RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

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Rules of Engagement: Do Strengths-based practices such as Signs of Safety Foster or Hinder Worker/Client Rapport Building?

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Abstract

This research project interviewed child protection workers to understand how they used strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model in practice to facilitate engagement and build rapport with families. In addition, child protection workers were asked for their definitions of engagement and rapport building, since these concepts have multiple definitions in child welfare. In semi-structured individual interviews, child protection workers provided their perspectives regarding what fostered or hindered their efforts to engage with families. A structural and critical lens was applied to the analysis of the data, to reveal what organizational and relational factors positively or negatively influenced engagement.

This study found that all workers identified strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model as producing positive outcomes. The workers' descriptions of strengths-based practice included positive aspects such as being forthright about their role and their mandate, and working from the family's strengths instead of focusing solely on risk. Workers' responses regarding the Signs of Safety model varied. Two workers were from an agency (CAS-A) that promoted and used Signs of Safety with families, and two workers were from an agency (CAS-B) that had just began to use the model in settings with colleagues. Workers' descriptions of the model were positive and highlighted the collaborative aspects of the model, its inclusion of the family in planning, and affording the workers with a balanced assessment that contained elements of safety and risk.

In contrast, this study found that despite the strengths-based focus of these approaches, they had limitations. Workers described factors within and external to the worker/client relationship that influenced whether or not workers would use either approach. All workers discussed instances when engagement with a family was not successful, and consistently

described client resistance as a barrier to the process. However, this study found that client

resistance was connected to power dynamics present in the worker/client relationship, and the

dual role workers had to assume to do their job and satisfy their agency mandate.

The workers interviewed for this study described reverting to their role of investigator,

when the family was resistant. This study found that a worker's authority was implied, and

related to a family's feelings of powerlessness and fear. All workers provided examples of both

types of resistance. As a result, this study concluded that strengths-based approaches could not

address the issue of power, and were effective only with the family's cooperation.

Workers described wanting to apply strengths-based approaches but felt overwhelmed by

organizational factors such as time constraints due to caseloads, and excessive administrative

burden. This study found that these factors were influenced by Provincial policy, which

emphasizes productivity and cost efficiency over family engagement. Workers identified lack of

agency support to apply strengths-based approaches as a barrier, with the exception being CAS-

A, that promoted the Signs of Safety model and permitted its workers to be interviewed for this

study.

The findings of this study have direct implications for practice and future research. To

address the issues identified by this research, practice and policy may need to be modified to

promote strengths-based practices to offer services that will meet the needs and safety of the

child and family. Further research is recommended, with a larger sample from an agency that

uses strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model, to determine whether positive

outcomes can be linked with these approaches. It is also recommended that research include the

perspectives of child protection workers and families.

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Introduction

As a social worker, I feel the topic of engagement and rapport is an important aspect of working with families, particularly in the context of non-voluntary child protection services. This compassionate aspect of social work is reflected in the Code of Ethics, which is founded upon respecting and upholding the dignity of others, as well as a commitment to social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2017).

I began my academic journey while employed as a child protection worker. I chose the field of child protection because it was a good fit, given my background. I distinctly know how it feels to overcome adversity; I was not born into privilege and experienced poverty and discrimination. When I reflect on where I am today, I feel privileged. However, my past experiences allow me to see families through a different lens.

I learned through working in child protection that most workers were committed to working with families in an honest and direct manner. However, I discovered that engaging families was not easily accomplished in child protection work. I encountered practice challenges related to power dynamics, and the dual role workers must inhabit. Thus, as a child protection worker I felt caught between abiding by the Children's Aid Society's (CAS) mandate, while attempting to work collaboratively with families. This was a delicate balance, as the two roles worked in opposition to another.

As a child protection worker, I found that most families I encountered were reluctant and at times hostile toward me when I tried to engage them. I understood where their strong emotional responses derived from. I was aware that I held significant power, and the family's

fear of the unknown caused them to react and behave in ways that were situational. I came to the conclusion that most families were more worried about what I might do with my power, and as a result they complied with whatever I or the agency recommended.

My experience using the Signs of Safety model was limited, but I found that connecting with families around their strengths was beneficial, and certainly preferable to a depersonalized, investigative approach. However, I had questions about these approaches, and whether they were effective in child protection. I wondered for whom these approaches best served in the worker/client relationship, considering the unresolved issue of inequality.

I thought critically about my role as a child protection worker and questioned if good intentions were enough, or if I was perpetuating power inequities by virtue of my position. I wondered if strengths-based practices were simply another way to convince families of what they needed to do to appease the CAS. I was aware that systems and structures were oppressing families, and at times I felt as though I was contributing to that.

As a child protection worker, I was aware of the organizational factors that were influencing the way I conducted my practice. I felt my passion regarding engagement was hampered by standards and policies that did not promote the use of strengths-based practices. I desperately wanted to use these approaches but was hindered by time, caseload, and administrative burden. At times, I felt I was doing families a disservice, but felt powerless to change the system, and focused merely on surviving it.

The questions I had led me to think critically, and motivated me to explore learning opportunities. I chose to 'not assume' that my opinion reflected how every child protection worker thought. This led to my research focus, where I wanted to interview child protection

workers to explore their perceptions on engagement and rapport, and to determine if it was

enhanced (or not) by social work theories and or models.

The specific research questions I wanted to explore were:

- How do child protection workers engage with the families they work with?

- Are strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model effective with

  engagement and rapport building?

Therefore, the goal of this research is to understand how child protection workers build

and maintain rapport and engage with families, in the context of non-voluntary child protection

services. In addition, to explore the perspectives of child protection workers' experiences on

their use of strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model to enrich our understanding

and knowledge regarding the efficacy and limitations of these approaches with families.

The next section reviews literature relevant to: rapport building and engagement

(research conducted from the perspectives of child protection workers & clients), strengths-based

practice (definitions, how the approach is used, benefits & limitations), the Signs of Safety

model (overview, uses, benefits & limitations), policy (positive & negative influences on

workers & clients) and the use of self (how the researcher navigates their insider/outsider role).

Literature Review

The literature review will examine academic and scholarly work focusing on rapport building and family engagement with child protection workers and service users. Engagement is a process in social work that involves a worker and a client developing a working relationship. Rapport is an aspect of the engagement process, where the worker establishes trust with the family, and is maintained by the worker through a collaborative working relationship with the family. To engage with a family in a child protection services, a worker must skilfully and openly communicate with a family and or individual (Dumbrill, 2006; Oliver & Charles, 2015). A successful process depends on worker characteristics, practices, and the response by the client (Drake, 1994). Engagement in child protection is different from engagement in other disciplines of social work, because of the non-voluntary aspect present in this type of work. Families are referred to child protection services because they are suspected of child maltreatment, and it is the worker's mandate to investigate the concerns (Drake, 1994; Schrieber, Fuller & Paceley, 2013). Therefore, engagement and rapport building are challenging to achieve, given the sensitive nature of this area of social work provision.

The literature regarding strengths-based theories and the Signs of Safety model will be explored as it relates to engagement and rapport building with child protection workers. The purpose of examining these approaches is to understand whether they contribute to positive engagement and rapport and to determine who benefits from the application of either strengths-based practice or the Signs of Safety model.

Frontline practice is governed by guidelines and policies in directing child protection workers in "how" they carry out their work with families, which works in contrast to the notion

of engagement (Smith & Donovan, 2003). Therefore, exploring the literature to gain an

understanding of how social workers are positioned in terms of authority and power, as well 'use

of self' (Mandell; 2007; 2008) in practice, will illustrate whether these factors positively or

negatively influence practice.

Engaging & Building Rapport in Child Welfare Practice:

Drake (1994), Lapierre & Cote (2011), Lee & Ayon (2004) explain that rapport is a

starting point of engaging families in child protection and focuses on worker/client relationship

competencies, such as worker attitude, communication skills and directness. This process is

important where tensions of family members are heightened due to involvement in child

protection services. Drake (1994) stresses the importance of building and maintaining rapport as

a crucial aspect of child protection practice and that "the prime benefit of an effective

worker/client relationship lies in the enhanced level of safety afforded [to] the child" (p. 601).

Child protection work is sensitive work, where clients at most times are non-voluntary.

Whereas, in other areas of social work, clients choose to be involved with a social worker and

seek out helping services (Drake, 1994). Gladstone et al. (2012) emphasize terms like rapport,

relationships and engagement to describe a process where trust is established with the desired

outcome of engaging with a client or family.

Arbeiter & Toros (2017) explain that "collaboration between a worker and family could

be understood on two levels, what it should be in theory and what it actually is in practice",

which means that although workers want to engage with families, other factors influence how

practice is actually conducted (pp. 20-21). In a study interviewing parents regarding their

perceptions of child welfare, Dumbrill (2006) explains that from the first meeting with families,

the relationship between the worker and family is unequal. The parents described feeling

"sceptical" that their worker was acting in their children's best interests, as well fearful of a

worker's power to apprehend their child(ren)(Dumbrill, 2006). Parents felt they had to comply

with a child protection intervention because "one rarely won a fight with child protection

services" (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 33). In their research with child protection workers and families

regarding engagement, Arbeiter & Toros (2017) found that workers were aware of the power

they hold, and it was their choice to use either a supportive or intrusive approach with families.

Therefore, the purpose of rapport building and engagement is to decrease power inequities and

share power, in part by the worker openly acknowledging the power they hold and adopting an

empathetic, non-judgmental approach with families (Dumbrill, 2006; Oliver & Charles, 2015).

However, Dumbrill (2006) and Mandell (2008) indicate that the worker's use of power dictates

whether rapport building and engagement will be successful. Therefore, if a family's voice is

not considered in the early stages of engagement, then families feel powerless to affect change in

their lives and to work with a worker.

According to Kriz et al., (2012) and Schrieber et al. (2013), most parents involved in

child protection services have a preconceived idea why a child protection worker would be

involved in their lives, and that is to apprehend their child(ren). While clients and workers have

similar ideas about what was needed to achieve rapport, such as transparency and trust, this is not

always the reality (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Drake, 1994). Many parents fear the involvement of

child protection and having their children removed from the family (Lavalette, 2011; Lemay,

2011). This preconceived idea of child protection workers as "baby snatchers" is influenced by

the media, community and or prior involvement of someone they know with the CAS (Kriz et

al., 2012; Schrieber et al., 2013). Families involved in the child welfare system tend to be non-voluntary, which means they have no option but to participate and address the child protection concerns or lose their child(ren) (Schrieber et al., 2013). Arbeiter & Toros (2017) and Broadhurst et al. (2011) highlight that rapport building between workers and families at times is not successful and clients resist involvement from Children's Aid Societies. These authors continue to explain that resistance occurs when child protection agencies assume the authority to define problems and their solutions for families (Broadhurst et al., 2011). As a result, the family either 'passively' or 'actively' resists the worker. Broadhurst et al. (2011) describe that "the local authority's assumed epistemological privilege is not always shared by parents who may consider themselves better able to define their own problems and preferred forms of help" (p. 531). Consequently, oppressed and marginalized families are put into a position of failure because of the perception that they are incapable of making changes in their lives (Drake, 1994; Dumbrill, 2006). For example, a family would resist their worker when they had a difference of opinion regarding interpretations, goals and expectations required to resolve the issue.

Dumbrill (2006) elucidates that a family's perception of power may vary according to the approach the worker chooses, as well the attitudes and assumptions the worker brings with them. If a worker attempts to engage with a family by asserting their authority and power, of course they may have clients resist them. However, if a worker engages with a family showing compassion and understanding to what the family is about to endure, the family may be more tolerant in working with the worker. Drake (1994), Dumbrill (2006) and Lapierre & Cote (2011) speak to the language and personality used by workers as key factors in relationship and rapport building. Similarly, Arbeiter & Toros (2017), De Boer & Coady (2007), and Dumbrill (2006) explain that when child protection workers approached families in a clear and non-

judgemental way, parents are able to relax and engage with initial meetings with the child

protection worker. Families that felt included were more apt to want to work in addressing the

concerns and ensure their children were safe (Drake, 1994; Schrieber et al., 2013; Trotter, 2002).

In contrast, Dumbrill (2006) clarifies that in some cases, building a positive relationship is not

possible and workers must resort back to a more intrusive approach. Therefore, the context of

any given child protection situation determines which approach a worker will use according to

their agency's mandate.

Smith &Donovan (2003) found workers would disengage and revert to an expert-led

approach, even if that meant going against the family's trust. Families reported they felt

betrayed by the worker and avoided participating in any part of the plan of care (Dumbrill, 2006;

Smith & Donovan, 2003). Arbeiter & Toros (2017), Dumbrill (2006) and Smith & Donovan

(2003) agree that applying client-centered approaches in child welfare can be barriers in working

with families; however it is not the fault of the worker. These workers are following

organizational policies, with the added pressures by their managers, the Ministry of Children and

Youth Services (MCYS) and time constraints, all of which have an effect on the process.

Research into the phenomena of client resistance conducted by Broadhurst et al. (2011)

illustrates a distinction between 'active' and 'passive' forms of client resistance. Clients and

child protection workers competed for conversational space during their initial meetings, and the

client's voice was often lost or ignored. This source of powerlessness resulted in the family

either reacting actively or passively against the child protection workers (Broadhurst et al., 2011;

Dumbrill, 2006; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Those families that actively resisted were labelled as

'uncooperative' (Smith & Donovan, 2003). Whereas, those families that acted with passive

resistance, were viewed as 'feigning cooperation' with the workers. Broadhurst et al. (2011)

sees families with passive resistance as "simply agreeing because they have limited power, particularly if a parent has no alternative suggestions of their own, and is not an agreement to accept the agency's advice" (p. 530).

Similarly, Yatchmenoff (2005) sees a distinct difference between family engagement and passively submitting, which is described as parents 'going through the motions', yet not fully committed and could result in families becoming uncooperative by not showing up or missing appointments. It is important that workers be vigilant and look for ways for the family to be invested in the process (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Further, Broadhurst et al. (2011), Dumbrill (2006) and Smith & Donovan (2003) caution that families may accept inapplicable services to simply end their involvement with the child protection agency as quickly as they can. If this is the case, this could result in unresolved issues and or risk that could involve the family at a future date with the agency.

Arbeiter & Toros (2017) highlight the issue of powerlessness and explain that families expected workers to define the problem and tell them what do to, which is an example of passive resistance. In addition, Arbeiter & Toros (2017) and Lemay (2011) explain that child protection systems inherently and normally use a 'language of deficit' as they work with families which locate the problem within the family and hinder the process of engagement and rapport. In addition, the expectations of an agency can also be disempowering to the family, even if the worker's intent is to be helpful. Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Dumbrill (2006) explain that the words and language can be used to enable or disable parents with either support or disincentive in making the changes regarding their parenting. Therefore, the tendency to perceive client resistance within the confines of cooperation can add a complicating factor to the process of family engagement (Broadhurst et al., 2011). These key aspects of practice set the foundation in

either building trust between the worker and family or disengaging a family from the process. Connolly (2007) and Rees (1999) suggest that client/worker tensions are created by neoliberal ideologies, and new language of social work needs to be developed, favouring the perspectives of service users. Connolly (2007) elaborates further:

> The language used to describe practice critically shapes the way in which practice is thought about and responded to. Using the language of social work within the practice also signals a commitment to the return of social work values. (p. 835)

Therefore, workers can resist managerialist forms of organizational pressure by developing sound judgment skills, but this may be difficult to achieve without the support of the agency (Carey, 2007).

Arbeiter & Toros (2017), Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Mandell (2008) explain that one of the challenges child protection workers negotiate is their dual role of 'supporter' and 'investigator'. They explain that the supportive role is aligned with the core values of social work, as well with the personal beliefs as a worker. The investigative role is aligned with concepts of policing or detective work, thus proving or finding that someone is guilty of doing something unacceptable. Therefore, workers are caught between wanting to create a trustworthy relationship with their client in humanistic way, yet their efforts are hampered by their job in policing families (Lavalette, 2011; Mandell, 2008).

De Boer & Coady (2007), and Mandell (2008) explain that child protection workers tend to resist the policing perspective of their work by adopting informal approaches that 'go above and beyond' their role with a client or family (De Boer & Coady, 2007; and Dumbrill, 2006). This allows the family to see their worker as a potential source of support, rather than someone out to "get them" (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Yatchmenoff, 2005).

Margolin (1997) explains that when social workers engage with clients, they are operating under a 'guise of kindness' to manipulate the client into doing what is required by the child protection agency. He suggests that the process of engagement and rapport building are ways workers can gain false trust with a client and family while justifying their continued surveillance as required by them through the child protection service (p. 25). Further, he emphasizes that although the discourse of social work has changed from seeing the client as inferior to "emphasis on empowerment", the intrusive ways in which interventions continue to be carried out maintains oppression (pp.124-125). He states the reason why the client is marginalized is because social work defines itself by "improving the process [of intervention] rather than examining the result" (p. 161) and that interventions ensure social workers; "Are efficient, thorough, on the top of our game" (p. 173).

Margolin (1997) explains more accurately that it is the client who convinces the worker that their intervention is helpful and effective, because they have no choice but to comply. He states that social work's "secret is coercion" based upon its notion of what an appropriate family constitutes (p. 179). He concludes that social workers "are victims too...living by two contradictory imperatives simultaneously", which suggests that it is the system, and not necessarily the workers who are the focus of his critique. However, he sheds light on conniving ways in which social work perpetuates a climate of (mis)trust between client and worker.

While this section highlighted the importance in understanding rapport building and collaboration with clients, what we understand in theory is not actually happening in practice (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017). It is important for workers to understand their "good intentions" may be challenged by the client who may then be labelled as "resistant" (active or passive).   Yet, workers need to be cautious with the way in which they use their "good intentions" and how this

could be viewed inadvertently as a form of manipulation. The next section examines child welfare policies that shape practice and how neoliberal and managerial ideologies have compromised the worker/client relationship.

Child Welfare Policy: Implications for Practice

Children's Aid Societies in Ontario are guided by the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), this legislation provides the guidelines and regulations in protecting children's health and safety (Service Ontario, 1990). For example, section 37(3) of the CFSA stipulates the conditions under which a child protection worker may act in the best interests of the child and outlines the permanency and court processes. However, it does not address how protection workers will engage with families (Service Ontario, 1990, p. 28). As a result, agencies are provided to some extent autonomy in how they engage with a family.

Lemay (2011), Mahon (2008) and Rees (1999) explain that changes to social policy over the last three decades have resulted in the government becoming less invested in social problems; thus, delegating responsibility to provinces and municipalities. Lemay (2011) and Rees (1999) explain that the financial limitations placed on Children's Aid Societies are aligned with a neoliberal ideology that supports private market over public service. This results in child protection agencies being responsible for provincial policy and providing measurable compliance outcomes to the work they do, rather than truly focusing on the needs of the child and or family. Carey (2007) states that such a policy objective creates a "social work business" where justified productivity is emphasized (p. 94). As a result of policy shifting, standards and employee satisfaction decreased, while caseloads, staff turnover and administrative tasks all increased

(Carey, 2007). Lemay (2011) concludes that time became scarce as practice became more restrictive. Workers spent more time in front of their computers than they did working directly with families.

Arbeiter & Toros (2017), Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Carey (2007) explain that service delivery focused more on meeting the policy objectives, therefore dehumanizing and devaluing the work of child protection workers. Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Smith & Donovan (2003) explain that workers, in their haste to complete government forms, sometimes excluded families from decisions and planning. Because of less time devoted to families, workers were left deciding which cases were priority in relation to crisis and increased paperwork (Carey, 2007; Lapierre & Cote, 2011; Lavalette, 2011). Smith & Donovan (2003) explain that due to the increased standardization and accountability to child protection policy, workers replaced direct contact with phone calls, and focused on families that were easier to work with (p. 550). Workers coped with the time restrictions and the "people processing" aspect of their job, but it inevitably led to the depersonalization of their work (Carey, 2007; Smith & Donovan, 2003).

How policy implicates practice is significant because the cumulative effects are felt by both the worker and the family. Lemay (2011) explains that in the rush to "get things done" child protection workers are not questioning whether they are "doing things right" (p. 608). Consequently, opportunities for successful family engagement are not prioritized as a form of meeting agency standards (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Broadhurst et al., 2011; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Carey (2007) explains that most service users are at a disadvantage when it comes to policy focused agencies as issues such as poverty, homelessness, and unemployment reduce opportunities and place additional stress on families involved in child protection. He explains

that these factors contribute to an atmosphere of mistrust which complicates family engagement and rapport building.

The next section covers strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model which are tools to assist child protection workers with assessment, planning and family engagement. How these tools contribute to or hinder the process of worker engagement and rapport building with families involved with child protection will be explored.

Tools of Engagement and Rapport Building

Solution-Focused Theory

Solution-focused theory is a collaborative approach used in social work to identify client competencies by asking 'exception', 'miracle' and 'scaling' questions (Payne, 2014; West, Bubenzer, Smith & Hamm, 1997). In their interview with the creators of solution-focused therapy, West et al. (1997) explain these techniques are designed to explore how the client managed adversity in the past and what the exception was to their situation. This allows the client to define potential solutions to issues, while the worker balances the client's perspective and challenges them to look for solutions (West et al., 1997). However, Payne (2014) cautions that in child protection, the approach may be critiqued for painting a purely positive image of clients, which is insufficient to address the safety of children. Therefore, he recommends an "understanding of what the theory requires us to do, within the context and the [agency] mandate", which means ensuring clients are in a safe situation before applying the approach (Payne, 2014, p. 247).

Solution-focused theory is similar to strengths-based theory as both assume the client has

competencies and is able to find exceptions and solutions to problems, which is accomplished by

the worker carefully questioning the client. The goal for the worker and client would be to

jointly plan for the child(ren)'s safety based upon how the client perceives the situation that

necessitated involvement with child protection services.

Strengths-based Approach

Strengths-based practice is a theoretical approach used by child protection workers to

identify strengths and successes of the client. According to Guo & Tsui (2010), this approach

assumes that all families have competencies and deserve to be included and respected in an

honest and direct manner. They explain that typically the family is labelled as a 'case' therefore

defining them as a 'problem' within the context of the agency. Staudt, Howard & Drake (2001)

stress that these concepts are not 'new' to social work, and aspects of the strengths-based

approach previously existed as "good social work practice" (p. 2).

Guo &Tsui (2010), Saleeby (1996), and Staudt et al. (2001) explain that strengths-based

practice eliminates the framing of families as 'problems', and views affected families in an

alternative way.   According to Saleeby (1996), key aspects of strengths-based practice are

empowerment, resiliency and membership (p. 298). He highlights community as a source of

support, which therefore allows child protection workers to consider the family's cultural

identity and membership within their community.

Guo & Tsui (2010), Oliver & Charles (2015), and Saleeby (1996) explain that strengths-

based practice allows workers to reject the dominant discourse that is risk focused, and

encourages a collaborative approach to addressing child protection concerns. Oliver & Charles

(2015) emphasize the purpose of strengths-based practice is for the family to make their own child safety decisions, while the worker carefully uses their authority to weigh in on the client's decisions.

In contrast, Oliver & Charles (2015) conducted research on child protection workers' perceptions of strengths-based practice and they found that workers felt the approach curtailed their ability to be direct in cases of conflict, because the approach relied on collaboration. Workers reported feeling at an impasse when the theory was insufficient to address children's safety, despite the presence of strengths (p. 140). For this reason, Oliver & Charles (2015) caution child protection workers that the strengths-based approach should be used in conjunction with other approaches such as Anti-Oppressive Practice, because strictly focusing on a family's strengths will not address power imbalances or differences between workers and families. Lastly, Oliver & Charles (2015) emphasize the need for workers to be aware that some families under stress are unable to think of themselves in terms of their strengths. Saleeby (1996) explains that one critique of the approach is that it "downplays or ignores the real problem" (p. 302). Strengths-based practice does not dismiss the reality of a situation but emphasizes possibilities over hopelessness (Oliver & Charles, 2015). Further, Oliver & Charles (2015) recommend that strengths-based practice be balanced with "purposeful use of authority...that supported workers to be as directive as they deemed necessary to ensure child safety" (p. 139). De Boer & Coady (2007), and Kriz et al. (2012) explain that strengths-based practice maintains a dual focus as it pertains to a family's involvement with Children's Aid Society. By working with the family's strengths, the worker is likely to identify the family's motivation to affect positive change. As well, this positive interaction may result in a shift of the family's perception regarding the Children's Aid Society.

The Signs of Safety model was developed from strengths-based and solution-focused theories. This model is used in many child protection agencies around the world (Oliver & Charles, 2015). The next section will review the literature on the Signs of Safety model and will provide an understanding the model in child protection work.

<u>The Signs of Safety Model</u>

The Signs of Safety model is a hybridization based upon strengths-based and solution-focused practice (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Keddell (2014) explains that the model emphasizes collaboration with families to assess safety, identify strengths and resources to ensure children are protected, while maintaining the child with the family when possible. In a report by A. Bunn (2013, pp. 20-33), several components of the model are described, these include: the risk assessment framework, which includes an assessment and planning form and the 'three columns' case mapping forms; exception and scaling question templates; and tools for children including 'three houses', 'wizards and fairies', and the 'safety house' templates. Child protection workers can use these components to build and establish rapport with families (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Therefore, the Signs of Safety model "implies that parents have competencies" (Keddell, 2014, p. 73) and are able to provide their input regarding their involvement with child protective services.

The most common Signs of Safety tool used by child protection workers is the "three columns" case mapping template (Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p. 104) which assists workers to visualize a child/family's case by organizing the worries, strengths and next steps (Keddell, 2014; Lwin, et. al., 2014; and Stanley & Mills, 2014). Stanley & Mills (2014) explain that case mapping promotes a dialogue between the worker and the family members focused on how

safety is created and maintained for the children in the family. However, Turnell & Edwards (1999) stress that child's safety is paramount to all practice and a consideration, therefore highlighting the limitations regarding the family's input to this approach.

With respect to ensuring safety of the child(ren), Bunn (2013) suggests that the worker should be truthful and provide clear explanations around the legal responsibilities of the worker and the agency. She explains labels such as; "danger statements,' 'safety goals,' and 'bottom lines' emphasize the tasks that need to be accomplished in order to move in a positive direction" (pp. 23-24). However, Keddell (2014) adds that 'bottom lines' are agency objectives to define what needs to happen for a family's file to close, ensuring that the agency's "institutional/epistemological privilege" is present, which suggests that while the Signs of Safety model promotes collaboration and strengths, the rationale to close a family's file is still defined by the agency.

Keddell (2014) identifies a number of limitations with Signs of Safety. She explains that the model assumes families are able to identify their strengths, which may be unrealistic if the family is thinking of themselves in terms of their imperfections or if they have been made to feel that the problem is located within them. Arbeiter & Toros (2017) and Lee & Ayon (2004) agree with Keddell (2014) and explain that in reality, families do not have control or influence regarding the decisions that are made for them. Keddell (2014) continues by explaining that ultimately Signs of Safety cannot address the structural factors that sustain social inequality, which may explain why only some child protection agencies promote the model's use. Thus, Signs of Safety is not immune to criticism and there are certain situations in which the model may be ineffective.

In the broader context of practice models, Mandell (2008) explains that family situations are unique and no one practice model or approach can address all of the complexities discovered within the family. She stresses that a family's cultural background and language barriers provide an added layer that could alienate them within the child protection process, which may provide another explanation why the Signs of Safety would not be applicable in every child protection situation.

Stanley & Mills (2014) explain that if child protection agencies and workers used the Signs of Safety model as it is meant to be used, then instead of focusing on "risks", professionals would work and think with families in a different way.

> If we think that risk factors are the most important part of risk assessment work we will probably set out to find them. If we think risk of being more of a constructed idea, a state or a situation that is arrived at through the work done with a family, within a network of family and professionals we will reach a professional judgment in another way. (Stanley & Mills, 2014, p. 27)

Lwin et al. (2014) similarly agree with Stanley & Mills (2014) recommending significant changes to child protection practice occur not only at the worker level, from an organizational level as well. This literature (Keddell, 2014; Lwin et al., 2014; Stanley & Mills, 2014) speaks to other practice challenges with the application of the Signs of Safety model. While case mapping appears to be the most common method in using the model, workers have indicated that they are applying the model without the input from the family (Keddell, 2014; Lwin et al., 2014; Stanley & Mills, 2014). Without having the family's input or involvement, it would be difficult for parents strive towards the goals not set out by them. This may explain why workers want to use the approach, but feel unsure about how to use it with a family; as well not all workers have the agency's support to use the model (Lwin et al., 2014).

In many ways, the Signs of Safety model appears to be beneficial when in engaging and establishing rapport with a family. However, questions remain to why the model has not been universally embraced by child protection agencies. Keddell (2014), Lwin et al. (2014) and Stanley & Mills (2014) suggest that there may be an unexpected cost to applying the Signs of Safety model in an organizational context.   The next section explores worker's use of self (Mandell, 2007; 2008) and highlights how child protection workers use their own belief system, values, and identity to engage and build rapport with the families they work with.

A Worker's Use of Self

The 'use of self' is related to the process of critical reflexivity, where social workers think and examine their own social location to better engage with families. Mandell (2008) begins by reviewing the idea of the 'use of self' with structural and critical theories, and how the social worker's 'personhood' is omitted from the organizational and institutional structures of child protection (p. 237). Mandell's (2008, p. 236) idea of the 'use of self' shifts the assumption that workers are of the dominant culture and recognizes that workers may also experience inequalities, oppression and powerlessness on many levels as well, societal or organizational. (p. 236). Mandell (2007) explains further:

> ...the implicit assumption most often is that when speaking of diversity, culture, ethnicity, or disability, we are talking about clients, while the therapist/counsellor is assumed to be a member of the dominant culture. Even in theorizing, we maintain power hierarchies. (p. 3)

Mandell (2008) explains that the worker's self is enmeshed in the dual role of supporter/helper and one who may need support/help, and how this complicates the role of the worker.

Further, Mandell (2008) characterizes the 'use of self' as an "awareness of structured relations of power and how that awareness shapes the encounter" (p. 242). Therefore, child protection workers can realize that by being a part of the helping relationship contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities and oppression. Yet, Mandell (2008) suggests that workers may be internalizing this conflict, and recommends that workers critically think and question themselves regarding how they proceed and make judgment with their role, and ask themselves for whom does this ultimately benefit.   Critics of the 'use of self' in child welfare suggest that the reflexive process and its relationship building aspects are used as a form of manipulation on the part of the worker to convince the client to do what the agency requires (Margolin, 1997). Mandell (2008) does not deny that sometimes this perspective is justified (p. 243). However, she counters the critique by recommending that workers apply their 'use of self' carefully and pay attention to their positions in relation to power (critical and anti-oppressive practice), understand how their values, culture and biases decrease or contribute to the oppressive imbalances (anti-oppressive practice), and to be aware of factors external to the worker/client relationship (structural) that may further marginalize clients (pp. 236-238).

Conclusion

Rapport building and engagement benefit families involved in child protection. Yet, there are also problems with how rapport building and engagement are used by child protection workers with families. Issues such as: authority and power, mistrust, and various inequalities perpetuated by policies and institutions can impact the outcome of engagement and rapport. Solution-focused and strengths-based theories and the Signs of Safety model were explored to see how these approaches and model would support the engagement and rapport process with

families. While these approaches are useful for child protection workers, there also issues in using such tools.

The 'use of self' explains how child protection workers can go beyond differences to understand how the self is enmeshed in their dual role of helper and being helped. Mandell (2008) recommends instead of distancing oneself from practice, workers should explore their role, judgments and think critically about whom benefits from child protection work.

Theoretical Framework

This research examines whether strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model foster or hinder child protection worker's engagement and rapport building with families. Structural and critical theories will be used as a foundation to this research in understanding areas of power, language and oppression.

Structural Theory

According to Weinberg (2008) structural theory focuses on oppression; eliminating or reducing the social inequalities produced by neoliberal and pro-capitalist policy. It is an aspect of critical theory which places the location of social change with societal structures (Payne, 2014; Weinberg, 2008). The purpose of structural theory is to shift responsibility for social problems from individuals to the structures that instil inequality. Payne (2014) explains further:

> Structural social work is inclusive because it is concerned with all forms of oppression...knowledge and culture are not neutral but also operate in the interests of ruling elites. Social structures, ideology and personal consciousness are connected, each affecting how the others develop. (p. 335)

The challenge in applying structural theory to actual practice rests within organizations that accept neoliberal policy that work in contradiction to oppression, and support the current social hierarchy (Payne, 2014). These arrangements reinforce power inequalities which allow those that hold the power and privilege to retain it (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Weinberg, 2008). Neoliberal policies encourage competition ahead of collaboration and the effects of this contradiction are felt by social workers and clients (Payne, 2014).

Structural theory's premise suggests unjust social hierarchies perpetuate the illusion that individuals within society share the same beliefs regarding culture and values (Payne, 2014; Weinberg, 2008). When resolving social issues, the social work profession is loyal to this perspective, meaning that social workers claim the best of intentions but blindly views problems in a generic way (Margolin, 1997). Consequently, the social work profession is criticized as contributing to unequal relations because of its reliance on a business model of practice (Margolin, 1997; Weinberg, 2008). In addition, social work practice stresses the 'professional as expert' dominant perspective and thus ignores the struggles of oppressed persons and silences their voices (Fook & Gardner, 2007).

Fook and Gardner (2007) argue that social work itself is a discourse, where knowledge about the identities of the worker and client is based on dominant opinions. Contained within that discourse are rules about how roles are defined and how workers and clients are supposed to relate to each other (Fook & Gardner, 2007). This discourse perpetuates inequality and further oppresses the marginalized by categorizing clients as being 'needy.' These rules for social work discourse fit with structural theory's premise that "oppression is group-based and relational," meaning for oppression to occur, there needs to be a dominant group that benefits at the expense of those outside of that group (Payne, 2014, p. 337).

In relation to dominant discourse, Weinberg (2008) questions whether social workers are essentially "helping clients to accept and adapt to basically unjust social structures." (p. 2). She explains that structural theory is limited because the profession is either one extreme or the other where social workers, by virtue of their social location, are engaging with clients in either a supportive or corrective way. Weinberg describes the dual role social workers must inhabit and the contradictory practices as "ethical trespass." (p. 2). It is suggested that any intervention a social worker embarks on can have multiple effects on clients and what may appear to be an effective intervention for one client may have the opposite effect on another. As a result, workers may overlook unforeseen factors impacting the lives of clients. Payne (2014) suggests that in order to address major change, there needs to be an understanding of the challenges clients face. A limitation of structural theory may be that it addresses macro level contradictions but cannot suggest ways in which to solve individual problems (Weinberg, 2008).

Structural theory is relevant to this research as it will provide opportunities to identify inequalities and explain how these are being influenced; particularly the difficulties child protection workers have in negotiating the restrictive nature of practice. Structural theory may illuminate barriers to family engagement present in the narratives of the study participants. Additionally, by using a structured lens to examine the process of relationship building, it becomes simpler to deconstruct discourse and language child protection workers use to reveal other perspectives and reasons why these were effective (or not) in family engagement.

Structural theory questions the ways in which interventions are conducted and constrained but misses the nuances of individual complexities which also may explain how and why relationship building is a challenge in the child welfare system (Fook & Gardner, 2007;

Payne, 2014). For this reason, a combined structural and critical approach will be applied to inform this research.

Critical Theory and Reflection

Critical approaches aspire to go one step further than structural theory and lessen the extent to which professional power outweighs that of the client (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Critical theory delves into the relational aspects of the worker/client dyad and addresses issues that structural theory neglects (Payne, 2014). Important connections are made between theory, practice and actions. Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 12) define critical reflection as a process that examines individually held assumptions about the social world in order to make necessary changes in practice.

Fook and Gardner's (2007) approach to social work focuses on challenging the ways in which social workers think about their practice. The first stage of critical reflection is to understand how people interact and how their experiences are justified or concealed, depending on their position of privilege. An important aspect of this reflection process is to understand how knowledge is influenced and created. Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 16) explain that to understand further, we must "unsettle" individually held assumptions that are accepted by virtue of whether these fit the status quo. One example is knowledge production in social work. This knowledge is presumed and accepted to be valid, and dictates how social workers do their jobs (Payne, 2014; Weinberg, 2008). However, the knowledge base does not reflect actual practice with individuals (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Margolin, 1997). Fook & Gardner (2007) elaborate further:

> Reflective practice therefore is an approach designed to assist professionals to become aware of the 'theory' or assumptions involved in their practice with the purpose of closing the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted. (p. 24)

Fook & Gardner (2007) suggest that by questioning practice assumptions, social workers can recognize how a narrow vision of knowledge's origin perpetuates oppression. Payne (2014) agrees and also recommends applying knowledge from other sources and being open to different perspectives. This speaks to the notion of inclusivity, which may be beneficial to the rapport building process between a worker and family.

When families are included in the production of knowledge, this leads to a sharing of power, which Fook and Gardner (2007) explain is a crucial aspect of critical theory. Fook & Gardner (2007) and Payne (2014) stress that who actually holds the power is not important; what is important is that both parties understand how shared power enables them to accept their differences. In those terms, power is considered to be both a structural and personal force and critical reflection allows an examination of its interactive properties. Dumbrill (2006) and Fook & Gardner (2007) recommend that by having frank discussions about the power they hold, and the power clients have within them. Workers can identify how clients can use their power to address issues in their personal lives. Additionally, this perspective highlights how people in oppressed groups can avoid defeatist mindsets and to challenge their position in society, thereby promoting change (Fook & Gardner, 2007, p. 35).

Another aspect to consider is the language of social work, which tends to be fairly black and white; a good example of this is when the worker and client are unable to positively engage due to misunderstandings of terminology and or processes. As a result, the family is labelled 'resistant'. Typically, there is no persistence by some workers to explore what the possible reasons for the family's behaviour may be, outside of the realm of resistance. Margolin (2007)

explains this is an example of how the field of social work is lacking and because it assumes it

knows what a client is experiencing. To avoid assumptions, workers should consider that

individuals have the capacity for change and can behave differently depending on the social

situation (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Payne, 2014).

Reflexivity itself also draws concern, because reflecting upon what social work does

incorrectly justifies the perception that social work is without flaws (Margolin, 1997). In this

contradictory way, Margolin (1997) suggests that the process of reflexivity produces 'self-

inoculations' whereby professionals cure their own guilt and anxiety regarding their practice. He

explains the dilemma further:

> Social workers always find themselves confronting a discipline that appears
> problematic in its particulars. How can we help clients without creating
> dependency? How can we articulate a common bond with people who speak a
> different language and belong to a different social class? How can we judge them
> without naming their weaknesses? (Margolin, 1997, p. 171)

Margolin (1997) suggests that by avoiding answering those questions and dealing with missed

opportunities, the social work profession instead offers 'cures' for issues.   He stresses that by

not questioning its role in the perpetuation of oppression, the language of individual failure will

continue to place the worker/client relationship and family engagement in jeopardy.

Additionally, the coercive elements of a child protection investigation cannot be erased, due to

the differences in power. This aspect leads to the client perpetually remaining in the position of

helplessness, always fearing that their children will be removed. Margolin (2007, p. 178-179)

criticizes social work's "ambiguous" goals for intervention while the consequences for clients

should they refuse to participate are clear.

How critical theory and reflexive practice relate to this research is that it allows the researcher to reflect and question judgments, values and biases that may affect the questions asked of participants (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The process of reflection permits a rich analysis of the narratives of the study participants and takes into account their unique stories and differing perspectives, as well their explanations of how the process of family engagement is influenced by differences in power.

By approaching the research with a critical lens, details of how oppressive systems within the agency continue to exclude, blame and victimize clients may be exposed. These notions would also apply to the strengths-based approaches and the Signs of Safety model and potentially provide different explanations for why these practices are used and to what end. Critical theory and reflection permit alternative ways of exploring social situations which do not neglect the social hierarchy and dominant discourse that influences the ways in which social problems are being dealt.

The next section will explore the methodology and methods used for this study, including discussing how the use of self in research will allow the researcher to address their insider/outsider role.

Methodology

For this study, I chose a qualitative research methodology to understand how child protection workers relate to the families they work with. I wanted to explore why engagement and rapport building matter in the worker/client relationship and if two methods (strengths-based theories and the Signs of Safety model) of engaging families were effective.   I chose a semi-structured interview format to permit me to modify questions or explore a participant's answer in more detail.

Qualitative research allows participants to describe their perspectives on a topic and situate their answers within the context of child protection practice. Additionally, this method allows participants to share and attach meaning to their experience. Sofaer (1999) explains that qualitative interviewing "plays an important part in clarifying the values, language and meanings attributed to people who play different roles in organizations and communities" (p. 1105). Qualitative interviewing provides a detailed explanation that can be examined for various meanings and produce rich data for examination and analysis.

As an important concluding thought, I feel it is important to recognize my insider/outsider role and insight as a former child protection worker, and now researcher conducting this study. It is important to note that this research is not about me per se; however I wanted to be transparent regarding my possible bias and insider knowledge when it comes to child protection work and this research project. It is my hope to understand if the theories and approaches, as they relate to child protection, benefit the work child protection workers do with families.

Methods

Recruitment

Prior to beginning this study, ethics clearance was received by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. The recruitment of child protection workers for this study started with me determining who I wanted to speak with regarding their experience with strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model. Therefore, I felt that frontline child protection workers with prior or current experience in a Children's Aid Society, who had at least one year of experience using the Signs of Safety model, would be the most appropriate for the type of research I wanted to conduct.

The recruitment strategy for this research involved contacting five Children's Aid Societies (CAS) in Southern Ontario. I initially contacted all five agencies by telephone and spoke to their Directors of Human Resources (HR), providing them with information about the study verbally over the phone. Two CASs contacted me by telephone and asked me to email them further information on the study, and provided their email address. I sent an email to the HR Directors at each CAS outlining the study topic and requesting that the HR Directors contact me if their agency was interested in participating with this research. Of the five CASs that were contacted, one CAS responded and agreed to have their workers participate in the study.   I forwarded the Letter of Information (Appendix D) and Recruitment Poster (Appendix A) to the CAS's Quality Assurance, Research, Evaluation and Strategic Direction representative, who sent out an email to all their frontline workers in the agency on my behalf. The email instructed participants to use their personal email and or telephone number to respond to the research inquiry. Initially, no workers responded to the email that was sent. I consulted with my thesis

supervisor and changed the length of the interview from one hour to thirty minutes in the recruitment email (Appendix C) and on the Recruitment Poster. After these changes, I requested for the agency to resend the revised email back out to the workers.

Participants were also recruited through social media (Facebook) where a Recruitment Poster was posted, and those CAS workers could respond to the post by contacting my personal email or private message. As participants contacted me to participate, I provided additional details on the study and sent each participant the Interview Guide (Appendix E) and Letter of Information and Consent form. I also sent participants the Interview Guide before the interview, so they could reflect on the questions I would be asking. Once the materials were reviewed by the participant, I arranged a meeting with the participant at a location of their choosing, except for their place of work in order to protect their identity.

Three participants responded to the email and four participants responded to the social media post. Of these participants, three declined to participate after first contact and their information was destroyed.

Study Sample

This research includes four (4) child protection workers with the range of experience between 7.5 to 39 years, and held a variety of positions, such as: Family Services Worker, Children's Services Worker, Resource Worker, and Intake Worker within Children's Aid Society. All participants were quite familiar and able to speak of strengths-based practice as it pertains to child welfare. However, participants had varying levels of experience with the Signs of Safety model.

In May and June of 2017, I conducted semi-structured, face to face interviews with four participants. I began the interviews by asking the participants about their roles and experience with CAS. The interviews were approximately thirty to ninety minutes in length and took place at a location that was comfortable for the participant. With permission from the participant, I recorded the interview and took some brief notes. The questions during the interview (Appendix E) were sequential, asking participants for their definitions of engagement, strengths-based practice and their use of the Signs of Safety model.   I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews as opposed to open or fully structured interviews for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I preferred to have the interview questions as a guide so that I could modify the question(s) when more information was needed. This method was flexible, and allowed the participant to share their experiences, knowledge, and for the interview to feel like a conversation. For instance, when I asked participants about engagement, and I wanted the participant to speak further on how they knew their families were engaged. Secondly, I encountered some difficulties when participants answered questions assuming I was familiar with terminology used in child protection agencies. Although I was upfront with my former role as a child protection worker, I did have to ask for clarification on some of the language and processes participants described.

Once the interviews were concluded, I transcribed and cleaned the interviews of any identifying information; I then forwarded the clean copy of the interview back to the participants. The participants were to review their transcribed interview and add or remove any information they felt misrepresented what they said. I allowed the interviewee one week to review their transcript, and requested the changes back by July 15, 2017.

I also offered to send participants either a summary of the research or a copy of the completed thesis, all participants have requested a copy of the thesis once completed and approved.

Data Analysis

To extract meaning from the data, I applied a thematic approach to analysis. The purpose of this approach was to understand how and why strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model affected the process of engagement and rapport building between a child protection worker and a family. I chose structural theory to extract meanings from participants' answers relevant to how organizations negatively or positively influence engagement. Structures in society impact workers and clients, although the structures may vary depending on the context and from whose perspective. Structural theory maintains that institutions create and perpetuate oppression, and separate people into groups based upon their social status. Therefore, this theory will lend itself well to the nature of my research, and may provide explanations why engagement was successful (or not).

I also chose critical theory because it compliments structural theory and advances further to understand power in unequal relationships. Critical theory asks what more can be done to address oppression, what actions need to be fulfilled to best serve the needs of clients. It also asks who benefits from these approaches, in the context of the worker/client relationship.

To analyze the data, I applied both theories in a blended approach, and the interview transcripts were read several times. Using the interview questions as a template, I first read each interview with no notes taken. For the second reading, I looked for key words and phrases that participants were emphasizing and highlighted those. In the third reading, I wrote notes in the

margins to categorize the apparent and hidden meanings of participants' responses. Finally, I charted the data into varying categories. For example, I asked participants about benefits of the Signs of Safety model, and in the analysis of the data I categorized the participants' responses under 'SOS Benefits' and had main points listed under this heading, with detailed notes regarding which points were similar or different. Throughout this process, I did two things: I kept a research log for self-reflection, and I kept reminders to refer back to the theories that underpinned this research.

The next section will explore the results of the study, how participants responded to the questions and the overall research.

Findings

This research explores whether strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model fostered or hindered rapport building and engagement between child protection workers and families. This section will examine the themes that have evolved from workers' thoughts on how they define the process of engagement and rapport building within their child welfare work through establishing and building upon a relationship, and the ways in which that is accomplished. It will also explore the worker's use of strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model, as it is used in their work in building rapport and engaging with families.

It is important to note that the study participants came from varying CASs in southern Ontario, each agency possessing differing internal policies with respect to practice approaches. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants and their agency, the CASs which use both strengths-based practice and Signs of Safety model will be referred to as CAS-A and all other CASs that possessed less experience with the Signs of Safety model will be referred to as CAS-B.

Establishing Relationships with Families: Engagement

Child protection workers described the ways in which they enter into a working relationship with families as an aspect of engagement and or rapport building. All workers defined this process as 'engagement', 'engaged', and 'rapport/relationship', and used these terms interchangeably, which implies that workers perceived the process of "establishing relationships" as a beginning phase of work with a family. Also imbedded in the phases of establishing a working relationship with a family is the worker's association to their role and or job as it relates

to the mandate of the Children's Aid Society (CAS).   Therefore, 'the best interests of the

children' does not always translate to a positive engagement regarding the best interests of the

family. Families can choose not to engage with child protection workers, but they are still under

the authority of Children's Aid Society and workers can take measures to be more intrusive. As

one worker specified:

> I'm very honest as a worker and can be a little bit blunt, so I let [families] know that.
> I tell them who I am, what my role is, and I like to start right from the beginning...
> (CPW3)

This worker specifies the need to clarify their role and purpose to a family. In the same instance,

this worker is also asserting their authority with a family and becomes a theme in understanding

engagement. Child protection workers possess power and authority on behalf of the Children's

Aid Society, therefore when working with families this power and authority is subject to how a

worker chooses to use it. When engaging a family, the worker does not need to state they have

authority, rather it is implied. One worker provided an example of the unspoken power they

possess, and although workers want to engage in a humanistic manner with families, the unequal

power dynamic creates unintended consequences and is a barrier to engagement and rapport

building.

All workers in this research emphasized the importance of transparency as a core aspect of

engaging with families. Transparency becomes an important theme in this study because

workers used words such as 'honesty', 'directness', 'humanistic' and 'respect' as a way to justify

their role and purpose for engaging with a family. One worker explained that transparency

meant accepting criticism from a family and colleagues, as a way to bring humanism back into

their demanding job. Two workers explained the importance of honesty and directness as it

relates to transparency when working with a family. Therefore, the workers were being clear

about the process and reasons for involvement. Another worker considered transparency as a

part of respect, and highlighted the importance of "…listening to them, [and] what they have to

say to you about why we're involved" (CPW1). All workers interviewed spoke of the need for

respect and trust being present, in facilitating engagement with families. One worker explained

wanting to understand the family and begin with "where the family was at" (CPW3). However,

the worker reverted back to the reasons why they were there and the job they had to do. This

worker arrived prepared and brought paperwork to the initial family meeting, stressing the

specific goals that needed to be met. Another worker indicated that engagement required seeing

the family as fellow human beings, and the importance of showing worthiness and respect. They

explain further:

> When I engage with a client I try to humanize it as much as possible...It is difficult to
> have a stranger in your home, going through information that may be very harmful,
> hurtful, extremely emotional for everyone...But the fact is the number one reason
> we're there is not for the adult but for the child...the best way is humanizing the
> person, acknowledge the fact that it's difficult for them and also respecting their
> boundaries. (CPW1)

While the worker is clear about their purpose for visiting the family, their approach is 'softened'

by the worker attempting to engage with the family in a humanistic way.

The child protection workers in this study discussed the importance and theme of

conformity when engaging and working with families. One worker described setting parameters

to allow the family to "pick up the ball after I've laid some track" (CPW4).   Another worker

explained that engaging with families meant they needed to "buy in" to why they were involved

in child protection services. Child protection worker, CPW2 explains:

> ...if we have a [child protection] issue, allowing them to kind of buy in to what the society is interpreting as a concern, which can then in turn kind of help us to get them to agree to making some changes that need to be made. (CPW2)

By having the family "buy in" during engagement, the process is made easier for the worker. However, it is this aspect of child protection work that is suggestive of the worker adopting a friendly attitude, or a 'guise of kindness' as a theme to this research in convincing families to "buy in" to the reason child protection is involved.

All workers interviewed for this study indicated that creating a relationship through engagement was the initial process in working with families. However, once workers established this relationship they recognized that rapport was built in to how families responded to the work they needed to do. This next section will explore how aspects of rapport building can either negatively or positively influence the worker/client relationship.

Building upon Relationships: Rapport

Child protection workers involved with this study were asked once they established engagement with a family, how they built upon that relationship. Three of the workers indicated that when a family initiated communication with the worker, that it was a good sign that they were engaged and ready to work collaboratively. These workers reported that the more the family communicated, the better the rapport was with the worker. As one worker explained, "I also tend to hear from families more...So, it's almost as if they're making an active effort to give me information" (CPW2).

This worker perceives that an engaged family is more cooperative and willing to do what is required to have the child protection concerns resolved. However, from a family's

perspective, cooperation is not a matter of choice and the onus is on them to communicate

with their worker. If the family does not choose to cooperate, then they may be labelled as

resistant. Cooperation and consequences are determined by these workers, and the

consequences of such a label of being resistant may prolong the family's involvement with

the Children's Aid Society.

Two workers discussed that building trust is an essential part of rapport, which

means listening to families and ensuring their voices are heard. However, since workers

are required to prioritize their agency mandate, these workers explained there were times

when options presented to a family were defined by the agency. One worker elaborated:

> Obviously, there are times when I say this is what needs to be done; you have the
> choice, either we're going to do this or that. I think it's important that they
> understand that there are certain things that they may have to do that they don't want
> to do. (CPW3)

By the worker asserting (to the family) that they are following agency policies and

Ministry legislation, it is not the worker that is the "authoritative person", but rather that

they are part of a broader organizational and structural system that dictates to the worker

what has to be done with the family. One worker explains their use of authority as a theme

in this study:

> [Families] know we have authority. I don't have to say that I have authority. We're
> there for the children, to see that they're protected. What is important are the best
> interests of the child. (CPW1)

The worker and family are both aware of the worker's level of authority; how the worker

chooses to use it could either support or hinder the worker's efforts to maintain rapport

with the family.

The worker/client relationship is also influenced by the dual role a child protection

worker must inhabit as an investigator of child abuse and a support to the family. The

worker is required to manoeuvre between the two roles, depending on the reason and

context to which the worker is involved.   To better manage this dual role, workers

described ways in which they went outside of their agency's role to build or maintain

rapport with families. One worker explains:

> A lot of our families are very poor. A simple gesture of giving them a food voucher
> or driving them to an appointment…Especially if they're new to this
> country…Because they're frightened of authority. The very fact that there is another
> individual with them, helps them move on to the next stage. (CPW1)

By providing a family with a food voucher or with a ride to an appointment, the worker

adds a level of respect and compassion to the relationship. Yet in the same instance, these

gestures could be viewed as manipulating the family with a 'guise of kindness'. Another

worker described the rapport process as engaging a family in informal conversation while

providing a ride to an appointment: "I find we have good opportunities [for rapport] when

we're all in a car together. Just generally having a bit more of a casual conversation"

(CPW2). Therefore, while all workers in this study are aware they wield varying levels of

power (explicit and implicit) by being "forward and transparent" or through acts of "kind

gestures" as they work with families, the process of engagement and rapport building is

strategic in nature.

The next section will examine findings of this study regarding the specific social

work approaches (theories and model) that child protection workers use to assist and

understand the work they do with families.

Solution-Focused and Strengths-Based Theories in Child Protection Work

Social work theories often guide social workers in the work they do with individuals

and families. For many social workers, these theories often translate into a form of

practice. In this study, solution-focused and strength-based theories were explored with

four child protection workers to understand how they used these in engaging and building

rapport with families.

Solution-Focused Theory

Of the four workers interviewed, one spoke in-depth about solution-focused theory

and its applicability to child protection practice. This worker considered solution-focused

techniques to not be effective for all situations because it emphasized solving a dilemma in

a brief period of time, and most child protection matters were complex and occurred over

the longer term. They explained this further:

> Solution-focused is brief; you're looking at complicated matters and trying to pick
> out the salient points and deal with them as quickly as possible…Is there brief
> solution-focused [practice] in CAS? No, because it's risk we're dealing with…so the
> solution isn't what is panning out and it's not driven by the client…usually it's the
> client that is working on what needs to be worked on, here it's the social worker.
> (CPW4)

This worker acknowledges that the tasks and objectives to achieve solutions are not

primarily defined by the client, but rather the agency. Therefore, the family does not have

a choice in what solutions they can strive for. Another worker spoke of having less

experience applying solution-focused theories and was unsure whether these would be

helpful in building rapport with families: "[The family] didn't like it because they didn't

understand it [the process and the solutions]" (CPW3). Other workers defined solution-

focused theory in terms of its applicability to strengths-based practice but made no

reference to solution-focused theory as a stand-alone practice technique.

The next section will focus on the participants' responses to their use of strengths-

based theory, and its applicability to their practice with families.

Strengths-Based Theory

Three child protection workers described strengths-based practice as a positive way

to engage with families, and how this approach assisted the workers in understanding the

family's functioning and what was "working well". One worker stated that once a family's

strengths were highlighted, they were able to focus on and discuss "potential solutions"

regarding child protection concerns (CPW2). Child protection worker CPW4 explains

what strengths-based practice meant to them:

> …our agency focuses on strengths and that's taking a situation that could be
> immensely traumatic for families and trying to pick out those few pieces that are
> highlights in somebody's life…Using [strengths] to elevate them to some degree
> where they can pool their own self confidence and start moving in a direction that's
> better for them and their children. (CPW4)

Another worker spoke of identifying a family's internal and external supports:

How strengths-based is really effective with families is by pulling in extra supports. So really talking to [the family] about who is in their immediate family, professionals and friends, not just who lives in the house. (CPW3)

All workers in the study described having an experience of applying strengths-based theories with positive outcomes. However, two workers brought forth concerns in using strengths-based practice in terms of their agency's focus on risk. They explained that their ability to view the family as able provide for their children was being defined by structural factors over which the family had no control, such as poverty, lack of housing and addictions.

The Signs of Safety model contains aspects of both strengths-based and solution-focused theories. Although the model is a relatively new concept to some of this study's participants as an alternative method of assessing safety and risk, the founding principles of the model (collaboration and inclusion) were known by the participants. In the next section, participants were asked how they defined and used the Signs of Safety model in their practice, and its potential benefits/limitations in child protection work.

The Signs of Safety Model

Engaging with the Signs of Safety Model

Workers discussed how they applied the Signs of Safety model in practice situations, and their responses varied. One worker stated that the Signs of Safety model allowed them to reflect on the ways in which cases were assessed within their agency:

I think that we [assess cases] in a lot of ways, because that's our mandate, to understand risk to a child and I think that sometimes it can be hard to pull back, and instead of just focusing on the risk, look at what is actually functioning and that's

what these models do. They force you to step back and see what [the family] has
been able to accomplish because in a lot of situations they've been able to maintain
safety of a child for a significant period of time and they've done it somehow.
(CPW2)

One worker expressed that they were familiar with Signs of Safety, but did not apply the

model. Worker CPW1 explained that they considered Signs of Safety to be "Something

I've always done…I don't think it's ever been labelled" (CPW1). Two workers explained

that they used Signs of Safety as a guideline in practice, but not necessarily as a universal

model to be applied in all child protection circumstances.

Three of the four workers described their use of the model at internal case mapping

conferences with colleagues to assist them in making collective decisions in mitigating risk

to children. The Signs of Safety model was "…effective to just have the concerns

essentially spelled out and outlined" (CPW2). Worker CPW3 explained further: "The

agency uses this framework in a little bit of a different way. We have to be more elaborate

around the risks and the strengths, and kind of the history…" (CPW3).

Another worker explained they used aspects of the Signs of Safety model with

children, to explore their hopes, wishes and dreams.   This worker reported that questions

such as "what would you wish for, what worries you, and scares you?" (CPW2) were

helpful, and sensitive to a child's developmental level.

Two workers described the usefulness of the Signs of Safety model as a visual aid,

thus providing clarity during case mapping meetings. They explained that during the

mapping process, family strengths were revealed, where another model or method of

assessment may overlook these aspects. As one worker stated:

> I see the majority of people I work with want that change…change means it's
> something that you have to do and you have to motivate yourself and also it's an
> admission [of where] you're faltering and no human being likes to admit to that.
> (CPW1)

This worker further indicated that for a family to realize change, they had to be in the right

emotional position to admit they may need help, which suggests that families have the

capacity to change. Perceiving families as capable is a principle upon which the Signs of

Safety model is based.

Two workers discussed applying the Signs of Safety model with families, one of

whom used the model with families in their homes, where they reported positive outcomes.

The other had extensive experience using the model to explore safety planning and urgent

case meetings when children were apprehended. CPW4 explains:

> We try to pull together a meeting within 72 hours with as many community
> professionals as possible…we follow [Andrew Turnell's] idea of the three columns
> though; what's working well, worries, next steps…in the concrete black and
> white…so people can walk away with something. (CPW4)

Case mapping provides a tangible item and template for the worker and the family to move

forward, by understanding what has worked in the past for a family, and what could be

challenging. This worker reported that meetings were seldom held without the family,

stressing that they should be a part of every decision being made, since they were the

subject of discussion. They questioned how other agencies could effectively develop a

plan without obtaining the family's feedback.

Two workers described the case mapping process as a way to look at what is

functioning in a family, and to see the family as a whole. Thus, case mapping highlights

which resources are available to effectively support the family and ensure children's safety.

However, two workers described instances where case planning did not include the family.

One worker explains how the family felt about the Signs of Safety process:

> I think one of the challenges was the dad wasn't quite on board with 'is this the best
> outcome for our child. Why can't mom just take care of her?' I think he felt he was
> being blamed for some of [the problems]. I followed up after the meeting…they
> came to the decision on their own that they couldn't take care of [the child]. (CPW3)

This worker's example demonstrates that while Signs of Safety appears to be beneficial for

engagement and rapport, including all family members' perspectives was a challenging

aspect of applying the model.

Challenges of the Signs of Safety Model

Two workers cautioned against relying on the Signs of Safety model as it should not

be applied universally to every child protection situation. One worker elaborated further:

> It's not a model we're dealing with, it's people…and there are some people that are
> never going to reach that level of their child being safe. We have to accept that and
> go to the next step…Which [means] the child is not going to be with them…We have
> to look at the potential of a child, as opposed to the parent. (CPW1)

This worker stressed that they wanted to be inclusive of the family and focus on strengths,

but there were occasions when using this approach would not be applicable. Another

worker described the family "not buying in" to the child protection concerns, and

"Regardless of how many strengths you try to pull out and how much networking you're

trying to do, there are some people that are hostile and opposed to the Society's

involvement, this is not effective" (CPW2). All workers interviewed discussed client

resistance and how this led to less reliance on a practice model and more on the agency's

mandate to resolve complex child protection issues. One worker described families not

showing up to meetings and how that was challenging. "You want [the family] there, so if

they're not going to participate…You can't really go ahead with this type of meeting"

(CPW3). This worker explained how families could resist 'passively', meaning they do

not become involved in a process to address child protection concerns. When families

passively resist, it is because they feel powerless and that their voice is not being heard. As

a result, the family disengages from the process and avoids contact with the worker.

Worker CPW1 expressed the need to "do our job differently" with the Signs of

Safety model, and related this to their work with culturally diverse populations.   They

elaborated that families involved in child protection may not be aware of the rules

regarding their child's safety.

> We have to acknowledge that we're dealing with a diverse group of people…how do
> we educate them, and help them understand that there are certain things that cannot
> happen in this country. Not because of the laws, but because it just is not appropriate
> or in the best interests of their children. (CPW1)

Therefore, this worker expressed sensitivity by understanding a family's culture, and

acknowledging that families may need to be educated in this Country regarding acceptable

parenting practices.

Another worker recognized that sensitive issues arising from power dynamics

within the family could influence their use of the Signs of Safety model.

> I worry that when we're in a room where domestic violence is an issue, so you're
> worried already about power and control and the struggles that are going on and now
> we have those parents together in a room. I don't want to dis-empower somebody

and I also don't want to give someone power that they didn't have. So that's a worry
of mine. (CPW4)

The same worker explained that their time was limited when there were imminent child

safety concerns that required the worker to react to protect the child. CPW4 explains this

further:

> …we're throwing together a meeting and we're putting stuff up on the board that
> might not be applicable…we're mired in the immediate risk. There are worries about
> liability; regardless of transparency…It's going to drive your practice. (CPW4)

While the worker attempted to use the mapping tool in the Signs of Safety model, the focus

was on 'time' and responding to 'immediate risk'. Two workers explained that case

mapping meetings took time and effort to arrange, and not all colleagues were "On the

same page. They don't take it as seriously, then it feels like a lot of extra work" (CPW3).

When workers were not familiar with or regularly using the Signs of Safety model, this

contributed to their 'comfortability' or 'defensiveness' with the model. CPW4 shares their

insight of this limitation when meeting with colleagues in another agency.

> Workers really need to be comfortable with transparency…They're carrying around a
> ton of authority and power…I've ran [case mapping] in other jurisdictions where
> they're not necessarily familiar with [Signs of Safety]…This comes back to
> defensiveness, [colleagues] don't know how to answer questions…and we're saying
> let's have an answer for this because you expect that family to have an answer.
> (CPW4)

When colleagues are unfamiliar with a model and or theory, there are feelings of

uncertainty and reluctance in using such a tool. One worker expressed feeling unsure how

to fit the Signs of Safety model into their existing caseload. They expressed that courts

have a preference for mandatory documents and plans of care.

> Different agencies and courts, they don't really care about my [Signs of Safety]
> chart. They want to see it in a plan of care. So that's a big challenge and sometimes
> it's so overwhelming which is why maybe we don't want to do [Signs of Safety].
> (CPW3)

Another worker spoke similarly about the structural barriers that impact a family:

> I wonder if we're actually taking enough time to actually understand and name the
> barriers, because I think it's just as important to name them: our worries, concerns
> and strengths…We expect them to be able to send their child to a program but how
> are they doing that when they don't have child care…I think it's these simple things
> that tend to come from a middle class perspective looking in on a family and where
> we have to stop doing that…We have to understand the practicality of what we're
> asking families to do. (CPW2)

Therefore, agency expectations may contribute to hindering the process of engagement and

rapport between workers and families. As a result, all workers in this study discussed the

importance of consistency across all CASs regarding practice approaches, but were unsure

how that could become a reality.

> Every family should be approached from a position of what has been working and
> how we can resolve this one issue that has brought [them] to our attention. I think
> that if we're not approaching in that way then we're perpetuating the stereotype of
> being only about risk. (CPW2)

Two of the four workers discussed how they wanted to see consistency through all CAS

agencies and that an agency-wide shift in practice would need to be undertaken.   There are

some Children's Aid Societies that support workers receiving training on the Signs of

Safety model, whereas other agencies do not make it a requirement. Workers were

specifically asked in this research if they received training on the Signs of Safety model.

The purpose of this question was to determine each worker's level of experience with the

model and what support was offered through their agencies. As result, one worker

explained they could not recall completing training specific to the model. Two other

workers spoke of receiving training regarding case mapping techniques, which is an aspect

of the Signs of Safety model. Both of those workers reported being given the book "Signs

of Safety" (Turnell & Edwards, 1999) by their agencies. The worker with the most

experience using the Signs of Safety model shared that their agency provided extensive

training over a course of several weeks. This same worker revealed that in the last decade,

their agency had trained all staff in applying the Signs of Safety model to virtually every

practice situation. Two workers responded that they would like to see more training

offered by their agencies, particularly to new child protection workers.

The findings of this research have drawn out and emphasized various themes in

understanding a child protection worker's role in the process of engaging and rapport

building with families while using solution-focused and strengths-based theories and the

Signs of Safety model. As a result of the various topics within the findings, key themes

evolved. The section that discussed establishing relationships through family engagement

revealed themes of: asserting authority; transparency; and conformity. The section

exploring building relationships through rapport highlighted themes of: trust; cooperation;

consequences; use of authority; dual role; and the guise of kindness. The section that

explored solution-focused theory highlighted themes of: ineffectiveness and brief

solutions. From the topic of strengths-based theory evolved themes of: family strengths;

solutions; and lack of structural support. The final area within the findings explored

themes with the Signs of Safety model, which are: applying the model; case

mapping/visual aids; recognizing resources. Some limitations to the Signs of Safety model

are: not applied universally; time; client resistance; structural barriers; and cultural

diversity. The next section will compare and contrast the findings of this study with the

existing literature, and will explain how this research contributes to practice. The study

limitations and implications for practice and research will be explored in detail.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine if strengths-based theory and the Signs of

Safety model were effective practices for child protection workers while engaging and building

rapport with families they worked with. The following questions framed this research:

1. How do child protection workers engage with the families that they work with?

2. Are strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model effective with

   engagement and rapport building?

Child protection workers responded with their perspectives in how they engaged and

maintained rapport with families, with themes emerging from those conversations. When child

protection workers spoke about how they engaged with families, themes such as: assertion of

authority, transparency and conformity emerged. Themes of cooperation and consequences,

trust, a worker's dual role, use of authority and the 'guise of kindness' were highlighted as

workers spoke about building and maintaining rapport. When workers were asked about social

work theories and how they used such practices when engaging and building rapport, themes

regarding solution-focused theory highlighted its inapplicability to practice and brief solution

format. Whereas strengths-based theory, the themes that emerged were: family strengths,

solutions, and the lack of structural support afforded to families. The themes that were

emphasized for the Signs of Safety model were: workers' application of the model; case mapping

and identification of family resources; non-universality; workers' time constraints; client

resistance; structural barriers; and cultural diversity. This discussion will explore the themes as

related to the literature.

Establishing Relationships with Families: Engagement

This study found that child protection workers engaged with families by asserting their

authority. This was done when workers described the importance of being 'upfront', 'honest'

and stressed the importance of transparency during their initial meeting with a family. This

assertion of authority was described by workers in how they asserted the purpose they were

engaging with families.   From a child protection worker's perspective, these actions justify and

provide the rationale for doing their job. To a family, a worker's behaviour and or

communication style may be interpreted as intimidating while the worker is engaging them

during the initial meeting.

Drake (1994), Dumbrill (2006) and Mandell (2008) emphasize the importance of child

protection workers possessing effective communication skills, due to the sensitive nature of child

protection work with families.   However, Yatchmenoff (2005) acknowledges the feelings of

tension and mistrust parents and families experience towards social workers, when child

protection authorities attend a family's home for an investigation. For some families, suspicions

and fears are heightened and are aimed towards the worker knocking at their door. The worker is

seen to have a primary agenda of proving the family and or parents are incapable of caring for

their child(ren), and to therefore enter with the intention of taking the child(ren) away from the home. While workers see their actions as transparent and upfront, parents fear that their children will be taken away which creates an unequal dynamic of power during the engagement process; a dynamic which cannot be erased (Mandell, 2008; Margolin, 1997). In studies involving parental perceptions of child welfare, Dumbrill (2006) and Kriz et al. (2012) found that parents were unsettled by a child protection worker's assertion of authority with the ability to intrusively investigate should a family not make efforts to address child protection concerns. Dumbrill (2006) and Kriz et al. (2012) conclude that families conform to the demands of the child protection workers out of fear of inadequacy. Therefore, for a child protection worker to facilitate engagement with a family, the worker should consider how the family may perceive their assertion of authority while clarifying their role and the mandate of the agency.

This study found that in addition to their assertion and use of authority, child protection workers expected families to cooperate with the engagement process and to follow through with the child protection agency's assessment and or investigation of child protection concerns. Therefore, the process of engagement is strategic in nature, which maintains a level mistrust in the worker/client relationship (Dumbrill, 2006; Yatchmenoff, 2005). Study participants described cooperation as a form of conformity, with the family accepting/obeying the purpose for the Children's Aid Society's involvement. In the findings, one worker described an engaged family as one that "buys in" to the reason and purpose that child protection is involved in their lives. In their research on engagement, Arbeiter & Toros (2017) and Yatchmenoff (2005) concluded that a family's motivation to participate in child protection services was not related to their intimidation to "buy in" or conform, but it was the compassionate and humanistic approach a worker used with the family. As a result, the family perceived the working relationship with

the worker to be reciprocal, therefore responding and becoming invested in the engagement

process.

While it is evident that child protection workers are committed to approaching families

with honesty and transparency, it is not apparent whether the process of engagement is truly

successful in the context of child protection practice. Drake (1994) explains that the sensitive

and non-voluntary nature of child protection work is the main reason why engaging families is

particularly challenging.

The next themes to be explored are factors that influence rapport building between a

worker and a family.

Building upon Relationships: Rapport

The workers in this study framed the process of rapport in the context of a family's

cooperation with their child protection worker. Cooperation was described by workers when a

family contacted or called the worker to report what was good in their life or what had upset

them (CPW4). From a child protection worker's perspective having a good rapport with a family

makes their job easier, but may not impact how the family perceives the intrusive aspect of being

investigated and judged regarding their competencies as a parent.

Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Dumbrill (2006) explain that the "care and control" function

of the child protection agency is an aspect of ensuring a family's compliance, while the worker's

reliance on their mandate and authority work in contrast to a worker's efforts to build rapport.

Therefore, the worker uses their communication skills to motivate a family to work

collaboratively and comply with what is expected of them by the agency.   Margolin (1997)

emphasizes the opposite; that it is the client who convinces the worker that rapport between the worker and client is effective. However, the worker may not realize that the client is complying with what is expected of them because they do not have a choice. The consequences of a family not appearing cooperative are much greater threat, and could mean the loss of their children or more intrusive measures being undertaken by the Children's Aid Society.

The participants in this study discussed how they offered families choices during intervention and planning; however the reality may in fact be the opposite. While workers genuinely have good intentions related to the choices they offer families, unequal levels of power further oppress families who feel their voice is lost or not heard. Arbeiter & Toros (2017), Broadhurst et al. (2011) and Smith & Donovan (2003) found that families involved in child protection services have no option aside from fully participating in the intervention, even if they disagree with the choices that were provided by their worker. Because of this unbalanced relationship, the family's perspective is lost and may complicate the process of the worker/client engagement and rapport process. Dumbrill (2006) and Smith & Donovan (2003) explain that if a family chooses not to cooperate, then they may be labelled as resistant. Therefore, facing consequences of being labelled as uncooperative may prolong the family's involvement with the Children's Aid Society. Thus, a definitive connection is made between communication, participation, and compliance that tend to enhance or hinder the process of engagement and rapport.

This study illustrated that child protection workers inhabit a dual role; one that supports and helps a family and another that investigates or polices a family. A child protection worker's priority is to protect the health and welfare of children according to the mandate of their agency; however, they must also simultaneously appear empathetic and support the families they work

with, to ensure any positive changes the family achieves are permanent. However, despite the

worker appearing helpful, some families perceive a worker's role as a form of surveillance over

their lives. The Children's Aid Society's mandate is influenced by policy, which devalues the

process of engagement and rapport building and prioritizes legislation over engaging with

families. As a result, workers are required to undertake an investigative/policing role, which

complicates building and maintaining rapport with families. Lavalette (2011) stresses that

workers' efforts to build rapport are eroded in favour of the 'policing aspects' of their job,

because of their agencies' emphasis on measuring compliance as an outcome. Workers in this

study discussed how engaging and building rapport with families was not successful when they

reverted to the use of their authority and investigative approaches.

Smith & Donovan's (2003, p. 550) research highlighted that when workers were faced

with competing demands, they "found ways to compromise" with families. Therefore, they

substituted 'quality' work with a family, with the measurable 'quantity' work to meet their

agency's mandate. There are many factors that could support or complicate how workers choose

to navigate their dual role, and much of this depends on organizational demands such as caseload

and administrative obligations.

The child protection workers in this study discussed how they 'go above and beyond'

their role within their agency to build rapport with a family. One example all participants spoke

of was their efforts to be kind to their families. Such 'acts of kindness' included driving families

to appointments, where they were able to meet with the children and family members in a neutral

environment. While these actions appear to be beneficial in building rapport, these may be

interpreted as manipulating the family, to convince them to comply with the agency's demands.

De Boer & Coady's (2006) research on helping relationships in child welfare revealed that by

'going above and beyond' their expected role, workers fostered trust with their families. However, Margolin's (1997) critique of social work maintains that the process of engagement and rapport building are ways in which workers can gain false trust with their clients in justifying their involvement and policing of families. He concludes by emphasizing that the intrusive and oppressive approaches a worker uses perpetuates oppression and confirms a family's position of helplessness. Further, De Boer and Coady (2007), Dumbrill (2006), and Kriz et al. (2012) recommend that child protection workers engaging families may have greater success, should they adopt a position of sharing power by having clear and direct conversations with families about their role, the power imbalance that cannot be eradicated, and having honest discussions about the threat of apprehension.

Solution-Focused and Strengths-Based Theories in Child Protection Work

Solution-Focused Theory

This study found that solution-focused theories were either not being used or were ineffective in the context of child protection practice. This suggests that the theory does not address the realistic issues confronting child protection workers in carrying out their jobs. Two workers in this study described the theory as being inapplicable to child protection practice because family situations were often complex, and resolving problems took a more extensive period of time than what the theory suggested. Another worker expressed that solutions in child protection were not client-driven, therefore dismissing the client's ability to problem solve, and redirecting the defining of solutions back to the child protection worker (CPW4). In that

instance, this worker recognized that solution-focused theory cannot be applied effectively, without the input from the family. To further this point, Arbeiter and Toros (2017) and Fook & Gardner (2007) noted that collaborative approaches differ from what is espoused in theory, to what actually occurs in practice.   Additionally, agency-defined solutions may be an example of how policy implicates and constrains practice, where efficiency in child protection is valued over engagement and rapport building with families (Carey, 2007; Lemay, 2011).

<u>Strengths-Based Theory</u>

This study demonstrated that strengths-based approaches were helpful for child protection workers, because a family's strengths and supports were recognized over their problems. Thus, this theory moves away from a deficit-based approach. Two key features of strengths-based theory that were identified as themes by all of the study participants were: emphasizing the strengths of the family, and using a family's strength to find solutions. It is interesting point that participants in this study felt that solution-focused theory was largely inapplicable to their child protection work. Yet, the use of strengths-based theory is focused to support the strengths of the family and find solutions.

Guo & Tsui (2010) and Oliver & Charles' (2015) research on strengths-based practice questioned the limitations of this theory, and how workers used their authority to support or sanction a family's decisions.   The participants in this study also found limitations with strengths-based theory, and revealed that it did not address factors that were negatively impacting families. Oliver & Charles (2015) also identified that the theory relies on the presence of collaboration in the worker/client relationship. However, if trust is an issue between the worker and the client, then applying such a theory could be challenging. Another example is

provided by Arbeiter & Toros' (2017) research, where they found strengths-based practice was complicated when families were under the scrutiny of child protection services. In most cases, families relied on workers to do the work and identify strengths, because they felt powerless to do otherwise. In addition, families may have felt intimidated to participate in a discussion about their strengths, since they knew whatever they said or contributed may be reflected negatively on them and affect the outcome of their involvement with child protection services.

Structural factors impacting clients, such as poverty and addictions were identified in this study as a limitation of strengths-based practice. Workers discussed that at times, their agency prioritized risk over the use of strengths-based approaches. Hence, families were being defined by the structural factors that were complicating their lives, instead of working with their strengths. This suggests that problems are located with the family rather than trying to dismantle the structures that continue to oppress a family. Fook & Gardner (2007) and Margolin (1997) recommend that social workers recognize and challenge their judgements about a client's situation, and to be aware of structural barriers that continue to contribute to place children and families at risk of child protection services.

The next section will discuss the Signs of Safety model and whether this model supports or hinders the engagement and rapport building process of child protection workers.

The Signs of Safety Model

This study explored the use of the Signs of Safety model in the work of child protection workers. While workers identified flexibility in their practice with the model, the most common use of the model was case mapping. Workers in this study described that the Signs of Safety case mapping created a visual aid for the worker and assisted them in focusing on safety and

identifying danger in the home. However, there are also challenges in using such a tool.

Research by Keddell (2014) and Stanley & Mills (2014) indicated that 'bottom lines' were more

important for agencies to identify than supporting the family's strengths, 'worries', and 'next

steps', because the focus remained on risk instead of finding existing elements of safety. In

many cases, the Signs of Safety model was used without the involvement of the family (Lwin et

al., 2014; Stanley & Mills, 2014). The exclusion of the family from this process defeats the

purpose of the Signs of Safety model, which is to promote inclusivity and collaborative work.

This suggests a limitation in the efficacy of this model, when applied in child protection practice.

Keddell (2014) similarly concluded that by excluding families from the collaborative work of the

Signs of Safety model or mapping, the tool would be rendered ineffective in practice. This was

also evident from the participants' responses when questioned about the usefulness of the Signs

of Safety model, as most discussed excluding the family from the process. As a result, it is less

clear whether this model actually fosters engagement and rapport building with a family

involved in child protection services.

        This study revealed that the Signs of Safety model may not be applicable in all child

protection situations, particularly when children are at risk of imminent harm and safety is

questioned. Mandell (2008) cautions that no single model or theory can stand alone to address a

client's complex situation, and this is particularly relevant in child protection where structural

and relational factors influence the worker/client relationship.

        A significant theme that evolved in this study with the Signs of Safety model was client

resistance. While the model is beneficial in highlighting and supporting the strengths of a

family, the opposite is true when workers encountered resistance by families. In these instances,

workers de-prioritized the use of Signs of Safety and reverted to their agency's mandate to

address the child protection concerns. Carey (2007) and Lemay (2011) explain that this dilemma

points to how policy overrules client-focused practice, and hinders the worker's attempts in using

approaches that are aligned social work values. Broadhurst et al.'s (2011) research into the

phenomena of client resistance emphasizes the presence of a power imbalance in the

worker/client relationship and how this contributes to resistant behaviour. In many cases, a

family may resist due to feelings of powerlessness because the family does not perceive any risk

to their child(ren) and feel they are not being heard by their worker or the agency (Broadhurst et

al., 2011).

Time constraints were another theme that evolved in this study. Child protection workers

felt the burden of organizational pressures, high case loads, and lack of support in using the

Signs of Safety model. Another limitation uncovered with the model is that it glosses over the

recognition of cultural diversity. Families from different cultures may not understand the

process, or fear that child protection services will take their child(ren). Dumbrill (2006), Kriz et

al. (2012) and Mandell's (2008) research emphasizes that cultural barriers are not addressed

simply by a practice theory or model, but for the worker to understand and have sensitivity

regarding another person's or family's culture and identity.

This discussion elaborated on many significant themes that evolved from the responses of

child protection workers in this study. A worker's assertion and use of their authority influenced

whether they would adopt either a strengths-based or an investigative approach to engage and

build rapport with families. A worker's choices depended on organizational factors, such as time

and caseload, and the family's response to the intervention. The family's behaviour

corresponded to their impression of the worker's use of authority and power, and they would

either comply or resist the worker's efforts to engage them. A family was expected to comply

with whatever the child protection agency required of them, thus when workers encountered a family's resistance, they relied on their use of authority instead of strengths-based practices.

A worker's dual role as a 'support' and an 'investigator' to families placed workers in conflict with wanting to help families and being obligated to 'police' them. In many cases, workers had to revert to their investigative role in order to meet their agency's mandate, which is influenced by policy that prioritizes efficiency over humanistic approaches with families. As a result of these conflicting factors, the power imbalance present in the worker/client relationship is perpetuated and cannot be erased.

The themes of power, authority and inequality greatly influence whether child protection agencies and or workers will attach value to using strengths-based approaches in their practice. Strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model were found to be only partially effective in fostering engagement and rapport with families. The ineffectiveness of these approaches related to factors exterior to the worker/client relationship, and this study highlighted instances where power, authority and inequality rendered the theory and model inapplicable in child protection practice.

The next section will explore how this study contributes to practice and future research, and will make recommendations based upon the themes discussed in this section.

Research Limitations

The study sample was small, with four workers that participated in the research. Because of the small sample size and the fact participation was limited to child protection workers who voluntarily consented to participate, this research may not represent what many child protection

workers may think about or respond to how they engage and build rapport with the families they

work with. Also, workers were not asked about their age, ethnicity, gender, etc. which may or

may not have an impact on how they interpret the engagement process or define either strengths-

based practice or the Signs of Safety model. Workers interviewed were confident in their

responses and of strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model. However, this study did

not include workers who may have had a differing opinion or a critical approach to engagement

and rapport.

The study also did not address other aspects of practice that potentially impacted

workers' abilities to engage and build rapport with families, such as: policies, high caseload,

management expectations, the effects of worker stress and job (dis)satisfaction, etc. Asking such

questions could have provided a broader view into the work of a child protection worker.

Additionally, this study did not consider the family's perspective on how child protection

workers engage and build rapport with the family during child welfare services.   While families

would not be able to provide answers to the specific theory and or model used by child

protection workers, their perspectives would have been crucial in providing feedback to child

protection workers and social workers regarding the process of engagement and rapport.

Another limitation of this study is that it was conducted in one local area of Southern

Ontario. Results of this study may be different in other geographical areas in Ontario, such as:

urban versus rural; Southern Ontario versus Northern Ontario; or mainstream versus First

Nations.

This research demonstrated that applying either or both strengths-based theory and the

Signs of Safety model while engaging and building rapport has limitations in practice. In theory,

strengths-based practice and Signs of Safety promote collaboration, but when applied in practice

there were notable inconsistencies such as: lack of time due to increasing caseloads, agency

disinterest in applying the approaches, and the prioritization of risk and liability over engaging

with families. Study participants discussed how their dual role as a supporter and an investigator

of families hindered their opportunities to apply either approach. The workers clearly made

reference to the challenges in balancing their agency mandate and engaging with families. This

study contributes to the existing research by establishing a link between structural barriers

imposed on the worker (by their agency mandate and influenced by policy) and the family

(oppression and powerlessness). This study determined that at times these barriers work in

opposition to one another and hinder the process of engagement.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Child protection workers participating in this study indicated that strengths-based practice

and the Signs of Safety model generally resulted in positive outcomes. However, two of the

workers discussed that more training and agency support were equally important to apply these

approaches with families. All workers expressed a desire to learn more about these approaches

and that they become standardized in the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS)

documents and best practices. The research also demonstrated that child protection practice

cannot be limited to the approaches that are used. Additional training focusing on anti-

oppressive practices and cultural sensitivity would promote an understanding of the structural

and racial barriers families from ethnic backgrounds experience. Also, a multi-faceted approach

to clinical supervision and regular critical group discussions with an emphasis on the unspoken

issues of power and authority would not only benefit child protection workers, but more importantly families they work with.

The Ontario Association for Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) is an influential organization that guides Children's Aid Societies province-wide and could play a significant role in advocating and recommending changes to training modules offered to new and experienced workers. This study highlighted the need to hear from families about their impression in how child protection workers engage with them initially and throughout their time with the service. The literature emphasized that client's voices have been silenced by the perpetuation of inequalities by the agency that is servicing them. Potentially, the OACAS or individual agencies could hold periodical sessions with families regarding their experience with the workers and agency. This could lead to practice focused research and or service-user led presentations. In addition, changes are also needed at the policy level to support child protection workers; this may be best achieved with the support of their agencies and the OACAS.

The research findings suggested that aspects of practice require strengthening or modification of strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model. Child protection workers in this study were passionate about their jobs and their enthusiasm for these approaches is evident. However, organizational factors such as policy limitations, high caseload, management expectations, stress and job (dis)satisfaction hampered their efforts to engage and build rapport with families. Further research focusing on how these factors influence workers' practice would provide an in-depth understanding of practice consistencies in an organizational context.

The findings of this study revealed that while strengths-based theories and the Signs of Safety model are collaborative, very little of this was occurring in practice. The study participants and the literature equally highlighted that while these approaches are effective tools workers use to build rapport and achieve engagement, families are frequently excluded from any part of the process. The exception was CAS-A, that allowed its workers to be interviewed for this study. According to those participants, their agency applies both approaches in virtually all child protection contexts and includes the family in planning for their children's safety. This study included limited explanations for why families are being excluded, but more in-depth research is needed to work toward possible understanding and solutions.

In addition, further research with a larger sample of child protection workers would be beneficial, to determine whether consistency in practice influences outcomes. If future research is conducted, consideration of a mixed methods approach may yield more interested study participants. This type of research could be of potential value to child protection agencies and may influence their decision to embrace strengths-based practice or the Signs of Safety model. Research in this regard may create potential for policy to be amended to include strengths-based ideologies in its language.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to determine if strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model were effective in the process of engagement and rapport building with families, in the context of child protection practice. To understand whether these theories and model were effective, the research explored how child protection workers engage and build rapport with families with the following research questions:

3. How do child protection workers engage with the families that they work with?

4. Are strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model effective with engagement and rapport building?

This research revealed that although strengths-based practice and the Signs of Safety model are effective in fostering engagement and rapport with families, the relationship between the worker and the family at times is an illusion. Child protection workers possess significant power and authority that creates inequality in the worker/client relationship that cannot be erased. Because families are aware of a child protection worker's power to remove their children, they will comply with whatever the worker/agency requires, regardless of which approach a worker chooses to use.

Child protection workers are required to adhere to their agency's mandate, which is influenced by policy that contradicts the process of engagement and rapport building. As a result, workers are conflicted and caught between wanting to create a trusting relationship, but their mandate expects workers to police families.

Child protection workers' practice is constrained by organizational factors, which influence the type of approach they use with families. Workers were overwhelmed by increasing caseloads, administrative burden, and a lack of time to devote to engaging with families in a meaningful way. These factors, coupled with limited agency support left workers feeling devalued and risk was prioritized over adopting strengths-based approaches in practice with families.

The 'rules of engagement' apply only if individual workers opt to use strengths-based approaches and the family participates. Thus, the lessons learned from this research were that strengths-based theory and the Signs of Safety model foster engagement and rapport building in the worker/client relationship, but only insofar as they make an intense situation 'more comfortable' for the worker. Factors influencing the efficacy of strengths-based approaches need to be acknowledged before any meaningful determination regarding efficacy can be ascertained.

The workers in this study expressed wanting to apply strengths-based approaches because they produced positive outcomes that equalled safety for children. Perhaps then, changes in practice need to be addressed at the policy level, to ensure that child protection workers feel less conflicted, and less obligated to make a choice between a risk and liability focus to developing ways to meaningfully collaborate with families.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Poster

McMaster University

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH

ENGAGING WITH FAMILIES USING THE SIGNS OF SAFETY PRACTICE MODEL

Looking for volunteers to take part in a study to understand how Social Workers
*ENGAGE WITH FAMILIES USING THE SIGNS OF SAFETY (SOS) PRACTICE
MODEL AND OTHER PRACTICE TOOLS*

You would be asked to: Take part in a one-to-one interview to share your experience
and your perspective on how you engage with families.

Your participation would involve one session and
will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes at a location of your choosing in your area.

In appreciation for your time, refreshments and snacks will be provided.

Your input and what you have to say can contribute to research and is appreciated!

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:
Lesley (LA) Mabo
McMaster School of Social Work
289-775-3699 or
Email: *mabol@mcmaster.ca*

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.**

Appendix B – Email Recruitment Script

Email Recruitment Script - Participants

Lesley (LA) Mabo, BSW,

Masters Social Work Candidate, McMaster University

Do strengths-based and solution-focused practice models foster or hinder worker/client rapport? A critical analysis of the Signs of Safety approach.
_____

E-mail Subject line: McMaster Study – Signs of Safety (Strengths-Based) Approaches

I am inviting you to participate in a 60 to 90 minute one-to-one interview to express your perspective regarding the Signs of Safety model, as well as strengths-based, solution-focused approaches you use to engage work with your families. As part of my graduate program in the School of Social Work at McMaster University, I am carrying out this study to learn what front line child protection workers think about the practice tools they use, particularly the Signs of Safety (SOS) model, and if these tools/model help with rapport building with families. As a former child protection worker, I developed an interest in the relationship between the worker and family was motivated to learn more from you about this specific work with families. If you have a year or more experience with the SOS model, I would like to speak with you.

The risks in this study are minimal. However, if you feel at any time uncomfortable discussing your work or the tools/model you use with families, you can choose to not answer any questions or withdraw from the research at any time with no repercussions.

If you choose to not participate or withdraw from this research, please let me know as soon as possible or contact me before June 15, 2017. I have attached a copy of the Letter of Information about the study that provides you with more details of this research.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

> The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
>
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
>
> c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support (ROADS)

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. After a week, I will send you a one-time follow-up reminder.

Lesley (LA) Mabo, BSW,

Masters Social Work candidate

School of Social Work

McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario

Tel: 289-775-3699

mabol@mcmaster.ca

Appendix C – Email Recruitment Script – To Agency

Email Recruitment Script

Sent on Behalf of the Researcher

Lesley (LA) Mabo, BSW

Masters of Social Work candidate

Study Title:

Do strengths-based and solution-focused practice models foster or hinder worker/client rapport? A critical analysis of the Signs of Safety approach.

_____

E-mail subject line: McMaster Study – Signs of Safety (Strengths-Based) Model

Dear Employees,

Lesley (LA) Mabo, a McMaster social work student completing her Masters in Social Work degree, has contacted ***Agency*** to request from our employees to participate in a research study understanding the Signs of Safety model and regarding rapport building approaches with families. This research is part of the requirement for her degree in the Master of Social Work program at McMaster University.

The following is a brief description of her study:

Lesley (LA) Mabo is inviting you to take part in a 60 to 90 minute interview that will take place at a time and place convenient to you. Through this research study she hopes to learn what social workers think about different approaches that work or do not work with service users, particularly the Signs of Safety (SOS) practice model. If you have a year or more experience with the SOS model, she would like to speak with you.

Please note that your participation with this study is voluntary and you can leave the interview or not answer questions at any time. Attached to this email is a copy of her Letter of Information and recruitment poster to this email, which provides you with more details about her study.

If you are interested in receiving more information about this study or taking part in the study, please CONTACT Lesley (LA) Mabo DIRECTLY by her telephone number or email address. Tel: 289-775-3699 or mabol@mcmaster.ca. Lesley (LA) will not tell or share with me or anyone at ***Agency*** who has inquired or participated in this research. Taking part or not taking part in this study will not affect your status or employment here at ***Agency***.

In addition, this study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

> McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
>
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
>
> Gilmour Hall – Room 305 (ROADS)
>
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Sincerely,

Representative

Position

Agency

Note that all bolded and starred words were eliminated in order to ensure the anonymity of the agencies involved in the research

Appendix D – Letter of Information and Consent Form

McMaster University

Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

DATE: 2017-05-03

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT FORM - PARTICIPANTS

Rules of engagement: Do strengths-based and solution-focused practice models foster or hinder worker/client rapport? A critical analysis of the Signs of Safety approach.

Researcher: **Research Supervisor:**

Lesley (LA) Mabo   Dr. Bonnie Freeman

School of Social Work   School of Social Work

McMaster University   McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada   Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

(289) 775-3699   **(905) 525-9140 x.21447**

E-mail: mabol@mcmaster.ca   E-mail: freeman@mcmaster.ca

What am I trying to discover?

My name is LA Mabo and I am doing this research as a part of my Masters studies in the School of Social work at McMaster University. As part of my research project, I want to understand how the Signs of Safety model, as well as strengths-based and solution-focused practice tools help you build relationships with your clients.

My research will focus on an analysis of the Signs of Safety (SOS) practice model to determine if this model works or not in all practice situations, and whether the use of the model helps or does not help build rapport with the families you work with.

To be more specific, my research area relates to the rapport building between the worker and a family. As a former child protection worker, I understand that the model can be both challenging and rewarding. Therefore, I will be asking you specifically how you engage with your families, if you use the SOS model as a guide and if this has made the process of relationship building more (or less) easier for the work that you do. I will also ask what other methods or practices you use to engage with families.

To participate in the study, I am requesting child protection workers to have at least 1 or more years of experience in using the SOS model. If you decide you would like to speak with me regarding your experience, an interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your time. Please know that your participation will be strictly confidential and voluntary. You have the option to withdraw from the interview or the research study any time.

The end goal of my research will be to give back this information to child protection workers, Children's Aid Societies and the community information that will improve the work that we do with children and families and explain the strengths and limitations of the SOS model.

If you would like to speak with me regarding your experience with the SOS model and other practices that you engage with in your practice, interviews will begin to take place in April and early May, pending on your schedule.

What will happen during the study?

I will be interviewing child protection workers who use the SOS model, as well as strengths-based and solution-focused practice tools in building relationships with families. Questions I will be asking will be: What types of practices/models do you use to engage with families in your work; Have you used the SOS model? What are some positive experiences or concerns you have with the SOS model? What could be done to better engage with clients/families?

I will be doing individual interviews and each interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded upon your approval or notes taken if you do not wish to be recorded. Interviews will be done at a location of your preference. Please note, due to confidentiality and your anonymity with this research, I will not arrange interviews at your place of work.

Once the interview is completed, I will ask if you would like me to send a copy of the interview transcript to your personal email to review, change (if needed) and approve before I begin to analyze all interviews. I will ask if you would like to receive a copy of the study results once the research is completed. If so, I can send the results to your personal email.

Please understand, the choice to whether you participate (or not) in this research study is up to you. This study is completely voluntary and you can refuse to answer questions and leave the study at any time.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts

There is a chance that you may feel uncomfortable sharing thoughts about work and/or clients. Please share what you are comfortable in saying. You can refuse to answer any question.

If at any time you feel uncomfortable and do express not wanting to continue with the interview or the research study, you can leave at any time, with no repercussions to you and your interview/data will be destroyed.

Potential Benefits

Benefits from this study will help you and your colleagues who use the SOS model and other practices with engaging with families. This research will also assist Children's Aid Societies and the broader social work community with social work models and practices.

Confidentiality

Your privacy is important to me and I will take great care in order to respect it. You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one aside from me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them.

The information you provide me will be kept in a computer or USB memory stick will be password protected and only I will have access to it. The consent you sign and any other written documents will be kept secured and only I will have access to it. One year after the thesis has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdraw at any time without reason, even after signing the consent form up until June 15, 2017, after which time my results will have been submitted in my thesis. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you decide not to answer some of the questions, you can still remain in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed approximately by August 1, 2017. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you. I will issue reports by August 15, 2017. A report and a copy of my Master thesis will be issued to the agency.

Questions about the Study:

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

mabol@mcmaster.ca
289 775 3699

Additionally you may contact my research supervisor should you wish to contact someone after I have completed my degree at McMaster.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

> McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
>
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
>
> C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
>
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read and been verbally presented with the information presented in this letter about the Masters research conducted by Lesley (LA) Mabo of McMaster University in the School of Social Work.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and received additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until June 15, 2017.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____Date: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

… Yes.

… No.

If no, I agree that Lesley (LA) can take notes during the interview:_____(participant's initials)

2. I agree to be contacted to review and make any changes to my transcripts.

… Yes. Please contact me at_____

… No.

3. …Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to me at this email address _____

Or to this mailing address: _____

                        _____

                        _____

… No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Appendix E – Interview Guide

Interview Questions

Rules of engagement: Do strengths-based and solution-focused practice models foster or hinder worker/client rapport? A critical analysis of the Signs of Safety approach.

LA Mabo, (Master of Social Work student)

(School of Social Work – McMaster University)

Information about these interview questions: These questions give you an idea what I would like to learn about your rapport building techniques with families. Interviews will be one-to-one with open-ended questions. Please note that sometimes, I will ask clarifying questions to ensure I understand what you are telling me or if I need more information. These questions will be, as follows: "*So, you are saying that …?*, "*Please tell me more?",* or "*Why do you think that is…?"*

Interview Questions:

1) How long have you been in your current profession?

2) What types of positions did/do you hold at work?

3) What does client engagement look like to you?

4) How do you define strengths-based and solution-focused practice?

5) What types of practice tools do you use to engage with a client?

6) In what ways do you use the Signs of Safety (SOS) practice model?

7) Did you receive training on the SOS model? If yes, what did that look like and what did you think of the training?

8) What are some positive aspects of the SOS model working with clients?

9) What are some areas of concern or challenges related to the SOS model working with clients?

10) What ideas do you have to make the SOS model better?

11) Do you feel that strengths-based practice approaches should be consistently applied by all Children's Aid Societies throughout the province?

12) Do you have suggestions not discussed that you feel would be beneficial to practice or building relationships with clients?

END