Teen Moms Talk Back:
Young Mothers Strategizing Supportive Communities

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Abstract

This thesis centers the expertise of ten young parents that have been involved with child protective services; what they identify as challenges and what would support their parenting. (De)colonizing, intersectional and transformative justice theories are used to frame the thesis. Using a written and an online, knowledge-mobilization component (teenmomstalk.ca) this thesis focuses on their agency and strategies as they parent in the face of stigma and systemic violence like poverty, colonization, racism, ageism, sexism and ableism. The written portion highlights parents' identification of poverty, isolation and stress as key challenges, their strategies to address them and necessary structural changes. The online component uses videos of the parents sharing their advocacy, money management, community-building, and wellness strategies with other parents. Together the two components highlight parents' insights into what would truly be in the "best interest" of their children, families and communities.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Elizabeth Ruth Henry. The last time I visited you were finishing up your Masters. I will always treasure that time together in the lead up to your defense and the defense itself. You were intentional, thoughtful and so engaged with the ideas and research you had done. I returned to school myself that September and you died in my second semester. So many times during this process I missed your support and wisdom and simultaneously heard your voice in my head reminding me of the importance of keeping a research journal or how you organized your writing process. I have held your commitment to honesty, integrity and thoughtfulness as a guide throughout this process. Thank you for being with me and know that I continue to hold you in my heart.

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The acknowledgements have been my favourite part to write although the strict word count means I can't be as effusive as I'd like.

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Chapter 1: Introductions: The Storyteller(s)

The story of how I came to do this research could be told in many ways:
This is a story about me,
the granddaughter of Russian Mennonite refugees,
sponsored to Canada through the charitable impulses of Mennonites who also
ran Poplar Hill Residential School in Red Lake, Ontario.

the granddaughter of Frisian farmers,
who came through a farmworker program that allowed them to farm for a Canadian for two years and then become a citizen,
a program that no longer gives citizenship since the farmers are no longer white.

They arrived in Kitchener, the home of the Attawandaron and the Haudenosaunee,
And farmed near Port Perry, the home of the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinabe- the Mississaugas of Scugog Island,
Both sides of my family talk with gratefulness about the peace they have found,
on stolen land.

I was born in Mississauga, the land of the Attawandaron, Wendat, Haudensaunee,
Anishinabe-Mississaugas of the New Credit,
named Heather Anne,
after my Grandmothers Hendrukje and Anni.

Now I live in Toronto,
Land stolen from the Mississaugas of the New Credit,
through a treaty that was missing and eventually showed up,
with the Chiefs' dodems/signatures glued on as an afterthought,
blatant fraud as the basis of my home.[1]

[1] Please read First Story Toronto's blog (https://firststoryblog.wordpress.com/aboutfirststory/) or (Freeman, 2010) for more information about the Indigenous history of Toronto.

To tell this story another way:

Before I went to school to work on this thesis I worked for six years with young mothers as a housing worker. The first ten times I heard the strain sneak into a mother's voice as she begged me to find her a place so Children's Protective Services (CPS)[2] wouldn't take her child, I ignorantly reassured her that CPS would never take her child for being homeless. That they would only do so if she harmed her child. The eleventh time, I started to listen much more carefully and came to realize that maybe I didn't understand the stakes in these mothers' lives. The hundredth time this happened, I had advocacy strategies, advice about what to say and not to say to CPS workers, and a burning rage wrapped around an overwhelming grief. I could picture the faces of children taken for months, and sometimes forever, because their mothers were homeless, and therefore "unstable", and therefore "unfit parents". I saw CPS refuse to return children because an apartment was judged to be too small but simultaneously be unwilling to help with a rent deposit to secure an "appropriate" place. They preferred, instead, to pay foster parents much more every month, while the children remained stuck in the system. I sat with mothers that had grown up "in care"[3] while they relived their experiences of abuse in the foster care system and their terror and rage that their children were in the same system and they had no way to protect them.

This is also a story about all the babies I witnessed taking their first steps, of mothers who persevered and thrived despite all the odds stacked against them, and the supportive relationships that the young mothers built with each other. This is a story about all the pictures on my office wall of smiling toddlers and high school graduations, of feeling the infectious nature of a baby's laugh wash over me and of my deep respect for the mothers' generosity and tenacity in the face of adversity. When CPS felt all encompassing

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[2] Child protection services is an umbrella term for agencies that are mandated to protect children. They are sometimes called child welfare but this connection can lead to confusion with income supports, or welfare, so I have used the term CPS throughout this thesis. In Toronto there are four of these agencies: Children's Aid Societies of Toronto (CAS Toronto), Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS), Native Child and Family Services (NCFS) and Jewish Family and Child Services (JFCS). The people I interviewed referred to CPS as CAS although they were occasionally referring to CCAS or "Native CAS".

[3] Being "in care" means being in the care of CPS, it could be kinship care, a foster home or a group home but it is being in the "care" of the state. I have chosen to put "in care" in quotations to highlight that all too often children are not safe, let alone well-cared for by the state (see pages 29-32 for a discussion of this).

and inescapable, it was these experiences that showed me the infinite creativity and insight of the young women parenting under its gaze.

This story shares some of my own learning. As a white, middle class girl I knew from experience that sometimes children experience violence in their families, in their communities. I saw my friends' parents struggle with relationship violence, substance use and mental health. They got divorced, went to rehab or paid for therapy but I never knew anyone involved with CPS. This is not a coincidence: although one in three Canadian adults report experiencing violence in their childhood, the families that get caught up in CPS overwhelmingly belong to marginalized communities.

To tell this story another way:

This story is about the parents that generously shared their experiences and thinking with me. I really struggled with how to introduce the parents, the written word so flat and incomplete. So after several rewrites I have settled on a quick introduction, a snapshot into our relationship. I have also included key demographic information in Table 1. I hesitated to include a table because of the way they can transform complex people into objectified data but it was the clearest way to summarize and share relevant information. However, the information in Table 1 is best understood together with the introductions and through their words throughout this thesis.

Alicia

Alicia and I have known each other since her son was about a year old and she moved to Toronto from Manitoba. I did a lot of housing advocacy work with her and always enjoyed our conversations about life in Winnipeg compared to here, the latest exploits of her son, and her advocacy successes with her landlord. Unlike many of the young women I worked with, she often brought family to the centre with her, including her partner Matthew, who I also interviewed, her mother, and various Aunties.

Alisha

I can't remember the first time I met Alisha, but I have this image of her holding her daughter's hands as she toddled towards me, both of their faces wreathed in enormous smiles. Alisha's smile always precedes her- charismatic, charming, and full of energy that occasionally turns jittery. We did several housing searches together and I remember her wit and charm even in the most stressful circumstances.

Chance

Chance and I also did several housing searches together and it took me awhile to earn her trust. She was very focused on completing high school and getting a secure place to live with her son. I remember sitting with her on a trip to the zoo through work and having one of those illuminating and sprawling conversations that transforms how you see the world.

Chantall

I met Chantall through a friend of hers who referred her for the research. She is so chatty and full of stories that the first time we met I had to interrupt her to do the informed consent form because she started talking from the moment she opened the door. She had a lot of insights about CPS that were especially interesting as she is a relatively recent immigrant and grew up in a country without a similar system. She is very well-connected and resourceful and referred a lot of other parents to me.

Jessica

I also met Jessica through the research. A friend posted my recruitment blurb on an online parenting group that they are both part of and Jessica reached out to me and obviously had things to share. She reported moving more than 50 times as a child and being in and out of CPS “care”, she also has her MSW and worked as a social worker and now as a teacher, giving her important insights into several sides of CPS.

Louie

I met Louie several years ago when she was doing a student placement. Many years before that, she had accessed services as a young mother at my former workplace, which inspired her to become a social worker. I worked with her closely and she is sensitive, reflective, and very attuned to how various forms of oppression connect and play out in the lives of young mothers.

Matthew

I got to know Matthew through his partner Alicia and we did a lot of housing work together, so I knew him quite well. He started dating Alicia when her son, Shine, was a baby and, although not his biological father he is a very involved, hands-on dad. I particularly remember Matthew asking me if we got bike seats for toddlers donated, because he loved to bike along the lakeshore and wanted to bring Shine along. I found him one and during our interviews he shared his pride and joy that Shine is now riding a two-wheeler.

Nukisha

Nukisha started coming to my work right when I was leaving so I didn't know her very well. However, when I was asking ex-co-workers for suggestions on who I should reach out to two folks suggested her as someone who had been through CPS as a child and as a parent and had a lot of important insights to share. Nukisha immediately responded to my request and had interesting stories and insights to share. She was also very patient when I showed up half an hour late for our first interview.

Paige

I knew Paige a bit from doing housing work together, but Chantall referred her to me so we were both surprised when she opened the door and we recognized each other. She is friendly and resourceful, always connecting people and services, and she referred several parents to me. Paige is also the only parent I interviewed who permanently lost custody of one of her children. She talked candidly about how painful and unfair that loss is.

Shadae

I first met Shadae when she was pregnant and she came across as quiet and very observant. I was struck with the difference after the birth of her daughter who seemed to bring her out of her shell, and the love between them was obvious. I got to know her well through housing work we did together. Shadae is one of the best advocates I know and our research conversations confirmed her as a skilled and strategic advocate.

To tell this story another way:

This story, this work, is about the complicated tensions, of trying to balance a combination of simultaneous truths through linear writing. I spent a lot of time reflecting on the written part of my research and trying to find ways to share the parents' words so that they are productive and nuanced. I approached this representation by including different styles of writing, trying to name tensions without resolving them, and by writing in clear language so that someone in high school could understand.

As I wrote in my research journal:

The days where the grief feels unending- where I sit at my computer and cry-
the work of deep learning-the heartwork that goes with the headwork.

My supervisor asked me how you write silence
How do you give equal weight to the things that weren't said?
To the things that cannot be said?
To the things that are said but I didn't understand?

When we chat about so and so's baby getting apprehended,
When we theorize about state violence,
We must remember that most of all we are talking about an experience so painful
it defies naming.

Someone once told me that after her kids were taken she couldn't leave the house for days-
devastated, ashamed and at a loss to explain
to her neighbours where her kids were.
Her story shook me, yet another facet of an infinite loss

So we talk about the power of making music, shitty landlords, treaty rights and the
importance of grocery lists- the infinite facets of survival

Alicia said- sometimes I just need to be with my family, we just laugh and joke, when I'm feeling stressed it's the best thing.

How to tell stories about massive traumas and redemptive love,
about struggles to buy diapers and the quiet intimacy of bedtime stories,
the first time your child rides a two-wheeler,
getting your child back in time to celebrate their seventh birthday at home,
waiting for your ten year old to turn eighteen so she can contact you.

To tell this story another way:

This thesis comes out of my commitment to taking seriously what young parents say about their lives and finding ways to move that knowledge into a space where others can benefit from what the parents shared and I learned. I spoke with ten parents that were involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) when they were children, as parents, or both. I asked them about issues that impacted their lives, concrete strategies they would like to share with other parents and their demands for structural change. The parents highlighted interlocking concerns around poverty, isolation and stress. They shared inspiring examples of how they created family, their many strategies for making inadequate money stretch, and the positive impact their children had on their lives. They had clear demands for structural change including the need for a livable basic income, more flexible, affordable childcare, and access to mental health supports without fear of CPS involvement.

My desire to listen attentively led me to an interdisciplinary program that allowed me a nuanced and complicated perspective on our conversations. I'm infinitely indebted to the insight and generosity of my three supervisors; Dr. Celia Haig-Brown from Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies, Dr. Chris Chapman from Social Work, and Dr. Susan Driver from Communication and Culture. Our individual and collective conversations challenged and guided me and they greatly enriched this thesis with their insights. I also had the privilege of being advised by a community committee made up of Hisayo Horie, Shaleta Daniels, Sheryl Jarvis and Stephanie Moynagh. When I asked them to be part of this committee I knew they had a wealth of experience and wisdom about CPS but I never could have imagined the power of our collective conversations and I am so grateful. The insights and generosity of the ten parents I spoke with- Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Nukisha, Paige and Shadae- form the core of this thesis and I'm so thankful for our

conversations.

Listening carefully also meant asking the parents I spoke with for this research what I could do to create something useful outside of my academic work. This goal led me to create a website: teenmomstalk.ca.[4] The website is a space for sharing concrete tips and strategies covering everything from advocacy strategies, to creating family for your child. The website also includes demands for structural change, conversations around how to keep your children as safe as possible in difficult situations and an inspirational playlist of music compiled by the parents. The website is a knowledge mobilization strategy and a gesture of reciprocity, a way for me to give back to the parents I spoke with. The website complements the written work and can be accessed at any point. In the next chapter I outline my theoretical framings and how they influenced my research.

Suggested Readings

1) *The Winter we Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement* Edited by The Kino-nda-niimi Collective
2) *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Land Justice, and Life Together* Edited by Steve Heinrichs
3) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander
4) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* by Dean Spade
5) *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* http://www.fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/Touchstones_of_Hope.pdf

[4] Throughout this thesis I will use the terms young mother or young parent because I believe it has less of a stigmatizing tone than teen mother or parent. In the title of the thesis and the website however I use the term "teen mom". This came out of conversations with the young parents who said that when they became parents they used the term teen mom. The title of the thesis holds the tension with both the teen mom and young mothers in it and the website uses teen mom because there is a wider variety of people searching the term teen mom. Decisions about language are always loaded but I decided, in consultation with the parents I spoke with, to use different terms depending on context.

CHAPTER 2: Framings: Ways to Understand the Stories

This chapter lays out my theoretical framings for the research. I have combined three complementary framings to understand and build on the strategizing of young mothers involved with CPS: 1) (de)colonizing, 2) intersectionality and 3) Transformative Justice (TJ). I combined the framings because, although they are complementary and each has the ability to take the others into account, I haven't found those conversations among the three in the literature. For example, intersectionality has the potential to take histories of colonialism seriously and decolonization must involve a multiplicity of creative approaches to addressing violence as suggested by transformative justice but none of these framings satisfactorily addressed all the challenges and potential solutions suggested by marginalized parents. All three framings share a commitment to analyzing the interconnections between individual and structural realities and an insistence on a transformation of CPS and the world.

A (de)colonizing framing is of fundamental importance because CPS is inextricably tied to colonialism in Canada and ending violence against children on this land means working towards ending colonialism and thinking about alternative ways to ensure their well-being. Intersectionality provides an important tool for understanding the interlocking structures of violence that make families more vulnerable to CPS and insists on centering the voices of parents most impacted by the systems. TJ fits well with this because it focuses on everyday actions to address violence that are already being undertaken in marginalized communities, and it provides guidance for moving forward in ways that focus on both individual and collective healing.

(De)colonizing

To think about CPS in the Canadian context necessarily means grappling with ongoing colonialism. In fact the very first "Call to Action" coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) is, "Reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care." (2015, p. 139). The TRC clearly names the direct connection between the violence of residential schools, which they call a form of cultural genocide, and the current functioning

of CPS. While I knew that the colonial relations at the heart of CPS would be centered in this analysis I struggled with whether the framing is anti-colonial or (de)colonizing.[5] An anti-colonial analysis works against colonialism, but a (de)colonizing analysis, "[I]s not simply opposition to colonial imposition, or even endless resistance. Decolonization as an ethic and guiding principle for collective struggle is both the ending of colonialism and also the act of *becoming something other than colonial.*" (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 111). The idea of working towards a world that is "something other than colonial" is difficult as a settler that has been raised firmly within colonialism. However, the evolution of residential schools to the Sixties Scoop to the current iteration of CPS provides a lens for understanding the fundamental importance of creating alternatives beyond colonial systems. The work of (de)colonizing is so massive and is such a foundational challenge to the status quo it is necessarily experimental and evolving. As Battell Lowman and Barker (2015) state it is,

> [O]pen ended and multiple, creating more and more different possibilities as it is pursued. Decolonization is a transformative process, one that cannot be fully revealed or understood until it is practiced, and even then it will comprise a shifting and moving set of goals, always responding to the needs of Indigenous communities. (p. 112)

There is already a large community of Indigenous people thinking and working towards changing, "the fundamental basis of political and social organization […] based on revitalized Indigenous political systems based in land-relationships" through a process called resurgence (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 113). Indigenous thinkers like Leanne Simpson (2011, 2014), Taiaiake Alfred (2005), Kim Anderson(2014), Bonita Lawrence (2012) , Glen Coulthard (2014; 2007) and many others are involved in different types of resurgence work that forms the core of (de)colonizing work. For settlers, the process is less clear and involves supporting resurgence work without appropriating it for ourselves (Haig-Brown, 2010). Battell Lowman and Barker (2105) state that,

[5] I use the word (de)colonizing following the example of one of my supervisors, Dr. Celia Haig-Brown. In her work the (de) highlights the challenges of people in the university "doing this work in light of histories of research and universities" (Haig-Brown, 2012, p. 1) and here I expand it to include anyone fighting against colonization from within Canada, a colonial state and as a settler whose presence signals the ongoing reality of colonial occupation. The –ing or gerund highlights that this framing must always be active, and responsive to the shifting contours of colonialism.

> Decolonization makes two demands. First, that we commit to no single method for confronting colonialism- this makes sense if we recognize that colonialism overlaps with many hierarchies of power, and so decolonization must be pursued on intersectional lines. Second, that decolonization is a transformative process, with no clear or homogenizing end goals, and in which it is the responsibility of individuals and communities of all kinds to figure out how they fit. (p. 121)

For me, as a settler, (de)colonizing meant learning about the history and structure of colonialism where I live, in my family, and in the structure of CPS. I examined the ways that colonization, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism and other systems of domination work together to shape how CPS functions. It meant asking the Indigenous women I interviewed about intergenerational involvement with different iterations of CPS and listening carefully to their stories of resilience and resistance. I engaged with Indigenous scholars and took their challenges to CPS and other colonial structures seriously. The (de)colonizing analysis challenged me to listen and learn from the parents I spoke with, to engage with their strategies and to reflect on demands for change that fall outside of the colonial state. Key to a (de)colonizing analysis is understanding how colonialism functioned and continues to function to bring us to the present moment. As Cindy Blackstock and Nico Trocmé state, Indigenous people raised,

> [O]ver 525 generations of children before child welfare and social work were even founded. Their emotional, physical, cognitive and spiritual ways of knowing and being guided the resilient development of hundreds of generations of Aboriginal children who were healthy, proud, contributing members of society, living safely at home in their communities. Yet consistent with patterns of colonialism, today this knowledge is too often viewed as ancillary to the 'legitimate' knowledge of the child welfare system. (2005, p. 14)

The devaluing of Indigenous ways of raising children, and the genocidal removal of children from their Nations is an important part of colonialism (Thobani, 2007). Settler colonialism is defined as a, " [P]ersistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/ settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there. Within settler colonialism it is the exploitation of land that yields supreme value." (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 12). Doing "whatever it takes to disappear" Indigenous peoples initially took the form of wars and fraudulent treaties, but

over time changed into strategies to disappear Indigenous people through mass removals of children to residential schools, and collective apathy about levels of violence experienced by missing and murdered Indigenous women (Kundouqk & Qwul'sih'yah'maht, 2009). Eventually residential schools were abolished, and although official apologies were made by the prime minister, the underlying structures of colonialism have not been dealt with and so they reinvent themselves (Blackstock, 2007). After residential schools came the Sixties Scoop,

> The mass removals of Aboriginal children during this time came to be called the 'Sixties Scoop'. Although this event has not registered in the Canadian Public's mind as the residential school experience has, it marks one of the darkest times in Canadian history. […] [I]nvolved agents of the state entering Aboriginal communities, rounding up children, and relocating them away from their parents, siblings, families, communities, clans, language, customs and culture. […] Upon removal, names of children were changed, often multiple times and personal histories were essentially erased. This has cumulated in the creation of a 'lost generation,' a cohort of Aboriginal people removed from their homes without access to their roots. (Cull, 2006, pp. 144 &145)

The above illustrates the efficacy of the Sixties Scoop at literally disappearing Indigenous people from the land and their Nations. Indeed, there are reports of Indian Agents and social workers coming into communities and rounding up all the children in the community and taking them away for adoption (Cull, 2006).

After the policies of the Sixties Scoop ended they were replaced by the next wave of CPS. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs released a report on the current state of CPS and called CPS a, "Continuation of Indian Residential School and Sixties Scoop mandate to remove children from their families, community and culture. Disconnections are created, and more families are torn apart by the system" (2014, p. 7). The colonial evolution of CPS can be seen in the horrifying reality that there are three times as many Indigenous children in care now than at the height of the residential school system (Blackstock & Trocme, 2005). As Indigenous thinker Taiaiake Alfred argues, "Structural change negotiated in a colonized cultural context will only achieve the further entrenchment of the social and political foundations of injustice, leading to reforms that are mere modifications to the pre-existing structures of domination." (Alfred, 2005, p.

180). The strength of this argument is easily demonstrated through an examination of the current iteration of CPS in which Indigenous children make up 6% of the population of Canadian children while being 40% of the children in CPS (Fallon, Chabot, et al., 2015). This type of disproportionality shows that while the name and structures of the system have changed there continues to be a very effective mechanism for removing Indigenous children from their families and Nations. Colonialism and CPS are deeply enmeshed as part of the long history of Indigenous children being removed from their families and therefore an engagement with a (de)colonizing framework must be foundational to work being done to analyze CPS (Blackstock, 2009; Gosek & Bennett, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The (de)colonizing framing names and centres the colonial relations at the heart of CPS, understands that ending violence against children involves the end of colonialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, and all other structures of violent domination, and works towards strategies outside of state systems. This framing connects clearly to intersectionality, which examines the interconnections between systems of violent domination and centres the knowledge of those most impacted by the systems.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides theoretical tools to understand the complexity of the structural and interpersonal realities of young moms, the importance of centering their knowledge, and insists on complex stories. It also creates an opening to articulate my own positionality so I can analyze how that shapes what I "know" and so that others reading this can reach their own conclusions.

The academic articulation of intersectionality comes from the intellectual labour of Black women (Hong, 2008). Kimberlé Crenshaw, The Combahee River Collective, and many others played an important role in shaping intersectionality and sharing it as a tool with enormous potential for making power visible in our personal interactions and political organizing. An early definition of intersectionality can be seen in the *Black Feminist Statement* by the Combahee River Collective that states, "We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our

particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." (Hong, 2008, p. 101). Their definition highlights four areas of a person's identity that have profound implications for their life chances and the way those identities are experienced simultaneously. Over time, other systems of oppression and their interactions have deepened the analysis including colonialism, cissexism, ableism, immigration status and ageism. Vivian May states that, "[I]ntersectionality entails thinking about social reality as multidimensional, lived identities as intertwined, and systems of oppression as meshed and mutually constitutive." (May, 2014, p. 96). By insisting that all of our identities are inextricably connected at all times, intersectionality provides tools to engage meaningfully with the complexity of peoples' lives. Experiences of racism, poverty and ageism are impossible to untangle in young mothers' experiences of CPS, and intersectionality insists that such a move to disaggregate is undesirable and impossible.

The understanding that our experiences are shaped by enmeshed systems pushes us to engage with the personal and structural simultaneously. May argues that intersectionality forces us to analyze multiple structures of oppression and that, "It is both particular and universal in scope, though, from the stance of binary thinking, this can seem illogical, even nonsensical." (2014, p. 96). This insistence on the simultaneity of the personal and structural is common to all three framings I'm working with. Young mothers' experiences are often understood through framings of personal pathology rather than structural violence. This makes it especially important to use framings that bring an understanding of individual choice and agency within a violent context that constrains the options available to young mothers. While academics with privilege, such as myself, struggle to grasp these complexities almost all of the young mothers I worked with knew that there has to be food in the fridge when CPS comes to visit because poverty, a structural reality, will be understood as neglect, a personal failing; especially if you are young, not white and struggling with postpartum depression.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's ground-breaking work on intersectionality states that the analysis is two-pronged (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Crenshaw sought to expose and transform institutional discourses that support the status quo, such as the law, and to highlight that forms of resistance, such as white supremacist feminism and

sexist anti-racism, also re-entrench systems of oppression by failing to use an intersectional analysis (Carbado et al., 2013). By trying to artificially pull apart and focus on a single axis of oppression, movements often expend energy fighting for the most privileged within a certain group. Dean Spade illustrates this using the example of who benefits in the struggle for same-sex marriage,

> [N]ot only will same-sex marriage provide little to people without property to inherit, legal immigration status to share, or employee health benefits to extend- and not only will it fail to protect those queer and trans people who are part of populations targeted by the racist, ableist, colonial, and anti-immigrant child welfare system from losing their kids- but the quest for same-sex marriage also supports norms of family formation that feminist, decolonial, and antiracist movements have fought to dismantle for centuries. (Spade, 2013, p. 1041)

This quote highlights the need to place those most targeted by oppressive systems at the centre of our analysis in order to have a clearer vision of the synergies between systems. By holding young mothers at the centre of this analysis, the connections between CPS, homelessness, intergenerational trauma, poverty and colonialism instantly become legible. This leads to an understanding that transformation rather than reform is needed because for example, hiring more racialized workers or updating policies will not provide housing, address poverty or end violence in interpersonal relationships. If protecting children is indeed our goal, a system that is at best reactive and at worst genocidal is unlikely to be reformed to meet those goals, especially when the system itself is a source of violence in the lives of those suffering the most under other systems of violence. Placing marginalized communities' responses to violence in the centre of the analysis is also integral to TJ.

Transformative Justice (TJ)

TJ is another important framing for this research. The grassroots community organization Generation Five is broadly cited as having coined the term TJ and they identify it as having three core beliefs:

> Individual justice and collective liberation are equally important, mutually supportive and fundamentally intertwined- the achievement of one is impossible without the achievement of the other.
>
> The conditions that allow violence to occur must be transformed in order to achieve justice in individual instances of violence. Therefore, Transformative Justice is both a liberating politic and an approach for securing justice.
>
> State and systemic responses to violence, including the criminal legal systems and child welfare agencies not only fail to advance individual and collective justice, but also condone and perpetuate cycles of violence. (Generation Five, 2007, p. 5)

The emphasis on the interconnections between individual and structural violence, and between individual justice and collective liberation, is integral to TJ and this research. TJ helps us to see that child protection agencies often perpetrate and perpetuate violence against marginalized children and families (Generation Five, 2007). The recognition that CPS involvement may increase- rather than decrease- violence, directs the focus towards other strategies for keeping children safe.

TJ comes from an activist praxis and while there is some academic literature about it, the bulk of the work is being done in communities as people experiment with ways to address and transform violence outside of violent state structures like the police or CPS (The Chrysalis Collective, 2011). Writing and thinking around community accountability and prison abolition are closely related to TJ and have also influenced my thinking. However, I am using TJ because it was created specifically to address violence impacting children.

The contributions of TJ to my framing of this research include the idea that our analysis should focus on proliferating alternatives to CPS rather than simply destroying it. TJ's foundation in activist praxis means that multiplicity, creativity and experimentation are valued (Kim, 2011). Imagining a world without state-based responses to child abuse, like CPS and the criminal justice system is difficult (Generation Five, 2007). However most survivors tell close friends or family about violence rather than the authorities. This means that friends, families and communities have already been experimenting with different ways to maintain safety (Creative Interventions, 2012). This valuing of experimentation strengthens the research because the everyday practices of young mothers hold important

insights into how parents with limited options strategize to strengthen and support their children, families and communities.

Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander write about prison abolition and have helped deepen my thinking about the relationship between transformation and reform with respect to CPS. Davis (2002) points out that it is a mistake to position them as mutually exclusive when they relate to each other in complex ways. Davis argues that while transformation must be our end goal there are reformist strategies that can be mobilized as steps towards transformation. Michelle Alexander supports this analysis and argues that if the goal is fundamental change, it must be a broad-based movement. Reformist strategies that further transformational goals can be an important part of building movement participation by an increasingly wide group of people (Alexander, 2012). These types of both/and strategies are used by grassroots organizations like Community Action for Families or Rise Newsletter in New York. Both organizations are adept at using strategies aimed at minimizing short-term harm to get new members involved in more transformative work for fundamentally changing how we keep children safe. In contrast social work literature critiquing CPS, tends to focus on reformist strategies. Even the call for larger transformations of CPS often focus on the need to shift from a legalistic to a family support model (Cameron, 2013) or other transformations that fail to question if a system of strangers backed by state power trying to intervene in families after abuse has happened is something that should exist at all. Some of the most fundamental challenges come from Indigenous thinkers who are questioning the foundations of the system and thinking through how traditional knowledge can help keep children safe (Baskin & McPherson, 2014; Fontaine, Forbes, McNab, Murdock, & Stout, 2014; Gosek & Bennett, 2012; Kundouqk & Qwul'sih'yah'maht, 2009; Susan Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao, 2009; Blackstock et al, 2006). This research focuses on the strategies being used by parents outside of CPS rather than how to reform CPS, because this is a fruitful conversation missing in the academic literature.

Michelle Alexander (2012) argues there must be a critical shift in the way we value and care for each other. When the root causes are not addressed structures of violence having amazing abilities to regenerate themselves in new forms as demonstrated by the residential schools-Sixties Scoop- CPS evolution used against Indigenous peoples.

Alexander explains,

> If the movement that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being – of every class, race and nationality- within our nation's border (including poor whites, who are often pitted against poor people of color), the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of a racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge- one that we cannot forsee, just as the current system of mass incarceration was not predicted by anyone thirty years ago. (Alexander, 2012, p. 18)

Systems of violence have an amazing ability to re-create themselves and so there is a need to work towards fundamentally different ways of relating. TJ is "an approach that looks at the experiences of both the individuals and communities involved, and the larger social conditions at work; an approach that seeks to integrate both personal and social transformation" (Generation FIVE quoted in Chen, Dulani, & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011, xxiii). TJ argues that the micro strategies used to address violence can provide insight into how larger change might also occur. This insight fundamentally shaped how I listened to the stories that parents told me about their strategies for parenting under challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

(De)colonizing, intersectional and TJ framings guided the questions I asked and what I focused on in this thesis. I spoke with the parents twice and the conversations were rich and lengthy and so these framings provided important tools for deciding what parts of our conversations to share. The framings all emphasize the importance of examining the interconnections between personal and systemic experiences of violence and resistance and the necessity of transformation of CPS to create justice and freedom from violence. Additionally, a (de)colonizing framing centres the colonial relations at the core of CPS and emphasizes the importance of settlers working to support Indigenous resurgence and experimenting with ways to create alternatives to colonial relationships. Intersectionality

insists that systems of oppression are interlocking and the voices and insights of those marginalized by multiple systems must be centred. TJ emphasizes the importance of taking seriously people's small experiments in resisting violence and using them to think about larger scale shifts in how we end violence. These framings can be used to understand the academic work about CPS that appears in the next chapter.

Suggested Readings

1) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* by Glen S. Coulthard
2) *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* by Emma Battell Lowman & Adam Barker
3) *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* by Dorothy Roberts
4) *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* Edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
5) *Community Accountability: Emerging Movements to Transform Violence* https://communityaccountability.wordpress.com/social-justice-journal-issue/

Chapter 3: The Setting: What are the Contexts of these Stories?

Drawing on my framings, this section will detail some of the research and the experiences of the parents I spoke with to give an overview of the issues with CPS. CPS is the arm of the state authorized to investigate allegations of abuse or neglect and recommend the permanent removal of children from their parents' care in order to protect children.

It is clear that children face unacceptable amounts of violence and that as a society we have a responsibility to protect them. However, it is also clear that CPS intervenes in families because they are marginalized rather than because they are abusive. Additionally, for those children that are taken into "care" their need for love and care as well as the basic need to be free from abuse once "in care" is far from guaranteed. The immense power of CPS creates an arena that reproduces various forms of social exclusion. For example, as noted by Gosek and Bennett (2012), there are currently more Indigenous children in CPS care than were in residential schools at the height of that system. Anti-Black racism is obvious in Toronto, a city in which, Black children make up eight percent of the population but 41% of the children "in care" (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2015). As well, although parental age is not determinative of parenting ability, Walmsley, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli and Strega (2009) have found an overrepresentation of CPS involvement in the lives of young parents. Cindy Blackstock (2009) and others have highlighted how structures of social exclusion intersect with age to create cultures of judgment and surveillance, increasing the likelihood of CPS involvement in families of young mothers (See also Miller, Cahn, Anderson-Nathe, Caue, & Bender, 2013; Quinless, 2013; Sheets et al., 2009). This perception of age-based discrimination was also reflected in my interviews. Young mothers often report that CPS doesn't respect their parenting because of their age. As Chantall says[6], "They're [CPS] thinking that you are too young to even know what you want, 'So I don't think you're capable of being a good parent, so I'm going to take your child away from you because I feel at your age it's not possible'- which is totally not true." There was a widespread perception that their parenting was constantly being judged because of their age, as well as their race, gender, class, immigration status, sexuality and/or Indigeneity,

[6] Please see pages 3-5 for an introduction to the parents I spoke with, I will quote them alongside the academic research throughout the thesis.

and that the judgments based on their interlocking identities had little to do with their actual parenting.

Young mothers' concerns about prejudice from CPS motivated me to speak with marginalized parents and centre the strategies they are using as important tools for resisting systemic violence and keeping their families safe. The importance of creating spaces for marginalized people, especially those involved with CPS, to share their experiences and insights is being examined by a small but increasing number of researchers. These include Jennifer Clarke's (2011) work with Afro-Caribbean parents in Toronto and Schreiber, Fuller and Paceley's (2013) research on parents' perceptions of the skills of CPS workers and Fine And Mandell's (2013) work with parents and children about their family's experiences with CPS. Building on Dumbrill and Lo's (2009, 2015) work with parents involved with CPS to create service users' theory, I addressed a gap in the literature by interviewing younger parents about the challenges in their lives and their strategies for addressing these challenges. I engaged in conversations about how young parents navigate the systems they are caught up in and how they mobilize supports like extended family, or inner resources like creativity to keep their families safe. My focus was not on recording their experiences of discrimination within CPS, although parents definitely did share those experiences. These stories are already in the literature and are borne out by statistics or a day sitting in the waiting room of any CPS office. There continues to be the need to explore the intersecting violences that play out in CPS more deeply and develop strategies to work against them however that is not my focus in this thesis. My interest lies in conversations about supporting families outside of state systems because my framings point me to think about solutions beyond CPS. I was curious about how these parents are already mobilizing support and what their demands are for a world in which the communities around them would support their families. Their strategies for ensuring their families' wellbeing have the potential to benefit other parents, families, and ultimately society as a whole.

As a person with a relative amount of privilege and insulation from how systems like police or CPS actually function, I believed that CPS did important work. I believed that CPS supported families and removed children from situations of serious abuse and put them into foster homes that were safe havens. Through conversations with other people that don't have experience with the actual functioning of CPS I know that these are fairly

common assumptions among ruling class white folks. Below I will use a combination of statistics and the experiences of people involved in the system to call into question these assumptions. The error of these assumptions is documented in academic literature and I will spend some time reviewing it but the overall focus of this thesis remains on the struggles parents involved with CPS experience and how they strategize to address them. Below I will go through three key assumptions about CPS and its functioning. I have titled them with a question and the quote below includes a previously held assumption and a quote from the interviews articulating how CPS actually functions.

What Does CPS do?

CPS supports families/ " I feel like when I'm around CAS I have to be perfect" Paige

Family support is part of CPS's mandate, but unfortunately workers are overworked and even when they want to provide support the size of their caseload often prevents them from doing so (Mandell, Stalker, Harvey, Frensch, & Ringrose, 2013). CPS Workers report wishing they could do more to support families, but for the most part they are limited to cookie cutter referrals to parenting groups, anger management, and therapy (Cameron, 2013). In a study of 31 mothers involved with CPS the authors mentioned that despite dealing with a variety of challenges, the, "similarity of treatment plans reported by mothers in this study was striking."(Freymond, 2013, p. 108) The bureaucratic and limited nature of the supports available comes through clearly to the parents. Chance explains,

> You're not even like a human, you're just a case file, just a case to manage and at the end they'll look at your case and go 'oh, she's got this, this, that [issue], so I'll send her to this, this, that [service] without even communicating with you and what you think is good for you, and [pause] they do lot of damage, they do a lot more damage than good.

It is worth noting that although the same types of referrals to parenting groups and anger management are almost always "suggested,"[7] there is no CPS funding for them, and so parents are left to scramble to find free services despite the fact that the waiting list for a free therapist is often months long.[8] Several of the parents reported frustration that even when parents requested supports that CPS agreed with, there was no follow-through with referrals or resources on the part of CPS. Chance describes the trajectory of her eventual apprehension as a child saying,

> I understand my mom wasn't the greatest mom, but my mom asked for support, she asked for the counseling, the family support, the school support. She asked for all these supports and it wasn't happening, it wasn't happening, and everything just got worse and worse and worse.

Even when CPS comes through with a useful referral, many parents from marginalized communities have a deep and well-founded fear of CPS. As a result, they report difficulty engaging fully with supports CPS offers. To use an academic analogy the experience of "parenting support" from CPS is as if a student went to their TA for guidance with avoiding plagiarism in an essay they were writing and the TA referred them to the head of their department for "support". One can imagine the student's fear when facing the potential of being accused of academic misconduct. And of course this is on a very different order of magnitude than the loss of one's children. As long as CPS continues to have the ability to apprehend children and fight in court for their permanent removal, it remains difficult to imagine a scenario in which they can be seen as supportive to families (Cameron, 2013).

One source of parents' distrust is addressed in one of the main recommendations coming out of *Partnerships for Children and Families Project*; "de-centring legal authority"(Cameron, 2013, p. 286). This comes out of a ten-year research project focusing on CPS in Ontario. They identify a counter-productive shift to an emphasis on CPS workers having to collect evidence and document all interactions with families. The constant

[7] Suggested is in quotations to highlight that any failure to follow-through on suggestions is often perceived by CPS workers as parents being uncooperative or unwilling to change which often has negative implications for the family (Maiter, Manji, & Palmer, 2013).

[8] These wait times can delay reunification and lead to the perception of parents being uncooperative or unmotivated to seek support.

expectation that workers be ready for court means that workers spend a lot of time documenting their concerns, which frames their entire view of the families. This has three linked outcomes,

> First, service providers [CPS] are preoccupied with meeting these evidentiary requirements. Second, service providers have little time for creating helpful relationships with children, parents, other service providers, or community representatives. Third, too many children and parents rightfully and regrettably fear and resist involvement with child protection authorities. (Cameron, 2013, p. 287)

This emphasis on evidence and extensive recording was obvious to the parents I spoke with. Many of them complained about the continuous note taking and their concern about how these notes would be used. Chantall analyzed this saying "they [CPS] are like the cops- instead of actually trying to support, they're doing more of the primarily investigative work and when you have that kind of system set up nothing is really confidential and everything is just being transmitted to some other supervisor to manager." The sense that anything they say or do would be used against them made it very difficult to develop a supportive relationship with CPS. Most parents I spoke with saw involvement with CPS as something to be avoided at all costs. This came from their experiences that CPS didn't provide support and that CPS removed children based on factors that had very little to do with their parenting.

Who is Impacted by CPS?

CPS removes children from situations of serious abuse/ "CAS has this big connotation of taking away people's children- especially young parents, or people of colour" Shadae

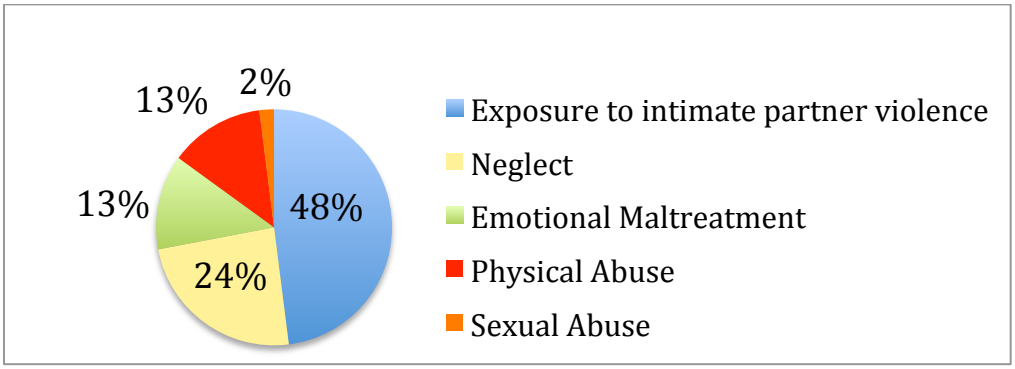
According to research done on the 2012 *Canadian Community Health Study*, one in three Canadian adults reports having been abused as a child.[9] Statistics like this show that

[9] This statistic is based on a narrow definition of interpersonal violence, if we use a (de)colonizing, intersectional TJ framing that also acknowledges structural violence like anti-black racism, colonialism, poverty, ableism, or Islamophobia; the experience of violence is even more common.

violence against children is a real issue that must be taken seriously. CPS, however, is not involved with one in three Canadian families. In fact in the 2012 *Canadian Community Health Study* of the adults that reported being abused as children, only 7.6% of them had been involved with CPS (Afifi et al., 2015). This leads to questions about which families CPS becomes involved with, and how these particular families become involved.

The chart below comes out of research by the *Child Welfare Research Portal*. The numbers are from 2013, the most recent data available for Ontario,.

Figure 1: Primary Category of "Substantiated" Child Maltreatment



Source: (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015)

I used to assume that CPS became involved in families where serious physical or sexual abuse occurred. However, the data tells another story. The chart shows that roughly five sixths, or 85%, of the "substantiated"[10] cases do not fall into those categories (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015). Of the 13% of cases due to physical abuse, CPS workers report that 95% of those cases caused "no physical harm", four percent caused physical harm "not requiring treatment", and only one percent of the thirteen percent required any form of treatment (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015, p. 15). The above statistics do not diminish the serious impact of physical abuse, but they do raise the question: if ninety five percent of the cases of physical abuse involve "no physical harm" how accurate is the category of "substantiated"

[10] It is important to note that substantiated refers to what CPS workers assess to be "the balance of evidence indicates that abuse or neglect occurred" (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015, p. 44). The "balance" of evidence is a legal term that means it is "more likely than not" or that it is 51% likely, which is a relatively low standard suggesting, logically, that in some of those cases that type of child maltreatment did not in fact occur.

child maltreatment? And, importantly, could there be less traumatic ways to support these children than removing them from their families? These statistics demonstrate that only a tiny sliver of families involved with CPS are involved for the reasons they are widely thought to be, and many of these children do not appear to be in any immediate risk of harm that is serious enough to outweigh the harm of removing them from their families.[11]

Examining the reasons families become involved, we see that almost half of them (48%) fall under the category of Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). This category of risk to children evolved from research in the 1990s that showed that kids who witnessed violence between their parents were negatively influenced by it, so much so that simply "allowing" children to witness violence could be understood as abusive behavior (Hughes, Chau, & Poff, 2011). There is, however, a growing body of research questioning the accuracy of those findings and how it is applied in a child protection context to blame victims, primarily mothers, for their own abuse (Hines, 2015; Hughes et al., 2011). While initial involvement comes from experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), once CPS gets involved the investigation can spread,

> Mothers are often expected to leave their abusive partners when CPS become involved; otherwise, they risk longer and more intensive intervention and are frequently scrutinized for their parenting capacities even when initial reporting is around their own victimization. (Alaggia, Gadalla, Shlonsky, Jenney, & Daciuk, 2015, pp. 83–84)

In a study based on CPS involvement for IPV in Ontario the researchers found that mothers were overwhelmingly (87%) the ones experiencing IPV. However mothers were also the ones held responsible, with attempts made to contact the person who actually had control over whether the children were witnessing violence only about a third of the time (Alaggia et al., 2015). Additionally in a study from Western Canada, very few of the parents were offered any type of support such as referrals to community domestic violence services or even safety planning. Rather, the mothers were simply told to leave their partners or they would lose custody of their children (Hughes et al., 2011)

[11] I discuss the impacts of removal in more detail in the next section. However, being "in care" can actually be quite damaging and dangerous for children.

Most of the referrals to CPS came from the police and so, unsurprisingly, the mothers that were referred were disproportionately racialized and younger compared to the regular CPS caseload (ibid).[12] The authors relied on reporting from CPS workers and didn't have accurate data around income levels, but they believed that the parents also tended to have less money than the regular CPS caseload (ibid). It is disproportionately young, poor, racialized, especially Black and Indigenous, mothers that are more likely to have police involvement due to intimate partner violence (ibid). Five of the parents I interviewed reported having becoming involved with CPS when they called the police as victims of violence; and two others reported police involvement and subsequent incarceration leading to CPS apprehending their children. Furthermore, entering a shelter is another pathway for CPS involvement. In Toronto, for example, the shelter intake line, Central Family Intake, makes a mandatory report to CPS if abuse is mentioned, even though the parent is actively trying to leave the abuse. Parents with sufficient money can stay in a hotel, or rent a new place and are therefore shielded from the scrutiny and judgment of CPS. All this happens despite the fact that the evidence about the harm caused to children from witnessing violence is being called into question, or at least it is being questioned that the trauma of witnessing violence is worse than the trauma of being removed from ones' family (Alaggia et al., 2015).

By CPS' own statistics, only a third of children demonstrated any emotional harm[13] from having been "exposed", to IPV (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015, p. 60). Of children who had experienced "neglect", the next biggest category (24%) for CPS involvement -71% experienced no measurable emotional harm (Fallon et al., 2015). The neglect category is especially subjective and frequently stands in for poverty through measures like homelessness or not enough food in the cupboards (Charbonneau et al., 2014). If 75% of the

[12] The pathway for young, racialized parents living in poverty to be overrepresented in calls to the police happens several different ways. Stereotypes can lead members of the public to judge situations as dangerous and call the police, especially in the context of colonial, anti-Black racism in which Indigenous and Black people are constructed as criminals. Living in poverty means that you often live in close proximity to others and have less privacy so screaming fights that would have no consequences for those living in a single-dwelling home can also lead to the police being called and if you are poor and don't have access to resources like money to leave a situation or stay in a hotel it is more likely that you will be forced to call the police or shelter system.

[13] Emotional harm included measures like bedwetting, nightmares, and anxiety, which can be caused by parental maltreatment but can also be caused by many other things.

children involved with CPS are involved due to their caregiver being abused or because of poverty, and roughly two thirds of them report no emotional harm, this calls into serious question why CPS is becoming involved. Again, this is not to say that abuse is not an issue; one in three Canadian adults reports having been abused as a child (Afifi et al., 2014). However, the statistics demonstrate that while child abuse remains common, CPS is not interacting with children primarily because they are abused. Instead CPS is involved with children that come to the attention of the system for failing to fit into white ruling class norms.

The colonial (Fontaine et al., 2014), racist (Clarke, 2011; Miller et al., 2013), classist (Kenny, Barrington, & Green, 2015), sexist (Strega et al., 2008), xenophobic (Maiter, 2015), homophobic (Charbonneau et al., 2014), ageist (Chambers & Erausquin, 2015) and ableist (Spade, 2013) nature of CPS is well documented. My intention here is to provide some of the statistics on the functioning of anti-Black racism in CPS in Toronto as one illustration of how structural violence impacts child apprehension.

The Children's Aid Society of Toronto (2015), one of the four CPS agencies in Toronto reports that, "There is an acknowledged disproportionality, disparity and discrimination in services provided to Black families by child welfare agencies across North America." (2015, p. 2). They define disproportionality as, "[A]n over or under-representation of certain groups (e.g., racial) in a public child welfare agency relative to the group's proportion in the general population." (ibid, p. 3) and report that while Black people make up 8% of the population of Toronto, they are 29% of the "ongoing service cases". The report defines disparity as what, "…occurs when services to one segment of the community are allocated differently, such as an increased or decreased *likelihood of entering or exiting the services system/or care*." (ibid, p. 4) The percentage of Black children taken "into care" is 31% and 10.8% are of mixed race with one Black parent. So while 8% of the population of Toronto is Black, 41.8% of the children in care have at least one Black parent (ibid). This disparity can also be seen in the length of stay in care; while 20% of white children remain in care for longer than a year, 45% of Black children remain in care longer than a year, and over a quarter of them (27%) remain in care longer than 18 months (ibid). All of these statistics show discrimination that the report defines as, "[U]nequal treatment based on one or more of the prohibited grounds, under the Ontario Human Rights Code. Discrimination can be

intentional or unintentional, direct or indirect but the result is adverse on prohibited grounds." (ibid, p. 5). These statistics provide local, recent evidence about the anti-Black racism embedded in CPS.

To understand the anti-Black racism embedded in CPS it is important to understand the historical trajectory of anti-Black racism. In Canada this begins with the practice of slavery which took place between the late sixteenth century until its abolition in 1834 (Bonnie & Pon, 2015). Dorothy Roberts (2002) describes how Black children were taken from their parents and sold whenever their white owners decided and the devastatingly violent impact this had on Black families and communities. From slavery onward, when white people lost the legal right to break apart families there was a shift so that Black mothers were constructed as "unfit mothers" who should not raise their own children even as they cared for white children (Roberts, 2002). There is then a specific resonance and history when a white supremacist state removes Black children from their families.

When talking about CPS in the Canadian context it is extremely important to highlight how CPS functions as ongoing tool of colonization. Indeed, as stated in the previous chapter although the Canadian government has issued an official apology regarding the residential school system there are currently three times the number of Indigenous children in the "care" of the government than at the height of the system (Blackstock, 2009). Though the stated intention of government intervention in Indigenous children's lives is no longer "to remove the Indian from the child" but rather, the "best interests of the child", children continue to be removed from their families, siblings, communities and Nations at extremely high rates. As a settler country that exists on stolen land and that depends on the continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples, removing children from their communities continues to harm the children, their families and ultimately their Nations.

It is important to understand how the trajectory of histories and structures of various forms of racism continue to affect attitudes that lead to the overrepresentation of specific communities of children "in care". For example Black and Indigenous children are the two most overrepresented groups but the histories and structures through which they become overrepresented are different. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2015) uses settler colonialism as the structure through which to understand racialization in the US, but the context is similar in Canada. She argues that, "What linked land taking from indigenes and black chattel slavery

was a private property regime that converted people, ideas, and things into property that could be bought, owned, and sold" (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 67). Nakano Glenn (2015) then explains that settler colonialism depends on Indigenous people disappearing so that white people can become the "owners" of the land, therefore indigeneity is understood to be constantly disappearing and CPS is an important structure through which Indigenous children are "disappeared" from their families and Nations. During slavery however, Nakano Glenn (2015) argues that white people derived value from the forced labour of Black slaves and to justify this violence Black people were constructed as property rather than people. This dehumanization in the past leads to current-day practices of anti-Black racism such as over-policing, surveillance and discriminatory assessments of the danger Black parents pose to their children. These differing trajectories are important to understanding the current disproportionality in CPS and thinking about how to work against it.

I will also briefly focus on the stigma around young parents. This is another area that highlights the evolving and oppressive nature of how we judge parents. There is a lot of current research stigmatizing young parents and describing all the negative outcomes for them and their children (for example, De Genna, Goldschmidt, & Cornelius, 2015; Dhayanandhan, Bohr, & Connolly, 2015; Morinis, Carson, & Quigley, 2013). A striking example of this was a study done by the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto who worked with many of the same families that I did. They constructed a quantitative, clinical narrative solely around the "high-risk" nature of these families, their struggles, and poor outcomes for their children (Thompson et al., 2015). As a counterpoint however, other research has found that children of young mothers showed as much "prosocial" behavior at age five as children born to older parent (Ensor & Hughes, 2010). Clearly stigma against young parents shapes the assumptions and questions that are asked about young parents and subsequently the "outcomes" of teen parenting. This stigma, especially from clinical practitioners like social workers in hospitals, can have dire consequences for families. I have heard multiple stories from young mothers about having CPS called on them by hospital staff only because they are 17 and not because of any concerns about their parenting. Imagine giving birth and trying to negotiate the accompanying wide range of emotions and insecurities while being scrutinized and feeling like there is no room for

error. The young parents I spoke with, like several research studies, report that the parents themselves saw becoming a parent as an overall positive decision, which gave them a sense of purpose and love (Barn & Mantovani, 2007; Chase & Knight, 2006; Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015). This stands in stark contrast to the social construction of "babies having babies" or the professional social work construction of developmentally immature adolescents making bad decisions (Luker, 1996). The book *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* clarifies the shaky nature of these claims, highlighting that in the US in the 1950s and 1960s most first time mothers were teenagers or in their early twenties and, at that time, they were considered more than capable of raising children (Luker, 1996). The moral panic of that era focused on unwed mothers rather than "teen" mothers, but as white middle class parents increasingly chose not to marry or to divorce, the stigma shifted from unwed mothers to teen mothers (Luker, 1996). Chambers and Ersauaquin (2015) use the term "intersectional stigma" to talk about how teen parents are constructed as "bad mothers" because of their age in ways that connect to other identities such as being poor, racialized, Indigenous or immigrant mothers. Intersectional stigma and perceptions of inadequate parenting, rather than actual maltreatment, put young mothers at increased risk of involvement with CPS.

Currently in Ontario, as shown in *Figure 1*, the two main categories for families to become involved with CPS are witnessing intimate partner violence and neglect. These risks to families would be better resolved by a supporting parents experiencing abuse and a guaranteed living income (see Chapter Five for a longer discussion on this), rather than by removing children (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015). As shown above while categories such as "witnessing intimate partner violence" appear neutral and indeed intimate partner violence occurs across social locations, the families that come to the attention of CPS in this category belong to communities that are over-policed; often Black, Indigenous and poor communities. Neglect, in which caregivers purposely withhold the necessities of life, is a serious form of abuse. In practice however, the category is overwhelmingly used to blame parents for being poor. Cindy Blackstock (2007) describes how this category is disproportionally used against Indigenous parents for things like "inadequate" housing, and is the main pathway for the overrepresentation for Indigenous children "in care". Overall, the routes to involvement with CPS tend to be based on membership in marginalized

groups, rather than the stated reason of protecting children. This leads to the final assumption that children are safe in foster care and happy to be there.

How Does CPS 'Care' for Children?

Foster care is a safe haven for children/ "If there was a Children's Aid for Children's Aid then Children's Aid would be screwed" Chance

Coming to realize that entrance into the foster care system could, and often did, decrease safety and security for children was the final factor that forced me to think about alternatives to CPS. Children removed from families because of conflict between their parents or because of poverty are often distraught at their separation. Even children that were happy to be removed or ambivalent about their removal reported being terrified once in the system. There is not a lot of analysis on the trauma caused to children when they are removed from their parents but this reality has been known for a long time. Dorothy Roberts describes this process in her pivotal book *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare,*

> When children are seized from helpless parents by more powerful government agencies, it creates a sense of vulnerability and betrayal in children, who rely on their parents to keep them safe, it is doubly traumatic to then be dropped unexpectedly in to the care of a strange adult. This is true even in the best of foster homes, never mind what befalls children in the hands of uncaring or abusive foster parents. (Roberts, 2002, p. 18)

A fundamental flaw in the system is that children need unconditional love, care and support, all things that temporary, paid caregivers are unable to offer. Chance highlights this when she says,

> My friend turned twenty one and it went from her worker calling her every day, 'How you doing?' to 'Sorry, I'm busy, bye'. And my friend was like, 'What the fuck? I been with this chick since I was fourteen years old and now she just cuts me like nothing?'

The trauma of being cut off abruptly is almost a best-case scenario because at least she was receiving some support previously. All of the parents that had spent time "in care" reported feeling alone to a degree that is unconscionable for anyone, let alone children. Matthew, who was placed in a group home at the age of eleven[14], describes quickly becoming, "really independent, like being left by myself. Just having to do everything by myself, and learning how to do things, by myself, literally. I didn't have family telling me to really like- go to school, high school, that type of stuff. So it was pretty hard trying to work things out…" Although he frames his experience in a group home as teaching him independence, the idea of an eleven year old feeling like he is totally alone, like he has to "learn how to do things, by myself, literally" is an indictment of a system that is supposed to be working in the best interest of the child.

Aside from neglect and the inability of a system to provide the type of care children need from a family, the amount of actual abuse experienced in care is staggering. Informally, many of the parents I worked with who had grown up "in care" reported experiencing abuse. Knowing, from personal experience, that their children's safety was potentially in jeopardy and that they had no way to protect them greatly increased parents' distress if their children were taken into "care" (Callahan, Rutman, Strega, & Dominelli, 2005; Dominelli, Strega, Callahan, & Rutman, 2005; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2002). Of the six parents that I spoke with who had spent time "in care," half of them spoke about experiences of abuse from foster parents and five of them shared experiences of extreme negligence on the part of their CPS workers. For example, Chance talked about being put into a secure group home at the age of eleven, and Alisha reports being permanently separated from her brother because he was "racist" towards their white foster parents and so was taken away. This failure to protect children often happens intergenerationally as illustrated by research entitled *Endangered Children: Experiencing and surviving the state as failed parent and grandparent* (Dominelli et al., 2005).

The final blow to kids often happens when they report the abuse to their workers and

[14] Group homes are institutions that are managed more like shelters or prisons than foster homes and are usually reserved for teenagers. The fact that an eleven-year-old child was placed in one instead of a foster home is shocking. Additionally Chance also reported being taken from her mother's care and being placed into a "secure" group home at the age of eleven for several months until she was transferred to a new worker who was horrified at her placement and put her into a foster home.

are not believed. This is often the moment that young people report realizing that they are adrift in a bureaucracy that does not believe and will not protect them; that there are no adults that will stand by them. Finding statistics to back this up is difficult as complaints by kids are often dismissed by workers and consequently not documented. To give an example of the type of "care" kids experience, after Chance was removed from a group home she was placed in an abusive foster home. She describes her experience this way,

> In fact Children's Aid made it even worse because going to Children's Aid I got to experience how it was to be beat up, how it was to get abused, how it was to have foster parents telling you that 'you're nothing, and that you're worthless and you're just going to be a ho when you grow up' and I just heard all of this stuff and I went from a goody-good girl, from everyone telling me 'oh, you're going to be a heartbreaker, you're going to be smart, you're going to go to university, you're going to be an amazing person, you're beautiful' to go to Children's Aid and they tell you 'you're ugly, you're fat, you're worth nothing, you're just a Native, your Mom's alcoholic' like every little name in the book I was called. 'You're just a Native, Native, Native', the Native thing was thrown at me so hard.

While deeply disturbing, Chance's experiences are by no means uncommon. It is also troubling to note the persistence of colonial violence that Chance experiences in a foster home in Toronto in the early 2000s and its similarity to abuse reported during the Sixties Scoop and residential schools. Trying to find evidence of the levels of violence experienced by children "in care" was difficult. The only place I could find a trace of this was in a study from the US that interviewed youth that had aged out of "care," in which 30% of the youth reported "maltreatment" during foster care (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). My ten years of work experience in the shelter system and with young parents would suggest that this is a conservative estimate, but regardless one child in three being revictimized "in care" calls into immediate question a system created to protect children. This is highlighted by an interesting statistical analysis done by an economist, JJ Doyle(2007), about children on the borderline of whether they should be removed, which he calls "marginal cases". According to Ontario statistics the "marginal cases" make up about 75%[15] of the caseload and in these cases he found that kids that stay with their families do better than kids that are taken into

[15] The combination of witnessing intimate partner violence and neglect is 72%, if emotional abuse is added, arguably 85% of the cases involved with CPS are marginal. Emotional abuse, while potentially very harmful, could be addressed by parenting supports and less intrusive measures than removal of children.

care. He examined "juvenile delinquency" and employment rates and found that children who remained with their families did better on all markers than children who were taken into foster care.[16] These are devastating conclusions that call into question the foundations of CPS. There is important work being done in the social work field on a variety of fronts to reform or mitigate the harm caused by CPS. However, entering my research from a (de)colonizing, intersectional TJ framing, the work of modifying or reforming CPS became less compelling. My changing perspective on what CPS actually does informed my desire to talk with parents involved with CPS about their insights and strategies and to focus on their strategies rather than their experiences of oppression, which are well documented. In the following chapter I will explain how I understood and conducted my research.

<u>Suggested Readings</u>

1) *Walking This Path Together: Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Child Welfare Practice (1st and 2nd Edition)* Edited by Sohki Aski Esquao [Jeannine Carriere] & Susan Strega
2) *Creating Positive Systems of Child and Family Welfare: Congruence with the Everyday Lives of Children and Parents* Edited by Gary Cameron, Marshall Fine, Sarah Maiter, Karen Frensch & Nancy Freymond
3) *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* Edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
4) *A Visceral Grief: Young Homeless Mothers and the Loss of Child Custody* by Sylvia Novac
5) *Creative Interventions: Resources for Everyday People to End Violence*
http://www.stopviolenceeveryday.org/stories/

[16] Doyle also found an increased likelihood of becoming a teen parent and while this brings additional challenges I do not believe being a young parent is inherently negative.

Chapter 4: The Questions: Why and how I heard these stories

While the previous chapter addresses what the research says about CPS and the families that are involved with it, this chapter focuses on the research conversations I wanted to have and how I conducted them. My questions and curiosity focus on what young parents involved with CPS see as barriers to their parenting and how they strategize to address those barriers. Margaret Kovach (2009) articulates the importance of choosing a research methodology based on the questions and conversations you want to engage in. One of my supervisors, Chris Chapman, suggested that I look into using narrative therapy as a research methodology. I decided to use it because narrative therapy's ideas about co-research, social constructions, and the power held in particular narratives fit well with the type of questions I wanted to ask.

My research framings: (de)colonizing, intersectionality and transformative justice all directed me to engage in conversations about support beyond the CPS system. I wanted to explore how parents targeted by CPS are already creating and practicing alternatives. Even in CPS' best iteration, when your toddler is tearing up your apartment and all you want to do is take a shower, it is your neighbor who can watch them for half an hour, not a distant professional (Alicia, Chance, Matthew, Louie, and Shadae all talked about the importance of neighbours as parenting supports). Narrative therapy as a research methodology offers important tools to facilitate conversations with young parents that honour their everyday practices and create space to imagine and demand a better world for their families.

Narrative Therapy as Research Methodology

From my decade in practice as a community worker, I was familiar with some of the techniques of narrative therapy. Michael White and David Epston, the founders of narrative therapy, do not use a fixed definition, rather they understand it as, "evolving, collaborative practices," in which a, "deliberate, sustained focus on narrative processes and concepts *is* the therapy." (Payne, 2006, p. 3). A slightly more detailed description by the *Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto* states that it, "views problems as separate from people and assumes people as having many skills, abilities, values, commitments, beliefs and

competencies that will assist them to change their relationship with the problems influencing their lives." (Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto, n.d.). Narrative therapy and research methodologies have a rich history of interconnection, with Epston drawing on his experience as an anthropologist to bring ideas of 'co-research' into therapy and decades later researchers turning to narrative therapy to inform their research (Dulwich Centre, 2004; Speedy, 2008). The editors of a special journal issue dedicated to the connections between narrative therapy as a therapeutic practice and as a research methodology state that a key concept of both forms of narrative therapy is, "inquiring into solution knowledges and problem-solving skills of people. At times, the solution knowledges that are articulated are documented and compiled in archives so that they can be made available to others who are facing a similar predicament" (Dulwich Centre, 2004, p. 4). These ideas as well as a focus on 'externalizing the problem', 'doubly-listening' and 'co-researching', each of which I explore in more depth below, informed how I understood and conducted this research.

Externalizing the problem

Narrative therapy has a strong commitment to 'externalizing the problem', which is informed by the idea that 'the problem is the problem, the person is not the problem' (Findlay, 2015). This played out in my research conversations through my curiosity about what parents saw as the problems that impacted their parenting rather than investigating why they were immature, impulsive or unable to parent.[17] Understanding the stressors in their lives as external to the parents directs the questions away from stigmatizing and individualizing framings and towards looking at how structures of colonialism, capitalism, sexism, racism and ageism impact their parenting (White, 2007). This is important because young parents are often keenly aware of being judged as inadequate because of their age, but also believe in their abilities to be good parents (Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Nukisha, Paige, Shadae, Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Once the problem was understood to be external to the parents, we could begin to investigate the different challenges, how parents were already addressing them, and what systemic changes would be supportive.

[17] This type of harsh judgmental language is often used by CPS to describe parents.

To facilitate externalizing the issue, narrative therapy focuses on asking questions, that frame familiar practices in new ways. Narrative therapists use the term "re-search" to mean, "emphasizing the active production of new knowledge from interrogating and re-working familiar stories" (Crocket, 2004, p. 4). In this research I wanted to make visible the strategies young parents are already using to support themselves and their families. These practices may then be shared to expand the repertoire of strategies for other families who may be struggling and contribute to providing building blocks for other solutions. It can be difficult to recognize the powerful yet mundane strategies used as part of everyday life; narrative therapy is a powerful tool for helping identify them. Jane Speedy writes:

> Some therapeutic and research conversations create the space for people to rehearse the stories they already know. This way of working [narrative therapy] is about moving towards the spaces where untold stories lurk, and that interests me more. (Speedy, 2008, p. 22)

Reading the above confirmed my commitment to using narrative therapy as my research methodology. These conversations have powerful potential to reveal dissonances between familiar stories and practices that tell other stories. For example, many of the young parents interviewed saw the use for a government organization, like CPS, to turn to with concerns for others or themselves (Shadae, Chantall, Chance, Paige, Alisha). However, when asked about what they had done when they were really struggling, they shared stories about reaching out to friends or family to help with childcare or money, rather than contacting CPS.[18] Chance echoed many of the other parents' experiences and actual practices when she said:

> You want to show your kid that [you're strong], … I remember I couldn't do it for him so I said, 'Mom, just please, you need to take him. There's no food in my fridge. I have no money. I have no nothing and I can't even look at him without crying', so she took him.

Chance believed in the need for CPS but narrative therapy-informed "re-search" conversations revealed her actual practice and a less familiar story.

[18] The one parent who reported reaching out to CPS during a crisis was told that she wasn't in enough crisis and wasn't eligible for their services.

Doubly-listening

Another important tool used by narrative therapists is "doubly listening". While careful listening is an important part of any research conversation, doubly-listening goes beyond this. It is described as:

> [P]ractices of listening to the 'talk that sings', the unsaid, the unsayable and the absent but implicit meanings in conversations. The open or liminal space in people's talk suggest possible entry points towards alternative meanings or traces of forgotten, or unacknowledged stories. (Speedy, 2008, p. 20)

The concept of "doubly-listening" creates space to discuss the agency in the stories these parents chose to tell, to withhold, or which I failed to understand. Narrative therapy does not understand stories as fixed truths but rather, as shaped by social forces and therefore having the potential to be re-storied by the participants, depending on what questions they are asked and by whom (Speedy, 2008). This highlights the importance of positioning myself and thinking through how that shapes the research conversations (Speedy, 2008). Doubly-listening troubles simplified interpretations of our conversation or the notion that I, or anyone reading my research, can understand anything beyond what research participants chose to share and what our own positionality enables us to hear (Paradis, 2000). An example of this occurred when Shadae shared that living on Ontario Works[19] was doable if one lived in subsidized housing but then followed up by saying you might not be able to eat for a couple of days during the month, but that you could live quite well. Shadae's understanding of living well or comfortably is quite different than what middle-class people's understanding of what living well might be. Doubly-listening created space to listen carefully, resist assumptions, and understand how her answer made sense within her life.

Another example of dissonance revealed by doubly-listening was in my first interview with Alicia, when she talked about some of her family moving to the Toronto area from Manitoba and how great that was for her. I asked a question assuming the reason it was good was because her family could help with childcare. But Alicia responded rather

[19] Ontario Works is the name for the government program that provides financial assistance to those who are not eligible for a "disability", age, or workplace injury related, compensation.

tersely that “they didn't do childcare,” and we moved on. In our second interview I was able to ask her about family in a more open manner and she said,

> [M]y family's very…we like to laugh and joke around, so like being around them lifts up [my] spirit cause it's just like everybody talks and we joke around and tease each other… [T]hat's the type of people *we* are.

Doubly-listening allowed me to recognize that I was misunderstanding the role family played in Alicia’s life during the first conversation and encouraged me to ask and listen again to what family meant for her.

Co-Researching

Another useful concept used by narrative therapists that has migrated from 1970s critical anthropology practice is “co-research”. Jane Speedy (2008) describes this as “a form of research alongside people, into matters that are of concern to them in their lives. This lends itself to a blurring of research and therapy practices.” (p. 11). At the core of “co-researching” is the idea that people are experts in their own lives and our work as therapists or researchers is to listen and respect what they are saying (Crocket, 2004). Co-researching encouraged me to conduct a second interview with the young parents to allow for “member checking”, in which the participants may look over transcripts, initial analysis and themes, and then provide feedback (Cresswell, 2013). Understanding the parents as co-researchers meant that I took their input seriously and worked it into the research from the outset. In the first interviews I also consulted interviewees about creative aspects of my research and what format would be useful for them. The most popular response was an online space to share strategies with other parents and with a strong preference for a video component. Their involvement shaping the form of the creative aspect created a greater investment in the project and five of the parents gave me permission to video record their second interview. Understanding parents as co-researchers greatly enriched our conversations and facilitated their involvement in the online, creative aspect of this research.

Narrative therapy techniques of externalizing challenges, doubly-listening and co-researching all contributed to what stories were told and how I have come to understand them. In the section below I will discuss the concrete details of how using narrative therapy as my research methodology shaped my research methods.

Method

Community and Academic Committees

An integral component of my research design included having a community advisory committee as well as an academic advisory committee. The community committee consisted of four people with whom I had preexisting relationships, who I deeply respect, and who have been impacted by CPS. The community committee met three times as a group: once to advise me on my proposal, once after first interviews, and then to give me feedback on my first draft.

The academic committee consisted of three professors from the departments of Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies, Social Work, and Communication and Culture. These three met as a group four times, individually with me on several occasions and advised me on effective research practices and provided me with important feedback. The interdisciplinary nature of the academic committee brought a rigorous and responsive analysis to the project.

Both committees offered invaluable insights into the research conversations I wanted to have and to ethical and practice-based challenges as the process unfolded (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow, & Brown, 2005). The community committee helped shape my research and helped me stay accountable to doing relevant and accessible work. They challenged me in a variety of ways including the suggestion to follow up on the thread about substance use that came up in the first interviews, which became a major theme in the second interviews. The academic committee had the interdisciplinary expertise to support my research and guide me through academic processes. They provided key insights into how to work within an academic framework and make my work relevant for a variety of settings.

Outreach

After both committees and the Office of Research Ethics approved my plans I reached out to young women that I knew from my previous work with young mothers. I did this using the snowball sampling technique in which I reached out to young mothers that I knew through social media and asked them to refer other young parents who had been involved with CPS (Csiernik, Birnbaum, & Pierce, 2013). This strategy was based on the insights of Indigenous researchers like Margaret Kovach (2009) on the importance of building on relationships in research. Relationships are especially important when talking about sensitive topics with people from marginalized, over-researched communities. I spoke with eight parents I had previously known through my work; six of them I had worked with closely, one relatively closely, and one who I had only worked with for a couple of months before I left my position. One parent was referred to me by one of the first women I interviewed and another was recruited via social media. This commitment to interviewing people who knew me, or knew of me through friends, enriched the conversations because there was an existing relationship and some trust.

First Interviews

I conducted qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine young parents in the first round of interviews. As part of my commitment to conducting research respectfully, I wanted to give the parents options about where to meet. I offered several options as to where the interviews could take place, ranging from a public space with privacy--such as public libraries--to people's homes. In the first round of interviews I met two participants at libraries and the rest at their homes. In the second round I met with all the parents at their homes. Meeting at their homes meant that they could save time and money by not having to travel and it was much more convenient if they had young children with them. It also helped shift the dynamic between us, as I had never been in any of their homes. Further, of the eight parents I had known in my previous role, I had helped four to get the subsidized housing they were currently living in and it was nice to have the chance to be hosted in their homes.

Building on the strong advocacy of researchers working from Indigenous frameworks, I was able to get approval from the university ethics committee to allow people to choose whether they would like to use their names or pseudonyms (Kovach, 2009). In Indigenous frameworks, all knowledge is understood to be situated, and so naming the speaker provides important context for the listeners (Kovach, 2009). Narrative therapy also values contextualized knowledge and the importance of honouring individuals' strategies (Payne, 2006). Several of the parents expressed pride in their strategies and wanted to be recognized for them while others had concerns about protecting their own and their children's privacy, or felt that they could be more honest if they knew their identity was protected. Many of the parents shared intimate stories that could impact their personal and professional lives and so I offered the option of using a pseudonym at the beginning and end of both conversations. Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Matthew, Nukisha, Paige and Shadae chose to use their names while Chantall, Jessica and Louie picked pseudonyms. In the initial interviews, I gave an option to have interviews audio recorded or written. Eight of the nine participants gave permission to audio record and one parent asked that I take notes. In the second interviews I got permission from the Ethics Committee to give the option of video or audio recording, as many of the research participants had suggested having video as part of the creative part of the project. Five of the parents gave permission for me to video record their second interviews, three gave permission to audio record, and one requested that I only take written notes.

Offering varying levels of anonymity was very important, especially considering the potentially vulnerable nature of our conversations. I made it very clear that, up to submission, I would make any changes requested in the written product and that the creative, online portion could be changed at any point. In fact, at the end of one of the interviews one mother asked me to omit certain details about an abusive ex-partner, which I then excluded from the transcripts, thesis and the creative portion.

Second Interviews

After the first round of interviews I transcribed the conversations and developed some initial themes using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparison method. I then took

these themes, as well as possibilities for the creative project raised in the initial interviews, to my community and academic committees for feedback. Along with the constant comparison method, I used mind mapping to organize the themes (Bahn & Weatherhill, 2012). I have included the mind map I created as Appendix A.

The second round of interviews allowed for member checking, in which the participants and I discussed the initial analysis and I asked follow-up questions that had arisen from the first interviews (Cresswell, 2013). The level of interest in second interviews was high and I connected with eight out of nine young parents for the second round of conversations. Additionally, in the second round I interviewed Matthew, Alicia's partner, who I did not interview in the first round but who I knew well and had worked with closely in the past. Both of my committees agreed that his input would be valuable to this research and would not compromise it in any way.

Conducting a second round of interviews created opportunities to have conversations over time, and in changing circumstances. It allowed time to deepen our conversations and build further trust. This commitment to building trust over time is part of both narrative therapy and Indigenous thought (Absolon, 2011; Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). Trust building is especially important in the context of families dealing with CPS involvement, as they are often very wary of what they disclose to professionals. In some of the conversations, there appeared to be a clear pattern of increased openness between the first and second interview but in two instances the first interviews felt more candid than the second. In one of these, there were obvious reasons, such as Chantall having to cut the second interview short because her son's after-school childcare had fallen through. In the other, it seemed that perhaps the parent was in a more stressful situation, causing them to be less forthcoming. Conversely, there was one conversation in the first round with someone I had known well, in which the interview was brief and superficial, whereas the second was more in-depth. My sense was that this discrepancy might have been a result of changes in mood or energy levels, rather than an increase in trust.

Ultimately, having two chances to speak with the same people greatly enriched the quality of conversations. From these second conversations I did selective transcription and manual coding of hard copies of the transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). I then met with my

community and academic committees for feedback and began the process of writing the thesis.

For both rounds of interviews I found the transcription process moved slowly and took a surprising amount of emotional labour. I did not find much discussion about this in the literature and did not anticipate how taxing it would be to re-listen to and type out some of the difficult parts of our conversations (Liamputtong, 2007). My relationships with several of the interviewees stretch back seven or eight years to when they were pregnant with children that are now in grade two. In this regard, the duration and intensity of these relationships likely differs from many research relationships. Having previously interacted so closely with many of the parents and children brought an intimacy to the conversation and amplified the impact of their stories of trauma and hardship on me.

Academic work often elides or discourages discussion about the affective aspects of labour involved in research (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009). In fact, I began to characterize my slow process of transcription as procrastination and was struggling with the fact that, although I could physically transcribe relatively quickly, I was unable to transcribe more than two to three hours per day. Even after I had finished transcribing I often found myself emotionally exhausted by what I had listened to and needed to take breaks and process it. A friend recommended *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Research Methods* by Dr. Pranee Liamputtong that I found helpful to normalize my reactions and to help me understand how the emotional labour enriched my thinking and to value it accordingly.

Creative/Knowledge Mobilization Component

My course of studies, Interdisciplinary Studies, creates the opportunity for a creative product to be part of the thesis. I really valued the opportunity to have a creative component to my thesis as I wanted to create something from our conversations that would be useful for the young parents I spoke with. This came from a desire to do meaningful work in a variety of formats and deeper engagement with knowledge mobilization. While knowledge mobilization is a growing and contested area of study, the following definition resonated with this research:

> Knowledge mobilization is about the active engagement of diverse public users of research results [...] often focused on involving users from the beginning of the knowledge-creation process and through activities of moving and sustaining applications of the knowledge. (Fenwick & Farrell, 2012, pp. 2 & 3)

While involvement at all stages, such as video creation, was not something I achieved, I tried to keep these concepts in mind at various stages of planning, conducting and interpreting of this research. The commitment to creating a product that would complement the written thesis meant that I also learnt how to do video editing and build a website, as well as a variety of other work that I did not anticipate at the beginning.

During the first interviews, I asked what the interviewees thought would be something useful to come out of this project. Overwhelmingly, parents suggested that a component involving social media, as a venue to share strategies and tips, would be very useful (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Paige, Shadae). There were also other suggestions; such as an opportunity to meet in person and share resources and strategies (Louie), and some folks wanted more involved social media efforts such as vlogging (Chantall) or moderated discussion forums (Shadae, Chantall). There was a strong preference for visual, rather than written, information, which was framed as a contemporary norm, "everyone likes to watch stuff instead of read" (Chantall, Nukisha, Paige).

For my second interviews I got an amendment from the Ethics Committee and reworked the consent form so that the people I interviewed could choose if they wanted to share video, audio or written quotes from our conversations online, as well as in this thesis. I then used my MacBook Air to video or audio record our conversations. To edit the interviews into shorter clips I used iMovie and then uploaded the clips to Youtube and shared them via the website.

The preference for a virtual space to connect with other young parents and to share tips and strategies fits well with narrative therapy's commitment to archiving and showcasing concrete strategies. In fact, in narrative therapy there is a practice of creating documents about strategies folks have used for various issues they have struggled with; such as eating disorders, bedwetting, or anxiety (White, 2007). It also fits well with TJ's

commitment to naming and sharing strategies already being used to respond to violence through projects like the Story Telling and Organizing Project (Creative Interventions, 2012). As the second interviews progressed, I collected valuable tips and strategies about money management, building community, and addressing stress. Based on my commitment to contextualizing these issues within larger frameworks of oppression, and feedback from my academic and community committees, I also asked about what they would say to people with the power to make larger structural changes. Together, the practical tips and structural demands formed the backbone of the online infrastructure of my research.

Honorariums- A Practice Discussion

This section will delve more deeply into issues surrounding the use of honorariums when interviewing marginalized people. As someone who had done social work for a decade I was used to giving honorariums for focus groups or surveys in which I was soliciting the time and knowledge of the young women I worked with. We live in a capitalist system where value and money are linked and, furthermore, given that I was asking marginalized people to expend emotions and share stories and knowledge, honorariums were an important way to value their labour. This perception is echoed by research in which study participants were asked about reimbursement for participation and they reported that the amount should take into account their time, and their risks and that this would be a good way to reflect the value of their participation (Breitkopf et al., 2011). The academic literature, my academic committee, and other academics I spoke with informally, however, had a range of opinions on honorariums.

Some of the academic literature cautions that offering honorariums may force economically vulnerable people to share information they would not otherwise choose to share (Largent, Grady, G Miller, & Wertheimer, 2012). I see this concern as simultaneously compelling and a bit misplaced. Research has a long and terrible history of exploiting and harming marginalized communities so it is always important to be reflective and avoid coercion (Smith, 1999). The possibility of coercion is especially troubling when parents involved with CPS talk about their experiences because the conversations have the

potential to be quite emotionally vulnerable. Through conversations with my supervisors, especially Celia Haig-Brown and Chris Chapman, I developed a series of strategies to mitigate some of the potential harms. I spoke primarily with parents I knew, out of the hope that the trust between us would allow them to be more honest about any discomfort. That said, I was also aware these preexisting relationships may function in an opposite way and lead to over-sharing out of a desire to please. This concern made it very important that I no longer had any professional role or power over them, although I continued to have more social power.

On the advice of my supervisors, I verbally emphasized that they could refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time and would still receive the honorarium. In the second interviews, I also repeated this during the section of the interview where there was more risk in answering questions around relationship violence and substance use.

Despite the trust that had been established prior to the interviews, it was apparent to me that it was not absolute. In several instances, parents said they didn't have anything to say about a particular question even though conversations in the first interview, or things I knew about their life, led me to believe they had personal experience with some of those issues. I also let parents know I was open to omitting portions of our conversation and, as stated above, one woman did ask me to leave out some information about her abusive ex-partner at the end of our conversation. Another strategy was to schedule ample time for interviews so that if we did get into emotionally difficult conversations I had the time to let the conversation progress without having to rush off. Additionally, I gave parents a sheet with crisis numbers and resources so that if emotional difficulty arose after our conversation they could get support.

Despite these mitigating strategies, there is and was always the possibility that the need for the honorarium would put the parents in a vulnerable position. Interestingly research shows that study participants link reimbursement with risk and more carefully evaluate their participation, the higher the amount of reimbursement (Breitkopf et al., 2011). Marginalized parents often need to weigh the pros and cons of strategies that may contribute to their financial stability and are often quite expert at it. How does participating in a research project compare to shoplifting, to boyfriends that give you gifts with strings

attached, to letting a friend stay with you in exchange for groceries, to participating in a parenting group that gives you an honorarium but might call CPS on you? This type of calculus is something marginalized parents are very experienced at, and it strikes me as patronizing to not allow them to make that choice.

My position is supported by a study of African American drug users living in poverty who saw themselves as autonomous individuals who were able to make informed decisions about risk regarding paid participation in research and saw it as one option among several for participating in the "informal economy" (Slomka, McCurdy, Ratliff, Timpson, & Williams, 2007). In fact, I reached out to several other young parents I had worked with closely who chose not to respond. I imagine some of them weighed up the honorarium against the topic of conversation and found it not worth the honorarium. Within this capitalist system, many of us do things we would not otherwise do without the need to support ourselves and our families. I concluded that, after mitigation, the risk of coercion was outweighed by my efforts to value and minimize harm to the people I was talking with.

The second concern stated in the literature, is that people might participate solely for the economic incentive, which may lead to lying or interviews that are not useful (Liamputtong, 2007). The potential of someone taking advantage of my relative privilege, to get an honorarium they are not eligible for, was a risk I had to be willing to take. I aimed to minimize the risk by speaking primarily with parents that I had relationships with. I also accepted that some people might participate solely for the honorarium and choose not to share very much. However, I would not withhold a tangible token of my appreciation from the parents I spoke with because someone might choose to get the honorarium but not participate.

A more complex concern raised by the academic literature is that marginalized people *should* engage in research out of a selfless desire to advance collective knowledge (Klitzman, 2013). This is a complicated issue, because undoubtedly there were a number of motivations behind people's decision to participate (Bell & Salmon, 2011). While the honorarium likely influenced the interviewees' decisions to participate, my impression was that these were busy parents who took time to share vulnerable stories with me out of genuine desire to make things better for themselves and other parents. Further, again, there were people who did not participate despite the honorarium being offered.

This tension arose in another fashion when a member of my community committee responded to my draft recruitment callout. In relation to why parents should participate, I had written "for the honorarium and because the conversations could help other moms". The community committee member said that it seemed disrespectful to mention money as the primary reason they would be involved, even though it was a consideration. On her advice, I shifted the honorarium to another section saying that it would be an "approximately one-hour conversation for which I would offer an honorarium". This experience resonated with other discussions in the literature about how participation in research is rarely purely altruistic but neither is it solely motivated by the honorarium (Bell & Salmon, 2011).

Providing an honorarium is about valuing people's time and contributions. From our conversations, I will earn a degree that will likely benefit me in concrete ways in terms of earning power, social prestige and the opportunity to study and be institutionally recognized for that study (Paradis, 2000). From this perspective, an honorarium is an infinitesimally small attempt at reciprocity, but it is important nonetheless.

I found the thinking of Dr. Emily Paradis informative around this issue because she had also worked as a social worker for many years before returning to the academy (Paradis, 2000). She pursued research with homeless women and wrote a very thoughtful article about feminist ethics. Paradis argues that paying participants is no substitute for "ensuring that research has intrinsic benefits for participants and champions the interests of the community." (Paradis, 2000, p. 847). I attempted to address this by ensuring that the knowledge mobilization component included demands to policy makers and people in power, as well as tips and strategies. I had also hoped to be able to give jam that I had made myself as a non-monetary, but more personal, thanks for their participation. Unfortunately however, the university ethics committee did not allow me to do so based on health and safety concerns.

Conclusion

Ideas of externalizing challenges, doubly-listening, and co-researching come from narrative therapy and played an important role in shaping the research. The discussion of narrative therapy as research methodology, as well as some of the specific methods I used, creates an important framework for understanding the discussions that took place. The next chapter highlights the conversations I had with the parents and shares some of the key themes.

Suggested Readings

1) *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* by Margaret Kovach
2) *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* by Pranee Liamputtong
3) *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* edited by Leslie Brown & Susan Strega
4) *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* by Kathy Absolon
5) *StoryTelling & Organizing Project* http://www.stopviolenceeveryday.org/stories/

Chapter 5: The Stories

This chapter highlights the strategizing and thinking undertaken by the young parents I spoke with. It should be understood in conjunction with the online component of the thesis, especially the video and audio-recordings of the young parents speaking. I hope this component can be useful for parents, frontline practitioners, scholars, and the general public. Although this chapter overlaps slightly with the online infrastructure it contains background information on the research participants and explores the themes from a broader perspective. In both components, my selecting and editing choices influence what is shared of our conversations, but there is a significant difference between reading words on a page and hearing them spoken by the person themself. I highly recommend visiting the online portion at: teenmomstalk.ca before reading this chapter of the thesis. While a broader range of strategies is found in the online component, this chapter is organized according to theme and examines several of the strategies and their implications in greater depth.

In the first round of conversations, three themes were often repeated. The themes were 1) money and how people made it stretch, 2) isolation and how they built community, and 3) stress and how they coped with it. The conversations often centred on the tension between parents' pride in their strategies and resourcefulness and the recognition that they were often in difficult situations with little institutional or societal support. Callahan, Rutman, Strega and Dominelli (2005) describe this tension in their research with young mothers that have grown up "in care". They articulate the concept as "prevailing on the edge on my own" (Callahan et al., 2005, p. 188). They highlight how the concept of "prevailing " calls up "individual agency, of courage and sometimes triumph over highly adverse circumstances." (Ibid). While "on the edge" illuminates the tension of doing this while facing "destabilizing and disempowering forces beyond the capacity of individual actions to address." (Ibid). Adding to their stress was the fear that if they were unable to cope with these difficult challenges CPS could become involved at any time. All of the young parents stated that their fear of CPS exacerbated their already challenging stress levels. However they had all developed a variety of strategies and resources for dealing with their situations. The tensions within the themes were apparent in how the parents discussed

them and they also emphasized how inextricably the themes were linked to each other. For example being late on rent (money) increases anxiety (stress); and friends (community) can provide connections for employment (money). Our conversations often flowed dynamically between themes and it is important to understand the relationships within and among the themes.

In the second round of conversations, I member-checked the three themes and the parents reported that the themes were relevant. Additionally, in the second conversations I asked about strategies for parenting around "sensitive"[21] topics such as how to minimize the impact of substance use and partner violence on children. On the recommendation of one of my supervisors, Susan Driver, I asked what the parents did to feel good or maximize wellness in addition to asking how they minimized stress. The answers revealed the role of creativity and artistic expression and the importance of the parents' relationships with their children.

Whom I spoke with

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the ten people I spoke with. Some demographic information is briefly summarized in Table 1 and there is a short introduction and window into my relationship with them on pages 3-5. In my outreach material, I wrote that I wanted to speak with "Moms who had either been involved with CAS[22] (ranging from [workers] coming by once to them taking kids) with your child(ren), or when you were a kid (they just visited your family or you were in foster care or a group home)." My plan was to interview mothers who had children during their teen years and had some involvement with CPS. I wanted to know what they identified as making their parenting more difficult and the strategies they used to address those barriers. I wanted to speak with young mothers because they often live at the intersection of a number of these systems of

[21] I'm using the word sensitive in the sense of the Miriam-Webster definition "calling for tact, care, or caution in treatment" because violence in relationships and substance use issues occur equally among all parents, but for marginalized parents they are grounds for removal of their children.

[22] Although I use the term CPS frequently throughout this thesis, in my outreach material I used the term CAS (Children's Aid Society), which as I mentioned earlier is the term most commonly used in Toronto.

discrimination that make them especially vulnerable to inappropriate CPS intervention (Brown et al., 2009; Freymond, 2013). CPS involvement is a stigmatized and sensitive topic so I hoped to speak with women with whom I already had a relationship. I worked in an organization with young mothers for six years prior to pursuing this research and a sizeable number of the young mothers I worked with had involvement with CPS as children. When parents spent extended time "in care," CPS often became involved in the lives of their children (Alisha, Chance, Nukisha, Shadae & Callahan, Rutman, Strega, & Dominelli, 2005).[23] I also wanted to understand the perspectives of interviewees who only had involvement as parents and those who had been involved as children but did not have CPS involvement with their children. My research outreach design used the snowball sampling technique, and so I connected with two parents who did not fit those characteristics. All the parents I spoke with had some involvement with CPS but I spoke with one father named Matthew, and I also spoke with Jessica, who had spent most of her childhood in and out of "care" but had her first child in her early thirties, rather than during her teen years, and has had no CPS involvement with her child.

I have provided some basic demographic information in a chart for easy reference for the readers. The chart while useful, also feels uncomfortable in the ways that it flattens families and categorizes them. To partially counteract this, I also share a brief glimpse into my relationship with each of the parents which can be found on pages 3-5.

[23] Please see Callahan, Rutman, Strega and Dominelli (2005)for a through discussion of the policies that create intergenerational CPS involvement.

Table 1: Background Information for Interviewees
(Information is at time of second interviews)

Name	*Current Age*	*Age at birth of first child*	*Age and # of children (y=years, m=months)*	*Racial Identity*	*CPS for self/child*	*Source of income*
Alicia	22	15	6 y and pregnant	"Native and African, so mixed-race"[24]	Child	Ontario Works
Alisha	24	18	6 y		Self & child	Working
Chance	20	17	3 y	"Aboriginal"[25]	Self & child	OSAP & OW
Chantall*	24	19	4 y, 3 y, 8 m	"Black majority, also a quarter white, I'd say I'm mixed"	Children	Ontario Works
Jessica*	32	31	10 m	"Biracial-Black and white"[26]	Self	EI-maternity leave
Louie*	29	17	12 y	"White"	Child	OSAP
Nukisha	20	17	3 y, 2 y	"Black"	Self & children	Ontario Works
Matthew	26	26	6 y son & expecting baby	"West Indian, from Trinidad"	Self & child	ODSP & part-time work
Paige	24	16	8y, 6y, 2y, 1y	"Caucasian"	Children	OW
Shadae	20	16	4 y	"Caribbean, Jamaican"	Self & child	OSAP

* I gave the parents the choice to use their name or pick a different name and the star represents a pseudonym chosen by the parent.

[24] When I asked for more info she said her Mom is Ojibway and her Dad is Kenyan.
[25] When I asked for more info she said her Mom is Cree and her Dad is Ojibway, but she reports often being read as white or mixed and during her time in foster care where she experienced a lot of anti-Native discrimination she would say "I'm white and I'm Trinidadian, or I'm Spanish and I'm this, or I just went through all these weird phases and in the back of my mind I knew it was wrong but I didn't want people to know that I was Native, 'cause everyone just judged me for that."
[26] Jessica reports being read by people as white although her Mom was half-Black and her dad was Black. She sees herself moving through the world with white privilege but also identifies being raised by a Black, Jamaican Mom and Grandmother. She says that this upbringing and her Black heritage is an important part of her identity.

Complexity and the Problems with Advice

Before getting into the themes of the research interviews, it's important to discuss the universal pushback I received when I asked for tips or advice. Relatedly, everyone I spoke with raised the issue of complexity at various points in our conversations. The parents all had tips and strategies to share, but they insisted on complexity and said it depended on many factors including your personality, strengths, and particular situation. When I asked them about their considerable expertise, they shared generously but they also adopted a nuanced, reflective stance against generalization or simplification. This is instructive: it stands in sharp contrast to the norm within social services where advice is freely offered and assumed to be universally applicable and helpful. The parents' refusal to simplify and generalize their experiences appeared in many ways. For example, Matthew and I had a long conversation about how hard it is for kids "in care" to learn how to receive love and how self-protective they have to be. Then Matthew said, "I've met people like that--cold. *And* I've met the warmest people ever--like just so loving, nice, kind." This constant reminder to hold complexity inspired me to share our conversations in their richness and seeming contradictions. The following sections therefore focus on the parents' strategies but need to be understood within the complex, situated, and self-reflexive spirit they were offered.

The three themes are 1) "Money's Tight"/ "Making it Work", 2)"So I was basically on my own"/"Socializing": Family, Friends and Godparents and 3) "I really struggled"/ "Keeping our spirits up". Using quotes from the parents I gave each theme two names to highlight the tensions within them. The stories the parents shared were complex and interconnected; pride around strategies for making money stretch collided with shame from not being able to provide more for their children; the stress of being single parents dovetailed with joy from hugs from their children. The parents' stories defy simple narratives, and I tried to honour this by naming the themes in two different ways.

"Money's tight"/ "Making it work"

"Money isn't everything but it's involved in everything."
-Matthew

Money constantly emerged as a theme since everyone except Jessica struggles financially. Alicia, Chantall, Matthew, Nukisha, and Paige are receiving social assistance. Chance, Louie and Shadae are receiving student loans (OSAP); Alisha was working and Jessica was on maternity leave from her teaching job. Alisha's work was a social work job rather than a service work job, such as retail or fast food, but she was going from insecure contract to contract and had lost her housing and was staying with her Mother, so money remained a huge concern for her. All the parents expressed how negatively their lack of money influenced their stress levels, and how hard it was practically and emotionally, especially if they couldn't provide for their children. Struggling for money led to a variety of problems including isolation (Louie, Chance), second-rate childcare options (Louie), unsafe housing (Alicia, Matthew), debt (Chantall, Chance), and struggling to leave violent relationships (Chantall, Paige, Shadae).

How Tight?

To give some context for how little many of them were living on, I calculated a rough estimate for how much a single parent with a child on Ontario Works would receive. A family this size in Toronto receives $994 a month: $655 for rent and $339 for "basic needs"(Income Security and Advocacy Centre, 2014). To this I added all the government benefits they would be eligible for which totalled $423 a month, leading to a monthly total of $1417 per month or $18 924 per year. To give a point of comparison, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives calculated a living wage for Toronto in 2015. They define a living wage to be what a family of four needs to,

> [M]eet its basic needs, participate in the economic and social fabric of their community, and purchase items that can help them escape marginal subsistence. The list of family expenses contains no extravagances. It doesn't allow families to save for their children's post-secondary education; it doesn't acknowledge that many working families also carry debt obligations. But it does recognize that

> things like rent, transportation, childcare, food, clothing, internet, and laundry costs are part of the basics that every family strives to meet. (Tiessen, 2015, pp. 5&6)

The living wage is calculated for a family of four in Toronto to be $65 870.55. To create a ballpark figure to compare them I halved the amount to $32 935.28. Comparing them we see the stark reality that a single parent with one child is living $14 011.28 or less than half of a living wage. The Low-Income Cutoff (LICO), a much less accurate measure, or a family of two in a large city in 2011 was estimated at $23 498 (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Even by this conservative measure, which is sometimes roughly used as the poverty line in Canada, the people I spoke to were living on $4574 less than that or, again, thousands of dollars below the LICO. The numbers paint a stark picture but some of the stories about what it looked like to live this reality were even starker.

I asked Jessica what it would have been like if her family had had more money growing up and the answer was damning. Jessica said that if there had been more money her Mom wouldn't have had to steal to support them and subsequently would have spent less time in jail, that her Mom would have been less stressed and done drugs less, that her Mom wouldn't have let sketchy men hang around the house and so maybe Jessica wouldn't have been sexually abused. Jessica also said that if there had been more money she wouldn't have had to become a “professional liar”, saying that she wasn't hungry when she was, and all sorts of lies to make it seem that things were okay at home so that she and her sister wouldn't get taken away by CPS. As well, more money would have allowed her to focus in school and not feel the shame associated with being poor and having to do things like stand in line for the food bank while kids from school walked by. This is a devastating list of consequences, especially in a country like Canada where there is more than enough wealth to ensure a liveable level of income for all.

Making it Work

Making such tight finances work was a huge source of pride and simultaneously shame, confusion, anger and defensiveness. Nukisha and Chance spoke quite frankly about not

knowing how to make their budgets stretch and the frustration, stress and mounting debt that resulted. The pride in making tight/impossible budgets work shone through in the ways Chantall and Paige detailed their strategy of going to parenting groups almost everyday so that they could receive food vouchers that covered most of their grocery costs, leaving their other money to pay for rent, transit and other necessities. Many of them talked about their pride in slowly learning how to make things stretch, often learning the hard way by having to go without food because there is no room for "extras" like a taxi from the grocery store or buying gifts for birthdays (Alicia, Louie, Matthew, Paige, Shadae). As Shadae, who had her daughter at 16 said, " I struggled a lot with budgeting when I first became a Mom: it was going from my parents taking care of everything financially for me to me being responsible for my finances at such a young age." Later she said, "I'm not perfect, I made some choices in terms of finances, relationships, parenting but mistakes are a learning period". This sense of increasing skill at managing challenging situations was a source of great pride and was often tied to their sense of being a good parent. As Chantall said, "As an adolescent growing up into adulthood and trying to be the best mom you can, you have to learn how to do that [managing money]. As well, it's a practice thing, you have to grow into it." All of the parents talked about wanting to provide a good life for their children. They talked about coping with overcrowding (Chantall, Alicia, Alisha), going hungry themselves (Chance, Shadae) or scrambling to find money for new shoes for their child (Alicia, Matthew) as stressors as they tried to provide for their children and they reported going into debt as they struggled to balance bills, rent, transportation and food. The lack of basics, let alone "extras" like birthday parties, clearly points to the precarious nature of their financial situations.

Advocacy Skills

The parents shared diverse stories about advocating for themselves and their children in a variety of bureaucracies and it became apparent how adept they were at negotiating systems that judged and stigmatized them. They talked about a variety of strategies from doing research about rights and policies before meetings (Louie, Jessica, Paige); to taking good notes during meetings (Louie, Jessica, Shadae); to speaking with the media (Alicia,

Matthew). As Shadae says, “I’ve had a lot of issues with daycares and schools discriminating, but if you know your rights and you let them know that you are aware of your rights you’ll see a change in their attitude.” Strong advocacy skills didn’t guarantee success of course, due to worker and institutional bias and discrimination (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Paige, Shadae). But nevertheless the parents were proud of their skills and were constantly seeking to improve and share strategies.

Having Each Other’s Backs

Alongside the hardships, many of the parents also spoke about the strength, solidarity and community they experienced with other folks that were poor. Chance said,

> I notice that ghetto people understand each other, and that's what I really forgot, when I got good in life. I forgot that even though I'm better now I can't forget my past. Because my past is who is going to make me get back up there, because nobody understands what I'm going through more than another person that's sitting in the ghetto with me.

Chance believed that in the end it was people living in similar conditions that understood her, encouraged her and truly supported her. Other folks similarly discussed a different set of values in poor communities, values that were grounded in an ethic of care and mutual support. Paige explained this in terms of struggling for money herself but still giving money to people that ask for it on the street because, “We need to help each other, it's not just help yourself, you know? Some people are like that, but not me, I'm a low income family, so I like to help out other moms and help other people that are struggling”. Louie talked about how not having enough money makes you depend on friends and family in a different, positive way and said,

> I really think people thrive when they're interconnecting, but in a capitalist society, they're like everybody is an individual, fend for yourself and you internalize it and you feel bad about it, but it's actually not, I don't think, the way that we're supposed to be doing things.

Louie's statement illustrates the enmeshed and simultaneous nature of feelings about money and the competing values placed on it. She distances herself by saying that in a capitalist society "they" think everybody is an individual, implying that she isn't a part of that society, then says "that you internalize it and feel bad about it", and then distances herself from that individualist, capitalist narrative again, saying that it's not "the way we are supposed to be doing things".

Systemic Solutions

While expressing a sense of shame for not having a good job and being able to provide for their families, parents clearly named the unjust nature of social assistance that falls far below the Living Wage needed in Toronto. As Paige explained,

> I think they need to have more resources for young parents especially, because we're the ones that are suffering the most. Like there's people living in mansions and here we are basically eating off the floor. [...] Welfare doesn't really give you anything; they need to bring up everything for low income families basically. Because right now it's not fair for our children and for us too.

Others echoed this sentiment and the idea that people with power must not understand how hard it is live on so little money. Shadae said that she'd like to see politicians support their families for a week on her budget, and Chance talked about how the politicians must not really understand how little money they were asking families to live on. They also had a wide range of demands about how people in power could contribute to improving their financial situation. These included a guaranteed basic income (Louie, Jessica, Chance, Paige), free post-secondary education (Louie), raising minimum wage (Paige), access to healthy, affordable food (Chantall), high quality subsidized housing (Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Louie, Jessica, Matthew, Paige), free dental and prescription coverage (Louie), free, flexible childcare (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Nukisha, Paige, Shadae) affordable, efficient transportation – whether improved TTC or access to a car (Alicia, Louie, Chance, Jessica, Matthew) and access to good jobs (Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Paige).

"So I was basically on my own"/ "Socializing": Family, Friends and Godparents

"*Having a network of people that will help you parent, 'cause it's kinda sad to do it alone, you don't have anyone to share their big achievements with."*
-Louie

The tensions present in this theme are palpable. Struggling for money makes you isolated but, as discussed above, it can also create a more interdependent sense of community. Parenting--especially single parenting--can be very isolating but can also create strong networks of support with other young parents. Having a child can create a unique bond but it may also bring up feelings of abandonment.

The parents told a lot of stories about feeling lonely, isolated, judged and abandoned. Parenting a young child is often isolating but doing it as a single parent with limited financial resources can be isolating on an entirely different scale. There is the physical isolation of winter, having to live in far-flung apartments because of affordability, cheap strollers that break down, sleep deprivation, and not having money for transit. As Louie says:

> Not having money makes you feel isolated because you feel bad about yourself. That's also stigmatizing and then not having the freedom to go and do things because of financial constraints or because you don't have childcare.

Young parents often need their social networks the most at the very moment they are experiencing the most stigma and isolation from family and friends for their decision to have a child.[27] On the other hand, the decision to parent may create new networks of support; many of the parents shared their experience of attending alternative or adult high schools and meeting other young parents who became integral supports (Alisha, Chance, Louie, Paige, Shadae). While becoming a parent could forge a bond through which new, supportive relationships were built, feelings of isolation still had a clear negative impact on the reported emotional life of several of the parents interviewed. Chantall talks about the impacts of feeling isolated when she had her first child:

[27] There are some noticeable exceptions to this. Alicia, for example, talked about how supportive her Mom was throughout her pregnancy until the present moment.

> I found myself crying sometimes and feeling depressed – like I need support and I don't have family support *per se* because I am from Jamaica […] My family that brought me here, they deserted me because I got pregnant so I was basically on my own.

Chantall's lack of money meant that she couldn't visit her supportive family in Jamaica and they couldn't visit her. The rejection by her family living in Canada made the challenging experience of parenting an infant even harder. Chantall's experience illustrates the persistent enmeshment of the three themes. The section below focuses on the parent's perceptions of connection and isolation however it is important to remember that the themes remain deeply interconnected.

The parents talked about experiences of loneliness and connection, often in the same conversation. Loneliness was described in the hard times of long nights alone (Louie); in the feeling of living without a safety net (Chance); in the pain of migration and leaving family behind (Chantall, Matthew); and also in the good times. Louie illustrates in the quote at the beginning of the chapter that sometimes the parents reported feeling the most isolated when their child did something amazing and they realized that there was no one to share their joy and pride with. This type of loneliness can arise even when others are around:. Alicia and Matthew point out that one can feel restless and need to get out and see friends even when in a long-term partnership, and Chance relates feeling isolated in the middle of a party. As a counterpoint, however, Shadae shared that being by herself feels amazing and not lonely at all.

Stigma

Societal and state reactions to young parents factor heavily in their feelings of isolation. Sunera Thobani (2007) describes the processes through which the Canadian state strengthens and supports "exalted motherhood" in which the arrival of a child is a cause for celebration. The construct of 'exalted motherhood' depends on having its opposite-- poor, young, non-White single mothers who are looked down upon, surveilled, controlled and

punished by the state.[28] This support manifests in everything from sympathetic looks from strangers to tax related benefits that disproportionally help middle to upper income parents (Thobani, 2007). For young parents, especially if they are poor and racialized, sympathetic looks turn judgmental and the amount received from social assistance is barely enough to pay rent in Toronto (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing). [29] As Louie identifies:

> Stigma is part of the reason why you feel isolated because you feel like you've missed out on something. You've made a mistake and you're made to feel that way instead of seeing [parenting] as this really positive thing, and this amazing relationship, and this contribution to the world.

Parents knew they were being judged and stereotyped for their choices. The judgments made them feel more isolated and less willing to open up and ask for support. For the parents who had spent time as children in the foster care system, that feeling of isolation was heightened (Alisha, Chance, Jessica, Matthew, Nukisha, Shadae). As Matthew said, "I took it in, 'cause like growing up I had *so* many people around me just come and go, come and go, whenever they feel like. So I just took it like just have a *certain* amount of people in your life." Becoming disconnected from one's family of origin and bouncing between a variety of foster and group homes made building trust in adult relationships and community more difficult.

Family

The parents struggled to various degrees with feeling they were at odds in their relationships. Tensions with their families, especially their parents, came across clearly. During the interviews, there was often a visceral yearning--a pain and mourning when talking about their relationships with their parents. Yet, it was often their parents who helped the interviewees out. Alisha spoke about how hurt and abandoned she felt because

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[28] "[T]he traditional nuclear, middle-class family ideal that lives at the heart of Canadian national formation [...] [V]alorization of this ideal as the national ideal means that the experiences of Aboriginal women, and of women of colour with/in the family were to be markedly different" (Thobani, 2007, p. 113).

[29] The average rent for a one bedroom (Mom & baby sharing room) in Toronto in 2014 is $1071. This is more than their entire welfare cheque ($994) which is meant to cover rent and living expenses.

of her mother's struggle with substance use and how that had led to Alisha's entrance into foster care. However it was her mother that she moved in with when she lost her housing. Chance listed all the ways her mother's substance use and Chance's subsequent entrance into foster care had harmed her and, yet, when she was at her lowest point, it was her mother who had taken care of her son.

A variety of systemic and personal mechanisms interacted to damage family relationships. Parents reported becoming alienated from their families through the child protection system (Alisha, Chance, Jessica, Matthew, Nukisha, Shadae), caregiver substance use (Alisha, Chance, Jessica, Nukisha), migration (Chantall, Matthew, Shadae) intergenerational trauma from the Sixties Scoop and Residential Schools (Chance, Alicia), and the criminal justice system (Jessica, Nukisha). Still, the above examples didn't always destroy family relationships. For example, Alicia has always had a close relationship with her mother who struggles with the legacies of intergenerational trauma inherited from her own mother's residential school experiences. One of the issues that stood out with the two Indigenous parents, and that was also present with many of the other parents I interviewed, was the intergenerational nature of both trauma and resilience. Chance's mother had been taken out of her community and adopted as part of the Sixties Scoop. She clearly links the Sixties Scoop, abuse, and intergenerational trauma to her current isolation, saying:

> [My mother] was part of the Sixties Scoop, went into an adopted family, got abused, and God knows what happened to her. She's unable to love. She's unable to communicate with me, which damaged me at the end of the day, and now I'm sitting here solo dolo [alone].

Alicia's grandmother was forced to attend a residential school and, similarly, she clearly links that to intergenerational trauma. Alicia talks about her grandmother's experience and says

> My Grandma was raped and had her bones broken. She seen her friends get killed. And these are nuns and preachers and they're supposed to be helping you but they're not. They would basically say, 'You're not Native, like you're not allowed

> to be Native, you have to be how we want you to be.' So it affected my Grandma where my Grandma turned into an alcoholic and then her children seeing her being alcoholic, so they started drinking, thinking like, 'Okay, this is the life we're used to.'[30]
>
> So yeah, residential school really affected my family in a big way. And they just gave them a bunch of money but it's like you can't just give them money and expect everything to be okay, because it's not. Like there's times that my Grandma still cries about things that happened to her and happened to family members and brothers and sisters.

Right after this conversation Alicia and Matthew talked about then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, his attacks on treaty rights and his failure to call an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. They directly linked historical colonial policy to current colonial policies in concrete ways. While these were the most explicit conversations about how systemic violence had impacted their families, the intergenerational impacts of trauma played out in many of their stories of isolation and alienation from their families.

Restrictive and racist immigration policies meant that Shadae and Chantall were separated from their primary caregivers when they came to Canada. In a linked story, Matthew was born in Canada but his mother sent him to live with his grandmother in Trinidad from the age of two to nine. His mother was attending school and working and couldn't balance that with single parenting. She was unable to bring her mother to Canada to help, so instead she made the difficult decision to send Matthew to Trinidad. Matthew's grandmother was his primary caregiver and is now whom he calls when he's feeling stressed, "So I make that long distance phone call and sit down and talk to her for like an hour and take my mind off of everything". Matthew's mother was separated from her own mother; Matthew is separated from his grandmother and primary caregiver and now his grandmother is separated from his children. The ripples of these painful absences stretch through the generations.

While these intergenerational traumas cause physical and emotional separation and isolation, the parents simultaneously identified ways that intergenerational resilience and strength existed in their family networks. Alicia discussed how impacted her grandma and

[30] The resonance between Alicia's grandmother's experience in residential schools and Chance's experience "in care" in the 1990s in Toronto is deeply troubling (see page 31).

mother had been by the violence of residential schools, but she doesn't struggle with alcohol use and she credits the way her mother parented her through the process of becoming a mother at sixteen as a huge part of her success as a mom. She lived at home with her mom at the time and her mom would always insist:

> Make sure Shine's good and if you want to go out you have to do all of that before you even go out, put him to bed, like make sure his bottles are ready, like, I'll watch him but make sure he's okay.

Alicia's mom's willingness to provide childcare while simultaneously holding her accountable as the primary caregiver gave her the combination of support and responsibility she needed to become the caring, involved mother that she is. Alicia's relationships with her mom and her extended family are a huge source of strength, care and love in her life. Similarly, Chance talks about the differences between her growing up and her son Frankie's growing up,

> He's a totally different kid: he might even be able to handle [overnight childcare] because he has so much support and so much love around him that I didn't have, I always have to remember that, when a child has so much love and so much support, it's a whole different ball game.

These stories help to illustrate how resilience and trauma are passed down through the generations. The legacies of colonialism and its ongoing manifestations are present in both Alicia and Chance's lives, as are resistance and strength. Both of them credit their own strength as parents to their mothers and extended families, to varying degrees.

There is also more reciprocity in their family relationships than in white, middle-class family norms. For example Shadae's father stayed with her for months rent-free, while helping out with childcare, Chance drove her mother to work every day when she had a car, and Jessica visited her mom and helped organize the supplies she needed to use drugs. Another example of the rich interconnections of support came during my second interview with Jessica when her sister came over to do her laundry for free and, while she was waiting, she took Jessica's daughter out so we could finish up the interview. Care and

support flow in multiple directions. When Alicia's mom had a stroke, the entire family spent a lot of time at the hospital taking care of her. This led Shine's Grade One teacher to call CPS because of his inconsistent attendance. Alicia and Matthew expressed concern about the impact of missing school on his education, even talking about summer school so he could catch up. However, they also believed that Shine had learned important lessons through his contribution to helping his grandma. Matthew talked about how eager Shine was to help wash dishes or to help his grandma with her wheelchair and said:

> Yeah, for sure, it does rub off on a child and it's a very good lesson for him and he did learn a lot, like it taught him to keep his room clean, how to do things on his own, like he wakes up in the morning and gets himself dressed, washes his face, brushes his teeth, all that stuff, on his own.

For them, his increased self-sufficiency, eagerness to help out with his grandma and experiences of the value of family helping each other are also valuable lessons. Through caring for her Mother, Alicia taught her son important lessons about the value of caring for family. Another important source of support were friends, who often had also become parents when they were young.

Friends

Many of the parents talked about how difficult it was to find friends that truly understood their experience of being young parents. However, once they found those relationships they deeply treasured them. Louie explains the importance of other young Mom friends by saying:

> When you're young and you have a child you're not quite the same as the people your age that don't have kids and that can be isolating in a way because you feel like you're different. But then when you're around other Mothers that are young as well, it's reassuring, because you're like, 'Ok, you kinda understand what I'm going through and where I'm coming from.'

These relationships created a sense that their decision to parent wasn't the end of their life and that there were other people who understood and would support them whole-heartedly. Receiving this emotional support from other parents who understood their situation was invaluable. Other young parents were often a primary source of information on a variety of important topics, ranging from how to apply for subsidized childcare to strategies for avoiding CPS involvement. For many of the parents, especially the single moms, the other important aspect was being able to childcare swap or to just hang out together. This could range from after school play-dates to spending the whole weekend together and sharing parent responsibilities (Chance, Chantall, Louie, Paige, Shadae).

These relationships were often huge sources of support while also providing opportunities to return the support, which was also significant. Alicia talked about having a friend and her child stay with her for months and how helpful that was for paying the bills and childcare, but it also increased conflict over chores and having to share a small space. Paige said she always picks up donations for a friend of hers who didn't have immigration status in Canada and therefore couldn't access the donations herself. Shadae described giving her phone number to a Mom she knew through a Facebook parenting group who was struggling and talking with her all night until the other mother felt better.

Jessica, Louie, Paige and Shadae all identified online mothering communities as an important source of parenting support and friendship. All of them had met up with Moms from these groups offline, but Shadae especially valued the anonymity of the online world. She said, "If you're having a stressful day with your child and you fear that your friends might judge what you might have to say, you can post in this group and they'll offer support and advice." The space to be open about her parenting struggles was important to her and she said that it was through other Moms in the Facebook groups that she had finally learned, "You can love your child without always liking them in the moment." She learned to accept that all parents experience moments of frustration and annoyance with their children and to not judge herself so harshly when she felt that way.

Friends and family played an integral role in how supported parents felt. Especially for the single parents, having friends or family that they could trust meant breaks from parenting which had a huge impact on their overall well-being (Alicia, Chance, Chantall,

Louie, Nukisha, Shadae). For me, one of the surprising conversations that came up repeatedly was the role of a third group- Godparents.

Godparents/ Chosen family

The term 'chosen family' comes from queer community and refers to families based on love and care rather than biology (Weston, 1997). Although the term came from the queer community, the practice of creating family takes many forms and is important in a number of communities, including communities where families have been disrupted by colonization, slavery, migration and/or poverty (Weston, 1997). Margaret Nelson (2013) proposes five different forms of chosen family, and the parents I spoke with used up to four out of her five types. Godparents fall into the category of "ritual kin" or, "relations that emerge as part of customary practice" (Nelson, 2013, p. 266). Describing this relationship in the Catholic Latino context, Lopez (1999) describes it as " the sharing of child-rearing responsibilities among parents and acquired godparents" (p. 24). This sharing of responsibilities was very similar to how the parents viewed the Godparent relationship. Nelson also names "convenience kin", or family that emerges in "marginal settings" like homeless shelters, "institutional kin" that come from "total institutions" like group homes or rehab, "organizational kin" which emerge in voluntary organizations like religious organizations or schools, and "intentional kin" that emerge from choice and intention (Nelson, 2013, p. 266). The only type of family these parents did not discuss creating was "caregiving kin" which was described as "relations that emerge in paid care" (ibid). The various parents created different types of chosen family. However, ritual kin in the form of Godparents stood out and the parents often explicitly named it as expanding family for themselves and their child.

Jessica was the only person to actually use the term chosen family, which she used to describe her best friend's family that she lived with in her final year of high school. They took her in, and she continues to be in close touch with the family. The Mother came from Montreal and helped Jessica after her daughter's birth and continues to act as a Grandmother to her daughter. However, many of the other parents talked about the important role that Godparents played (Alisha, Chantall, Louie, Nukisha, Shadae). About

half of them had gone through a religious ceremony and, as Nukisha put it, they, "had the certificate to prove it." For the others it was a cultural rather than religious relationship but in both cases it was a way to create family for themselves and their children. They described picking Godparents intentionally to be family for their children in very concrete ways. Louie described choosing her daughter's Godmother at the age of seventeen this way:

> At the time, out of the group of us she was the most responsible, established person because she had both her parents there and she had a car, her driver's license, she was progressing at the pace she was supposed to be through high school and she was working, so she was the best candidate to be a Godparent.

Louie looked around and chose the most stable, responsible friend to be a Godparent, and she continues to be in Louie's daughter's life twelve years later. Although most of them chose peers or slightly older folks to be Godparents, Alisha described her daughter's Godfather as also being her mentor and said,

> He's older, he's not my age, he's 48, well he passed when he was 48 but he took care of me like his daughter, he raised me as his daughter, and my baby father was not around and he's the one that fed me, put a roof over my head, everything and even till the day he died he was taking care of me still.

Alisha clearly understands their relationship as family and one of the things she did to strengthen that relationship was to make him a Godfather to her daughter. In one of the most heartbreaking parts of our conversation Alisha described the sudden death of her daughter's Godfather, who they had been living with. She explains that,

> I can't go back home, home is like, I mean my name is on this lease, this house, but it's not my home, it's not where me and [my daughter] consider home and we'll never have our home back because he's never going to come back.

The parents picked important supports in their life to become family and the Godparents often played key roles in the lives of their Godchildren. Shadae lost childcare when she transitioned from high school to college and her daughter's Godfather travelled over an hour every morning to be at her house in Scarborough by 7 am so that she could attend

classes downtown. He did this for over a month until she was able to secure childcare for her daughter. This was a huge act of care and love, without which Shadae would have lost at least her semester and probably the year. Alisha talked about her daughter's Godmother and said,

> You gotta make sure you choose really good ones because when I got arrested, me and her Godmother were not talking, but she was the first one at court the next day and she was at court with me for [daughter] the whole time.

This was another way in which Godparents were understood to be family; they would be there when you needed them even if you hadn't been talking. Louie also spoke about how she was no longer close to her daughter's Godmother but her daughter and the Godmother continued to have a good relationship.

Systemic Solutions

While community and support are not things that can be mandated or legislated, the parents had some clear demands for systemic improvements. Highlighting the interconnections between the themes, most of them said that having enough money would be the most helpful systemic shift (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Paige, Shadae). Money would mean the ability to hire babysitters, the ability to live closer to existing support systems, the ability to travel to friends and family, and an overall decrease in stress levels which would facilitate maintaining relationships.

The other major systemic suggestion was high quality, trustworthy, affordable/free childcare that was flexible. Many of the parents expressed concern that the only jobs they could get were in the evenings and so childcare that went only until 5pm didn't meet their needs (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie Nukisha, Shadae). Shadae clearly explains this need when she said:

> Not all jobs are nine to five, […] like if we're picking up shifts here and there, there should be places for parents to drop their kids for a couple of hours so they can work an evening shift knowing that their child is somewhere safe, so I think that's something that the government should look into.

As well, many of the parents supported the idea of free weekend or overnight childcare (Chance, Chantall, Louie, Shadae). Trust is always a huge issue for parents and many of them liked the idea of being able to get a break while their children stayed in spaces, like their daycares, that were already familiar and trusted. Other suggestions for improving childcare included that it be integrated into high schools or adult schools (Alicia, Matthew), and that it be drop-in or flexible so that it could be accessed as needed (Chantall, Jessica, Shadae).

Aside from more money and more accessible childcare, there was a scattering of suggestions around creating spaces for parents to socialize and connect. Shadae, Alicia, Paige and Jessica talked about community spaces, and especially those close to where they lived, so they could meet other caregivers in the area. They discussed the importance of having free playgroups or social events that children could attend or where childcare was provided: spaces to share resources with other parents, take parenting classes and to access all the services they needed in one space. Many of these are ideas that already exist in a limited fashion but are either underfunded, geographically distant, or have restrictive age criteria. The parents, then, were asking for an expansion or improved funding for services that already exist. Yet other systemic demands were more outside the box, such as Jessica discussing the idea of scattered living rooms where you could go and meet other caregivers and Louie talking about the need for, "structured but personal and free networks" where you could meet other parents to build trust and relationships and potentially do childcare swapping.

"I really struggled"/ "Keeping our spirits up"

"It's really hard finding support within things when you're a single mom because you really don't want people to find out what's going on and the hard life struggles that you're dealing with. You really don't want them to know that you're like- you're not failing, but you feel like you're failing. You want to show the world that everything's good, that you're good, that you're strong"
-Chance

The themes of stress and wellbeing were ever present in our conversations. The parents struggled with post-partum depression, intimate partner violence, trauma, involvement with CPS, bereavement, and systemic violence like grinding poverty, racism, and ageism. All these realities had negative impacts on their emotional wellbeing. They were also acutely aware that candid conversations with professionals about any of these issues could result in a call to CPS, which decreased options for coping and increased stress.

As with the other two themes, parents' wellbeing and ability to deal with stress is intimately connected to finances and the support in their lives. Struggling for money means stressing about paying rent, eating, and providing for children; for single parents it means having no option for a babysitter to get a break; all of this has a negative impact on how a person feels and their stress levels. Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Matthew, Nukisha and Paige all talked about how hard the struggle for money was. Chance gives an example of this connection when she described how difficult it was,

> To walk up to a job interview starving, and you know you haven't eaten all day long, but you just used your last money to get there and just pretend like everything's fine and hope that you get that job. That's what killed me, that's why I had to take a few weeks off – because right after school, no, it wasn't happening. I was crying all the time, I'd wake crying over no reason, it felt like it was the end of the world, panic attacks like crazy, like it was hooo, that killed, those were hell.

Stress was also intimately connected to how isolated parents felt. Jessica, Alicia and Matthew talked about co-parenting and it was obvious how much of a difference it made to live with an involved family member. Alicia explained that she'd never had to worry about bundling her son up for a late night run to the convenience store because, "There's always Matthew or my mom, to be there, to help out," and she was very aware of how much that

decreased her stress levels. Louie on the other hand talked about how stressful and unrelenting single parenting can be if you don't have people that you trust to give you breaks.

> It's like literally you need a break or else you're going to fall apart […] It's like a survival thing, especially if you are a single parent and you're just so alone with them all the time.

Such overlapping of the themes – isolation/connection and stress in this instance; poverty and stress in the previous paragraph – should be familiar by now, but it's worth highlighting again because the parents consistently emphasized these interconnections. A complex understanding of the issues allows a fuller reckoning with the challenges and potential solutions.

The stigma attached to mental health labels and the very real risk for involvement with CPS if you can't 'cope' led me to use broader, less loaded terms like stress. The parents responded to this usage in an interesting combination of clinical and colloquial ways. Parents described their experiences colloquially in terms of "struggling", "stressing", being "at the end of my rope" or as Chantall described it, the "edge of losing my head". However, they also used some very clinical descriptions of their experiences. The parents that had grown up in CPS 'care' were especially comfortable describing their experiences in more medical terms. They talked about being "manic depressive" and having "general anxiety disorder", being "bipolar", or having "panic attacks" with the ease of children that had grown up continuously being labeled. Their experiences are reflected in the provincial data which shows that in Ontario in 2014 over half the children living in CPS 'care' were taking psychotropic or behavioural drugs, a percentage significantly higher than the general population of children in Ontario (Contenta, Monsebraaten, & Rankin, 2014). Alisha describes this experience by saying,

> Being in CAS you talk to a lot of therapists and social workers. That's the first thing they do to you, they send you into this room, you play games and interact with these people and then they judge you based on that. It's like a laboratory, that's what you feel like.

Her language clearly conveys that she experienced mental health assessments as things that were done *to* her and that they were for the purpose of judging, rather than helping her. These types of experiences are common for kids "in care" and they led to a familiarity and comfort with clinical diagnoses, and also to an ambivalence about these diagnoses. Chance describes the process of repeated diagnoses this way, "Now they are going to re-diagnose me because my family doctor just diagnosed me with manic depressive disorder and general anxiety, which I don't know if that's true either." This combination of familiarity and ambivalence with clinical diagnoses was common and intersected with parents' conflicting desires to seek professional support while realizing the potential risks of being labeled 'crazy' and therefore unfit to parent.

Stress due to CPS

The constant threat of CPS involvement in their lives was another common source of stress. Nukisha who temporarily lost custody of her oldest child explains, "Now that I'm not involved with [CPS] I'm so happy, but it's so quick for them to come back." This awareness that their parenting was constantly being watched and judged had a big impact on their stress levels. There was an awareness that things like dirty clothes (Jessica) or normal toddler meltdowns (Shadae) could bring accusations of neglect, attachment issues, and abuse, and so they felt a constant pressure to have clean, perfectly behaved children. Matthew discussed that despite knowing that he was a good parent, "It's a heavy load on your shoulders, just feeling there's a government worker looking at you and your child, for what? Trust me, it brings stress." He knew that there was no reason for CPS involvement but that it didn't matter because his identity as a young, poor, racialized father who had grown up in CPS care himself, automatically positioned him as a "risk" to his child.

Trauma

As parents talked about their emotional struggles the connections to intergenerational (from colonization, migration, slavery), systemic (police, CPS, poverty), and interpersonal (intimate partner violence, childhood abuse) violence was very apparent. It often felt that their anxiety

and depression were healthy and natural responses to extremely difficult experiences. Paige talks about the relationships between her panic attacks and traumatic experiences in her life this way:

> [Panic attacks] kind of got a little bit worse when I lost my daughter because that's really hard, because you give birth to a baby and then they [CPS] just take it away and that was really hard and it even got harder when I was able to keep one kid and not have the other, because people were looking at me like I'm nuts. So it was really hard and then it got worse, it got really worse when my ex-husband strangled me, then it just - I'd been abused for lots of years but it never got to that extent, you know strangulation, where I basically almost died 'cause I couldn't breathe. So, that really affected me and now it's just like- like I've had panic attacks before but I'm constantly having them now and anxiety, like severe anxiety.

Stories of extreme, ongoing violence and loss were common among the women I interviewed. Alisha talked about losing four close people including her boyfriend, step-father, boyfriend's grandfather and the mentor she and her daughter lived with within the span of two years, all of them unexpectedly. Her struggles with depression and anxiety seemed like a natural response to that much grief and unexpected loss. Many of the parents shared long histories of childhood trauma, as well as traumatic experiences in their youth and early adulthood (Alicia, Alisha, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Matthew, Nukisha, Paige, Shadae). The reality of traumatic life circumstances is reflected in the literature which acknowledges that mothers involved with CPS often face traumas which are "persistent and intense. They are not the challenges that those of greater privilege might reasonably expect over a lifetime" (Freymond, 2013, p. 99). Unfortunately the fact that mothers are raising children under situations of extreme adversity is seen as a sign of failure on the part of the parent rather than a sign of resilience and strength in the face of structural violence (ibid). As awareness of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) increases, so too does the stigma towards parents that have it, or are believed by CPS workers to have it (Erickson & Tonigan, 2008). This diagnosis turns into yet another way that marginalized parents are targeted by CPS for increased surveillance and involvement due to the structural violence they have experienced (Freymond, 2013). What the mental

health system had to offer these parents as treatment were medication and therapy, which parents viewed ambivalently.

Psychiatric Medication

Many of the parents had been prescribed psychiatric medication. About half of those that had been prescribed them had taken it and found it useful, and the other half felt ambivalent and never used their prescriptions. Paige explained her decision not to take medication prescribed by her doctor, saying:

> I'd rather deal with my panic attacks than take something that makes me feel high, or feel funny or drowsy or acting weird. I have kids to take care of so I'd rather deal with the anxiety than with these pills that I've never tried before, that might make me feel some way.

For Paige the potential risks associated with psychiatric medication outweighed the potential benefits. Her comment also highlights how difficult it can be to experiment with different medications and experience their effects while single parenting.[31] On the other hand, Louie shared that while she hesitated to take medication for several years, once she started taking it she found it to be so helpful that she regretted not taking it earlier. Another parent shared her experience of taking medication, but said that when she started using illegal drugs she stopped taking the psychiatric medication because she wasn't sure of the potential complications of taking both drugs. If she hadn't been afraid of losing her child, she may very well have sought out her doctor's support at this time. Similar concerns arise in relation to the other major tool offered by clinical mental health workers, which is therapy.

Therapy

Many of the parents identified therapy as something that they were interested in, but most of them described their fear of their words being taken out of context and this leading to CPS

[31] While more privileged parents are given the agency to experiment with psychiatric medication and other forms of therapy, CPS often links failure to stick to the first medication prescribed by a doctor as an unwillingness to address "mental health issues" and a possible ground for removing a child.

involvement. Louie explains the tension between the importance of being honest but not worrying your therapist:

> It's such a weird dynamic 'cause you're there to open up. That's how you really get help and really heal, is being able to be really honest but then you can't be a hundred percent all the time because you're scared. So it's just a really tricky thing to negotiate and I think it stops a lot of people from seeking help, which is really unfortunate.

This statement was echoed by all of the parents that had participated in therapy. The parents raised two main concerns, that something they shared would be misinterpreted and lead to CPS involvement or that they were struggling with serious issues and wanted to seek support but knew that their therapist would report them and they would be at serious risk of losing their children. Young, marginalized parents are aware that various service providers are constantly scrutinizing their parenting. This consciousness led parents to be extremely concerned that if they stated they were struggling in any area of their life or if they expressed normal ambivalence about parenting that their therapists would assess them as unstable or unloving and call CPS. Parents reported frustration that the threat of CPS prevented them from accessing helpful services even when there was no child protection concern. The other problem was that some parents struggled with substance use issues, abusive partners, and/or thoughts of suicide, and they desperately wanted support around these issues. However they knew that as parents they risked immediate apprehension of their children if they sought support.[32] It is important to remember that these are issues that rich and middle class parents also struggle with, but CPS is rarely called; instead they simply pay for rehab, get a divorce, or hire a therapist. One parent shared a story of being frustrated with her four year old, slapping her on the hand and immediately regretting it. She wanted to speak with her therapist and learn better strategies for coping with her daughter but she was frightened of the consequences so she was left feeling ashamed and frustrated that there were no supports.[33] The fear of CPS involvement leads to parents hiding and avoiding

[32] This demonstrates how CPS actually endangers children and their families by driving marginalized parents in difficult situations away from supports and increasing their isolation.

[33] Hitting with an open hand as long as it does not leave a mark (i.e.-spanking) is legal in Canada, but marginalized parents are held to different standards.

stresses in their lives, which makes it much more difficult to cope and heal. The only exception to this attitude was Alisha who had a therapist who had worked with her Mom and other members of her family, and Alisha reported trusting her to respond appropriately. Alisha said that her therapist would call CPS on her if she beat her child but she trusted that if she was struggling with her mental health or expressed frustrations with her daughter, these conversations wouldn't be taken out of context. This trust had created a long-standing, productive relationship between herself and this therapist and, although she didn't see her regularly, she expressed that knowing there was someone she could talk to and trust made a huge difference in her life. Most people were not that lucky, however, and so were forced to turn towards other coping techniques outside of systems. The three main strategies parents employed were creative self-expression, substance use, and spending time with their children.

Creative Self-Expression

One strategy that really shone out was the use of creative outlets to feel good and decrease stress. Many of them talked about listening to music (Chantall, Alicia, Chance, Nukisha, Matthew, Shadae), making music (Matthew), writing (Chantall), dancing (Chantall, Shadae), making art (Chantall, Paige), playing with their children (Alicia, Shadae, Paige, Jessica, Matthew), or taking pictures to share on social media (Chantall, Jessica, Shadae, Paige) as things they did to feel good. Matthew is a musician and he explained the power of making music for releasing emotion this way,

> I go to the studio and I write angry, I write like really angry lyrics, and be loud and obnoxious about it and take out all my energy like that. By the time I'm done, it's like I'm sweating and I'm like, 'Yo, I have a song, I have this little video thing.'

Having the space to express his frustration in an embodied, creative manner allows him to release his emotions. Chantall talked about the importance of writing in her journal by saying,

> I have my stressful days when I feel like no one is getting me or understanding me and I just pop out my journal and I start writing my thoughts and express myself through that, and for some reason I feel a little better because it kind of gives me that way to opening up and because I know my book is not going to judge me, I just feel free to write whatever I feel.

In these two quotes, the parents focus on different forms of expression using words, but others described the power of expressing and releasing emotion without using words through dancing, listening to music, and taking pictures (Alisha, Chantall, Nukisha, Shadae). The experiences of the parents resonate with the academic literature about the power of arts-based therapy (D. A. Coholic, 2011; D. Coholic, Fraser, Robinson, & Lougheed, 2012; Nsonwu, Dennison, & Long, 2015). The parents used the power of creative self-expression to work through their emotions outside of the formal therapy context.

Substance Use

Substances[34] like tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs played a complicated role in the lives of the parents. During my first interviews, two parents mentioned using substances to cope with stress and, when I asked about it directly in the second interviews several of the parents talked about using substances.[35] Parents identified a variety of substances as helpful and stress relieving, and at other times or intensities of use, parents reported substances having a more negative impact.

Their substance use must be understood within the current context where drug-using moms are understood to be bad and "unfit" mothers (Loppie & Pauly, 2015). The moral panic around drug using mothers comes from the rise in concerns in the 1980s about "crack babies", a highly racialized, classed, gendered and colonial concept (Rutman, Field, Jackson, Lundquist, & Callahan, 2005). The example of "crack babies" illustrates an informative gap between facts and feelings about prenatal substance use. In a multi-year

[34] Substance use is highly stigmatized and it is important to distinguish between substance use, and problematic substance use. Problematic substance use is defined as "patterns of use that cause specific physical, mental or social harms" (Loppie & Pauly, 2015, p. 220) and I used it only when parents *themselves* identified their substance use as having been something they wished to change.

[35] At no point during our conversations about substance use did I feel concern about the safety of their children. However this is a risky topic because of the possibility of CPS involvement so I have avoided mentioning names in this section.

study conducted on the children of parents who used crack during their pregnancy there was no difference in health or development between them and other low-income children (Betancourt et al., 2011). Tellingly, the researchers have become increasingly vocal about the negative impacts of poverty on health and child development as the cohort of children have grown up and are now young adults (Betancourt et al., 2011). CPS, however, continues to police prenatal and parental substance use and often equates it to neglect and even abuse (Loppie & Pauly, 2015). A study with CPS workers and mothers in the Canadian context reports that CPS workers lack training and that their assessments,

> [D]o not always distinguish between patterns of substance use that result in children being neglected or unprotected from abuse, and patterns in which safe arrangements are made when use occurs. The identification of substance use alone becomes proof of child maltreatment (Rutman et al., 2005, p. 229).

One of the CPS workers in their study reported the assessment process consisting almost entirely of the question, "Is a woman using? Isn't she using? Oh, she's using. She must go to treatment now. She doesn't go to treatment, she doesn't get her baby. And it's like this, kind of … a built in formula." (Rutman et al., 2005, p. 236). CPS workers often don't ask questions about if, and how, the parent's substance use is impacting their parenting or how they might be supported to parent without removing the children. The parents I spoke with were very aware of the stigma associated with parenting and using substances and the associated risk of CPS involvement.

During our conversations, three of the parents shared how calming they found cigarette smoking when they were stressed. Two parents also talked about smoking small amounts of marijuana for stress relief, which they reported as positive and not impacting their lives or parenting. Several of the parents talked about their past struggles with alcohol, and one parent talked about having used other illegal drugs in ways that she said eventually worsened her mental health and negatively impacted her ability to parent. She, however, was lucky enough to have family to take care of her child until she was able to stop using drugs so heavily, so that any impact on her child was minimized. Louie talked about her struggles with alcohol when her daughter was much younger, explaining:

> For a long time I struggled with alcohol because even though I had all this support, you do spend an awful lot of time alone and you don't have the freedom to come and go, so a lot of nights you're kind of like sitting alone and your kid's already sleeping so…I would like… drink to feel not bored or less isolated and less lonely. I mean it was bad in a way but it was also… self-medicating so there's good things about that and bad things about that.

Louie clearly understands her substance use as a form of self-medication, of coping with her stress and isolation. This was less than ideal, but also one of the few tools available to her. Research agrees with Louie's analysis and it is widely documented that problematic substance use arises to cope with poverty, trauma, social isolation and mental health struggles, especially anxiety and depression (Loppie & Pauly, 2015). Furthermore, it's not clear that this had any negative impact on her child at all. A wealthier mom who drinks to self-medicate once the children are asleep would almost certainly never come under CPS investigation.

Even more than with mental health, there is a huge fear about being honest with service providers about substance use because of the possibility of CPS involvement. This fear is borne out in the literature, which shows that substance use while parenting occurs across racial and class lines but that marginalized parents are punished for this with the removal of their children (Benoit et al., 2014). Several parents reported a past desire to address their problematic substance use, but the lack of safe services meant that they had struggled to change their patterns of substance use by themselves in silence and fear. Chance reflected on her mother's experience of substance use and her subsequently being taken into "care," and she shared this insight:

> If a parent is going through some type of substance abuse or something, try and help the parents before it gets too late. Because, is it better that a parent seeks help, gets support, still is able to take care of their kid and their kid […] doesn't see any of this? Or the parent goes down the loophole, the kid starts seeing everything, next thing you know the kid gets taken away, next thing the parent's depressed, the parent doesn't get any more help and the parent becomes even worse and the kid gets worse? All because nobody supported and helped them.

This quote illustrates this mother's understanding of the importance of early support and intervention for parents who wish to change their substance use. It also highlights how the

loss of children often deepens dependence on substances in order to cope with the devastating loss. This is a common coping strategy; in research about Indigenous mothers dealing with child welfare and substance use, the authors state, "Often mothers respond to the apprehension of children by becoming depressed, fearful and hopeless which can last weeks, months or years. Already struggling with substance misuse, chances are a woman's way to deal with such strong emotions is to use even more." (Baskin & Mcpherson, 2014, p. 11). Chance's quote also highlights the important relationship between parents and children. The current CPS system focuses on the "best interests of the child" as if these are somehow completely separate from the best interest of the parent, or the family unit. Chance calls attention to this fact by saying that when parents don't get appropriate support for their substance use and they lose custody of the children, things get worse for the parent and the children "all because nobody supported and helped *them*". A more holistic understanding of the family would entail understanding that the "best interests of the child" would be better served by supporting the mother to address her substance use.

Love from their Children

While parenting was a source of stress, it was also a source of strength, joy and pride. Several parents said that they would be dead or in jail if it weren't for their child (Alicia, Alisha, Chance). Their children gave them a reason to live and were huge motivating factors in major life decisions such as returning to school and leaving abusive partners (Alisha, Chance, Chantall, Louie, Nukisha, Paige, Shadae). Small, daily gestures of love from their children were also a huge source of joy and wellness (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Matthew, Paige, Shadae). Matthew shared one example of the connection between love, happiness and his relationship with his son.

> It's true, just the love, you know? It makes you feel happy, like for example, when I pick him up from school and he had a great day in school, I'm just happy, I'm so happy, I'm blessed, I'm glad that he did good in school. It makes me happy too, you know? Having kids makes me feel better, having kids around and we'll just be chilling here and he'll just come put his arm around me, you know? That kind of stuff.

Many of the parents shared similar sentiments about the healing nature of their relationship with their child and the importance of that love and connection.

Systemic Solutions

One of the largest systemic solutions suggested was access to more money since poverty was a major source of stress in their lives (Alicia, Chance, Chantall, Louie, Jessica, Paige, Shadae). This focus on poverty is backed up by research that suggests poverty, and capitalism itself, is a huge cause of problematic substance use (Mate, 2009). Another popular suggestion was flexible, quality, and affordable childcare, so that parents could have breaks when they needed it (Chance, Chantall, Jessica, Louie, Paige, Shadae).

The parents also identified school (adult high school, college, and university) as a major source of stress in their life and suggested that there should be more recognition of their parenting labour and increased flexibility with respect to deadlines and course load (Alisha, Chance, Louie, Nukisha, Shadae). The other major systemic suggestion was access to therapy and substance use supports without fear of CPS involvement.

Conclusions

The parents shared important insights into their strategies for parenting despite systemic and other barriers that were often intergenerational. The parents clearly name poverty, lack of childcare, and barriers to accessing formal support, as struggles in their daily lives. Their creativity and resourcefulness led them to develop advocacy skills, create family, and use creative forms of self-expression to cope with stress. They talked about livable incomes, affordable childcare, and better supports as necessary systemic changes that would support their parenting. The website and this chapter represent my desire to share some of the richness of our conversations. The final chapter will address possible areas for further research and my reflections on what the parents shared.

Suggested Readings

1) *Mothers of the Nations: Mothering as Global Resistance, Reclaiming and Recovery* Edited by Dawn Memee Lavell-Harvard and Kim Anderson
2) *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* by Gabor Mate
3) *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex* Edited by CR10 Publications Collective
4) *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* Edited by Joyce Green
5) *My Real Life Book- www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/documents/en/ylc/YLC_REPORT_ENG.pdf*

Chapter 6: Building New Stories

This chapter represents an avenue for me to contribute to my research conversations with the parents I spoke with. One key thing I wanted to do through the online knowledge mobilization infrastructure and the previous chapter was create a space to feature the voices of the parents I interviewed. Privileged researchers have a long history of conducting interviews in marginalized communities and then thinking they know best and dismissing what people have to share (Smith, 1999). This mindset continues today, despite ample evidence that privilege makes it more difficult to understand what is going on and why (Liamputtong, 2007). Paradoxically, there is also a long history of privileged researchers coming into marginalized communities stealing their strategies and wisdom, repackaging it, and gaining immense personal benefit (Paradis, 2000). The knowledge mobilization infrastructure constitutes one strategy for giving back, by actually returning the strategies and knowledge to the wider community. In addition to giving credit and returning the ideas and strategies to the community, I also wanted to contribute something to the conversation through personal reflection and some creative brainstorming. This chapter represents my desire, after carefully listening, to respond. I begin this chapter by briefly mentioning some of the gaps in the research conversations and areas for further research. Little of the academic literature focussed on the voices of young parents and/or parents involved with CPS, beyond stories of victimization, which creates a negative and incomplete picture that increases stigma. The remainder of the chapter focuses on some ideas and possibilities for moving forward inspired by the conversations we had.

Gaps

There are some notable silences and absences in the stories I've shared. I will highlight sexuality and relationships, immigration status and ableism and disabilities as key areas for future research. Conversations around substance use, spirituality and the role of faith, and strategies for coping with individual and systemic violence, should also be explored in much greater detail.

Sexuality and Relationships

While talking about partners and other caregivers I worked hard to not assume a gender. However, none of the parents I talked with shared stories about non-straight romantic relationships. According to the *Toronto Teen Survey,* LGBTQ and questioning youth were three times more likely to be involved in a pregnancy than straight youth (Planned Parenthood Toronto, 2010). Part of this absence may come from the fact that I didn't ask about romantic relationships specifically, preferring to ask more open-ended questions about who supported them in their parenting. This hesitancy came from a desire to avoid pressing for information that they may not be open to sharing because it could put them at risk of CPS involvement[36] or because it is personal and not necessary for my work.

If we understand queerness not just as a sexual orientation all the parents I spoke with were queered by their failure to conform to dominant heterosexist norms of parenting (Cohen, 2012; 1997). Their age, Indigeneity, race, poverty, gender, disabilities, and status as single parents already place them outside of normative 'straightness' and 'good parents'. However, a focus on queer young parents that have been involved with CPS could provide interesting insight into additional ways their parenting is surveilled and different resources and networks of support that become available to them.

I didn't ask about sexuality directly, and I also didn't ask directly about romantic relationships. I decided it wasn't necessary to pry into a risky subject if they didn't raise it. There is so much stigma around young parents' sexuality and decision to parent that I found it difficult to even formulate questions that did not sound judgmental. Even questions about whether a father is involved in the lives of the children implies that if there are multiple children that they have the same father or if you ask about each child's father it sounds like you are assuming they have multiple sexual partners. The stigma around intimate relationships is so strong that that if the father is not involved then she made a bad choice, but if he is involved but has abused her then she is putting the children at risk, but if he is involved and not abusive then they should be living together and married. Some of the parents were undoubtedly living with romantic partners, but mentioning that has the

[36] 48% of "substantiated child maltreatment" in Ontario falls under the category "exposure to intimate partner violence" and so even mentioning a partner can be risky (Fallon, Van Wert, et al., 2015).

potential to bring CPS involvement and financial problems. Many mothers choose not to disclose that they are living with their partner so that they can continue to get an independent welfare cheque.[37] This silence around partners is an early and important lesson that marginalized young parents must learn.[38] On the other hand, when I asked parents what I had missed in the interviews or what they thought I should have asked about, Louie said romantic relationships. Strategies about how to date as a parent, when to introduce your child to a date, and how to deal with the loneliness of being single are all pressing topics in the lives of parents. The silence on my part, and theirs, creates a gap in our conversations and a potentially fruitful, although fraught, area for future research.

Immigration and Status

One of the parents I spoke with had immigrated to Canada relatively recently, but all of them had legal immigration status here and spoke English fluently. Having worked with young parents' who don't speak English well and/or who don't have immigration status, I know there are additional barriers to finding housing, childcare and income that were not touched on in this thesis but are important to consider. Non-status parents have a lot to teach us about how to survive outside of state systems because they cannot access them. Glimpses of these strategies appear briefly[39] but I didn't speak directly with anyone living without immigration status.

[37] Even though families receive marginally more money if there are more people on the cheque the mother almost always loses control of the money and risks losing it altogether if their partner doesn't comply with the many bureaucratic reporting requirements. I have enquired, and while welfare's policy is that money can be given to either partner in practice the money is always sent to the man. This is true even when the woman has been receiving OW independently and he is added onto her cheque.

[38] An interesting example of this was in the Hospital for Sick Children's research on young mothers in Toronto that reported, "99% were single". We worked with many of the same families and while many parents were single parents it is highly unlikely that 99% of them were (Singh, Murphy, Thompson, & Hick, 2015).

[39] For example picking up donations for friends without status or letting friends stay with them for a while.

Ableism and "Disabilities"

A silence, rather than absence, existed around issues of ableism. I did not ask about "disabilities"[40] specifically, or if and how the parents thought that ableism might impact their parenting. I did this partly because it potentially puts parents at risk of CPS involvement and partly because I underestimated the prevalence of "disabilities" and how they reported them impacting their parenting. "Disabilities" came up in several different ways. One of the parents was accessing income supports for people with disabilities and one of them was in the process of applying. This type of income support provides more money and represented an important way to improve their financial situation. As well several of the parents in post-secondary education talked about accessing disability services through their school for learning disabilities and mental health issues like anxiety. This was often an important source of material and emotional support and is touched on in more detail on the website. Other types of "disabilities" came up when one of the parents asked me to sit on a specific side of her because she had better hearing in one ear than the other, or folks mentioned chronic health conditions like asthma and diabetes. When discussing advocacy skills, a number of them talked about learning to advocate for appropriate learning supports for themselves or their children in the school system. It would be interesting to talk with parents about the ways they strategically share their "disabilities" to gain access to resources and hide them to minimize risk of CPS involvement.

Suggestions

It is important to frame this discussion by stating unequivocally that many of the barriers facing marginalized parents are systemic and that the burden of change should not fall on them. A lot of harm that families experience through CPS could be avoided with a guaranteed minimum income that was livable, access to high-quality, affordable childcare,

[40] Here I define "disability" following AJ Withers who writes, " Disability is a social construct, an identity invented to described and invent deviance from a conscripted, historically-contingent social norm. I reject the notion that impairment or disability is a biological reality. This does not mean that biology is not at play in our lives; however, biology is constructed by and deeply imbued with social meaning, so much so that the two are indistinguishable." (Withers, 2010, p. 2)

comprehensive health care- including mental health, dental health, non-western health care and prescriptions, and safe and affordable homes.

Examining CPS quickly leads to confronting massive, entrenched systems of violence, which can be overwhelming but there are also many different ways to chip away at it. Indigenous thinkers like Glen Coulthard (2014) and Leanne Simpson (2011, 2014) Women of Colour anti-violence activists like Incite: Women of Color against violence (2006), and transformative justice all push me to see the state as a major en-actor of violence against marginalized parents, and to think about alternatives outside of the state. I realize that individual and community-based initiatives dovetail neatly with neoliberal ideas of the state withdrawing from social security. This is especially troubling when we consider that even if we stop demanding resources from the state, the military industrial complex, prison industrial complex and big business will continue to lobby and receive resources. However, there is already work and research being done around how to reform CPS or use the non-profit field to support parents. The scale of the problem means that any work being done to address it is important. However, I am most interested in strategies that build the skills necessary to create and nurture communities that would be capable of supporting families

My suggestions in this area are evolving and should be seen as jumping off points for further discussion and action. I will showcase the breadth and depth of the possible solutions by sharing short suggestions, as well as going into more detail with three specific ideas. Below I have included a diagram where I put forward strategies suggested by the parents I spoke with or ideas that grew out of their suggestions. I then go into more details about three ideas, which range from ideas that are immediately implementable to those that would require a massive shift in our social worlds. These changes are not impossible, or even that difficult to implement if there was a change in how we value people. As I was thinking about this section I came across a quote focused on prison abolition but it resonated strongly with my reflections on what a world without CPS might look like:

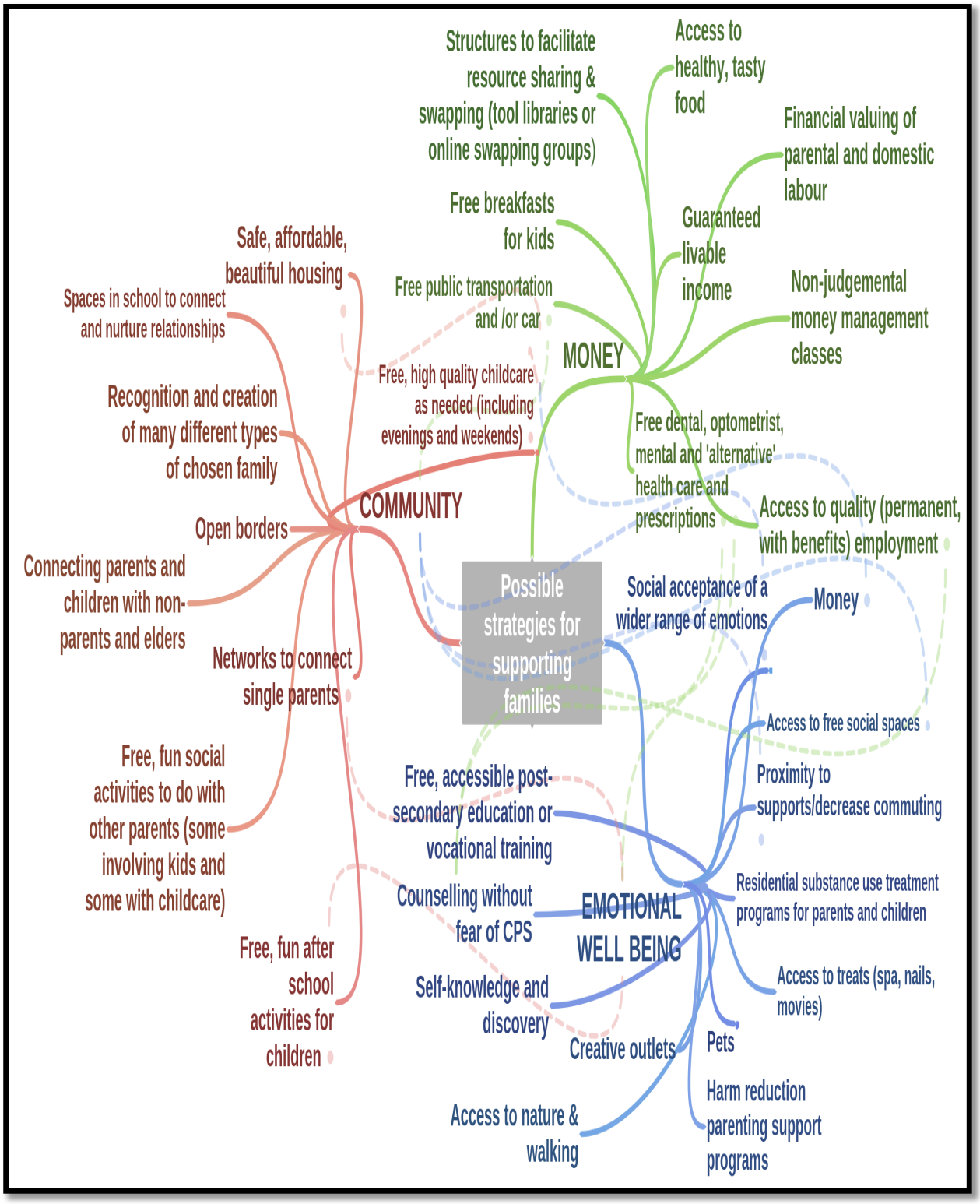
> What would it mean to desire a future that we can't even imagine but that we are told couldn't ever exist? We see the abolition of policing, prisons, jails, and detention not strictly as a narrow answer to "imprisonment" and the abuses that occur within prisons, but also as a challenge to the rule of poverty, violence, racism, alienation, and disconnection that we face every day. Abolition is not just

> about closing the doors to violent institutions, but also about building up and recovering institutions and practices and relationships that nurture wholeness, self-determination, and transformation. Abolition is not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends. Every time we insist on accessible and affirming healthcare, safe and quality education, meaningful and secure employment, loving and healing relationships, and being our full and whole selves, we are doing abolition. Abolition is about breaking down things that oppress and building up things that nourish. Abolition is the practice of transformation in the here and now and the ever after (Bassichis, Lee, & Spade, 2015, pp. 36 & 37).

The above passage gets to the core of what a fundamental challenge abolition of CPS represents and its possibilities. Envisioning a world that is safe for all children would mean massive shifts but none of them are impossible, and they would ultimately be life-giving for all of us. It is in this spirit of abolition that I offer the following ideas.

Brainstorms

Figure 2: Possible Strategies for Supporting Families



Skill-Sharing

Skill-sharing[41] focuses on reciprocal learning and teaching and could be implemented almost immediately in many formats, around a variety of topics. I thought of skill-sharing because several parents identified parenting classes as important sources of support and because of parents' suggestions for mental health and addictions support. The most common demand around mental health and problematic substance use was that parents be able to access these supports without fear of being reported to CPS. One way to address this is through anonymous online support spaces, which I will discuss below. I also reflected on TJ's assertion that when people experience violence they turn to family and friends, who they call bystanders, for support (Kelly, 2011). This led TJ to focus on building capacity among bystanders to support people who have experienced violence and to hold people who have hurt others accountable (Generation Five, 2007).

Supporting loved ones who are struggling with substance use or thoughts of suicide is difficult, and so we must create ways for bystanders to support each other and share skills they have developed from supporting others in those situations. This includes centering "a dedication towards developing (re)new(ed) modes of communicating with each other that are grounded in abundance, accountability and love." (Kim et al., 2012, p. 5). An example of doing this through a skills share model are two different events puts on by Communities United Against Violence, a grassroots organization focused on ending all forms of violence in the LGBTQ community. The first example is Safetyfest, an annual event in the Bay area, that "emerged out of the belief that our communities already have so many of the skills we'll need to transform violence and create safety, we just need to share them!" It is described as a festival, "to increase the resilience and relationships in our communities by sharing skills, stories and inspiration." (Communities United Against Violence, n.d.). *Communities United Against Violence* also hosts Safety Labs where participants work on building self-awareness, communication, and support skills (Communities United Against Violence, n.d.). The more radical work of a world without CPS requires that all of us develop

[41] I first heard this term when I worked at a feminist violence against women shelter. Women staying in the shelter took turns sharing skills they had developed, ranging from finances to decorating tips to legal knowledge with the group. I always hated the word and concept of "life skills," which often focuses on skills valued by white middle class workers and completely dismisses the wealth of extremely valuable life skills that people possess.

better skills and strategies to support our loved ones and hold them accountable if we are concerned about how they are treating children (Generation Five, 2007) . These types of fundamental communication skills also facilitate the creation of supportive communities and political organizing.

Some of this teaching and learning, especially initially, may take place within social service agencies. Many of the parents identified parenting classes as an important place for them to learn about parenting, get support from their peers, socialize, get a break from their children, eat a meal and receive a food voucher. Being able to address their financial, social, and emotional needs in one place was very useful.[42] Although social service agencies may initially host different types of skill-sharing, the focus must be on reciprocal teaching and learning that agencies often find challenging to actualize. Agencies sometimes describe their groups as collaborative and solicit input from the group and try to be responsive but often they need to maintain control of the overall agenda and/or what constitutes a "correct" response or strategy. A key aspect of this type of skill-sharing must be self-determination. CPS and other social service agencies have a long history of trying unsuccessfully to force learning on parents through anger management groups or parenting classes. The parents I spoke with identified parenting classes, advocacy skills, and financial literacy[43] as things they wanted to learn. Learning about systems of oppression, how trauma impacts ones' life, how to support loved ones that are struggling and building health relationships were also mentioned as areas of interest. The other concern with social service agencies as the primary site of skill-sharing initiatives is that it centralizes power into the hands of "experts" or "facilitators" and ultimately skills and ideas spread much more quickly when spread among networks in a variety of manners, whether through informal conversations or more intentional sharing spaces.

It is also important to emphasize that much of the necessary wisdom and strategies already exists in communities and so the urgent political task is more about spreading this intergenerationally or between different networks rather than reinventing it. This may also involve reflective work as folks are often unaware of the diversity of strategies employed as

[42] Although several of them did discuss how these groups were also spaces of surveillance by social workers and that they were careful about what they shared.
[43] Non-judgmental and relevant financial literacy about topics like budgeting with very little money, cell phone contracts or OSAP debt were all suggested as potential topics by parents.

we navigate our daily lives. The resurgence work being done by Indigenous communities is an important example of using traditional teachings to guide responses and strategies (for example: Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown, & Formsma, 2006; Simpson, 2011, 2014). This reinforces the importance of everyone examining the personal, familial and cultural[44] strategies and wisdom they have learned and how they might be shared in non-appropriative ways with others. Sharing skills and strategies gives individuals and families the necessary tools to create networks and communities that can support their families in many different ways.

Web-based tools

This is more of a collection of strategies, some of which can be done through current platforms and some that would involve the development of new tools. The online world is already being used to build community, make money stretch, and increase wellness. Several parents talked about the importance of online parenting communities, buying and trading used baby supplies and connecting with other parents for emotional support. Several parents talked about using neighbourhood-based parenting groups and lists. Interestingly, they reported that when they traded items, they started chatting and arranged playdates with their children in the neighbourhood, moving their relationship from online to offline and from something that helped with money to something that built community. This was one of the first things that caught my attention and suggested that potentially this was a powerful tool for supporting parents.

One of the parents I spoke with said that making mommy friends was like dating, which sparked the idea of making an app for parents to connect. This led me to think about the importance of relationships and trust, and how an app that could connect parents to be friends could also potentially create more options for childcare swapping or at least a break if your child is playing with their child. Making connections based on shared parenting values and philosophies is important, especially if you hope to do childcare swapping, and dating apps are already designed that way. Dating apps could also be useful as a template

[44] Cultural here is defined broadly including cultures based on race and ethnicity but also working-class cultures, queer cultures, spiritual or faith-based cultures, dis/abled cultures or migrant cultures.

because they are already designed to facilitate matches based on proximity, answers to preset questions, or other criteria like age of children that might be important to parents.[45]

Another possible use of online tools is to facilitate buying and trading as a way to make money stretch. In Toronto there is a large Facebook group, recently made into an app called Bunz Trading Zone. This was mentioned by one of the parents as a space for trading almost anything that she had accessed. In this group, people have specific requests like tokens for their plant clippings or they post furniture, or a service, like hair-cutting and ask people what they can trade for it. Other types of postings I've seen that could be obviously transferable to the parents I worked with include:

1) I'm sick at home, can someone bring me halls and orange juice in exchange for a bottle of wine
2) Alerting people to deals and giveaways ie- right now there is a company giving a way free metropasses at Yonge and Dundas
3) Trading things like employee discounts at the retail store they work at
4) I am a hairdressing student and need to practice dying hair, if you come to my school tomorrow at 8:30 a.m. I can dye your hair for free
5) I'm getting evicted or not being given work shifts, what advice do folks have?

The primary demographic seems to be hipster millennials[46] that are struggling for money, and there is a warm community vibe. Spreading this type of non-stigmatizing trading-based platform to parents and folks living in poverty could help amplify the strategies parents already employ to reach a larger audience. This could be an especially powerful tool for people who don't have immigration status. Parents without status have to work,[47] and if they have young children they need to work in their home, or find unlicensed childcare. They can take care of other people's children or do hair, sell their cooking or other types of businesses that can be run out of their home. The dilemma, however, is that you need a large network of people to run a business, but if you are newly arrived and/or trying to stay under the radar, it is often difficult and risky to build those networks. Informal trading

[45] Dating apps are notoriously lookist, racist, ableist, and classist, and these dynamics would undoubtedly play out in a parent-friend making app, but it could still be a good short term strategy to make connections and build social networks.
[46] This is a Toronto based group and while the group is majority white, there is a sizable portion of various racialized people, the more homogenous element seems to be their age and I'm guessing that many of them grew up middle class and currently find themselves struggling for money.
[47] Or be dependent on someone else for money, which puts them in a very vulnerable position.

networks like Bunz provide an excellent opportunity to connect in a relatively risk free way with a large audience of potential customers that will never ask to see your SIN or ID. While online buying and selling tools are already being used by a majority of the parents I interviewed, the concept of a trading tool has potential as many of these parents have skills or items they are no longer using that could be connected to larger networks.

Another type of online tool coming out of a trading network like Bunz could be a space for folks to pool resources- for example if one person has a car and another person has a Costco membership, and another two people would love to get in on a sale they could arrange to meet up and buy things in bulk and split between themselves so that they could benefit from the cheaper price per item.[48] These types of strategies are currently employed by folks that struggle for money, but sometimes you don't know anyone with a car or your Auntie's Costco membership expired, and this type of platform would allow folks to connect with a larger group of people and arrange meet ups.

Online tools also have the potential to promote cross-class resource sharing. When I worked with young mothers, our donations room was one of the most popular services because we often received high quality, useful donations. We also received a lot of garbage and I always suggest that parents consider if they would give this item as a gift when considering what to donate. I used to suggest that they think about if they would put it on their own child but many middle-class parents dress their children in slightly stained or used clothes that would draw accusations of neglect for less privileged parents. Many of my middle-class parent friends received multiples of baby items and wondered where they could donate them. In Toronto there is a Facebook group called *The New Moms Project* that facilitates the passing of important resources and baby items from more to less privileged moms. While most of my suggestions focus on sharing resources and skills within marginalized communities to decrease 'saving' crusades, I think there is a need for those with more money to share concrete resources. Connecting to share resources between moms can be one strategy, especially if it is run from a solidarity rather than charity model. Creating and facilitating the space from a solidarity perspective has a huge impact because even if the parents sharing the resources have some charitable motivations they aren't

[48] This could be one way to address the fact that being poor is often more expensive and so for example individuals don't have enough money to buy bulk items and benefit from the cheaper price per unit.

necessarily interacting directly with the folks receiving the resources. Another strategy is to encourage parents who receive donations to donate things they no longer need, so that parents can help each other rather than solely receiving donations.

The above apps focus on decreasing anonymity and moving online connections to the offline world. However, there is also value in anonymous spaces. Especially in a world where many common experiences, such as substance use, intimate partner violence or mental health struggles can still lead to the removal of ones' children if one is part of marginalized communities. There are many anonymous apps for things such as confessing that you had an affair or asking for advice. Consider the possibilities if these tools were used to create truly anonymous spaces for parents to talk about their substance use or violence they are experiencing in their relationships, openly and without judgment. A couple of the parents spoke about Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous as anonymous spaces where there were no workers with a "duty to report"[49] and so people were able to seek support to minimize the impact of their substance use on their children. An app could take the form of a peer-based anonymous support network or more of an advice format in which people submit anonymously and a group of folks with personal experience share advice and strategies. Both formats benefit from having multiple perspectives from people with personal experience because these are difficult situations to which no 'correct' answer exists. There is increased credibility when people who have personal struggles with difficult life situations speak about their strategies and what they learned from their experiences.

Another reason to use peers rather than professionals,[50] is that professionals often want to 'fix' situations quickly and neatly. This desire for quick and simple answers comes from busy caseloads, a desire to be 'helpful', and a need to manage risk, and liability. As professionals we can slip into objectifying the people that we work with and then solutions seem quick and obvious because we don't grant them the complexity and richness of detail that we grant ourselves and our loved ones. This causes professionals to have difficulty

[49] Although of course any member of the public can call at any time

[50] These categories are by no means mutually exclusive but the way I interact with my parent friends is different than the young women that I worked with.

sitting with complexity and ambiguity that many of the parents described when they insisted that their strategies were always context-dependent.

Home

From my decade of community work and the research conversations the need for families to have a home really stood out. A home[51] can be the foundation of stability for a family. I wanted to expand my thoughts around home because it addresses community, money and stress. Housing instability due to poverty means that parents are forced to move many times which is stressful and makes it difficult for parents and children to develop and maintain relationships with neighbours, friend and classmates. Parents are often forced to move far from family, friends, school and work in search of affordable housing leading to long commutes and increased isolation. Even when affordable or subsidized housing is secured it is often poorly maintained in ways that endanger people's health.[52] Parents often feel forced to make difficult choices between their child's health and affordable housing although the more affordable private rental units are often similarly poorly maintained. The idea of a home for everyone is the furthest from our current reality although there are interesting experiments in this already going on through co-ops, co-housing and intergenerational housing in Sweden. These experiments can be built upon to make them much more widely available. The following is based on the idea that home is a concept and physical space that everyone, regardless of income should have access to. These ideas should not be utopic; we have the resources to make them possible; however we need to shift our collective priorities so that everyone is valued.

Based on the concerns raised by parents these homes would be affordable, beautiful, well maintained in terms of repairs, pests and daily cleaning of common areas, at the minimum. The units would also need to be well soundproofed as noise is a major cause of conflict when people live close together. Overall, they would be designed to be aesthetically

[51] When I say home I don't mean a single family home, which can be isolating and unhealthy. Rather I mean the place that you live that feels safe and good, which most of the parents I spoke with did not have access to.
[52] This was highlighted in an interview where a parent reported that part of their child's bedroom wall had fallen off, and there were concerns about asbestos but that Toronto Housing had not repaired it despite many work orders and the media becoming involved.

pleasing and towards maximum livability rather than minimum costs. The physical building should be designed to maximize interaction between neighbours. All units in the buildings should be universally accessible to decrease the impacts of ableism. Buildings should have natural light and be close to green areas for walking and playing.[53] There should be laundry in everyone's unit and every other floor could have an extra washer so it doesn't take all day if you have to do several loads.[54]

Buildings should have a large common space geared towards children where they can play and their caregivers can socialize; this is especially important in Canada where the cold necessitates indoor space for playing.[55] There should also be common spaces geared towards adults and older children. This could include common rooms that are geared towards different types of creative practice. For example one building might have musical instruments and a small recording studio, another might have a variety of art supplies and classes, another might have a dance studio, another might have a pool and small gym, or a small library with writing workshops. Buildings with different amenities could be grouped together so that there would be a variety of creative spaces within walking distance. Many of the parents talked about how they used creative outlets to feel better and some creative pursuits include expensive supplies like instruments or a pottery kiln that can be shared. They could also be spaces to meet other people with similar passions and where children could spend safe and stimulating after school time.

Every building, or floor, could have designated Grandparents/Elders/Aunties and Uncles who would have experience developing relationships with children and supporting and mentoring parents. These would be family rather than workers, who you could send your kids to for twenty minutes if you needed to run out for milk, who you could call for advice or a listening ear, who could come over every morning for a month to help with breakfast and getting kids out the door, or who would have weekly movie nights for all the kids in the building. The position of being a Grandparent would be socially valued- through

[53] Many of the parents mentioned walking as a form of stress release and several of them talked about meeting other parents at playgrounds and other places their children played.
[54] Laundry rooms are often located in basements that are poorly lit and maintained and can feel unsafe, as well as inconvenient, if you have young children and need to do laundry while caring for them. The extra unit on every other floor comes from a condo that a friend lives in which is designed like that.
[55] This addresses the need for close drop-in spaces to socialize with other parents. This is especially important when it's cold or people have infants or several children so that travelling on transit can be challenging.

money or community respect, and, in return, people could help them with household chores or shopping to ensure that they had time to focus on being a Grandparent. Another possibility is to have a building pet so that kids and adults can have access to a pet without having to take full responsibility for it.[56] There could also be designated people in every building trained in conflict resolution and in recognizing and supporting folks in relationships that are becoming unhealthy. They would have the power to ask people to leave the building so that people experiencing the violence aren't forced to leave. The designated people would also have the responsibility to find another place for that other person to live, where they would receive support to address the roots of their behavior and continue to be held accountable.

Many of the ideas listed above feel far from our current reality and difficult to achieve. However, the possibilities for creating them exist, and I have included them to spark discussion and visioning about what a world without violence could look like. I included all the ideas under the umbrella of home, because they are dependent on physical proximity and commitments based on ongoing relationships. These types of relationships and communities are challenging to build when parents are forced to constantly move and be focused on survival. A safe and beautiful home is the foundation from which many things can flow.

Conclusion

The ideas included under skill-sharing, developing or repurposing online tools, and creating safe and beautiful homes come out of the conversations I had with parents and my reflections on potential responses. They are meant to be conversation starters and spur action and dialogue around how to make the world safer and more loving for all children, families, communities and Nations.

I want to end by thanking all the folks who challenged, supported, loved and argued with me. This work came out of years of being allowed into the lives of young families and they have taught me so much. It is truly a collective effort that benefited from the wisdom of

[56] Several parents noted how fun and healing they found their relationships with pets.

so many people. Thank you to all the folks who listened to me, asked me questions, made me food and supported me in so many different ways.

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Suggested Readings

1) *Dancing on our Turtle's Back* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson
2) *Don't Leave your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways to Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities* Edited by Victoria Law and China Martens
3) *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Centry* by Grace Lee Boggs & Scott Kurashige
4) *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities* Edited by Ching- In Chen, Jai Dulani, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha
5) *Toward Transformative Justice: A Liberatory Approach to Child Sexual Abuse and other forms of Intimate and Community Violence* by Generation Five - http://www.generationfive.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice-Document.pdf

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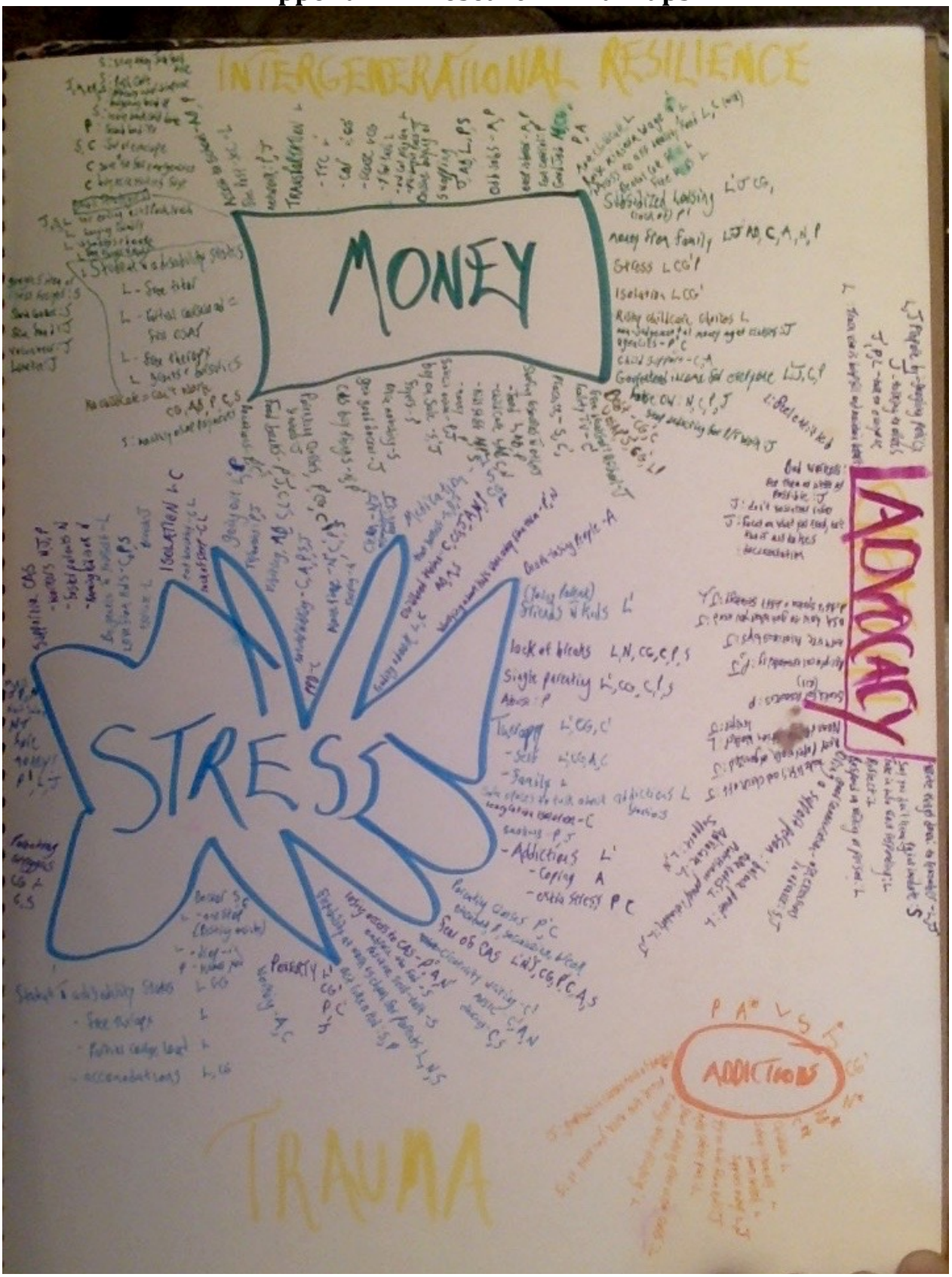
Appendix A- Research Mind Maps



COMMUNITY + ISOLATION
TRUST
VIOLENCE
COLONIALISM
SEXISM
AGEISM
STIGMA
BETRAYAL
STUCK
HEARTBREAK
Complexity
resistancy to boss
HOUSING + HOME
Godparents
Friends w/ Kids
Family
Poverty
Respite
Neighbors
Shelters
Subsidized
Close to transit
Close to other people
Housing instability
Living in foster homes
Far from transit
Overcrowded
VIOLENCE