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Not trustworthy. African parents' perspectives on Norwegian child protection care measures

Ikke til å stole på. Afrikanske Foreldres Perspektiver på Omsorgsovertakelse

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the experiences of African parents with care measure histories and their working relations with the Norwegian Child Protection Service (CPS), investigating how these interactions affect trust and collaboration between parents and the agency. Qualitative interviews with 15 parents revealed the emotional and existential impact of care measures resulting in feelings of injustice, resentment, and disempowerment. The study emphasises the need for CPS to build strong working relationships with parents throughout child protection procedures, particularly for ethnic minority families who may lack confidence in the Norwegian child protection system. Despite the legal obligation of CPS to provide continued support and assist parents in developing necessary parenting skills, our results show that cooperation is complicated by perceived institutional bias, opaque decisions, no focus on reunion, and the overall feeling that the agency does not encapsulate the interests of minority families. The study highlights the importance of reflecting on power, trust, and risk in encounters between service personnel and minority parents, underscoring the need for empathetic approaches to child protection that prioritise building trust and collaboration between all parties involved. The findings have implications for improving relationships between professionals and parents and promoting greater trust and confidence in CPS.

SAMMENDRAG

Studien utforsker perspektivene til etniske minoritetsforeldre med barnevernshistorikk rundt samarbeid og tillit mellom foreldre og barnevern. Studien baseres på kvalitative intervjuer med 15 foreldre som understreker at det å fjerne barn fra hjemmemiljøet ofte fører til følelse av urettferdighet, bitterhet og maktesløshet hos foreldre og barn. Disse følelsene forsterkes gjerne av barns tap av språk og religion, som underbygger mistillit mellom foreldre og barnevern. Skjønt barnevernet plikter å yte kontinuerlig støtte og hjelp til foreldre, blir samarbeid umulig for mange foreldre som ikke ser mulighet til å utfordre ansattes beslutninger. Foreldre i studien lever med antagelser om at barnevernet skal fjerne barn fra minoritetshjem. Studien understreker viktigheten av å reflektere over makt, tillit og risiko i møter mellom tjenestepersonell og minoritetsforeldre. Studien viser behovet

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for at barnevernet jobber aktivt med å bygge sterke arbeidsrelasjoner med foreldre. Konklusjonen studien trekker er at det behov for en empatisk tilnærming til barnevern som tar hensyn til foreldrenes emosjonelle og kulturelle opplevelser, og som prioriterer å bygge tillit og samarbeid mellom alle involverte parter. Studiens funn har implikasjoner for det norske barnevernsystemet, spesielt med tanke på å forbedre forholdet mellom fagpersoner og foreldre og tilliten til barnevernets tjenester.

Introduction: trust in professional encounters

Trust shapes individuals' perceptions of the world and forms the foundation of interpersonal relationships (Luhmann, 1988). People tend to trust those they believe have their interests at heart (Hardin, 2002). Trust between professionals and clients is critical to establishing and maintaining positive working relationships in human services encounters and may influence the outcome of such encounters. Establishing trust between the professional and client in contexts where the professional has discretion to reach life-and-death decisions in the client's life can be challenging. Clients' minority status sometimes complicates trust-building in such contexts, with the minority/majority dimension potentially infusing layers of relative powerlessness. Known for decades to practitioners and researchers, in Norway, many minority parents harbour strong prejudice against the Child Protection Services, and in encounters with agency personnel, flag issues of distrust and disempowerment (e.g. Fylkesnes et al., 2015; Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Kvalvaag & Mezzanotti, 2021; Skivenes, 2023). Despite this, realistically, parents need to overcome expectations of bad outcomes vis-à-vis CPS and relate to personnel in ways that allow them to benefit from their expertise and improve their parenting skills. Presumably, this is facilitated by trust between the parties, even as the nature of interactions between professionals and clients might render trust evasive. Insight into the experiences and perspectives of parents with care measure histories is necessary to understand what trust in the agency and professionals entails. We conducted a qualitative research project investigating working relations between Norwegian CPS and African minority families. Our starting point in this paper is that the parents in our study – whose children have been removed by care measures – have been deemed, defined, and judged *untrustworthy* by professionals. From the viewpoint of denied parenthood, we examine these parents' interpretations of their relationship with CPS. Examining emotional reactions makes sense because people act on these impulses, affecting their interactions with professionals, and understanding parents' shared experience of distrust is paramount, even if the reality of their narratives is not objective or immediately transferable.

In Norway, CPS is legally required and mandated to support parents in maintaining custody of their children or regain it following care measures. CPS is called on to assist parents throughout procedures, which puts the onus on personnel to build rapport with parents. Norwegian law recognises that developing trust is crucial in resolving these encounters in the 'best interest of the child' (Bvl §1-7; bvl §4-16). In encounters with a state agency vested with far-reaching discretionary powers, involuntary ethnic minority clients often feel disempowered, our results show. Even so, they are expected to muster trust for personnel who have declared their distrust in the client and who are *seen to* harbour bias against non-conformist modes of parenting, make arbitrary decisions, disregard parents' hopes of reunification, and overall fail to encapsulate their families' interests. When parents say, 'They wage war on parents who've fled war!'; 'They steal children!'; 'They bribe our children!'; 'I call them child pirates!' – they speak to the violence these processes have done to their sense of parenthood. Referring to theories of trust and discretionary power, a sense of injustice and disempowerment are sentiments unlikely to engender trust (e.g. Falch-Eriksen, 2016). At the same time, we argue that parallel to how medical outcome conceivably improve with better

communication between doctor and patient, trusting relations stands to improve outcomes in CPS encounters. Therefore, we explore the impact of these sentiments on participatory opportunities in service encounters and ask, what makes minority parents pause and question the agency's ability to accommodate their interests?

Background: 'We fear *Barnevern*'

The discussion is developed to question why relations between CPS and ethnic minority parents often come across as strained, as the previous research discussed below notes. Before discussing similarities and contrasts in the trappings of trust in professional encounters marked by asymmetrical relations and discretionary power, we introduce current knowledge on the relations between CPS and ethnic minority communities in Norway. In Norway, parenting can be done in many equally valid ways, and parents have the constitutional right to choose the care they provide their children (e.g. Falch-Eriksen, 2016). The Norwegian Constitution mandates CPS to safeguard the child's best interest and ensure that children and parents' right to family life are maintained, 'preferably in the home'. The Norwegian child protection system has been categorised as 'family service oriented', lending crucial importance to prevention and family support (Kriz & Skivenes, 2011). There is albeit no uniform procedure between the agency's local offices: Professional discretion plays a vital role in decision-making, informed by CPS personnel's culturally situated ideas about 'proper parenting' and what is considered 'best for the child' (e.g. Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Rysst, 2020; Samsøen & Willumsen, 2015). On the other hand, Norwegian CPS has been called 'child-focused' in its 'emphasis on conflicts of interests between parents and children, on listening to children's voices, and by the weight given to developmental psychological knowledge' (Picot, 2012; also, e.g. Aamodt, 2015; Hennem & Aamodt, 2021). Research supports the view that the child protection system employs a *psychologising gaze*, which leaves little room for emphasis on differences between cultures in 'how care, family relations, and togetherness is done and finds expression' (Aarset & Bredal, 2018, p. 139).

In Norway, CPS issues care measures in response to (suspicion of) various kinds of 'detrimental care' (Falck-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019) – including abuse, neglect, and inadequate parental caring ability ('omsorgssvikt'). According to Statistics Norway, in 2022, CPS initiated 47,034 measures; of these, 8249 were care measures (Statistics Norway, 2023). 'Non-Western' immigrants and their Norwegian descendants comprise 12.1% of the Norwegian population. In 2022, this (super-heterogeneous) population category received 11,536 measures (24% of all measures), of which 1595 were care measures (19% of all). While this speaks to circulating perceptions in minority communities of the agency's focus on minority families, it is important to note that official figures also reflect that, over the last few years, across all population categories, the total volume of measures and the number of care measures have fallen drastically.

Notwithstanding, the idea persists in minority communities that CPS targets minorities specifically. Consequently, over several decades, relations between CPS and ethnic minority communities in Norway have been 'notably strained' and 'many migrants to Norway fear' the agency (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). Internationally, the issue of Norwegian CPS' approach to cultural sensitivity is the subject of untold pixels of media exposure – reference *Mrs Chatterjee vs Norway*, the (2023) Bollywood all-time box office hit. Tomes of scholarship have investigated ethnic minorities' encounters with CPS following the early observation from Fylkesnes et al. (2015) that institutional structures bring heavy to bear on ethnic minority parents' opportunities to interact with social workers. A line of authors has expounded on rumours and fear of CPS circulating in minority communities (e.g. Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Rugkåsa et al., 2015; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2018). Researchers have discussed how minority parents avoid seeking help from service providers adjacent to CPS, such as NAV and health stations, knowing these institutions are legally obligated to report suspicious circumstances concerning children to the CPS (e.g. Handulle, 2022; Haugen et al., 2017). Handulle and Vassenden (2021) explore how fear of CPS foreshadows the everyday practices of ordinary

middle-class minority parents with no prior agency contact. Against such conceptions, Tembo et al. (2021) argue that immigrant families feel disempowered through their interactions with CPS, which they perceive to be controlling through excessive surveillance of immigrant parents' parenting practices (also Smette & Grønli Rosten, 2019). This paper discusses how the lack of confidence reflected in previous findings complicates working relationships in encounters with personnel with whom cooperation is essential for the outcomes of procedures.

Theory: asymmetry, discretion, (dis)trust

What makes trust evasive in encounters between two parties (CPS, parents) vested in avoiding the abysmal outcome of care measures and thus have common interests analogue to that between doctors and patients in securing optimal outcomes for the non-professional party? To help make sense of minority parents' *reciprocal reluctance* to assume the agency's trustworthiness, we briefly sketch a working definition of client 'trust'. What factors must be present for clients to develop trust in professionals in encounters marked by asymmetrical relations and discretionary power over essential life decisions vested in the counterpart? Leaning on Annette Baier's understanding, for a client to be able to trust a professional requires a willingness by the client to relinquish control over and let someone else take care of something he cares for, 'where such "caring for" involves some exercise of discretionary powers' (Baier, 1986). Clients must, in so many words, be willing to expose themselves to potential harm or disappointment in the encounter. Baier argues that trust is not solely about the competence or reliability of the other party but also a moral expectation or attitude, which seems important to how clients approach the professional in various contexts. Robert Goodin argues discretion is granted to those in charge to make 'reasonable decisions', while unreasonable ones 'exceed their powers' (Goodin, 1986). On these grounds, we assume that clients who believe that the professional is making unreasonable and unpredictable decisions and thus moves beyond the confines of discretionary power will have difficulty trusting the counterpart. We take the exercise of professional discretion as a crucial axis of trust in service encounters. To trust, the client must be reassured that the professional's behaviour will remain predictable. In as much as clients need to rely on the continued relationship with the professional and be able to foresee a future course of action (Carey, 2017), predictability is a central tenet of professional trust.

In professional contexts, trust presumably depends on the participatory status of the client – with summoned clients perhaps more naturally sceptical of the professional than clients who have sought redress on their own accord. Of relevance to the present context is John Elster's idea (2004) that *dis-trust* takes two forms. If you distrust someone, Elster argues, you may either choose to 'abstain from interacting' or interact and take precautions. When you trust, on the other hand, you stop monitoring your counterpart: You let your guard down. A patient who distrusts a particular general practitioner may (theoretically, at least) abstain from interacting to seek alternative counsel. Crucially, involuntary clients are not 'free to abstain from the interaction' with the professional and are therefore compelled to brave encounters with caution. This hints at another essential element of trust in professional contexts. To trust the professional, a client would reasonably need to feel his interests maintained by the counterpart. Russell Hardin (2002) construes trust as shared interests or investments, and with the term 'encapsulated interests', captures how individuals or entities are more likely to be trusted when seen as sharing or invested in the same interests as the trustor – in this case, the client. Conversely, once clients start questioning the commonality of interests, it leaves little room for trust in the professional, making 'vested interest' an essential component of client-professional trust.

Limited research exists on populations' trust in child protective services (e.g. Skivenes & Benbenisty, 2022; Kvakic & Wærdahl, 2022). Substantial attention has been paid to ethnicity as a factor in the quality of doctor-patient relationships and medical outcomes, and this body of research points to similarities and contrasts in the need to establish trust and the sway of communication between the parties on outcomes from procedures. Patients who seek medical assistance from a

physician do so, indicating some prior confidence in biomedicine (regardless of the feelings they may harbour for any individual doctor) and, as voluntary clients, will often have discretion in choosing a service provider. Nonetheless, in professional encounters, physicians must establish trust with individual patients to promote communication that leads to optimal solutions and outcomes. The trust-building process is meant to be facilitated by the physician's visible tokens of professional knowledge and role vis-à-vis the patient – emblematically represented by the white coat, stethoscope, and titled nametag – which are signals to the patient that, '*As a doctor, I have your interests at heart*'. Those symbols betoken the patient's transition from institutional confidence in biomedicine to trust in the personal competence of the physician.

However, the literature on interpersonal relations between doctors and patients shows that trust can be more *ephemeral* in situations with ethnic and linguistic incongruity between the role players (e.g. Schouten & Meeuwesen, 2006). Ferguson and Candib (2002) found consistent evidence that ethnicity substantially influences the quality of the doctor-patient relationship, in as far as 'minority patients are less likely to engender empathic responses, establish rapport, receive sufficient information, and be encouraged to participate in medical decision making'. These are issues that may play into how a patient feels able to trust the doctor and speak to an additional dimension of clients' relative powerlessness. The point is that, in encounters based on power asymmetry and broad professional discretion, ethnic discrepancy may complicate the facilitation of trust. Ferguson and Candib argue that in medical encounters, effective communication may improve various outcome measures, and it seems reasonable that majority-status physicians be made aware of the need to develop more effective relationships and forms of communication with ethnic minority patients. On these grounds, we take professional trust in service encounters to predicate on 1) continued relations, 2) predictability, and 3) the client's belief that the professional discretionary power is tuned to maintain his interests. In the following, we employ this theorem to make sense of the parents' experiences of encountering CPS divested of any confidence in the institution (more likely being overwhelmed by terror and trepidation) and – since they feel they can never truly let their guard down – how mutual trust remains elusive.

Methods, data, material: destinies and narratives

We investigated the destinies and narratives of African minority families in Norway following the removal of children from family homes. We wanted to understand more about the effects of care measures on individuals, families, and communities and the consequences for families' integration into Norwegian society. Fear and distrust of the child welfare system are not confined to African minority communities; ethnographically speaking, the 'African' identity of the families discussed is peripheral to the arguments developed. Methodologically, our approach was developed to capture participants' reading of symbolic meanings in their relationships with the agency and broader Norwegian society, and the fundamental premise was to obtain perspectives often marginalised in child protection discourses. We wanted to understand parents' experiences rather than uncover objective 'truths' about the Norwegian child protection system. This study rests on insight into narratives gathered through a qualitative methodological framework consisting of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, well-established methods to draw out participants' ideations. As part of a more extensive research project on minorities and CPS, we obtained voices representing various positions in protection procedures to supplement parental perspectives and amassed more than 160 h of interview material. This paper focuses on parental perspectives that are not readily available for research.

In recruiting minority parents with child removal history and in data collection, the project benefitted from two team members having insider status in African minority communities in Norway. Over time, through personal and professional networks and snowballing, we recruited fifteen parents born in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, all but one being female and with a preponderance of single mothers. Many participants first encountered CPS after brief residencies in the country and

more than half within six months of arrival. Two participants lived in the country for 10–15 years before first contact. Participants encountered CPS local branches in municipalities across the country. Altogether, the parents related the life destinies of more than 60 children. Interviews lasted two to four hours and were conducted in various settings and locations, including campus and private homes. We interviewed core participants on several occasions. Participants conversed with the researchers in English, Norwegian, Swahili, and Somali. During interviews, some participants initially appeared sceptical of the researchers, creating a tense atmosphere on several occasions. However, as participants were invited to share their stories and experiences with CPS (through open-ended questions like ‘Please tell us the story of your contact with *Barnevernet*’ and queries primed on elaborating narratives) – they gradually grew more comfortable. The phrase ‘lower the guard’ (Elster, 2007, p. 344) is particularly apt in this paper, as it reflects the significant impact the constant and terrifying sense of emergency the fear of CPS can evoke in parents. Many spoke at length (and with visible relief) about their experiences. In their narratives, a persistent lack of trust is palpable.

In analysing this dense and interweaving material, we benefitted from previous research on minorities’ encounters with CPS and other service institutions. In the analytical process, we relied on a cooperative effort involving all team members in a critical and reflexive approach. We employed a framework building on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) whereby we collaborated by coding interviews and observations by reading through passages together. These codes were combined into thematic clusters, which allowed us to draw out broader currents cutting across sections of the material, such as the strained communication with the agency, changing power dynamics in families, psycho-social consequences of foster care, breaches of children and families’ rights, bias of the system and personnel, etc. Perhaps unsurprisingly, fear and loathing of the agency emerge as central and intermeshed narrative themes.

As researchers, we are beholden to an ethical code of conduct that ensures the anonymity of study participants. We reflected on ethical issues related to interviewing parents with potential trauma around the loss of children. Speaking to researchers about these issues might trigger adverse psychological reactions in parents who are livid with the system. In discussing these encounters, we considered the risk of contributing to marginalising stigma and prejudice. The material uncovers a cluster of destinies following CPS intervention that can only be described as family tragedies, highlighting the need to understand more about where the communication breaks down. Minorities’ trust in CPS merits concern, we believe, because distrust is contagious and corrodes sections of citizens’ confidence in the state (Wathne et al., *forthcoming*). Awarded a grant from Stiftelsen Wøien, the project was approved by Norwegian Data Service/SIKT (Project number: 270863).

Findings: why trust remain elusive

Distrust of the agency reverberates in our empirical material. In this paper, our point of origin is that parents’ lack of prior institutional confidence helps stifle the development of trust between parents and professionals. In a scenario wherein involuntary clients feel disempowered by the professional’s wide-wielding discretionary powers, the central insight from our discussion is that the agency effectively demonstrates a failure to encapsulate the interests of minority parents: ‘They don’t care about *our* interests!’ We discuss four clusters of findings to explain the subsequent lacuna of trust between the parties. The parents’ perception of overall divergence between the agency’s focus and the interests of minority families spring from narrative themes we have organised into the following analytical categories: Disadvantaged parenting; child-centred ideology of professionals; unpredictability of bureaucratic decisions; and no focus on repatriation.

Disadvantaged parenting

In child protection procedures, a minority cultural case context sometimes complicates a precarious situation. It is overwhelmingly clear in our material that most encounters have been initiated without

parents' institutional confidence in the agency. A common narrative theme is the feeling that the agency has not been rigged towards helping families find an equilibrium between Norwegian majority values and those of the minority culture of parents. To make matters worse, many parents speak about how they feel personnel have displayed a lack of knowledge and understanding about 'African parenting practices', a standing phrase. A common trope is that minority parents are met by personnel who represent institutional values and practices that devalue 'non-Norwegian' styles of parenting ('African', 'foreign', 'minority', 'immigrant', etc., were used interchangeably by parents) to the degree it compromises outcomes of procedures. They have felt their parenthood demeaned on the prejudice of Norwegian base values in the child protection system.

Though some parents speak of acts of violence towards their children, they mostly deny the accusations against them and say they do not understand the legality or urgency of decisions to remove the child(ren). They present themselves as 'good parents' who have acted in the best interests of their children, attempting to provide a better life and allow them to develop roots in Norway while also being proud of their heritage (Cf. Handulle, 2022). The idea of reallocating to Norway in pursuit of a better life for them – sometimes dramatically: 'I risked our lives to come here!' (Ifriki) – makes it difficult for some to comprehend accusations of abuse or neglect. From the parents' perspectives, many of these cases appear to be related more to minority families' difficulties adjusting to Norwegian society rather than 'core' child welfare concerns. Alongside other parents, some of Blessing's anger is directed towards the notion that the agency has not understood the specific challenges she faced as a minority parent. Many parents could be cited here, but Blessing and Jenny bring out several relevant issues recurrent in our material:

The police deported him, but they took too long to do so. I don't blame the police so much as I blame CPS and the school. They created problems for my son and made my life difficult. I suffered with him, and yet they didn't help me. When we African parents have issues with our children, Norwegian authorities should learn to consult and listen to US for solutions. Not just decide according to their feelings. Later, when these kids get into trouble, we parents take over their burdens (Blessing)

The following excerpt is from a conversation with Jenny:

Minorities fear CPS because of their approach and lack of knowledge about our cultures. Many African parents have little knowledge about parenting in Norway. They think CPS will take their children. CPS should prove that when a parent lacks knowledge, they will give it. They don't have to destroy the family. They should prove that they are friendly and not harmful people. This is the kind of information they must put across to parents. But they are narrow-minded. They don't focus on the future. If you destroy the family, you destroy society (Jenny)

Previous research notes that in encounters with CPS, some minority parents rely on coping mechanisms referred to as 'deficiency positioning', which amounts to a feeling that a lack of normative knowledge and skills circumscribe opportunities to participate (Fylkesnes et al., 2015; also, Price & Rosén, 2015). In the same vein, as minorities and 'African parents', the participants in this study feel they know less about proper parenting and how to be good citizens than majority Norwegians. This, they imagine, has exposed them to the agency's attention. Parents feel strongly about never receiving instruction around accepted practice and 'good parenting' at the time of CPS intervention. Halima and Jenny exemplify this at some length:

I was new here when they came. I had no one to lean on. There was so much I had to learn! Parents who come here get no instruction on how to be good parents in Norway, about their rights, and how the system works. I got wind of all the things I'm not supposed to do or allowed to do, but I had no way of knowing what is considered good (i.e. in the Norwegian context). They say they're trying to help children, but they don't see how they tear families apart and hurt parents' mental health (Halima)

I didn't have any idea how CPS operates. Nobody was able to sit down and guide me. Maybe if they'd given me that kind of education, I would not have made the choice I did. I didn't know the consequences; I was ignorant. They didn't educate me on my rights. They should have told me that my kids would be separated. I should have kept them together by not separating from my husband ... if only they could help my husband manage his anger, we would have been together as a family (Jenny)

Parents' ability to position themselves as trusting and trustworthy during and after procedures is also compromised. Motivated to avoid further embroilment with the agency, parents speak of having turned down material help and other initiatives from CPS at the cost of the need for assistance. Lack of trust and rapport has often prevented communication between client and professional, which could have helped parents develop skills to maintain or regain custody of their children.

Once, they asked me if I wanted someone to help me deliver the children to school. I told them they should pay me to do those things myself. I felt they were trying to find a way in to take the children. I tried setting boundaries. No matter what they said, no matter what they offered, I was always worried and skeptical. I calmed down as a strategy, but I never trusted them (Mercy)

Unpredictable decisions

Parents relay shock and dismay at what they see as unpredictable procedures leading to decisions to implement care measures.

When the case started, my eldest son went to the teacher and told her. The teacher asked me when I had the first meeting. She said, 'Never go there alone because they can do anything to you or use anything against you'. I brought the teacher and the social teacher, but I was worried they would cooperate with barnevern. So, a friend came too (Mercy)

They express anger that CPS has disregarded the professional opinions of doctors, teachers, and others in positions to testify about parents' ability to care. Like Shamus in the following excerpt:

The principal at the school confirmed that my children were well-adjusted. The doctor confirmed there had been no violence or abuse against them. My neighbour testified for me. They didn't listen and placed the children.

They had no witnesses. I read the documents later; the entire system is unfair.

After two years, the Council decided to send the children back, but CPS still refused. The police interrogated the children, but CPS didn't listen.

This points to the feeling of grave injustice *all* the parents in the material speak about in that they feel and sense that discretionary powers vested in the agency have been used to achieve outcomes unfavourable to the interests of parents and families. Many parents believe CPS's presence has been arbitrary and disruptively single-focused rather than geared towards bettering families' coping. Such suspicions must be severe hindrances to trust.

'Child-centred' professionals

As a group, the parents speak coherently about the procedural injustices they feel subjected to. They insist that CPS' approach focuses on a single child in (minority) families rather than helping families adjust. The following three excerpts from conversations speak to interconnected topics centred on CPS' single-child focus rather than on whole families, misguided intercessions, adverse outcomes, and split-up families:

Frankly, I gained nothing from CPS. They should've sat with me to explain wrong and right and what I should have done as a mother. Even the children gained nothing. They're in bad ways now because CPS took them away. It created a disconnection between us. I never got the help I needed to handle them. What's their job – shouldn't they help parents? (Ruth)

They may think that they did the right thing by taking the children from home. But what are the consequences, and what good has it done to the family and children? The damage they did wasn't temporary but everlasting. The children say they'll have it with them for life (Jenny)

The government spoiled my son. During meetings with CPS, they never listened to my views as a mother. CPS was always on his side, not my side and CPS never had any sensible, workable solutions to his misbehaving except to take him away from me. Before CPS took him, I'd decided to take him back to Africa. That was the only way I could handle him ... (Blessing)

We wish to intimate that perhaps some of the sad outcomes in our material could have developed differently with closer communication facilitated by trust between clients and professionals.

No focus on repatriation

The parents maintain reunification as the goal for the future. They tend to see a vindication of their parenthood involved in having a child return to the fold as an adult. *'I know they'll come back to me!'* is a frequent expression. There is a trend in our material seeing young people return to the parental sphere after reaching the age of maturity and exiting the child-placement system. It is only that, even before care measures, parents view the agency's role as disrupting rather than stabilising family dynamics. A common theme among parents, at the heart of the issue of trust, is the feeling they report having been left to their own devices by the CPS and the broader child welfare system immediately upon the child's removal. The parents appear to have a limited understanding of their rights following care measures. However, they are vocally dissatisfied with the lack of guidance or support for reuniting with their children. The parents feel that the agency's termination of their working relations has precluded the development of validated skill sets that might ensure the children's repatriation. It is common among parents to report not having met their children over several years following foster placement. Feeling that CPS had devalued her parenting skills throughout two separate cases, Elisabeth, for instance, claimed she had never been offered guidance towards the return of her children:

After the court case, I couldn't see them for an entire year. They said they'd follow up – but they never did!

I was going crazy! They made me see a therapist. That's *all* they did! I went to DPS (i.e. the district psychiatric clinic). I was crying from bitterness. But DPS was impressed!

After three sessions, they said I didn't need their services. They finished the appointments! But CPS said I was the one who quit. After that, they tried to cut the number of yearly visits to six (Elisabeth)

Among the parents who have been able to maintain contact with their children during placement, there is a great deal of anger at the services for their perceived inability to facilitate visitations. Ifriki's story is particularly poignant on this point:

It feels like CPS doesn't want us to cooperate. They don't facilitate visits. They claim they facilitate visits and offer me help, but they don't!

I find it very difficult to work with them. I am worried about the mothers who lose it mentally after having their children removed.

Nobody asks you anything or pays any attention. This is the responsibility of the government!

A very sore issue, Ifriki agonised over her children showing up at visitations with tattered hair and chafed skin, which is to say, showing signs of not receiving proper hair- and skincare. This is a sadly familiar experience in this set of parents' narratives. From parents' perspective, proper hair- and skin care for African children signify both good parenting on their part – in the sense *'Look, I give my child proper care!'* – and a lack of knowledge and sensitivity on the part of the authorities of the care needs of African children. Parents take it as a sign that the child protection system does not properly understand African parenting practices and devalues *'African ways'* of being parents. Attention to this topic is a way of saying, *'I am a good parent. They took her from me unreasonably, and now they fail to give her proper care!'*

Another aspect of parents' distrust relates to being denied information about children's well-being, location, and development in foster care. Ifriki explained a common reason why she had never been able to position herself to cooperate with personnel:

They don't give me information, not even about their school. I want to follow up – make sure they do well. I don't understand why I can't be informed.

My eldest has some issues; I'd like to help her. It's painful having to relate to Barnevern.

Parents describe feeling ejected from the parenting role and point to a lack of follow-up following the implementation of care measures as evidence of an assimilationist agenda. This powerful narrative theme relates to parents' existential sorrow that foster-placed children 'become too Norwegian' and lose identity-bearing traits such as religion and native language. As recalled from the introduction, parents resent the agency and the Norwegian state for placing minority children in majority homes, thus subjecting them to a form of 'enforced assimilation' in majority homes. Furthermore, here, with Baier is the source of parents' distrust, namely in the very doubt that the agency will use the discretionary powers vested in it to 'care for' the best interests of the foster-placed child. On top of that, parents articulate very adamantly that there has been no agency focus on repatriation and no attention directed toward their developing skills compatible with reunification.

Discussion: a systemic failure to appear trustworthy

In sum, CPS appears untrustworthy in as much as personnel fail to actively turn a lack of systemic confidence into trusting working relations; they are seen to devalue African parenting skills and practices and do not offer help towards 'integration'; they lay down unpredictable decisions; they terminate ties with parents after care measures, and place children in circumstances that alienates them from their minority culture – which, taken together, makes African parents feel that CPS does not have their interests at heart. Decisions by CPS to remove children from the home environment, meanwhile, often carry severe emotional and existential impact on parents, leading to feelings of injustice, resentment, and disempowerment (see e. g., Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022; Schofield et al., 2011). Regardless of background, parents are likely to experience the decision to remove as an existential crisis (e.g. Syrstad & Ness, 2021, p. 462). These reactions and sentiments are inconducive to trust (Falch-Eriksen, 2016). The mutual distrust between parents and CPS is often further compounded by the loss of language and religion for the child. When children's development in foster care is seen as flying in the face of their cultural rights, this signals to parents that the agency explicitly does not 'care for' either their ward or the interests of minority families. Meanwhile, CPS must foster strong working relationships with parents throughout procedures to successfully repatriate children according to the mandate. This seems particularly important in cases involving ethnic minority families whose confidence in the Norwegian CPS may hinder trust in professional relations. Parents need to relate to professionals whose judgements and actions they have limited opportunity to challenge. As we have shown, the narrative theme of disempowerment resonates strongly among parents in our material. Parents typically report leaving encounters with CPS overwhelmed by the notion that discretionary powers have been used to their disadvantage.

We are concerned with a particular group of parents' beliefs and lived experiences. We do not claim to map out CPS practices objectively, which is not to say that CPS can afford to disregard these findings. Distrust of the agency is a democratic problem that needs to be addressed on many levels. Parental fear is real. From the argument this presents, unless cultivated specifically to set (minority) parents at ease during procedures, trust, *by default*, remains elusive. Instead, in the metaphor from earlier, insofar as leaving clients hard-pressed to lower their guard, to trust in these conditions is akin to 'being reckless' (Baier, 1986). From what we have presented of findings and given our theoretical framework, in these circumstances, a timorous parent *cannot* trust. Despite the legal requirement for CPS to provide 'constant support' (Picot, 2012) and assist parents in developing the necessary parenting skills throughout procedures, parents believe CPS operates with an agenda to remove children from minority homes. Though no such agenda exists, the sentiment remains a significant hurdle to building trust between parents and CPS. CPS needs to address these perceptions to foster confidence in the agency. The lack of trust limits the system's effectiveness and has long-lasting adverse effects on interaction.

Conclusion: empathetic approach

Luhmann noted that a lack of trust harms systems' ability to serve intended purposes effectively. In the context of child welfare, we have seen how 'the lack of trust withdraws activities. It reduces the range of possibilities for rational action' (Luhmann, 1988, p. 104) – and that is bad because less than optimal communication between parents and authorities may result in outcomes that, in the long run, may be detrimental to the interests and rights of the child and those of families. We have intended to highlight the importance of reflecting on power, trust, and risk in child welfare encounters between agency personnel and minority parents, such as this set from African minority communities. The need to be aware of the confidence-and-trust issues between vulnerable citizens and state/municipal actors vested with the power to make potentially devastating decisions in people's lives is of the essence because optimal communication between the parties stands to improve the chances of more favourable child protection outcomes and may also improve the standing of the agency in the communities. The study thus highlights the need for a nuanced and empathetic approach to child protection by child protection agencies to account for parents' emotional and cultural experiences. Agencies need to prioritise building trust and collaboration between all parties involved.

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