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Toward Co-Production of Child Welfare Services With Immigrant Parents: Insights Into Enabling and Constraining Factors

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Abstract

This article explores the factors that facilitate or constrain the co-production of child welfare services (CWS) in the encounters between immigrant parents and child welfare systems. It draws on empirical data from interviews with ten parents who have experience with the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (NCWS) due to allegations of child maltreatment. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, involving multiple iterative cycles and theme construction to identify factors that influence active parental participation in the process and, by extension, co-production of the services. The findings reveal that while a range of factors shape the co-production of CWS, they highlight the central role of: (a) parents' negative perceptions of the NCWS and limited awareness of how to engage with the system; (b) the impact of the child welfare system's approach to intervention; (c) the role of parental trust or distrust in the NCWS; and (d) the quality of relationships and the underlying power dynamics between parents and the NCWS. Yet, while some factors—such as parents' negative perceptions and limited awareness—appear to have a more pronounced impact on specific stages of co-production, like early engagement and collaborative planning, others, like trust and power dynamics, exert a crosscutting influence that shapes participation and co-production across the full spectrum of the intervention process.

Keywords

child welfare services; co-production; factors; immigrant parents; Norway

1. Introduction

There is growing awareness and consensus that public services, unlike products, are always co-produced, and value is created through interactions between professionals and service users (Bovaird, 2007; Osborne

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et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). The view of service as co-produced rather than a mere professional product has contributed to a shift away from the traditional model of public service provision, in which service professionals are endowed with immense power and responsibility for designing and delivering services to passive recipients toward a model of service production and delivery as a joint venture, where service users actively participate in designing, delivering, and improving services alongside professionals (Pestoff, 2006; Strokosch & Osborne, 2023; Whitaker, 1980). This is also integral to the trend toward the democratization of welfare services, as it empowers service users and promotes more accessible, inclusive, participative, and decentralized forms of service provision (Strokosch & Osborne, 2023; Walzer, 1988).

Co-production as an approach to service production and delivery can enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness of services, particularly in fields like child welfare services (CWS), by allowing service users to engage based on their identity, values, background, and experiences. This is particularly important in cross-cultural CWS, involving encounters between immigrant parents (hereafter referred to as "parents") and CWS, as such meetings often involve value pluralism and normative complexity arising from competing or conflicting perspectives related to concepts such as the child's best interests, good care, the child–parent relationship, childhood, children's rights, child maltreatment, and child protection (Terrefe, 2023). Interventions based on a coproduction approach can help bridge this gap by facilitating shared understanding of the operationalization of normative concepts, such as good care and the child's best interests, through negotiated terms between parents and the child welfare system, as this approach acknowledges the resources and expertise of both professionals and service users in co-producing services. As such, it can enhance parents' trust and participation in the process, foster tailored interventions, and lead to more positive intervention outcomes. Yet, while co-production is increasingly recognized as a valuable approach to enhancing the accessibility, inclusiveness, and responsiveness of public services, its feasibility and implementation in child welfare settings remain underexplored.

A review of the literature reveals a growing body of research examining co-production across a range of disciplines, offering insights into the concept from different vantage points. In recent years, co-production and co-creation have gained considerable traction in Norway, particularly within the context of welfare service delivery (Simonsson et al., 2023; Torfing et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature stems from service contexts characterized by relatively equal power dynamics, where collaboration between parties is voluntary and consensual. Consequently, the relevance of these studies for understanding co-production in contexts such as child welfare is limited, as these settings are often characterized by mandated interactions, pronounced power imbalances, and minimal user control over participation. Furthermore, unlike other service settings, child welfare systems operate under a dual mandate that balances two often conflicting responsibilities: investigating child maltreatment referrals and providing support to families (Gilbert et al., 2011; Picot, 2014). This competing mandate can present both structural and relational challenges to engaging parents as equal and collaborative partners from the outset.

Quite a few studies have also examined co-production and co-creation in CWS settings (Pestoff, 2006; Røiseland, 2024). Røiseland (2024) examines how co-creation applies across different policy contexts, focusing on three areas: the exercise of authority, service delivery, and regulation. The findings suggest that co-creation is context-dependent, with authority-based contexts, like CWS being less suitable, while service delivery areas, such as elderly care, are most favorable for its implementation. In addition, a study by Pestoff (2006) examines co-production in childcare services across eight European countries, finding that most

services use a top-down approach, limiting parental participation. Yet, the results also demonstrate that greater parental participation leads to more tailored and effective services, fostering community and shared responsibility. However, these studies either depart from the majority perspectives or focus primarily on the policy context of CWS, resulting in limited understanding of the contextual nuances of co-production in parent–child welfare system interactions across diverse cultural contexts. Hence, despite the surging interest in co-production, little is known about the concept and the determinants influencing it within child welfare systems, particularly in the context of cross-cultural CWS involving immigrant parents.

This study examines the factors that facilitate or undermine the co-production of CWS in cross-cultural contexts by examining interactions between immigrant parents and the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (NCWS). To this end, the analysis in this article is guided by the question: What influences the co-production of CWS in interactions between immigrant parents and CWS? The analysis is based on parents' experiences and perspectives of their interactions with the NCWS. Although the co-production of CWS involves multiple stakeholders, the scope of analysis in this article is limited to the factors that influence the co-production of CWS in interactions between parents and the child welfare system.

2. Co-Production as a Conceptual Framework

Co-production is an approach rather than a specific method for service provision built on the principle and understanding that service users are best placed and have the knowledge essential to enhance the quality of services alongside professionals. It validates and utilizes service users' expertise through knowledge sharing and empowerment. The concept has emerged as a driver of public policy reforms and democratization of public services by promoting active citizen participation in the planning and delivery of public services (Meijer, 2016; Osborne et al., 2018; Pestoff, 2006).

The shift from hierarchical old public administration (OPA) to new public governance (NPG) promotes more collaborative, networked interactions, fundamentally reshaping both the approach to, and power dynamics in, public service delivery (Bovaird, 2007; Osborne, 2006; Pestoff et al., 2013; Radnor et al., 2014; Torfing & Triantafillou, 2013). Accordingly, while traditional user participation tends to align more closely with the ideals of OPA, which emphasizes hierarchical relationships between service providers and users, co-production, associated with NPG, repositions service users to a more empowered role, allowing them to actively participate in designing, delivering, and improving public services. In other words, co-production represents a shift from classical user-participation models, which are built on a top-down approach, to a more equal partnership between users and professionals. As such, user participation can be understood as a practice that facilitates the inclusion of users' perspectives, aiming to ensure their views are heard and considered, while the ultimate decision-making power remains with service professionals. "Co-production" or "co-creation," by comparison, is a process in which service users hold more equal decision-making power and actively contribute their resources and perspectives to the design, implementation, and delivery of services alongside professionals (Pestoff, 2009; Røiseland, 2024; Vike et al., 2025).

In this study, co-production is defined as a continuous and iterative process wherein parents and the child welfare system collaborate as partners through shared decision-making to design, create, deliver, and evaluate CWS interventions. To this end, the study utilizes co-production as a framework through which parental participation is understood as a mediating factor—where the degree of their engagement directly

influences the overall level of co-production within CWS. Accordingly, co-production can be understood in this study as a continuum, akin to a ladder, ranging from passive engagement forms such as compliance and consultation to active participation in shared decision-making. Mere compliance is associated with minimal or no co-production, whereas active or meaningful parental participation represents the gold standard. This conceptualization renders the otherwise fluid notion of co-production as more context-specific and analytically accessible by examining the degree of parental participation in CWS interventions and the factors shaping it, as reflected in participants' lived experiences. This approach enables a thorough analysis of the factors underlying the spectrum of parental engagement in CWS, ranging from compliance-driven, mandated involvement to more active and meaningful participation. With the aim of providing a more comprehensive understanding of factors that influence the co-production of CWS, this article conceptualizes co-production also as a family of interrelated concepts—comprising co-design/co-planning, co-creation, co-delivery, and co-evaluation—framed as a co-production loop, as illustrated in Figure 1.
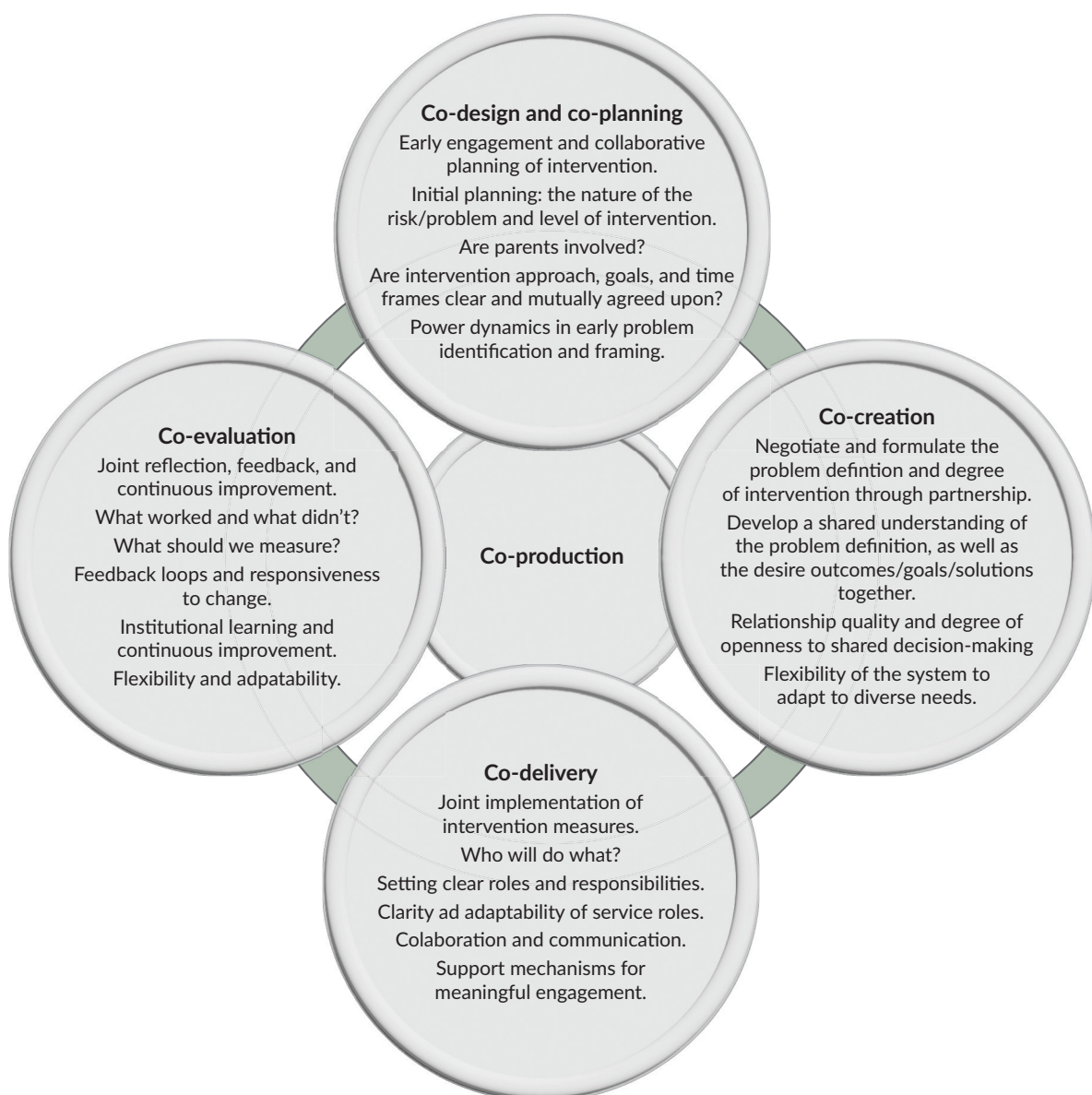

Figure 1. Co-production loop—a conceptual model.

Drawing on public administration literature on co-production and co-creation (e.g., Gordon & O'Brien, 2018; Osborne et al., 2018; Pestoff, 2006; Whitaker, 1980), this framework synthesizes core elements of co-production, contextualized to the specific setting of CWS. As illustrated in the figure, this analytical framework conceptualizes co-production as a multifaceted and interlinked process consisting of co-design and co-planning, co-creation, co-delivery, and co-evaluation. Accordingly, co-production activities are embedded across multiple phases of the intervention process, including initial planning (e.g., risk assessment), the formulation and implementation of intervention measures, as well as evaluation and feedback. Each stage represents a critical point of interaction where specific facilitators and barriers to co-production can emerge. For example, co-design and co-planning centers on early-stage engagement by assessing, for example, factors influencing parents' active participation in risk assessment and defining intervention methods and objectives. Building on this, co-creation emphasizes the collaborative formulation of appropriate intervention measures between parents and the NCWS, assessing, for example, factors that influence parents' ability to negotiate culturally appropriate solutions and professionals' flexibility in accommodating them. Subsequently, co-delivery concerns the joint implementation of intervention measures in partnership, examining factors that enable or constrain parental involvement during this phase. Finally, co-evaluation involves joint reflection on outcomes, which helps assess factors shaping the capture and inclusion of immigrant parents' perspectives (e.g., through culturally sensitive tools) to inform and improve intervention practices.

These phases are inherently interconnected, as understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder co-production in CWS requires an integrated approach rather than viewing each phase as an isolated event. This approach enables a systematic examination of the diverse factors shaping co-production at multiple stages and levels within the child welfare system, all within a coherent analytical framework. For instance, it supports the examination of crosscutting themes such as parental trust, which in this article is conceptualized as "parents' willingness 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 specific professional(s) within the organization" (Terrefe, 2024, p. 480) across the various phases of intervention. While the experiences of study participants and consequently the findings may not correspond or align with each stage in a linear or rigid manner, this framework provides a structured conceptual lens to map key factors influencing co-production at critical points along the service trajectory, thereby enabling a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of factors enhancing or impeding co-production in the interactions between parents and the NCWS.

3. The NCWS and Immigrant Families

The NCWS has a purported mandate to ensure that children and youth living under conditions that may harm their health and development receive timely assistance and care. It is also responsible for promoting a safe and supportive environment for their upbringing (Ministry of Children and Families, 2023, Section 1). To this end, the NCWS has the given authority to investigate child maltreatment referrals and intervene, when necessary, while also supporting families. For the purpose of carrying out its statutory obligation, the NCWS is organized under two administrative hierarchies: the municipal CWS and the central government's child welfare authorities. In addition, the Child Welfare Tribunal, which is an independent decision-making body, has the power to decide over coercive measures (Ministry of Children and Families, 2023, Section 14). The primary tasks, however, lie with the municipal CWS. The municipal CWS has the mandate to assess

child maltreatment referrals, conduct investigations of the child's care situation, make administrative decisions regarding assistive measures (e.g., it provides family support and therapeutic services), and arrange alternative care services (Ministry of Children and Families, 2023, Section 15).

Despite its stated intentions to protect children, the relationship between parents and the child welfare system in Norway and other Western countries—especially among immigrant families—is often fraught with tension and a lack of trust (Eide et al., 2018; Fersch, 2016; Fylkesnes et al., 2015; Handulle, 2022; Korzeniewska et al., 2019; Paulsen & Berg, 2021; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). Multiple studies, both in Norway and internationally, also show that parents often have limited participation in CWS intervention processes (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Berrick et al., 2015; Kildedal et al., 2011; Križ & Skivenes, 2010). The NCWS has been widely criticized by study reports, parents, interest groups, the media, and international bodies like the European Court of Human Rights for being intrusive, discriminatory, and lacking cultural sensitivity in intervention practices, particularly with regard to families from immigrant backgrounds (Aamodt, 2023; Haugevik & Neumann, 2020). To better understand the factors that shape co-production in practice within such settings, the following methodology presents the analytical framework and research tools used in this study.

4. Method

This qualitative study is based on empirical data collected as part of a larger research project investigating the formation of trust and distrust in interactions between immigrant parents and the Norwegian child welfare system. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide is structured around key thematic categories. For parents, the guide includes broad categories with sub-questions and probes covering: (a) background information; (b) reasons for contact and experiences with CWS; (c) trust or distrust in the NCWS; (d) communication; and (e) final reflections.

The study participants included 10 parents recruited from municipalities across different regions of Norway. The inclusion criteria for parents were being an immigrant parent who permanently resided in Norway, with previous or ongoing contact with the NCWS due to allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. Accordingly, 10 parents from Poland, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Iraq, and five child welfare professionals were recruited for this study. The sample of parents consisted of three men and seven women, and only one parent from each family was interviewed. Most of the study participants encountered the NCWS more than twice. These parents represent a range of factors that may influence the co-production of CWS, including diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and parental values and practices that may differ from the mainstream ideals informing the child welfare system. They also vary in terms of ethnicity, religion, level of acculturation, reasons for migrating to Norway, and prior experiences with the authorities in their countries of origin. They 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.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed that their

participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason and without facing any consequences. All data were treated with strict confidentiality. Identifiable information was removed during the transcription process, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Data were securely stored on encrypted devices.

With regard to data analysis, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), developed by Braun and Clarke, was used to analyze the data. RTA involves several stages: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, constructing and reviewing themes, defining and naming these themes, and synthesizing findings into a coherent narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021; Braun et al., 2023). As an inductive method, RTA is rooted in qualitative, constructionist, reflexive, and interpretive approaches, ensuring an iterative process for theme development. Unlike traditional thematic analysis, which follows a relatively structured step-by-step framework, RTA is more flexible and responsive to emerging themes. It acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity as an essential part of the analysis, allowing for the active interpretation and construction of meaning. In other words, RTA involves active theme construction, where themes are not discovered but constructed through a recursive and iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). For example, the data analysis and findings were influenced by the study's aim and research question, which served as a lens to interpret and organize participants' accounts. The analysis involved multiple iterations of theme development, emphasizing deep interpretation and the iterative construction of themes to identify factors that facilitate or hinder active parental engagement in the intervention process and consequently in co-production activities.

5. Analysis of Interview Results

The participants provided detailed accounts of their lived experiences of encounters with the NCWS. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis began with the author thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts, guided by the study's objectives and research question. This familiarization phase was followed by the identification of key features related to participants' engagement or disengagement in co-production activities, and the generation of initial codes. These initial codes include "parents' fear," "the reputation of the NCWS," "limited awareness," "emergency removal," "positive interactions," "adversarial approach," "powerlessness," "lack of shared understanding/values," and "trust or distrust."

The initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories based on conceptual affinities and emerging patterns. Accordingly, codes such as "parents' fear" and "cooperative behavior" were consolidated under the themes "parents' lack of knowledge" and "the reputation of the NCWS," respectively. Similarly, "emergency removal" and "involuntary intervention" were categorized under the theme "approach to CWS." Codes like "positive interactions" and "information sharing" were grouped under "relationship quality." Additionally, themes such as "interpersonal trust" and "lack of trust" were also placed under "parents' trust or distrust," while codes reflecting parents' feelings of powerlessness were classified under the theme "the role of power." Finally, overlapping themes were synthesized into four overarching categories that capture the key factors influencing parental engagement and, by extension, the co-production of services. These categories are:

1. Parents' negative perceptions of the NCWS and limited awareness of how to engage with the system;

2. The impact of the child welfare system's approach to intervention;
3. The role of parental trust or distrust in the NCWS;
4. The quality of relationships and the underlying power dynamics between parents and the NCWS.

6. Findings

The overall findings from the data analysis suggest that the co-production of CWS between parents and the NCWS is shaped by a complex interplay of factors. Yet, four main factors emerge as particularly salient. Below, the findings are presented with illustrative quotes from participants' accounts.

6.1. Parents' Negative Perceptions of the NCWS and Limited Awareness of How to Engage With the System

A recurrent theme in the participants' data influencing parents' active engagement and, consequently, the co-production of services, is their negative perception of the NCWS coupled with limited understanding of how to engage with the system.

In describing the fear and confusion experienced upon initial contact, one participant stated: "When we were contacted by CWS, I thought the children would be removed immediately" (Interviewee 1). This reflects participants' limited knowledge and anxiety rooted in their limited understanding of the child welfare system's purpose and procedures. Such perceptions appear to significantly affect, in particular, parents' early engagement and collaborative planning of interventions (i.e., co-design and co-planning of CWS), often resulting in disengagement or defensive behaviors. Furthermore, when parents perceive involvement with the system as synonymous with imminent child removal, they tend to resist communication or withhold information, thereby impeding their participation in jointly defining the problem and determining the level of intervention (co-creation), as well as their cooperation in implementing intervention measures (co-delivery). This is because interactions driven by fear undermine trust and obstruct the development of mutual understanding regarding intervention goals and the respective roles of all parties—both of which are critical for effective co-production.

The impact of parents' limited awareness on the co-production of services is also evident in participants' lack of knowledge about how to engage with the system during the intervention process. This uncertainty was reflected by a participant who stated: "I did not know how to respond and what to do" (Interviewee 2). This suggests that parents may lack the necessary knowledge and skill to engage effectively with the system and participate meaningfully to co-produce CWS. Unclear expectations and limited understanding of their role seem to undermine parents' confidence, thereby impeding their active involvement, an essential component of co-production. Without sufficient knowledge or trust in the process, parents may remain passive throughout the intervention, consequently foregoing opportunities for meaningful participation in the co-production of services that align with their values, perspectives, and lived experiences.

6.2. The Impact of the Child Welfare System's Approach to Intervention

Participants' experiences of active participation in the intervention process and, by extension, in the co-production of services, were also often mentioned in relation to the NCWS's approach to assessing and

responding to child welfare concerns. Participants frequently expressed frustration and disagreement with the NCWS's intervention approaches, often perceiving them as secretive, intrusive, or punitive rather than supportive.

A participant expressed this frustration in response to an uninvited home visit, stating, "Home is where you live and where you find sanctuary, not a place to be investigated by CWS" (Interviewee 6). Such practices by the NCWS appear to foster parents' perceptions of interventions as intrusive and rooted in surveillance rather than support or protection. These perceptions were found to erode trust and compromise parents' sense of safety, often prompting a defensive stance. In effect, this approach seemed to diminish parents' willingness to engage collaboratively with the system, thereby restricting opportunities for partnership in the co-planning and implementation of interventions.

Another theme related to the intervention approach, particularly in the accounts of participants who experienced the loss of child custody, concerns emergency child removal. One participant described this experience as follows: "By the time I arrived, the children had already been taken into the custody of CWS" (Interviewee 6). The participant's experience of arriving home to find that her children had already been taken into custody suggests that decisions were made unilaterally by the NCWS without prior consultation, explanation, or involvement of the parent. Although such measures are typically taken only in extreme cases involving imminent concerns for the child(ren)'s safety and well-being, they nonetheless entail exclusion of parents from critical decision-making processes. Participants also frequently expressed concerns about the NCWS engaging with their children without their knowledge or consent, often perceiving such actions as covert or adversarial, contributing to a sense that the system was operating against them. The unilateral nature of such interventions, often initiated solely on the basis of professional risk assessments without incorporating the parents' perspectives, seems to diminish opportunities for collaborative engagement from the outset, thereby precluding the development of a shared understanding of the concerns, risks, and intervention goals. Parents' experiences of unilateral decision-making by the NCWS under such approaches appeared to foster feelings of exclusion, disempowerment, fear, confusion, and resentment, all of which diminished parents' willingness or capacity to engage meaningfully with the system and co-produce the services.

A further notable finding in participants' accounts relates to how the perceived investigative and adversarial nature of the NCWS's intervention approach adversely affects parental collaboration, thereby constraining the potential for co-production. Several parents reported being interviewed in a manner akin to criminal interrogation, noting that caseworkers often appeared confrontational or dismissive of their perspectives, especially when parents contested the allegations contained in child maltreatment referrals. The resulting sense of being Othered was found to foster distrust and disengagement or, in some cases, provoke a defensive stance—ultimately undermining the cooperation and mutual trust essential for the co-production of CWS.

6.3. The Role of Parental Trust or Distrust in the NCWS

Participants' experiences of active participation in the intervention process and, consequently, co-producing CWS, also appear to be significantly influenced by their trust or distrust in the NCWS. The analysis revealed that trust or distrust in the NCWS is multifaceted, encompassing several dimensions including trust or

distrust in the NCWS as an institution, relational or interpersonal trust between parents and child welfare workers, and trust or distrust induced by the absence of a shared understanding of values, among others. These interrelated forms of trust were found to play a critical role in shaping parents' willingness to engage in co-production across various phases of the intervention process, from early engagement and collaborative planning (i.e., co-design and co-planning) to negotiating and formulating the problem definition and intervention strategies (co-creation), the joint implementation of measures (co-delivery) and, finally, to feedback and evaluation (co-evaluation). The overall data indicate a notable lack of trust in the NCWS, particularly during the early stages of intervention.

Expressing distrust and the perceived futility of collaboration with the NCWS, one participant remarked, "I cannot collaborate with someone who is trying to take our child away" (Interviewee 4). This quote vividly illustrates how deep-seated distrust can significantly hinder engagement in the co-production process, particularly during the co-planning and the co-creation of a shared understanding of intervention needs and desired outcomes. When parents perceive the NCWS as adversarial and as a threat to family unity and well-being, their willingness to engage openly and collaboratively in identifying needs, assessing risks, and formulating intervention goals appears to be significantly diminished. Such distrust is found to hamper transparent communication and shared decision-making from the outset, as parents perceive sharing information as increasing their vulnerability. Consequently, they may withhold crucial details or disengage in the early stages of co-design and co-planning, limiting the foundation for co-production.

In expressing distrust stemming from perceived inconsistencies between stated goals and actual practices, one participant remarked: "How can sending children to an institution...be protecting children?" (Interviewee 6). This may suggest that when intervention outcomes are not mutually negotiated and explicitly agreed upon, parents are less likely to perceive the child welfare system as a genuine partner in care. This appears to lead to disengagement, thereby undermining collaborative relationships and ultimately hindering the co-production of services. Conversely, when trust is established, parents are more likely to engage collaboratively and contribute to the co-production of services. In this sense, trust is not merely a desirable relational quality but a necessary precondition for the reciprocal engagement that underpins co-production of CWS.

6.4. The Quality of Relationships and the Underlying Power Dynamics Between Parents and the NCWS

Another prominent theme in the participants' data related to the level of parental engagement with the NCWS and, consequently, the co-production of services pertains to the quality of relationships and the underlying power dynamics between parents and the NCWS.

The findings demonstrate the significant influence of the quality of relationships between parents and child welfare professionals in either facilitating or hindering the co-production of services. Participants frequently highlighted the transformative role of respectful, empathetic, and supportive interactions with child welfare workers in fostering trust and enabling meaningful parental engagement throughout the intervention process.

One participant illustrated this, stating: "Our caseworker was very calm, respectful, full of empathy, and very good at listening. She understood our challenge....The way she talked to us comforted me a lot and took away my fear" (Interviewee 1). This quote suggests how a professional demeanor, combined with

emotionally attuned and respectful communication, can transform uninvited intervention and power-laden interactions into spaces of emotional security, mutual understanding and collaboration. It suggests that when child welfare professionals demonstrate empathy and sensitivity to parents' concerns and circumstances, they help reframe the parent–professional relationship—from one rooted in surveillance and control to one based on collaboration and support. These are key conditions for fostering active engagement and, ultimately, co-production. This also indicates that co-production is not only about procedures and structures, but also about the relational climate in which services are delivered. Some participants further noted that the development of relational trust with their caseworkers significantly transformed their perceptions and experiences of the intervention. Similarly, parents who reported negative experiences with the intervention following the initial encounter predominantly attributed these to strained relationships with child welfare professionals.

Another closely related theme in the participant data regarding the quality of interactions between parents and child welfare professionals is the embedded asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in the relationship. In describing the embedded power imbalances that often left them feeling marginalized or voiceless, an interviewee stated, "The caseworkers can decide whatever they want" (Interviewee 6). This quote reflects a perception of unilateral authority that undermines the foundational principle of shared power in co-production. When parents believe their perspectives do not influence decisions or that outcomes are predetermined, their motivation to engage meaningfully is significantly weakened. The perception of being excluded from the decision-making process seems to not only impede collaboration but also reinforces a hierarchical model of service delivery, which is fundamentally at odds with the relational and participatory ethos of co-production.

Reiterating the imbalance of power, another participant remarked, "You can go to the meetings and speak, but they had already decided what to do" (Interviewee 5). This statement encapsulates a sense of symbolic or tokenistic participation, where parents are allowed to express their views but see little evidence that their input leads to change. Parents' perception of engagement as procedural rather than substantive seems to foster feelings of disempowerment and alienation from the intervention process, thereby impeding meaningful participation in co-production activities such as engagement in shared decision-making during initial planning and implementation of intervention measures.

On the other hand, workers' flexibility in exercising their power appears to foster trust-based collaborative relationships, thereby enhancing parents' participation. This positive dynamic was illustrated by one participant: "The worker allowed me to reschedule the appointment for a time when I was free from work" (Interviewee 10). This example of flexibility demonstrates how accommodating parents' realities can foster respect and trust, key conditions for effective co-production. Such gestures signal a willingness to share power and recognize parents as competent and legitimate contributors to the decision-making process. The data analysis shows that child welfare workers' empathetic and supportive engagement with parents, rather than the reinforcement of authority, plays a critical role in helping parents overcome fear and negative preconceptions about the NCWS, fostering more active participation even within contexts of entrenched power imbalances.

Taken together, the co-production of CWS between immigrant parents and the child welfare system is shaped by a complex interplay of factors pertaining both to the parents and the intrinsic characteristics of

the system itself. The overall analysis indicates that contemporary policy frameworks, mandates, and the intervention practices of the NCWS provide limited space for interventions grounded in co-production principles that position service users in general, and immigrant parents in particular, as equal partners in the planning and delivery of the services. In other words, the current child welfare system exhibits significant limitations in embracing co-production ideals, such as engaging service users as partners from the outset and actively acknowledging and addressing power differentials. This may suggest the need to explore alternative approaches that are more closely aligned with the foundational values and principles of co-production.

7. Discussion

The goal of this study is to examine the factors influencing the co-production of CWS in the interactions between immigrant parents and the NCWS. Analysis of the participants' data reveals that co-production of CWS is a multifaceted, complex, and evolving process shaped by parents' negative perceptions and limited awareness of the system, the NCWS's intervention approach, parents' trust or distrust, the quality of relationships, and the underlying power dynamics between parents and the NCWS.

The findings suggest that a critical factor affecting the co-production of CWS, particularly during the early phase of intervention, is parents' negative perception of the NCWS, combined with their limited awareness of how to navigate or effectively engage with the system. Participants frequently expressed fear of child removal. The fear experienced by parents was intensified by the involuntary nature of the interventions and their limited understanding of their rights, responsibilities, and the avenues for meaningful participation. This uncertainty about how to navigate the system or advocate for their families frequently resulted in anxiety and a defensive stance. This aligns with previous studies indicating that parents' early interactions with the NCWS are often marked by fear and distrust, largely driven by the fear of losing custody of their children (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Terrefe, 2024). Parents' negative perceptions of the NCWS—shaped by prior experiences, community narratives, or perceived vulnerabilities—appear to significantly inhibit their engagement across all stages of co-production, with particularly pronounced effects during the early phases of intervention or collaborative planning. When parents perceive the system as punitive, intrusive, culturally insensitive, or primarily as an agency that removes children, they are less likely to engage in co-designing or co-planning services. Entering the system involuntarily and without a clear understanding of their role or the intervention's goals appear to undermine the collaborative relationships essential for co-production, a process where both parties share power, exchange knowledge, and work toward jointly defined outcomes (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Gordon & O'Brien, 2018). Without this understanding, parents are less able to contribute meaningfully and are more likely to disengage (Handulle, 2022; Needham & Carr, 2009). Such disengagement weakens shared understanding, mutual problem definition, and joint goal setting, ultimately impeding co-creation. Additionally, a lack of knowledge or trust may lead parents to remain passive during co-delivery, missing opportunities for active involvement.

Parents' limited engagement with CWS often reflects broader systemic dynamics shaped by implicit power relations and institutional assumptions. The NCWS operate on the premise that service users understand both normative parenting expectations and how to navigate the system. This becomes especially problematic for immigrant parents from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds who may be unfamiliar with the system's norms and values. When expected to engage based on these dominant assumptions, they are often unintentionally marginalized, limiting meaningful participation. Co-production is therefore hindered not only by parents' lack

of system knowledge but also by differing understandings of concepts like family, appropriate parenting, child maltreatment, and the child's best interests.

The findings further indicate that the impact of parental fear and limited understanding on co-production is exacerbated by the nature and approach of the NCWS's interventions. Beyond the involuntary nature of the intervention, participants frequently expressed frustration with the NCWS's intervention approach, which was often perceived as secretive, investigative, and adversarial. Practices such as uninvited home visits, the manner in which parents were interviewed, unannounced engagement with children by the NCWS, and the swift removal of children were often perceived by parents as intrusive and authoritarian rather than as supportive service. These approaches appear to disrupt the processes of co-production in CWS in multiple ways. For instance, emergency removal of children from their families due to suspected severe abuse or imminent risk to the child's health and well-being (Ministry of Children and Families, 2023), as well as engaging children without parental awareness, tend to inhibit co-planning by bypassing early engagement with families and excluding parents from the initial stages of risk assessment and intervention planning. The unilateral nature of such interventions frames the problem without incorporating parents' perspectives, cultural values, and lived experiences—also limiting the opportunity to build a shared understanding of concerns, risks, and intervention goals. In effect, such methods undermine the trust and relational safety necessary for co-creation, a stage in which services should be collaboratively negotiated and adapted to reflect both professional expertise and parental insight. This exclusion from key stages of the intervention, particularly those as consequential as child removal, not only eliminates co-production at a pivotal point but also erodes parents' trust in the system. When service users are not meaningfully involved in defining the nature of the problem, intervention methods, and goals, they may come to perceive the NCWS as a system of control and surveillance rather than one of support, thereby severely limiting the potential for co-production. Certain intervention approaches, therefore, appear fundamentally incompatible with the core principles of co-production, which emphasize the early and sustained involvement of all parties, transparency, and shared decision-making.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that even in cases not involving the immediate removal of children, where parents have the opportunity to engage from the outset, factors such as the investigative and adversarial nature of the intervention continue to inhibit active parental participation, thereby constraining the potential for co-production. Under such conditions, parents may feel criminalized or surveilled rather than supported, which diminishes their willingness to meaningfully engage in the co-planning and co-creation of services. This finding, supported by previous studies, demonstrates that the involuntary and adversarial character of interventions, combined with the CWS's reputation, significantly diminish the potential for cooperation (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Featherstone et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Laufer-Ukeles, 2015; Munro, 2019; Terrefe, 2023). The investigative approach to intervention is partly rooted in the NCWS's statutory mandate to investigate child maltreatment referrals, which often leads to an adversarial and risk-oriented approach. This approach tends to operate on a binary distinction between children deemed in need of protection and the parents from whom protection is sought. This dynamic fosters antagonism and resistance between parents and child welfare workers, ultimately eroding the collaborative partnership, active participation, and the mutual responsibility that co-production requires. In general, these findings indicate that several factors hindering the co-production of CWS are embedded within the structural design of the child welfare system, its governing policies, and broader systemic frameworks. This supports a study by

Røiseland (2024) that found that authority-based contexts, like child protection services, are often less suited to involving users in the co-creation of services.

The analysis also reveals the crucial role of parental trust or distrust in the NCWS in influencing co-production of CWS. As noted in the findings section, trust and distrust in the NCWS are multidimensional, encompassing individual trust held by parents, collective trust within immigrant communities to which participants belong, interpersonal or relational trust between parents and child welfare professionals, as well as trust in the NCWS at the institutional level. The findings, consistent with previous research, suggest that parents can develop trust in the NCWS—even in contexts marked by uncertainty, fear, and vulnerability—provided they find the intervention meaningful and responsive (Terrefe, 2024). Such trust can, in turn, facilitate the co-production of CWS by enabling the open sharing of information and the joint identification of needs, concerns, and shared goals (i.e., co-planning); the collaborative formulation of problem definitions and intervention strategies (i.e., co-creation); and the shared implementation of intervention measures (i.e., co-delivery). Trust plays this enabling role because it reduces complexity and enables a leap of faith in the face of the unknown (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979; Möllering, 2006; Simmel, 1950; Terrefe, 2024). It is therefore essential for effective interpersonal relationships, successful collaboration (Das & Teng, 1998; Misztal, 1996; Vangen & Huxham, 2003), and active participation (Warming, 2013).

Conversely, parental distrust is often rooted in the negative reputation of the NCWS, prior negative experiences, a lack of shared understanding, or heightened vulnerability. For example, parents' negative perceptions of the NCWS may erode trust and reinforce fears that engagement with the system could result in harmful consequences, particularly the potential loss of custody of one's child(ren) (Fylkesnes et al., 2015; Handulle, 2022; Terrefe, 2024). This appears to undermine parents' willingness to engage actively, thereby hindering the co-production of CWS. Misztal (2012) noted that situations characterized by high vulnerability and distrust have been associated with lower levels of commitment and motivation, as individuals tend to take protective steps to minimize their exposure to further vulnerability. Hence, establishing a trust-based relationship is fundamental to enabling NCWS interventions rooted in co-production.

The findings further highlight that the co-production of CWS is significantly shaped by the quality of relationships and the underlying power dynamics between parents and the NCWS. The analysis indicates that parents can develop trusting and collaborative relationships with the NCWS, which can serve as a foundation for the co-production of CWS—even amid institutional distrust, fear, and vulnerability—provided that they experience the encounter as meaningful. Such meaning is often rooted in factors like relational trust in child welfare professionals and assurance that the intervention will not lead to child removal (Terrefe, 2024). In particular, the analysis highlights the critical role of parents' positive experiences with child welfare workers—characterized by openness, support, empathy, and cultural responsiveness—in promoting meaningful engagement in collaboratively planning, co-creating, implementing, and evaluating interventions. Such relationships seem to foster a sense of being heard, valued, and empowered among parents, thereby enhancing interpersonal trust and their willingness to share information openly and actively contribute to the co-production of services. Conversely, hierarchical or adversarial relationship dynamics—where professionals are perceived as rigid and dominate decision-making, and parents perceive themselves as passive recipients—seem to significantly hinder co-production.

The study also indicates that the feasibility of co-production-based interventions within the child welfare system is closely tied to the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between the NCWS and parents. While co-production is theoretically centered on interactions between equal partners, where individuals and organizations collaborate as equals in the design and delivery of services (Needham, 2008; Ostrom, 1996), the reality of the parent–NCWS relationship deviates from this ideal as the NCWS holds considerable power. The results of the data analysis indicate that the power dynamics and the dominant position of the NCWS stem from various interconnected facets of the system. These include the coercive power of the NCWS to intervene, investigate, and remove children, including against the parents' will (Ministry of Children and Families, 2023), the power embedded in the dominant perspective that shapes intervention practices and the subsequent hierarchy of values and knowledge, and the power of child welfare workers due to their professional role. This complex web of power and power imbalances significantly hampers parents' active participation in co-producing CWS, limiting their agency in various ways. This aligns with Pestoff's (2006) study of childcare services in eight European countries, which found that top-down structures and professionals' control over decisions undermine meaningful parental participation and limit co-production.

Nonetheless, the findings of the current study point to the critical role of frontline child welfare professionals in addressing power imbalances, thereby facilitating interventions grounded in co-production. Accordingly, workers who adopt power-informed practices can enable parents' meaningful participation, even amidst fear and institutional distrust. This includes recognizing the power inherent in parents' knowledge of their values, families, and children, as well as the protective factors present within the social context, family dynamics, or the broader community. The data suggest that when workers exercise power flexibly—by adapting to parents' perspectives and needs—they enhance parental participation. In addition, a pragmatic, context-sensitive approach, such as adjusting meeting schedules, has been found to foster parental trust and participation, and, in turn, to support co-production by creating an environment where parents feel more engaged and able to contribute. The adverse impact of the power imbalance can also be redressed by letting parents see how their perspectives and contributions have a meaningful impact on the process. Beresford (2021) highlighted that for service professionals, user participation is often seen as a transactional activity focused on gathering information from users, whereas for service users, participation is a quest for empowerment. That is, service users want their voices to be heard and to have a role in shaping the intervention, which provides them with a sense of influence and control over the process. This creates an environment where parents feel more engaged and able to contribute, fostering a more collaborative relationship. A core principle of co-production is the explicit acknowledgment, critical examination, and active addressing of power differentials to ensure equitable participation and shared decision-making (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Gordon & O'Brien, 2018).

In summary, the analysis underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the factors shaping the co-production of CWS, highlighting how these dynamics unfold across relational, institutional, and systemic levels. That is, these factors are also interrelated in either promoting or undermining the co-production process. For example, while parents' limited awareness of what the intervention entails, of how to respond to the allegations, and of what to expect impedes co-production by limiting their ability to provide valuable input and participate meaningfully, the asymmetry of power further makes it difficult for parents to engage as equal partners and build genuine partnerships with child welfare workers. Yet, factors such as a positive relationship between parents and NCWS workers can foster active parental participation despite these adversities, thus enabling co-production to some extent. The findings also suggest that while co-production

offers a valuable approach to enhancing service user participation, empowerment, and the responsiveness of child welfare interventions, its feasibility is often constrained by the inherent nature of the system itself. This includes limitations imposed by legal mandates and the more coercive, risk-oriented aspects of intervention. While the study indicates that elements of co-production can be supported through existing mechanisms, fully implementing co-production-based interventions would likely require a fundamental restructuring of the current power dynamics and intervention frameworks within the NCWS. Yet, the findings point to the potential of co-production as a promising pathway for creating more accessible, responsive, and inclusive services, with the capacity to help address the trust deficit that continues to challenge contemporary child welfare systems.

Finally, ensuring child welfare interventions based on co-production is not only a matter of fairness but also upholds fundamental human rights values and principles, affirming the right of service users to access CWS and influence decisions about their families in accordance with their own values and perspectives. A core tenet of co-production is the recognition that service users possess valuable knowledge and are uniquely positioned to contribute to the design and delivery of services alongside professionals (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). Thus, it centers the voices of service users in shaping the policies and practices that affect their lives. Child welfare intervention based on co-production can therefore further the protection of human rights, like rights to family life, privacy, dignity, agency, and participation enshrined in international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It also ensures that interventions are not solely based on dominant perspectives and norms but also take into account the diverse values and lived experiences of families, particularly those from immigrant and minority communities. This approach also aligns with service users' rights to cultural identity and equitable access to services, while helping to prevent discriminatory practices within child welfare systems.

8. Implications for Practices, Policies, and Future Research

The findings of this study have several implications for practice, policy, and future research. The findings suggest that, although co-production within contemporary CWS is limited, there is significant potential for its development, particularly when parents experience positive, respectful, and meaningful interactions with child welfare professionals. These findings imply that practitioners should prioritize facilitating opportunities for parents to actively participate in the intervention process. This involves initiating engagement not solely through information gathering, but also by sharing relevant information and collaboratively negotiating the intervention's purpose, process, and goals with parents. Such practices are essential for challenging parents' preconceived notions about the NCWS and for fostering trust-based relationships that support more effective and responsive interventions. In addition, addressing parents' immediate emotional and material needs—particularly in the early stages of intervention—can play a critical role in facilitating their empowerment and participation in the co-production process. This may require child welfare professionals to be willing and able to move beyond traditional, compliance-based approaches and adopt more relational and flexible forms of engagement. It includes recognizing parents as equal partners rather than passive recipients of services, and actively working to reduce informational gaps and power imbalances that hinder their ability to engage meaningfully in co-production activities.

Policy reforms should focus on introducing organizational structures and approaches that facilitate interventions based on co-production, particularly in the NCWS's engagement with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Measures such as aligning training programs for child welfare workers based on principles of co-production can facilitate a more conducive environment. This is because co-production-based interventions, which require engaging parents as equal partners, demand new skills and approaches. In this regard, service users with lived experience can be an invaluable resource for training programs. For example, in Scotland, the "Who Cares? Scotland" initiative involves young people with lived experience of foster care in designing training programs for child welfare professionals, helping to improve their understanding of the needs of children in care. Similarly, peer mentoring and advocacy programs in the United Kingdom involve foster care alumni or parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system, offering mentorship and support to those currently involved (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024).

Policy reforms should also consider alternative approaches to engaging service users that emphasize equality and collaborative partnership. One such approach is the deliberate integration of frameworks that support co-production across all levels of the child welfare system. In this regard, practices like family group conferencing (FGC)—where extended family members work alongside social workers to design and shape interventions—can foster more inclusive and culturally responsive spaces for parental engagement. For example, in New Zealand, the *Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act* (New Zealand Government, 1989) mandates FGC as a legally required decision-making process in child protection cases. In addition, the increasing use of the family team meeting approach, also referred to as family group decision-making, represents a family-centered intervention model aimed at facilitating collaborative decision-making processes within child protection services (Crampton, 2007; Olson, 2009). Such approaches can enhance family participation and empowerment by enabling families to identify solutions tailored to their unique circumstances. Within these models, solutions are co-negotiated with parents, while child welfare professionals take a facilitative rather than a directive role. In Finland, an emerging model based on a collaborative approach within the child welfare system like "experts by experience" and "the systemic practice model" is being implemented (Isokuortti, 2024; Pösö, 2018). These models actively involve parents with prior experience in child protection services, encouraging them to play a role in developing more family-centered support models by co-leading policy discussions and contributing to service redesign efforts. Similarly, Norway's family council (*familieråd*) approach is used to bring together the child's family and close network to develop solutions, ensuring that the child receives support from their own community rather than relying solely on public agencies to make decisions. Expanding this approach by contextualizing it for immigrant parents could further support intervention based on co-production within the NCWS. Moreover, future policy should consider the development of alternative frameworks that acknowledge and respect parental practices and values that diverge from dominant norms. Such frameworks could empower parents to engage with CWS based on their own knowledge systems and cultural values, thereby enhancing the responsiveness of the interventions. Achieving this would require a continuous negotiation of values concerning parenting, child–parent relationships, and culturally embedded understandings of care and responsibility. Additionally, parents' lack of awareness—along with the resulting fear and distrust in the system—can be mitigated through targeted awareness campaigns within immigrant communities. This approach could also help to reduce the negative reputation of the NCWS and the widespread distrust within immigrant communities.

Finally, the analysis underscores the need for further research into the feasibility of CWS interventions grounded in co-production principles. In particular, future studies that examine the perspectives and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse families' interactions with the child welfare system could deepen the understanding of how co-production works in cross-cultural CWS. Although the findings and suggestions are based on parents' experiences with the NCWS, their relevance could, with appropriate modifications, be transferable and applied to child welfare systems in other countries. The potential transferability of the study's findings to cases with similar characteristics lies both in the consistent structures and patterns observed in the participants' data, as well as the explanatory power of the conceptual framework that guided the analysis. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) noted that theorization enables the move beyond isolated cases and draws a wider conclusion by framing individual cases in broader conceptual categories, thus allowing for meaningful comparison across different contexts.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The author affirms that all data supporting the study's findings are contained within this article.

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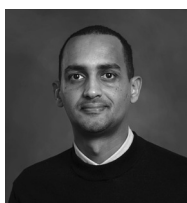
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