



Forskning om barn og barndom i Norden



Peer Reviewed Article | Vol. 41, No. 2–3, 2023, pp. 90–106

Immigrant Parents' Experiences of Child Welfare Assessment Processes in Child Maltreatment Cases: Implications for Trust

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to an in-depth understanding of how immigrant parents' experiences of the child welfare assessment process shape their trust in the Norwegian child welfare services (CWS). The study is based on qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews with six immigrant parents who have previous or ongoing contact with the CWS. The study finds that the parents' experiences of the child welfare assessment process influence their trust in the CWS in a variety of ways, with the central themes being: (1) interactions with child welfare workers; (2) transparency and (un)predictability of the process and outcome; and (3) the risk-oriented, problem-focused and adversarial nature of the assessments. Whilst the parents' positive experiences of the assessment process are associated with trust, their ambivalent and negative experiences are related to mistrust and distrust in the services respectively.

Keywords: *immigrant parents, child welfare assessment, child maltreatment, lived experiences, trust*

Introduction

The relationship between immigrants and the Norwegian child welfare services (CWS) is strained and characterized primarily by fear and distrust, among other things (Fylkesnes et al., 2015; Paulsen & Berg, 2021; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). The CWS has been criticized

by citizen groups both within Norway and abroad for being biased, discriminatory, and taking unnecessarily intrusive measures, especially against immigrant families (Czarnecki, 2018; Haugevik & Neumann, 2020). Several studies have also highlighted a prevalent lack of trust in the CWS among immigrants (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, 2018; Czarnecki, 2018). However, the dynamics between parents' experiences of the CWS child welfare assessments and their trust in the services have been little explored.

Studies demonstrate that among the various modalities of trust formation, direct personal experience or interactions between the trustor and the trustee have been identified as the most influential sources (Dietz, 2011; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Rousseau et al., 1998). As such, immigrant parents¹ (hereafter referred to as simply "parents") experiences with the CWS during child welfare assessments are expected to affect their trust in the services. This is because child welfare assessments underlie almost all phases of the process from substantiation of the child maltreatment referral to the closure of a case. For instance, the decision as to whether to further investigate a case or not, the appropriate level of intervention, and case review to evaluate whether children who have been removed from their parents can be safely reunited with their families and the case, therefore, can be closed, all require child welfare assessment including risk assessments (English & Pecora, 1994; Hughes & Rycusa, 2006).

Besides, as the CWS is family oriented, the scope of the child welfare assessment extends beyond a risk-oriented approach focused solely on intervening after abuse or neglect has already occurred (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2011). That is, in the context of the CWS, parents' engagement with the services is even broader, as the assessments encompass a wide range of assessments and interventions aimed at preventing abuse/neglect and also giving therapeutic support to parents to promote a nurturing and safe environment for children. This entails parents' engagement through interviews, observations, home visits, and evaluations conducted by professionals to determine not only the safety, well-being, and potential risks to the child but also to help parents to care for their children. As such, understanding how parents' experiences of the assessments and how these experiences shape their trust in the CWS is imperative. However, there is a noticeable lack of studies that have systematically investigated the relationship between parents' experiences of the child welfare assessment process and their trust in the CWS.

This article thus seeks to enhance understanding of this topic by drawing on parents' lived experiences, by asking, "How do immigrant parents' experiences of the child welfare assessment process in child maltreatment cases influence their trust in the services?"

In the following sections, a brief overview of child welfare assessments is given, followed by sections on the conceptualization of trust, methods, findings, discussion, and a brief conclusion at the end.

Throughout the article, I will use the terms child welfare services and child protection services differently since child welfare services is a broader term comprising a broad

1 For the purpose of this study, immigrants are defined as persons born abroad of two foreign-born parents (Statistics Norway, 2022).

spectrum of interventions including child protection as well as programs aimed to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring (Cameron & Freymond, 2006, Gilbert et al., 2011). Thus, CWS is used to refer to the Norwegian child welfare services while CPS is used as an abbreviation for child protection services in general.

Child welfare assessment: A brief overview

Child welfare assessment is usually the first step after the initial referral of child maltreatment (abuse and/or neglect). It encompasses a broad spectrum of assessments conducted in various phases of the services' interventions. These include an initial assessment of child safety, to determine whether the child is at imminent risk and requires an immediate response, risk assessments during the screening protocol to assess whether a referral should be investigated further, as well as assessments regarding child developmental needs, parenting capacity, and ongoing assessment of the match between services and needs (Fairbairn & Strega, 2015). Yet, it lays a foundation for case reviews to assess if and when children who are removed from their parents can safely be reunited with their families and the case can be closed, as well as any changes in the risks and protective factors or changes in the level of risk over the lifetime of the case under consideration (English & Pecora, 1994; Hughes & Rycusa, 2006).

In this article, child welfare assessment is defined as investigations or assessments in various phases to protect children from maltreatment, as well as to determine whether parents have the minimal capacity necessary to protect their child(ren) and if not, whether they can achieve this with available resources and support. This broad conceptualization of child welfare assessment is consistent with the overall objectives of the CWS, which are aimed not only at the protection of children from risk but also at helping parents to care for their children (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2011).

A review of the literature shows there is a lack of studies exploring the relationship between clients' engagement with the CWS and their trust in services. Some studies explored the CWS investigation process, albeit with a limited focus on how clients' experiences of the process are associated with their trust in the services (Christiansen et al., 2019; Havnen et al., 2020; Lauritzen et al., 2017, 2019; Vis et al., 2016). A few studies have also examined the impacts of clients' experiences with the CWS investigations in the Norwegian or Nordic context. For instance, Aadnanes and Syrstad (2021) found that the child-centric and risk-aversion paradigm, with its focus on uncovering severe violence and neglect, undermined the focus on resilience/strengths in these families, and contributed both to parents' experiences of the CWS as problem-focused and their distrust in child welfare professionals. Moreover, a Nordic study on Norwegian and Danish parents' experiences of child welfare assessment found that many parents lack knowledge about the assessment duration and content, and some parents had a feeling of being objectified and exposed to the covert use of power, for example by the social worker controlling the flow of information in a case (Kildedal et al., 2011).

Several studies have also demonstrated that child protection services are increasingly becoming risk-oriented and problem-focused, and that this is undermining the

responsiveness of the services (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Featherstone et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Munro, 2010; Ulvik, 2019). However, there exists a knowledge gap regarding how parents' experiences of the CWS assessments specifically influence their trust in the services, particularly from the perspective of immigrant parents.

Conceptualizing trust

In sociological literature, trust has been defined differently with an emphasis on various aspects and bases of trust (Dietz, 2011; Oomsels & Bouckaert, 2014; Rousseau et al., 1998; Uslaner, 2002). Some scholars define trust as an attitude or belief (Rousseau et al., 1998), an action (Oomsels & Bouckaert, 2014), and a process (Möllering, 2006). Yet others focus on specific characteristics of the trustee: ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995); differences between bases and dimensions of trust (Lewicki et al., 2006); attitudinal versus behavioral trust (Kramer, 1999); and the measurement of trust (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006).

Despite the diverse definitions of trust in the literature, there is a broad consistency and convergence among the various definitions of the concept around the notion of willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations as a central element (Rousseau et al., 1998).

In this article, trust and distrust are defined, respectively, as:

Parents' willingness or unwillingness to be vulnerable by suspending fear or uncertainty, based on the positive expectations that their case will be favorably resolved by the child welfare services or a specific professional/s within the organization.

Trust is conceptualized as a family of concepts comprising distinct yet related members of the "trust family"—trust, mistrust, and distrust (Hardin, 2002; Lewicki et al., 1998; Luhmann, 1979; Oomsels et al., 2019). Whereas trust is a settled belief in the trustworthiness of others, distrust is a confirmed belief about the untrustworthiness of others. Mistrust is rather a novel and distinctive member of the trust family, and it is not based on confirmed/settled beliefs in the trustworthiness of others. It represents doubt or skepticism about the trustworthiness of the other (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Lenard, 2008). Lenard (2008, p. 313) defines mistrust as "a cautious attitude towards others; a mistrustful person will approach interactions with others with a careful and questioning mindset." Hence, mistrust can simply be understood as watchful trust, as it rests on the mistruster's cautious and continuous process of assessments, feedback, updating, and investigative orientations. In the context of this article, mistrust can be understood as: *parents' cautious willingness to be vulnerable based on constant and continuous assessments of the trustworthiness of the child welfare services or a specific professional/s within the organization.*

How is trust formed? Given the dynamic and multidimensional nature of trust, there are various factors or contexts that facilitate or inhibit the formation of trust. According to Dietz (2011), people use multiple sources of evidence in assessing whether the other party is trustworthy.

A review of previous studies shows three main modalities of trust formation: (1) direct personal experience, also called interactional source or relational trust (Dietz, 2011; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Rousseau et al., 1998); (2) the similarity of norms, values, goals, and social characteristics, also known as the trust network (Mayer et al., 1995; Parsons, 1977; Tilly, 2005); (3) at the societal level, social trust is derived from relations between institutions and society (Rothstein, 2000; Uslaner, 2002), as well as social relations and capital within social systems (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2002). In addition, trust formation is also largely contingent on an individual's tendency to trust others or his/her predisposition or propensity to trust others (Mayer et al., 1995). It is thus worth noting that parents' trust judgment is also influenced by their respective cultures, contexts, education, and previous trust-related experiences, among other things (Fukuyama, 1995; Uslaner, 2002).

Although the various sources of trust are interlinked and feed into one another, studies suggest that direct personal experience or relational trust is the most influential source of trust between the trustor and the trustee, with institutional factors operating more in the background (Dietz, 2011; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). The analysis of the data thus draws on relational trust, which refers to trust formed on the basis of "repeated interactions over time between trustor and trustee" and "information available to the trustor from within the relationship" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 399).

Methods

In this article, an exploratory qualitative design was adopted to capture parents' lived experiences of the CWS child welfare assessment processes and implications for their trust in the services (Berg & Lune, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

A sample of six immigrant parents was recruited from three different municipalities in northern Norway. The inclusion criteria for the study participants were being immigrant parents who are permanently residing in Norway with their children, and have previous or ongoing contact with the CWS due to allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. These criteria were used to purposively sample the participants in a strategic way. Purposive sampling is ideal for the study, as it enables the identification and selection of information-rich cases through the identification and selection of individuals or groups that have knowledge and experience of a phenomenon of interest (Bryman, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016; Ritchie et al., 2013). Accordingly, six immigrant parents, two from Poland, three from Eritrea, and one from Somalia, were chosen for this study. The sample consists of one man and five women, and only one parent from each family was interviewed. All of the study participants encountered the CWS more than twice.

The informants belong to ethnic groups that are among the top ten immigrant groups in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2021). They also represent a variety of factors that may have a bearing on their relationship with the CWS, including culture, religion, acculturation level, reasons for and means of migrating to Norway, and previous experience with public child welfare services in their respective countries of origin.

The participants were recruited using immigrant organizations in different municipalities and snowball sampling. In this regard, leaders and members of these organizations with whom contact had been established at previous points using social media platforms were used as entry points. These individuals assisted as gatekeepers and key informants in giving information about the research to the members, as well as in locating and contacting potential participants.

With regard to research ethics, the participants were given detailed information about the interview purpose and consented by signing an information letter. Thus, participants' informed consent was secured in advance of the commencement of the interview. In addition, during data analysis, information that was deemed sensitive by the researcher due to potentially revealing the identity of participants or the CWS they had contacted was either deleted or transcribed into broad categories, and numbers were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

A semi-structured face-to-face interview was employed as a method for generating the data from participants. The interviews were conducted based on a flexible interview guide that was organized in three parts: (1) parents' knowledge and expectations about the CWS prior to initial contact; (2) parents' experiences with the CWS assessment process and outcomes; and (3) the role of trust in the process and how engagement with the CWS influences parents' trust in the services.

The participants provided a thorough description of their experiences of contact with the CWS and how these influence their trust in the services. The interviews lasted for between one to two hours. Most of the participants were able to speak English or Norwegian fairly well, while participants from Eritrea were interviewed in a mix of Norwegian and Amharic languages. All of these languages are fluently spoken by the interviewing author and hence no interpreters were required. However, the fact that these languages are not the participants' native languages may influence the quality and depth of the data collected.

Analysis

The analysis unit for the study is parents' different experiences and perceptions of the child welfare assessment process. Participants' interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The article's analytical framework draws on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting different patterns and themes in the data.

During the first level of coding, an inductive approach was utilized to code the data intuitively in a way that captures both the diversity and the patterns within the participants' data, while at the same time staying very close to the participants' language and content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tjora, 2018). At this stage, open coding was used to code participants' responses on how they experienced the assessment process. After this, all the codes and the part of the data associated with them were written down.

After coding was completed, the next level of data analysis was carried out by generating themes from the coded data. The process of developing themes from the codes began by reviewing, comparing, and contrasting the coded data to identify consistent patterns

and broader topics or concepts around which the codes can be grouped (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is followed by drawing connections between codes and combining codes that seem to share a similarity using axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). After drawing various thematic maps and exploring different clusters of codes, four thematic clusters that were recurrent across contexts and experiences were identified: (1) The workers are open, respectful, considerate/inconsiderate, supportive, parents felt heard and valued (involved/engaged), unwilling, not flexible, and lack understanding of the parents' situations; (2) The assessment is unclear, unpredictable/ambiguous, accurate/inaccurate, discretionary, helpful/unnecessary, tiresome, and repetitive; (3) The assessment is intrusive and investigative, stigmatizing, based on wrong information, biases, and full of assumptions, focused on finding parents' problems and faults, insensitive to the family situations and culture, the child's narrative is more valued than the parents, parents' feeling of not being valued, of being excluded and distrusted, and powerlessness (helplessness); and (4) Parents' language and communication challenges, parents' lack of trust in the workers and the system.

Finally, the aforementioned thematic clusters were further classified into three main categories:

- (1) Parents' experiences of interactions with child welfare workers;
- (2) Transparency and (un)predictability of the process and outcome; and
- (3) The risk-oriented, problem-focused, and adversarial nature of the assessment.

Consequently, parents' experiences with the assessment process (positive/negative or ambivalent) resulting from their interactions with child welfare workers were categorized as parents' experiences of *interactions with child welfare workers*. Parents' experiences related to transparency and (un)predictability of the process and the perceived emphasis on risk and contentious nature of the assessment were classified respectively as transparency and (un)predictability, and the risk-focused and adversarial nature of the assessment.

Findings

The findings indicate the impact of parents' experiences of child welfare assessment on their trust in the services is multifaceted. Besides the three main themes analyzed earlier, factors such as language barriers and a lack of knowledge about the system, as well as normative pluralism as to what constitutes concepts like child maltreatment and child protection, also appear to shape parents' experiences of the process and trust in the services. The data shows that participants' experiences were dynamic. Each participant had mixed experiences of contact with the CWS. However, there were also a few cases involving child removal (i.e. two of the participants), where the interviewees expressed overtly negative experiences and thus distrust in the CWS.

Whereas parents' positive experiences of the process are associated with trust, ambivalent and negative experiences are related to mistrust and distrust respectively. In this section, the main findings of the study will be discussed.

Parents' experiences of interactions with child welfare workers

The findings appear to indicate that participants' interactive experiences with child welfare workers during child welfare assessments play a significant role in influencing their trust in the CWS. Participants described how their willingness to be open despite the inherent uncertainty, complexity, and vulnerability is rooted in how these parents perceive the qualities of their interactions with the workers. The data shows that participants' responses regarding their experiences of interactions with workers during assessments were a mixture of positive, negative, and ambivalent. Participants who expressed having had positive experiences and feeling trust referred to the workers as very professional, fair, balanced, genuine, caring, very calm, respectful, full of empathy, open, very good at listening, and understanding.

The relational aspect of trust and how the caseworker's openness, respect, and empathy during the assessment process helped one interviewee to overcome her fear of the CWS and gain trust is expressed here:

In the beginning, when we were contacted by the child welfare services, I thought the children would be removed immediately. But after the initial contact, my thought was completely changed. Our caseworker was very calm, respectful, full of empathy, and very good at listening. She understood our challenge, and something tells me in my heart that she wanted to help us. The way she talked to us comforted me a lot and took away my fear. (Interviewee 2)

The role of parents' interactions with the caseworkers during the assessment in which the parents had a positive experience and gained trust in the services were also expressed in the context where the participants had issues with third parties, like ex-partners, kindergartens, or schoolteachers who sent the referral to the CWS, where the CWS workers helped them to normalize their relations with these parties.

On the other hand, participants' unwillingness to be open and cooperate with the CWS is stated as being caused by their negative experiences in interaction with the workers. In this regard, parents referred to case workers as prejudiced, unwilling to create a positive relationship, unwilling to listen, unwilling to know the truth, and incompetent. The workers' perceived incompetence is mainly mentioned in reference to their limited cultural sensitivity and also limited understanding of the broader socio-economic context of these parents' lives and challenges.

Transparency and (un)predictability of assessment process and outcome

Besides the role of parents' experiences of interactions with workers, the study also finds that the transparency and (un)predictability of the assessment process and outcome as perceived by the parents are of particular relevance to how these parents relate to and trust the CWS.

When analyzing the interview data, parents' experiences of the services as transparent and predictable appear to be associated with their willingness to be open and encouraging

their trusting attitude, whereas their experiences of the assessment as obscure, ambiguous, or unpredictable are related to distrust in the CWS. Yet, parents' experiences of the assessment as discretionary seems to have led them towards skepticism or a more cautious attitude (i.e. mistrust) towards the CWS.

In expressing the assessment's perceived lack of transparency and how this inhibits trusting relationships, one participant said:

If child welfare services are there to protect children, why are they so secretive? If child welfare services are interested in protecting my children, so am I. So there should not be anything to hide between me and them ... they interviewed my daughter at school without my knowledge... Were the questions asked in a way that made my child give answers that confirm child welfare services' suspicions? Nobody knew. I still do not know. (Interviewee 1)

The transparency and the predictability of the assessment process and outcome are vital for the formation of trust, as parents' willingness to be open and take a leap of faith requires at least partial knowledge and the ability to anticipate the outcome of the case. In mentioning the perceived lack of transparency and unpredictability of the assessment and its debilitating effect on parents' willingness to volunteer information, the same participant elaborated:

The whole system works like a secret agent. I did not know what they see as child abuse. What they look at to decide what. What is the consequence of my answer or if I gave them information, will that help the case or turn it against me? You never know. (Interviewee 1)

Besides, participants have expressed skepticism or appear to have a cautious belief in the trustworthiness of the services. This is caused mainly by parents varying and inconsistent experiences with child welfare assessments and outcomes. The perceived discretionary nature of the assessment and outcome appears to lead the parents to carefully and continuously assess the trustworthiness of the CWS, based for instance on the caseworkers' characteristics.

In describing the unpredictable, ambiguous, or discretionary nature of the assessment outcome, one participant pointed out:

[...] in the beginning, they said I am a very dangerous mother and removed the children. Finally, they returned some of the children after a long process and years. But I am still the same person and none of my situations changed from when the children were taken to when they were returned to the home. The caseworkers can decide whatever they want... (Interviewee 6)

The discretionary nature of the assessment was primarily mentioned by the participants in relation to the role of the individual caseworkers. Some of the participants had three

or more different caseworkers and stated that they had different experiences with each caseworker. The analysis of the interview suggests that parents who experienced the engagement with the CWS as discretionary, trust or distrust the workers depending on how they perceive the interactions with the workers and are more ambivalent about the CWS as an institution.

The risk-oriented, problem-focused, and adversarial nature of the assessment

The analysis of the study findings reveals that the perceived emphasis on risk and problems, as well as the adversarial nature of the engagement as the modus operandi of the assessment process, negatively influence parents' trust in the CWS. In this regard, some of the participants perceived the assessments to focus excessively on problems and employ an adversarial approach in their engagement. Frequently mentioned themes in this regard include the focus on finding parents' failures and deficits, the implied suspicion or presumption of guilt, parents' feelings of not being trusted, and the adversarial, intrusive, and investigative nature of the assessment process. When analyzing the interviews, it appears that these experiences further undermine parents' trust, as they generate hostility and thus impede parents' willingness to be open and engage in collaborative relations with the services.

Participants who experienced the assessment process as adversarial, risk-oriented, and problem-focused felt that the assessment predominantly highlighted parents' faults and only paid attention to the perspectives and credibility of children, failed to consider families' perspectives, and bore prejudices about the parents and their parenting capacity. Parents' experiences in this regard are mentioned primarily in relation to interactions with the workers, the nature of the investigation, and the focus of the assessment.

In describing the problem-oriented and adversarial nature of the assessments resulting from her experiences of interaction with the workers, one interviewee pointed out:

Whenever I told her my views, she [the caseworker], brought what the children said and used it against me to falsify my views. I then told her that you repeatedly told me what the children said but I want you to listen to what I say. And then our communication changed to fighting and negativity. They expect you to accept everything they say. If you disagree, you are a liar and they bring everything to show you are lying. (Interviewee 3)

Another participant remarked on the adversarial and problem-focused nature of the assessment, emphasizing the nature of the investigation and stating that:

My husband and I were interviewed [...], with questions like why did you hit the children, without even asking whether we did it or not. We were interviewed like criminals. (Interviewee 5)

Pointing to the risk-oriented and problem-focused nature of the assessment, a participant reiterated:

They did not see that I was an unemployed single mom with four children and could not provide the children with new tablets and telephones, and a house with their own bedroom [...] and this created a mess in the family. [...] The caseworkers were busy talking about what happened and what the children said rather than understanding why it happened and my struggle. (Interviewee 6)

The finding appears to suggest that the participants' perception of the assessment as risk-focused and adversarial inhibits their trust as it signals, among other things, that the CWS lacks the goodwill to resolve the matter favorably or in their best interest.

Finally, the study's findings show a strong positive correlation between parents' positive or negative experiences of the assessment process and trust or distrust in the services respectively. For instance, participants who experienced the process as ambiguous, unpredictable, and intrusive expressed distrust in the service as a result.

Paradoxically, the study also finds that despite having negative experiences with the assessment process, some parents expressed trust in the CWS due to their satisfaction with the assessment outcome or intervention. This is especially the case in encounters where participants expected the removal of their child(ren), but the outcome turned out to be, for instance, advice and guidance, or financial assistance. One interviewee commented in this regard:

I had a very difficult time with my caseworkers [...] but nothing of what I feared happened. They understood the challenges we had with the children. They gave us a course and guidance [...] it was very helpful. (Interviewee 4)

This type of trust, also called calculus-based trust, is based on calculative exchanges after weighing the outcomes of the assessments (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). This suggests, in this context, that the role of parents' experiences of the assessment process and outcome in influencing trust in the CWS is a product of the interplay between how the clients experience the two phases (i.e. the process and the outcome).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine how immigrant parents' interactive experiences with child welfare assessment processes in child maltreatment cases influence their trust in the CWS.

The findings demonstrate that all three identified aspects, i.e. parents' interactions with the workers, transparency, and (un)predictability, as well as the risk-oriented, problem-focused, and adversarial nature of the assessment, have a significant influence on parents' trust in the CWS. Yet, the data shows that in terms of influencing parents' trust, all identified themes are not standalone aspects but are rather context-driven and intertwined, as

they all resulted from parents' direct engagement with various aspects of the assessment process. This supports the findings of previous studies that have shown that people use multiple sources of evidence to assess whether the other party is trustworthy, with direct relational experience or interactional sources being the most influential source of trust (Dietz, 2011; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). For instance, participants who perceived the workers as open or transparent, respectful, empathetic, pragmatic, and supportive expressed having had positive experiences, satisfaction and expressed trust in the CWS and vice versa. This is consistent with the relational and processual nature of trust (Möllering, 2006; Rousseau et al., 1998). Studies also show that trust developed as a result of repeated interactions between parties can compensate for the absence of similarity of values or goals, as it can lead to the emergence of shared psychological identity (Rousseau et al., 1998). Hence, relational trust between parents and workers can, for instance, make up for the parents' uncertainties and fear of the CWS. In this regard, the role of the Norwegian CWS workers in shaping clients' experiences is even more significant, as Norway has not yet adopted a national assessment framework, unlike neighboring Sweden (*Barns behov i centrum*) and Denmark (Integrated Children's System). This, in turn, gives the workers extensive discretionary power in the provision of services and thus shapes clients' experiences of the services (Havnen et al., 2021; Vis et al., 2016). In emphasizing the role of experts working in a given organization in the formation of trust in the organization, Giddens (1990) pointed out that they play a special role, as they are representatives of the system at the "access points" where the trustor experiences the system.

As noted earlier, the role of parents' interactions with the workers in shaping participants' trust is also related to parents' perceptions of transparency and the (un)predictability of the assessment process and outcome. The findings show that parents who experienced the assessment process and outcome as transparent and predictable are more willing to be open and engage in cooperative relations (for example, by giving information or agreeing to intrusive measures), whereas parents who experience the process and outcome as secretive and ambiguous tend to be more distrustful and defensive. This is not surprising, as parents' willingness to be open by suspending vulnerability based on positive expectations of the CWS is contingent, among other things, on their ability to obtain information or have some knowledge and form expectations (predictability) about the CWS's future actions. The necessary conditions for trust, in this regard, are thus parents' partial understanding, as well as their ability to form expectations during the process on the one hand, and the CWS's ability to fulfill expectations on the other (Rousseau et al., 1998; Simmel, 1950). This is because trust is a reflexive process (Giddens, 1990; Möllering, 2001), which requires "partial knowledge" or "partial understanding" to anticipate the CWS's future actions.

Further, parents' perceptions of the assessment as risk-oriented, problem-focused, and adversarial also appear to undermine their willingness to trust, as they erode their belief in the benevolence or goodwill of the CWS to care for their interests and needs, a key element in trustors' evaluations of trustees' trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995). In this regard, participants pointed out the following reasons for their lack of trust: that the

workers emphasized that the parents were at fault, that they were stigmatized, and that the workers were unwilling to form positive relations, among other things. Besides, the adversarial nature of the assessment as perceived by the participants also seems to inhibit parents' trust, as it not only stems from distrust but also generates hostility, animosity, antagonism, and insecurity, rather than openness, cooperation, and participation. Here, it is worth noting that immigrant parents' relations with the CWS usually depart from distrust and fear (Erdal, 2015; Fylkesnes et al., 2015). These negative experiences can therefore be detrimental to the formation of trust, as they reaffirm parents' preconceived notions about the services. For instance, the CWS practice of interviewing children without their parents' presence and consent was often mentioned by the participants as CWS secrecy, as part of the problem-focused, adversarial nature of the engagements, which undermined their trust in the services. According to Aadnanes and Syrstad (2021), the CWS practice of interviewing children without their parents' knowledge is rooted in individualistic, child-centric, and problem-focused approaches. Assessment approaches that are based on the premises of individualistic and "child-centered" philosophies may in turn be not only incongruent with the participants' collectivist parenting cultures that value strong family bonds but also undermine their trust in the CWS, as mentioned by the participants. Such an approach misses the fundamental interdependent context of parents' and children's rights and interests (Ursin et al., 2022).

As the way forward, the current social services' practice dominated by the risk/deficit discourse is being challenged across a range of fields for their narrow focus on individual impairments and risk. This has led to changes in policy and practice in fields like disability and mental health (Featherstone et al., 2018). Studies have shown that assessments and interventions that are resilience or resource-focused contribute to clients' trust (Toros et al., 2018), whereas risk-oriented and problem-focused approaches are positively associated with clients' distrust (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Morgan et al., 2019). The findings of the present study, along with previous studies, point in the direction of the need to reimagine the current individualistic and problem-focused assessment approaches driven by the focus on risk and risk aversion (Featherstone et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Munro, 2010; Ulvik, 2019). However, child protection services may face challenges in achieving a proper balance between the mandate to control and investigate while at the same time helping families, especially in serious and dangerous cases of child maltreatment (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021). Child protection services in some jurisdictions follow multiple pathways to assess child maltreatment referrals, also called differential response or alternative response. Accordingly, cases with a high risk of maltreatment are subjected to investigative assessment, whereas cases with low risk are examined through family assessment aimed at identifying parents' needs and connecting them with resources. Studies show that families whose cases were assessed using the differential response approach were more engaged, less worried, gained access to more services, and were satisfied (Loman & Siegel, 2015; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2015). The differential approach is thus associated with enhancing the services' responsiveness and clients' trust in the services.

Finally, participants' responses also indicate that their perception of the CWS assessment and their trust in the services are also related to their disposition to trust, which, in turn, appears to be linked to their less individualistic and more inter-relational, collectivist cultural backgrounds. This can be inferred from the participants' reactions to the CWS's secrecy, their expectations of culturally appropriate behavior towards one another, and the sense of being excluded and ignored. Therefore, incorporating relational rights and inter-dependent well-being approaches into child welfare assessments conducted by the CWS, particularly in relation to immigrant families, not only contributes to fostering parents' trust in the services but also provides a more suitable framework and milieu for safeguarding the child's best interests (Ursin et al., 2022).

In general, the overall findings of the study show that immigrant parents' experiences of the child welfare assessment process shape their trust in the CWS in a variety of ways. The dynamic nature of both parents' experiences of the process and how these experiences influence their trust in the CWS show the reciprocal, multidimensional, and context-driven nature of the nexus between parents' experiences and their trust in the CWS.

In the end, more empirical research in the area from the perspective of immigrant families is needed to make up for the long-standing gap in research and the current knowledge base, as well as to enable deliberate integration of transcultural perspectives into all continuum of the child welfare services.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Christian Lo and Dr Emma Seyram Hamenoo from Nord University, and Dr Veronika Paulsen from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, for their supervision and insightful feedback throughout the process.

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