

**Resistance and Protest against Norwegian Child Welfare Services on Facebook -  
Different Perceptions of Child-Centring**

**Edda Stang**

Phd Candidate in Social Work and Social Policy, Oslo and Akershus University College of applied sciences.

Address: Høgskolen i Oslo og Akershus

Postboks 4, St. Olavs plass

0130 Oslo

Norway

Telephone: +4767238172

E-mail: [edda.stang@hioa.no](mailto:edda.stang@hioa.no)

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## **Resistance and protests against Norwegian Child Welfare Services on Facebook -**

### **Different perceptions of child-centring**

This paper addresses the protests against Norwegian Child Welfare Services that are unfolding on open international and Norwegian Facebook groups. The purpose is to gain insight into the message of large open Facebook groups protesting child welfare services and investigate what such resistance is concretely targeting. From the beginning of the 2010s, Norwegian Child Welfare Services have faced powerful national and international criticism not only in the mass media, but also on different social media, like Twitter and Facebook. Social media like Facebook contain opportunities to gather like-minded people across time and space without economic costs, and also to internationally mobilize with few resources (Shirky 2009, 48). Participation in social media does not necessarily mean dialogue, influence and the ability to being heard, but new media technologies have made it easier to express oneself (Lüders, Følstad, and Waldal 2014, 457; Aalberg, Elvestad and Skogerbø 2015, 32). Facebook groups protesting child welfare services are part of a broader network that includes websites, blogs and groups with national and international connections. In recent years, there have also been offline demonstrations, public meetings and seminars addressing the same issue. The Facebook groups challenge existing structures or system of authority, they serve as collective enterprises and they act outside institutional or organizational arrangements, all of which are some of the key elements that define social movements (Snow, Soul and Kries 2004; Baron 2013, 29). Thus, even if they might be fragmented and their duration is uncertain, the groups studied in this paper were approached as part of a potential social movement protesting the child protection system.

Comparative studies have shown a new and growing child-centred social policy orientation in many European countries (Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes 2011, 252). Norway stands out, along with other Nordic countries, as a leader when it comes to elevating children's equality

and rights (Skivenes 2011; Picot 2014, 690). A child-centred society is a positively charged concept in a European context, and refers to communities that perceive children both as future citizens and also as actors with their own rights (Hennum 2014, 441). On the other hand, several theorists, both in Norway and, for example, England, have questioned whether a powerful child-centred child welfare service, with great emphasis on developmental psychology, can also have consequences that have not been sufficiently taken into account (Hennum 2015; Featherstone, White and Morris 2014; Picot 2014, 699). A theoretical debate has been raised related to the individualized child-centred social policies that impact basic issues in the field of child welfare. It addresses what constitutes a good childhood and what basis of knowledge defines it as such. It discusses the view of the child and the distribution of responsibilities between the state and the parents, and it examines what significance socio-economic inequalities and class have on the field of child welfare.

The main question in the study is as follows: What goals and what conceptions of child welfare services are presented in Norwegian and international protest groups against Norwegian Child Welfare Services on Facebook? This is discussed in light of debates that have been raised within research on child welfare – with particular emphasis on different understandings of child-centring. The analysis is used as a basis for discussion about how child welfare services may be experienced, and the issues this raises for child welfare policy.

There is limited research both on protest and organized criticisms of child welfare services in Norway, and on protest groups against child welfare services on social media internationally. One exception is a recent Israeli study about verbal aggression in cyberbullying against social workers (Kagan, Orkibi and Zychlinski 2017). This study focuses on the content of the offensive messages, and because the study includes child welfare issues, I will comment on some of the findings in the conclusion.

It is particularly interesting to study protests aimed at Norwegian Child Welfare Services, as it is currently being subject to sharp international and national criticism in different media.

Further, child-centring is claimed to be particularly apparent in Norwegian policy and practice (Hennum 2014, 445; Skivenes 2011, 172; Picot 2015, 690). In comparative studies, Norway stands out as a pioneer for children's rights (Hennum 2016). Norway is also ranked number 1 in the KidsRights Index (2016), which measures how a number of countries observe children's rights (Skivenes 2016).

### **Child-centring in child welfare – Critique and protest**

States vary according to the extent to which they take responsibility for children's upbringing. This is related to both how the system defines responsibility between the public and private sphere and its cultural view of children and families (Gilbert et al. 2011, 6). Certain states assume broad responsibility in that their objective is to both protect children against risks and even out socioeconomic differences, while others have a more limited aim that is concentrated on protecting children from the risk of harm. Compared with other states, Norway and the other Nordic countries can be said to assume a broad responsibility for children in the child welfare system (Skivenes 2011, 155).

In previous comparative studies from the 1990s, the continental and Nordic welfare states are often described as being characterized by a 'family service' orientation, with an emphasis on biological family, preventive measures and support. The Anglo-American welfare states were classified as 'child protection' oriented, where government intervention is preferred to weak parental care (Gilbert 1997). Major changes in child welfare systems have taken place in the last 20 years, and this distinction is no longer deemed to be adequate. Comparative studies show a converging tendency between a 'child protection' and 'family service' orientation (Gilbert et al. 2011, 251). These findings are based on a comparative study of the social policy

and professional practices within child welfare among ten Anglo-American and European countries (Gilbert et al. 2011).

### ***Child-centred orientation***

Several recent studies (both comparative and of individual countries in Europe) describe a new third orientation called 'child-centred orientation', which to varying degrees exists alongside 'family service' and 'child protection' (Gilbert et al. 2011, 252; Featherstone et al. 2014; Skivenes 2011). Child-centring has to do with the child's overall development and welfare, and is not solely about protection against harm and abuse (Gilbert et al. 2011, 252). The child-centred orientation may take on different forms in different countries, but what these countries share is that such an approach puts the children's rights before their parents' rights and emphasizes parental obligations as caregivers (Gilbert et al. 2011, 253).

In comparative literature, Finland and Norway are among the examples of countries where policy is aimed at creating a child-friendly society, and where the state assumes a gradually greater role in providing a wide range of early intervention and prevention services (Gilbert et al. 2011, 252- 253). With regard to Norway, Skivenes writes that the authorities emphasize that the child should be put first in any assessment within the child welfare system, but Norway still does not have a unilaterally child-centred orientation (2011, 154). The traditional family-centred approach (family service) has characterized Norwegian child welfare thinking for a long time, and, according to Skivenes, there are signs that Norwegian child welfare still contains elements of this, along with the child-centred orientation. However, there is no guidance on how they should be balanced in practice - despite conflicting values and principles in their respective orientations (Skivenes 2011, 172).

Political signals regarding empowering children, giving every child equal opportunities and safeguarding all children from violence and abuse may be viewed as a political type of child-centring. This is perceived as hardly controversial in Norway and there is broad political and

professional consensus on these values, which are also anchored in The Child Welfare Act (1992) and The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The questions that are posed to a child-centred orientation in this article are directed at how experts on children can interpret and exercise child-centring within child welfare services.

### ***Critical perspective on the individually-oriented psychological child centring***

Giving children status as independent citizens with their own rights can stand in conflict with the parents' and the family's right to the child and the child's right to grow up with his/her parents (Marthinsen, Lichtwarck, Fauske, and Clifford 2013, 22). Parents can thus be said to have lost power while their children have become 'empowered' (Picot 2014, 698). Child-centring demands high standards of parenting skills and parents are held responsible for ensuring child welfare (Pösö et al. 2014, 486). The work of child welfare services in recent years has come into conflict with other views on the relationship between child, family and state (Madsen 2016, 102). Child welfare cases in Norway involving families from Russia and other Eastern European countries have partly resulted in negative attention toward Norwegian child welfare services and demonstrations have been held in many countries (Madsen 2016, 102).

Coming from England, Featherstone et al. (2014) have pointed out the need for innovative thinking about child welfare systems. They believe that there is a need to focus attention on poverty and deprivation and that radical individualization of childhood restricts potential responses (2014, 9). In the Norwegian context, Kojan (2011, 17) has found that in the work with families from the lower classes (defined as unemployed and working class), it is often the family that is seen as the problem, while in high status families, it is the child who has the problem. Child welfare services' specific focus on the parents' weaknesses leads them to ignore the effect of socioeconomic and cultural factors on children's welfare and opportunities (Hennum 2014, 448). Assessments of parents and children are instead based on

psychology and other social sciences, with particular emphasis on developmental psychology (Andenæs 2004, 29).

The epistemological framework and the methods child welfare services build upon leads to a professional gaze being directed at certain observations in the family, while others are ignored (Hennum 2014, 451). For example, if a mother has had a difficult childhood, her abilities in terms of stimulation and eye contact may be emphasized, while other factors, such as fear of losing the child or stress due to material conditions are overlooked (Hennum 2016).

Norwegian child welfare workers may have a clear sense of what parents should be like and what constitutes good care (Picot 2014, 219). Aided by the extensive use of developmental psychology jargon, they try to teach parents how they should for example 'see their child' and 'interpret his/her signals', as asserted by Picot (2014, 220).

According to Madsen, child psychology has undoubtedly contributed to far fewer children growing up with any physical or mental harm than before, but at the same time he asks whether there is a saturation point for the psychological perspective on the child, where psychology's well-intentioned expertise in some cases can be stretched too far. If the psychological expertise becomes predominant, it may displace other necessary types of understanding (Madsen 2016, 95).

Hennum questions whether a child-centred society might imply acceptance of an authoritarian and moralizing state on behalf of children, and whether the professional understanding of child-centring often can lead to demands on the parents that they cannot possibly achieve (2014, 453 and 441). Featherstone et al. conclude that the current child-centred paradigm is deeply ethically problematic. Such a paradigm is connected to the construction of children as individuals who are not rooted in networks and communities (2014, 17).

Via comparative studies it is thus possible to identify a European, and particularly Nordic, tendency towards increasing child-centring in the child welfare system and in society in general. The way child welfare workers, psychologists and other experts on children frame and understand a child-focused orientation has consequences. This is true both for individual persons and families in child welfare services, but also for how child welfare services are perceived and discussed publicly.

### ***Protests against Child Welfare Services***

Some parents in the child welfare system feel intimidated, fearful and powerless by the child protection process (Featherstone et al. 2014, 2), and some parents who have lost custody of their child feel disempowered by the child welfare authorities (Slettebø 2013). Castell argues, “If many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented, they are ready to transform their anger into action, as soon as they overcome their fear” (2015, 15). Further, by experiencing an unbearable event, suffered by someone with whom they identify, they can overcome their fear by expressing their anger in the form of outrage (Castell 2015, 15). Such an unbearable event might be losing a child to child protection custody, while not really understanding why, and at the same time experiencing injustice and abuse of power.

For individual experiences to link up/join together and form a movement, there needs to be a communication process that disseminates the events and the emotions attached to them, according to Castell. Social media platforms like Facebook might facilitate such a process. Individuals who are not connected to politics or formal organizations can initiate collective actions through social media (Enjolras et al. 2013, 33). Facebook can help to transform and legitimize a social movement’s ways of producing and sharing information and shape both narratives and collective identity of participants (Baron 2013).

## **Data, perspective and procedure**

Norway is among the countries in the world with the greatest access to broadband and use of media technology (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, and Storsul 2014, 314). A relatively large proportion of the population are also members of national protest groups in the Facebook population (25 per cent of those ages 16-25 and 11 per cent of those over 26 years old) (Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, and Wollebæk 2013, 95). On Facebook, it is possible to create both *public groups*, which have members, and *communities*, which have followers. In the context of this paper, it is not essential to distinguish between them as it is the messages and goals of the groups/communities that are analysed, and it is possible in both locations to read both the administrators' and participants' posts. From now on, both types are collectively designated as 'groups'. In the study, open Facebook groups with members, likes or followers of between 2,500 and 29,000 are included.

There is no easy way to get an overview of groups on Facebook with Norwegian Child Welfare Services as the subject, partly because new groups are constantly being established while others stop being active. Many have 'child welfare' (barnevern) in the group name, but not all. In addition, some groups only have a few members, while others have many thousands. The study contains data from six groups - four Norwegian and two international. The groups differ from each other according to how their protests are directed. The two international ones (in mostly English text) have names and goal descriptions that direct their protest toward the fact that child welfare services/the state have the authority to place children outside the home, and their main goal is to move the placed children home to their biological family. Three of the Norwegian groups direct their protest toward the system of child welfare services and the practical execution of their work. The fourth Norwegian group shares some of the goals with the other Norwegian groups, but has as its main objective that all of the kids from a specifically named family should return to their biological mother.

The groups were found through searches on Facebook, Google and via posts across the groups. The criteria were that they should be protest groups against Norwegian Child Welfare Services, be open to everyone who wants to read them and have over 2,500 members or followers. The groups that were selected should represent different types of groups within the criteria. There are several groups, both Norwegian and international, who meet the criteria for the sample, but it is difficult to give an exact number of how many.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Social media challenges in many ways the distinction between what is considered private and what is considered public. Therefore, it can also be a challenge to know the situations in which we can unproblematically retrieve data from social media, and when it is appropriate to ask for consent. Initially, the plan for this study was to get in contact with the administrators of the selected pages and ask for consent to post a 'research in progress' message on the Facebook wall with general information and contact information. In the first group, the project was met with goodwill and interest from both the administrator and from many of the group's members in connection with information on their wall. The next step was to get in touch with several other groups, and in one of these, it quickly became clear that the administrators did not want a researcher's gaze on the group's activity. The data from this group are therefore not included in the material.<sup>i</sup> The comments from some of the administrators in this group led to a change in the strategy for collecting data (see below).

Instead of saving discussions and individual posts from the other groups, a table was made to provide an overview of the main characteristics of the group's aims and messages. All data is anonymised in the text and direct quotes are omitted to prevent searchability online. Two quotes, however, are included on the basis of consent. The study received ethical approval from Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) 16. April 2014.

## *The article's source of data*

<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Contribution to the study</b>
Information read and collected in May, September, October, November and December 2016.	Regular search and reading of posts on a broad range of Facebook pages that protest against child welfare services, with most of the focus on the six selected groups. Cues and some selected posts were stored.	6 primary groups. In addition, 4-5 similar groups not included in the selection were "visited".	Review of the field. Insight into size, variety and similarities. Justification of selection of groups. Capture aspects of the activity that did not take place precisely at the time of data collection mentioned below.
Overview of six large open groups Week 33, 2016.	Group names and articulated aims were registered. The selected posts were read and categorized. Posts were not stored as direct quotes, but either paraphrased or registered with cues.	6 groups. The first 20 -30 posts pr. group. 157 main posts were registered (associated comments were not registered).	The overview gave a broad picture of the landscape and made it possible to separate between different kinds of protest groups and analyze their different main messages.
Data collection from one particular group (the first group). Data consists of direct quotes from the Facebook Wall. May 2016.	Through the administrator, I got permission to post my presence on the group's wall and inform participants about data collection. <sup>ii</sup> 20 posts were collected and stored in word-documents every third/fourth day in May 2016.	1, 116 posts/statements were stored. This includes 157 main posts with associated comments.	The access to original posts and the opportunity to read them through several times made it possible with a closer analysis. The main parts of the paraphrased statements and the two direct quotes (for which I got the authors' permission to use), comes from this material.

Table 1.

## **Perspective and procedure**

The Facebook groups in the study are regarded as a network of individuals where the active part of the network participates by sharing their views, experiences and relevant information.

The administrators serve as the driving force by stating the aim of the group, sharing information and mobilizing members to participate in offline activities, like demonstrations and seminars. The groups are considered part of a growing social movement that seeks to transform powerlessness into empowerment (cf. Castell 2015), and thereby shut down or

dramatically change the child protection system. The data consists of written material posted on a public social media arena. The postings are produced by individuals, but it is the collective message in this digital public that is the object of study. The focus is on what appears to be the collective conceptions of child welfare services, particularly in light of academic debates about “child-centring”. Child-centring is used as an overarching perspective in the analysis.

The analytic procedure consisted of the following steps: 1) All of the material was initially read through and approached as participation in a potential social movement. 2) The data from the overview (the examination of six groups) was read and arranged into categories based on type of posting (“Statements about the child welfare system”, “Mobilization”, “Sharing of information and news”, and “Personal support and advice”). A description of the groups was then generated, outlining their aims and characteristics about their statements and discussions 3) The material from the first group was re-read. A description of the first impression and issues repeated and emphasized were composed. It was then possible to more closely examine the issues that were revealed by the categorizations from the overview, due to having access to the original postings. 4) It became evident that the material in different ways touches on issues that are also discussed in recent child welfare literature. The further analysis examined not only what the material, as a whole, said about these issues – but also potentially other issues and dilemmas were thematized.

### **The Goals and primary messages of the groups – Protests against out-of-home placements and injustice**

In this section, the groups’ different messages and goals are described. Thereafter, key thematic areas of the material are highlighted and discussed. Finally, how the protest groups

as a whole represent an alternative understanding of child welfare and child-centring is illustrated.

The three Norwegian groups that target the system of child welfare services present the following main messages (excerpts of the statements taken from the groups' descriptions of goals): there are grave conditions in child welfare services that cannot be accepted; violations are taking place that need to be highlighted; child welfare services commit injustices against children; and children are subjected to great suffering under public neglect. The goals described range from the following (excerpts): focus on the abuse of power and children in child welfare services who are not doing well; justice in individual cases; supporting individual families with advice and tips; and a possible closure of the existing child welfare services and the establishment of a new assistance agency for children and families. The means that have been suggested in order to achieve such objectives are incitement to carry out an investigation of the entire country's child welfare services, shedding light on stories and stimulating debate. The final Norwegian group stands out with several objectives: the return of the children to the family in question *and* illuminating the system. Although the main theme here is the return of the children, child welfare services as a system is also emphasized.

The three system-oriented Norwegian groups have a dialogue-oriented objective and want to change the system by creating debate and shedding light on individual stories. Yet that is not always what characterizes the actual activity on the walls. For example, severe harassment and death threats against child welfare services as a group have taken place and occasionally names and images of the staff at child welfare services or its affiliates are posted. One person encouraged scaring the child welfare employees and their children, and some argue that it helps to fight back by terrorizing them. Extreme means are justified in that what the parents have been subject to has also been extreme. Otherwise, there is a magnanimity shown towards

a very wide range of statements. An understanding that many are desperate is conveyed and therefore they may express themselves in a relatively extreme manner.

Positive attitudes toward child welfare services are hardly accepted. Attempts to refer to child welfare services in a positive manner are mostly met with great resistance. At the same time, supportive comments do arise. This does not happen very often, but can testify to the fact that the members represent a greater breadth of understanding of child welfare services than that which dominates on the group's 'wall'.

The main message of the two international groups is that child welfare services is stealing children and in a 'rude' manner violates the rights of both parents and children, and that this needs to be stopped. Their goal is that children who are moved by child welfare services should come home to their biological family. The posts are largely about individual cases. The study showed that groups both have their own profile and approach to child welfare services, and at the same time there are a high number of posts across pages (many write the same thing in several places) and many are members of and 'like' several groups. The exchange of information operates across the groups; this is networking through sharing of meaning (Castell 2015, 6).

### ***Distrust in the State and the role of Child Welfare Services in relation to children***

Some of the public criticism of child welfare services that has been presented in Norwegian mass media is based on child protective services entering into non-Norwegian families, and shows how misunderstandings can have unfortunate consequences and lasting repercussions (Witoszek 2012). It is argued that families from countries or cultures where confidence in the government is low may be afraid of the authority child welfare services have to intervene in families (Chi Nwosu 2014). In the international Facebook groups, it is evident that this authority frightens and provokes. These groups are protesting against the possibility of a state

assumption of care and view of the child as disconnected from the family. The protests are directed at the existence of the child welfare services. There is a great deal of focus on the belief that people need to watch out for child welfare services in Norway. Many warning posters are posted about Norwegian Child Welfare Services. For example, there is a poster with a message for all pregnant women about the fact that Norwegian Child Welfare Services can take your baby based on your history. Warnings include allegations that Norwegian Child Welfare Services kidnap children and are mass murderers.

Images that are posted of children show either happy children with their families or crying children who have lost their family. They are referred to as "*stolen*" by child welfare services. Those who stand behind this conception of child welfare services promote an understanding of family where the child is family property and does not have rights him/herself (Storø and Backe-Hansen 2016). In one post, a six-year-old news story from *The Telegraph* with the headline 'Smacked children more successful later in life, study finds' (The Telegraph 03/01/2010) was shared. The case resulted in a longer thread of discussion and largely a defence of 'spanking' and 'smacking'. One woman argues against this and says the study is not particularly scientific. She is called crazy and accused of being in contact with 'child welfare services'. However, such discussions constitute exceptions. The majority of the items in the international groups are about the actual assumption of care as an undesirable phenomenon, and there is little discussion of child welfare services' possible reasons for intervening in families. The protests seem to be aimed at the Norwegian state and not just child welfare services.

In the Norwegian groups that mainly target the system, some of the participants' posts can also be interpreted in such a direction. For example, the sharing of a YouTube movie where a children's choir sings 'let the children be set free, let the children come to me'. The song is about children who must be freed (from child welfare services) to come home to mom, dad

and the family. Many of the posts in the Norwegian groups are protests against the fact that the state thinks it knows better than the parents about what is best for the child. For example, one participant says the following:

*It is those who have the power to define what is best for the child in this country who create the problems. The policy reflects the notion that there is sufficient consensus that around a quarter of parents in this country are less capable of providing care than the state is.*

In this statement lies the idea that both the state/child welfare services do not resolve, but create, problems, and that the demands the state presents to parental care are so high that a large proportion of the population will fall short.

### ***Powerlessness and injustice.***

Many posts thematize the power of child welfare services and the powerlessness of the families. There are several who claim that child welfare services abuse their power and engage in harassment. Particularly evident is the communication of experiences of arbitrariness, abuse of power and the idea that child welfare services make up things to frame the families. One person says that the child welfare services permit themselves anything they want and that they exercise arrogance of power. Several react to the fact that child welfare employees act as experts on other people's family lives and child rearing. One person says that the best way to cooperate with child welfare services is to accept the role as 'a primitive' who will be guided by 'people with higher standing'.

Particularly in the Norwegian groups, there are many posts on unjust power relations in society. Powerlessness is expressed through descriptions of heartless child welfare workers, corrupt psychologists, false reports, notes of concern with false allegations and through statements such as this:

*When parents are tired and downcast because of the measures instituted by child welfare services, this is used to argue that parents cannot take care of their children.*

*Do not show your weaknesses to child welfare services, there is no help available.*

Many express that their version or understanding of the situation falls on deaf ears, is not valued or does not have any effect on the case. Various child welfare measures that are meant to promote an equalizing of socioeconomic differences, such as financial support or paid day care spaces are hardly discussed, and there are few who mention class or socio-economic conditions specifically. One participant pointed out, however, that Norway is a class society, and this is powerfully expressed in the child welfare system. She believes that there is an income-related division between those who become victims of child welfare services and those who do not. Correspondingly, another participant writes that child welfare services generally attacks those who have the least resources and are sick. Among the posts, there is advice that it pays to have a job and permanent housing, and to be healthy if one is to have any standing among child welfare services.

The groups' statements testify to the fact that child welfare services is perceived as being an extremely powerful organization. Many describe accusations by a system it is impossible to defend oneself against. In several places, the terminology and diagnoses of child welfare services are discussed as something incomprehensible and something that it is impossible to protect oneself against, for example, 'attachment disorders', 'developmental delay', 'understimulation' etc. One asks what *mentalizing ability* is. He says that a friend of his could lose custody of his children due to a lack of mentalizing ability and he does not know what this means. He receives many responses, including that it is something the employees of child welfare services do *not* have. One comments that child welfare services use fancy words that ordinary people do not use on a daily basis, in order to confuse parents with academic jargon. Some attach links to places where the concept is explained. A further claim is that it seems

like everyone is losing their kids for the same reasons, such as "understimulation" and "poor attachment".

The psychological concepts seem to have an alienating effect instead of an explanatory one. They are described as constructions, something child welfare services invent and which results in claims about a person's own family that s/he cannot recognize him/herself in. Many posts suggest that it is difficult to understand why child welfare services have moved children, whether it is their own or in families they know. One lady says she finds it lucky that she has been fortunate enough to keep her children and that anyone whatsoever gets to have their children at home. Another also describes it as luck that she was allowed to keep her children, but now she is worried that they are going to take her grandchildren.

Several also point out how child welfare services believe they have the ability to know whether a child who is doing okay now may have a hard time in the future. One says that child welfare services can suddenly remove a child without warning, because they think they can predict whether parents will be capable of raising the child in the future. In the Norwegian groups, several have repeatedly described that a difficult history will be used against you by child welfare services. Two participants commented for example that a prior ADHD diagnosis has been used as an argument by child welfare services.

It is thus evident that many react to the notion that child welfare services can know what the child's development will be like, and especially that they know better than the parents themselves. The professional knowledge, for example about attachment, outweighs the parents' perceptions of the children and their lives (Hennum 2014, 451). Regardless of how solid their justifications might be, it seems that child welfare services fail to convey their reason for action in a way that is understandable and acceptable to people who are not professionals.

## **Another understanding of child welfare and children's rights and another type of child - centring**

The Norwegian groups in the sample give the overall impression of being rooted in the idea that a society needs some type of child care system. Nevertheless, the child welfare services we have now are taking the wrong children. They allow children to live with parents who are violent or have serious substance abuse issues, but take children from normal and well-functioning families (who perhaps have had a challenging phase). For example, one man says that child welfare services remove children who are doing fine at home, while children who really need help are not getting it. In response to that there is a lady who comments that child welfare services do not want to have children who are victims of violence because they want to have children who can more easily attach themselves to the foster home, that is, children who are not damaged in terms of attachment. Out-of-home placements are considered to be a violation of human rights. It is thus child welfare services as the executor of the state that violates human rights by intervening in families and moving children.

In all of the groups in the sample, child welfare services are mainly referred to in a negative manner. Instead of viewing it as an agency that is meant to help and protect vulnerable children, the groups are steeped in the understanding that child welfare services are a systemic evil. The statements primarily testify to a strong distrust toward child welfare services as part of the Norwegian state. One person says that child welfare services have not quite understood the difference between the *child's best interests* and the *child's worst interests*. Another man claims for example that child welfare services go against the *child's best interests* because they do not listen to children. Another says that child welfare services might listen to the children if they agree with them, but if not, then the children are treated as if they do not know what is best for them.

In the Norwegian groups, it occasionally appears that child welfare services can perhaps do *some things* right, but individual persons within child welfare services and weaknesses in the system lead to major violations and unethical conduct. The fact that individuals have gained too much power and do not exercise that power in a responsible manner is a theme that recurs in all the Norwegian groups (and to a limited extent is an issue in the international groups). For example, employees in child welfare services are referred to as cruel people without a heart. Norwegian society is characterized by a high level of confidence in the state and public bodies (Wollebæk and Seggaard 2010). This does not apply here, in either the Norwegian or international groups.

### ***Parental child-centring***

Having a child-centred orientation is not a theme addressed directly by the groups, but all the groups are still centred on children - both in purpose and in actual activity. Focus on children's rights is largely present, but then in terms of the right to be with one's biological family. Love between children and parents is a recurrent theme, as well as sorrow and despair over not being able to be with one's child, and also the child's sorrow over not being with his/her parents. Children are the best thing we have, and parents are the best thing the children have, one participant writes.

The groups protest against aspects of professional child-centring, while both the groups' goals and activity are largely *centred on children*. They represent a type of parental child-centring where the child's best interests are inextricably tied to the family. The child's love, security and need to belong are central. There is also a focus on sorrow in connection with the separation of children and parents and concern for abuse against children in public care. The type of child-centring these groups represent distinguishes itself in this way from the professional child-centring by emphasising other understandings and values related to children and childhood.

## Discussion

We have seen that the groups thematize similar issues that are also raised in theoretical discussions in the field. We have gained insight into how the protest groups highlight what they perceive as unjust power structures. There is a difference in what the Norwegian groups convey (especially the three system-oriented ones) when it comes to a desire for dialogue and influence *within* the system, and the two international groups that do not accept the basic premise of a child welfare system. The extent to which this type of division will apply to *all* Norwegian and international protest groups against child welfare services is nonetheless uncertain, yet most relevant groups will probably still fit into such a categorization with gradual transitions, although there will be exceptions.

The Norwegian groups in particular protest against child welfare services' exercise of power. In the material, repeated allegations emerge of serious errors and unethical procedures, emergency placements of children based on an assumption about the future, that child welfare services do not know the difference between the *child's best interests* and the *child's worst interests*, incomprehensible argumentation and constructions of problems and diagnoses etc. Experiences in dealing with a system parents might have contacted for help, but which responds by using information from the background history as an argument *against* them, seems clearly unfair and provocative.

The abovementioned Israeli study about cyberbullying against social workers differ from this study in fundamental ways. In their study, Kagan et al. focused on bullying, extreme language and aggressive messages, and not the broad protest which was the focus of this article, but there are still very many similar results. They found, for example, the repeated story of abducted children being removed with no explanation and they find the expressed experience of injustice (2017, 9). They also found the same kind of imagery. The pictures show happy children with their families or crying children removed from their homes. There might even

be some of the same pictures, because identical pictures and information are circulating in anti-social worker networks across borders. This suggests that what Kagan et al. refer to as a “anti-social worker discourse” contains opinions and activities across countries and systems, which implies that findings can be relevant beyond a national context.

Many people might understand and interpret the activity within the protest groups as representing defensive attitudes, for example that parents feel that they *have to* protest and say that the children were taken for no reason, to protect their identity as a parent. Others will point out that the types of expression are so extreme that that in itself says something about what the participants might be like as parents. This is probably also part of the picture, but experiences and knowledge also emerge here that must be taken seriously by government and child welfare services. More professional and academic voices within child welfare have clearly spoken up for criticisms of child welfare services to be taken seriously and to not dismiss all criticism as isolated anecdotes (Vindegg and Gording Stang 2016, Storø 2017). This article supports this view.

The analysis of the material shows that there is little doubt that child welfare services in many contexts have a communication problem. The fact that many do not understand why they themselves or someone they know are losing custody of their children is a big challenge for a system like child welfare services. This also applies outside the groups that have direct experience with child welfare services. Many reports in the mass media in recent years have presented families who have lost custody of their children on what appears to be a very weak basis (e.g., TV2 in 2016). Child Welfare Services in Norway are known to be poor at communicating to the community about what they are doing, and that contributes to the population not knowing whether we have a good child welfare service or not (Storø 2015).

The Norwegian Child Welfare Services presumably encompass tendencies toward both an individualized psychological child-centring *and* a family-service orientation, where both

directions may have unintended consequences in their purest form. To gain a more complete picture of understandings of child welfare and reactions to the practices of child welfare services on open social media, the data must be expanded to include more types of groups and fora. This text only provides insight into protest groups, yet at the same time offers an important insight into a world of experience child welfare services must take seriously.

## **Conclusion**

Through Facebook groups, social actors challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society (for example child welfare services), and claim representation for their own values and interests (Castell 2015, 5). The groups in this study demand visibility for *their* story of the child welfare system and *their* parental child-centring. Using Facebook, the protest groups raise basic issues into the public eye. This provides opportunities for discussion and the experience of shared destiny and support. Although groups against child welfare services have existed previously, the Facebook groups represent something different in the public sphere. Each group presents an understanding - both of child welfare services and the practices of child welfare services – that is completely different from the understanding that is presented by professional and political circles. At the same time, they also touch on issues that are discussed in the research literature within child welfare policy. Their understanding generally builds on their own experience with child welfare services.

Children's rights, including the right to be considered as independent individuals, do not exist in opposition to simultaneously viewing the child as part of a greater social and cultural whole. Social workers should help ensure that those who do not fit in or function normally according to society's normative standards are treated with respect and given opportunities (Marthinsen et al. 2013, 21). Emphasis on children's rights do not contradict the ethical obligations social workers are bound by that involve respect and equality toward and cooperation with both the adults and children one comes in contact with in the child welfare

system. Extreme and slanderous types of expression do exist, but the shared experiences as a whole speak of a dissatisfaction and distrust that extends beyond individual narratives. These must be seen as important contributions to the development of child welfare policy both in Norway and other European countries.

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<sup>i</sup> This may be considered as a potential weakness of the material as this group was extra large and rapidly expanding at the time of collection as well as the fact that it can likely be characterized as particularly extreme in terms of its perception of child welfare services.

<sup>ii</sup> Posts from this group will be deleted at the end of the project as required from Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).