

Article

We Fled Gunfire to Protect Our Children: Reimagining Child Protection in Australia for South Sudanese Communities

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Abstract

This article reports on action research which sought the perspectives of South Sudanese families and communities about their experiences and understanding of child protection. The research was grounded in cycles of interviews, consultation, and participation observation with a total of ninety-seven participants which included South Sudanese leaders and families in Australia and in Uganda. The resulting data offers a layered insight into the pressures families navigate and the strengths on which they draw to keep children connected to community and culture in Australia and the importance they place on community led approaches in which protection and safety are understood as collective responsibilities. The findings show that the collective strengths they highlight are often misunderstood within Western child protection systems. The paper concludes that meaningful partnership and developmental ways of working are essential for building trust and designing approaches that keep children safe within culture.

Keywords: developmental practice; child protection; cultural responsiveness; whiteness and social work; relational social work; foster care; South Sudanese

1. Introduction

Drawing on one of the authors' encounters of being labelled a child stealer in Australia and later being challenged by elders in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp who urged her to take the message back that all Africans love their children, this paper reveals the cultural misalignment that often shapes contemporary child protection.

The paper is organised to reflect a qualitative, interpretive approach to understanding child welfare approaches among South Sudanese families living in Australia. It outlines the conceptual and methodological framework underpinning the study, including the use of qualitative interviews and focus groups and an analytic approach informed by the concept of crystallisation. This analytic approach uses a constructivist epistemology and is informed by Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) as a lens to examine assumptions which shape child protection practice.

There have been numerous studies examining the settlement challenges and tensions that culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families can experience when arriving in English-speaking countries (Hashimoto-Govindasamy and Rose 2011; Losoncz 2019; Losoncz and Marlowe 2020; Mugadza et al. 2020; Schweitzer et al. 2006, 2007; Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham 2010; Tusasiirwe 2021). Despite this body of work, limited research



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attention has been given to identifying what changes are required within child welfare services and child protection systems to more effectively respond to the needs of CaLD families.

This research, involving interviews with a diverse number of South Sudanese community members and leaders, investigates the limitations of child protection service provision when attempting to work effectively across cultural differences. It explores how these CaLD families navigate welfare systems shaped by colonial histories and focuses on identifying changes that enable culturally responsive work grounded in an appreciation of history, structure and the everyday realities of family life.

2. Contextual Background: Child Protection in Australia and the Arrival of South Sudanese Families

The historical background of child protection in Australia helps to understand how and why present-day child protection work with South Sudanese families appears to continue to be shaped by colonial histories and dominant views about parenting and family life.

Contemporary child protection systems in settler colonial countries such as Australia have emerged from a long tradition of child rescue. This history has left a legacy producing policies and practices that, although framed as safeguarding children, have often reproduced unequal power relations between institutions and families, particularly those from Indigenous or refugee backgrounds (Haebich 2015). Keddel (2023) argues that children living in areas of poverty or high deprivation, as well as children from racialised and Indigenous groups, experience intersecting forms of overrepresentation across most child protection systems. Much earlier, Harries (2009) noted that children reported to authorities often come from communities with limited structural power. These families are commonly poor, Indigenous, or culturally and linguistically diverse, comprise single parents, and include those with mental health issues, intellectual disability, and addiction, or other health problems.

The historic waves of child protection have been described by many authors, one of whom, Dorothy Scott, captured these waves almost twenty years ago (Scott 2009). The first wave, driven by middle- and upper-class women in the late nineteenth century, was the child rescue movement, which presented itself as benevolent. In practice, it operated within rigid ideas about respectability and morality with the rescued child imagined as a blank slate that could be shaped through western norms and values. The establishment of Children's Courts and voluntary child protection societies gave this moral agenda legal and organisational backing. As Scott (2009) and Goddard and Liddell (1993) explain, these organisations rarely addressed the structural causes of hardship. Instead, there was a focus on identifying individual parental failings and it was this early framing which created a powerful dynamic in which 'good parenting' became tied to whiteness and middle-class domesticity.

The second wave marked by Kempe's "battered baby syndrome" child abuse became increasingly medicalised. This shift expanded the authority of doctors, hospitals and specialist investigators and it strengthened the idea that abuse could be identified and addressed through clinical assessment. As scientific legitimacy grew, the system moved towards risk management practices that took hold through the late twentieth century. Over time, child protection work evolved into more compliance-driven bureaucratic structures that assess risk through formal tools and intervene through legal processes. Lonne et al. (2008) argue that this approach has been increasingly dominated by neoliberal managerial, risk-dominant paradigms that, over the past three decades, have been aimed

at ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children by identifying potential risks and taking appropriate actions to protect them.

The third wave emerged in more recent times as statutory child protection services worldwide have become overwhelmed with notifications of child abuse and relentless challenges have been made about the unsustainability of contemporary systems (Scott and Swain 2013; Lonne et al. 2008; Featherstone et al. 2014; Lonne et al. 2019). Universal supports that once offered broad accessible assistance such as settlement services for new migrants, community-based childcare, neighbourhood centres and early intervention services are being progressively withdrawn or reshaped through a reliance on volunteering or competitive short term funding cycles. Lonne et al. (2013) argue that as universal services contract, statutory systems have been forced to absorb the consequences of this withdrawal and have become the primary point of response when family/child difficulties escalate.

The history of this third wave is essential to understanding the fears of CaLD communities arriving in Australia and other Western speaking countries who are unsure of the purpose of these child protection structures they confront. Some communities arrive from countries which have no formal child welfare systems in place; most then face statutory bureaucracies which they perceive as being at odds with their culture and ignore the importance they believe in community-based and collective ways of working. Losoncz (2019) argues that this can leave CaLD communities feeling persecuted and stigmatised by Australian authorities due to their customary parenting practices, and lead to mistrust and apprehension about Australian institutions.

In terms of cultural context for this research, Australia is often invoked as a successful multicultural country with a long history of welcoming and settling migrants from all corners of the world (Ang and Stratton 1998; Colic-Peisker 2011; Mansouri 2015). Yet the nation was established as a monocultural society after the arrival of the First Fleet, built around Anglo-Celtic norms. Throughout the twentieth century these monocultural foundations were reinforced through policies such as the White Australia Policy, which Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017) argue render Australia a racialised space shaped by colonisation and white racialised policy frameworks. The emergence of multiculturalism in the 1970s marked an important shift in public discourse and in migration patterns; however, scholars argue that many contemporary systems continue to reflect cultural assumptions forged during the monocultural era (Sawriker and Katz 2009). This ongoing legacy continues to influence how families from diverse cultural backgrounds are viewed, understood and supported. Across these shifts, statistical data consistently demonstrate that families outside dominant cultural norms remain disproportionately involved in child protection systems (Kaur 2012; Losoncz 2019; Sawriker 2016).

Among the humanitarian arrivals, the South Sudanese population has become the fastest growing group and has produced a newly emerging community in Australia with over 24,000 people arriving in the last two decades (Kaphle et al. 2024). People from South Sudan are amongst the most disadvantaged and face multiple settlement challenges in adjusting to the Australian social structures and service systems (Kaphle et al. 2024). Abur and Mphande (2020) stress the need for understanding the histories of CaLD communities and appreciating the challenging issues facing people from refugee backgrounds in Australia, including people from the South Sudanese community. They argue strongly that this research is vital for policy formulation and service delivery practice.

3. Methodology

The action research design is grounded in a constructivist epistemology which understands knowledge as co-produced through social interaction and meaning making rather than discovered as objective fact (Crotty 1998; Vygotsky 1978). This epistemological posi-

tioning aligns with community-based participatory research traditions and is considered essential for examining culturally grounded understandings of safety and child wellbeing within contexts shaped by displacement, resettlement and interaction with Western child protection systems. Action research was selected as it enabled the research to unfold in partnership with South Sudanese participants across Australia and Uganda, supporting iterative cycles of reflection and adaptation in response to the participants' priorities (Stringer and Aragón 2020).

While the research was initially conceptualised through a linear "look, think, act" model, this developed into a more adaptive approach shaped by community priorities (Muirhead 2020; Stringer and Aragón 2020). The responsive approach was shaped by participant relationships, practical constraints of working across continents and the relational ethics required to build and sustain trust. Rather than positioning the researcher as a detached observer, the design focused always on relational ways of working and the researcher's role in brokering connections, listening and moving at the pace set by participants themselves. Knowledge production was therefore understood as situated, partial and relational, emerging through ongoing engagement rather than discrete stages of data collection and analysis.

Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling conducted in partnership with South Sudanese community leaders in both Australia and Uganda. Initially, participants were approached through existing relationships with community leaders who supported the aims of the research and facilitated introductions within their communities. Snowball sampling then enabled participation to extend through relational networks based on trust, recommendation, and consent. In Australia, participants were from metropolitan settings, while in Uganda, research included community members and staff in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. A total of ninety-seven participants were involved in the research. Participants included elders and community leaders as well as participants from the Office of Prime Minister in Uganda and non-government organisation (NGO) participants. Together these participants contributed layered perspectives on child welfare and family responsibility across different contexts. Participants came from a range of South Sudanese cultural groups including Dinka, Nuer, Annuak, Acholi, Bari, Lou, Kuku, Shilluk, Balanda, Kakwa and Madi. Rather than treating participants as discrete demographic categories for comparative analysis, the research approached the groups as being relational and interconnected. While differences in roles in community, age and gender were acknowledged, the analysis focused on shared meanings, tensions and collective insights emerging across groups reflecting the relational orientation of the research and ethical considerations associated with community-based research.

Across the two research sites, data were generated through a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Drawing inspiration from the study of Denzin et al. (2006), recruitment was guided by principles of relational accountability and ongoing dialogue, rather than predetermined sampling quotas or demographic targets. Participation remained voluntary and consent was revisited throughout the research process as relationships and expectations evolved. In Australia, four focus groups were conducted involving a total of twenty-four participants, alongside individual interviews with community members and leaders. In Uganda, five focus groups were held with thirty-seven participants, complemented by individual interviews with community members, government officials, and non-government organisation staff. Focus groups and interviews explored how concepts of safety, child welfare and family responsibility were understood and negotiated in everyday life. Participant observation enabled attention to relational dynamics, informal interactions, and contextual influences often absent from formal interview settings.

Data collection occurred over an extended period and comprised multiple qualitative methods to analyse the wide range of textual and visual materials which included interview transcripts, field notes, sketches, photographs, diary entries and video recordings. This diversity reflected both the relational nature of the research and the varied ways participants chose to share experiences and insights. The breadth of data required an analytical approach capable of holding complexity rather than reducing accounts to simplified themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to guide the initial stage of data analysis with thematic analysis used as an organising analytic strategy to engage with the breadth of participant accounts through their six-phase framework. From the coding, six key themes emerged. These were money, parenting, reciprocity, humour, settlement and collectivism. This was not the final analytical lens because patterns, tensions and contradictions emerged across Australia and Uganda.

Crystallisation (Ellingson 2009) was adopted as the overarching analytic mode, enabling the six themes representing different forms of data—visual, narrative and experiential—to be held in conversation with each other. Crystallisation recognises that complex social realities are best understood through multiple perspectives rather than through a single definitive account. Different forms of data act as facets of a crystal that illuminate the phenomenon from different angles, allowing patterns, tensions and contradictions within participants accounts to be explored rather than reduced to simplified themes.

Within this approach, Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) provides one of the lenses for this approach through which the data is interpreted. CWT offers a framework for examining the multiple ways in which White norms and assumptions can become embedded within institutions, professional knowledge and everyday practice (Young 2004; Young and Zubrzycki 2011). In this context, the term White does not refer simply to individual identity but to historically dominant ways of organising systems, defining professional standards and shaping what is considered legitimate knowledge or practice. These norms often operate quietly yet continue to perpetrate white ways powerfully, shaping thinking and influencing professional decision-making.

The metaphor of the crystal prism became central, offering a way of visualising how many truths, angles and meanings coexist within participant accounts. This approach resists binary interpretations, attending instead to the shifting colours, intersectionality and tensions within the data. To further explore these connections, the analysis was supported by additional artistic processes including marbling, which draws metaphorically on marbling as an art practice. This process enabled themes to be understood as layered, moving and relational rather than fixed or discrete, reflecting the dynamic patterns described in visual methodologies (Cheng et al. 2015).

Ethical considerations were integral given the relational nature of action research. Ethics approval was granted via the university Human Research Ethics Committee. This research would not have been possible without the initial approval and contribution of leaders of the South Sudanese community in Western Australia. These participants wanted to know their role would be a constant one involving ongoing consultation and genuine trust about balancing academic demands of the research with the needs for openness and sharing of emerging ideas. Researcher reflexivity was approached as an ethical practice rather than a strategy for eliminating bias (Reid et al. 2018). The researcher's relational positioning, long-term engagement with communities and role in shaping dialogue and interpretation were explicitly acknowledged. Ongoing dialogue, accountability to community leaders and transparency regarding emerging ideas were used as mechanisms for ethical practice and reflexive accountability. The research recognises that insights do not emerge directly or neutrally from participant voices, but are necessarily shaped through the researcher's own bias, interpretive decisions and the broader institutional contexts in which

the research is situated. Concepts such as “lived experience” are therefore understood as socially and politically embedded rather than neutral or self-evident.

4. Findings: Words of Wisdom

The insights below presented here were not selected as representative quotations but as analytically significant condensations that emerged through the crystallisation process. Statements were identified and refined where insights were consistently raised across multiple participants, settings and forms of data including interviews, focus groups, observations and through relational engagement. These ‘Words of Wisdom’ were selected as findings because they crystallised collective meaning making across participants, offering guidance grounded in experience rather than definitive findings or answers. These statements are carried forward as their ‘truths’ to sit with and consider, creating space to reflect on how families understand safety, responsibility and authority across different social worlds.

“We saw people die so we had to protect our children but here in Perth child protection means something else. Maybe we need a Department for Adult Protection.” (Community member, focus group, Australia, Participant 28)

Participants in Australia spoke about the sharp contrast between how children were protected during conflict and war versus how they perceived the child protection system works in Australia. In South Sudan, keeping children safe was a collective responsibility shaped by war, danger and the need to act quickly or risk a fatality. Deng (2017), Losoncz (2019) and Sawrikar (2016) argue that terms like ‘child protection’ are widely accepted in institutional conventions but their meanings vary across different ethnic and cultural groups in society, such as the South Sudanese community. Families described arriving in Perth and their fears towards a child protection system which they had heard had the authority to remove children from families. Parents talked about their feeling of powerlessness and losing authority and felt their intentions were being questioned or not being recognised for the strength they had shown in keeping their children alive through war and displacement. For refugees experiencing long years of precarious existence, their integration and feeling part of the community centre on a sense of safety, stable employment and housing, economic security, and accessing educational opportunities for their children (Losoncz 2019). The comment about needing a “Department for Adult Protection” carries the message describing how adults felt fearful, unprotected and misunderstood in a system where they often felt overlooked.

“I get annoyed when I hear that term it takes a village to raise a child. Our villages were destroyed and we are trying hard to make a new one.” (Community member, individual interview, Australia, Participant 13)

Participants pushed back against the phrase ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ describing it as a phrase often used by Westerners that ignores the effects of colonisation and internal wars had on fracturing their villages and social infrastructure. Authors such as Boym refer to such observations as the prevalence of the ‘nostalgic gaze’ in contemporary thought in which idealised notions of community obscure histories of disruption, displacement and loss (Boyman 2001). Participants explained that not only did wars upset all their family and kinship systems, but they also then found themselves scattered throughout refugee camps and eventually settling across the world. Some had relatives who were relocated to USA or England at the same time they were allocated Australia as their new country of settlement.

When South Sudanese families arrive in Australia, they observe that people think they are all somehow connected to each other, but they often do not know one another and might only be meeting each other for the first time at the airport. They described

a new challenge of attempting to forge new communities from scratch, describing how they are often placed in isolated suburbs away from their cultural networks and everyday connection. These unfamiliar environments have created a sense of loneliness but also a loss of safety networks which once protected children leaving families without the communal support, the 'village', that shaped their ability to collectively care for children.

Parents described tension between cultural norms of informal supervision where children would be visible in their community or indeed in the refugee camps where many spent a considerable number of years. Any issues in families would traditionally be dealt communally or with elders. They described how in their home communities, neighbours, extended family and elders met to support families who were struggling drawing on their memories of collective care from earlier periods in their lives. Being placed in new suburbs in a foreign land away from others meant many lost that safety network and indeed some participants felt so distressed they were contemplating returning to their home in Africa despite the risks attached to that.

"We are fed up with white people telling us how to look after our own children."
(Community member, individual interview, Australia, Participant 6)

Participants expressed frustration with Western-designed parenting workshops, describing encounters where professional authority and the dominance of white people shaped their experiences. Here 'Whiteness', as a now well acknowledged social/racial construct, operated not only as cultural dominance but also as what [Young and Zubrzycki \(2011\)](#) describe as a positional identity that carries unearned privilege, often unseen by those who benefit from it. These reflections point to unequal power relations and the continuing influence of colonial thinking within child protection practice ([Hendrick and Young 2023](#)). The participants called for "African solutions to African problems", highlighting a desire for approaches grounded in community knowledge rather than externally imposed interventions.

Frankenberg's work further illuminates these dynamics by identifying behaviours that reproduce white privilege, including colour blindness and the belief that a universal humanity can overcome racial inequities ([Frankenberg 1993](#)). Race-cognisant practitioners are described as those who recognise the structuring force of racism and who actively work to acknowledge and address their own privilege in order to engage more fairly with those harmed by it. [Hendrick and Young \(2023\)](#) likewise argue that being white brings automatic advantages in access to resources unrelated to merit, ability, or need, even while inequities continue to exist within white communities. Together, these insights frame Whiteness as both an identity and a system of unearned benefit that shapes interactions between institutions and families, with clear implications for contemporary child protection practice.

Participants also challenged assumptions about physical discipline being a cultural norm in African communities. They explained that the use of the stick had been introduced by white missionaries during colonial rule. One participant explained that missionaries used a stick to 'tame us wild Africans' and they were keen to state that this was not a longstanding cultural practice. Before the arrival of missionaries, other forms of discipline were used within the community. One common approach described by participants involved placing a child on the ¹veranda in silence, visible to others, where the shame of being observed was considered sufficient. Participants described the portrayal of corporal punishment as an African cultural tradition as a colonial myth, arguing that its widespread use reflected missionary and state-imposed disciplinary practices rather than Indigenous child-rearing norms. Historical scholarship similarly documents how corporal punishment was constructed and legitimised within colonial governance in East Africa ([Anderson 2011](#)), highlighting how colonialism imposed new systems of discipline that reshaped family life and everyday practices at the most intimate level.

“Where I come from there is no term for mental health.” (Community leader, individual interview, Australia, Participant 31)

This quote emerged during a focus group discussion where participants explained that in their communities, people collectively support one another through difficult times. Distress was not understood in terms of mental health to which some of them were referred when facing family problems in Australia but was instead described as part of everyday life and understood through shared struggle rather than formal counselling. The latter was viewed as irrelevant to participants because they preferred familiar, communal ways of coping. They emphasised solving problems together, visiting each other at home and “talk-talk-talking” until emotions settled, rather than approaching external services or discussing personal issues with strangers.

Participants also described the central role of community care during bereavement. People gathered, stayed close and supported families through grief, sometimes for weeks, until they felt strong enough to manage independently. Community presence was understood as a cultural obligation rather than something to be replaced by formal services. Across both Australia and Uganda, participants noted that extended family, church groups and informal networks offered consistent emotional and practical support, even when immediate family members were absent.

“African children already see themselves as being different so if they are raised by people who look like them, who talk like them it will help form their identity and strengthen who they are.” (Community member, individual interview, Australia, Participant 15)

This quote from a participant captures a strong concern among community members about the identity risks children face when placed with carers who share no cultural or visible connection to them. Families recognised that some South Sudanese households were unsafe because of violence or substance use, yet they worried that removing children into white foster placements would erode their sense of self. Participants stressed that many African children already feel visibly different in Australia, and that growing up without adults who look like them or speak like them would deepen this sense of dislocation. The Africa-born population represents a small minority of migrants; however, their visible difference is especially significant given Australia’s history of Whiteness (Baak 2019; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The issue was framed as ‘belonging’ so children knew who they are. Several participants linked this worry to a reliance on white carers which reinforced the anxieties that their own ability to care for children did not meet the Australian expectations of parenting. For many, cultural matching was understood as protective. Participants believed that being raised within familiar cultural environments supports children to grow with confidence in a society where they may already be marked as different.

“Sometimes you need to hear my cries but sometimes you need to stay away too.” (Community member, individual interview, Australia, Participant 23)

This quote reflects the diversity and complexity of participants’ views on violence in the home. Their accounts revealed no single or unified position with some participants describing family violence as a private matter that should remain within the household and believed that statutory workers should stay away. Others took the opposite view, arguing that it was the responsibility of government agencies to intervene and provide support when safety was at risk because that was the role they were paid to do.

Views on involving elders also varied, with some participants describing elders as figures who should guide responses; however, for others, they described involving community leaders as bringing shame or making the situation worse. These contrasting perspectives

demonstrate participant views that experiences of family violence cannot be approached through fixed rules or assumptions.

“It is very hard when the system doesn’t understand you and you don’t understand the system. You don’t have a tick box for us. I am an elder so these are my children but the system does not recognise this.” (Community leader, individual interview, Australia, Participant 1)

Participants spoke about the difficulty of navigating systems that neither understand them nor reflect their ways of being. One elder captured this tension by asking why the system does not recognise his role as an elder, advisor and caregiver. Participants described the need to step outside formal structures to connect across different worldviews or to work around systems that felt rigid and unresponsive. A community-based social worker in Uganda explained that she often operated at the edges of the system, describing this as “working underneath the system” so she could understand what was happening in the community and therefore build meaningful human connections.

Elders and other community members also observed and questioned why the child protection system fails to acknowledge them as important figures not only in a child’s life but also within the broader family and community networks. Many expressed their willingness to care for children in the community who were unable to remain at home, yet, they said, the system continued to prioritise biological inquiries over community ties. This caused frustration, as participants felt the system was obstructing their collective ability to be considered for caregiving roles and to support families.

One elder reiterated that the success of the partnership approach came from stepping away from rigid systems and engaging in a human-to-human way that created shared ground, rather than simply acting within designated roles. Such an approach is already articulated in recent academic literature in the third wave of child protection (Featherstone et al. 2014; Lonnie et al. 2019). One example is that of Harries (2009, p. 50), who emphasises the importance of “human togetherness,” which involves building meaningful relationships rather than relying on regulatory measures. This idea of partnership resonated across the research data, highlighting the significance for participants of finding ways to connect with one another and come together as human beings to understand diverse worlds, rather than focusing on differences.

5. Discussion

The ‘Words of Wisdom’ are some core findings that reveal a landscape shaped by competing pressures and unresolved contradictions. Participants explained the challenges they faced as parents and described the challenges of keeping their children safe while holding onto long-standing cultural expectations of respect, authority and collective responsibility. Some spoke about wanting support from statutory agencies yet feared that intervention might erode their role as parents or misinterpret the complexities within their families. Others emphasised that family matters were private and that workers’ involvement risked doing more harm, particularly when parents feared their cultural knowledge would be overlooked or dismissed. Resettlement, they said, led to further strain, disrupting extended family networks and leaving parents to navigate unfamiliar systems without the community structures they once relied on.

Understanding these contradictions and the competing truths they generate is essential for thinking about how practitioners acknowledge families’ lived realities rather than relying on their own assumptions about culture, risk or parenting. Their significance lies in how they point to and frame several key areas: the tensions that shape everyday decision-making, the centrality of relationship, the effects of colour blindness, the impact of proceduralising practice and the importance of children’s rights to identity.

Elements of these tensions are already captured as components of a global conversation with scholars across different countries describing the struggles of families asking for approaches grounded in relationships rather than procedures alone (Cottam 2018; Keddell et al. 2022). During the second wave of child protection, practitioners have increasingly been required to operate within institutional frameworks that regulate the “life world” via the “institutional world” (Habermas 1984) through rules, forms and reporting requirements. This has created a conundrum where contemporary scholarship highlights that relational work is being called for but practitioners must navigate systems that are not built to support it.

The South Sudanese participants in this research expressed this contradiction clearly. They asked for responses that recognise their own community knowledge, cultural expectations and the importance of trust, while also navigating systems that they felt often misread them. The challenge of raising a family in an unfamiliar cultural context is prevalent amongst CaLD families who have a limited knowledge of Western parenting practices. Renzaho and Vignjevic (2011) describe how children from migrant communities tend to adapt quickly while parents often hold onto their own cultural values and parenting styles.

Participants’ accounts describe how resettlement pressures, disrupted kinship networks and unfamiliar child protection processes interact with a system that they felt privileges Western models of parenting. They described this as being at the expense of their own customs. It is very apparent from these data that practitioners need to find ways of holding all of these truths at once: the need for safety, the value of cultural knowledge and the constraints of statutory structures.

This research has highlighted the ties to Australia’s monocultural policy history and the long positioning of whiteness as an unmarked norm within social work institutions (Gray and Webb 2013). Throughout this research, Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) offered a way to interrogate how these assumptions continue to shape assessments and frameworks used by practitioners and researchers. Young (2004) argues social work practice seldom involves reflexive consideration of what it means to be white and the implications for practice. Sawrikar (2016) notes that even the term CaLD continues to refer primarily to groups who are not white and English speaking and further argues that the term can obscure race and religion in ways that reproduce exclusion rather than challenging it.

Arguably, the term CaLD itself functions as a way of categorising ‘others’. The term CaLD was introduced as a move away from the term Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) used in the 1990s because NESB was seen as too narrow to capture the range of differences between the majority and minority populations. The term CaLD itself remains uneasy as a label implying that a homogenous ‘other’ defined only by difference from the cultural majority. Participants repeatedly emphasised that African children benefit from being cared for by adults who look like them to support identity, belonging and safety. Participants spoke about the need for people to ‘look like us, speak like us and understand people like us’.

Scholars, such as Moreton-Robinson (2015), note that mainstream systems remain hesitant to name colour directly, stressing the need for training that builds cultural literacy, clearer guidance on cultural identity planning and accountability mechanisms that prevent colour-blind decision-making from being treated as neutral. This research highlights that developing the confidence to talk about colour with sensitivity is no longer optional but central to culturally responsive child protection. The policy questions this raises are not simply whether colour should be acknowledged but how systems can build the capability to do this ethically and respectfully. An implication of the research is that child protection systems need to acknowledge colour blindness. Walter and Baltra-Ulloa (2019) note that social work practice seldom involves reflexive consideration of what it means to be white

or Euro-Australian, and that this question is largely absent from the texts used to train future social workers.

This research sits within a broad professional and practice context which resonates internationally with research consistently showing the strength of relational practice—co-design and lived experience (Bromley et al. 2025). Evidence from Australia and overseas highlights that families do better when practitioners can work with flexibility, build trust and respond to context rather than rely on rigid procedures. Relational approaches create the conditions for safety, belonging and cultural understanding (Ruch 2023). Alongside this awareness are the contemporary systems designed to protect children which have been organised through structures that prioritise regulation, compliance and risk management. Both sit alongside each other: relational work is increasingly promoted at the same time that statutory systems remain shaped by procedural logics that limit it.

In 2024, Eileen Munro reflected on the legacy of her much earlier UK child protection review and reiterated her earlier argument that the system remains over-bureaucratised and overly focused on compliance rather than professional judgement (Munro 2011, 2024). More than a decade on, subsequent inquiries continue to identify the same pressures. In the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, MacAlister reports that high levels of bureaucracy persist and that social workers still lack the time and resources needed to build relationships with families (MacAlister 2022). A follow-up survey found that practitioners were spending almost 60 per cent of their working hours completing case-related paperwork, which echoes Munro's concerns about excessive policy demands, preparation for inspection, poor IT systems and a risk-averse culture (MacAlister 2022).

This third wave of child welfare reform also signals genuine hope, placing greater value on the knowledge held by people with lived experience and recognises the power of co-designed frameworks that centre parent rights and child rights (Bromley et al. 2025). Children are increasingly understood as holders of cultural identity, not simply subjects of protection creating space for more relational and culturally grounded practice (Keddell 2023). Reforms that enable cultural matching of children with potential carers reflect movement in the right direction, yet the evidence shows that these gains will only be sustained if matched by stronger policy investment and a long-term commitment to change.

A small yet significant example of emerging hope can be seen in the early development of a Community Carers initiative in Western Australia. Action research conducted by one author Speirs (2018) worked with the South Sudanese community to explore a community-led model of care that could address tensions between families and the statutory child protection department. The participatory approach generated new opportunities for dialogue, and community members began electing to apply to become carers. Importantly, these opportunities were galvanised by the fact that participants repeatedly emphasised that children should be cared for by people who looked like them and shared their cultural background, language and community ties.

A second related development is reflected in the broader shift within Australian jurisdictions and more broadly internationally toward reframing frontline roles from child protection workers to child safety practitioners. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how relational practice and structural policy can begin to move in the same direction. When community knowledge is taken seriously within system design, culturally grounded care becomes not only possible but effective. These developments offer a glimpse of what becomes possible when developmental ways of working that prioritise bottom-up knowledge begin to meet top-down policy strengthening both child safety and cultural connection.

6. Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this research is that it is focused on the views of South Sudanese participants in one state of Australia alongside the views of those in a refugee camp in Uganda. This research does not claim to represent the experiences and perspectives of all South Sudanese and the challenges they face in Australia as a result of changes within their families.

7. Conclusions

This research demonstrates that South Sudanese families who were interviewed conceptualise child safety, protection and wellbeing as a relational practice enacted through a sense of collective responsibility and cultural authority rather than through formal processes. They understand protection as maintaining children's sense of belonging within community. The findings offer important insights into how placing culture at the centre of practice can inform contemporary debates about children's rights, belonging and protection. Participants' accounts of fleeing gunfire to save their children in search of safety locate protection in a landscape of extreme danger. By foregrounding these experiences, the research contributes to understanding the meaning of protection and highlights ongoing tensions between procedural systems and relational worlds.

The central contribution of this research is the identification of relational and cultural misalignment as a source of risk within child protection practice. This suggests that meaningful practice requires not only professional skill but also a sustained commitment to complexity, prioritising relational ways of working meeting each other through genuine human-to-human connection.

Building on this research, a next step for future research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the community-led model of care that has been developed, including its capacity to support culturally grounded placements and improve outcomes for children and families.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CaLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
CWT	Critical Whiteness Theory

Note

- ¹ The term veranda is used here as the participant's own descriptive shorthand to convey a visible, communal space associated with the home, rather than as a literal reference to a specific pre-colonial architectural form.

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