Your Policies, Our Children: Messages from Refugee Parents to Child Welfare Workers and Policymakers

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In this study, refugee parents living in Canada share their views of parenting and their experiences of Canadian child welfare services. Using photovoice methods, parents develop messages for child welfare workers and policymakers working with refugee families and communities. The messages are presented from the parents' point of view within three major themes: understanding the hopes and fears we have for our children, understanding our settlement challenges, and working with us in the development of child welfare policies and services.

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Parents who are refugees in Canada have accomplished a remarkable task—they have escaped war, persecution, and perhaps death to bring their children to a safe place. The path to sanctuary is often perilous, with those who have arrived safely overcoming considerable odds to protect their children and preserve their families. Despite these parenting achievements, refugees come into conflict with child welfare systems over parenting issues. Such conflict is not unique to Canada; similar issues occur in the United States (Earner, 2007; Earner & Hilda, 2005). Refugees in Britain reflect, "We thought we were safe when we came here but we are not" (Sale, 2005, p. 32). This "lack of safety" comes from a number of refugee families having children removed by child welfare authorities, the mandates of whom refugees say they do not understand, and therefore they fail to respond appropriately to their family needs (Dumbrill & Lo, 2008; Lo, 2008; Sale, 2005).

Understanding and responding to refugee families presents a significant challenge for child protection agencies. It is a complex task addressing child welfare issues with families who often face multiple problems such as post traumatic stress (Lacroix, 2006) and settlement issues, in addition to challenges that traditional family relationships face (Segal & Mayadas, 2005), such as a lack of natural support networks (Williams, Bradshaw, Fournier, Tachble, Bray, & Hodson, 2005), housing, employment, and language and cultural barriers (George & Tsang, 2000). It is also suggested that, given past negative experience of government authority in their countries of origin, refugees are unlikely to trust or engage with government agencies in their new countries of refuge (Earner, 2007). Although a growing literature helps social workers understand these problems, little knowledge exists to help child welfare workers deliver services to refugee families, and even less

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knowledge identifies how workers can approach these families from a strengths perspective, which attempts to resolve protection issues by building on and harnessing preexisting parenting abilities and successes (Berg, 1994; Corcoran, 1999; Turnell & Edwards, 1999).

Further complicating service delivery are negative, prejudicial, and sometimes hostile societal attitudes toward refugees (Briskman & Cemlyn, 2005; Humpage & Marston, 2005; Louis, Duck, Terry, Schuller, & Lalonde, 2007), which intersect with a societal discourse in which refugees are portrayed as passive victims or alternatively as a threat to national security (Craig & Lovel, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). Social work is implicated in this discourse through a "complex interplay between social workers' skills and knowledge in this area and the prevailing and largely negative social attitudes towards [refugees and asylum seekers]" (Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003, p. 213). Indeed, researchers have claimed that social workers sometimes enact "harsh and discriminatory attitudes" toward those from these groups (Briskman & Cemlyn, 2005, p. 719) and that social work literature promotes a "deficits discourse" by portraying refugees and asylum seekers as needy service recipients and thereby feeding the notion that they are a "burden" on host communities (Butler, 2005).

These attitudes and influences make it easier for social workers to identify the deficits of refugees but diminish their abilities to recognize and build on refugee strengths, particularly in child welfare circumstances where refugee parenting appears to clash with Western norms. A need for social work to move beyond a refugee deficit discourse has been identified (Butler, 2005; Humpage & Marston, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). Moving beyond deficits is difficult in child protection settings where identifying parental failings is an imperative in ensuring child safety (Lord Laming, 2003). Theoretically, child protection services navigate this difficulty by assessing deficits while simultaneously identifying the parenting and family strengths that can be bolstered to mitigate them (Dumbrill, 2005; Trotter, 2004; Turnell & Edwards, 1999). But how are

child welfare workers to gain knowledge of refugee strengths when both scholarly and public discourses highlight their deficits? Do social workers have the conceptual tools to build on refugee strengths, and do social work theories and education conceptualize issues and build solutions in ways that benefit refugee families? Indeed, Coll and Pachter (2002) reviewed a number of recent parenting studies that indicate that the Western parenting models workers tend to rely on sometimes fail to bring positive outcomes for ethnic minority and refugee children. These and other problems have led researchers to question whether social workers have the knowledge or skills required to deliver service to refugees (Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003) and have led refugees to claim that child protection systems fail to meet their needs and at times endanger their children (Dumbrill & Lo, 2008; Lo, 2008; Sale, 2005).

So how can child welfare services to refugee families be improved? One way to answer this question is to ask refugee parents themselves—to develop "service users' knowledge" by having refugee parents explain the challenges they face and the ways child protection issues can best be addressed in their communities. The term *service users' knowledge* emerges from the United Kingdom, where social work clients have developed a significant voice in developing knowledge about their needs (Beresford, 2000) and designing services to meet those needs (McLaughlin, 2006; Webb, 2008). Building on the notion of service users' knowledge, refugee parents were asked to discuss their approaches to parenting and their experience of child welfare services and to formulate messages for child welfare service providers that would enable them to better engage and work with refugee families.

Method

The study was initiated to enable refugee parents provide information that might help child protection workers and agencies to better engage and work with refugee communities. A participatory action (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Park, 1993; Sechrest, 1997;

Wagner, 1991) approach was used, enabling participants to play an active part in the research process and in dissemination. Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang, Feng, & Feng, 1996) was also used because of its effectiveness in developing knowledge across cultural and language differences and because of its potential to enable marginalized groups to bring social change (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Wang, Feng, et al., 1996).

Sampling

After obtaining university-based ethics approval, sampling began. A snowball sample was initiated by an agency serving refugees in Ontario. This agency was a non-child welfare agency, and this helped protect the identity of participants when they spoke of their child welfare experiences. All participants signed informed consents and care was taken in research reports to refer to events and demographics in ways that would not identify participants. A total of 11 participants took part, including 9 women and 2 men. Eight originated from West Africa, and three originated from Southwest and Central Asia. Three of the participants had arrived in Canada as "landed immigrants" rather than as refugees, but the process they followed in leaving their former homelands caused them to regard themselves as refugees.

It was initially assumed that to develop service users' knowledge about child welfare systems, participants should have had received child welfare intervention themselves. It became evident, however, that refugees who had not personally experienced intervention had considerable knowledge of child welfare services because of providing support to relatives and community members who were going through intervention processes. Consequently, the sampling criteria were relaxed to include parents with indirect experience or knowledge of Canadian child welfare social work systems, bringing the number of participating parents to the final 11.

Interpreters were provided for two participants who did not speak English fluently. Interpreters were selected in consultation with these participants to be sure that they were comfortable shar-

ing their experiences those particular individuals.

Procedures, Data Management, and Analytic Method

A research steering group was formed to guide the study. This group comprised of the primary researcher, two research assistants, two social work students (who were immigrants themselves, with direct experience of working with refugees), two workers who provided settlement services to refugees, and a refugee community leader. This group ensured that the research was undertaken in a manner that was comfortable for participants and respectful of their various cultural norms and values. Transportation was provided to and from the focus groups for participants, along with child care. Each focus group began with a meal provided for participants.

Focus groups were led by the author and research assistants. The initial focus group began by discussing the project's purpose, followed by presentations by the researcher about photography and the legalities and ethics of taking photos. An open-ended examination was then initiated with participants about their perspectives on parenting and their views and experiences of Canadian child welfare services. Using disposable cameras, participants photographed events and surroundings of their everyday lives, which they experienced as related to the issues that they wanted to discuss. These photographs were brought back to focus group meetings and participants used them to share and articulate their experience as refugee parents in Canada. Most of this sharing and discussion took place in the focus group, but participants would occasionally telephone or meet with the research assistants individually to clarify things they had said previously or add new information. The photographs produced by the research were considered the property of participants, and they were given control over which images were to be presented to the group and used when reporting findings.

Concepts and categories emerging from the focus groups and individual discussions were (with the agreement of participants)

constantly compared between group members and meetings so that any tensions in findings and between various ideas were fully explored. Alternate explanations for data were also considered and discussed with participants. This process ensured that the research captured and consolidated participant's collective experience and ideas rather than simply cataloguing idiosyncratic experiences and divergent thoughts.

Trustworthiness was established by the researcher and research assistants gaining consensus on the messages emerging from the study. Given the participatory nature of the project, participants were also constantly conferring with the researchers about the themes that were emerging. In the concluding stages of the project, findings were consolidated into writing and were formally presented to participants for member checking.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from this study, which became messages that participants wanted to be communicated to social workers: understanding our hopes and fears, understanding our settlement challenges, and working with us in the development of child welfare policies and services.

Understanding Our Hopes and Fears

Participants recounted terrible stories about escaping war. Yet, it was not these traumatic events that dominated discussions, but the hopes participants had for their children. A mother explained, "I have a longer story but I'll make it shorter, we came to Canada with tons of visions for our daughters." Another participant captured these thoughts through two photographs, one of bushes and the other of a road. The mother explained:

> I took this picture of the bushes [Figure 1] because when you are in the middle of the forest you can't see your way out and it's so hard to try and see where to go. This is what it was like for those of us who came from the refugee camp.

FIGURE 1

The Bushes

> Sometimes you stay there for years and years and you wait and wait and nothing happens. You get frustrated, you want to go back home, but how can you go back to the war? So those of us who are refugees and immigrants can attest to how far it was for us to get to Canada.

The mother went on to explain her second photograph:

> This photo is a road [Figure 2] and it shows how far we've come for a better future for our kids. My kids will go to school in Canada and become somebody who has a future—you know our expectations of coming here are great.

Another mother elaborated these hopes:

> We think of the white man's country as the very best.

FIGURE 2
The Road

> That's the notion when we think about Europe, America, North America or whatever.… So when we hear that we were to travel [to Canada], we have high expectations… and you know it all boils down to our children. We think, "oh, our children are going to have the best," that I can say, "my daughter is going to have a better education."

Participants were unanimous in the hopes they had for their children. They were also unanimous in the fears they had for their children. The mother who took the photograph of the road went on to say, "Sometimes it [the road] can go the other way where you can't discipline your child because the Children's Aid Society [child protection services] will come after you and the government

FIGURE 3

Lost Bird

will come to take our kids from us."

Discipline was seen by participants as a means to keep their children safe. Canada was not entirely the way participants expected; most could afford housing only in poorer city neighborhoods where crime, drugs, gangs, and guns were commonplace. Refugee parents had considerable experience and success protecting their children from crime and violence in the past, and they quickly learned to remain just as vigilant protecting their children in Canada as they did elsewhere. Participants explained that they had learned to protect their children by closely supervising their engagement and activities outside the home and by teaching them to have respect for others and to do well in school. Participants

used discipline to enforce these rules, and there appeared to be a direct relationship between the strictness of this discipline and the degree to which the parents believed their children faced danger. Participants, however, understood that their disciplinary principles were not encouraged and sometimes not allowed by social workers and professionals involved with their families. A mother explained, "The whole vision we have about our children coming to Canada is shattered because the society we found ourselves in is a very different one." Participants described the impact of not being able to rely on their traditional parenting practices:

> When we get here, we become frustrated that our way of doing things back home can't be implemented on this side of the world because it's just all so different. We can't bring our children up our way.

> Yes—here a 10-year-old would act like a 4-year-old. If you tell them not to do something, they'll always do it. Back home if you have a 10-year-old, most of the time they will act like adults because they are disciplined to know right and wrong.

> My children are growing up and learning the ways of a different society and I see that my children have grown up to have no respect. We feel our children are out of our hands.

Emerging from these discussions and photographs refugee parents formulated a message for child welfare service providers—workers should try to understand refugee parents' hopes and fears. Participants wanted to convey to workers that they have great hopes for their children, but they also have great fears too; they worry that their children may be harmed or turn out "bad" in a Canadian society that they see as fraught with danger.

Understanding Our Settlement Challenges

Participants spoke of their parenting challenges being

compounded by settlement issues such as culture shock, employment challenges, the lack of appropriate community supports, social workers lacking "a heart," and racism.

Culture shock had a profound impact on some of the participants. A mother explained:

> I didn't see the beauty of this country, the beauty of the summer, spring and the flowers. I was trying to adjust to new things. After five years here I can now see the beauty.… When you live in a society there may be many things that are not right, but because you grew up there you understand the problems. When I came here, the problems are new to you and they appear shocking.… I was like a lost bird when I arrived…that is why I took this photo [Figure 3].

Not all participants felt that years had been lost in Canada but there was consensus that adjusting to life in Canada was harder than expected.

Adjusting to Canadian culture was compounded by problems finding employment. A mother explained:

> The interviewer told me that I can't have the job because I don't have Canadian experience. Well how do you expect me to have Canadian experience, I've just been in the country for three months? Where do you expect me to get Canadian experience from if you don't offer me the job?

These employment challenges impacted the resources available to families and also family life and relationships. A mother took a photograph of business workers [Figure 4] in the Canadian town she lived in and explained:

> My husband was like these businessmen, he was a civil engineer. He went to university and has lots of work experience but here he is a technician. We were middle class in our country but we became low, low, the lowest class here. It affects our family, the kids, your emotions and behavior.

FIGURE 4

Business People

Participants also made a case for better services to be better geared to their family needs:

> When I first came to Canada, this agency provided workshops such as how to manage your money and it was helpful. But then afterward you get less and less help from them.
>
> We have found difficulty getting help from community agencies because they are not geared to help refugees and immigrants. They say they are, but they don't help. It is no good.
>
> What after-school programs are there for our kids? We don't know about them. We can't help our kids with their

homework—we don't know English.

Although the lack of appropriate services impacted participants, their greatest concern was the ways they were treated by social workers. Some participants spoke fondly of social workers who had helped them, but this was the exception rather than the rule; most shared negative experiences of social workers. Participants said that social workers should "have a heart" and care about the people they work with. Participants determined whether workers "had a heart" based on whether they treated clients with respect and dignity. One mother's story epitomized the participants' experience of being treated without respect. The mother's social security check had been stopped erroneously, and the mother turned to an Ontario Works social assistance worker for help. The mother explained to the research focus group (through an adult interpreter) the way events unfolded:

> My social worker used my children to interpret because I did not understand English. She [the worker] started scolding me and my children translated. "You need to manage money better and if you cannot afford food you have to go to the food bank!" I felt so ashamed because I had been going to the food bank already for a long time, but I did this secretly so my children would not know, and now my children were finding out and also they were also hearing me being scolded by the worker.

Neither the mother nor anyone in the focus group had a photograph to describe this story, so at the mother's suggestion the following photograph [Figure 5] was taken, in which she shows how this interaction made her feel. Other participants indicated that they could relate to the feelings this photograph conveyed.

Another experience familiar to all participants was racism. Participants said that they experienced racism, which they described as a collection of attitudes and practices that they said disadvantaged refugee families. Participants said that most times these attitudes are subtle and "undercover," but sometimes they are more

FIGURE 5

Sadness and Shame

overt, as in the following example:

> I wanted to wear a poppy for Remembrance Day but I was afraid to do so because a white lady came up to my friend from Pakistan and told her, "Take that poppy off, it is only for Canadians to wear."

Such settlement issues impacted refugee parent's access to resources, and also their feelings and emotions—these challenges made it hard to find their place in Canadian society and some of the attitudes they met from members of the public and also professionals made them feel that they did not belong. Participants wanted child welfare workers to understand that when they engage with refugee parents, these types of challenges are the substance of their daily lives. Participants suggested that workers who

were aware and mindful of these issues would be better equipped to understand and engage with refugee families.

Working with Us in the Development of Policy and Services

Participants spoke of sometimes needing support regarding their children and one mother spoke highly of support she had been offered by child protection services when caring for her younger teenage sibling. Most participants, however, felt judged and misunderstood by child protection workers. A mother said that to correct what she regarded as misperceptions workers have about refugee parents, she wanted workers to understand that

> We did not bring our children here to harm or abuse them; we brought them here because we want a better life for them. It was hard bringing our children here and on our journey we learned a lot about how to keep our children safe and raise them well. We don't know everything about parenting but we know a lot.… Child welfare workers need to understand that we know a lot and they must not take our children from us if there is a problem but instead must learn to work with us to solve the problem.

Although participants acknowledged a need for assistance with their children, they were not sure whether social workers could understand or act in the best interests of children. It was not just child protection workers who participants doubted, but social workers in general. A father and community leader said,

> They [social workers] tell our children that they have a right to leave home at 16. What kind of future can a child expect if they leave home at 16? To say this to our children, social workers must either not care about them or have very low expectations for their future. We have higher hopes for our children. Do social workers say this to their own children?

A mother took a photograph of teenagers at a local Town Square and commented,

> These are children hanging around the town square. Some of these kids are in the care of the Children's Aid Society. The CAS take your kids and they say that they are the best—that their way of raising children is better than ours—but then why are these kids hanging out on the street? Is it because of lack of discipline or guidance? Will some of these children grow up to be homeless? What does the future hold for them?

Participants wondered whether the norms and culture of Canadian society itself is conducive to the best interests of children. To participants, young people spending their days "hanging out" at the town square was an indication that their future prospects may be compromised. Participants believed that young people being allowed to "hang out" at the Town Square may be somehow linked to growing up homeless. To participants, homelessness is a Canadian danger that they needed to protect their children against:

> Back home, we wouldn't think that there would be homeless people in Canada. When we see them now, we wonder why. Canada is supposed to have all the opportunities, Canada is what we want for our home, yet there are people that are homeless here. Why are they homeless? Was it their upbringing that caused their problems?

To protect their children from future homeless outcomes, participants spoke of relying on the methods that protected their children from danger in the past, such as discipline that is sometimes strict, teaching respect for adults, and focusing on education. Participants were aware from interaction with social workers and particularly child welfare workers, that rather than support them in these "child protection" efforts, social workers would discourage and at times undermine these types of parenting. Consequently, participants questioned whether social workers truly cared about

FIGURE 6

Homeless

children and doubted whether following social work advice would attain the "great hopes" that they had for their children. It was not only interaction with social workers that caused these doubts, but also observations participants made about the nature of Canadian society and the state. A mother took a picture [Figure 6] of a homeless man walking along a path at a local park as police officers looked on. The mother explained the significance of this scene:

> I took this picture because I saw on the news last week that some homeless people who were living in a Toronto neighborhood were moved on by the police. The people in that neighborhood wanted them driven away. The Salvation Army tried to help the homeless people and feed them… but the government refused to listen and so the homeless people had to leave.… Some of these homeless people once were the same kids that the Children's Aid took and let go at 18; they have grown up and are homeless, and now the same government that took them from their homes drives them away. But where do they go? So what is Children's Aid for? Are they there to defend the kids, or are they there to give them free will and lead them astray? Maybe they should revisit their plan.

Despite this lack of confidence in child protection social work and the state, refugee parents said that they wanted to work with child welfare services to develop systems that acted in the interests of their children. The final message that participants wanted to give to child welfare service providers is "We are not sure if your child welfare way is really better, [but] let's work together in the interests of children."

Discussion

This study suggests that when social workers intervene in refugee families to address child welfare concerns, a good place to begin is asking about any concerns the parents have for their children, and

ascertaining how the parents are currently responding to these concerns. Such conversations are likely to reassure the parents that the worker also has their children's interests at heart, and this will provide an opportunity for the worker to introduce their own concerns for the children's well-being. Indeed, refugees and immigrants arrive with established parenting practices that may be very different to those in their new host communities and their interactions with and pathways through the institutions in their new communities is often different to those of nonnewcomer families (Rambault, 2005a, 2005b). A viable starting point for working across these differences is for workers to identify and build on parent's concerns for the well-being and future of their children.

Casework engagement skills, however, are unlikely to fully resolve issues child welfare social workers face in engaging refugee families. Clearly, some refugee parents do not trust social work systems or the government that funds them. Previous research suggests that mistrust comes from refugee's experience of governments in their countries of origin (Earner, 2007), but this study suggests that mistrust may also be caused by their experience of government services in Canada. To refugee parents, workers who do not appear to "have a heart" and others who advise children to leave home at age 16 create the suspicion that the state is not committed to the best interests of children. These concerns are compounded by contradictions seen by refugees, such as the state claiming to "care" for children while being uncaring toward homeless adults by having the police move them on when their presence troubles local residents. In the minds of refugees, the notion of caring for a person when they are a child or youth and not doing so when they are an adult, particularly when adult outcomes such as homelessness may be related to events in the person's youth, is a contradiction. Parents in the study began to question whether Canada's commitment to the well-being of children was in fact a commitment only to the notion of childhood being a protected time of life rather than a commitment to children themselves. In-

deed, if the commitment and caring was to the child as a person, then that commitment would not end at an arbitrary age but would instead extend throughout the person's life—the type of commitment refugee parents spoke of having toward their children.

Despite the concerns refugee parents had about child welfare services, they were keen to work with service providers to ensure that social work systems did act in the best interests of children. The parent who reported a good experience with child welfare intervention was an indication to participants that social work help can have value. Participants were also aware that they need to adapt their parenting to better fit the Canadian context. To these ends, refugee parents were keen to be proactive in working with service providers to ensure that social work systems met the needs of their families and brought the outcomes they wanted for the children. This finding supports the idea of initiatives where child protection agencies and child welfare policymakers build links and relationships with refugee communities, through which they can review and plan with these families the best ways to protect and promote the well-being of children in these communities.

Findings from this study, therefore, suggest that at both a casework and policy level workers and agencies engage with refugee families by tapping and building on refugee parent and community hopes for their children. The study is limited, however, because not all parents in refugee (or other) communities are as motivated or capable of meeting their children's needs as the participants in this study appeared to be. In such circumstances, however, the suggestion by participants that refugee communities and service provides collaborate in finding ways to protect and promote the best interests of children remains a viable strategy—because after all, it takes a community working together to raise and protect a child.

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