

Social workers' challenges in the assessment of child abuse and maltreatment:

Intersections of class and ethnicity in child protection cases

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Abstract

Defining and assessing child abuse and maltreatment has long been a challenge to both researchers and practitioners in social work. Taking an intersectional perspective, this paper explores the meaning of class and ethnicity in professionals' investigations and assessments in child protection referrals. Overall findings show that class power was particularly actualized for caseworkers facing parents with high social status: In these cases, the parents often resisted the investigation and therefore the caseworkers had difficulties in disclosing or defining the abuse. In comparison, culture was often made relevant in cases involving minority ethnic parents, where abuse often was actualized as corporal punishment. This practice tended to be seen as a cultural issue rather than related to social problems. In these cases, class power was not articulated. The paper sheds light on intersections of class and ethnicity that may affect social work practice with children at risk of abuse and maltreatment.

Keywords: Child abuse and maltreatment; social work; ethnicity; class; intersectionality.

Introduction

Child abuse and maltreatment¹ is one of the core areas of concern in the field of social work; however, its status as a social problem is historically rather new. Not until the 1960s was abuse and maltreatment of children acknowledged internationally as a serious issue, when our understanding of and a way to define it began to take shape (Buer and Fauske, 2009, p. 99; Hacking, 1991, pp. 253–254). Today, knowledge of the severe damage violence against children causes is widespread, and the promotion of international children's rights and the passage of legislation to prevent child abuse have contributed to a change in general values and moral codes (Hacking, 1991).

In the Norwegian context, the government took the first step on preventing child abuse in 1972, through repealing parents' right to chastise their children in the Children Act. In 1987, a supplement to this act was added, clarifying that children were not to experience violence and abuse from their parents. However, ambiguity in the legislative text prevailed up until 2010, when the Children act was revised once again, reaffirming that all violence and abuse, including physical punishment as part of child rearing, was banned. With this ban, the Norwegian government introduced zero tolerance of any forms of abuse and maltreatment of children (Hennum, 2016; Skjørten et al, 2016; Sommerfeldt and Øverlien, 2016).

However, rapidly changing global demographics resulting in contact among diverse populations has contributed to cultural conflict in many domains, including the issue of child abuse and maltreatment (Nadan et al, 2015, p. 41). In 2002, The World Health Organization (WHO) underscored that global research must consider the differing standards and expectations of parenting practices among cultures worldwide, as well as the complex circumstances of children's lives (Imoh, 2013; Nadan et al, 2015). Thus, social workers and other professionals continue to face challenges in knowing what constitutes acceptable parenting practices and what violence against children is (Calheiros et al, 2016; Malley-Morrison and Hines, 2004).

This paper explores the challenges and dilemmas social workers in Norway experience in investigating and assessing abuse and maltreatment cases. More specifically, it analyses how the intersection of class and ethnicity affects the definition and assessment of violence, focusing on the position of social workers within these categories. The findings shed light on how these intersections are embedded in a social structure of power in which the outcome unfolds in specific ways, depending on the families with whom social workers interact.

I have now outlined the context in which social workers operate, particularly in Norway where zero tolerance of violence and abuse against children has become the general norm, judicial as well as socially. Furthermore, I have pointed out the challenges in defining and assessing child abuse and maltreatment in a culturally and socially diverse context caused by changing global demographics. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce research on challenges related to class and ethnicity in social work and child protection, before I present intersectionality as the theoretical outset for the analysis. Next, a description of methodological strategies will follow before the analysis of how intersections of class and ethnicity create different preconditions for social workers' assessments and definition of child maltreatment cases. The analysis is presented in two sections, dealing with the categories of class and ethnicity separately. The concluding discussion suggests how the effect of the intersections of class and ethnicity may create biases regarding which children receive the professional interventions they are in need of, and whether these interventions are appropriate.

Research on class and ethnicity in social work and child protection

Internationally as well as in the Nordic context, a substantial amount of critical research has focused on social work² with minority ethnic children and families. Approaches differ from looking at how and when ethnicity matters to whether social workers oversize the meaning of culture at the expense of non-cultural factors, such as poverty and other concerns. Several researchers have emphasized the problematic issue of constructing social problems as cultural

issues (e.g., Williams and Soydan, 2005; Chand and Thoburn, 2005, 2006; Christie, 2010; Eliassi, 2015; Gulbrandsen and Østereng, 2011; Kriz and Skivenes, 2010, 2011; Gupta and Featherstone, 2015; Rugkåsa, et al, 2015; Ylvisåker et al, 2015). Regarding child abuse and maltreatment specifically, some research have investigated issues related to culture to understand abuse (e.g., Korbin, 1981; Nadan et al, 2015), but such studies have been focused on minority ethnic groups rather than majority ethnic populations. In other words, culture has received disproportionate attention in explaining social problems and child abuse and maltreatment for minority ethnic groups. Whereas it is rarely explored regarding abuse and neglect among majority ethnic families (Sawrikar and Katz, 2014).

Regarding social class, we have overwhelming evidence that poverty and low income are strongly related to abuse and neglect (Pelton, 2014, p. 30), which applies to the Norwegian context as well: Children in socioeconomically marginalized families, or whose parents have little or no education, are overrepresented among child protection cases (Dyrhaug and Sky, 2015; Kojan and Fauske, 2011). However, some Norwegian researchers have identified a gap in the research concerning the meaning of social status in child protection (e.g. Kojan, 2010; Vagli, 2009). Kojan (2010) found that parents' high social status affected decision-making in child protection. For example, when these families were referred for services, it was likely on the basis of the children's behavioural problems instead of the parents' maltreatment.

Furthermore, within the socioeconomic marginalized group represented in Norway's Child Protective Services (CPS), ethnic minority families are overrepresented (Dyrhaug and Sky, 2015; Frønes, 2015). This is no surprise; as much as 40 percent of children with immigrant backgrounds in Norway live in poverty (Dzamarija, 2016). However, it is important to note that not all minority ethnic families are low status, and many low status families are majority ethnic. In this study, two categories of families were the most prominent: high status families implicitly understood as majority ethnic and minority ethnic families implicitly represented as low status.

Therefore, these categories of families represented in the data were selected for an analysis of the intersection of class and ethnicity, with very specific and different outcomes.

The ethnic and class bias represented in statistics as well as in research, necessitate an investigation of the intersections of class and ethnicity in professional social work with child abuse and maltreatment. Applying an *intersectional* perspective, this paper aims to analyse the effect of intersections of class and ethnicity in professionals' assessments and definitions of child abuse and maltreatment. The focus is on how the social workers made these categories relevant, and how this may affect the professional discretion and agency.

Theoretical and analytical framework: Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a conceptual language to grasp individuals' simultaneously positioning and belonging within different categories (Phoenix, 2006, p. 22). Furthermore, it highlights how such simultaneous positioning may affect individual agency (Orupabo, 2014). A main concern within this perspective is the disclosure and articulation of power relationships that create and naturalize inequality (De los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005, p. 127). Power is constructed and constituted within and among different groups, as well as through the interplay between different levels in society (Jensen and Christensen, 2012). To understand how processes of differentiation unfold, we must understand how subjects are interwoven with institutional and structural levels (Berg et al, 2010). Intersectionality enables us to analyse how categories such as ethnicity and class and social structures, such as Child Protective Services, may affect individuals' and groups' power positions differently.

In this paper, class and ethnicity constitute the analytical categories, with high and low status as subcategories of class, and majority and minority as subcategories of ethnicity. A key point is that these categories represent unequal power positions, and being mutually constitutive, they cannot be perceived in isolation from each other (Anthias, 2012; Phoenix, 2006).

Class

The concept of social class refers to formal and informal relationships that affect people's positions and possibilities in society (Dahlgren and Ljunggren, 2010). Therefore, class is relational: The existence of privileged classes presupposes the existence of underprivileged classes (Aakvaag, 2008). Embedded in this hierarchy is an unequal distribution of power. For example, representatives from higher classes are often situated in positions with the power of definition, and thus, can dominate official versions of what is legitimate and illegitimate (Dahlgren and Ljunggren, 2010). Bourdieu's concept of *capital* is relevant here. According to Bourdieu (1979/1995), three main types of capital affect one's class position. *Economic capital* provides the financial means to pay for needed goods or services; *cultural capital* refers to the nonmaterial ability to master cultural 'codes', acquired by birth and/or higher education; and *social capital* is membership in relevant groups or networks that can be mobilized when needed. Dominant classes possess a large amount of capital, and consequently, the power of definition.

Ethnicity

How and when social workers recognize ethnic difference and how this recognition may affect practice vary in different European countries (Christie, 2010; Kritz and Skivenes, 2010, 2011; Williams and Soydan 2005). Intersectional analysis of ethnicity examines how dimensions of difference are constructed through interactions (Berg et al, 2010). Precisely central to the definition of ethnicity is social interaction: According to Barth (1969), studying ethnicity entails identifying how ethnicity is made relevant in social interplay. The point is not to determine cultural features, but how demarcation or classification of people and cultural practices is 'done'.

Although the majority is no less ethnic than the minority (Eriksen, 1993, p. 4), the majority appears neutral in society, and can be described as an *absent presence*, representing an invisible, unspoken and unquestioned norm (Phoenix, 1987). However, as with class, a majority cannot exist without a minority, which calls for applying a majority-inclusive principle

in intersectional analysis of ethnicity (Staunæs, 2004). Omitting ethnic minorities' relationships with the ethnic majority will not yield answers to our research questions (Gullestad, 2002, p. 42).

To understand when and how ethnicity and class matter in social work concerning child abuse and maltreatment, then, we must grasp the relational character of the majority and minority categories, as well as how they intersect with class positions and the social hierarchy. Empirical data must illuminate how majority ethnic norms and codes are embedded in the construction of 'the different', and how class unfolds within the majority category, as well as between majority and minority positions.

Methodology

Selection strategy, data and methodological reflections

Two child protection (CPS) agencies within a large Norwegian city were included in the study. These agencies were situated in boroughs with differing demography: One had a larger proportion of minority ethnic families and families with lower educational and income levels (borough 1); the other had a larger proportion of majority ethnic families and families with higher educational and income levels (borough 2). Both CPS agencies had an overrepresentation of minority ethnic families among their cases; however, borough 2 had quite a few cases involving majority ethnic families with high social status.

Participants with relevant case experience were recruited through department managers. Supplementary, a few freelance caseworkers with experience in various CPS agencies were included. These were recruited through their respective agencies. Most of the participating caseworkers had social work education, only one had other professional background. Furthermore, the participants had varied amount of experience, ranging from a couple of years to over ten years of casework. The managers in both agencies emphasized the importance of the staff's competence and knowledge of child abuse and maltreatment, and provided

opportunities for the staff to take courses and education within the topic. All together 10 caseworkers participated in the study. I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews, resembling an everyday conversation, however, following an interview guide covering the topics I wanted to know about (Brinkman and Kvale 2015:31–32). The aim of this method is to explore the topic of interest, gather descriptions of the phenomenon studied and pay observant attention to what is taken for granted and what can be read “between the lines” (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015: 32–33). Interview questions revolved around what the professionals do when they investigate possible child abuse, how they assess severity and context, and the parent-child relationships. The social workers were asked to describe and discuss challenges in their work, especially related to definition and understanding of what constitutes abuse and maltreatment.

The way in which the caseworkers distinguished between high status families and minority ethnic families figured prominently in their answers, each group representing different challenges and dilemmas. However, applying these two categories to families presented a methodological dilemma: Despite their analytical function, using these categories risked reproducing stereotypes and maintain stigmatized perceptions of individuals, a problem Gunaratnam (2003) called ‘the treacherous bind’; although the intention of analysing categories loaded with stigma is to deconstruct them, the very use of them risk upholding their essentializing meaning. As a solution, Gunaratnam suggested investigating the *contextual meanings* of the categories, that is, analysing the ways social workers make ethnicity (and class) relevant to child abuse and maltreatment.

Analytical approaches

Following the aim of exploring the challenges and dilemmas professionals experience when facing child abuse and maltreatment cases, I conducted horizontal readings to identify relevant topics within each individual interview. Next, I conducted vertical readings to identify similarities and differences across the interviews (Haavind 2000). Although I systematically

searched for topics relating to challenges and dilemmas, I also conducted a more open search to identify other prominent topics (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This first phase of both systematic and open reading revealed two particular issues, namely the different ways in which class and ethnicity appeared in the talk about child abuse cases, and the social workers position when facing parents with high social status. These two overall issues shaped further analysis and I decided to apply the intersectional perspective in the next phase of reading. I particularly searched for taken for granted or silent references within the majority category, which constructed 'the different' regarding child abuse and maltreatment.

Based on the initial focus on challenges and dilemmas, this question guided the first phase of the analysis: (1) What did the caseworkers present as challenges and dilemmas? In the second phase, the following questions guided the readings: (2) How was class and ethnicity made relevant to child abuse and maltreatment? (3) How did the professionals present their own positions?

With this analytical approach, I was able to organize similar topics into two overall themes: issues of power and disclosure regarding high status families and culturalization of abuse in relation to minority ethnic families. These two overall themes will be elaborated separately in the following analysis.

High status families: issues of power and disclosure

Data collected in interviews revealed that agency professionals—especially in borough 2—and the freelancing caseworkers tended to describe abuse and maltreatment cases with high status families in a distinguished way: These cases represented particular challenges related to disclosing violence. First, the caseworkers experienced difficulties in investigating possible abuse because the parents could mobilize to prevent insight into their family life. Thus, the class power issue is actualized. Second, because of these disclosure issues, the assessment and definition of abuse became difficult, sometimes these cases were redefined as neglect, and often

they were dismissed or slipped from CPS's oversight. Third, the caseworkers wondered whether some cases would reach the CPS at all because agents of other public bodies seemed to fear reporting high status families. Another issue that was frequently addressed regarding the high status families, was the presence of psychiatric problems and drug abuse among both the adolescents and the parents, which appeared more prominent than violence.

The following excerpt exemplifies issues of disclosure and power related to class among high status families:

C1: I've had quite a few abuse cases with resourceful parents. They can be very fierce in meetings. They bring lawyers, you know, it is chaos compared to what you're used to. ... And the lawyers are friends and colleagues, right. Or dad is a lawyer. ... They bring official guidelines and we often sit and discuss the procedures: 'The deadline was two days ago' and such. ... It is much easier to talk to a drugged mother or the immigrant family; you get to present the case to them. Because these 'real adults' as I call them, they control the case.

The challenge of dealing with lawyers figured prominently in most cases involving high status families who had the economic capital to pay for legal help and the cultural capital to master a discussion about CPS routines and procedures. In this way, the parents – not the caseworkers – could 'control the case' and set the agenda around procedural matters, rather than the children's well-being.

In addition, this caseworker positioned herself within the social hierarchy by admitting she found it much easier to talk to parents with addictions or an 'immigrant' background. Her statement implies a power position over lower status families. By calling the high status parents 'real adults', she excluded other status parents from that designation. As a majority ethnic social worker, she held a position within class and ethnicity that apparently affected her professional agency.

Power issues with high status parents can also be at work in other public bodies, such as schools. In the following interview excerpt, a caseworker addresses the issue of class power and mentions the reluctance of other professionals to report concerns:

C2: ... [W]e often hear that they are more scared of ruining the cooperation with the parents; they are so afraid of being wrong. And we have experiences with such cases becoming fierce, with the lawyers and everything. So they are more afraid of the consequences. And regarding the children ... I don't have any numbers, but I think you can see more often that those families take their children out of the day care nurseries, change schools ... and then the children slip. You don't get to follow up. ... I think it is many we don't reach, and that we receive more notifications on the other families.

The consequence of this fear may be that CPS officials never learn about possible abuse and maltreatment, or if they do, they are prevented from intervening. In conclusion, this caseworker addressed the result of this underlying class bias: The CPS receives more notifications on 'the other' families. This statement confirms the power position that social workers (and other professionals) hold over lower status families who do not have access to various forms of capital.

A grey zone of abuse and neglect

A prominent feature in the interviewees' discussion of cases with high status families was the imprecise talk about child abuse, which may reflect general difficulties in gaining access. The information the caseworkers had about violence was often unconfirmed and diffuse, and their talk tended to slip into stories about neglect instead of concrete evidence of violence. Several caseworkers pointed out abuse cases that were dismissed because of lack of documentation, only to return to CPS when the children reached adolescence. These returning cases often concerned the young person's behavioural problems, such as eating disorders, drug abuse or

psychiatric issues. In this excerpt, a caseworker elaborates on the family problems behind such behaviours:

C3: Well, in my opinion, it is problems regarding the family dynamics. It can be very varied, I mean, you can look at the family structure, that is ... how the interaction is, the communication in the family. I am not very happy about using the word resourceful, because what is that? Because in my experience, many of these so-called resourceful parents are not able to take care of their children. The emotional sort of care is absent, you know, regarding closeness and love and such things.

Other professionals reiterated this problem: parents' failure to provide emotional care for their children. In somewhat generalized terms, the caseworker dismissed the common assumption that higher status ('resourceful') parents tends to buffer the risk of abuse and neglect, and indicated that capital is unrelated to parenting ability. Actually, in some cases, material resources appear to create physical and emotional distance between parents and children: Some caseworkers mentioned families living in big, spacious houses in which children and parents did not spend time in the same room. Others said some parents appeared to compensate for their absence with material goods. Thus, when participants discussed high status families, they tended to link high status and material resources with a particular form of neglect: dysfunctional family dynamics characterized by the parents' physical absence and emotional distance.

However, the caseworker cited above (C3), also noted that emotional dysfunctions in these families may stem from the parents' own childhood experiences of neglect; a family crisis, such as a high-conflict divorce; or the parents' substance abuse or psychiatric problems. Substance abuse and psychiatric issues were frequently mentioned as 'typical' problems in high status families.

Although the high status families' child protection cases were 'normalized' by reference to the typical risk factors, class issues nevertheless were apparent as the professionals

continuously described the taboo of such social problems and the parents' efforts to hide them and maintain control:

C4: They have thick walls, big facades. It is easier to hide things. I think people have a lot to prove in a borough like this. Facades to maintain perfection and success. Of course, it is a lot to keep in its place. I think there is a lot of drinking here. We know that alcohol and drugs and violence are related. We have examples of these families.

In line with several others, this caseworker describes a dynamic where keeping the social problems hidden appears crucial to the high status parents. The effect of this dynamic was the social workers' official authority impaired significantly, leaving the children invisible and out of reach. The class-based barriers to investigation tended to result in a redefinition of these cases from abuse to neglect. Although the social problems in high status families were not necessarily different than those of lower status families, the high status families' power position over the CPS workers constricted the professionals' discretion and agency, resulting in different outcomes than with lower status families.

Corporal punishment – a cultural issue?

The participating professionals' discussion about child abuse and maltreatment in minority ethnic families also had a distinguished form, mostly centred on corporal punishment³. This child-rearing practice was not mentioned in connection with high status families, and with one exception, never discussed in relation to majority ethnic families. In fact, low status majority ethnic families were the least explicit category in the interviews, and therefore, appeared invisible although they were an implicit reference. The interviewees' expressed divergent opinions whether corporal punishment was limited to minority ethnic families; nevertheless, the topic dominated the discussion of these cases, and the phenomenon appeared to evoke ambivalence and challenges of discretion. Furthermore, although all caseworkers defined

corporal punishment as violence, they nevertheless expressed challenges in defining and assessing the phenomenon, as demonstrated in the following statement:

C5: I think it is a silly concept. Violence is violence, independently of the reason. When you name it corporal discipline and punishment, you normalize and explain it away. First and foremost, I think about mild slaps, but there are examples of parents saying they use violence for child-rearing purposes, and the violence is severe ... I agree that there are different degrees of violence; it is a milder form of violence to slap than to whip, but both are violence. Both mild and severe violence [are] harmful. Corporal punishment seems to be put in a different category, although it is precisely the same as other forms of violence.

As corporal punishment was discussed only in cases with minority ethnic families, it was implicitly connected to ethnicity, which tended to mark the practice as something different from other forms of abuse. However, this caseworker attempted to define corporal punishment as *not* different, by framing it as violence regardless of its form or justification, illustrating the ambivalence and ambiguity embedded in the topic. One way to interpret the caseworker's firm definition of corporal punishment as violence may be as an attempt to manage the risk of overlooking severe violence against children explained as physical punishment in child-rearing, a dilemma several caseworkers described. However, it may also be a reflection of the zero tolerance of all forms of abuse and maltreatment of children embedded in the legal framework of CPS, as well as in sociocultural norms. Therefore, the recurrence of the phrase 'violence is violence' in the data as a whole may well describe a positioning within the political and societal context.

Another aspect of the statement 'violence is violence' is its inherent power of definition: The caseworker (C5) was a majority ethnic male whose position and remarks were not neutral. His statement had a demarcating effect, reinforced by both his ethnic and class position, which represented the unarticulated norm, although his intention was most likely to the contrary. As

a professional from the ethnic majority, he had the capital and power to define corporal punishment as violence.

Another excerpt from the interview with this same caseworker exemplifies the ethnic demarcation embedded in the discussion about corporal punishment. When asked if the caseworker saw violent punishment among ethnic majority families, he responded:

C5: Yes and no, actually. How do I put it ... Norwegian parents doesn't necessarily say they use violence for child-rearing purposes. It is against the law in Norway— everybody knows that. But there are examples of violent episodes occurring because the child has been disobedient or done something wrong. But child-rearing is not used as a reason in the conversation with these parents, ethnic Norwegians. But then, when you get referrals about violence in a non-Norwegian ethnic family, one often thinks about corporal punishment. ... But as I have seen, when you talk to them [minority ethnic parents], it is often the same risk factors. It is psychiatric illnesses, drug abuse, traumatic experiences that you also see with the ethnic Norwegian parents who use violence. So in a way it is similar. The same risk factors.

Citing Norwegian law in this way was a recurring feature when professionals discussed corporal punishment. In contrast, they never mentioned the law when talking about violence in majority ethnic families, perhaps because, as this caseworker said, 'everybody' (most likely meaning majority ethnic parents) knows the practice is illegal. According to this caseworker, when violence resembling corporal punishment occurred in majority ethnic families, it was not defined or explained as related to child-rearing. The statement suggests that the legal ban on all forms of violence against children has erased the phenomenon within the majority category. Furthermore, as the ban has established zero tolerance as the social norm, using corporal punishment has become a social taboo. Therefore, when violence resembling corporal punishment occurs in majority ethnic families it needed another explanation, which according to this caseworker tended to be the parents' drug abuse, psychiatric illness or childhood

experiences. These are socially and culturally accepted explanations of violence against children in the majority societal context. Although these risk factors were often also present in minority ethnic families, professionals tended to demarcate corporal punishment in those cases as based on ethnicity. Thus, ethnicity constituted the underlying concept constructing this phenomenon as different from other child abuse and maltreatment cases.

Similar phenomenon, different framing

As discussed in the previous sections, many child abuse cases, regardless of the families' ethnicity or class, shared similar characteristics, such as substance abuse, psychiatric problems or childhood trauma. Nevertheless, ethnicity appeared to play a role in defining the abuse differently between majority and minority groups. In the following excerpt, the caseworker discusses a case with a majority ethnic family in which the child was placed out of the home while the CPS worked with the parents, and was returned to the parents when they developed more appropriate parenting strategies. The caseworker said the abuse was precipitated by the child's disobedience:

C2: ... [T]his child did not do what it was told ... was a difficult child. Perhaps some would say [the violence] was related to child-rearing, but it was much more explosive than that. Much more unpredictable. So we were concerned about the development [of the violence]. It was getting out of control. ... But it turned out, you know, it was [the parent's] own experiences, from the parent's own childhood.

Here, the caseworker hesitated to relate the violence to child-rearing, although she acknowledged the abuse had to do with discipline difficulties. Instead of defining the case as a corporal punishment issue, she explained it as stemming from the child's problematic behaviour and the parent's own childhood experiences, a similar explanation that other professionals used when working with high status families. In this case, the violence was *not* demarcated based on ethnicity, or *culturalized*. In abuse cases with the very same contextual features as described in

this statement, but among minority ethnic parents, the abuse was often related to cultural child-rearing practices (corporal punishment); strikingly however, ethnicity was absent in the caseworker's understanding of this case with a majority ethnic family. Again, we see how shared ethnicity between the caseworker and the parents erased ethnicity as a relevant distinguishing marker. The excerpt exemplifies a tendency to frame and define child abuse and maltreatment in majority and minority ethnic families differently. Moreover, reference to class was also absent in the caseworker's discussion; therefore, this case likely represents a 'normal' case, that is, one involving a majority ethnic family that does not challenge the caseworker's structural authority position.

However, despite the tendency for 'ethnic' framing in minority ethnic cases, several caseworkers stressed the context, circumstances and relationships as crucial aspects of professional assessment. In the next excerpt, another caseworker talks about his understanding of corporal punishment and demonstrates how contextual aspects influence his professional discretion:

C6: One can differ between when the violence happens, in which situations it happens. ... These cases [of corporal punishment] are often about a conflict situation, where the parents lack other ways of setting boundaries and it ends with the parents hitting or throwing the child into its room or something. Some reasons for it happening, that you can sort of understand when they don't have other ways of handling it.

Here, the parents' shortcomings and frustrations in child-rearing appeared to be assessed as an important reason for the abuse, despite the label of corporal punishment. The caseworker did not demarcate the physical punishment as cultural practice; rather, he contextualized it in a similar way as the caseworker in the previous excerpt, emphasizing conflict situations and boundary-setting as triggers. In this way, contextual features appeared to impact the

caseworker's assessment. This excerpt serves as an example of the similarity of the triggers for abuse, despite different framings based on the parents' ethnicity.

Ethnicity then, appears to create ambivalence and ambiguity in defining child abuse and maltreatment. Although the caseworkers consciously balanced their professional discretion, they nevertheless seemed to experience challenges in defining and assessing violence in minority ethnic cases and deciding on how to intervene. In majority ethnic cases, such defining and intervention issues did not appear to pose the same problems. An explanation for this difference may be that the professionals and majority ethnic parents shared taken-for-granted notions about culturally accepted explanations for maltreatment. Although most caseworkers emphasized that all the parents may face similar risk factors for abuse, they appeared to be somewhat trapped in a culturalizing discourse that framed and defined violence in minority ethnic families differently from that in majority ethnic families.

Concluding discussion

This analysis indicates that the position of a social work professional within the categories of ethnicity and social class affects the assessment of child abuse and maltreatment, in different ways, depending on the position of the family involved. Therefore, a social worker's professional agency may be limited as a consequence of this intersection of class and ethnicity.

Effects of the intersections of class and ethnicity

Social workers' educational background does not rank high in the social class hierarchy in Norway (Kojan, 2010), nor does their occupational status. Therefore, interacting with parents with a higher educational and occupational status – and more cultural capital – puts social workers in a subordinate power position. This finding is particularly interesting in the context of the Scandinavian welfare state, which is known for its egalitarian model and small degree of social inequality (e.g. Halvorsen and Stjernø 2008). Therefore, discussing class differences and class power is somewhat taboo. This social norm makes the prominent focus on class power

and material wealth in the social worker interviews all the more striking. Applying Bourdieu's (1979/1995) concept of capital, the caseworkers appear to possess a lower social position than high status parents, and therefore lack sufficient capital to intervene authoritatively in these families. Thus, the parents, not the social workers, possessed the power of definition regarding the concern for maltreatment. Not only did high status parents succeed in preventing insight and investigation into their families, but also these cases appeared to slip into a grey zone of neglect and abuse. Furthermore, many cases were dismissed, or they returned as concern for the child's behaviour instead of abuse. The problematic consequence of this pattern of class power is that the possible abuse within these high status families becomes invisible, and children's legal protection is at risk. In other words, the social workers' structural position prevents them from safeguarding these children's rights.

In comparison, caseworkers presented in this paper were situated in a superior position when facing lower status families, including minority ethnic families, who did not have the same amount of capital as high status families. As professionals representing structural authority, disciplinary knowledge *and* majority society morals and values (Gulbrandsen and Østereng, 2011, pp. 92–93), social workers possessed the power of definition. Thus, a different scenario emerged in meetings between social workers and lower status, minority ethnic families than with the high status parents: The professionals were able, with authority, to define the problems in the family. Here, ethnicity became the underlying factor creating the power differential, whereas class is not made relevant. By framing child abuse and neglect as corporal punishment, understood as a cultural child-rearing practice, child abuse and maltreatment were constructed as a cultural issue, although ambiguously so. This understanding seemed to omit the typical risk factors such as stress, drug abuse and psychiatric issues (cf. Chand and Thoburn, 2005, 2006; Christie, 2010; Williams and Soydan, 2005). Furthermore, frequent references to Norwegian law reinforced the demarcation, *and* indicated the social workers' perceptions of

their mandate to promote *cultural integration* (Hennum, 2011). This again reinforces the power position of the social work professionals over minority ethnic families.

Culture and social status - parts of the context

Although the analysis demonstrates the challenges and dilemmas social workers experience related to class and ethnicity, neither category should be removed from consideration. On the contrary, the analysis underscores a practice that applies and considers these factors as parts of a whole, with an effect on the situation of abuse as well as the professional assessment of the case. As the interviews revealed, substance abuse, psychiatric problems, parents' childhood experiences and even adult trauma could precipitate violence against children in both minority and majority ethnic families; however, these same conditions appears as taken for granted explanations for abuse in majority ethnic families, while the violence tended to be culturalized in minority ethnic families. Such culturalizing of violence risk overlooking the 'normal' risk factors with minority ethnic parents.

The solution to this problem, as a few caseworkers implied, is a contextual approach. By looking at the family's total situation, class, ethnicity and culture may be considered equally with other contextual features, including structural issues, parents' stress levels and children's functioning. Such an approach is not a novel one in social work. On the contrary, it is well known and applied; however, it appears that ethnicity in particular tends to push 'normal' risk factors to the background. The risk of such class and ethnicity differences in child protective services is the invisibility of children in high status families and the hyper-visibility (Bredal, 2007) of those in the minority ethnic families. Such bias does not benefit children's wellbeing and safety positioned in either category.

Although these findings cannot be generalized, they illuminate structural biases that may reinforce and maintain inequality and discrimination. Furthermore, the findings showing biases related to professionals' interpretations based on the clients' ethnicity is not new, rather

they confirm previous research. However, contrasted with the class perspective, the analysis highlights a less illuminated issue, namely social workers *lack* of power when facing families with higher social status than themselves. While children in minority ethnic families risk receiving inappropriate interventions because of misinterpretations based on ethnicity, the children in high status families are at risk of not receiving help at all. Kojan (2011:45) states that the material deprivation in lower status families lower the threshold for CPS to intervene in these families, and thus the entry into high and low status families differ. However, the moral meaning of class is also relevant, as CPS in the Norwegian context represent middleclass values. Thus it is easier to ‘pathologize’ lower status families (Vagli 2009). Supplementing these perspectives, the analysis in this paper show how the intersections of class and ethnicity may affect the social workers’ agency in ways that create biases in terms of which help is provided, or whether help is provided at all. The social worker’s mandate is to prevent and combat precisely such patterns of inequality, and therefore, awareness and sensitivity of these processes of differentiation must be integrated in social work research and practice.

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Notes

1. The concept of child abuse and maltreatment is applied as an overall concept including physical, psychological and emotional abuse, as well as witting and unwitting neglect. Maltreatment is applied when referring to all forms, whereas abuse and violence are used alternately to refer to physical and psychological expressions.

2. In this paper, I use the terms social work and child protection work interchangeably; however, in Norway, these are separated endeavours, and the publicly funded Child Protective Services (CPS) is an independent agency from other social services, an organizational structure unique to Norway.
3. The Norwegian concept is directly translated ‘child-rearing violence’, indicating that violence is used as a child-rearing technique; however, in this paper, I have applied the internationally recognized English term, corporal punishment.

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