

Children's confidences, parents' confessions: Child welfare dialogues as technologies of control

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Abstract

The article presents findings from a detailed examination of dialogical sequences recorded in written documents from Norwegian child welfare services. Using a frame drawn from Foucault's theory of technologies of control, it describes how conversations between the social workers and parents function as disciplining tools. By emphasizing children's rights under Norwegian law and scientific-based knowledge about children, the social workers regulate the parents' life towards what is culturally considered as proper parenting in Norway. In doing so, they assign the children and the parents different subject positions in the dialogues. I will argue that the children become subjects through what is perceived as the sharing of confidences, while the parents become subjects through confessions and admissions.

Keywords

Case records, child protection, critical social work, governance

There is much historical evidence showing how children in the West have been used in various ways by national and local governments to exert various forms of control over families. A special focus of these processes of control have been single mothers, families having limited incomes and little schooling and families having ethnic backgrounds differing from the majority of families in society at large – in other words, families perceived as socially marginalized (Donzelot 1979, Bean and Melville 1989, Margolin 1997, Ladd-Taylor and Umanski 1998, Smith 2001, O'Malley and Waiton 2005, Anderson 2006). Many of the control measures earlier impacting on the lives of adults and children would today not be viewed as legitimate in light of

current knowledge. In contemporary national states, interventions into family life have had to change in order to protect their legitimacy. A number of scholars have described how modern state regimes have come to rely more and more on various forms of concealed power practices (Foucault 1980, Rose 1994, Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2007). A central place in these special forms of family governance by the state is occupied by social and child welfare professions who possess a highly specialized set of technologies of power.

The article presented here may be understood as one attempt to explore how certain of these technologies operate in the context of contemporary Norwegian society. It draws upon written documents in 28 child protection cases involving families of non-Norwegian ethnic background. With a point of departure in Foucault's writings about technologies of control as an analytical framework, the following pages will describe how children in these families are used in various ways to discipline their parents. In this respect, I am especially interested in how the child welfare service's view of children challenges the mothers' and fathers' own view of their children and their own family lifestyles. I will describe how the child welfare services emphasize children's legal rights and use scientifically-based knowledge about children to deal with a number of dilemmas created by the dynamics of a pluralistic society. The combination of rights and scientific knowledge is a powerful tool, but a subtle one as such. I will conclude that the use of this combination within dialogues is meant to lead the parents to admit their faults and to produce another narrative about themselves as parents.

The data

The data consist of 40 child welfare cases dealt with in 2007 by two child welfare offices in a large Norwegian city. The cases involve 40 families comprising a total of 94 children, among these 28 families (80 children) with an ethnic background other than Norwegian. All parents in this group were foreign born, had refugee status and had been living in Norway for various lengths of time. Some of the children were born in their parents' home countries while others were born in Norway. The children described in the cases are from a few weeks old up to age 16.

The case file for each of these families contained numerous reports and journals. Most of the cases had been active for many years, and the reports came from a variety of agencies who had

been dealing with either the children or the adults in the family. These included public health clinics for pre-school age children, pre-schools, schools and psychiatric out-patient clinics for both adults and children/adolescents.

Collecting data

The data were collected during the course of one year's ethnographic fieldwork equally divided between the two child protection agencies. The fieldwork proposal had been evaluated and approved by the Privacy Ombudsman and the Council for Confidentiality and Research of the Norwegian government. Their authorizations made it possible to read the case files and to interview 22 social workers at these agencies about specific cases which they had been involved, and in many cases, still were involved. The fieldwork and these interviews helped to provide thick descriptions about the dilemmas experienced by professionals working with families marginalized by the wider society. Moreover, these ways of collecting data helped to see the place of document writing in the context of social work and its societal statutory work.

The data and the cases examined

Each case file consisted of two types of documents: those withheld from public access and public documents which could be read by those persons directly involved in the case such as the parents of the child in question, as well as by the youngsters themselves once they reached a certain age. The public documents reflecting reports made by various professionals such as social workers, child protection workers and psychologists, presented the case's official version. According to Norwegian law, this version was available, if necessary, for public investigation.

This article's main focus is on one part of the research findings dealing with one type of public document - the social worker's reports. These are based on the social worker's own investigation of the case and if necessary on reports from other welfare professionals such as psychologists, nurses working at public health clinics, and teachers. In examining these kinds of documents, the research focus has been narrowed to an analysis of three cases containing reports of dialogues between social workers and parents of children. These reported conversations highlight a number of issues concerning child protection work. The conversations were chosen for their representativeness and 'thickness of descriptions' which reveal several important contours about

how these exchanges are carried out and meaning conveyed. The fact that the parents were of non-Norwegian ethnic background often appeared to sharpen the messages delivered by the social workers. Social workers wanted to be understood and they made their messages clear, even over-communicated them when meeting these parents. This is one reason why the dialogues in these three cases provided rich data to be analyzed.

In order to meet ethical issues related to the cases, the names of the children have been changed and other details which could lead to identification of the child or the parents have been changed or omitted. Only the details necessary for the purpose of the article are taken into account. The three cases have many details in common with other cases, such as conflicts within the enlarged families where some adults are said to use children for a specific purpose, fathers receiving disability benefits due to war injuries, and so on. Furthermore, the reasons why the children in the cases were in contact with the child protection services were also shared by many other boys and girls. Most boys had come in contact with child protection services because of petty theft and behavioural problems at school and the girls because they were assessed as needing relief from housework and caring for siblings.

Child welfare dialogues as technologies of control

In the Norwegian welfare state, the principal purpose of the dialogues with parents conducted by agents of the child welfare service is to gather information about how well the child is doing within the family, and on the basis of this information generate a document that initiates the provision of assistance, if necessary. In examining the three cases chosen as the focus of this article, a key aim has been to identify what kind of knowledge is produced in the dialogical sequences in conversations between social workers and parents and children. Using a framework initially suggested by Foucault (1988) and later refined by Villadsen (2007), these recorded dialogues were analyzed as technologies of control, i.e. as tools for a specific purpose.

Initially, the analysis showed that social workers aim to enlighten and educate through these dialogues by asking the parents one set of questions while not asking others as the information is being gathered. These dialogues often seemed to reflect a particular way of thinking about the

relationship between parent and child in keeping with society's view of how the parent-child relationship should unfold and how family life should be lived. In so doing, the dialogues help to create two narratives: one falling within the sphere of normalcy and one deviating from prevailing norms. This was evidenced by some sequences in the documents which seemed to be controlled dialogue or guided speech aimed at getting parents to generate narratives either complying or deviating from current knowledge about children and parents in society. Questions had to be posed: What did the reported dialogues tell about the practice of social work in child protection services?

Before presenting some examples of how children's and parents' narratives about themselves were controlled and influenced in these conversations, it may be fruitful to explain more thoroughly how technologies of control are understood within a Foucauldian analytical model – in particular, what is meant by technologies of power and technologies of self. According to Villadsen (2007), these concepts are part of a context in which the formation of subjects is viewed as the product of historical practices and social relations when power is present. Analyses of the recorded dialogues as a technologies of control show, for example, how social workers acting as case administrators can present children as entitled subjects (children with the individual right to be heard) and what significance and ramifications this view of children has for the parents and their method of childrearing. The message conveyed to the parents is that they must help to actualize their children as individuals with their own rights. By assigning the parents and children different subject positions, the social workers acting in these administrative roles work to transform the parent-child power relationship so that children are empowered in relation to their parents. In these kinds of processes, children become subjects through what may be seen as the sharing of confidences (private, intimate speech), while the parents become subjects through confessions and admissions.

Confessional narratives

Many researchers assert that we live in a culture and an historic period that foster narratives of the self (Furedi 2004, Brooks 2000, Miller 2000). According to Foucault, these narratives did not emerge on their own (Foucault 1978). They are the result of practices that were developed first within the church as pastoral guidance and then taken over by disciplines such as psychiatry and

psychology, which have justified these practices on scientific grounds. Within these disciplines, the act of talking about oneself is thought to have a health-promoting effect. However, the person is not supposed to tell just anything to a psychiatrist or psychologist (or in our case, a social worker). The person is expected to talk about what she or he wants to conceal, what makes the person feel shame or guilt, the prohibited acts the person has carried out – in other words, narratives about actions that deviate from prevailing norms and lead to guilt and shame. Since norms are not static, these narratives will vary over time as Foucault's studies show, but they will also vary in space if one takes into account anthropological knowledge about different cultures. A typical example is that hitting children is prohibited in Norway, whereas this is not the case in many other countries. The documents analyzed in this study include statements such as "*the father will not admit that he hit their child. He blames the mother and says that she does not understand that she must not hit*" or "*the mother denies hitting her child and pulling his hair*" – descriptions that indicate the type of confessions the parents are expected to make.

In other words, special narratives are created during the encounter between a client and a professional in the health and care service sector. These are confessional narratives which, according to Foucault (id.) and Brooks (2000), are the ways in which the subject is produced in the West and which is the basis for the West's perception of the self.

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crime, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illness and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educator, one's doctor, to those one loves...Modern man has become a confessing animal. (Foucault 1978: 59-80)

Foucault contributes to an understanding of the modern subject through his insight into how confessions about the self are portrayed as liberating for the speaker, whereas in reality they place the speaker in a conforming, submissive position within power relations that produce a particular truth about him or her. What the speaker says, as it is practiced within various agencies, appears to be less than free speech but more of a passive action - a submission to an authority (Taylor 2009). It is within this framework, where speech feels obligatory, that children and parents become subjects in various welfare agencies. The parents or child must speak, tell something

about themselves, explain themselves. When they are asked to speak, they make statements for which they can be held accountable. They can therefore be controlled with reference to self-produced knowledge (Villadsen 2007). The words that are spoken, the narrative about oneself which Foucault often refers to in his studies as the truths about the self, take place with assistance from an authority who facilitates the confessional speech, filters his or her statements and guides the speech in a specific direction (id.). The narratives about children and parenthood that are generated with help of the welfare professions are not neutral narratives, but must be viewed in connection with how adults and children are socialized in their respective roles by means of political measures in the form of incentives, laws, guidelines, etc. and which role the welfare professions have been assigned in modern governance. Welfare professionals are supposed to produce knowledge about children and adults as well as to function as the welfare state's support and partner in the disciplining of adults. Their task is to use and to apply in practice the knowledge found in political documents when they come into contact with children and parents. In this way they give substance to more general talks about children's need for care, children's need for security, children's need for belonging, etc.

Dialogues as technologies of power

As regards power, it is important to point out that modern power seldom takes the form of constraint or force, but instead entails fostering or influencing a person's abilities and behaviours. According to Foucault, the subject is brought under the control of various forms of power, which is imposed externally (technologies of power) or which individuals exercise vis-à-vis themselves (technologies of self). Technologies of self are tools that help individuals to control themselves by making it possible for persons to isolate certain aspects of themselves so that these can be controlled and thus changed in a particular direction. One example of these is techniques to gain control over one's own alcohol consumption. Technologies of power on the other hand attempt to determine individuals' behaviour and subject them to certain goals or forms of dominance (id.). They are both instruments of control and instruments of observation in that they render particular objects visible and direct attention towards them. They shape the controller and the controlled in certain ways, create certain positions, from which certain objects can be observed and certain statements uttered. It is

“crucial to maintain that individuals are cocooned in formatting spaces [the social services office, rehabilitation clinic, doctor’s office...] which seek to guide them towards certain ways of thinking about themselves, guiding themselves and regulating their relations with others.” (id.:162).

Applied to the child welfare service, it could be said that the child welfare service sets specific boundaries for what can be said and by whom, for what positions various subjects can assume, and for what knowledge can be produced or is assigned value in such a setting. From this perspective a child welfare office is a normative field that produces particular types of subjects and knowledge regimes about children and parents. As earlier mentioned, some subject positions assigned children and parents by the child welfare service are as entitled subjects and as facilitators of entitled subjects, respectively. However, Villadsen deems it necessary to point out that

“the spaces’ devices and the technologies of control used seek to create certain subjectivities, but they do not determine them” (id.:162).

This point emphasizes the potential for children and parents to assume subject positions other than those assigned to them by the child welfare service. Some fathers in the case material, for example, do not submit to assuming the position of facilitator for their child’s formation as a subject. They use overt power to make various demands in order to be seen and heard in an attempt to maintain a position of authority. In practice, their behaviour is interpreted from a (Norwegian) cultural perspective as a threat against the case administrators, and these fathers end up undermining their own authority and position of power.

In the following section I wish to elaborate on this understanding of the Norwegian child welfare service as the context and framework for dialogues. This is relevant in order to gain an understanding of why and how the dialogues can be interpreted as technologies of control: first and foremost as technologies of power since they are framed by a system that both produces and utilizes knowledge regimes about children and adults, but also as aspects of technologies of self by helping the parents to become self-reflexive and to see their own role in their child’s behaviour.

The child welfare service as context

The child welfare service is one of the many welfare agencies designed to help achieve society's objective of providing all children in Norway with the best possible conditions to grow up under. The functions of these agencies include acting as guardians to ensure that children's rights as individuals and citizens are safeguarded and establishing norms for what constitutes a good childhood. The child welfare service agency is charged with the task of taking care of society's most vulnerable members. Which children are considered to be most vulnerable at any given point in time depends on political decisions and various scholarly discourses about children (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, Egelund 2002). For instance, children with an ethnic minority background were initially identified as a target group for public-sector measures by virtue of the challenges related to their non-Norwegian background. Later they were regarded as children regardless of their ethnic background in keeping with the public debate about children's rights and the question of whether culture and ethnicity are relevant when children are suffering.

The child welfare service is a field that both produces and uses knowledge. However, this activity is not neutral, since it must be able to justify and legitimize state intervention and control at all times. It is therefore crucial for state agencies to choose knowledge that is perceived as legitimate and that does not hinder the state in carrying out its tasks. Some researchers have argued that developmental psychological understandings of children have taken precedence over others in modern welfare states and these understandings increasingly are used as a basis for political objectives and intervention into specific population groups. They conclude that the welfare state implements policy on the basis of a standardized view of the child without gender, class or ethnicity: in short, a globalized child or universal child (Burman 1996, White 1999, Canella and Viruru 2004, Mac Naughton 2005, Pence and Hix-Small 2009). This development has entailed regulating adults and their lives based on knowledge about children which reflects middle class values and lifestyles. According to some researchers, these middle-class standards stress the importance of speaking with children about their feelings, developing the children's academic interests, participating actively in school as parents, teaching children the art of argumentation and solving problems through negotiation (Duncan et al. 2004, Gillies 2005). In the view of Lareau (2003), these criteria comprise a dominant cultural repertoire about how children should be raised and which all professionals who work with children must subscribe to.

As a state agency, the child welfare service operates at the interface between government support and government control. The service is obliged to provide assistance and support so that the adults in the child's home can cope with their responsibility as parents, but it also has a duty to intervene – with force if necessary – when such assistance and support are to no avail. This means that the child welfare service can assume responsibility for children and even remove them from their families. In this and other ways, it could be said that the child welfare service is chiefly responsible for establishing the norms for how society wants the circumstances of children's lives to be. In this role, the service has the power to intervene when children and adolescents live under conditions that society cannot accept or when they exhibit behaviour that society deems unacceptable. In Norway, The Child Welfare Act of 1992 - strengthened through the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2003 - regulates what is and is not acceptable. It clarifies under what circumstances society, represented by the child welfare service, has the right to intervene.

Among policymakers there has been a call to reduce the randomness of decisions taken by the child welfare service. Case administration that is consistent and uniform can be achieved by strengthening the protection accorded children and parents under the law and by enhancing professional expertise in the field of practice. Especially crucial for children's rights is the principle that children have a right to express their opinion and be heard in cases concerning them. Despite growing attention paid to children's right to state their views regarding their own case, many researchers point out how seldom children's voices actually appear in various documents about their lives (Gording Stang 2007, Oppedal 2008). Moreover, assessments in many cases are based on dialogues with parents and with adults in various agencies. But this picture of children's absence from case documents may be refined if one focuses attention on the societal functions served by the written documents of child protection services. In order to achieve a societal statutory work, the child protection services must transform all speech into written words. Children's statements are automatically subordinated to the logic contained in the documents and interpreted within the systemic logic of the child welfare service. Why and how the documents are written (including who is allowed to prepare the documents) are decisive factors in what is recorded about the child and what knowledge about the child is produced by the child welfare service.

It is in this context that children appeared to be used to regulate parenthood and adulthood in their families – a context where youngsters on the one hand are their parents’ children while also part of society’s prioritized spheres of responsibility on the other. This double role is specifically defined in the document entitled Official Norwegian Report of 2000:12 where it is stated that children are not just the parents’ children but also society’s children and the nation’s future (NOU 2000:12). By showing which subject positions children and parents are offered in their encounter with

“a modern child welfare service in which the rights of the child and strictly professional assessments are always given highest priority” (Stortingsmelding nr 40/2001-2002: 11),

I will be able to conclude that conversations between social workers and their users work as technologies of control which regulate the parents’ life towards what culturally is considered as proper parenting in Norway.

Children’s confidences, parents’ confessions

The following section presents sequences of dialogues illustrating how these exchanges between social workers and parents function to bring about a change towards a special kind of cultural understanding of the relationship between parents and children. The dialogues shed light on where the boundaries go between the right of families to organize their lives differently from the general population and the demands and expectations imposed on children’s upbringing which are based on normative expectations of how children should be socialized in Norwegian society.

The first example is represented by Farah. She lived in a refugee camp for eight years before coming to Norway in the early 2000s. She has seven siblings and her mother is expecting her eighth child. The school sent a report about Farah to the child welfare service which stated that *“the girl told her friend that she is hit and kept like a slave at home. The friend told their teacher. The girl denies this to the teacher, but she also admits she told this to her friend”*. The father and mother are summoned to the child welfare agency to discuss the report. The father then says that *“his brother is to blame for this because he was thrown out of his family’s home. Now he is trying to take revenge by using the children”*. The parents are informed that an investigation will be

launched in accordance with Section 4-3 of the Child Welfare Act to find out “*how the girl is doing*” and which will result in the case either being dropped or other measures being implemented. They are also informed that “*in rare cases children are removed from the home, but as a general rule the child welfare service seeks to provide assistance to children within the family. The investigation may either support your statements or support the girl’s claims*”.

During their first meeting the parents were told that there would be three home visits when a case administrator would also “*speak with the girl*” and that there would be a joint meeting about this case with the school since it was the school that reported the situation to the service. At the end of a three-month period a report would be written describing the child’s need for care and the parents’ ability to provide this care in relation to the child’s needs. The father in this case says again that he “*does not want any help, advice or guidance, and that the family neither has any problems nor needs help from the child welfare service*”. It was then stressed once more to the parents that “*we must take it seriously and investigate the child’s situation. This is according to Norwegian law. The girl’s voice counts*”.

The premises for interaction between the family and the child welfare service are established in the reported meeting: The child had said something at school giving a teacher cause for concern. In other cases children’s statements are perceived as a confidence such as in this example: “*He shared a confidence, saying that it was his mother who hit him the most*”. Children’s confidences are assigned value and thus also power in the encounter with public sector professionals. These private confidences then trigger a public and official reaction vis-à-vis the family. By focusing on the statement made by a child, the child welfare service demonstrates its stance towards children. The social workers make it clear to the parents that a child’s statement cannot be ignored. “*We pay attention to what a child confides to a teacher or another adult.*”

The second example is Thomas, a boy whose family came to Norway in the early 1990s. The family consists of a mother, father, three boys and two girls. Only one of the boys was born in Norway. The child welfare service has been involved with the family regarding all three boys on an almost continual basis. Assistance has been provided mainly in the form of acceptance in a pre-school, milieu workers in the home, personal support contacts, and financial support for activities. The measures were implemented at periodic intervals. The dialogue referred to here

took place between a case administrator and one of Thomas' teachers. *"The teacher says that he has visited the family's home and that the home seems to be in complete chaos. The children wander about the school and in the streets long after the school day has ended. The boys' clothes are often dirty and not suitable for the weather. They do not bring a lunch to school or have money to buy lunch. The teacher concludes by saying that something needs to be done about this situation."* The older Thomas became, the more reports were made by teachers describing the boy's or the parents' behaviour. These descriptions provide insight into both the norms and deviations from the norms. These norms come to the fore indirectly when parents appear to be ignoring directives requiring that their child must have appropriate clothes, a lunch, be clean, go home after school and that the parents should look in the child's backpack for any messages they need to respond to, etc. On one occasion, Thomas' father is summoned to the office and *"the child welfare service confronts the father with the fact that his sons are behaving badly at school. When the father is asked why he thinks his boys do not do well in school, whether he sees any connection between his behaviour and their behaviour, the father answers that he does not think there is any connection and he cannot explain it, it is just the way God made them"*. The case administrator introduces here the father to a psychological way of thinking about children: There is a connection between the father's behaviour and the sons' behaviour. This explanation is unfamiliar to the father, who gives a religious understanding of his challenges as a father.

The cases in this study are rich in written dialogues that reveal how various social workers work with a father or mother to get them to understand how the child's behaviour can be viewed in relation to what they as parents do or say. In other words, case administrators try to get the parents to understand the impact they as parents have on the children, whereas the parents often express a religious or normative understanding of a child's behaviour. The third case's document states: *"The father said that the son was in trouble all the time and that he would no longer be allowed to live at home, that the child protection officer could take him away immediately. The child protection officer spoke with the father about how the boy would feel to hear him talk like that, but then the father became indignant about the child protection officer getting involved in how he raises his son."* The father is summoned to a meeting at the child welfare office and *"is confronted by the child welfare service with the fact that he said to the child protection officer that they could come and take the boy away. The father said he was angry and that he meant it*

because he does not like thieves. The father explains that the child protection officer was angry at him because he said that, and they said the boy was kind and well behaved. The father thought they should not have said that. They should have said that the boy was mean and that he stole. The father was asked whether today he believed that the child welfare service should take the boy away. The father is now against this". In this case the father makes a clearly normative statement about stealing and thieves. He seeks support for his views, but instead the case administrators explain to him their understanding of the effect that his normative statement could have on his son. The case administrators try to get the father to think about what he says. Also inherent in this is an attempt to *"put the responsibility back on the father"*.

In none of the cases is there any information or description of how the children's actions are dealt with by the case administrators. It is more important to document their own work with parents than to write down what is being done to address the children's behaviour. *"It is important for us to get the parents to understand that a child of his age is not at fault"* or *"It is important that the mother and father admit that they have hit them and that they will not do it again. The reason why they hit the children is of little interest."* By documenting the parents' reactions to their children's behaviour, the social workers acting as case administrators reveal various ways of understanding and interpreting children's behaviour. While social workers interpret children's behaviour as the result of emotional problems associated with the parents' method of childrearing, many parents interpret their children's behaviour as a deviation from a norm. The solution to the problem will therefore vary depending on one's understanding of the problem. However, analyses of the dialogues between social workers and parents show that the aim of the conversation often is double: To get the parents to admit (or realize) that their method of childrearing is unsatisfactory and to pass on to the parents the child protection agency's way of interpreting children's behaviour. Underlying the dialogues is the belief that the parents will change their practice to conform to Norwegian parenting practices when listening and talking to the social workers.

The examples above show how responsibility is placed on the parents during the dialogues by telling the parents about children's rights and by explaining which childrearing methods are acceptable and lawful in Norway. Here a prime concern of the social worker is to present to the parents an understanding of children as emotional, vulnerable beings. As vulnerable beings,

children must be protected by having their rights enforced. A recurrent theme in the cases is that children are not being “*protected from the adult world*” or “*from adult problems*” and that a lack of protection triggers emotional reactions that children have no chance to process. The imperative of protecting the child is linked with the social workers’ beliefs about what parental responsibility ought to be and what kind of childhood a child should have – i.e., a protected childhood (Boyden 1990). All the cases contain examples of how case administrators use the dialogues to clarify what is believed to be an appropriate distribution of responsibilities between parents and children. “*The child welfare service told them that it is the parents’ responsibility to decide where she will live and that the parents’ statement gives a responsibility to the girl that she should not have*” or “*The child welfare service is uncertain whether the parents give more responsibility to their girl than what is reasonable given her age. In the view of the child welfare service, children can have chores to do at home, but not so many that this infringes on the girl’s need for leisure time.*” Many Norwegian parents view participating in organized activities as an opportunity for children to develop interests and skills outside of school and to learn social codes. Organized activities are often proposed as a measure by the child welfare service and aim at providing an active social environment for a child described as “*having no friends*” or “*lacking social skills*”.

In keeping with Taylor (2009), it could be said that the dialogues conducted by the child welfare services in Norway are used more to confirm the cultural, moral, political and theoretical viewpoints of the participating professionals rather than to assist the parents in their struggle to create a life of dignity, in this case in another country. In contrast, recent research comparing Norway to Great Britain has shown that child protection workers in England were much concerned with contextual factors such as racism, discrimination and poverty, and the consequences these have for the daily life of minorities. In Norway, however, these were non-issues for the child protection workers studied who were dealing with families with non-Norwegian ethnic backgrounds (Kriz and Skivenes 2010). According to this study, the responsibility of the Norwegian child welfare services is often defined in educational terms with the aim of teaching parents to integrate their children into Norwegian culture. In this setting, children’s confidences and parents’ admissions are vital components of the educational project.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show how children and parents have their own positions within society defined in relation to power or powerlessness by the apparently neutral appearing operations of a modern child welfare service in which the rights of the child and strictly professional assessments are always given highest priority as cited in the report referred earlier in the article. These processes are made possible by dialogues which can be understood as technologies of control that the Norwegian child welfare services use to discipline parents. In this study, the targets for this kind of disciplining actions have been parents having ethnic backgrounds other than Norwegian, but other cases examined in the larger study involving Norwegian parents and their children reveal similar patterns. The manner in which this disciplining of parents takes place is not overt. Instead, it takes a much more subtle form in the context of conversations as well as in the way these are conducted. The social workers in these dialogical exchanges are disciplining parents by making them think reflexively about their own parental behaviour and by presenting certain kinds of knowledge to be used by the parents for understanding the child. The main subtle but nonetheless coercive element in the conversations is embedded in the fact that the discipline of parents is done on behalf of the children – invariably accompanied by strong moral stance. The social workers are constantly illustrating what they (and Norwegian society by extension) regard as acceptable parenting by focusing, among other things, on the child as an emotional individual with rights. This then often challenges parental understandings of their own children and destabilizes accustomed distribution of power and responsibility between them and their children. In meetings between parents and the social workers, the parents are being required by various technologies of control to assume a specific position vis-à-vis their own children in order to arrive at a narrative about themselves as parents socially and culturally acceptable to the norms of middle class Norwegian society.

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