

The Discursive and Social Organization of Mothers, ‘Trauma’, Violence and Risk in Child Protection and Family Law

Researcher Information

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Background

There is growing recognition of the importance of trauma-informed practice in health care, since research indicates that many clients who access services have experiences of trauma and are at a higher risk of facing retraumatization (Varcoe et al., 2016). However, the literature on trauma-informed practice beyond the health context is limited. Given the flow of clients through health and social services concurrently, this is an area in need of development.

The narratives of mothers with experiences categorized as ‘trauma’ and who access support for their children is a particularly pertinent area for exploration (Davies & Krane, 2006; Strega et al., 2013). Studies report that mothers who have experienced trauma can find it particularly challenging and perhaps retraumatizing when they access support for their children (Davies et al., 2007; Strega et al., 2008). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding specific practices and policies that can lead to such experiences.

To build the nascent evidence on trauma in the context of social services, this study will focus on mothers who have experienced ‘interpersonal trauma’ (i.e. childhood abuse, intimate partner violence) *and* ‘structural trauma’ (i.e. oppression, colonialism), as there are strong connections between marginalization, violence, trauma, mental health and poverty experienced by women (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012; Richmond, Geiger, & Reed, 2013; Tseris, 2013).

Overall, this issue needs to be addressed because mothers who experience negative encounters when accessing children’s social services are less likely to continue utilizing them (Foster, O'Brien, & Korhonen, 2012). This can result in children and mothers not receiving the supports that they need to optimize wellbeing.

Research Question and Objectives

This study asks: *“How do practices in children’s social services organize the experiences of mothers with ‘trauma’ when they access support for their children?”* Research objectives include:

- (1) To understand how child protection and family legal systems are used, received, coordinated, and delivered with mothers who are categorized as having experienced ‘trauma’.
- (2) To uncover how social disparities emerge for mothers and are connected to broader social relations, practice frameworks, and institutional discourses.

- (3) To understand the connection, and disjunctures, between the experiences that mothers have when navigating MFCD and family court, and how these systems that mothers rely on – or that are imposed on them – are coordinated and organized.
- (4) To explore how to better support mothers in children’s social services.

Method of Inquiry

This study applies institutional ethnography, which is a critical research approach that draws on ethnomethodology, Marxism and feminism to uncover how society's institutions regulate people's lives (Smith, 1999). This approach investigates organizational processes and examines how they are coordinated, largely by texts, through textually mediated discourses, and used to impact personal experiences (Smith, 2001). Institutional ethnography takes a particular experience as a point of entry, beginning from the actualities of people’s lives (Smith, 1987).

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