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# Child Welfare Intervention in Visible Minority Immigrant Families: The Role of Poverty and the Mothering Discourse

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# Child Welfare Intervention in Visible Minority Immigrant Families

## The Role of Poverty and the Mothering Discourse

*This paper explores the relationships between barriers to employment for visible minority immigrants, poverty, Mothering Discourse and child welfare intervention. It is argued that the barriers that visible minority immigrant face in securing suitable employment is the main factor contributing to the poverty of these groups in Canada. The stressors associated with lack of financial security and its associated problems, combined with perceptions regarding cultural norms related to parenting within visible minority populations make the children in these families at risk of child abuse and neglect. The North American Mothering Discourse and the manner in which it causes visible minority immigrant mothers to be labelled as “bad mothers” are discussed.*

The past decade has seen a predominance of immigrants coming to Canada from Asia and South East Asia (CIC, 2007). The rapid growth of this population has led to estimates that by the year 2017 half of all visible minority persons will be South Asian or Chinese (Mitchell, 2005). These populations are very diverse and range from immigrants with poor English and French skills who come as dependents under the family class, to highly skilled professionally trained immigrants who immigrate to Canada under the economic class. Despite the diversity, these families share three common features that impact their parenting in Canada—barriers in securing and finding suitable employment; the loss of social support systems and traditional ways of raising children; and a North American Mothering discourse that stresses the primacy of the mother as caregiver and an orientation towards the rights of individuals as against those of collectives. It is not surprising then, that visible minority populations (who are likely to be first and second generation immigrants) are overrepresented in child welfare. Further, both popular and academic literature often highlight

cases of physical violence towards the child within visible minority immigrant families, feeding commonly held views that visible minority immigrant families are abusive towards their children.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section one discusses the obstacles immigrants face in finding suitable employment in Canada. Section two highlights the phenomenon of immigrant poverty as an outcome of these barriers and discusses the relation of this poverty to child welfare intervention. Section three discusses the manner in which cultural norms related to visible minority parenting are described in the literature and the relationship of such discourses to child welfare intervention. The final section traces the North American Mothering Discourse and the manner in which it causes visible minority immigrant mothers to be misrecognised as “bad mothers.”

### **Barriers to immigrant employment**

In 2008, over 60 percent of the total immigrants admitted into the country were economic immigrants (CIC, 2009). New immigrants are selected on the basis of a points system that allows them entry into the country if they meet the skills set requirement of the Canadian economy (Lee, 2000). They also have to prove proficiency in either the English or the French language. A majority of new immigrants to Canada are in the working age group, highly qualified and do not have disabilities that prevent them from working (Fleury, 2007; Lee, 2000). Yet, new immigrants face many difficulties in the recognition of their credentials (Reitz, 2005; Sparks and Wolfson, 2001), in finding suitable employment (Sparks and Wolfson, 2001), and earning an adequate income.

It is not uncommon to hear about highly educated foreign trained professionals working as security guards or taxi drivers. The expensive, complex and time consuming process of becoming a member of a regulated profession or trade becomes a great deterrent to most newcomers who are struggling to earn enough to meet the basic needs of the family. Visible minority immigrants seeking employment are told that they lack “Canadian experience.” They question how they can ever gain this experience if they are barred entry into any employment at the onset. The Public Policy Forum describes the requirement for Canadian experience as “a retroactive condition placed on newcomers, impossible to fulfill without first being part of the workforce” (Liu, 2007). In most cases the requirement for “Canadian experience” can be understood to be a euphemism for “You are not like us,” “We don’t know if you work like us,” “We don’t know if you can fit in with us.” Erik Liu (2007) suggests that the requirement for Canadian work experience is a “cultural parameter” that is equated with proof of language skills and of ability to perform in a Canadian work environment (10).

Andrew Jackson (2001) advises us that it is lack of procedural fairness that contributes to visible minority foreign immigrants being overrepresented in low skilled jobs, as employers may not be prepared to undertake a fair or unbiased decision-making process to ascertain the suitability of the visible

minority immigrant. Much of past literature has proposed that the barriers visible minority immigrants encounter in finding employment stem from institutional/structural or hidden forms of racism (Morris and Gonsalves, n.d.; George, 2007; Townson, 2005). Faced with these numerous barriers in finding suitable employment, visible minority immigrants take up jobs that enable them to survive—typically poorly paid and not in their field or profession (George, 2007). That immigrants, and particularly visible minorities, are overrepresented among the poor in Canada (Jackson, 2001) is, therefore, not surprising.

### **Immigrant poverty and child welfare**

New immigrants to Canada form one of the five main groups likely to experience ongoing poverty in Canada (Hatfield cited in Fleury, 2007). In a study that examined the income differentials across Canadian communities using census data, Kevin Lee (2000) found that 30 percent of the immigrant populations lived below the poverty line in Canadian cities. This number was much higher than the 21.6 percent poverty rate among Canadian-born residents who resided in cities. Among these immigrants, newcomers or recent immigrants who had migrated in the past four years were the most likely to be poor and have incomes below the poverty line. Similar results were reported by another study that found that while the overall poverty rate in Canada was 21 percent (using pre-tax low income cut off measures), for visible minority persons the poverty rates were 38 percent. Of these, seven in ten persons were foreign born (Jackson, 2001). Analysis of the 2001 census highlights how the poverty rates for fairly recent immigrant women was 12 percent higher than for those of all the foreign born women. A majority of these newcomers were found to be belonging to visible minority groups (Townson, 2005). A fact sheet on Women and Poverty states that, “Education does not reduce the income gap between immigrant women and Canadian-born women” (Morris and Gonsalves, n.d.: 1). The fact sheet highlights discrepancy in incomes of new immigrants, who despite having a university degree and working full time, earned \$14,000 less than Canadian-born women.

There is much academic research focusing on the relationship between unemployment, poverty and its associated features and child maltreatment. Child maltreatment research has shown how such abuse is correlated with parental unemployment (Gillham et al., 1998), poverty, single parent families, parental substance abuse, social isolation and domestic violence (Fontes, 2002). An information sheet highlighting the findings of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) – 2003 (see Roy et al. 2005), shows that substantiated neglect was found to be the primary form of maltreatment in poorer households. Other studies reiterate similar findings by highlighting the association between stressful living situations such as poverty, and overcrowded households with increased risk of violence exposure (Jaycox et al., 2002).

Difficulties in finding employment is one of the main reasons for the

emergence of “satellite” or the “astronaut” children/family arrangements, where the immigrant family sends its children to the country of origin to be raised by the extended family (Tsang et al., 2003; Keung, 2009).

### **Perceptions regarding visible minority immigrant parenting and child welfare intervention**

The visible minority families’ cultural practices in relation to parenting and the manner in which these are interpreted in the Canadian context also make such families likely candidates for child welfare scrutiny and intervention. Sarah Maiter (2001) informs us that a popular training manual for child welfare practitioners advises that “some ethnic or cultural backgrounds may be more likely to condone severe spankings or beatings as a form of discipline” (Crawford qtd. in Maiter, 2001). A booklet for service providers working with immigrant families on issues related to child abuse and neglect (Preston, 2001) that uses the words “immigrants” synonymously with “minority” similarly identifies visible minority immigrant parents as a high-risk potentially abusive population which might be resistant to intervention. The text highlights perceptions, attitudes and reasons why immigrant parents might condone corporal punishment, and fear or resist authority or external intervention. Even the popular media appears to reflect the opinion that visible minority families are abusive to their children. In the words of Russell Peters (2006), a well-known Canadian comedian “One thing separates immigrant families from regular Canadian families. Doesn’t matter where your parents are from, if they weren’t born in this country they will whop your ass when you are growing up.” Media coverage of child deaths in visible minority families are often linked to “honour killings” (Rogan, 2008; Proudfoot, 2009) and repeatedly suggest these deaths are outcomes of the tussle between visible minority immigrant parents forcing their children to conform to their own customs and values which might be at odds with what the child understands to be relevant for him/her while growing up in Canadian society. In summary, there appears to be a common place assumption in Canadian society that visible minority immigrant families are violent towards their children

The academic literature too reflects these understandings. An article that compared the case characteristics and service outcomes of Aboriginal children, non-Aboriginal children and visible minority children being serviced by child welfare in Canada (Blackstock and Trocmé, 2004) found that compared to non-Aboriginal children, visible minority children in Canada have more than double the number of applications to child welfare court and almost as high child welfare placement as Aboriginal children. The primary form of maltreatment for the visible minority families was physical abuse related to disciplining or punishment of the child. A more recent study based on the CIS (Lavergne, Dufour, Trocmé, and Larrivée, 2008) found that children of colour are overrepresented in the child welfare investigations. The study found that children from Aboriginal and visible minority families were 1.77 times more

likely to be selected for investigation by child welfare services than children in the general population and that physical abuse was investigated and substantiated more often for children of Asian origin. The authors concluded that child and family risk factors alone did not account for the overrepresentation they observed and that a certain amount of racial bias might have a role to play in these disproportionate outcomes.

Sarah Maiter, Ramona Allagia and Nico Trocmé's study (2004) informs us that immigrant groups do not culturally sanction physical abuse towards children. However, many are likely to follow traditional norms while parenting such as a focus on a collectivist approach to parenting, dependency on familial/community support (Mitchell, 2005) and a tendency to sanction a more authoritarian approach to discipline (Chao, 1994). It would be fair to assume that most of these families would be immigrants or comprised of a mix of first generation and second generation immigrants who continue to be plagued by issues related to settlement and integration.

Thus, the literature seems to indicate a relationship between the barriers facing immigrants in their settlement process, their subsequent slide into poverty, common perceptions related to the parenting of visible minority families and child welfare intervention.

### **The mothering discourse, visible minority immigrants and child welfare**

A report highlighting the key findings of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect acknowledges that "some of the most prominent social and cultural dimensions contributing to maltreatment stem from poverty, social isolation, and inequality" (Trocmé and Wolf, 2001: 23). Research has reiterated the influence structural factors such as poverty; homelessness and addiction have on child maltreatment and subsequent involvement with child welfare, particularly among the Aboriginal populations (Blackstock, Trocmé and Bennett, 2004; Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin and Shangreux, 2005). Yet, when maltreatment does occur, for any or all of the reasons mentioned above, it is the mothering of the child that is taken to task. More often than not, it is the child's biological mother who is alleged to be the perpetrator of the abuse and neglect. The CIS – 2003 found that biological parents were most often the alleged perpetrators of physical abuse, neglect, and emotional maltreatment. Biological mothers were identified as the alleged perpetrators in 60 percent of the substantiated cases, across all categories of child maltreatment (Trocmé and Wolfe, 2001). In examining the discourses surrounding poverty and child maltreatment, Karen Swift (2002) summarizes the contradiction described above as "Poverty has always been a strong and recognized theme associated with cases of neglect. Nevertheless, the issue of neglect invariably resolves itself into one of personal problems" (88). The personal problems being referred to are those of the mother and her inability to parent her children effectively. Swift further reminds us that "the study of child neglect is, in effect, the study

of mothers who 'fail' (101).

Feminist authors have critiqued the dominant Mothering discourse and shown how it was created historically to serve the needs of a changing socio-economic and political society. Allison Griffith and Dorothy E. Smith (2005) demonstrate how the Mothering Discourse supports a North American nuclear family by tracing its historical trajectory. An excellent summary of the Mothering Discourse, as we experience it, is offered by Erika Horwitz and Bonita C. Long (2005) and Andrea O'Reilly (2004). The discourse, according to these authors, stresses on the primacy of the mother as the sole caregiver of children, both in order to develop crucial bonds with the child as well as to prevent insecure attachment and low self-esteem that are possible when children are left in the care of others. It further stresses that large amounts of time/all of the mother's time must be spent in nurturing, loving, caring and stimulating their child and that the child must take priority over a career. According to the discourse, the mother must be willing to sacrifice her own needs for those of the child to this end. The child is presumed to be inherently good, and misbehaviour on the part of the child is an indication of some need or that the mother is failing. Mothers are furthermore, expected to rely on experts for instructions on caring for their children.

The authors point to the contradictions and vested interests some of these discourses entail. The literature suggests that the "consequence of expecting mothers to be the sole source of attachment for children may be the easing of social responsibility and the promotion of an individualistic society" (Horwitz and Long, 2005: 99). I agree with the authors when they opine that such discourses exclude the voices of marginalised mothers and mothers in general.

O'Reilly (2005) describes Motherhood in the western context as "organised as a patriarchal institution that is deeply oppressive to women" (126). The idealised images the discourse creates are impossible to achieve for most women. The mothers who strive to achieve this ideal mother condition often face guilt and anxiety as they try to attain the unachievable. The oppression through the mothering discourse becomes magnified manifold when it is applied to visible minority immigrant mothers who are struggling for survival and may require to work outside the house to help feed the family. Such mothers do not have the copious amounts of time required to bond with the children or to provide them with the resources the experts feel are crucial for their development. Also, visible minority immigrant mothers may have very different value systems regarding the role of the wider family in the care giving of the child. They may come from collectivist cultures where the responsibility of child care and parenting is shared with the extended family (Mitchell, 2005). In such cultures, mothers alone often have a limited (but important) role to play in parenting, and the father, grandparents, aunts, uncles are customarily entitled to share in the rights and responsibilities that accompany the "parenting" of children in the family. These kinds of social supports are not available to the immigrant family in Canada, adding to the stress of mothering. Language barriers may prevent



the mothers from accessing resources or obtaining help relating to difficulties in parenting, as might financial and transportation barriers. The Mothering discourse effectively makes the visible minority immigrant woman the “bad mother”—one who is unable or unwilling to be the one solely responsible to nurture her child to become an independent, autonomous human being, and, one who is incapable of devoting copious amounts of time or resources for the child’s growth and development. As O’Reilly (2004) notes, those who may not choose or be able to subscribe to the good mother discourse, are deemed “unfit mothers who find themselves and their mothering under public scrutiny and surveillance” (16). Bedtime routines provide a striking example of the differences in mothering practice that in turn hook into values that the two different cultures consider important—in many South Asian families, children would typically sleep in the same bed or same room as the mother/parents or grandmother. Generally the child would be held/rocked/patted to sleep. A crying child would be picked up and gently soothed. The child’s needs for security generally take precedence over the needs of the parents for privacy. Compare this practice to sleep rituals encouraged in Canada where the child is expected to sleep in a room separate from the child’s parents, and where the parent is advised not to rock or soothe the baby and to delay responding to the child when she cries (Landy, 2007). In Canada the child is expected to develop his/her self-reliance while providing the parents with the required space to assert their own unique relationship as a couple. The prominent discourse is taken up by societal institutions that have the authority to enforce the same. Informal conversations with two child welfare workers have revealed that the child co-sleeping with the parents is looked down upon in the practice context.

My own experiences as an immigrant parent, and that of many others I know, have made me conscious of the daily stress to attend to the Mothering discourse in Canada, especially when these discourses contradict what we have learnt through other discourses in our countries of origin.

### **Conclusion and future directions**

Much of the literature on visible minority immigrant parents has focussed on the “high risk” nature of this group for child welfare. For example, a documentary for service providers working with immigrant families on issues related to child maltreatment (Preston, 2001) identifies visible minority immigrant parents as a high-risk potentially abusive population which might be resistant to intervention. This paper has tried to problematize this kind of demonizing. By demonstrating the relationships of barriers in employment and subsequent poverty with child maltreatment I suggest that the Canadian government has to take more responsibility for the integration of skilled immigrants it attracts to the country. By drawing attention to the dominant Mothering discourse that permeates all societal institutions in Canada, including child welfare, I suggest that current understandings of cross cultural social work practice are inadequate as they do not seek to truly understand and accept alternate ways of parenting.



Through this process I hope the emphasis in intervening with visible minority immigrant families shifts from “mother blaming” to providing meaningful supports and a more open dialogue of the various ways of mothering.

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