

Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research

Helen Robinson, MPH, MSW; María Gandarilla Ocampo, MSW; Mary Shires, LMSW; Grace Newton, MSW; Melissa Jonson-Reid, PhD; Sanaria Sulaiman, MA; Patricia Kohl, PhD

Abstract

Legacies of racism, discrimination, and oppression undergird health and social inequities for African Americans in the United States. In response, research-practitioners across various sectors have increasingly employed participatory methods to collaborate with African Americans in addressing causes and consequences of structural racism. These approaches have been gradually gaining prominence in child welfare research and reform. This study explored the utility of Community Cafés—an evidence-based participatory model to engage community members who have had contact with the child welfare system (CWS) to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at reducing CWS contact and preventing placement into foster care. Eight Community Cafés were held over 4 days with 101 participants. Results indicated participants felt the café process provided a safe space for open communication, where their voices were heard and valued. Participants also viewed the cafés as an opportunity to meet, connect and share information and contribute to the common goal of building and strengthening community. Implications for future research and practice for Community Cafés in collaborating with African American families in child welfare research are discussed.

Keywords: Community Cafés, empowerment, African American, participatory research, lived experience, child welfare, child maltreatment prevention

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Introduction

Historically, protecting African American children from child maltreatment has not been a priority in the United States. In the earlier conception of child welfare services, African American children were excluded from services intended to keep children safe from experiencing child maltreatment (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). Following extensive advocacy efforts, African American children and families were slowly included in child protection systems. However, in more recent decades, child protection systems have been characterized by *racial disproportionality*, a phenomenon in

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which certain racial groups are disproportionately represented in a system, when compared to their overall representation in the population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). While nationally 37% of all children will experience a child abuse investigation before the age of 18, over half of African American children in the United States will experience an investigation (Kim et al., 2017). And while there is ongoing debate whether this disproportionate level of interaction is warranted or exists when you consider factors beyond race (see racial disproportionality debate: Bartholet, 2009; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Drake et al., 2021; Fix & Nair, 2020; Kim & Drake, 2018; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Smith & Pressley, 2019; Rebbe et al., 2022; Wulczyn, 2020), it is inarguable that the child welfare system (CWS) impacts the lives of many African American families in America.

While the engagement of families with lived experience in various reforms and programs related to child welfare is not new (e.g., Marcenko et al., 2010, 2011), the regular integration of family experience and voice in designing a better approach to child welfare has yet to be realized. The engagement processes of sharing stories can both be therapeutic and act as a form of empowerment for families who often report having negative experiences with CWSs. Research suggests that although parents sometimes find some aspects of their interaction with child protection services (CPS) as helpful, such as being connected to resources and services, they also report their experiences as being harmful and traumatizing (Rise PAR Team et al., 2021; Roberts, 2021; Schreiber et al., 2013). For example, parents express experiencing anxiety and fear of having their children removed when interacting with CPS (Fong, 2020; Schreiber et al., 2013). Some studies also report that families of color experience discrimination and racism from child welfare agencies (Merritt, 2020, 2021).

Through the sharing of their lived experiences, families can offer expertise and wisdom to improve and shape systems and services in a way that is responsive to family needs and reduces trauma. An

example of such an approach is the implementation of Touchstones of Hope, which is aimed at reconciling child welfare experiences of indigenous families and developing effective programs and policies (Cross et al., 2015). One avenue in which these opportunities have been gaining ground in child welfare research is through the use of participatory research methods (Cerulli et al., 2017; Fernandez, 2007; Stafford et al., 2021; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014).

Participatory Research Methods

Participatory research is a general term used to describe research approaches that share a central philosophy of inclusivity and that acknowledge the value of engaging in research *with* those who stand to be affected by it (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Recognizing that power differentials in conventional research approaches often mirror societal hierarchies, participatory research aims to create non-hierarchical relationships that value self-determination, in which researchers and participant community members share decision-making power to produce knowledge and engage in social action and meaningful solutions (Hall, 1992; Northway, 2010; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Salsberg et al., 2017). It also maintains that the participant group ongoingly determines both how 'community' should be defined— that is, who will be included in research efforts, and how and to what degree they will participate (Northway, 2010).

Power, safe space, and voice emerge as core, interdependent principles distinguishing participatory research from conventional approaches of inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Salsberg, et al., 2017). The extent to which a safe space is cultivated within the research process by means of intentional redistribution and sharing of power reflects the degree to which the professional research partner supports the expression of participant community voices (Chávez et al., 2008). Participatory research asks community members to expose their personal views about a given situation, often through the retelling of their lived experiences (Desai et al.,

2019). Given the sensitivity of such disclosures, participatory research must take intentional measures to ensure confidentiality, as well as “domination-free” or power-free spaces (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 123) where an “openness” or transparency is promoted and where community contributions are valued as the driving force of positive, foreseeable change (Titterton & Smart, 2008). In keeping central its core principles, participatory research employs strategies that are culturally meaningful to the participant community and grounded in collective ways of knowing (Hall, 1992). Examples of these include community meetings, video documentaries, community dramas, photo-novels, sharing oral histories, community surveys, story-telling, and shared testimonies. This study focuses on one form of community meetings, the Community Café.

Community Cafés as Participatory Research Methods

Developed by Brown and Isaacs (2005), Community Cafés are a derivative of World Cafés (World Cafe Method, 2019), a unique participatory model engaging participants in conversations about questions that are meaningful to them. Cafés are structured in a way that fosters constructive, authentic dialogue, allowing for patterns of collective intelligence and wisdom to emerge through the sharing of experiences (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Careful attention to and maintenance of an environment that is safe and engenders the cross-pollination of thoughts among participants is paramount to the café model. In this safe space, all participants are regarded as experts of their own lived experience, allowing diverse perspectives to engage in co-creating innovative solutions (MacFarlane et al., 2017). The goal is to create an experience that is unlike ordinary meetings with usual routines and authoritative structures, instead supporting the unfolding of organic, self-organizing processes centralized on a designated topic (Steier et al., 2015). Cafés usually begin with a welcoming message that reaffirms the importance of the democratic process established by a group communication agreement. This is followed by the

café questions, several rounds of conversation, and the ‘harvesting’ or gathering of ideas from each table. The café typically culminates with group consensus of potential next steps towards action (Steier et al., 2015).

Until recently, the model has typically been used in business and organizational settings as a way of facilitating strategic planning efforts and promoting conversational leadership (Fullarton & Palermo, 2008). Researchers, however, are beginning to document its utility with vulnerable and disenfranchised populations (MacFarlane et al., 2017), including older adults with diabetes (Yankeelov et al., 2019), youth living with bipolar disorder (Noack et al., 2016), community-dwelling older adults with risk of falls (Khong et al., 2017), residents in an older adult living facility (Roos & Du Toit, 2014), and parents of children with severe disabilities (Carter et al., 2012). The current study builds on this research by utilizing Community Cafés to engage community members from a predominantly African American community who have had contact with the CWS in order to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at preventing child maltreatment and reducing future contact with the CWS.

To date, researchers have used café methods with system-involved parents to examine perspectives on foster care reunification (Stephens et al., 2016), with service providers examining their perspectives on the ways in which funding sources impact community efforts in child protection (Cerulli et al., 2017), and to center children’s voices in family services participation (Stafford et al., 2021). Best and colleagues (2021) also previously used community cafés to identify program elements for their Authentic Family Engagement and Strengthening (AFES) Approach, which aimed to incorporate anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices within the CWS. Overall, these studies find that the Community Café model is beneficial in centering participant voices and identifying keyways to improve service provision. The café approach remains understudied as a participatory research method with African

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American communities in child welfare research. This study explored the utility of Community Cafés by addressing the research question: To what extent does the Community Café model create a safe space for participants to share their experiences, give voice to their expertise, and empower African American community members as active participants in child maltreatment prevention and child welfare reform?

The PACT-STL Project

The overarching purpose of the Parents and Children Together-St. Louis (PACT-STL) project is to develop, implement, and evaluate strategies that prevent child maltreatment, reduce entry into the public CWS and foster care, and enhance the overall well-being outcomes of children and families. PACT-STL is a partnership among a leading nonprofit organization, university researchers, state and regional CWSs, public safety net system agencies, community service providers, and parents with lived child welfare experience, and it is aimed at promoting the well-being of children, families, and communities. Specifically, PACT-STL is working to create a plan that helps to address the needs of at-risk families and reduce entry into the CWS. The first stage of the development of the multilevel intervention plan consisted of a rigorous needs assessment, which included gathering input from the community and combining several sources of administrative and community-level data to get a regional view of availability and accessibility of resources.

Relevant Context for the Study

St. Louis County and St. Louis City have a history of racial and economic inequity, which has resulted in a disproportionate presence of risk factors for child maltreatment and other adverse outcomes in select communities (Vision for Children at Risk, 2017). More specifically, 13 of the 18 zip codes (72%) in St. Louis City have been rated as having severe risks to child well-being, based on a list of child well-being indicators (VCR, 2017). Nine of 45 St. Louis County zip codes (20%) have a severe rating; however, these 9 zip codes look demographically different from the rest of the St. Louis County zip codes.

Most of these zip codes (7 out of 9) have an African American population of 60% or more, whereas St. Louis County zip codes rated as having low risk have less than 3% of an African American population. Community Café participants were recruited from the city and county zip codes determined to be at highest risk.

Methods

PACT-STL held a total of six Community Cafés (two sets of four in-person Community Cafés and one set of two virtual Community Cafés) to gather input from community members residing in the target area who have lived experience or knew someone with lived experience with the CWS. The overall goal of the cafés was to collaborate with African American communities experiencing high levels of risks associated with threats to child safety and well-being. Information gleaned from participants was used to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at reducing these risks and strengthening community and family protective factors, while also partnering with residents to address immediate community concerns related to child abuse and neglect. There were 101 total participants. The first set of four cafés were held in person at a local community center, while the second set were held virtually to accommodate public health measures (e.g., physical distancing) in place due to COVID-19. For both cafés, participants were recruited in partnership with the project's lead community partner via personal outreach, flyers, and word-of-mouth. Following each café, participants were provided with an evaluation survey (paper or online) to capture their experience and feedback of the Community Café process. Participants were provided a \$20 gift card for their participation. Human subjects approval was obtained from Washington University Institutional Review Board. Below are brief descriptions of each set of cafés.

Community Café Session 1: In Person

The first set of cafés had three primary goals: 1) to understand how community members defined child abuse and neglect; 2) to learn about community

members' experiences with and perceptions of the CWS in St. Louis City and St. Louis County; and 3) to identify the type of support and services community members felt could promote child and family well-being. The cafés, which took place at a local organization that is known, trusted, and respected within the community, were held over two days, with morning and afternoon sessions each day. Childcare was provided, along with breakfast or lunch items and snacks. Participants were invited to sit at one of seven large tables that could each accommodate six participants.

Each Community Café began with a brief overview of the PACT-STL project, a presentation on the Community Café model, including the agreements and expectations about communication, objectives of the event, and information regarding the CWS. Attendees then engaged in a one-on-one ice breaker activity. In addition to café participants, two service providers affiliated with local community agencies joined each group, serving as a discussion facilitator and a note taker. Each Community Café had two 30-minute small group discussions, in which participants were tasked with answering a total of four questions:

1. Do you know someone who has had experiences with Children's Division or the courts? What was that experience like?
2. What do you consider child abuse or neglect?
3. Who supports you in your role as a parent? What does that support look like?
4. What else would be helpful in supporting you or your community as parents?

Participants were welcomed to speak in third person to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of their personal stories. The small group facilitators posed the question to participants, and participants spoke freely while note takers documented responses. At the end of each of these discussions, a member of each group reported out to the larger group in a "harvest" session where ideas were noted.

Community Café Session 2: Virtual

The second set of Community Cafés were hosted via Zoom about five months after the first set of in-person cafés. The partnering agency actively recruited participants by making phone calls and inviting participants to attend. Community members were also encouraged to invite others. To address potential platform accessibility issues, a Zoom prep session was held prior to the cafés for participants. The aim of these cafés was to solicit participants' ideas and feedback on the PACT-STL Action Plan, which was formulated based on the first set of cafés. The virtual cafés lasted about one hour longer than the three hours scheduled due to technical difficulties and the participants' desire for continued conversation. Not all attendees had attended the first set of cafés.

Before being sent to breakout groups for discussion, participants received an explanation of the virtual Community Café and ground rules as well as an overview of the PACT-STL Action Plan. In breakout groups of three or four participants, a note taker, and a facilitator, the groups spent 40 minutes discussing two questions related to the Action Plan. Participants were brought back to the main session for Harvest, in which one designated member of each group shared a summary of the main ideas discussed in their group.

Evaluation Survey for Community Cafés

Participant experiences with the Community Cafés were evaluated via survey evaluations (25 questions), as well as through observation notes taken by the evaluation team. The survey consisted of three main sections. The first section asked demographic questions about the participants' race, age, number of children, relationship status, and level of education. The second section assessed participants' experience at the Community Café. Participants were asked to respond on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to statements such as "I felt empowered after participating in the Community Café" and "I felt community members had a voice in the discussion." The third section included

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two open-ended questions: “*What did you like best about this Community Café?*” and, “*What could be done to improve this Community Café?*” to garner feedback on the Community Café process.

Analytical Approach

Descriptive analyses were conducted to present demographic data and participant responses to statements regarding their Community Café experience. Data was managed to account for missing or duplicate survey responses (virtual survey). A thematic content approach was used in combination with principles of participatory research methods—*power, safe space, and voice*—as synthesizing concepts to help organize findings (Sandelowski, 1998). A group of four researchers individually analyzed all the qualitative responses and identified emerging themes and subthemes.

The four researchers then met and discussed the themes they identified and how these themes related to the participatory research methods principles. Following the discussion, the researchers deliberated and agreed on a set of main themes and subthemes that best captured the participants’ responses. The lead researcher then re-analyzed the responses using the final agreed upon themes and coded the responses. A second researcher reviewed the lead researcher’s analysis.

Initially, the researchers reviewed the in person and virtual cafés separately. Given that researchers observed similar themes emerging across both in-person and virtual cafés, all qualitative responses were then coded together. However, findings specific to the virtual platform (e.g., difficulty getting and staying connected) were noted separately.



Results

Table 1 presents participant demographic data for both sets of Community Cafés. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present participants' average ratings, which ranged from 1 to 4, of statements regarding their experience at the cafés.

Variables	Community Café Set 1 (n=62)		Community Café Set 2 (n=39)	
	n	% or Mean (SD)	n	% or Mean (SD)
Gender	50		38	
Female	39	78%	29	76.32%
Male	11	22%	9	23.68%
Age	45	43.4 (14.92)	38	45.03 (14.83)
Race/Ethnicity	49		36	
African American/Black	42	85.71%	30	83.33%
Latinx	1	2.04%	0	0%
Multiracial	1	2.04%	4	11.11%
Native American	3	6.12%	1	2.78%
White	2	4.08%	1	2.78%
Number of Children in Household	41	2.24 (2.05)	38	2.37 (2.51)
Relationship Status	48		36	
Divorced	7	14.58%	3	8.33%
Married	10	20.83%	12	33.33%
Partnered	3	6.25%	1	2.78%
Single	25	52.08%	18	50%
Widowed	3	6.25%	2	5.56%
Education Status	50		37	
Elementary	2	4%	0	0%
Junior High School	1	2%	1	2.70%
Some High School	3	6%	2	5.41%
High School or GED	13	24%	12	32.43%
Trade/Vocational Training	2	4%	4	10.81%
Some College	10	20%	10	27.03%
Associates Degree	7	14%	3	8.11%
Bachelor's Degree	5	10%	2	5.41%
Graduate Degree	7	14%	2	5.41%
Military	1	2%	1	2.70%

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Figure 1. In-Person Community Café Set 1 Survey Responses

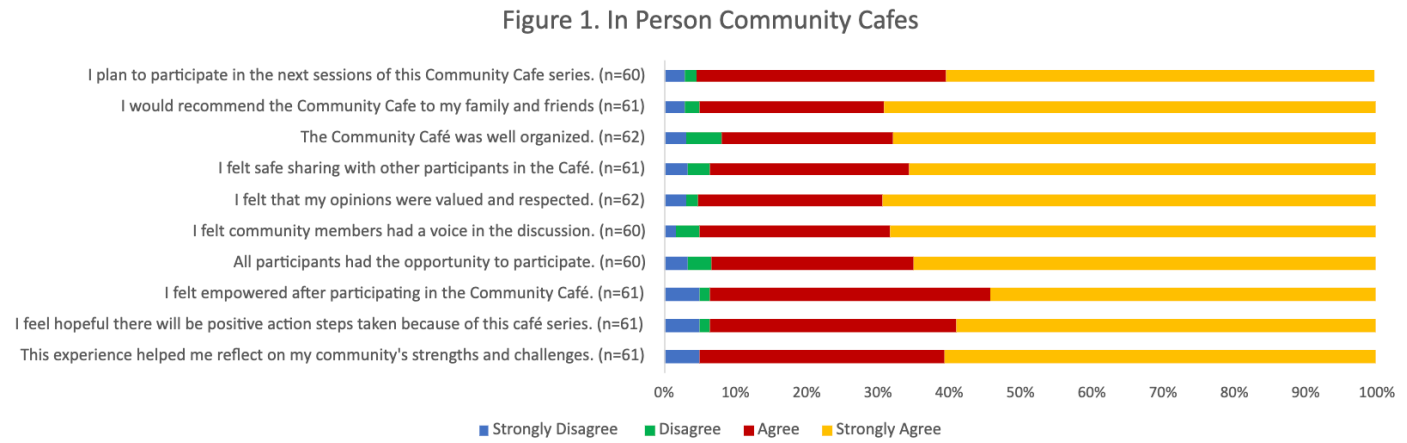
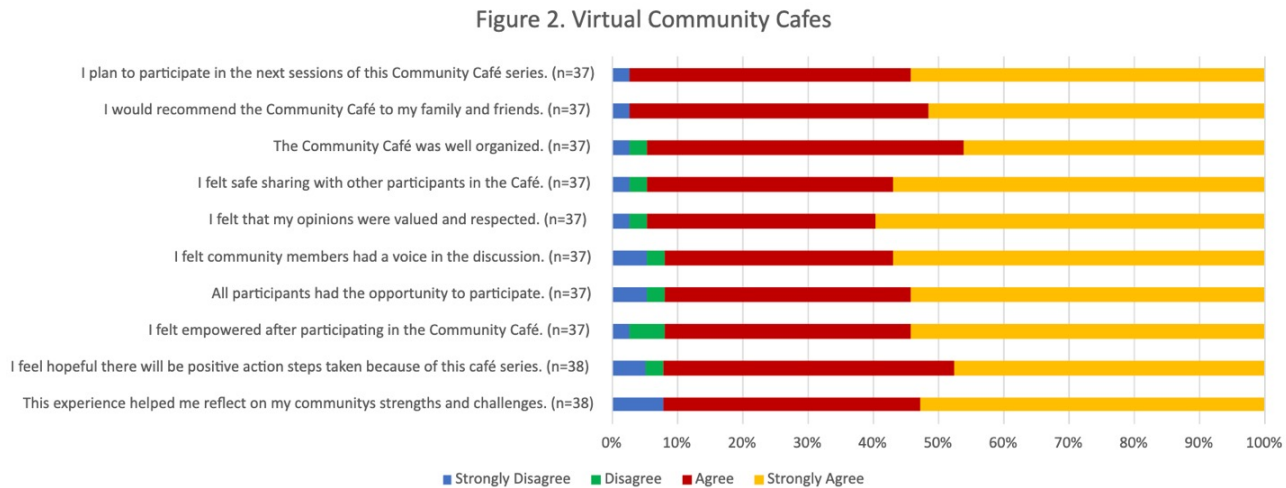


Figure 2. Virtual Community Café Set 2 Survey Responses



Community Café Set 1 (in-person)

The first round of four in-person cafés included 62 participants. While all participants completed a survey, the numbers in Table 1 exclude missing responses for any given question. As a result, the numbers reflect the percentage of the total responses for a given question. Most participants identified as female (78%) and African American (about 86%). Participants’ ages ranged from 16 to 76, with a median age of 42. The number of children in a household ranged from 0 to 7 with families having a median of 2. The highest level of education among

respondents was a high school diploma or GED (24%), some college (20%), an associate’s degree (14%), or a graduate degree (14%).

Survey Responses

In terms of experience of Community Café participation (see Figure 1), 95% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt community members had a voice in the discussion, that their opinions were valued and respected, and that the experience helped them reflect on their community’s

strength and challenges. Additionally, 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that all participants had the opportunity to participate, that they felt safe sharing with other participants in the café, and that they felt empowered after participating in the Community Café. Ninety-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were hopeful positive action steps would be taken because of the café. About 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Community Café was well organized. Finally, 95% of participants would recommend the Community Café to friends or family and would like to participate in the next session of the Community Café series.

Community Café Set 2 (virtual)

The second round of two Community Cafés included a total of 39 participants. Most participants connected from a smartphone (68.42%), while the rest connected by a non-smart cell phone (15.8%) or a laptop (15.8%). Over three quarters of participants were able to participate with video, and most participants (83.34%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to fully participate in all café activities. Finally, more than half (68%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to use the virtual platform, Zoom, with ease. The majority (76%) of participants identified as female and African American (83%). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 79 years, with a median age of 41. The number of children in participants' households ranged from 0 to 12, with families having a median of 2 children. The highest level of education among respondents was a high school diploma or GED (32.43%), some college (27.03%), trade or vocational training (10.81%), or an associate's degree (8.11%).

Survey Responses

In terms of experience of virtual Community Café participation (see Figure 2), about 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt community members had a voice in the discussion, that all participants had the opportunity to participate, and that they felt empowered after participating in the Community Café. Further, 92%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the experience helped them reflect on their community's strengths and challenges and that they were hopeful positive action steps would be taken because of the café. Approximately 95% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their opinions were valued and respected, that they felt safe sharing with other participants in the café, and that the Community Café was well organized. Finally, 97% of participants would recommend the Community Café to friends or family and would like to participate in the next session of the Community Café series.

Qualitative Responses

The open-ended questions regarding what participants liked best about the Community Café and what they would do to improve café processes provided an opportunity for participants to give more detailed feedback regarding their experience. Similar, overlapping themes emerged from the data across both the in-person and virtual café delivery formats. This suggests that cafés can be effective despite delivery method adjustments.

Five central themes emerged from participants' responses regarding what they liked best about the café: (i) safe space for open communication; (ii) having a voice—feeling heard, understood, and valued; (iii) meeting and connecting to build community; (iv) sharing information and learning from others; and (v) contributing to a common goal of strengthening the community.

Safe Space for Open Communication

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that Community Cafés were a safe space for open communication. Participants pointed out that the atmosphere of the café, specifically the “openness” of café discussions, created unrestrictive transmission of ideas where “people were able to be open,” had the “the ability to share and receive,” and had the “ability to communicate and build a platform for healthy dialogue.” Further, this atmosphere supported feelings of protection and security among participants, which allowed participants to be forthcoming and straightforward in their sharing. Participants pointedly

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expressed that they were “*feeling safe to talk about personal issues*” and that they valued “*how we could share our stories in a safe place.*” The sense of safety and candidness engendered in the Community Cafés also helped participants feel that they had “*the opportunity to voice my honest, personal opinion.*,” were “*able to express my feelings openly,*” and that café model provided an “*open form of talking problems out.*” This open sharing and sense of safety also seemed to enhance feelings of intimacy among participants, as one person noted the “*participants’ willingness to be vulnerable.*” Participants also acknowledged the value of sharing relatable experiences with others. As one person stated: “*It was great to sit with others with similar experiences,*” and another expressed, “*It was therapeutic to be able to discuss personal things.*”

While members did not always explicitly cite the ground rules as a main reason for liking the Community Cafés, their comments reflected how the café structure based on the established rules played an important role in creating an atmosphere of safety and openness. For example, a participant expressed appreciating “*the fact [that] we can easily listen to each other and without disruption.*” Another participant similarly expressed valuing “*that I was able to speak without being interrupted and share some things I wanted to share.*” Further, participants noted that confidentiality, a ground rule of Community Cafés, was a highlight of their experience. One participant stated, “*I like that everything was confidential and I was able to talk about my experience in 3rd person.*” During the Cafés, participants were encouraged to speak in the third person about their experience to maintain anonymity and further promote a sense of safety. Another participant noted that the “*the confidentiality was very good.*” Finally, the democratic nature of the Cafés resulted in full participation and a diversity of responses. One participant expressed, “*I liked how everyone participated in the discussion,*” and another stated, “*I like best the open discussions and [hearing the] thoughts of everyone.*”

Having a Voice: Feelings Heard, Understood, and Valued

Participants noted that what they most appreciated about their involvement in the Cafés was the opportunity to feel safe and confident in expressing themselves openly and to be heard, understood, and valued. One participant stated that Community Cafés provided “*the option to voice my opinion and be heard and listened to.*” Participants also reported that the ability to express opinions (“*I was able to express my opinions about abuse and neglect*”), to make known their personal stories (“*able to share my story with different families and the café team*”), and to convey grievances (“*got a chance to show what was bothering me*”), were important aspects of the café experience.

The café structure enabled participants to feel heard and understood through a process of bearing witness to and validation of participants’ lived experiences and ideas. As one participant shared, the part they appreciated most was “*that ya’ll took the time to understand us and how we really feel. Thank you.*” Similarly, another participant emphasized “*they [Community Café leaders and agency staff] are there for you if you need help and... they like to hear you out on things as well.*” These feelings and reactions also seemed to be related to a communal sense of being respected and appreciated, which engendered a sense of connectedness, as captured in the statements: “*I was able to have input and able to learn from others*” and “*being able to hear other voices and being heard and respected. Thank you.*”

Meeting and Connecting to Build Community

Other well-liked aspects of the cafés were the welcoming atmosphere and the opportunity to build community. Several participants indicated that what they liked the most about the cafés were that “*I felt welcomed,*” “*the community atmosphere,*” “*the vibe of the different people,*” and the “*cooperation from all attendees.*” Participants made specific mention of how the execution of the Community Cafés facilitated the convening of diverse people from different sectors.

This sentiment was highlighted by the statements: *“I love the set-up and the ability to get to know others from community partners,” “being able to meet and discuss with other (professional/community) and gain insight,”* and *“meeting new parents and community sponsors.”* It is important to note that this sense of community building was present even in the Community Cafés held virtually. Participants indicated the use of breakout rooms for certain café activities was conducive to rapport building among participants, despite the virtual space. One participant expressed that they liked *“how we were able to introduce ourselves to people we may not have known. I felt like we were in person.”* Others commented that the breakout rooms enhanced intimacy and *“allowed for more in-depth discussion.”* Overall, participants shared that they appreciated *“the technological advances we get to use to reach out to others simultaneously”* and *“enjoyed this format in spite of not being in a physical room and feeling each other’s energy.”*

Sharing Information and Learning From Others

The café process was conducive to sharing information and learning from others as this acquisition and exchange of information was noted as a key strength of Community Cafés by participants. Some participants explicitly stated that the thing they liked most about Community Cafés was *“the wonderful information I received”* and *“the valuable information and sharing.”* This sharing and exchange of information occurred at various points of the café process, whether it was during the ice breakers, the discussions, or report-outs, and included varying information, whether it was stories, resources, or general information. Participants especially acknowledged the cafés as spaces to share lived experiences, as depicted by the comment, *“It was great to sit with others with similar experience and have open dialogue.”* Some participants particularly liked the exchange of experiential knowledge and wisdom regarding parenting, as illustrated by the responses, *“I really enjoyed being at the meeting listening to other parent advice”* and *“the conversation on children and raising children.”* Markedly, a few

participants mentioned that what they liked most about the cafés was the opportunity to learn from others’ experiences with CPS and reporting child abuse and neglect. One participant stated they appreciated the discussion *“because we was learning more about our community and when to hotline”* and *“learning about other hotline experiences from peers.”*

Contributing to a Common Goal of Strengthening the Community

Another key aspect of the cafés that participants mentioned was their ability to provide a space for participants to inform changes and reform that they believe will lead to improved outcomes for families, children, and the community. One participant shared: *“it was therapeutic to be able to discuss personal things to help the future of our communities become stronger with a stronger sense of family.”* Another participant expressed: *“I was able to give feedback on how the state can be more helpful to our youth,”* and specifically for youth involved in the CWS, *“that they trying to come up with ways to make things better for children in the system.”* Participants also valued the café process as a place where they recognized progressive movement towards collective action (*“community opportunity to share experiences for action planning”*), inclusive governance (*“sharing information and the willingness to include community to be part of the decision making”*), and next steps in developing practical, effective solutions for families (*“we worked together in coming up with solutions to overcome!”*). Ultimately, the Community Cafés were well-liked by participants and contributed to participants’ positive experiences.

Recommendations to Improve Café Experience

Generally, attendees reported that the cafés met or exceeded their expectations, with some participants expressing that they liked “everything” and that “there was a great turnout on all fronts.” When asked, most participants explicitly stated that they had no recommendations on how to improve the café experience, and some even offered praise for the café process in their recommendation responses. However, some participants also provided areas in

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which Community Cafés could be improved as a method and to further the project goals. Four major recommendations to improve the café process and experience emerged and included the need to (i) increase the number and frequency of cafés; (ii) increase and diversify participants; (iii) focus the café discussion content on issues; and (iv) improve the organization and processes related to café engagement.

- **Continue Café Engagement While Increasing Frequency.** Many participants encouraged continued community engagement with cafés, praising the efforts to “keep doing what you are doing” but also recommending that “it be done more often and get more people involved.” One participant gave a specific recommendation about what they believed should determine the length of the cafés: “to continue with Community Café until change and progress[is] in place.”
- **Increase and Diversify Participants.** The majority of suggestions to improve the café processes highlighted the need to increase the number and diversity of attendees. Participants championed for “more community involvement,” specifically to “get more families involved to help the next generation.” Towards increasing family involvement, one participant proposed that efforts be made to “bring fathers in” and another advised “getting some of the people that we are addressing about this matter to possibly attend the next event,” referring specifically to families who have had interaction with child protection services. While some suggested that “having more participants from the community than ‘professionals’” in attendance would improve the cafés, others called for efforts to “bring

in aldermen and police.” One participant even suggested bringing in child welfare workers from the public child protection agency to participate. (There were a small number of these workers present at a couple of the cafés as table facilitators, but these workers were not present at most of the tables.)

- **Organization and Process Recommendations.** Participants also gave recommendations for improving aspects related to café organization and processes. One recommendation was to pay close attention to the pace of the café. One participant commented that café events needed to adhere to “better timing, time went over,” while another participant suggested “maybe get started with discussions earlier” to address this issue. It should be noted that timing recommendations mainly were related to the virtual cafés, as these went approximately an hour over time. Additional recommendations made specifically for the virtual café were allotting more time for breakout room sessions. Some participants noted that they experienced technical difficulties with joining and staying connected to the virtual meeting; however, no specific recommendations were provided regarding this. Finally, participants proposed that the marketing of and recruitment for public participation in Community Cafés be increased. A participant suggested that staff should “extend means/methods of public awareness regarding community café.” A recommended way to increase community outreach efforts was to generally “stay in contact more.” Another participant who provided a similar recommendation explained that, “The café can be made more helpful if we had more events to help us with more information we can use.”

- **Focused Content on Issues.** Finally, although not a recommendation made by many, some participants pointed out that more effort was needed to ensure that attendees understood both the process of the café (“they need to help people understand what’s going on”) as well as the intended foci and desired changes (“clarity on what the focuses are. Define exactly what needs to be changed more clearly.”). Towards achieving this, one participant suggested “better questions focusing on and surrounding the situation at hand.” Overall, only a few recommendations were provided on how to improve the café experience and process, yet those that were made offer important insights into improving the café process.

Discussion

This study evaluated the utility of Community Cafés to engender a safe space for participants to share their lived experiences regarding child welfare involvement while informing the development of a child maltreatment prevention intervention. Our findings suggest that Community Cafés were an effective method to engage predominantly African American community members to not only provide feedback on an initiative aimed at preventing child maltreatment, but also to create a safe space for participants to share their lived experiences and create a greater sense of community. This sense of safety and willingness to share during cafés was of particular importance because several participants reported having negative experiences with the state’s CWS, yet they were willing to be vulnerable and express themselves in front of leaders and/or providers who work for or collaborate directly with the public child welfare agency. Further, some participants even suggested inviting child welfare workers, police and/or local leaders to future cafés. Altogether, this suggests that with careful attention and intention, the Community Cafés model is an effective way to empower community members to use their experiences and voice to change systems in a way that is most responsive to their needs. Given that in some studies African American families

who interact with child welfare have indicated that they feel racially discriminated against by the system (Merritt, 2020, 2021), empowering these communities to inform or change systems that significantly impact their communities is of monumental importance. Future research is needed to explore the empowerment process that occurs through Community Cafés. This deeper understanding could inform the use of café methods as a means to empower populations who interact with CWS.

Participants also liked that Community Cafés provided the opportunity for all to participate, connect from shared experiences, and learn from each other. Paralleling our findings, Löhr and colleagues (2020) found that their use of the café model in research involving global food insecurity promoted mutual learning and high levels of participation among participants. Similarly, in this study, the café process was useful in facilitating dialogue concerning sensitive topics such as experiences with CPS and reporting child abuse and neglect. In their study, Löhr and colleagues (2020) indicated that, compared to other forms of engagement such as individual interviews or focus group discussions, the café model’s inclusivity and ability to convene a large pool of participants made it ideal to reduce selection bias, endorse the diversification of participants, and expand the characteristics of those who were initially invited and participated. However, our community participants noted there was a need to increase the number and diversity of attendees, suggesting that further intentional recruitment efforts should be taken to enhance the advantages of the model.

While there is scant literature documenting the intentional use of the café model to engage African American populations, there is even less that demonstrates its use with African American communities in child welfare research. Stephens et al.’s (2016) research exploring parents’ experiences of their challenges and successes, as well as their perspectives of needs during and after reunification, used the café model to support the integration of

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parent voices and the inclusion of their participation, as they are most impacted by reunification issues but are systematically excluded from such discussions. Similarly, our findings demonstrate that the Community Café model upholds the central aspects of participatory research methods: *power*, *safe space*, and *voice*. Collectively, the results from both studies suggest that the café model's democratic, self-determined processes prioritize concerns, issues, and stressors associated with child welfare involvement—from investigation to reunification—and could be useful in engaging parents from majority African American communities in identifying ways to inform child welfare transformation. To better understand the effect of Community Cafés on promoting and ingraining equitable processes in child welfare research and practice for African Americans, future research should discern the elements of the café model that create this democratic process and support the full participation of parents in the transformation of systems.

Our findings also highlight the utility of Community Cafés in creating a safe space where African American community members feel valued and heard and as an empowering space where agency can be actualized. Participant responses indicated that they recognized the value of their lived experiences in shaping system reform and informing how the system responds to the specific needs of the African American community. As previous research has suggested, the model situates itself as a catalyst for dialogue and action beyond the café session (Löhr et al., 2020). Similarly, an important aspect of the PACT-STL project is ensuring that community members can meaningfully impact prevention of and response to child maltreatment in their communities. To achieve this goal, PACT-STL has continued to collaborate with café participants to address immediate community concerns identified in the cafés. Working groups with café participants and other community members have been created

to develop and implement action plans aimed at reducing family and community risks factors associated with child abuse and neglect/maltreatment and involvement in the CWS. Future community engaged research should explore the usefulness of Community Cafés as a means to empower families and affect community change.

One important contribution of this study was the adaptation of in-person Community Cafés to virtual cafés due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related safety restrictions. At writing of this article, our application of the virtual Community Cafés in child welfare research seems to be the first of its kind documented in the literature, and, as a result, it can provide meaningful insight to future applications of a virtual delivery method. Overall, the virtual platform was well-received by attendees. Despite technological mishaps that were difficult to navigate at times, participants noted specifically that the breakout room feature enhanced the café's already marked ability to create a friendly yet effectively confidential atmosphere. Further, participants in the virtual cafés identified similar benefits as those who participated in the in-person cafés. Altogether, this suggests that the impact of Community Cafés is robust in the face of some adaptations, such as delivery method. The decline in the number of participants who completed an evaluation for the virtual cafés, compared to the in-person cafés, was a noted challenge to the virtual format. What led to this decline remains unclear, and further attention is warranted to fully understand how to maximize participation and engagement. Ultimately, with careful attention and consideration, virtual Community Cafés could become a cost efficient and effective model to engage and empower communities. Continual employment of virtual Community Cafés should look to develop an improved, streamlined approach where protocols are established that help to manage technological complications and enhance community reach and participation.

Limitations

While this study offers new insights into the use of in-person and virtual Community Cafés to garner feedback on child welfare prevention strategies from a predominantly African American community, the study also presents several limitations. Firstly, because a convenience sample was employed, the study results may reflect selection bias and are not generalizable to the larger population. Beyond selection bias, the positive findings may be in part influenced by the existing, positive relationship between the agency leading PACT-STL and the communities from which participants come. Future research that partners with organizations that may not be as embedded in the community as this one can provide additional insight on which Community Café conditions are and are not most conducive to positive outcomes. Further, this study only asked two open-ended questions that gave an opportunity for participants to provide in depth feedback regarding their Community Café experience. Additionally, some of the feedback provided at times reflected the wording present in the Likert scale statements regarding participants' experiences. It is possible that the statement prompted certain word choice from participants. Future research can address these limitations by utilizing a more rigorous evaluation design with a larger sample size.

Conclusion

Overall, despite its limitations, this study provides an important contribution to child welfare research that attempts to engage and partner with marginalized communities to inform the development of interventions, and, more broadly, system change. The current context of child welfare suggests that the system is beginning to reckon with its intended and unintended marginalization of African American communities and slowly moving toward community informed, preventative interventions to child maltreatment. This study demonstrates that Community Cafés have the potential to serve as a promising model to engage community members and produce knowledge on how to improve and shape systems and services in a way that is responsive to the community's needs. Moreover, the use of the café model as a participatory method in the child welfare research space can shift power dynamics and provide an opportunity for harm reduction and healing for the communities most affected by CWSs. As it stands, Community Cafés can be an effective tool for child welfare agencies interested in investing and strengthening relationships with families to creatively problem solve the issue of child maltreatment and avoid future family interaction with CWSs.

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About the Authors

Helen Robinson, MPH, LMSW, is a doctoral student at the Brown School. An activist-practitioner-researcher, her research focuses on empowerment-based approaches to address racial health disparities that plague African American communities. Specifically, Helen is interested in community participants' experiences of empowerment-based processes and their perspectives regarding how such efforts impact both themselves and their communities.

María Gandarilla Ocampo, BSW, MSW, a doctoral student at the Brown School, uses her practice experience with children, families, and communities to inform her research in child welfare. Her overall goal is to prevent child maltreatment and future family interaction with CWSs through community-based interventions that bolster families and communities.

Katie Shires, LMSW, is a doctoral student in Social Work at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. She is a National Institute of Mental Health T32 pre-doctoral fellow. Her research focuses on child and adolescent mental health and family interventions in rural populations.

Grace Newton, MSW, is a recent graduate of the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis and is interested in child welfare, adoption, and family preservation strategies. She currently works as a public adoptions social worker with children in Wisconsin's foster care system.

Melissa Jonson-Reid, MSW, PhD, is the Ralph & Muriel Pumphrey Professor of Social Work Research at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. She is a nationally known researcher in child maltreatment and cross sector services research and community-based preventive intervention.

Sanaria Sulaiman, MA, is the Executive Director of Vision for Children at Risk in St. Louis Missouri.

Patricia Kohl, MSW, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. She is a leading expert in strengthening, implementing, and sustaining evidence-based interventions that improve the quality of care for children with behavioral health needs and/or CPS involvement.

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