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Article

Beyond risk: Centering relationality and reflexivity to transform child welfare

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Abstract
Standardized risk assessment (RA) is central to the functioning of Anglo-American child welfare systems. Academic literature has extensively critiqued the reliance of child welfare systems upon RA and the technocratic practices and policies which it has given rise. Despite these critiques, and in the absence of discussions of an alternative approach to child welfare that moves beyond neoliberal constructions of risk, child welfare systems continue to be shaped and governed by risk. This paper draws upon lived professional experiences and literature on risk and child welfare to provide a critical examination of how and why risk remains a driving force within Anglo-American child welfare services, the implications of this, and why we should not continue to rely upon risk-centric models of child welfare policy and practice. This paper advocates for child welfare systems to move beyond risk-centric policies and practices, in pursuit of a re-prioritization of the values of social justice and relationality. Rooted in the value of relationality, alternative approaches such as a social model of care and engaging in practices of truth-telling are proposed as strategies for transforming Anglo-American child welfare systems.

Keywords
risk assessment, child welfare, neoliberalism, social model, relationality

Résumé
L’évaluation standardisée des risques (RA) est au cœur du fonctionnement des systèmes de protection de l’enfance anglo-américains. Le recours au RA, ainsi que les pratiques et politiques technocratiques qu’elle a engendrées, ont été largement critiqués dans la littérature académique. Malgré ces critiques, et en l’absence de discussions sur une approche alternative de la protection de l’enfance allant au-delà des constructions néolibérales du risque, les systèmes de protection de l’enfance continuent d’être façonnés et gouvernés par le risque. Cet article s’appuie sur des expériences professionnelles vécues et sur la littérature sur le risque et la protection de l’enfance pour fournir un examen critique de comment et pourquoi le risque reste une force motrice au sein des services de protection de l’enfance anglo-américains, ses implications et les raisons pour

lesquelles nous ne devrions pas continuer à nous appuyer sur ces modèles de politiques et de pratiques de protection de l'enfance centrés sur le risque. Cet article plaide en faveur d'un dépassement des politiques et des pratiques centrées sur le risque dans les systèmes de protection de l'enfance, afin de réaffirmer les valeurs de justice sociale et de relationnalité. Ancrées dans la valeur de la relationnalité, des approches alternatives telles qu'un modèle social de prise en charge et l'engagement dans des pratiques de vérité sont proposées comme stratégies pour transformer les systèmes de protection de l'enfance anglo-américains.

Mots-clés
évaluation des risques, protection de l'enfance, néolibéralisme, modèle social, relationnalité

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Introduction

Anglo-American child welfare systems currently operate within a risk paradigm. Despite claims to serve the best interests of children, risk-centric models of child welfare have perpetuated social injustice for already marginalized children and families at individual, community, and structural levels (Feely & Bosk, 2021; Ferguson, 1997; Gillingham, 2006; Rothwell et al., 2018; Pecora et al., 2013). In Canada, the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth within the child welfare system is evidence of social injustice (Blackstock, 2007; Fallon et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2019). Risk-focused models of child welfare services benefit individuals in positions of authority and state power, while causing and perpetuating harm to already marginalized families (Featherstone et al., 2018; Littlechild, 2008; Rose, 2000).

This paper positions the neoliberal construction of risk within Anglo-American child welfare systems as a social justice issue requiring urgent action. Inherent to this argument is the alarming incidence of child welfare investigations in Canada, which have continuously increased since 1998 (Fallon et al., 2021; Trocmé et al., 2010). This aligns with the introduction and widespread uptake of a risk-focused approach to assessing and intervening in cases of child maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2023). Compounding this issue is the over-representation of Indigenous children within the child welfare system, who are negatively impacted by colonial biases inherent to standardized risk assessments and pre-established risk factors. To argue this position and to challenge the status quo in child welfare practice and scholarship, I weigh my professional experience as a child welfare worker against the existing literature on risk and child welfare. I provide reflections on the literature rooted in my lived experiences as a child welfare worker and consider ways of practicing child welfare work that moves beyond risk assessment. To do this, I first describe my ontological and epistemological stance on risk within child welfare, followed by a summary and analysis of risk's historical and theoretical origins in child welfare. I then draw upon my lived experience as a direct practice child welfare worker, weaving this into my

examination of the literature describing the impacts of risk upon child welfare services, children, and families. Finally, I conclude this paper with a discussion of ways that individual child welfare workers and Anglo-American child welfare systems can begin to move beyond a focus on (assessing) risk, toward (providing) support. This discussion aims to propel the literature forward in exploring solutions and support for addressing systemically-rooted risk factors driving neoliberal child welfare systems, including the use of truth-telling and a social model of care. To provide clarity in distinguishing reflections and lived experiences from conversations within academic literature, I have used indentations to identify my reflections.

From encouraging to avoiding risk: Rooting risk in lived experiences

> My personal and professional lived experiences have shaped my approach to social work practice, academia, and my understanding of the risk paradigm within child welfare. Beginning my career as a child welfare worker working on First Nations reservations in rural areas of Canada profoundly impacted my understanding of risk. My experiences assessing, intervening, and attempting to avoid risk to myself as a new social worker, and the children I worked with, form the foundation for my academic work. However, what is perhaps even more foundational to my understanding of risk, and the need to move beyond it in child welfare are the times that I was shown a way and/or acted beyond the mandates of assessing risk, toward providing support rooted in relationality and authenticity. I am always inspired by my relationships with supervisors, colleagues, parents/caregivers, and children, past and present, that move beyond checklists and documentation, toward authenticity, care, honesty, and trust.

Social work in Canada is deeply rooted in an egregious history of colonialism (Blackstock, 2007; Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; Choate, 2019; Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Gregory, 2020; Hudson & McKenzie, 1981). Child welfare services have especially perpetrated detrimental harm against Indigenous children, families, and communities, through colonial pursuits of assimilation and genocide, including the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop. Ongoing child welfare practices that separate children from their families, communities, and land perpetuate colonialism (Blackstock, 2007; Johnson et al., 2022; Timpson, 1995; Spencer & Sinclair, 2024). As a settler, and a social worker, I have a responsibility to actively oppose colonial policies and practices. This responsibility is central to my understanding of risk and my belief in the need to move beyond risk, toward connection and relationships as the catalysts for child, family, and community well-being.

Epistemological and ontological stance

> My epistemological stance shapes my approach to analyzing and resisting the risk paradigm in child welfare. I view knowledge as something that is co-created in

relationships with others. I value the knowledge and wisdom that come from lived experiences. I value knowledge that bridges the heart and the mind, bringing together emotional and cognitive processes of knowing. Conceptualizations of risk emphasize the use of knowledge and experiences from the past, to inform actions and inactions of the present, to avoid danger and/or negative outcomes in the future (Swift & Callahan, 2009). I have witnessed and experienced the very real impacts that a focus on risk in child welfare has on children, families, communities, and workers; resulting in tensions, mistrust, and fear, while deterring time, attention, and resources away from meeting the material and support needs of families. Within the complexities of large systems like child welfare and the unique functioning of family and community systems, I set aside my ontological struggles with the reality of risk to remain rooted in my epistemological value of relationality. It is through relationships that I have seen and felt the impacts of risk upon individuals' lives. I aim to honor those relationships by focusing on the need to address the systemic, epistemic, and social injustices that are caused by the dominance of risk within the child welfare system.

The emergence and evolution of risk in a modern liberal society

Risk identification, prevention, and mitigation has existed for centuries. Evidence of this has been traced back to the Middle Ages, when voyaging ships travelled in pairs to address the risk of one ship becoming lost at sea (Kearney & Donovan, 2013; Webb, 2006). Since then, processes of industrialization and modernization have significantly impacted the evolution of risk, especially how risks are constructed and responded to. The current state of late modernity has been characterized by reflexivity (Beck, 1992; Webb, 2006). A self-reflexive society has emerged from the forced "self-confrontation" of the state by new forms of hazards and risks to safety created through processes of modernization (Webb, 2006, p. 36). One such example is the prevalence of social media, which was created for modern communication but has consequently created new potential for various forms of harm for children and youth (Bozzola et al., 2022).

World risk society

Ideologies of capitalism and individualism underpin Ulrich Beck's (1992) thesis of the world risk society. Beck's (1992; 2008) work describes how society has become reflexive through processes of modernization, resulting in the creation of uncertainties and new potential catastrophes – referred to within society as risks – resulting from the very processes of global modernization. This has been echoed in recent child welfare literature which suggests that social and technological advancements in society continue to create "new and greater risks to children and young people" (Munro et al., 2020, p. 7) (e.g., risks of exploitation and trafficking, violence, environmental risks to safety).

Central to a world risk society is the conceptualization of risks in modern reflexive societies as delocalized, incalculable, and non-compensable (Beck, 2008). Delocalization emphasizes the global context of risks, which are transferrable across time and space. Incalculability highlights the inability to determine and define the consequences of risks, which are characterized as non-compensable due to the grandeur of threats posed by risks which cannot be completely remedied or compensated for.

The reflexive nature of a risk within liberal societies (Beck, 1992) has profoundly impacted the field of child welfare. Children are viewed as a particularly vulnerable population in need of protection from risks to ensure their development into productive, well-adjusted members of a modern society (Herrenkohl et al., 2021; Parton, 1998). Child welfare policies and practices reflect the entrenched concern of risk within society, as priority is given to the prevention of catastrophic negative outcomes of child well-being (i.e. child deaths) over the promotion of the general well-being of children and their families (Herrenkohl et al., 2021; Littlechild, 2008). Assessing and mitigating the risk of future harm has become a primary task for workers, pushing efforts to support the well-being and needs of families farther into the background (Houston & Griffiths, 2000; Russ et al., 2025; Saxena & Guha, 2024; Swift & Callahan, 2009).

Risk as a core technology of government

Webb (2006) describes neoliberalism as "the political programme of a risk society" (p. 38). Neoliberal political agendas complement the concerns of a modern world risk society by focusing efforts on empowering citizens to become responsible for their own lives and futures through identifying and managing risks within their individual lives (Parton et al., 1997; Rose, 2000). Within a neoliberal political programme, risk is a core technology for the government and control of citizens, and supports efforts to govern from a distance through the diffusion of authority and power away from a single head of state to numerous government departments and representatives, and quasi-governmental organizations (Munro, 2019; O'Malley, 2008; Rose, 2000).

The use of risk as a technology of government is evident in child welfare policies and practices which place the locus of responsibility for the protection of children, and consequently, the blame for children's exposure to risks of harm, upon individual parents – usually mothers (Strega et al., 2013). This is particularly evident in child welfare concerns regarding risks associated with children's exposure to family/domestic violence. Through processes of responsibilization, mothers are expected to protect their children from exposure to violence that is most often perpetrated against them (Coy & Kelly, 2019; Strega & Janzen, 2013). Defined as the "process by which neoliberal economic policies displace responsibility for welfare and safety from the state to communities and individuals" (Coy & Kelly, 2019, p. 153), the responsibilization of parenting has extended to all risk factors in a child's environment, including systemic issues such as poverty, crime rates, safety of public play spaces, etc. (Callahan & Swift, 2007; Higgins et al., 2019; Parton et al., 1997). It is only when citizens are unable or unwilling to self-manage risk in their lives that this responsibility is to be assumed by delegated state

representatives and agencies (Featherstone et al., 2016; Ferguson, 1997; Rose, 2000). This neoliberal model for state intervention families' lives is the foundation of Anglo-American child welfare mandates. As a result, child welfare workers have also been subjected to responsibilization when they are delegated authority by the state to make determinations as to the perceived risks of harm to a child and the necessary measures to mitigate those risks (Barry, 2007; Swift & Callahan 2009). The issue of biases and perceptions within the subjective application of measures of risk and interventions of protection by child welfare workers is particularly problematic. Worker biases, caseload factors, and pressures felt by workers to absolve themselves of liability in a risk-averse system can impact decision-making, resulting in the application of child welfare interventions, which have life-changing potential impacts (positive and negative) upon families (Russ et al., 2025). Featherstone et al. (2019) have suggested that "as a result of the focus on risk, the investigation paradigm can become paramount as distinct from the helping one" (p. 128). Risk has been used as a technology of government enabling the state to avoid blame for critical incidents and child deaths, with child welfare workers and caregivers becoming scapegoated while neoliberal discourses of risk allow the state to uphold an image of an intervening authority who protect children whose parents have abused or neglected them (Beck, 1992; Russ et al., 2025).

The reinforcing power of discourse

Discourses of risk and responsibilization have effectively engulfed child welfare workers in a continual process of assessing and managing risks. Fear associated with the loss of freedom and rights as included citizens in society has been instilled in both individual parents/caregivers and child welfare workers, who bear the brunt of the consequences when negative outcomes (i.e. significant harm or death of children) occur (Kearney & Donovan, 2013). For child welfare workers, this fear is not only for the well-being of children, but also for their professional liability and credibility (Kearny & Donovan, 2013; Munro, 2009, 2019).

Through processes of individualizing the management and control of risk, the individual becomes so entrenched in and focused upon the need to address risk in their own lives that attention is diverted away from risks caused by systemic issues and injustices (e.g., poverty, dangerous living conditions) (Callahan & Swift, 2007). Given the systemic roots of issues like poverty, intergenerational trauma, and racism, individuals cannot mitigate the associated "risks" independently (Hunter & Flores, 2021). This creates a continual condition in which individuals' resources, including time, material resources, emotional and physical energy, are constantly spent trying to mitigate risks in individual families' lives, leaving a lack of resources available to address root causes of identified "risks" (Featherstone et al., 2016; Gillingham, 2006; Littlechild, 2008).

Risks of risk in Anglo-American child welfare

Within the risk paradigm, child welfare workers spend a significant portion of their time assessing risk and rely heavily upon risk assessment [RA] outcomes when engaging in decision-

making processes, especially decisions regarding child placements (Barber et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2016; Stoddart, 2017). Extant literature spanning multiple decades critiques and problematizes child protection systems' over-reliance upon standardized actuarial risk assessment procedures and policies (Fallon et al., 2023; Featherstone et al., 2016; Houston & Griffiths, 2000; Parton, 1997; Swift & Callahan, 2009). Issues concerning the reliability and validity of RA in child welfare are based upon several key arguments: (1) the population versus individual statistical basis of actuarial science; (2) RA tools as replete with biases and assumptions; and (3) the inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of RA in preventing future harm.

The application of actuarial science to assess risk on an individual level within health and social fields is fundamentally problematic. Bosk and Feely (2020) explain the problematic nature of risk in child welfare as due to the epistemological tension that exists between actuarially-based RA and professional values of the social work profession. Multiple authors (Higgins et al., 2019; Littlechild, 2008; Parton et al., 1997) talk about the uptake of actuarially-based RA procedures in child welfare as consequences of public inquiries and media attention on serious incidents resulting in child deaths. Adopting a standardized science-based procedure for assessing the risk of harm to children was implemented in the spirit of avoiding any future critical incidents (Littlechild, 2008; Munro, 2019). However, standardized risk assessment using actuarial science has been adapted from its original use by insurance companies who assess risks to themselves in providing insurance to an individual. This raises questions for its application to child welfare, as its original use has been to protect the person/company/organization applying the assessment, rather than to protect the individual it is applied to. Moreover, actuarially-based RA are not reliable or accurate in predicting the critical incidents of harm and fatality that have driven its integration into child welfare. RA applied to child fatality has been described as being no more accurate in their predictive powers than flipping a coin (D'andrade et al., 2008; English & Pecora, 1994).

Cultural, racial, and socioeconomic biases have also been discussed as influences upon the reliability and validity of RA in child welfare (Stapleton et al., 2022). Callahan and Swift (2007) describe how RA tools have been developed based upon "middle-class Euro-Canadian assumptions," (p. 176) providing rationale for reasonable concern of biases when such tools are applied to families that do not fit this demographic. Additionally, RA processes are based upon the fundamental assumption that the presence of risk factors being assessed is directly connected to the occurrence of harm (Swift & Callahan, 2009). Finally, a lack of readily available evidence supporting RA can be understood within the context of an inability for retrospective research studies. The predictive and preventative focuses of RA in child welfare means that it cannot be determined whether the RA and associated intervention did actually prevent harm to a child. Once an intervention is implemented as a result of an RA, it is not possible to determine with absolute certainty whether that specific intervention prevented harm from occurring or whether the harm would have occurred without an intervention (Littlechild, 2008).

Illusionary benefits and best interests

Those with the highest levels of authoritative power and social privilege (i.e. government officials and leaders) benefit through their means to access private services as needed. They are also able to avoid responsibility for the needs of less privileged populations while neoliberal policies and practices are at best non-beneficial, and at worst, detrimental, to individuals with the least power and privilege (often children and their families) (Caldwell& Sinha, 2020; Rose, 2000). Racialized, Indigenous, and poor children and families are among the most disadvantaged groups within the child welfare system (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; Rothwell et al., 2018; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011).

Risk-centric child welfare policies and practices have redefined large-scale social problems (e.g., poverty, food insecurity, neighborhood safety), as individual deficits and problems (Callahan & Swift, 2007; Kearney & Donovan, 2013).

> I recall observing this in my work, when reports of maltreatment would be received and categorized as "physical neglect – food/shelter/clothing." I was required to investigate these circumstances, often labelling and categorizing parents as neglectful or inadequate, based on circumstances of poverty. Through this process, I felt that I was expected to place blame upon individual parents for the social inequalities they faced and recommend interventions focused on parents' need to provide the basic necessities for their children by seeking employment or keeping a budget. These usual responses by workers such as myself and my colleagues failed to acknowledge systemic issues such as a lack of available jobs or affordable childcare. It failed to recognize the simple fact that one must have money to be able to create a budget for how they will spend it.

Discourses of risk focus upon the ideal of avoiding and preventing all forms of harm to children – a difficult value to argue against within a Risk Society. However, harm does occur, both despite and as a result of the use of RA and risk-focused policies and practices in child welfare (Gillingham, 2006; Higgins et al., 2019; Swift & Callahan, 2009). This is evident in the well-documented representation of low-income families within the child welfare system (Featherstone et al., 2018; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011; Trocmé et al., 2023).

The literature laments the harmful and largely unintended – consequences of RA, with limited evidence to support the assertion that RA is effective in preventing harm from occurring to children (Gillingham, 2006; Higgins et al., 2019). Considering this, we must call into question who benefits from risk-centric child welfare policies and practices. Some may argue that it is of benefit to individual workers, allowing them the ability to protect themselves from liability. While this may be true, I believe that it is not the entire or only truth.

> *As a child welfare worker, standardized RA tools allowed me to separate myself* from the work when things became particularly complex and emotionally challenging. I could frame myself as merely the messenger – blaming RA

> outcomes as the rationale for decisions made – and avoiding the need to be accountable for difficult decisions and outcomes, which often concerned the separation of children from their families.

Standardized RA also facilitates consistency within child welfare teams (Feely & Bosk, 2021).

> While I now question the attribution of "good" or "effective" or "appropriate" decision-making with consistency, it was reassuring at the time. As a new child welfare worker and recent social work graduate, I often felt reassured that I had done the "right" thing when I was able to rely upon standardized decision-making processes that yielded consistency amongst myself, child welfare worker colleagues, and supervisors. However, I now recognize that processes of standardization and consistency did not settle the inner turmoil that I often felt when my values of relationality and support conflicted with the rigidity and bureaucracy of a neoliberal child welfare system.

Through both my professional lived experiences, and in the academic literature I have reviewed, it is clear that for many workers, RA procedures are influential on their practice. However, the use of RA as a form of managerialism and control over individual workers' interactions and interventions with their clients, just as it is implemented by those workers to manage and control the circumstances of children and families, is also highlighted (Ferguson, 2016; Swift & Callahan, 2009).

> Certainly, I experienced this as well, often feeling that the end goal with a file was to ensure no errors could be found upon audit, versus a focus on the outcomes for children, the relationships built, and the support provided to children, families, and their communities.

The ability of risk-focused child welfare policies and practices to sustain the authority of those in positions of power while allowing them to escape accountability and responsibility seems to be a primary reason for remaining stuck within the risk paradigm. Risk-oriented strategies for the practice of child welfare "do not focus on meeting the needs of children or responding to child abuse" (Parton, 1999, p. 101). The centrality of risk in child welfare is a political issue, which benefits only those individuals in positions of political power and privilege. Child welfare workers benefit from the protective nature of systemic risk-oriented practices from liability. However, this comes at the expense of frustration by a lack of resources available to provide material and social support to families. Risk-oriented policies fail the children and families they are allegedly aiming to protect by continuing to place blame and police the parenting of already marginalized parents/caregivers, rather than addressing the systemic roots of those very risk factors.

Separation and isolation

A key component of a risk-centric model of child welfare policy and practice is separation and isolation. Child welfare workers do not always agree with RA outcomes, nor do they agree with the centrality of risk in decision-making processes (Bosk & Feely, 2020; Swift & Callahan, 2009).

> It was my disagreement with the structure and political stance of the child welfare system that motivated me to become a child welfare worker. I felt that before I could pursue a goal of systemic change, I needed to first understand and experience the inner workings of this risky system of practice. It was behind the safety of a closed conference room or supervisor's office door that I began to truly understand the impacts of risk-thinking within child welfare. I recall the times that my supervisor and I talked openly to one another, in secret, about resisting the oppressive nature of a system focused on risk assessment – the times that we talked about providing additional funding for access visits, keeping a file open to be able to provide transportation services to programs and services needed by the family, and planning ways that we could help families meet needs through our own creative efforts of seeking donated items, etc. I recognize now just how fortunate I was to have a supervisor and teammates who shared similar values and beliefs and who were willing to take risks in "bending the rules" to provide support to children and their families. Yet, even as a team, we remained isolated and discreet about the ways that we aimed to support families outside the policies and mandates of our roles. We were cautious of what we discussed, what we didn't, and remained cognizant of the need to protect ourselves from liability. Reflecting back on these instances now, especially in light of the literature, it seems that the need to engage in resistance covertly and beyond the scope of child welfare workers' roles maintains and perpetuates a risk-centric system of practice and policy.

Dewanckel et al. (2023) and Bosk (2018) describe how child welfare workers covertly resist risk-centric policies and practices in their work. This includes tweaking their RA outcomes to match their clinical judgements and providing material and other supports to families outside of the mandate of their jobs. This problematic feature of these research findings lies in the way in which workers have described the need to engage in these efforts of resistance discretely. Acts of resistance occur by individual workers, in isolation from one another, and without collective or overt discussion. When workers quietly go above and beyond their mandate to support families and avoid the negative implications of poverty upon assessments of risk, a risk-centric system

that individualizes poverty is inadvertently and unintentionally perpetuated through its implicitly allowed continuation.

Workers do not talk about the ways that they apply policies subjectively and creatively to support the needs of families. Workers in Dewanckel et al.'s (2023) study highlight the joy they felt when this topic emerged in the focus group. They were happy to hear that they are not alone in their efforts and that others do the same. Yet there seems to be an implicit fear of organizations and managers finding out about this street-level bureaucracy and rogue decision-making.

Austerity

Kearney and Donovan (2013) describe how risk is used by governments as a tool for austerity. The use of standardized RA tools allows government to justify their actions of limited spending and to cut funding to universal programming in favor of "targeted" support which only supports those deemed most at risk (Callahan & Swift, 2007). The connection of being labelled as "high-risk" with the receipt of services and/or resources has forced individuals/families to take on "risky" and "at-risk" identities to have their needs met, and child welfare workers to rely on RA as a means to access funds, resources, and services for children and their families. Through government austerity, RA has become a necessary evil for child welfare workers, as it is the most powerful tool at their disposal to get the resources so desperately needed by children, families, and communities.

> As a child welfare worker, it seemed that we were constantly being reminded of the shortage of funding and resources and the need to justify every dollar provided in any form to children and families. Throughout my work, I became more and more frustrated by this, and ultimately, tried to utilize the lack of funding argument to benefit children and families. I began to write letters to our Agency directors and to Federal funding programs such as Jordan's Principle (First Nations Caring Society, 2024). I was most successful in securing additional financial support for families when I was able to describe how the provision of a service or resource would be financially advantageous in preventing future costs associated with out-of-home care. While I disagreed with the focus on financial impact over well-being, I felt obliged to "play the game." I did what I felt would help clients meet some of their needs in the moment. Now, I wonder whether these circumstances improved the situation for some in the moment, at the expense of perpetuating systemic inequities and issues overall?

Counterarguments to prevention and austerity focus on how RAs can be used as a way to allocate prevention resources and identify families to participate in prevention programmes (Higgins et al., 2019). However, prevention programming is also impacted by government austerity, being provided to "high risk" populations, rather than universally. Considering the praise provided to the outcomes of prevention work in addressing issues related to social

inequalities, the inadequate funding and under-provision of prevention programs is a serious concern (Higgins et al., 2019). Government responses of a lack of resources for universal prevention programming demonstrate how austerity perpetuates a risk-centric system of child welfare.

The costs of risk – can we really "afford" a risk-based child welfare system?

Despite decades of critiques of risk-centric policies and practices for child welfare (Featherstone et al., 2014; Houston & Griffiths, 2000; Littlechild, 2008; Parton, 1996; Swift & Callahan, 2009), RA not only remains a driving force in child welfare policy and practices, but formal approaches to assessing risk also remain largely unchanged (Fallon et al., 2023). This raises the question of whether we can afford to continue practicing child welfare from a risk-centric approach.

Rooted in actuarial science, RA fails to align with the humanitarian values of the social work profession (Feely & Bosk, 2021). Ethical dilemmas and moral turmoil consistently arise in child welfare work, as the values of objectivity, standardization, and predictability clash with the relational foundations of the social work profession, creating barriers to upholding values such as the pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, and respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2024).

Harms and consequences of risk

Ample literature clearly outlines the harms and consequences that have resulted from risk-centric practices and policies in child welfare. These include intergenerational trauma, fragmentation of families, disrupted attachments and relationships, placement instability, and marginalization through processes of labelling and categorizing (Higgins et al., 2019; Swift & Callahan, 2009).

> When I reflect on the harms and consequences caused by risk-centric practices and policies, I recall the looks of fear in children's and parents' eyes when they spoke with me and their weariness to trust any reassurance of care about their family. I carry the weight of those fearful eyes looking back at me as I delivered the decisions made in the "best interests" of their children, and from their heaviness, I know that as a worker within this system of risk, I have caused harm.

While consistency, standardization, and worker accountability are highlighted as positive components of the risk, there is limited literature and empirical evidence to support the argument that the benefits of RA outweigh the consequences for children and families (Barber et al., 2008; Callahan & Swift, 2007; Gillingham, 2011). Recent literature has also called these benefits into question, suggesting the need for subjectivity to return to child welfare work and that standardized RAs have contributed to high rates of worker turnover (Munro & Hardie, 2019; Russ et al., 2025). Neoliberal emphasis upon managerialism and professionalization of government services has allowed for the association of standardization with high quality child welfare services, whereby documentation is associated with accountability (Callahan & Swift,

2007). This fails to acknowledge that documentation practices allow for the worker to be accountable to the child welfare agency, rather than to the children and families themselves.

Finally, the centrality of risk in child welfare policy and practice has led to workers having insufficient time to complete the tasks of their roles, thereby limiting the amount of time that they spend directly engaging with children and families to understand their experiences, needs, and relationships (Ferguson, 2016). Given the limitations of risk-centric models, we must consider whether it is both feasible and/or valuable to rely upon these frameworks to achieve the goal of upholding children's best interests.

Moving beyond the risk paradigm

In the face of an abundance of literature focused upon risk within Anglo-American child welfare systems, there is a dearth of literature propelling us forward toward any alternative ways of doing child welfare practice.

> As a worker, I disagreed with such a focus on risk in decision-making and intervention; I wanted to do things differently. Yet, I often felt that I had no other choice. In the absence of alternatives, I felt compelled to continue to rely upon risk-centric assessments, interventions, and interactions.

There has been some discussion on the transformative potential of a child welfare approach informed by a social model of care (Featherstone et al., 2018). Fundamental to a social model of care is the location of deficits within the environment, rather than the individual, and the right for all people to thrive within their environment (Featherstone et al., 2016). Acknowledging the positive potential of a social model of child welfare, I imagine each of the strategies discussed below as stepping stones that might be used to build a path toward a system of child welfare that prioritizes families' needs. These strategies share a common foundational belief: when we meet families' needs, we will meet children's needs (Johnston et al., 2022).

Truth-telling

The First Nations Caring Society (FNCS) (2024) has set a strong example of the power of truth-telling in effecting transformative change. The I am a Witness campaign and the public dissemination of all affidavits and court materials for the Human Rights Tribunal Case against the Federal Government on behalf of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children are examples of effective use of truth-telling and transparency in the pursuit of social justice. Colonial atrocities perpetrated against Indigenous children, families, and communities by Canada and Canadians have caused detrimental trauma and harm across generations, communities, and nations, which continues today via the child welfare system. While the need for ongoing change and transformation of the current child welfare system remains, actions taken by the FNCS have been significant in working toward social justice and equity. The FNCS' (2024) pursuit of legal action via the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has resulted in changes to legislation and multi-million-

dollar settlement agreements, which will support Indigenous communities and agencies in addressing inequitable and racially biased child welfare services (FNCS, 2024). Given this success, I am curious about the potential impact of truth-telling about risk, through research on lived experiences, and through public truth-telling events, in building a collective resistance with enough strength to initiate shifts in practices and policies.

Brave, honest, and transformative discussions about child welfare workers' and parents' experiences of assessing and being assessed for risk occur regularly within the Child Welfare Truth-Telling Collective [CWTTC] (CWTTC, 2024). There are also times when workers and/or parents speak out against child welfare services or systems which have caused harm to children and families. However, these publicly made outcries seem to be insufficient to bring about significant change in child welfare. Evidence from the field of mental health has demonstrated the potential impacts of organized and formal acts of truth-telling as a strategy for resistance (Costa et al., 2012). Further use of this strategy is needed in child welfare, as families, child welfare workers, communities, and government authorities together can support connections and facilitate acts of resistance. Research centering the lived experiences and truths of parents and children who are the subjects of RAs is also needed, as child welfare literature has been largely exclusive of these perspectives to date. This includes research tasked with developing and evaluating evidence-based approaches which are commonly implemented with marginalized families. The experiences and voices of families whose lives are forever impacted by their involvement with child welfare systems must be present in every aspect of the changes to this oppressive system.

Harnessing the transformative power of language

When we continue to talk about risk, regardless of how we talk about it, we reinforce its importance within our society, and, more specifically, contribute to its sustained power for governing child welfare. Scholars emphasize how we can harness the power of discourse for social change by focusing on transforming language as a step toward transforming systems of government, control, and oppression (Chambon & Irving, 1999; Gillingham, 2006; Moffatt, 1999).

The disability movement has demonstrated how transforming discourse(s) can challenge systems of oppression and contribute to social justice for marginalized populations. Beginning in the 1970s, the disability movement centered person-first language to facilitate empowerment. Ultimately, discourses on disability shifted away from endorsing biomedical, pathologizing understandings of disability, and toward a social model of disability. Through the intentional reframing and use of language, individual "deficits" were redefined as societal barriers to accessibility, which must be addressed at societal and state levels to uphold the inherent rights of all people to thrive within their daily environments (Featherstone et al., 2016). Transforming the language of risk in child welfare could also have transformative impacts. Focusing discourse and language of risk on the deficits of society and its political and economic systems could support a move away from individualized, blame-focused discourses of risk.

Relationality: Re-centering connection and complexity

The risk-centric operations of and policies governing Anglo-American child welfare systems are both reductionist and isolating (Featherstone et al., 2019; Higgins et al., 2019) This is true for children, parents/caregivers, and child welfare workers. Families are labelled, reduced to a sum of scores of prescribed topics, values, and circumstances which determine the need for intervention. When that need (or risk) is deemed "high", separation is viewed as the means to safety (Featherstone et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2022). Similarly, for child welfare workers, their professional knowledge, expertise and relational skills are reduced to the ability to perform a primary checklist of assessment tasks (Gillingham, 2011). Workers are expected to follow these rigid, reductionist policies and practices which epistemologically conflict with their professional (and for me, personal) values and ways of being and doing social work practice from a helping and relational stance (Bosk & Feely, 2020; Featherstone et al., 2016; Gillingham, 2006). This does not mean that evidence-based practices (or even RAs) have no place in child welfare. Rather, it is the need to allow relationships to become central and for evidence-based assessments and interventions to be secondary to relationships. Evidence-based assessments and interventions must be re-conceptualized as tools within child welfare service provision, rather than being relied upon as the child welfare service.

The need to prioritize relationality in child welfare work has been recently highlighted in the literature (Ferguson, 2016; Munro & Hardie, 2019). This means focusing on relationships, connections, trust, humility, and embracing complexity in our understandings of and interactions with families. While this change cannot occur overnight, there are ways that relationships and an ethic of care (Collins, 2003) can be promoted in child welfare work. Normalcy practices, which emphasize the continued involvement of children in their usual peer and family activities, is one way this change can begin (Font & Gershoff, 2021). Maintaining the activities that are important to children and their families – such as sleepovers, engaging in religious practices together, and family dinners – within their usual environments, can convey care for families. Asking parents what they need and spending time with them in their homes to work collaboratively toward meeting those needs not only shows care to parents, but also supports children, because the needs and well-being of children are inextricable from those of their families (Ferguson, 2016; Johnston et al., 2022).

Taking risks in practice and research

> As a child welfare worker and now a doctoral student, I often think about what transformative change could look like in child welfare systems. I believe in the ability of research to encourage workers to reflect on their own hopes and dreams for the future of child welfare and to instill hope in the possibilities of alternative ways of doing and thinking about child welfare. As I continue my doctoral studies, I recognize the risk of reinforcing the status quo if I engage only in the

current scholarly conversations. It is through these discourses that negative understandings of risk have been accepted as truth, overlooking the risks of success and positive change. With this in mind, I endeavor to embrace risk-taking as an opportunity to contribute to positive transformation. It is through collaboration and collective action that we can begin to develop alternative approaches to child welfare which de-center risk. I believe that such a process, while complex and challenging, "risks" only the potential to advance socially just child welfare services for children, families, and communities.

Conclusion

Risk has permeated almost every facet of Anglo-American child welfare systems. The political and social context of risk within a reflexive modern society have contributed to the emergence and maintenance of child welfare policies and practices rooted within the risk paradigm. Critiques of RA in child welfare span over three decades, emphasizing how RA fails to effectively prevent child fatalities and fails to address systemic issues of colonialism, racism, and poverty, and further perpetrates social injustices against already marginalized children and families. Alternative approaches to child welfare that move beyond risk have been largely discussed hypothetically in the literature. Evidence of efforts to move beyond risk and the theoretical alternatives that have been recommended in existing literature include truth-telling, a social model of care, and a relational approach to working with children and families. These alternatives provide hopeful possibilities requiring further exploration, particularly through research with individuals with lived experiences as workers in these risky systems of child welfare. Social work's fundamental commitment to social justice requires that we act with courage, empathy, respect, and care for children, families, communities, and society. Children are our future, and it is social work's responsibility to ensure that all children can grow and thrive to reach their full potential; beyond a child welfare system constrained by risk.

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