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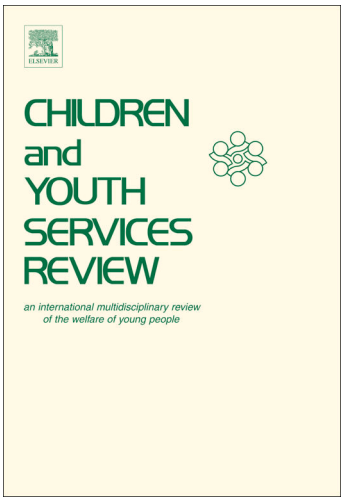

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Children's participation in decision-making processes in child protection services: Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers increasingly recognize of the importance of children's right to participate in decision-making processes in child protection services. While the importance of children's participation is widely acknowledged, research suggests that this participation can may adversely affect children when committees do not constitute a "safe space" that is sensitive to the needs of the child. These needs are often influenced by the children's cultural values and norms, their families, and the broader socio-cultural milieu. The present study provides an in-depth analysis of the experience of participating in committees from the perspective of Arab-Israeli children. It illuminates both the effective mechanisms that encourage their participation and the obstacles that impede it. The findings reveal that children's participation in decision-making processes is influenced by various cultural and systemic factors. These results emphasize the need to design culturally sensitive mechanisms in child protection services to empower children and enable them to participate in decision that concern their lives.

Keywords: child protection services, child participation, social workers, culture

1 INTRODUCTION

Children's participation in decision-making processes in child protection services is anchored in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, article 12 (UNCRC, 1989). The Convention reads as follows: "1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. 2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law."

The commonly accepted meaning of article 12 of the UN convention stipulates that children have the right to be heard and to express their opinions in every decision concerning their lives (Henaghan, 2017). Consequently, in recent decades, various countries globally have incorporated children's participation rights into their welfare policies and legislation (Alfandari, 2017; Berrick et L., 2015; Bessell, 2011; Henaghan, 2017). These efforts were based on the understanding that children's participation in decision-making and hearing their voices may contribute to increasing their self-esteem (Vis et al., 2011) and tailoring interventions to their specific needs and quotidian experiences (van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2004; Vis et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, despite increased efforts to implement children's rights to participate in child protection services, in practice, decision-making processes persist in fostering exclusion and a sense of distance among children (Bessell, 2011; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Contemporary research suggests that the right to participation is only partially implemented in the welfare system (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2019). It is noteworthy that children are often only marginally engaged in the proceedings of the "planning and treatment committees" that serve as the main court on which their future is decided, and often remain passive participants whose voices either unheard or not given adequate consideration (Connolly & Masson, 2014; Husby et al., 2018; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Pert et al., 2017; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017). These findings highlight the ongoing challenges in translating children's participation rights from theory into practice within child protection services.

The discrepancy between children's right to participate in decision-making in child protection services and actual implementation has led to increased efforts to expand the empirical knowledge base of the various factors that shape and mediate children's participation in these services (e.g., Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2019; Heimer et al., 2018). This research aims to broaden participatory practices, thereby enhancing children's involvement in decision-making processes within child protection services and translating participation rights into tangible realities (van Bijleveld et al., 2019; Woodman et al., 2023).

Cultural factors that either encourage or hinder participatory practices have been rarely explored. Moreover, in multicultural societies, children and their families may belong to ethnic groups with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. Previous literature demonstrates that culture may influence risk assessment and decision-making regarding children (Abdullah et al., 2018; Enosh & Bayer-Topilsy, 2015; Nouman et al., 2019), as well as his/her participation in decision-making. Cultural constructions that include cultural norms and values may affect the degree to which the culture allows participation, the level of children's participation in decision-making, and the quality of this participation (Gal & Duramy, 2015). This study aims to contribute to the extensive literature on children's participation in decision-making

processes within child welfare systems, with a specific focus on cultural perspectives and children's own perceptions. While there is indeed vast research on this topic and numerous efforts to create effective mechanisms for children's participation (e.g., Hart, 1992; Liebel, 2012; Shier, H. 2001), including studies examining this issue from a cultural standpoint (e.g., Cudjoe et al., 2020; Lansdown, 2011; Tisdall, 2015), there remains a need for more research that directly captures children's own views within specific cultural contexts. Our research endeavors to delineate both facilitative mechanisms and barriers to children's participation in decision-making processes from a cultural perspective, as perceived by the children themselves. Specifically, we focus on a sample of children from Arab society in Israel, a traditional collectivist culture. Through this culturally-informed approach that prioritizes children's voices, the study aims to enhance our understanding of children's participation in decision-making processes within a specific cultural context, potentially informing more inclusive and effective child protection practices that are sensitive to cultural nuances.

1.1 CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

Children's participation defined as the active involvement of young individuals in matters affecting their lives, is multidimensional encompassing various understandings of decision-making processes (Woodman et al., 2023). It is often conceptualized as a continuum—from no or little participation, where the child might be informed but not consulted or actively involved in decisions, to higher levels where children share responsibility for decisions (Shier, 2001). In fact, the implementation of children's participation is not contingent on full participation but that every child should have the opportunity to choose the optimal level of participation that matches his or her capacities (Hart, 1992). This conceptualization of participation as a continuum is particularly relevant in the context of child protection services.

Empirical evidence from diverse global contexts underscores the efficacy and significance of children's participation in decision-making processes pertaining to their lives. In child protection services, it is commonly understood that the CRC stipulates that children should be involved in matters affecting them (Henaghan, 2017). Research continues to affirm the effectiveness and importance of children's participation in decision-making processes concerning their lives. Recent studies highlight that children's involvement enhances their self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of control (Coyne et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Vis et al., 2021). Moreover, it promotes professional interventions that are responsive to children's specific needs and enhances collaboration in implementing intervention plans (Isokuortti, et al., 2020; Skivenes & Sørsdal, 2018). Despite the recognized importance of children's participation, empirical evidence suggests that children report limited opportunities to engage in decision-making processes (Woodman et al., 2023). In numerous recent studies, there is a consistent finding that children often express experiencing marginalization in decision-making processes, with adults' opinions taking precedence over their own (Wilson et al., 2020), and that they continue to feel powerless, voiceless and afraid in the face of child protection services (Balsells et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2010). Furthermore, other studies have found that even children who participate in decision-making processes lack information about processes that support decisions and, in practice, are excluded from decisions (Alfandari, 2017; Husby et al., 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

From the perspective of child protection professionals, facilitating children's participation in decision-making presents a multifaceted challenge. This intricacy sometimes stems from the conflict between safeguarding a child's rights and ensuring his/her protection (Marmor et al., 2017). This complexity often arises from the inherent tension between

upholding children's rights to self-determination and fulfilling child protection practitioners' duty to safeguard children's best interests (Diaz et al., 2019; Heimer et al., 2018; Shemmings, 2000). Cross-national studies indicate that children's participation is often contingent upon professionals' subjective interpretations of children's maturity and emotional state (Toros, 2021; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). This interpretation limits participation in light of the professionals' fear that it is potentially harmful for the child (Vis et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2012). Other factors identified that influence participation stem from professionals' limited understanding of participatory practice, time constraints, the lack of practitioners' skills in engaging with children, and the lack of child-centered processes (Alfandari, 2017; Diaz et al., 2019; Hultman et al., 2020). These findings underscore the multifaceted barriers to effective implementation of children's participation rights in child protection services.

1.2 CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The intersection of culture and decision-making in child protection services is characterized by two fundamental aspects in the literature. The first is that the child and his/her family's cultural values and norms constitute cultural determinants that may affect the children's ability and right to participate, as well as the form, level, and effectiveness of child participation (Gal & Duramy, 2015). The second is that social workers are required to develop sensitivity to cultural differences in order to create and promote culturally tailored professional mechanisms in decision-making (Enosh & Bayer-Topilsy, 2015; Nouman et al., 2019). Moreover, continuous reflection of their attitudes regarding the social and cultural reality in which they operate is required for professionals to shape their professional practice (Corin-Langer & Nadan, 2012).

A pivotal framework for conceptualizing children's participation within a cultural context is the ecological model (Gal & Duramy, 2015), which delineates the multifaceted layers influencing child participation. This model encompasses not only case-specific factors - such as the child's age, gender, developmental stage, and cognitive and emotional capacities - but also environmental influences and concentric circles of impact. These circles of influence refer to the child's trust in adults, family support in participation, personal skills of the professionals involved in the decision-making processes and their stance on children's participation, and the child's cultural characteristics. The cultural characteristics shape various aspects regarding the child's status, the role of the extended family in his/her upbringing, and the extent to which the community to which the child belongs allows participation in decision-making. Diverse systemic and cultural elements interact dynamically and concurrently to influence children's participation in decision-making processes.

From this cultural perspective, professional understanding relies on acknowledging ethnic and cultural diversity as reflected in children's lifestyles and social experiences, necessitating the creation of culturally tailored participation mechanisms. The literature underscores the imperative of fostering a" culture of inclusiveness" within child protection services, wherein participatory mechanisms are meticulously designed to address the specific needs of each child (Bessell, 2015; Graham et al., 2015). The present study's foundational premise aligns with the understanding that cultural norms and values are intrinsically woven into the fabric of children's participation in decision-making processes. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to augment the understanding of children's participation in decision-making within child protection services through a cultural lens, by examining children's participatory experiences and their correlation with decision-making mechanisms.

1.3 CULTURAL CONTEXT

Arab society constitute Israel's largest minority group, comprising about 21% of the country's population (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2022). Although increasingly influenced by Western ideologies and practices, this society largely maintains its collectivist cultural ethos, which continues to take precedence over individualistic value (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Haj-Yahia & Sadan, 2008). The family unit, perceived as the paramount social system, is expected to remain intact and serves as the primary source of emotional and material support (Haj-Yahia, 2000). Arab individuals are not expected to be autonomous or to act independently of the group (Al-Krenawi, 2002); dependency and conformity to the family rules and values are perceived as mature social adjustment and as a means of survival (Amar, 2012). This cultural context provides a unique backdrop for examining children's participation in decision-making processes within in child protection services. In contrast to these traditional norms and values internalized by members of Arab-Israeli society (Suan & Hanan, 2013), the social work profession in Israel is grounded in individualistic, universal, and Western cultural principles (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Zoabi & Savaya, 2017). These principles guide decision-making in child protection services within local welfare agencies. In Israel, decisions concerning at-risk children are made by treatment planning committees within social services departments of the local government.

According to The Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs' (2017) policy, Section 8.9: Committee for the planning and evaluation – its role and ways of functioning, preparing children for committee hearings and their participation in them are complex issues requiring sensitive and professional handling. The preparation process involves a meeting between a social worker and the children, which is coordinated with and approved by the parents, and conducted using age-appropriate language. Children receive information about their situation, needs, and relevant procedures, including an explanation of the committee and its objectives. Their words, perceptions, and wishes are carefully documented. Participation in the committee is assessed based on the children's age, developmental and emotional state, balancing their right to be heard with considerations of potential harm. When children are not present at the discussion, their statements are conveyed by professionals who have listened to them. The decision to summon children under 12 is made after a preparatory process and in consultation with both professional staff and parents, taking into account the child's cognitive, developmental, emotional, and family circumstances Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, 2017). The juxtaposition of individualistic professional orientation and the collectivist values of traditional Arab society can create conflicts for social workers involved in child participation decision-making processes (Zoabi & Savaya, 2015). This discord may lead to both internal and external conflicts for social workers. Moreover, even when social workers in local child protection services come from traditional Arab backgrounds, their Western oriented professional education may create cultural dissonance (Nouman et al., 2019).

This cultural-professional dichotomy can impact the design and implementation of participatory practices in child protection services, thereby affecting both the level and quality of children's engagement in decision-making committees. The insights of children who have participated in these committees are not only valuable but essential for understanding and improving participatory practices within this unique cultural context.

2 METHOD

2.1 SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

This study examines the participatory experiences of children who consistently engaged in child protection service committee meetings within Arab communities in Israel, offering insight into mechanisms that either facilitate or impede children's involvement in decision-making processes. All the children belong to Arab society, a society characterized by traditional collectivism.

The study employed a qualitative methodology. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven children between the ages of 12-18 who participated over time in treatment planning and evaluation committees - having participated in a minimum of five committee meetings, in public welfare agencies of the local government in Arab localities. The interviews took place with each of the children after the last committee meeting in which they participated and in which decisions were made regarding them. Potential participants were selected through a convenience sampling process designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the children's experiences. In this study, the sampling strategy aimed to ensure diverse representation by including children who participated in committees from across different locations, where decision-making processes varied.

Studying children involves strict ethical and procedural requirements, particularly when dealing with minority populations. In our study, this meant obtaining consent from Arab parents or guardians, addressing community sensitivities, and adhering to cultural norms. These factors influenced participation in our research. Furthermore, to capture the diversity within different localities and intersections within the Arab sector of Israel, the seven cases can be viewed as a combined multi-case study.

Five participants were girls and two were boys. For three participants, the decision was made to remove them from the home to residential care, three were sent to live with close relatives (foster care), and one remained within the family but was appointed an external guardian.

The interviews were conducted by the authors during 2021-2022. Each interview ranged in duration from 90 to 120 minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a setting in which the children participate - boarding school, foster care or in a neutral place outside the family home. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed through an integrative process, which involved consultation with three social workers who are engaged in making decisions in treatment planning and assessment committees. The final version of the interview guide focused on the children's experience of their participation in the committees, and the organizational mechanisms that promote or hinder children’s participation in these committees.

The guide included the following questions: What was your experience regarding the participation process? What was your experience of the results of the committee process? What is effective participation for you? How would you evaluate the preparation, discussion and monitoring of the implementation of the plan? How do you think the participation process could be improved? During the interview, the children were given the opportunity to answer these questions to express their perspectives freely through personal narratives reflecting their experiences.

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The authors, experts in cultural decision-making research, analysis of the interview transcripts using, content analysis principles and thematic and categorical analysis mapping

(Shkedi, 2003). A dialectical orientation approached was employed to explore the entire system through contradictions, conflicts, continuities and the construction of axes. The analysis consisted of four stages: reading each interview as a complete text, identifying and coding significant statements, classifying the meaning units into categories and themes, and integrating the themes into a cohesive conceptual framework.

2.3 RESEARCH ETHICS

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' university. Throughout all stages of research, meticulous adherence to ethical obligations was maintained. Participants were recruited through referrals from the family social worker. After receiving the referrals, the study was presented to the parents, who were informed of their and their child's right to refuse without any repercussions. The interviewer, who was not affiliated with the local social work agency involved with the family, had no direct power over them. It was acknowledged that a status differential existed, as the interviewer, while coming from a similar cultural and ethnic background, was more educated due to their training. Following parental consent, the nature of the study was explained to the children in an age-appropriate language and manner. They were informed that they were not obligated to participate, that they could withdraw at any time, and that they could refuse to answer any questions, thus securing their assent to participate. Participation was voluntary and parents were required to sign an informed consent form while obtaining assent from the children. To ensure confidentiality and data protection identifying information was kept separate from the interview content. In the presentation of findings below, participant names and identifying details were changed to ensure anonymity.

3 FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that different cultural and systemic elements work simultaneously, influence each other, and in fact shape children's participation in decision-making processes. These elements, which can be conceptualized as participatory determinants, include the presence of family members, the goals of the committee, communication characteristics, and trust in the system.

3.1 THE PRESENCE OF FAMILY MEMBERS – "WANTING TO BEING ALONE"

The presence of family members emerged as a critical factor influencing children's experiences and the quality of their participation in decision-making committees. In the presence of the family, the hierarchical relationship dynamics in a cultural context of parental authority were highlighted, along with the obligation to obey them. All the participants noted that the presence of the family constitutes a decisive barrier that arouses cognitive-emotional tension in participating in discussions, due to the differences between them and the parents in the way they present the child's situation to the committee: *"My mother says one thing, and in reality, it's different. She paints a pretty picture of the situation. It's like she's talking about someone else's life, not mine. I sit there feeling torn. I want to speak up and tell the truth, but I can't contradict my mother in front of everyone. It's frustrating and makes me feel invisible, like my real experiences don't matter."* This quote reveals the complex emotional landscape navigated by children in these situations. The child experiences a profound disconnect between her lived reality and the portrayal presented by her mother. This discrepancy creates an internal conflict for the child, caught between the desire to express her truth and the cultural expectation of respecting parental authority. The child's frustration stems not just

from the misrepresentation of her situation, but also from the feeling of being silenced and invalidated in a forum ostensibly designed to address her needs.

The questions the professionals asked the children in the committee in the presence of family members were perceived by several participants as not being tailored to the situation, which increased the discomfort: *"They asked me about problems in the family; don't feel comfortable talking about my parents in front of them.*" Questions perceived by the participants as insensitive to the situation or the cultural context led to confusion and anger and unwillingness to continue cooperating with the professionals: *"When they ask me about my father and family, [with my father being present at the meeting] what am I supposed to answer? I feel a mix of emotions inside me – nerves and confusion. I don't feel comfortable with being asked such culturally inappropriate questions that put me in such a situation."* Many of the participants emphasized that their participation in the committee without the presence of family members may increase the quality of participation: *"I prefer them not to be present. If the family isn't present, children won't be ashamed to say what bothers them and what they want."*

3.2 GOALS OF THE COMMITTEE – "PREDETERMINED DECISIONS"

The extent and quality of children's engagement in committee proceedings is intrinsically linked to the children's experiences regarding the goals of the committee meetings. Participants reported heterogeneous experiences. Three participants noted that in their view the committee's decisions in their case were predetermined, without the possibility of choice, and in fact the committee was established to implement a predetermined decision: "*The committee doesn't change anything. The decisions are predetermined; it isn't possible to change the decision."* These participants expressed a disengagement and apathy regarding their participation: *"It doesn't matter to me; it doesn't interest me.*" The participants reported that they came to the committee meetings with expectations of receiving more knowledge, diverse options, and choices. When these expectations remained unfulfilled, they perceived no tangible benefit in attending the meetings and participated only because they were required to: *"I participate because I have to. They do not provide solutions and I don't open up there. I don't understand why we need such a thing at all."*

Participant children revealed a nuanced approach to their involvement in committee proceedings. They reported that even when they felt aggrieved by the professionals' conduct, they often chose not to voice their opinions or thoughts. This decision was driven by two key factors: a perceived lack of meaningful impact from their participation, and a desire to avoid potential conflicts or tensions within their social environment. Essentially, these participants weighed the potential benefits of speaking up against the risks of disrupting their social dynamics. In situations where they didn't see their input as crucial, they opted for silence as a means of maintaining harmony and avoiding complications, even if it meant not addressing their personal grievances or concerns: *"Instead of bringing my true self, I show respect to the social worker, even if I've been hurt, I will endure. She is an older woman with status and respect among her colleagues at work, and I will not allow myself to hurt her and diminish her value in front of people."* On the other hand, when children experience the committee as facilitating meaningful dialogue and presenting viable alternatives among different options, it engenders a sense of empowerment, positive self-image, and belief in the ability to influence: *"It was a discussion full of information for me; I came out of the committee with opinions and options regarding my future plans."*

Other participants perceived the committee members as patronizing, requiring them to assert themselves to present their own perspectives. This power differential between committee members and children stems partly from age and status differences, and may also be influenced by cultural norms that promote a paternalistic attitude by adults towards children. Participants' narratives vividly illustrated the conflict between paternalistic and individual autonomy. Two children reported that they tried to oppose the committee and fought for their right to express their opinion. One child quoted what she heard or attributed to the committee members: "*We know what's best for you more than you do; we don't let you explain how you feel."* The child expressed a different view: *"This is my life. I'm the victim and I'm the one affected by the situation. The decision isn't yours, it's mine."* She is not necessarily recounting what she said during the meeting, but rather reflecting her state of mind and the inner dialogue in response to the patronizing attitude of the committee members.

3.3 POWER GAPS AND COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS – "THINK TWICE"

The characteristics of the committee's communication patterns, combined with the inherent power gaps between the committee members and the children significantly shape children's experience regarding their participation. The majority of participants reported that communication in the committee was characterized by formality and an austere and inflexible communicative atmosphere that did not enable them to feel confident and freely express themselves: *"I agree that we should be serious in the meeting, but the atmosphere was too tense. I was afraid to even cough or smile."* This hierarchical communicative practice is accompanied by a perception of power asymmetry relations between the children and the professionals, because it conveys a message that the professionals have the knowledge and power to make decisions on their behalf: *"They say they know what's best for us; they don't let us explain how we feel."* It is particularly salient that this communication style generates a high level of caution among participants: *"If I say something that won't be interpreted correctly, they can even prevent me from meeting with my brothers. I have to think twice about every word I say."*

It is noteworthy that participants not only critiqued existing communication practices but also offered constructive alternatives. Participants advocated for promoting alternative communication in the committees that would allow children to express themselves. This communication is characterized by a dialogue with the children and may include the following dimensions: *"Change the language of the professional discourse to one that is age-appropriate and that children can understand"*; *"speak in colloquial Arabic and not in a literary language that requires rich knowledge of the language unfamiliar to the child"*; *"address children at a slow pace that allows them to breathe, release, and reduce pressure within the committee"*; *"create empathetic and close communication that includes speaking at eye level and avoiding giving orders."* Two of the participants mentioned that in the meetings they attended, the communication was comfortable and helped them feel safe and express themselves. *"There is a difference if the social worker tells me to answer, or if she gives me a smile and asks what I think. It's easier when there are smiles and they listen to me until the end."*

3.4 TRUST IN THE SYSTEM – "FEELING OF SECURITY"

Children's trust in the professional system is a critical determinant of their participation. Trust depends heavily on the level of familiarity with the professional before committee meetings, professional facilitation and scaffolding in the discussions, and the degree of closeness to him/her. Our analysis reveals a strong correlation between pre-committee

preparation and children's sense of security: *"Before the committee, the social worker, my uncles and myself sat together. She explained to us what would happen in the committee and what would be from this side. She assured me and gave me confidence. I needed her to tell me that everything was fine, and that whatever happened would be only good, and that's how it would be."* Another participant experienced a perceived psychological safety and the ability to express himself, thanks to a relationship of caring and closeness between him and the social workers on the committee, which led to trust and an increased level of participation. *"There is trust and love between us and they helped me a lot. I wouldn't have felt comfortable without them."*

Conversely, cases characterized by limited professional engagement engender systemic distrust, as evidenced by one participant's account: *"Participation is strange. You don't know anyone in the room who is about to decide for me on a treatment plan they think may suit me. It's strange to let them decide for me. The pressure was on, everyone started talking, and I decided to leave without prior notice."* This child describes the unsettling nature of the situation, where people he does not know or have any relationship with are about to make major life-changing decisions for him. This situation fosters a sense of "bad faith" and total distrust, which led the child to get up and leave the room. His departure non-verbally communicates his lack of trust and the futility of his presence. By leaving, he is essentially signaling that his presence feels like a facade for their predetermined decisions, and he refuses to participate in what he sees as a mere illusion of participation, a game he refuses to take part in.

This situation may also generate stress and anxiety among the children: *"All professionals enter the meeting, I don't know them, and sometimes I didn't understand what each one was doing. And asking questions is scary and stressful."* The overall sentiment among participants highlights the essential role of trust: *"There is nothing to fear from the meetings, but the professional must know the child and provide calm and security; this may affect the atmosphere and communication in the committee discussions."*

4 DISCUSSION

This study offers valuable insights into the participation experiences of minority children in child protection decision-making committees, shedding light on the complex interaction between cultural context, institutional practices, and children's rights. Our findings reveal a dichotomy between the acknowledged right of children to participate in child protection services within minority societies and the practical realities of decision-making processes, which often perpetuate marginalization and foster a sense of alienation among children. This disconnect highlights the challenges of implementing theoretical models of children's participation (e.g., Shier, 2001; Hart, 1992), in culturally diverse contexts.

While these models emphasize the importance of empowering children and valuing their voices, our research shows that applying them in certain cultural contexts, particularly collectivist societies, can be challenging. Children in our study expressed a strong desire for active participation in committees and for having an impact on decisions affecting their lives. However, many felt voiceless and believed that their perspectives were not genuinely considered. This discrepancy between their physical presence and meaningful involvement has led to committees being perceived as ineffective, resulting in a sense of mistrust towards the child protection system.

Our analysis confirms and expands on previous research regarding low child participation (e.g., Connolly & Masson, 2014; Husby et al., 2018; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Pert et al., 2017; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017) by highlighting the cultural and systemic contexts that influence participatory experiences. We identified barriers to children's participation that have been documented in previous studies, such as insufficient professional training (Vis et al., 2011) and concerns about harming children (Bijleveld et al., 2015). However, these barriers take on greater significance within the cultural context we examined, where they intersect with unique challenges arising from the clash between collectivist values and Western approaches to children's participation.

The conflict between children's rights and their practical implementation is particularly pronounced in collectivist cultures, where traditional values often clash with more individualistic approaches to child participation (Abdullah et al., 2018; Lansdown, 2011; Tisdall, 2015). Similar to findings from Ghana (Cudjoe et al., 2020), our study reveals that children in collectivist societies are often socialized to remain silent in the presence of adults, which poses a significant barrier to their participation in formal decision-making processes. This cultural expectation directly contradicts the principles of active participation advocated by Western-derived models of children's rights, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive approaches to child protection and participation.

Our analysis aligns with and extend Gal and Duramy's (2015) ecological model of child participation. Within the collectivist Arab context, cultural values emerged as a dominant factor shaping children's participation experiences. The cultural expectation for children to respect parental authority created a significant barrier to authentic participation. Our research exemplifies the model's recognition that family influence can be negative. Additionally, our research highlighted the critical role of trust in the system and in professionals, an aspect that could be more explicitly incorporated into the ecological model. These findings underscore the need for culturally tailored participation mechanisms, particularly in collectivist societies, where family dynamics and cultural expectations significantly influence children's participation in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, this study reveals significant tensions in committee dynamics, particularly when professionals' direct questions about family issues to children in the presence of their families. This practice imposes considerable psychological distress on children, due to cultural commitments to the family system and norms that prioritize its preservation. It highlights a potential disconnect between the collectivist culture shared by both children and professionals and the more individualistic, child-centered approach that guides professional practice in these committees.

The cultural context profoundly affects communication dynamics within committees and their impact on children's participation. Formal communication often creates perceptions of power imbalances between children and professionals, leading to increased caution among child participants. Our findings emphasize the importance of both professional skills, such as empathetic communication, and cultural skills, such as adapting language to match children's understanding.

Trust in the system and its professionals is a critical factor in promoting children's participation. Children who felt supported by professionals reported a sense of security and viewed the committee process as meaningful and empowering. This aligns with research from other collectivist cultures, which emphasizes the importance of building trusting relationships to overcome cultural barriers to participation (Husby et al., 2018).

Despite its significant contribution, this study has some limitations. The relatively small sample size and focus on a specific cultural context may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples across various collectivist cultures to validate and expand these results. Additionally, the study's reliance on retrospective accounts from children introduces the possibility of recall bias. Longitudinal studies tracking children through the decision-making process could yield more accurate and comprehensive data. Another limitation is the absence of perspectives from professionals and family members involved in the committees. Future studies should include multiple perspectives, such as interviews with social workers, committee members, and parents, to triangulate the data and provide a more holistic understanding and comprehensive picture of the participation dynamics.

The findings of this study indicate several key implications for practice in child protection services, particularly within collectivist cultural contexts. Professionals in this field need to cultivate strong cultural competence, including an understanding of the nuances of collectivist cultures and their impact on children's participation. Training programs should be designed to improve professionals' skills in navigating cultural tensions while upholding children's rights. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of communication strategies that are both age-appropriate and culturally sensitive. Professionals should be trained in using language and approaches that help children feel at ease and empowered to share their perspectives.

Given the paradoxical impact of family presence on children's participation, professionals should develop strategies to engage families in ways that support rather than obstruct children's voices. This might involve separate sessions for children and families or facilitated family discussions that explicitly encourage children's input. The critical role of trust in facilitating participation cannot be overstated. Professionals should prioritize building long-term relationships with children, rather than relying solely on formal committee meetings for engagement.

Effective preparation is crucial for children to actively participate in decision-making processes. This preparation might include pre-committee meetings, child-friendly explanations of the process, and ongoing support throughout the decision-making journey. Child protection services should adapt their decision-making models to better accommodate collectivist cultural values while still prioritizing children's participation. This could involve adopting more circular, consensus-based approaches that align with cultural norms while still ensuring that children's voices are heard.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex interplay between cultural context, institutional practices, and children's participation in child protection decision-making within a collectivist society. It contributes to the expanding literature on children's participation in child welfare systems by offering a culturally nuanced perspective that is particularly relevant to collectivist societies. The findings reveal a significant disparity between the acknowledged right of children to participate and the practical realities that often marginalize their voices. This underscores the need for a culturally sensitive and nuanced approach to effectively promote children's participation.

It advocates for a rethinking of the participation models to bridge the gap between Western-centric notions of individual rights and the collectivist values that influence many minority communities' social structures. This aligns with calls in the literature for fostering a "culture of inclusiveness" within child protection services (Bessell, 2015; Graham et al.,

2015), while acknowledging the unique challenges posed by collectivist cultural norms. It addresses the tensions between individual rights and collective cultural values, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively promote children's participation across diverse cultural settings.

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