OSLOMET

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How Do Social Workers' Make Sense Of The Encounter And Action Towards Families?

A Qualitative Study of Child Welfare Workers´ construction of meaning and action towards families from diverse social classes.

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, research has focused on financial constraints as a risk factor for neglect within a family, thereby explaining the overrepresentation of low-class families in child welfare service. This thesis aims to contribute to the less-explored research field by examining the dynamics and implications of social class within the child welfare system. The objective of the thesis is to explore the interpretations and experiences of child welfare workers when encountering families from different socio-economic backgrounds and how it affects their actions. In light of this, the thesis´ objective is the following question: How does the client's social class affect the meaning making and action of the social worker?

Data collection consists of vignettes as the initial framework of six semi-structured interviews with caseworkers from the child welfare system. The thematic analysis shows that the caseworkers' interpretations and action towards the clients are connected to three overarching themes. The themes concern: 1. Making sense of the families, 2. The caseworkers´ perception of self and 3. The impact of the meaning-makings on the caseworkers´ action.

This thesis findings indicates that the social class of the clients may affect the meaning-making, and as a result the action of the social workers. The low-class families were portrayed as inarticulate, not ethnic Norwegian, motivated and willing to get help but also afraid of the potential consequences of saying no. The construction of meaning about low-class families, led the caseworker to assume the need for taking a larger role and led the families to more often accepting assistance, while also being afraid to decline it. In contrast high-class families were depicted as articulate, well-educated, typically ethnically Norwegian, assertive of their rights, and resourceful. This made the caseworkers according to their own perception, feel they were in a subordinate position. As a result, child welfare workers reported that they engaged in more rounds of discussions and simultaneously became uncertain about how much they could push, which, in turn, led to more cases being dismissed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OSLOMET

CHAPTER 1 **INTRODUCTION**

Through my work in the child welfare field, I have both witnessed and contributed to cases with similar challenges, getting different outcomes. Looking back on these cases, some particular factors stand out. Families not referred for further intervention by child welfare services often showed greater resources in terms of financial stability, social networks, education, employment, and the vocabulary they used. Conversely, those deemed to require more extensive assistance typically possessed contrasting attributes, such as low income, unemployment, and a limited support network. In hindsight, I have found myself contemplating whether their social class inadvertently influenced the decisions, even when it was unrelated to the primary issues faced by the families. If this were the case: Why?

Traditionally, research has focused on financial constraints as a risk factor for neglect within a family, thereby explaining the overrepresentation of low-class families in child welfare service. The goal of this thesis is not to undermine this claim but rather to contribute to shed light on the less frequently examined dynamics and implications of class, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Therefore, this study delves into the complexity that may shape decisions made by child welfare workers when they are confronted with cases involving families from different social class backgrounds.

To address the objective, this thesis relies on a qualitative research methodology, using fictitious vignettes as the initial framework for interviews involving six caseworkers employed within the child welfare service.

1.1 Background

The Child Welfare Agency's mandate is to ensure that children who live under conditions that can harm their health and development get help at the right time. The social worker has a formal power based on authority in law (Garsjø 2007, p.276), in addition to a possible informal power to define and to implement this (Ask & Berg 2011, p. 66). This places great demands on the decisions to be made (Barnevernsutvalget 2021). Empirical studies provide

extensive evidence indicating that these decisions tend to affect individuals characterized by economic insecurity, limited education, low labor force participation, single parenthood, and often families belonging to minority groups (Egelund 1997, Drake and Zuravin 1998, Lagerberg & Sundelin 2000,Penn and Gough 2002, Andenæs, 2004, Freysteinsdóttir 2007,Helgeland, 2008, Juul 2010, Kojan and Fauske 2011,Bunkholdt and Sandbæk 2013, Marthinsen & Lichtwark 2013, Pelton 2014, et al.).

The increased incidence of these families in child welfare services must be seen in the context of prevailing research that has established a correlation between risk conditions related to financial circumstances and the likelihood of problems developing in a family (Pelton 2014, Drake and Zuravin 1998, Lagerberg & Sundelin 2000, Freysteinsdóttir 2007, Kvello 2010, Penn and Gough 2002, et al.). However, supporters of an alternative perspective argue that the overrepresentation of low-class families is rooted in structural realities (Sunesson 1981, Kristinsdottir 1991, Ericsson 1996, Egelund 1997, Vagli 2009, Hennum 2014, Kojan 2011, Berg et al. 2017, et al.). This perspective suggests that the child welfare system is not isolated from broader societal issues, but rather that it operates within a larger context that perpetuates class-based oppression and particular paradigms of knowledge. Paradoxically, there is little research that focuses on middle-class clients, even when some studies emphasize its impact on intervention within the child welfare sphere.

1.2 Research question

Given the extensive research on the relationship between low-class families and neglect, this thesis aims to contribute to a less-explored research field by examining the dynamics and implications of social class within the child welfare system. More specifically, the study aims to explore the interpretations and experiences of child welfare workers when encountering families from different socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, this thesis investigates how this interpretation can affect the authority exercised by the child welfare worker and how it, in turn, may affect the child welfare service interventions. In light of these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated: In the context of professional encounters with clients from diverse social class backgrounds, **how do social workers make meaning of the encounter and action towards the family?**

CHAPTER 2 **PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY**

This chapter introduces relevant previous research and the theoretical framework for this thesis. The theory presented serves as a foundation to be able to analyze how socioeconomic background affects meaning-making and the actions of the child welfare worker. This will be done by providing insight into the existing research in the field of child welfare and class, followed by a presentation of a theoretical framework that offers perspectives on the decision-making process, structural inequality, symbolic power and human complexity.

2.1 Previous research

The overrepresentation of low-class families is a consistent phenomenon in the global context of child welfare (Pelton 2014, Drake and Zuravin 1998, Lagerberg & Sundelin 2000, Freysteinsdóttir 2007, Penn and Gough 2002). Similar findings have been made within the Norwegian child welfare context. In 2009, a comprehensive study was undertaken by Edgar Marthinsen, Graham Clifford, Halvor Fauske, Willy Lichtwarck, and Bente Heggem Kojan on a research project called *The New Child Welfare System (TNCWS)*. The project started in 2009 and was published as an anthology in 2013. In the research program, a more extensive survey of 723 respondents was carried out on parents' experiences as clients in child welfare, where the parents were classified through occupation. The classification in TNCWS was based on a simplified version of Statistics Norway's occupational classification standard, again based on the European Socioeconomic Classification (ESeC). Class affiliation number 1 was professional and administrative managers, 2 employed and lower-salaried employees, 3 working class and 4 unemployed (Marthinsen & Lichtwark 2013, p. 44).

The report showed that around 70 % of the parents in the study belonged to the working class (class 3) or had no connection to the labor market (class 4). About half of these had one income in the household. The same applied to the number who received some form of public benefit (Kojan, 2011, p. 43). Families with a class background of professional and administrative managers (class 1) accounted for just under 20 percent, while 12% belonged

to self-employed and lower-level white-collar workers (class 2) (Marthinsen & Lichtwark 2013, p. 44).

Consequently, a significant proportion of the families encountered by social workers emanate from low-class households, characterized by economic insecurity, limited education, low labor force participation, single parenthood, and often families belonging to minority groups. This tendency can be explained by research that shows that families with poorer living conditions have a higher risk of drug addiction, criminal involvement, physical and mental health issues, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of child abuse (Pelton, 2014; Drake and Zuravin, 1998; Lagerberg & Sundelin, 2000; Freysteinsdóttir, 2007; Kvello, 2010; Penn and Gough, 2002; Bunkholdt and Sandbæk, 2013, and others). This knowledge is also part of the social workers' education (Juul 2010, p. 18-19).

Despite the prevalence of low-class families and the well-established association between impoverished living conditions and various forms of risk, several researchers posit that poverty remains concealed within the documentation of the child welfare service (Egelund 1997, Andenæs 2004, Juul 2010, Morris 2018, et al.). Juul (2010), on the other hand, contends that matters related to poverty are often individualized, emphasizing personal attributes, lifestyles, and behaviors within families.

The study "Why do we not see poverty?" by Agnes Andenæs (2004) highlights a similar pattern, where the primary focus remains on family interactions, with limited consideration of the economic context. It underscores that even when caseworkers do acknowledge the financial circumstances, interventions primarily target the caregiving aspect.

Tina Egelund (1997) claims that the invisibility is connected to the 1970s increased research focus on psychology and psychopathology over poverty and living conditions. According to Egelund, this change in perspective stems from a recognition that the child welfare service was incapable of addressing the structural conditions the families were tied to. Therefore, social workers function within a paradoxical context, where ideals such as "equality," "dignity," and "respect for diversity" coexist with the stark realities of class

structures and societal inequality. Consequently, the social worker's mission remains unfulfilled as they fail to address the underlying structural conditions within society. This in turn implicates the child welfare system's perpetuation of social inequality and class differences, despite their alleged contrary intentions.

The overarching principle underpinning child welfare, advocating that families should be treated equally and fairly in relation to the state (NOU 2023: 7), is, as posited by some researchers, challenged by the inherent structural conditions that promote a middle-class norm within the child welfare system (Sunesson 1981, Kristinsdottir 1991, Ericsson 1996, Egelund 1997, Vagli 2009, Hennum 2014, Kojan 2011, Berg et al. 2017). In the article "Developing Child-Centered Social Policies: When Professionalism Takes Over" Nicole Hennum (2014) argues that the ideals being pursued lead to the objective of encouraging the working class to raise their children in the same manner as the middle class, consequently constructing a narrative where only middle-class values are seen as good enough.

In this manner, some researchers claim that high-class families influence the decision-making processes in child welfare services in a different way than low-class families (Kojan & Fauske 2010, Kojan 2011, Aadnanes 2017). In the study "A Class Perspective on Families in Child Welfare" (Kojan and Fauske 2010), which was conducted as part of the TNCWS research project, it was found that social class affected the reasons for intervention and the types of services provided to the family. In short, high-class families received different measures than low-class families.

The article *"Underdog? Child welfare workers' experiences of meeting families with high status"* by Bente Heggem Kojan (Kojan 2010) which also stems from the *TNCWS* study centers around interviews with 16 caseworkers. The article highlighted that faced with people with what is considered high status, the caseworker's behavior was different than faced with people with what is considered low status. Consequently, the study indicated that child welfare workers perceived themselves to be in an underdog position when in contact with high-status families.

In the study *"Social Workers' challenges in the Assessment of child abuse and maltreatment: intersections of class and Ethnicity in child protection cases"*, Margrete Aadnanes (2017) reported similar findings. The data material consisted of interviews with ten case workers. The study indicates that the client's position within the categories of ethnicity and social class affects the interventions made by the child welfare, depending on the family's class position.

In essence, the research presented in the previous sections highlights the complexities and dynamics at play when social workers engage with families from different social class backgrounds, and how these encounters are comprehended and acted upon. In particular, previous scholarship, as exemplified by the work of Egelund (1997), Andenæs (2004) and Juul (2010) suggests that the focus on the risks associated with poverty has, paradoxically, rendered the condition of poverty itself invisible within the realm of the child welfare. This phenomenon is according to Egelund (1997), Kojan 2010, Hennum (2014) and Aadnanes (2017) connected to structural conditions where the child welfare system operates within the framework of middle-class norms. Consequently, there exists an alleged categorization based on stratification of social class in the child welfare system. The existing body of knowledge indicates that it can be useful and important to examine how social workers make meaning to the encounter and action towards families from diverse social class background. These encounters are to a certain extent the sites where classifications and differences are constructed and confirmed.

2.2 Theoretical framework

In the upcoming chapter, the theoretical framework will explain facets related to the complexity of understanding a given situation, in order to provide insights into the social worker's construction of meaning. This theoretical exposition will include an exploration of four interconnected elements, namely: the decision-making process, structural inequality, symbolic power and the difficulties of human complexity.

2.3 The decision-making process

Within the municipal child welfare service, quick decisions are required, often under statutory deadlines (Øverbye 2023, p. 70). The information available to child protection staff may be inaccurate, incomplete, and subjective. The case workers are therefore dependent on receiving and collecting information from various stakeholders including schools, kindergartens, health centers, and pedagogical-psychological services. The purpose of collecting such information, combined with internally conducted investigations, is to highlight the need for intervention or further action. Within this process, the assessments and interpretations of the case worker become central (Langsrud et al., 2019).

The decision-making process within the child welfare service can according to Elisabeth Backe Hansen (2004, p. 105) be divided into three phases. The initial phase is information retrieval, where the caseworker obtains relevant information for the case. Then, the second phase is about processing the information where the case worker separates what is relevant from what is not. The final phase involves the integration of the processed information into a coherent decision-making framework. Here, the case worker assesses the information against the relevant legislation and thereby provides the basis for which decisions should be made. Such decisions may include the initiation of alternative placement for the child, the implementation of specific measures, or closing the case (Backe Hansen 2004, p. 7-8).

Although the decision-making process outlined may appear straightforward and easy to follow, the practical implementation is considerably more intricate and subject to multiple influences. The child welfare service is tasked with navigating the complexity of various family circumstances, challenges, and needs in addition to dealing with their own human complexity, power position, and normative standards which can influence the decisions made by the caseworker.

2.4 Structural inequality

In the Child Welfare Services Act of June 18, 2021, No. 97 (the Child Welfare Act - CWA) §3-1, it is stated that "When a child, due to their care situation or behavior, has a particular need for assistance, the child welfare service shall offer and implement voluntary support

measures for the child and parents". The law does not specify who needs this assistance. The term "particular" implies that the child has a need for help that other children of the same age do not have. Therefore, it is the task of the professional to define what they consider to be beyond what is considered normal (Bunkhold & Sandbæk, 2013, p. 175).

The task of child welfare can therefore be understood as defining norms and deviations of the clients (Marthinsen 2003, 89). This authority is visible and legitimized through legal frameworks (Garsjø 2007, p. 276). Caseworkers, therefore, have power in light of their professional position and as representatives of the public support apparatus. One of the most significant characteristics of the encounter between the client and the professional is this structurally determined inequality (Skau 2012, p. 38).

Structural inequality means an inherent imbalance in the helper-client relationship. On the one hand, the caseworkers' authority derives from a complex foundation that includes economic, cultural, ideological, and legal dimensions. On the other hand, the client has statutory rights intended to safeguard their interests. Although these rights provide some leverage for the client, they do not fully correct the inherent power differential between the client and the helper (Skau 2003, p. 61-63). The power often only exists as an opportunity, but the opportunity itself, and the parties' knowledge of it, often results in the helper getting it the way it wants (Skau 2003, p. 34).

Consequently, it is important that the decisions taken by the child welfare services have legitimacy and correspond to the prevailing societal values and norms for the structural inequality to be considered acceptable. Child welfare education is, therefore, a normative education that encompasses specific values. These values are related to the culture and the worldview that society emphasizes. Accordingly, child welfare becomes representative of a culture where certain factors are prioritized over others. Therefore, the caseworker can be seen as the custodian of the values and norms considered to be normal (Rugkåsa, 2008, p. 91).

2.4.1 Normality

What individuals perceive as normal depends on the context in which the individual lives, their culture, and the norms and rules that apply in society (Aamodt, 2011, p. 109). Consequently, there exist various normative cultures that encompass both written and unwritten values and rules in every society. These normative cultures are intricately intertwined with factors such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, age, place of residence, religious beliefs, and gender (Christiansen and Kojan 2023, p. 23).

In Norwegian society, independence achieved through self-sufficiency in education, employment, health, and finances is highly valued (Eide, 2020, p. 164). The ideal image of parenthood is influenced by this and can be described as "self-sustaining," "stable relationships," "organizationally proficient," and "competent caregivers." These descriptions are not neutral but emphasize qualities that not all social classes have the prerequisites to live up to (Egelund, 1997, p. 199). Simultaneously, what constitutes the correct norm for child-rearing is rarely explicitly formulated within the child welfare system. However, it is still used as an instrument to presuppose what is seen differently. Therefore, it is only when something deviates from the norm that the concept of "normal" becomes visible (Egelund, 1997, p. 252-253).

2.4.2 The deviant

The concept of the abnormal can emerge when two different cultures intersect. In the context of child welfare, this concerns the responsibility of professionals to ensure children's health, development, and access to necessary care. It is the norms and interpretations guiding our actions that characterize this multicultural dynamic (Lindboe, 2008, p. 179). When interacting with clients, cultures may collide if the client does not adhere to the values that professionals deem essential for adequate care. Consequently, the client is perceived as deviating from the cultural standards established within the child-rearing framework, leading child welfare to intervene in an effort to guide families toward this presumed ideal norm for parenting (Lindboe, 2008, p. 181). Conversely, the more closely a family aligns with the societal norm in their approach to child-rearing, the more challenging it becomes to employ coercive measures aimed at altering their behavior (Marthinsen, 2003, p. 36).

2.5 Symbolic power

The caseworker can use the power to highlight certain aspects over others (Reichelt 2006, p. 314). For example, child welfare interventions may be aimed at assisting parents in raising their children in an acceptable manner. Conversely, the client may seek help in finding housing, employment, or additional financial resources (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003, p. 19). The professional power can therefore be said to lie in the possibility of defining the client's reality based on the professional's perspective, as opposed to considering the client's subjective experience (Skytte 2008, p. 203). According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, such manifestation of power may be regarded as a form of symbolic power. The symbolic power lies in the ability to construct and shape reality, rooted in the case workers' legitimacy. The symbolic power can, therefore, be associated with the case workers' informal power to define. Symbolic power is an invisible form of power. The client may be unaware that he is exposed to it, and at the same time, the helper can be unaware that they are exercising it (Bourdieu 1996, p. 38-45).

The probability of being able to exercise symbolic power is closely intertwined with the possession of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital. These forms of capital emphasize that individuals' life circumstances and opportunities are not accidental but are shaped by inheritance, history, and recurring patterns over time (Esmark 2006, p. 89). The fewer resources the client has, the greater the chance that this power will be exercised against them (Skau 2012, p. 38).

Cultural capital means that some individuals accumulate cultural resources over time that others may not have access to (Esmark 2006, p. 87). There are three types of cultural capital: embodied, institutionalized, and objectified(Esmark 2006, p. 89). Embodied cultural capital refers to the internalization of cultural dispositions that manifest in behavior and expression, also called habitus. Institutionalized cultural capital, in turn, depends on levels of education, with higher education resulting in greater cultural capital (Esmark 2006, p. 90). Finally, objectified cultural capital includes elements such as books, art, and objects considered valuable in society (Esmark 2006, p. 91).

All of Bourdieu's forms of capital can be viewed through the lens of symbolic capital. To be considered symbolic capital, these attributes must not only be perceived as valuable by others but also possess an element of exclusivity (Prieur 2006, p. 65). For instance, an academic way of speaking would no longer be exclusive or considered symbolic capital if everyone had this way of speaking.

2.5.1 Habitus

The manner in which a client responds to the exercise of symbolic power is linked to their habitus (Prieur 2006, p. 52). The term habitus denotes a system of dispositions that underlies an individual's actions (Esmark 2006, p. 89). The dispositions are knowledge that sits in the body through experiences, memories, ways of thinking and moving. The habitus is unconscious to the extent that the individual may not always be aware of or understand their actions (Aamodt 2005, p. 10, 50).

Different social classes tend to develop distinct forms of habitus, with these dispositions becoming evident through manners, language usage, and clothing. Moreover, the habitus can unveil an individual's socio-environmental origins and contribute to their accumulation of cultural capital (Helgeland 2008, p. 174). Some habitus can be associated with lower social status, while others might be considered more valuable. Evaluations of one's own habitus and that of others are linked to social class (Aamodt 2011, p. 142).

2.6 Human complexity and simplification

How an individual relates to and whether decisions are influenced by the other's capital position and habitus also involves human complexity driven by cognitive and relational factors. As articulated by Kahneman (2013), individuals employ two distinct cognitive systems when confronted with complex information. When using System 1, rapid, often subconscious, and stereotypical decisions, commonly referred to as heuristics, are employed (Christiansen and Kojan 2023, p. 27).

One manifestation of heuristic thinking is the "what we see is all there is" principle. This implies that decisions are founded upon observable phenomena, as individuals lack access to information that lies beyond their immediate perception. Caseworkers within the child welfare service operate within a domain where decisions necessitate expeditious handling due to statutory timelines. Moreover, the information available to them may be incomplete. When the heuristic of "what we see is all there is" is employed, there exists a risk of overemphasizing observed interactions between children and parents. The concealed information may possess relevance and influence the decision-making process, but it remains unobservable and thus impossible to form judgments upon. While the observed interactions may be correct, there is also a risk that the decisions are based on wrong perceptions (Christiansen and Kojan 2023, p. 27).

2.6.1 Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is another form of heuristic, where individuals faced with a given situation quickly formulate an explanation and stick to this explanation, even when new information may suggest alternative interpretations (Spratt et al. 2015). Instead, new information is unconsciously adapted to match the initially constructed assessment. Confirmation bias is particularly problematic in child welfare services, as it can lead to a selective search for evidence that supports preconceived suspicions (Øverbye 2023, p. 70).

2.6.2 Categorization

Confirmation bias can also be intertwined with informal heuristics, where individuals categorize situations based on previous encounters with similar scenarios and act accordingly. The use of the categories can save us time and can be a way of systematizing the world (Skytte 2008,16). An individual's identity has many dimensions and can vary depending on whether one looks at the person's medical history, childhood history, work history, etc. Child welfare educators do not have the capacity to consider all aspects of a person, which may make it necessary to categorize the individual and their issues (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003, p. 16).

Social work has a tradition of focusing on individual characteristics rather than the life conditions of the individuals, as this is beyond their control. When caseworkers are determining a family's need for assistance, they must consider the child welfare's ability to provide help, where the client's perception of the situation may become less important. Therefore, the child welfare's description of the client takes precedence over the client's self-description and their situation. In this way, it becomes important for the caseworker to look for characteristics in the family that indicate they are in need of help. This categorization process is not neutral but is associated with what does not conform to societal norms (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003, p. 15-19).

These categories become problematic if the case worker assumes the person is the category (Eide 2020, p. 80-81). There is a tendency for us humans to explain behavior situationally when it comes to individuals we can identify with. Conversely, when meeting individuals we perceive to belong to another category than ourselves we attribute the same to their behavior. As a consequence, an ethnic Norwegian, middle-aged female social worker may more often interpret situations for individuals of different ethnicities as products of cultural factors, rationalize a teenager's behavior based on their age, and attribute a man's behavior to his gender (Skytte, 2019, p. 17). This is not necessarily incorrect but can give rise to stereotypes.

2.6.3 Stereotyping

Stereotypes are another form of mental shortcuts that can be seen as informal heuristics. Stereotypes involve preconceived notions about social groups and their characteristic features. In contexts where quick decisions are essential due to time constraints or limited information, stereotyping can serve as a practical tool. However, a significant challenge arises when these stereotypes do not accurately reflect the reality of the social group. For instance, an employer may wrongly assume that a particular ethnic group has fewer skills and qualifications, leading to discriminatory employment practices that adversely affect job seekers from that group, regardless of their qualifications. If the jobseeker interprets that

the decision has been made based on discrimination, it could lead to self-fulfilling prophecies by not wanting to improve their qualifications (Øverbye 2023, p. 73).

It is essential to acknowledge that all the various heuristics mentioned above often play together and mutually reinforce the impression that the decision taken is rational, well-considered, and correct (Øverbye 2023, p. 73).

Within the framework of human decision-making, System 2 represents a more conscious, comprehensive, critical, and analytical approach. Nevertheless, an excessive reliance on System 2 can lead to decision refusal, while an overemphasis on System 1 can result in misjudgments. In practice, individuals often use both systems in a complementary way (Christiansen and Kojan 2023, p. 27).

2.6.4 The relational aspect

The second aspect of human complexity is affected by the relational aspect. The child welfare service receives most information through interaction with parents and children, often accompanied by prior knowledge of the family. Studies show that caseworkers have already made up their minds about whether or not to trust the family when they meet for the first time. Information that corresponds with the case worker's initial assessment tends to stick, while information that differs from the original attitude may be overlooked or minimized (Christiansen and Kojan 2023, p. 29).

2.7 Summary

The theoretical framework presented illuminates the intricate nature of caseworkers' engagement with families facing complex circumstances. The concepts of habitus, cultural capital and symbolic power illustrates how social class may influence the child welfare system's norms and values when these descisions are to be made. The rapid decisions the case worker has to take within statutory deadlines within these complex situations, emphasize the potential for biases and simplifications in understanding the intricate family situations. The teoretical framework presented, therefore serve as a foundation to analyse

how social workers may construct meaning of encounters with families from diverse social class backgrounds.

CHAPTER 3 **METHOD**

This chapter begins with an account of hermeneutics, thereby establishing the epistemological foundation as the basic framework for this thesis. Then, the qualitative research method of vignettes as a foundation for the interviews will be introduced. Followed by, a sketch of the thematic analysis approach and a discussion about whether the project has validity, reliability, and transferability for the investigated phenomenon. Finally, relevant ethical considerations for this research project will be presented.

3.1 Epistemological Foundation

Epistemologically, social science can be divided into two main directions: positivism and hermeneutics. Positivism, with its roots entrenched in natural science, claims that there is an objective reality, independent of people's perception of it (Moses & Knutsen, 2019, pp. 8-9). Hermeneutics can be seen as a counterpart to the positivistic tradition. Proponents of this tradition argue that the study of physical objects and socially created phenomena are not comparable, as social scientists study living objects that do not exist only as physical, tangible objects (Jacobsen 2022, pp. 25-26). A hermeneutic approach emphasizes that there is not one singular truth but that phenomena can be interpreted and understood in multiple ways and at various levels. In other words, attention is directed towards the perception of reality as opposed to objective reality itself. Within this framework, the primary focus is on comprehending how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct their world (Johannessen et al., 2021, p. 29-31).

In this thesis, the purpose is not to uncover something that can be described and defined as objective truth. Rather, I explore the meaning-making of the caseworker to see how social class affects their interpretation. Hence, the foundation of this thesis is rooted in the hermeneutical tradition, where the aim is to gain insight into agents´ interpretations and meaning-making rather than to casually explain a phenomenon.

In accordance with hermeneutic principles, the process of meaning construction is dependent on our historical background and the prevailing social and cultural environment. At the same time, it suggests that such constructions are not strictly deterministic or limited by these contextual factors. The person interpreting the material plays an active role in this process of meaning construction, as the material can look different, depending on the person's understanding of it (Thomassen 2020, p. 173). Those who are being studied in this thesis interpret and assign meaning to their actions, interactions, and the world around them based on their own cultural and social perspectives. The researcher can try to analyze and interpret the interpretations made by the individuals by examining the context, cultural norms, and the underlying social structures that influence the actions and meanings of the participants. This double interpretation, the one made by the informant, and the one made by the researcher, is called double hermeneutics (Jenssen 2021, p. 99-101)

In this thesis, I have interpreted the informant's understanding of a phenomenon, which indicates the presence of a double hermeneutic. The purpose of interpreting the narratives from the informants was to uncover the attitudes, reflections, and justifications that underlie their statements. Consequently, it is essential to contextualize the interpretation of the data material within the framework of my own preconceptions. I have personally worked in the child welfare field for eight years, which I consider a valuable asset for comprehending the respondents. However, this can also be a limitation in the sense that it may have shaped my preconceptions, causing me to take certain things for granted. Consequently, I have endeavored to be reflective about this when conducting the study.

3.2 Choice of research design

Methodology can be characterized as the systematic approach used to achieve a research objective. It is common to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative methods. Within quantitative methodology, theories are tested by examining the relationships between different measurable variables, in order to analyze them through statistical procedures. In contrast, the qualitative methodology involves an exploration of the interpretations and meanings individuals or groups attribute to a particular social problem (Creswell & Creswell

2023, p. 5). Given that the initial research question in this thesis revolved around comprehending a phenomenon within the realm of individuals' social reality, rather than seeking statistical relationships, it was rooted in the qualitative method. Moreover, this research orients towards an investigation of how meaning-making about specific social groups can affect action, which made vignette studies a suitable research design as a framework for the interviews (Egelund 2010, p. 128).

In this approach, respondents are presented with short, fictional stories to which they can reflect and respond to (Finch 1987, p. 105). Vignettes can be used as a snapshot to bring out a single scenario, or they can be used as a series of interconnected narratives to give a fuller picture (Jenkins 2020, p. 1). The underlying objective is to extract normative aspects of social phenomena in addition to individual judgments, attitudes, values, and mindsets (Grinde 2004, p. 23).

One way to use the vignette method is through factor research. This survey involves respondents being presented with fictional vignettes through a questionnaire. The participants must then answer the vignettes using a pre-designed scale or choose answer options prepared by the researcher in advance (Jenkins 2020, p. 4). This makes it possible to examine the impact of one variable in relation to another, offering insights into how this variable influences respondents' decision-making (Egelund, 2010, p. 134). An example of this is a Danish study that sent out fictitious job applications to employers to investigate how refugee background and country of origin affected the recruitment process. The researchers found that employers to a lesser extent hired people with refugee backgrounds and that this particularly applied to refugees from Ethiopia (Ravn and Bredgaard 2021).

Another way to use the vignette method is through in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. By employing vignettes, researchers can pose open-ended inquiries to participants, such as: "What do you think about this case?", "What makes you think the way you do?" or "What do you think will happen next?". In this way, the approach allows the participants to answer the vignettes within their own perceptions. Data collection therefore takes place through the interaction between the researcher and the respondent

about the presented topic (Jenkins 2020, p. 9). The vignettes in qualitative data collection are often presented through different stages where the story is further developed at each stage. Respondents can then be asked questions for each stage in the vignette (Jenkins 2020, p. 9). It is recommended not to use more than four vignettes, where each can have three development stories (Finch 1987, p.109).

A notable advantage of the vignette method is its ability to capture empirical data related to behaviors that are challenging to observe directly, such as illicit drug use, cases of sexual assault, or acts of violence. Through vignettes, insight into the respondents' thoughts, reflections, and behavior around sensitive issues can be retrieved from the fictional narratives without the need for personal disclosure (Jenkins, 2020, p. 2).

Additionally, the vignette method is shown to be particularly suitable for comparing social workers' assessments and choice of measures in the same case or to compare perceptions from different parts of the population or other countries (Grinde 2004, p. 23). An example of this is the study "Nordic Child Welfare" by Turid Vogt Grinde (2004), where vignettes were employed to compare assessments of interventions and coercion in child welfare cases in Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. In this study, participants were required to provide written responses detailing their evaluations for each individual vignette. The study revealed that the vignettes, in terms of their perceived severity and choice of interventions, exhibited variations across the different countries.

The vignette method is intended to describe realistic stories where the aim is for the respondent to elicit answers similar to scenarios in the real world. The credibility of vignettes is crucial to prevent the respondents from giving "false" answers. A risk with the vignette method is that the respondents give answers they assume are most socially or politically correct. This can lead them to respond to what they think should happen instead of what they believe will happen which could potentially create false interpretations in the study (Jenkins 2020, p. 7).

Furthermore, the risk of respondent fatigue should be acknowledged, whereby excessive exposure to repetitive fictitious narratives may prompt less thoughtful responses. To mitigate this risk, employing fewer vignettes, reducing extraneous details, and limiting response options could be an option (Jenkins, 2020, p. 8). In addition, researchers must be aware of the possibility of respondents giving "wrong" responses if the vignette scenario deviates from their preconceived expectations (Jenkins, 2020, p. 9).

In light of the objective to investigate how the client's social class affects the meaning-making and action of the social worker, this study involved two versions of three developing vignettes. These vignettes maintained identical narratives and developmental trajectories, differing only in the child's name and the parent's occupation. One version portrayed a family of high socio-economic standing, while the other depicted a family of lower socio-economic background. The boys' names were chosen based on the perspective that many of the low-class families in child welfare come from minority backgrounds. In the study, three respondents were allocated the case of Abdi, while another three were assigned the case of Lars. Consequently, not all respondents received the same case.

The rationale behind the design of the vignettes was to investigate potential differences in the meaning-making of the families and how it affected the caseworkers' actions. In this way, the vignettes serve as a mechanism to elicit the perspectives of the participants concerning the study's overarching objectives.

3.2.1 Presentation of the vignettes

The vignettes were sent to the respondents in advance so that they could prepare for the interview. In addition, respondents were asked to choose answer options for the vignettes, which became the topic of discussion during the interviews. The design of the vignettes was crafted to be vague, to avoid any natural "right" or "correct" answer. This approach was chosen so the respondents had more room to reflect on what they would do in a similar situation.

The end result of the vignettes was therefore designed like this:

First vignette:

Lars/Abdi is 4 years old and attends daycare. The educational leader has contacted child protective services as they perceive Lars/Abdi as restless. He often becomes very angry, both towards other children and the staff. When he hurts himself or becomes upset, he refuses comfort and often runs away. Since his father works long hours as a doctor in the emergency room/the father has long days as a cleaning worker, the boy is usually picked up by his mother. His mother does not recognize the descriptions of the boy and says that he is not particularly angry at home.

The question asked related to the vignette was: *Based on the information provided above, do you believe there is a problem that child protective services should address?* The informants could choose between these answer options: A) Based on the information above, there is no need for an investigation or action by child protective services at this time, B) To determine whether a child protective case should be opened, I need more information, C) Child protective services must initiate an investigation as there are grounds for intervention and D) It is urgent to initiate intervention measures.

The second vignette:

The school has submitted a concern report about Lars/Abdi, who is 11 years old. Lars /Abdi has difficulties sitting still and frequently enters and exits the classroom. He often gets into conflicts with other students and has been involved in two physical fights at school in the past month. He shows no remorse after these conflicts and refuses to apologize. He also becomes aggressive when boundaries are set by adults. The school describes both parents as resourceful/in the version about Abdi the reference to resourceful has been removed, and highly involved in the boy's education. The contact teacher feels that the parents take the boy's behavior at

school seriously but is concerned because Lars/Abdi has told a counselor that his father hits him when he gets angry.

The question asked related to the vignette was: Based on the information provided above, do you believe there is a problem that child protective services should address? The informants could choose between these answer options: A) Based on the information above, there is no need for an investigation or action by child protective services at this time, B) To determine whether a child protective case should be opened, I need more information, C) Child protective services must initiate an investigation as there are grounds for intervention and D) It is urgent to initiate intervention measures.

The third vignette:

In the last vignette, the case has progressed to the parents having a conversation with a case worker at the child protection service and proceeds as follows: Lars'/Abdi's parents express surprise that the school has submitted a concern report. When confronted with what the boy has said, the father acknowledges an incident where he firmly grabbed Lars'/Abdi's arm but denies ever hitting him. The parents mention that Lars/Abdi is a boy who seeks attention and suggests that this might be the reason he said something like that. The mother says she has been working on a bigger case lately, which has taken up a lot of her time/*The mother says she has taken on a lot of extra shifts lately* and has therefore been very busy. She now realizes the need to be more closely involved with the school, as she is uncertain about the level of support the boy has received given recent events.

The question asked related to the vignette was: Based on the available information, what do you believe is the appropriate course of action for child protective services in this case? The informants could choose between these answer options:
A) Implement support measures within the home. If so, what measures?, B) Place Lars outside of the home as a supportive measure, C) Initiate a custody transfer case (through forced intervention) and D) Close the case.

3.2.2 Interviews

The vignettes were further followed up with interviews where the conversation revolved around the fictional stories. Two predominant formats exist in the domain of qualitative interviews: semi-structured and unstructured. Unstructured interviews have similarities to a "normal" conversation where questions and answers have a natural rhythm. Semi-structured interviews include predetermined topics, often guided by an interview script or guide (Bryman et al. 2021, p. 425-426).

In the context of this research work, the interviews were anchored in the vignettes and, therefore, followed a semi-structured format. Complementing the vignettes, an interview guide was prepared to follow up on other topics.

3.2.3 Recruitment and selection:

Given the central focus of this thesis on case workers within the child welfare service, it was essential to engage with individuals who held this role. The recruitment process was guided by a strategic selection methodology, a common approach in qualitative studies that seeks to match the informant's characteristics or qualifications to the theoretical perspective. The aim is to ensure that suitable informants are recruited (Sharan & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96).

An overview of various child welfare services throughout Norway was prepared to start this process. Then 1-3 child welfare services were selected from each county, culminating in a list of 38 child welfare services. Initial contact was established via e-mail with the child welfare workers in 18 child welfare services. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of these outreach efforts went unanswered, and those who did respond either declined to participate or delegated responsibility to caseworkers, with subsequent silence. It is relevant to note that caseworkers in child welfare are recognized for their demanding workloads, often with limited time for supplementary obligations, which may explain the limited response. Consequently, a strategic shift was necessary, leading to the use of the snowball sampling method.

In accordance with this revised strategy, contacts were made to acquaintances who were employed in child welfare and asked if they could put me in touch with people who worked as caseworkers. In this way, acquaintances facilitated connections with several potential participants. It is recognized that a challenge in using the snowball sampling method lies in the potential to collect respondents from a limited network, potentially compromising the diversity of the study (Thagaard 2013, p. 54). Nevertheless, the first three people who were contacted came from child welfare services located in different parts of Norway. These in turn put me in contact with people in other child welfare services. The original intention was to engage ten respondents, a scope that was later revised to include six informants during the course of the study.

3.3 Thematic analysis

Within the context of qualitative data analysis, the main focus is on the examination of textual content. The process of analysis involves noticing different patterns, capturing the essence, and creating meaning for what has been said (Saldaña 2020, p. 881). Notably, this is a dynamic process where you go back and forth through the various data collected (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 86). The analytical approach used in this study is thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a methodological process designed to uncover noteworthy aspects within a given data set. Its aim lies in identifying and elucidating themes (Maguire & Delahunt 2007, 3353). These themes can be regarded as the uncovering of patterns that manifest through the data set in addition to elements that are of particular interest to the researcher in the context of the research project (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82). Virginia Braun and Veronica Clarke (2006 p. 87) have outlined a structured six-phase guide for carrying out a thematic analysis. The first phase consists of getting to know the data.

3.3.1 Transcription

The beginning of this phase was initiated when the process of transcribing the interviews started. Transcription, as used in qualitative research, turns sound into text, making it possible to code and analyze interviews (Poland 2002, p. 628). In this study, the transcription

was performed using the f4transcript software program. This transcription program provides a natural turn-taking where 'A' represents the interviewer and 'B' is the informant. In addition, the program allows adjustments such as slowing down, pausing, and rewinding, while also automatically time-stamping sentences. This makes it easier to return to an exact point in the audio file if necessary. Although the program can help to make the transcription process more efficient, it is still done manually.

Transcription also comes with some challenges. One such challenge concerns the acquisition of sound with low quality, which makes the content inaudible. Nevertheless, strategies can be adopted to reduce this problem. Measures include choosing a noise-free environment, conducting audio recorder tests before the interview, and placing the recording device close to the participant, all of which contribute to achieving high-quality audio recordings (Poland 2002, p. 638). In the current study, interviews were conducted via Zoom, with equipment testing conducted prior to the interviews, while the audio recorder was placed near the computer. Consequently, the resulting audio files were of good quality, making it easy to hear what was said when transcribing. This enabled the possibility for an accurate transcription.

This also poses an additional challenge as nuances of meaning can occasionally be lost in the translation from sound to text. The transcriber is responsible for the choices made, which may include decisions about the placement of punctuation, sentence structure, and the omission or change of certain elements (Tolgensbakk 2020, 125). The transcriber's interpretation can influence these choices and potentially influence or even change the content of the interview (Poland, 2002, p. 632).

In carrying out the transcription, I tried to maintain a verbatim representation of the participant's utterances, even if they contained grammatical errors. Pauses in the transcription were marked through three dots, and instances of laughter, either from the participant or myself, were put in parentheses. However, it is important to emphasize that transcribing verbatim is only one facet of transcription, the broader challenge lies in capturing the mood and intonation with which the words were articulated. An advantage of

this phase was that I had transcribed the interview myself and was quite familiar with the data material, which minimized the risk of misunderstanding the context of what was said (Poland 2002, p. 640).

3.3.2 Coding

After becoming familiar with the data set, the research process moved to its second phase, generating initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 88). These codes, which can include a single word, phrases, or even long sentences, are intended to try to capture the essence of what is being said (Saldaña, 2020, p. 882). Adopting an inductive approach, I attempted to capture what I found interesting about the research question and then extract codes from this (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86).

Given the focus of the research investigation on the influence of socio-economic background on decision-making in child welfare, I directed my coding efforts towards elements relevant to this thematic context. After going through the transcript repeatedly, editing and deleting, I was left with a selection of codes that, in my judgment, encapsulated the core of my research inquiry.

3.3.3 Categorization

After coding the transcript, the analytical process moved to the stage of identifying recurring patterns and attempting to organize them. This central process, which involves aggregating related codes, is called categorization (Saldaña, 2020, p. 885). This is the third phase of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89). The codes were written on paper, collected, and organized, where finally, three categories emerged that I considered relevant. Under some of the categories, there were few codes, nor were they relevant to the research question. I, therefore, ended up deleting some and adding others. In this phase, I engaged in the fourth phase of thematic analysis, which involves reviewing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 91).

The principal categories that emerged from this systematic categorization process included: "Making sense of the families," "The caseworkers' perception of self," and "The impact of the meaning-makings on the case workers action". Within these broad categories, I delineated further subcategories. The category "Making sense of the families" was, for the sake of simplicity, divided into meaning-making by families from low and high classes. "Individualization of living conditions", "Ethnicity as a Perceptual Factor", "Scared, motivated and willing" and the "The recognizable client" were placed under low-class families. While "the independent identity", "The identity-braking system" and "The unrecognizable client" were placed under high-class families. Within the domain "The caseworkers' perception of self" the subcategories included "The Caseworker as a Figure of Authority" and "The uncertain and careful caseworker". Conversely, the category "The impact of the meaning-makings on the case workers action" was subcategorized into "The caseworker defining the situation" and "the client defining the situation". The final phase of the thematic analysis involves making a report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93). This thesis stands as the result of this analytical process.

3.4 Validity, reliability, and transferability

Within social science research, three central criteria have emerged to measure empirical research. These criteria include reliability, transferability, and validity, each of which contributes distinct dimensions to the assessment of research integrity and quality. Reliability refers to whether a replication of the study under identical contextual conditions would yield similar results. Transferability refers to whether the design used was clearly presented, who was involved, and how data was collected and analyzed (Bryman 2021, p. 40). Finally, validity is about the extent to which the method and the findings give a correct picture of the phenomena being investigated (Jacobsen 2022, p. 240).

Within the framework of validity, assessments in relation to whether suitable sources are obtained, whether they provide reliable information when the data were collected, and how the information was obtained, are central. A challenge in this research project was to obtain a sufficient sample of respondents from the child welfare services. Despite this challenge, six respondents were interviewed, drawn from different child welfare services. All respondents

had worked with families of both high and low socio-economic status, which I considered an advantage in light of them giving reliable information. However, since vignettes are hypothetical stories, the respondents will not necessarily give authentic answers, which can result in low validity. In this research project, questions were added about what the informants usually did in similar cases, in order to minimize this weakening validity (Egelund 2010, p. 144).

In one version of the vignettes, respondents are presented with a child with a non-ethnically Norwegian name. The boy's name were grounded in existing research indicating that many families from lower socio-economic strata within the child welfare system have minority backgrounds. Simultaneously, highlighting immigrant status may have influenced the social worker's interpretation. The choice of the boy's name can therefore be a source of error, posing as a potential threat to the validity of the study.

In the evaluation of the research studies' reliability, it is examined whether there are features of the research that may have influenced the final result. Such factors may include that the interview process itself affects the participants, that the context is unusual, that the interview is biased, that the interview questions are perceived as surprising, or that the recorded data is inaccurate. To mitigate these concerns in this study, the vignettes were sent out to the informants in advance to prevent any elements of surprise during the interviews. An audio recorder was used during the interviews, allowing an accurate conversation reproduction.

In the analytical phase, an approach was adopted where dominant respondent perspectives were emphasized, while individual statements were also highlighted to illuminate several facets of the research question. Admittedly, there will always be alternative viewpoints that others would attach more importance to, in addition to the fact that my selection may be shaped by my preconceptions. At the same time, the themes and categorizations are, as I see them, relevant to the problem and can provide a reasonable basis for the mechanisms behind the meaning-making an action toward the clients.

Regarding transferability, an important point is that the more units one investigates, the more likely it can be generalized to another context (Jacobsen 2022, 256). The limited sample size of six informants in the current study may create challenges for transferability. However, it is important to emphasize that transferability is not solely dependent on sample size, but also depends on the theoretical underpinnings and previous empirical foundations that underline the research findings (Jacobsen, 2022, p. 256). In this regard, this study draws strength from its adaptation to existing literature and established theoretical frameworks. At the same time there is little international research on families from higher classes in child welfare which may weaken the findings' transferability.

3.5 Ethical considerations in research

In the context of research, it is important to follow certain ethical principles. Firstly, there is a mandatory reporting requirement for projects involving the processing of personal data electronically in Norway. Secondly, there is a demand for informed and voluntary consent and thirdly, it is the researchers' duty to guarantee the confidentiality of their informants (Dalen 2011, p. 100).

In light of these ethical principles, this project underwent a formal notification to the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD), accompanied by a project description, a delimitation of methodological choices, and a plan to safeguard the informants' confidentiality. After approval from NSD, an introductory letter was sent to the relevant informants. This letter explained the project's aim, methodological choice, and the intended way of presenting the results. The introductory letter also informed them that participation was voluntary, explained how the study would handle their personal information, what would happen to it after the project was completed, and outlined their rights. Informants were asked to provide written consent via email. The same information in the introductory letter was verbally communicated before the interviews commenced.

In order to ensure respondent confidentiality, it was communicated to the participants that access to audio recordings would only be limited to the researcher and the appointed

supervisor. To further ensure anonymity, personal identifiers such as name, gender, contact details, and workplace affiliations were replaced with codes. In addition, audio recordings were deleted after the completion of the transcription process. In this thesis, participant identities have been anonymized through the deliberate omission of information that could lead to the identification of individual respondents.

CHAPTER 4 **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the study's findings and the discussion of these, organized into the categories that emerged through thematic analysis: "Making sense of the families," "The caseworkers' perception of self," and "The impact of the meaning-makings on the case workers action".

4.1 Making sense of the families

The child welfare service is tasked with navigating the complexity of various family circumstances, challenges, and needs. This must be done within established timeframes and legal frameworks in a complex and ambiguous context. Therefore, it is natural for the caseworker to categorize clients to bring order, thereby rendering the context more comprehensible and manageable. This categorization process also became evident in the caseworkers meaning-making of the families.

4.1.1 Making sense of the low-class families

4.1.2 Individualization of living conditions

In the examination of interview data, an observation emerged, wherein the respondents' construction of meaning regarding low-class families was predominantly linked to individual attributes, notably their inadequacies. Within this contextual framework, the socio-economic circumstances of these families assumed a central role, with the respondents

establishing a connection between unfavorable living conditions and weakened parenting skills.

> *"What it does to, for example, your caregiving ability or your capacity for care, to keep thinking about 'can I afford this, can I afford that.'"*

> *"Having financial difficulties often affects parenting skills, you know."*

> *"Because you know, if you don't have enough money for your family… well… you can actually become unwell because of it, and then it's understandable that you can't provide good care."*

Prior research has established a substantial foundation for the correlation between poverty and the risk of child maltreatment (Pelton 2014, Drake and Zuravin 1998, Lagerberg & Sundelin 2000, Freysteinsdottir 2007, Kvello 2011, Penn and Gough 2002, et al. 2009, Bunkholdt and Sandbæk 2013, et al.). It appears that the participants are reasoning in alignment with this research when they indicate a connection between limited finances, and parents' capacity to offer adequate care for their children.

Simultaneously, as the respondent acknowledge the connection between unfavorable living conditions and the challenges families face, financial considerations are not prominent in the respondents definition of the problem. The respondents highlighted cases where they had covered expenses for daycare or leisure activities, but the responsibility for addressing the family's financial difficulties rested according to the caseworkers, with NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration) and not the child welfare service.

> *"We can participate in meetings, we can connect them with the relevant parties, but it's not the child welfare service's responsibility to find housing. It's not the child welfare service's responsibility to ensure that the family has financial resources."*

Instead, rather than addressing poverty per se, substandard living conditions within child welfare families were attributed to a broader contextual framework. This framework took into account the geographical context and its potential significance. Notably, the presence of various substantial institutions in the area, including addiction treatment centers, psychiatric facilities, and correctional facilities, was suggested as potential contributing factors. The respondents also highlighted that poor living conditions rarely occurred alone, and could often be linked back to mental health

> "So, you know, when it comes to finances... well, it's all interconnected, everything. It's just one cow that's loose in a way [...]There are various reasons why people struggle financially, and it often ties back to mental health... so it's a part of a larger picture."

> "Here, we kind of have both addiction clinics, the prison, and psychiatric facilities, so we have many of these, um... 'heavy' institutions, and many who have been there choose to continue living in the area."

In this way, the participants in the study individualized the economic challenges by attributing them to factors such as unemployment, substance abuse, mental health issues, and criminal behavior. This resonates with prior research conducted by Egelund (1997), Andanæs (2004), and Juul (2004), which posits that the child welfare system tends to eschew a direct acknowledgment of poverty and instead tends to attribute it to characteristics of the individual. This phenomenon is not confined to child welfare systems; rather, it mirrors a more extensive societal perspective on poverty where poverty is seen as a result of personal choices or character flaws rather than structural issues (Sunesson 1981, Kristinsdottir 1991, Ericsson 1996, Egelund 1997, Vagli 2009, Hennum 2010, Kojan 2011, Berg et al. 2017).

4.1.3 Ethnicity as a Perceptual Factor

The respondents observed that low-class families were often described as having non-Norwegian origins while high-class families were predominantly of Norwegian descent. This

suggests that ethnicity is a prominent factor in how low-class families are constructed in the context of the child welfare system. The respondent acknowledges that this is not always the case, but at the same time, it usually is.

"It's easy to think of high-income families as Norwegian and low-income ones as not Norwegian... Often... Mostly it's like that... but not always."

4.1.4 Difficulties in understanding

The connection the case workers make between ethnicity and low-class families may be due to categorizing based on previous experiences with similar scenarios. However, while there may be correlations between ethnicity and economic status in some cases, it's essential to recognize that such generalizations based on ethnicity can be problematic and may perpetuate stereotypes or biases. Marianne Rugkåsa (2012, p. 78) states that depictions of minority ethnic women often rely on what contrasts with the majority and their deficiencies. This resonates with the findings in this analysis where language and understanding were presented as attributes lacking in minority ethnic low-class families, while they were considered "easy to explain" to Norwegian families.

"Like now, I have a case where the communication is difficult between the mother and the boy, but they are Norwegian. So it's easy for me to explain what I mean by that. But for a family where we either have to use an interpreter or they don't understand very well, it would have been very difficult for me to explain because I think it's difficult for them to think that they should communicate in a different way. And maybe especially for parents to understand that there are other ways to talk to their children"

The idea that language and understanding are often presented as attributes lacking in minority ethnic low-class families, while they are considered the opposite with Norwegian families, indicates a potential bias in how social workers and child welfare professionals perceive and approach these families. The respondent points out in the expert that it is challenging for these families to contemplate and grasp the possibility of alternative modes

of communication. In this manner, the respondent takes the role of the one who understands, in contrast to the minority ethnic family, which appears as unknowable. Additionally, inherent in this observation is the assertion that minority ethnic low-class families employ communication methods that deviate from the Norwegian norm for interacting with children. Consequently, the heuristic thinking where "what we see is all there is" is present as the minority ethnic low-class family is depicted as a homogeneous group, making the diversity within ethnic groups invisible.

One of the respondents highlights an illustrative case that underscores the divergent understandings held by the caseworker and the minority ethnic low-class family regarding a particular situation. The case pertains to a mother who, during an encounter with child protective services, expressed a desire for assistance with her children's school-related challenges. In contrast, child protective services deemed it necessary to assist the mother in improving her communication with her children. In pursuit of this dual objective, caseworkers sought to address the school-related issues, at the same time as they concurrently worked on the relationship between the mother and her children. A course of action the respondent perceived as not fully comprehended by the mother.

> *"I had a mother a few years ago where there were a lot of school challenges, but she was very clear that everything was fine at home... We had assistance there for a long, long time because we helped her with the school situation, while the counselor also tried to work towards the mother and the children [...] But I worked with that family for four years, and I still think that the mom didn't quite understand that the assistance was aimed at her".*

4.1.5 Several children

In addition to the mother's need for assistance with communication, child welfare services considered that the family's challenges were also linked to the fact that the mother was a single parent responsible for raising six children. The fact that the mother could not effectively convey the difficulty of her situation made it challenging for child protective services to implement assistance directed toward this aspect.

*"Everything was fine at home. (Laughter). We understood that it wasn't, she was
alone with six children. And when she can't express to us that it's tiring and difficult,
it's also challenging to implement measures addressing it."*

As Rugkåsa (2012, p. 78) suggests, categories and characteristics become relevant when they
contrast with the majority, where characteristics of the majority are often taken for granted
as they reflect the norm. The presented expert with the phrases "everything was fine at
home" and "we understood that it wasn't" highlighted this aspect. The low-class minority
ethnic mother with six children is seen as contrasting with the ethnic Norwegian families
with few children, which are perceived as the norm. This contrast creates an assumption
that the situation of the low-class minority ethnic mother with six children must be
challenging, even if she initially stated that "everything was fine at home." This illustrates
how the perspective of child welfare professionals is constructed by prevailing societal
norms which can influence the perception of what constitutes a challenging family situation.

4.1.6 Culturalization of neglect

In light of ethnicity as a perceptual factor, the respondents emphasized that the nature of
cases involving low-class families was associated with general parental neglect and that
violence was perceived as a consequence of cultural upbringing.

*"We observe a higher prevalence of substance addiction and mental health issues in
high-income families, whereas in low-income families, general neglect is more
pronounced. In high-income families, violence tends to be linked to drug and mental
health issues, whereas in low-income families, it is often attributed to cultural and
upbringing factors."*

Even though it may be accurate that family violence within a family has its roots in cultural
beliefs about child-rearing, the caseworker constructs a narrative suggesting this as the
predominant case, thereby establishing it as a perceived truth. The risk inherent in this
approach is that the caseworkers' meaning-making of low-class minority families, results in

overlooking other contributing factors to the violence. This resonates with the study of Aadnanes (2017) who observed that in cases involving high-class majority-ethnic families, abusive behavior tends to be attributed to substance abuse or mental health issues. However, in cases involving minority families, violence is frequently contextualized within cultural terms. As a consequence, this cultural framing of violence has the potential to divert attention away from the actual reason for the violence, potentially resulting in the family receiving inadequate support.

4.1.7 Scared, motivated and willing

A pervasive theme that emerged among the respondents was that minority families from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often consented to the offered help, out of fear of the potential consequences of refusal. Therefore, these families did not necessarily agree that they had an inherent need for help, but were originating from regions where challenging the authority of the state could lead to substantial consequences. Consequently, accepting assistance became a means of appeasing the child welfare workers rather than an indication of the families genuinely perceiving the necessity for such help.

> " There is perhaps more fear…and they feel that they have to please us in such a way that we don't... Because they may think that we can take their children like that (snaps fingers)"

> " Sometimes I feel that when I talk to low-income families, perhaps especially families who don't speak Norwegian very well or come from another culture where the state has a strong influence, it's a bit like they say yes because they think they have to. Not because they deep down think they need it"

At the same time, the low-class clients are also characterized by the respondents as motivated and willing to receive assistance because they see themselves as needing it.

"We see that those who may have fewer resources, often have been more open to receiving help, and have wished and seen that if we accept this, maybe we can make things a little better. Sees the child's needs..."

"Some low-income families may feel that we're so far down anyway, so we might as well just accept it. Because we are having a hard time, everything else is hard"

The respondents underscored that clients exhibit a heightened awareness of their own situation and, by extension, their children's need for assistance, as evident in their expressions such as "maybe we can make things a little better", "sees the child's needs", "we're are so far down anyway" and "we are having a hard time". This finding contradicts the earlier depiction, where low-class minority families were characterized as possessing limited understanding and insight into their circumstances.

Consequently, it appears that the respondents perceive these families as motivated and willing to accept assistance when their perspectives align with the caseworkers' interpretation of the situation. In contrast, when there is a disparity in understanding, the respondents view these families as having limited insight. This suggests that the caseworkers' construction of meaning shifts depending on how aligned the clients' perception is with the caseworker's understanding of the situation.

4.1.8 The recognizable client

The elements of ethnicity, understanding, and family size reappear in their descriptions of Abdi's family. The respondents characterize the case as recognizable and similar to other cases they have dealt with. According to the respondents, these types of cases present significant challenges due to the parents' reluctance to self-reflection. Implicit in this is the suggestion, when the family's understanding of the situation is different from the perspective of child welfare.

"It's very recognizable, the case you've presented."

"It's quite recognizable. And these cases can be challenging to work in. It's difficult to bring about change, um... because the parents are not willing to look at themselves."

In the development of the caseworkers meaning-making of the family, the respondent further elaborates, stating, "there may be language difficulties" and "difficult to understand things." Additionally, the respondent highlights the presence of a mother striving to make ends meet and the existence of several siblings within the family.

"There can be language difficulties, right, It can be difficult to understand things, but it can also be the care situation.… It says here that his father works a lot, and then there are several siblings here. There is a mother who struggles to make ends meet.."

When it is noted that language difficulties may be a factor, the respondent adds significance to the situation by referencing the boy's name, thus emphasizing the relevance of ethnicity. Furthermore, the respondent supplements the available information by mentioning a mother grappling with financial challenges and the boy's multiple siblings. When encountering individuals who differ from ourselves, we have according to Skytte (2019, p. 17) a tendency to approach them with preconceived expectations rather than engaging with the person, leading to the formation of stereotypes about specific groups. The additional information attributed to Abdi's case can therefore be regarded as part of the respondent's meaning-making, which as seen is influenced by material circumstances, ethnicity, and a lack of mutual understanding.

4.2 Making sense of the high-class families

In contrast to low-class families, where the respondents' meaning-making was attributed to individual characteristics in the form of their deficiencies, it is primarily how high-class families perceive themselves and their ability to mobilize in resistance against the child welfare service that the case workers emphasize in the meaning-making of these families. One of these characteristics is their independence.

4.2.1 The independent identity

Child welfare workers experience that high-class families often refuse help and do not consider that they need it. The child welfare services are considered taboo and not something they could identify with. Typically, they wanted to solve their problems through alternative agencies, such as family welfare offices or psychologists. In contrast to low-class families, where the respondent noted respect for public institutions, the caseworkers emphasize that high-class families often consider their situation a private matter.

> *"It is perhaps also the case that many resourceful people in a way… want to sort it out by themselves, right. Go to the family office, go to BUP, and they want to sort of take charge of it in a completely different way."*

> *" It has seemed like it is a bit like.. perhaps taboo, to get help from the child protection service. They would prefer to follow up themselves. Private psychologists, for example, both for them and the child."*

> *"For them, it's private, and then they wont share it with us."*

In contrast to the low-class families, who could be fearful and offer little resistance, the respondents highlighted that high-status parents displayed significant resistance and seemed unafraid in their interactions with child welfare. This resistance manifested in their awareness of their rights, articulate expression, demands, and the ability to engage in formal and informal networks. In this way, the respondents described that high-class families had a high cultural capital.Consequently, it was perceived that these families challenged child protection differently, leading to more "noise" and resistance.

> *"I think that many well-educated, resourceful people are much more verbal, they have familiarized themselves with things, they have tried quite a few things, so it is a completely different way to work.... »*

> *"They are more concerned with their rights.. and that's nice, everyone should be concerned about that, but it's a bit like... sometimes a bit of unnecessary noise."*

"They might often have someone with them. Some resourceful grandparents or a resourceful friend, colleague who also contributes to, kind of... give us resistance."

4.2.2 The identity-breaking child system

Another characteristic highlighted by the respondents was how high-class families perceived child protective services as disrupting their identity. The respondents explain that high-class families often attempt to hide the involvement of child welfare services, as this could potentially affect the neighbors' and children's school perceptions of them.

"I particularly remember one case when I was working on an investigation. It was expressed by a quite resourceful family that they were concerned about what if the neighbors find out... they didn't want the teachers to know, as rumors may start circulating. They were afraid it would affect their status."

In the expert, the respondent highlights the client's status as the reason why the family wanted to hide the involvement of child protective services. In this way, class is brought to the fore as the family perceives themselves to have a higher status than those who typically come into contact with child protective services. One of the respondents highlighted that some high-class families have a simplistic view of the families involved in child welfare services, characterizing them as "children on the street". This portrait does not resonate with the image they have of themselves, which makes it challenging to be in contact with child welfare since it breaks deeply with their perceived identity. The respondent described in this way that high-class families considered themselves to have a different habitus than those typically in child protective services, and they viewed their habitus as superior.

"I experienced that, in a way, high-income families could, at times, stigmatize the child welfare service more. They could be very concerned that they were not a child welfare family and perhaps had a slightly nuanced picture of a child welfare families...And that it sort of belonged to a fantasy group in society. I would say the

way they described them... was almost a bit like children on the street.. So getting into the child welfare service was difficult because it broke so deeply with their identity."

A similar dynamic can be found in Margrete Aadnanes's (2017, p.342) study where she emphasizes that high-class families' had a need to hide their social problems because of the taboo it brought with it. The effect of this was that the children became more invisible and out of reach for the child welfare service.

4.2.3 Behavioral problems of the child.

In high-class families, the problems were intertwined with substance abuse and mental health, in addition to a greater incidence of behavioral difficulties among the children. The respondents also highlighted cases that were initially closed, could appear later as behavioral problems of the child. The caseworker explained that the behavioral problems most likely stemmed from the former poor interaction between the parents and the child, but it later appeared as if the child was difficult.

> *"It can be cases of violence and mental health, or that the child has a lot of behavioral difficulties."*

> *"Many behavioral issues in adolescents, which may be rooted in interaction difficulties from a very young age but manifest more as behavioral problems in adolescence."*

This finding resonates with previous research conducted by Bente Heggem Kojan (2010), where her study highlighted a pattern in which child welfare agencies more often targeted interventions aimed at addressing behavioral problems among children in high-class families, while in low-class families, the interventions were primarily aimed at parents.

4.2.4 The unrecognizable client

In contrast to the case of Abdi, respondents who were interviewed regarding Lars's family did not provide specific characteristics of the family. Instead, the prevailing description of the family is "that it could be about so many things." They attribute this vagueness to the need for additional information to be able to say more about the family.

"It can be quite a lot of different things."

"One forms some thoughts regarding children with that type of behavior, but one knows that it could be about so many things."

"I form a picture of the family. But .. we are probably very concerned with clarifying the messages more…You know.. It can be about so many things."

The respondents' descriptions of Abdi and Lars can be seen in the context of society's norms and values. Clients in the child welfare system typically have limited resources and little connection to the job market at the same time as societal ideals uphold contrasting values. When it comes to high-class families, the circumstances are different, as they are part of the societal majority concerning qualifications related to work, education, housing, and finances, which are highly valued in Norwegian society.

Historically, social work has functioned as a class-conscious project, where social workers have traditionally been tasked with helping economically disadvantaged and poor individuals (Aaslund, 2014). Although child welfare service in the modern landscape has a different purpose, the clients are still predominantly characterized by poverty and unfavorable living conditions. Consequently, these institutional archetypes remain recognizable since they stand out from the majority, enabling easy categorization based on observable characteristics (Jarvinen & Meyer, 2004, p. 11). In contrast, high-class families who do not fit the traditional archetype of families can lead to a vaguer or more nuanced perception.

The respondents' descriptions of Abdi and Lars can, therefore, be seen in the context of what Aadnanes (2017, p. 347) describes as the invisibility of the high-class family and the

hyper-visibility of the low-class family. Which according to her, does not benefit the children in terms of whether they are placed in either category.

4.2.5 Different interpretations of the families

It is clear from the findings that respondents attribute distinct connotations to low-class and high-class families, and these characteristics often exhibit contrasting features.
In cases with low-class families, the respondents' meaning-making was attributed to individual characteristics in the form of their deficiencies. In contrast, the high-class families were to a greater extent described in terms of how these families saw themselves and the characteristics they possessed in opposition to child welfare

Low-class families were described as less often of Norwegian ethnicity, often faced language difficulties, and had a higher number of children. The low-class families were therefore, described as having less cultural capital, which became evident through their habitus. The poor living conditions of these families were associated with mental health issues, substance abuse, and criminality. However, the primary reason for child welfare intervention was the general neglect of care within the family. In cases involving violence, cultural factors, and upbringing were attributed as contributing factors.

In contrast, high-class families were depicted as articulate, well-educated, typically ethnically Norwegian, assertive of their rights, and resourceful. The high-class families were therefore, described as having high cultural capital, which was evident through their habitus.   Their familial challenges were more closely associated with substance abuse, mental health issues or their child had behavioral difficulties. Incidences of violence were, therefore, more often attributed to this. High-class families preferred addressing their problems through alternative support agencies.

In this manner, the respondents constructed a narrative wherein low-class families were portrayed as vulnerable, acknowledging their reliance on external assistance, and simultaneously too afraid to say no. Consequently, the caseworkers may uphold a

perception that assistance from child welfare aligned with the picture of low-class families as something different from the majority. In contrast, high-class families were portrayed as powerful and unafraid to assert their autonomy. Therefore, the case workers may contribute to maintaining the narrative that the high-class families as a part of the majority by indirectly saying that the child welfare system broke with their identity.

4.3 The Caseworkers' Perception of Self

4.3.1 The Caseworker as a Figure of Authority

In the course of the analysis, it became evident that the caseworkers interviewed held distinct perceptions of themselves, their roles, and their positions of authority when dealing with low-class families in contrast to high-class families. This construction of self is intricately linked to the social, cultural, and economic capital possessed by both the clients and caseworkers.

In cases involving low-class families, the respondents often experienced that the clients rarely resisted or contradicted what the caseworker said, creating a perception that they were in agreement with child protective services.

> *"The low-income families that don't resist… well, I just continue because they don't provide any resistance, so in my mind, it's perfectly fine for them."*

The educational background and occupational status of child welfare workers do not hold a high position in the social class hierarchy in Norway (Kojan 2010). However, the caseworker, education has provided them with specific knowledge, theories, and expertise related to child development and caregiving, which function as forms of cultural and symbolic capital. The absence of resistance may signify a power dynamic in which clients defer to the authority and expertise of child welfare professionals, recognizing that they possess valuable knowledge and resources. Additionally, caseworkers may feel the need to take on a more prominent role in working with these families due to the clients' limited access to relevant capital.

"That perhaps in many cases with fewer resources, one has to organize and arrange more within the family and take on a larger role than many others."

Caseworkers' self-perception as organizers, as opposed to the family, underscores a power dynamic within the child welfare system. This dynamic arises from the family's lack of resistance and the caseworker's perception of playing a significant role in the family's situation. Consequently, the respondents believe they have greater influence in their interactions with low-class families and are more inclined to assert "how it should be" concerning upbringing.

"I feel I exercise more power perhaps when I talk to those with low incomes… Telling them a little more like that's how it should be concerning upbringing. They rarely contradict what I say... so you're allowed to do what you want in the investigation... "

The statement, "I feel I exercise more power," reflects the caseworker's perception of their own position of power within the social hierarchy, particularly in their interactions with low-class families. This statement indicates that the caseworker acknowledges their authoritative role and the influence they can have over these families. Based on the clients capital and habitus, the social worker therefore, had the capacity to exert symbolic power.

4.3.2 The Uncertain and Careful Caseworker

In contrast to low-class families, high-class families often displayed resistance and independence, challenging child protective services in distinct ways. The caseworkers perceived high-class families as more self-assured and less inclined to grant caseworkers authority.

"I think they challenge, in a completely different way"

The respondents perceived that high-class families are more self-confident and less inclined to let caseworkers "do as they please" in contrast to low-class families who may offer little resistance

> *"High-income families are more like… they set limits for what I am allowed to do and.. I guess they also know that I can't do what I want.."*

The resistance and assertiveness demonstrated by high-class families, who are cognizant of their rights and autonomy, create a different, potentially more challenging dynamic for caseworkers. When families actively push back against recommended interventions or assert their autonomy, caseworkers experience heightened uncertainty and diminished confidence.

> *"I have noticed that if a family in front of me is sitting there and in a way... have a lot of resources..And are like here you are not allowed to do anything.. I become a bit like .. I don't know, a bit more careful .."*

> *"The more resistance I get, the more uncertain I become about myself…"*

In the presence of knowledgeable and resourceful families who have the ability to engage both formal and informal networks, it is possible that the child welfare educator may experience a sense of inferiority and start to doubt their own judgments regarding the child's well-being. The respondents' descriptions of themselves as "more cautious" and "more uncertain" when they encounter resistance may be indicative of this. Therefore, when child welfare workers interact with families possessing high symbolic capital, they may see themselves in a subordinate position.

Kojan (2010, p. 55) identified a similar phenomenon in her article "Underdog," where she conducted interviews with child welfare workers regarding their encounters with high-status families. Kojan's findings revealed that these families showed greater resistance, had an increased awareness of their legal rights, and were, therefore, more able to comply with the child welfare worker's performance. The resources of these families also became evident in

the form of formal (lawyers) and informal networks they could mobilize during negotiations with the child welfare services. This caused the case workers to feel like they were in an underdog position concerning these families.

4.4 The impact of the meaning-makings on the case workers action

In the course of the analysis, it became evident that the respondents' perceptions of both clients and themselves influenced their capacity to construct the situations and, consequently, their actions when dealing with families in child welfare service.

4.4.1 The caseworker defining the situation

For low-class families, caseworkers often framed the issues within the context of mental health concerns, criminality, and general neglect. They were portrayed as inarticulate, not ethnic Norwegian, motivated and willing to get help but also afraid of the potential consequences of saying no. The caseworkers therefore encountered less resistance from these families. The construction of meaning about low-class families, made the caseworker assume the need for taking a larger role and thereby had the power to set the standard for what constituted the "right" course of action.

The mother who sought assistance for the school situation, where the child welfare intervention was directed toward the relationship between the mother and the child is an example of this. In addition, the respondents pointed out that the families often perceived their financial circumstances as the primary issue, in contrast to the caseworkers. To encourage these families to say yes, the financial situation was used as a part of an arrangement where the case worker facilitated contact between the families and agencies such as NAV in exchange for the families agreeing to accept help from the child protection service.

"It may be easier for them to say yes to help, because it also brings a different kind of help. We can help them in meeting with NAV and the housing office and use this to sell in relief assistance, so it may be easier for them to say yes to it."

In this way, caseworkers employed the family's financial concerns to address what they perceived as the real issue. The respondents also recognized that some individuals might feel pressured to say yes, even though it was intended to be a voluntary choice.

"An investigation should be voluntary, but some may feel that they are almost a bit pressured to say yes"

The authority, knowledge, and legitimacy of caseworkers, combined with the clients' reluctance to decline assistance and desire for financial help, enabled caseworkers to shape the situation according to their perspective. Therefore, cases involving low-income families were more frequently opened, as these families exhibited less resistance and were more inclined to accept the offered help.

As a result, caseworkers encountered fewer dilemmas related to imposing assistance against the family's wishes, and there was less need for a well-thought-out way of thinking (cognitive system 2) in these cases. This resonates with a study of Kojan (2010, p. 55) who found that child welfare workers were able to justify measures more readily in cases involving lower-class families using "common sense" arguments.

4.4.2 The client defining the situation

In contrast, high-class families were described as having higher levels of education, articulate language, self-reliance, awareness of their legal rights, and access to formal and informal networks. Caseworkers felt greater uncertainty and reduced confidence when dealing with these families, compared to low-class cases. This dynamic undermined the official authority of caseworkers, which, in turn, constrained their extent of action. This applied particularly in cases where the situation wasn't severe enough to warrant compulsory interventions since

initiating interventions required voluntary cooperation from the parties involved. This ambivalence led to the case worker going some extra rounds and considering whether they could exert pressure or advocate concrete measures.

> *"I might become a bit more like, okay, then we have to go some rounds about what we should do."*

At the same time the respondents found it challenging to push back against families' resistance, especially when they knew that the content of the report may not provide a strong basis for opposing the parents' wishes. The caseworker's response to this challenge involved stepping back and reevaluating their approach.

> *"They often have valid reasons for why they don't want us to do things. Everything from conversations, home visits, information gathering, and I know that if we don't have consent, there are limits to what we are allowed to do…[...] When they say no and exert pressure on me, it's difficult for me to push back because deep down, I know that maybe the content of the report doesn't provide a basis for doing the opposite of what the parents want... So, it's hard for me to argue and kind of push back when I know what I know, and that's when I might step back a bit…"*

In such cases, the caseworkers' decisions required deliberate, well-thought-out (cognitive system 2) and conscious decision-making processes. This resonates with the study of Kojan (2010, p. 55) who found that child welfare workers were more likely to justify interventions for higher-class families with professional justifications.

The caseworkers, in these situations, were often inclined to close the case if the family had substantial needs, encouraging them to seek help from other agencies.

> *"If you see that there isn't a huge need, I think closing the case is better."*

"Then you might consider closing the case by instructing them to contact the family counseling center or Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services (BUP).. That you can agree that they need help, and they should receive it from that agency, and you can sort of let it go."

In these cases, it was, therefore, the family that held the power to define the situation, rather than the child welfare workers, and as a consequence, these cases more often ended up being closed.

In the case of Abdi, all the three caseworker wanted to initiate a case, where the reason for opening an investigation was because the child's behavior was considered a potential cause for concern.

"I just think that the description of the boy gives cause for concern, that with anger. He is four years old, it is quite early to be so angry…".

In contrast, none of the respondents wanted this in Lars's case because of their need for more information and because they were afraid of ending up in a situation where it would be a matter of one person's word against another's.

"With little information, it is so difficult to start a good investigation. It just ends up with word against word "

Given that the six respondents did not receive identical vignettes, it is not feasible to ascertain whether their responses would have remained consistent or whether they would have varied had they been presented with the alternate case. Nevertheless, this thesis indicates that caseworkers' construction of meaning impacted their encounters and actions towards families from diverse social classes.

CHAPTER 5 **CONCLUSION**

In the context of professional encounters with clients from diverse social class backgrounds, this analysis indicates that social workers make different meaning and action towards the families.

The social workers' meaning-making of the low-income families was, like the research of Egelund (1997) and Juul (2004), often linked to individual characteristics. In the analysis the social workers tend to link poor economic conditions to mental health concerns, criminality, and general neglect. These families were also portrayed as inarticulate, not ethnic Norwegian, motivated and willing to get help but also afraid of the potential consequences of saying no. The caseworkers therefore encountered less resistance from these families. The construction of meaning about low-class families, made the caseworker assume the need for taking a larger role and thereby had the power to set the standard for what constituted the "right" course of action. By representing structural authority and adhering to societal norms, low-class families were in a disadvantaged position relative to the child welfare system. Additionally, their financial struggles were as in the study of Adnanæs (2004) used as a justification to initiate interventions, even though the actual interventions were aimed at improving the relationship between parents and children. The authority, knowledge, and legitimacy of caseworkers, combined with the clients' reluctance to decline assistance and desire for financial help, enabled caseworkers to shape the situation according to their perspective. Consequently, low-class families were more inclined to accept the offered help.

In contrast high-class families were depicted as articulate, well-educated, typically ethnically Norwegian, assertive of their rights, and resourceful. The resistance and assertiveness demonstrated by high-class families created a different, potentially more challenging dynamic for caseworkers. Similar to the studies by Kojan (2011) and Aadnanes (2017), the case workers experienced heightened uncertainty and diminished confidence, when these families actively showed resistance. This led to the social workers finding it challenging to push back, especially when they knew that the content of the report may not provide a

strong basis for opposing the parents' wishes. The caseworker's response to this challenge involved stepping back and reevaluating their approach. In these cases, it was, therefore, the family that held the power to define the situation, rather than the child welfare workers, and as a consequence, these cases more often ended up being closed.

In the beginning of this thesis, I posed the question of whether social class had influenced my action towards the families I worked with even when they had similar challenges and, if so, why. While there is an ideal of treating all families equally and fairly, this study indicates that social workers' meaning-making and actions towards families may result in families being treated differently. The question of whether the goal of equal treatment is possible however, remains a topic for another future exploration.

5.1 Recommendations for Further Research

The most intriguing aspect for re-analysis would be to delve deeper into how the caseworker's construction of families influences the various decision-making phases. Within this dataset, there are indications that child welfare services are more inclined to close cases in high-class families compared to low-class families when the cases are deemed less severe. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore how social workers define the situation and the extent of information available to them in more serious cases involving high-class families.

Furthermore, it would be of interest to examine how the social worker's meaning-making of the families would impact the decision-making process in a quantitative design employing vignettes as a method.

5.2 Limitations of this thesis

This thesis encountered constraints related to limited time, which in turn imposed restrictions on the recruitment of participants, the scope of interviews, and the depth of data analysis. A more comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted research question would have been feasible had more time been available for these processes.

A notable limitation of this thesis pertains to the small number of participants who were interviewed, totaling only six individuals. These child welfare workers working in diverse agencies across different regions of Norway, potentially enhancing the generalizability of findings across multiple contexts. However, this diversity also implies that specific conclusions cannot be drawn for any particular department or geographical area. Furthermore, the limited number of participants and the chosen methodological approach preclude the generalizability of the findings to the entirety of the child welfare sector.

The participants included in this study were selected for their expertise and experience in working with families from both lower and higher social classes within child welfare. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the findings might have varied had a larger and more diverse set of participants been involved, as the insights presented herein represent only the perspectives of six individuals.

The previous research and the selected theoretical framework influenced the design of this study. Consequently, it is essential to acknowledge that alternative inclusion or exclusion criteria may have yielded different findings.

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Appendix 1: **NSD Approval**

◖◗ Sikt

Meldeskjema / Sosioøkonomisk bakgrunn og valg av tiltak i barnevernet / Vurdering

Vurdering av behandling av personopplysninger

Referansenummer	**Vurderingstype**	**Dato**
199861	Standard	27.06.2023

Tittel
Sosioøkonomisk bakgrunn og valg av tiltak i barnevernet

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon
OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet / Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap / Institutt for sosialfag

Prosjektansvarlig
Dag Jensen

Student
Maren Lilløy Buchanan-Andersen

Prosjektperiode
02.01.2023 - 01.12.2023

Kategorier personopplysninger
Alminnelige

Lovlig grunnlag
Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene er lovlig så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det lovlige grunnlaget gjelder til 01.12.2023.

Meldeskjema ⧉

Kommentar

Personverntjenester har vurdert endringen i prosjektsluttdato.

Endringen består av en forlengelse i prosjektperioden. Vi har nå registrert 01.12.2023 som ny sluttdato for behandling av personopplysninger.

Hvis det blir nødvendig å behandle personopplysninger enda lengre, så kan det være nødvendig å informere prosjektdeltakerne.

Vi vil følge opp ved ny planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Kontaktperson: Silje F. Opsvik
Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

Appendix 2: Interviewguide

Bakgrunnsinformasjon

Hvilken utdanning har du? Og når tok du utdanningen?

Hvor lenge jobbet du i barnevernet?

Er det delt opp i ulike avdeler der du jobbet? Hvilken avdeling jobbet du under?

 Spørsmål rundt vignettene

Vignett 1

Hviket svaralternativ valgte du på den første casen?

Kan du si noe om hvordan du kom frem til det svaret?

Vignett 2:

Hviket svaralternativ valgte du på den andre casen?

Kan du si noe om hvordan du kom frem til det svaret?

Vignett 3:

Hviket svaralternativ valgte du på den tredje casen?

Kan du si noe om hvordan du kom frem til det svaret?

Hvilke elementer tas med i vurderingen deres?

Eventuelle spørsmål rundt andre saker:

Ressurssterke familier

Kan du fortelle om en sak hvor familien har hatt mye ressurser?

Hvordan vil du beskrive de vanskene/utfordringene som disse familie står i og opplever?

Hvilke tiltak er vanlige å bruke i arbeidet med disse familiene?

Hvordan opplever du møte med disse foreldrene?

/Lavinntektsfamilier

Hvilke egne erfaringer har du med arbeid i lavinntektsfamilier med barn?

Hvordan vil du beskrive de vanskene/utfordringene som lavinntektsfamilier står i og

opplever?

Hvilke arbeidsformer/tiltak er vanlige å bruke i arbeidet med lavinntektsfamiliene?

Hvordan opplever du møte med disse foreldrene?

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Informasjon til deltakere av studien

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet
«vurdering og iverksetting av tiltak i barnevernet»?

Bakgrunn og formål

Mitt navn er Maren Lilløy Buchanan-Andersen, og er masterstudent på Oslomet – storbyuniversitetet for sosialfag, retning international social welfare and health policy. Gjennom denne masteroppgaven ønsker jeg å se på hvilke faktorer som spiller inn når barneverntjenesten setter inn tiltak og ikke. I den forbindelse ønsker jeg å foreta en kvantitativ og kvalitativ studie ved bruk av tre vignetter (caser) om samme barn/familie.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

På bakgrunn av min masterstudie ønsker jeg å ta kontakt med saksbehandlere i ulike barnevernstjenester. Jeg håper å få 20 til å svare på vignettundersøkelsen og 10 stykker som kan stille til intervju.

Om du ønsker å delta kan du velge å bare delta på vignettundersøkelsen eller om du også vil takke ja til intervju. Vignettene inneholder et spørsmål hver hvor du skal sette kryss på det svaret du synes er mest relevant. På den siste vignetten er det mulig å utdype hvilke tiltak man eventuelt ville satt inn. Vignettundersøkelsen vil ta ca. 5-10 minutter. Om du har mulighet eller lyst til å stille til intervju ved en senere anledning kan du krysse av ja på dette spørsmålet i vignettundersøkelsen. Intervjuet vi basere seg på vignettene og ta ca. 1 time. Intervjuet kan også gjøres på zoom.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet er behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Om du takker ja til å stille til intervju vil personopplysninger som fremkommer i lydopptaket være tilgjengelig for meg og min veileder Dag Jensenved OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet. Navnet, kontaktopplysningene og arbeidsstedet ditt vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Lydopptaket vil snarest bli transkribert etter intervjuet og deretter slettet. Deltakere som deltar i intervjuet vil bli anonymisert, og derfor ikke gjenkjennelig når studien publiseres. Utdanning vil kunne bli publisert.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Hva skjer med personopplysningene dine når forskningsprosjektet avsluttes?

Prosjektet vil etter planen avsluttes mai 2023. Etter prosjektslutt vil datamaterialet med dine personopplysninger anonymiseres. Lydopptak vil bli slettet og navnet og arbeidsstedet ditt vil bli kodet. Kontaktinformasjons som mail og telefonnummer vil bli slettet.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet har Personverntjenester vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene

OsloMet

- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet ved Dag Jensen, mail: dagjen@oslomet.no, tlf: 908 54 805.
- Vårt personvernombud: Ingen Johanne Flatland, mail: ingerjohanne.flatland@oslomet.no, tlf: 482 45 876 ved Oslomet – storbyuniversitet.

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til Personverntjenester sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- Personverntjenester på epost (personverntjenester@sikt.no) eller på telefon: 53 21 15 00

Med vennlig hilsen

Dag Jensen   Maren Lilløy Buchanan-Andersen
(veileder)   (student)

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet **vurdering og iverksetting av tiltak i barnevernet** og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- ○ å delta i spørreundersøkelse med vignett som metode
- ○ å delta i intervju
- ○ Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet