those receiving their services. Kundouqk & Qwul'sih'yah'maht (2015) push social workers to engage in reflexive practices to "understand the impact that Canadian policies and practices have had, and continue to have" (p. 32).

Conclusion

The study highlights front-line workers' strategies in mitigating the asymmetrical power relationships inherent in refugee children and families' interactions with the immigration and child welfare systems through relationship-building skills and efforts to make these interactions transparent and empathetic. However, this approach must align with an anti-oppressive, trauma-informed systemic framework to be truly effective. A trauma-informed lens and cultural safety are critical to all Canadian systems, especially when dealing with racialized children and families who have endured multiple traumas. Given refugee children and families' unique histories and challenges, the current child welfare system framework may not be sufficiently equipped to address their requirements.

Refugee families and children arrive in Canada in a position of instability, having lost their cultural, social, and economic ties — and, in many cases, both their language and their ability to navigate the system. As a result, moving between the child welfare and immigration systems can prove tenuous and confusing, as families and children are directed to multiple different people who are unable to give full answers for the compounding issues regarding migratory status and child welfare involvement. Most child welfare workers are unequipped to help a family or child to navigate the immigration system; likewise, settlement and housing workers do not have the resources or knowledge to assist with the child welfare system.

Consequently, there is a systemic gap that fails to recognize and address the needs of refugee children and families within the Canadian child welfare and immigration systems. Therefore, there is a pressing need to establish specialized systems that embrace a trauma-informed, culturally relevant approach, and that operate independently from government structures. An immediate recommendation is for child welfare workers to take additional training related to the intersection of child welfare and immigration to best meet the needs of children and families in this context. Another recommendation is for child welfare agencies to strengthen partnerships with culturally appropriate community organizations while being mindful that such collaborations can create a power imbalance if any one family's equal participation in

decision-making is not guaranteed. We call for systemic alignment with trauma-informed principles, considering historical experiences and systemic issues affecting refugee communities in Canada, and propose that future research explore this issue using insights from other jurisdictions.

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