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'Good parenting' among middle-class families: a narrative positioning analysis of Norwegian child welfare workers' stories

'Godt foreldreskap' i middelklassefamilier: En narrativ posisjoningsanalyse av norske barnevernsarbeideres fortellinger

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates norms of parenting in the context of the Norwegian child welfare service (CWS). Research from both international and Norwegian contexts shows that current parenting ideals are built on middle-class values that are often taken for granted. However, there is limited knowledge about the interaction between the CWS and middle-class families. Through narrative positioning analysis, we explore how child welfare workers (CWWs) construct the identities of two middle-class families in contact with the service and how the CWWs' ideals about parenting are expressed through these stories. Both families are positioned as well-off, and the CWWs provide classed and gendered descriptions of the parents that coincide with dominant narratives of intensive mothering. As clients, the parents are constructed as active adaptive agents and active expert agents. The CWWs relationally construct themselves as a catalyst for change and as a support. The analysis provides insight into how the middle-class ideal is almost unnoticeably being solidified as a standard, and we metaphorically see the interaction between the parents and the CWS as 'status maintenance ceremonies'. We argue that a narrative positioning analytical framework can be further developed and used to increase reflection on social work practice and education.

SAMMENDRAG

Denne artikkelen utforsker normer for foreldreskap i en norsk barnevernskontekst. Både internasjonal og norsk forskning viser at foreldreskapsidealene er bygget på middelklasseverdier som ofte tas for gitt. Samtidig finnes det begrenset kunnskap om interaksjonen mellom barnevernet og middelklassefamilier. Gjennom en narrativ posisjoningsanalyse utforsker vi hvordan barnevernsarbeidere konstruerer identitetene til to middelklassefamilier som er i kontakt med tjenesten, og hvordan barnevernsarbeidernes idealer om foreldreskap uttrykkes gjennom disse narrativene. Analysen viser at begge familiene posisjoneres som ressurssterke, og barnevernsarbeiderne gir klassebaserte

KEYWORDS

Social work; good parenting; motherhood; class; narrative positioning analysis

NØKKEORD

Sosialt arbeid; «godt foreldreskap»; moderskap; klasse; narrativ posisjoningsanalyse

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og kjønnede beskrivelser av foreldrene som samsvarer med dominerende normer for intensivt moderskap. Som klienter blir foreldrene konstruert som tilpasningsdyktige aktive aktører og aktive ekspertaktører. Barnevernsarbeiderne posisjonerer seg selv relasjonelt som katalysator for endring og som støtte. Analysen gir innsikt i hvordan middelklasseidealet nesten umerkelig blir konsolidert som en standard, og vi ser metaforisk på samhandlingen mellom foreldrene og barnevernsarbeiderne som 'seremonier for opprettholdelse av status' ('Status maintenance ceremonies'). Vi argumenterer for at narrativ posisjoneringsanalyse kan videreutvikles og brukes for å øke refleksjonen i sosialt arbeid i praksis og utdanning.

Introduction

Social issues related to poverty and the lower classes have traditionally been the primary target of social work (Donzelot, 1979; Gibson, 2020), and low-income families are overrepresented in child welfare services (CWS) across different welfare regimes (Bywaters et al., 2016; Kojan & Storhaug, 2021). Current parenting ideals are built on middle-class values, and the child welfare service is an important actor that contributes to establishing boundaries of normality (Gillies, 2005; Hennem, 2010; Hollekim et al., 2016; Kojan & Fauske, 2011; Rugkåsa et al., 2017; Vagli, 2009). Research that addresses the interaction between parents and the CWS from a class perspective has shown that parents from lower classes are at risk of feeling stigmatised and not recognised, while parents from higher classes more often feel recognised in meetings with CWS workers (Fauske et al., 2018; Gupta, 2018). However, our knowledge of the interaction between middle-class parents and the CWS is scarce.

This article takes a closer look at the CWS narrative of good parenting through an in-depth reading of two rich stories about middle-class families in contact with the CWS. The case workers' stories represent heuristics for studying how norms of good parenting can come into play in child welfare practice. We apply a narrative positioning analysis (NPA) to better grasp the complexity of these stories, as an NPA makes it possible to navigate between fine-grained microanalysis and macroaccounts (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 380). The main question we ask is *How do child welfare workers (CWWs) construct the identities of middle-class parents in contact with the service, and how are the CWS ideals about parenting expressed through these stories?*

With the aim of being open and curious about how CWWs understand the concept of parenting, we do not apply a predefined concept but rather view parenting as a sensitizing concept that suggests where to look in the empirical material (inspired by Blumer, 1954).

The concept of good parenting in child welfare research

Previous research on parenting in a child welfare context has suggested that class (Kojan & Fauske, 2011), culture (Hollekim et al., 2016) and gender-specific (Fleckinger, 2022; Storhaug et al., 2012) expectations of parents affect CWWs' assessments of child–parent relations. Good parenting in the Norwegian discourse is dialogue-based and child-focused (Hollekim et al., 2016). Ideals about parenting have implications for social workers' images of parents and children and for what welfare measures are provided to families that are not able to meet the requirements.

The societal focus on parenting tends to ignore gender, while in reality, parenting relies on gendered practices (Daly, 2013). Mothers are expected to demonstrate a willingness to subordinate their own needs and interests to those of their children, and the perception of what constitutes socially appropriate mothering is an ideology of intensive mothering in which 'the methods of appropriate child-rearing are construed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996, p. 8). Lareau (2011) shows how the boundaries between

institutions and children's homes are fluid and finds that middle-class parents, especially mothers, repeatedly cross these boundaries in mediating their children's lives. Lareau refers to the middle-class child-rearing approach as 'concerted cultivation' characterised by high parental involvement. This involvement requires actively fostering and assessing children's skills, opinions and talents and constantly working to help them achieve their potential. Leisure activities organised by adults are an important part of daily life. Furthermore, Lareau (2011) argues that welfare institutions reproduce differential advantages among children by transferring middle-class ideals.

Narratives

Storytelling is a central human activity. Stories are distributed and circulated in every society (Gubrium, 2005; Klausen, 2017). We are the stories that we tell about ourselves (Fivush, 2010), and the stories define who we are in time and place and in relation to each other (Sørly et al., 2021). People organise their stories in relation to their surrounding context and according to culturally available narratives and plots (Sørly et al., 2021).

Organisations or fields of practice also use narratives. According to Linde (2009, p.11), institutions attempt to preserve aspects of their past and use them in the present to influence the future. Remembrance, memories, and transmission from human to human are all important parts of creating knowledge. Making sense of the past, present and future includes people telling stories. When certain people tell stories to their colleagues, their colleagues take up the stories and reuse them. The collective 'we' within a practice field might be able to tell a collective story: 'This is what we as social workers are thinking'. The transmission of knowledge is continuous. Quite often, collective stories become dominant narratives. Sometimes these dominant narratives are considered hegemonic, controlling stories (Linde, 2009). They are often collective representations of how we think the world is and how we think it should be. The dominant narratives are often taken for granted, for instance, in a CWS, and represent the majority's values (Mishler, 1995). These narratives create social boundaries between people and categorise people as 'others' or 'different' from oneself. CWWs might create dominant stories of the parents they meet throughout their professional life.

Identity construction is closely related to dominant narratives, stories, and storytelling. Our approach sees identities as grounded in these specific social processes and narrative practices (Komulainen et al., 2020). The focus in this perspective is not the narrator's ability to create a coherent identity but rather the process of identity performance with a focal point on the strategies the narrator uses to claim or present certain identities in certain situations (De Fina, 2015; Komulainen et al., 2020). By using a positioning analysis, we focus on what the CWWs are talking about and on storytelling as an interactive situation in which identities are created and interactively displayed (Komulainen et al., 2020) in close relation to dominant narratives. Institutional settings, such as the CWS, differ from many other research areas, as the expectations of people involved and tasks performed by them are more focused. Furthermore, parents and CWWs are interdependent, and the identities of both the parents and the professionals are negotiated and constructed in their interactions (Juhila & Abrams, 2011).

'Status maintenance ceremonies'

When taking a step back in the analysis of the interviews and trying to figure out how we could understand what the overarching narratives express about CWS identity construction, we were inspired by Garfinkel's (1956) classical paper about 'successful degradation ceremonies'. He argues that status degradation is universal for all societies, and the intention is to deprive people who stand outside society's laws, values, and norms by degrading their former identities and making them more susceptible to external control (Garfinkel, 1956; Gibson, 2020). The concept has been used to theorise the role that humiliation and shame can come to play in child protection services

when parents do not live up to the normative standards of good parenting and are defined as 'outsiders' (Gibson, 2020). Twisting the concept, we obtained the metaphorical concept 'status maintenance ceremonies', which helped us see what was taken for granted in the CWWs' stories about the two middle-class families.

Methods

This article is part of a larger study about child welfare and inequality. In the qualitative part of the main study, 37 parents and the CWWs in contact with 21 of these parents were interviewed. The participants were recruited from 9 different child welfare offices in Norway. The analysis in this article is based on two interviews with CWWs, thematizing their contact with one family each. Prior to analysis, the families were categorised as middle-class due to the parents' high education and leader position, a coarse-grained classification similar to Lareau's (2011, p. 365). For our analytical proposal, class is understood not merely as belonging to a category or possessing specific capital or assets but also as involving the activation of resources and social identities, or, rather, the interaction of these identities (Ball, 2002, pp. 175–176). The interaction is explored from the CWWs' point of view through their narratives. The implicit and explicit norms of good parenting expressed by the CWWs were visible throughout all of the empirical material, and the two interviews were chosen due to their information richness (Guetterman, 2015). The interviews functioned as a magnifying lens for the topic. The CWWs were women in their late 30s who had graduated at the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s. One of them had worked for the CWS for 14 years, mostly as a family counsellor, and the other had been working for the CWS for approximately 2.5 years, mostly investigating cases of concern.

The first author conducted the two interviews in Norwegian. The interviews began with questions about the CWWs' professional experience, and they were then invited to talk about a specific family, their daily life, their work challenges, parenting and their contact with the family. The interviews were semistructured and moved back and forth both thematically and chronologically. Both CWWs were eager to talk about their experiences. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the excerpts used in the article were translated to English after the analysis.

Ethics

The study was approved by The Norwegian Center for Research Data [ref. 580655]. The social workers received information about the study and provided their consent to participate. The parents provided specific consent for the CWWs to talk about their cases. Both the parents and the CWWs were assured of confidentiality, and their stories were anonymized to protect the participants and other persons mentioned in the stories.

Narrative positioning analysis

In this study, we understand the stories being told as performative acts of identity construction. All these stories were performed in social interactions in an interview context with the first author, and we focus on the storytelling act between the first author and the narrators in our analysis. As narrators, we construct our own and others' identities *in situ*. We use a three-level positioning analysis to study the CWWs' understanding of good parenting. Level 1 highlights the question 'What is the story about?' and focuses on how the characters are positioned in the story's time and place. It 'reveals aspects to how they view the world' (Bamberg, 2004). Level 2 addresses the question 'Why is the story told in this way at this particular time?' The interactive setting between the interviewer and the interviewee in the interview situation is thus analysed. Level 3 investigates the narrators' positioning of themselves in relation to the dominant narrative of good parenting. We try to understand

how their narratives are situated in relation to broader social and cultural processes beyond the immediate storytelling situation (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

Inspired by social scientists emphasising creativity in research, in contrast to the more deductive process of merely applying theories, we use counterfactuals (Paulsen, 2014), and we use reversals and reconceptualization as heuristic tools (Abbott, 2004). In this manner, we try to see the whole narration process *as something* (Asplund, 1970) and thus reverse the 'status degradation ceremony' (Garfinkel, 1956) by seeing the stories as stories of 'status maintenance ceremonies'.

Analysis – two CWWs' stories about parents' willingness to change

Both stories are about families where the CWWs were initially concerned about the children's well-being and the changes that then happened. After the initial investigations, both families received counselling, and it was decided that the CWS would meet with the families and professionals at the children's schools.

The narrative of a willing mother and an absent father

One of the CWWs described her experiences working with Karianne, her husband, and their two boys, who were 13 and 10 years old. The family came into contact with the CWS after the office in charge of mental health care for children and adolescents (BUP¹) sent a note of concern to the CWS because the 13-year-old had said that his parents had become violent when he expressed anger at home because of bullying at school. The CWS organised separate meetings with the children and the parents. Eventually, the parents were offered parental counselling as a supportive measure, which they accepted. The CWS assessed this measure and concluded that it was effective in improving their parenting practices.

At the beginning of the interview, the CWW was asked what she knew about the family's daily life, which she summarised as follows:

- C: So they are well-off² [ressurssterke] people, family, in the first place. And the children went to leisure activities and football and swimming. And ... yes, I am thinking they are a family that has a social network [...] With the exception of these challenges, I think that they are a quite ordinary family with decent income, [...] but they came into a difficult situation, and it became difficult for them to deal with it, and they lacked some tools to handle this challenge: the situation that the son [13] found himself in and the challenges that he faced from it.
- I: Who sent the note of concern, then; I am sorry, was it the [BUP]? No?
- C: Yes, [...] and then a conversation was conducted with the son [13], which the parents did not know about because there was suspicion of violence. Uh ... and it has been very difficult for the parents; they felt [that] they lost all control.

The interviewer asked the CWW how she would describe the parents before and after the counselling, and the CWW said:

- C: I have just seen them with the kids two times, so if I am going to describe them, it will be based on what they told me ... I think that is sometimes a bit frightening to do.
- I: Mmm. How do you think the parental counselling has worked, then?
- C: Both parents were here at the beginning, and mom continued, and the father quit. So the mother may have been more engaged with these things than the father. [...] They have learnt techniques and obtained tools that made it easier for them to handle challenging situations. They think that what they have learnt and used has contributed to positive changes in the family and the relationships among family members. Especially the relationship between mother and son [13], which we have mainly focused on. [...] They have been committed, interested, reflective, [and] made use of the counselling to a very great extent. [They've] been open, brought up different problems, tried out what we have been talking about in the counselling. They have tried things out after the meetings, and they have been open about how it went, both when it has worked out and when what they experienced has been difficult to manage. [...] They realized quite quickly themselves that they had to handle [situations] differently, and they have worked thoroughly with this to gain an increased understanding of the regulation of his feelings. Uh ... it had an effect rather early in the counselling.

- I: Do you think that there were some similarities or differences in how the father and mother dealt with the children? Do you know anything about that?
- C: I think, that maybe since mom has continued with the counselling and dad has not done that, and the main focus was very much regulating emotions and meeting emotions ... that perhaps the mother has come further in her development than the father and ... that mom may have started to make more changes than the father has done. [...] I believe the mother has probably worked more actively on it at home than the father has done, again because it's mom who's come here the whole time. She was here 12 times without the father, the last 12 times this year, [...]. A little more than a year. Even though the mother has probably talked to the father about it, that will never be quite the same experience for him.

The narrative of protective and intensive mothering

The other CWW was interviewed about her contact with Marit and her son, Mats. Mats was 9 years old and had no contact with his father. The CWS came into contact with Marit and Mats after receiving four notes of concern regarding Mats's absences from school, Marit involving her son in 'adult stuff' and concerns about Marit's mental health. Severe school refusal was seen as the main challenge by the CWS, but the situation changed when Mats changed schools and his mother was finally allowed by the school to be present for her child at school, which she wanted. She stopped working to be available for her son. When the CWW was asked to talk about the family, she said:

- C: He is a boy who has little [...] or no contact with his father [...] I wonder if he has only seen him in a photo and that is what he knows about his father. The mother is a well-off mother whom ... we assess does everything in her power for her son ... and then he has challenges that lead to him not having attended school for a long time. [...] I think [the first meeting with the CWS] was a quite brutal meeting for the mother because she had not imagined [coming into contact with the CWS].
- I: So I wonder if maybe you can first tell me a little bit about their everyday life? If you know anything about it.
- C: What is it like now? Yes, now it is turned around. [The child started to be more present at school] [...] The mother has been [...] there for him [at school], and mom has worked with [her child's] assistant to advise how they are going to ... handle the boy and know what to do if he gets sad or what to do to motivate him. [...]
- I: Has she changed as a parent in any way since she came into contact with child welfare services, or ... ?
- C: Uh ... That is, it's kind of hard for me to say because we haven't observed them at home [...]. So we've been focusing on ... school. Uh ... so we have not mapped her out as a mother. We have only had conversations with her.
- I: Has she said anything about what makes her so stressed when in contact with the CWS?
- C: She's had a fight with [local authorities], and she hasn't felt recognised. She says that she feels met in good faith by the CWS, but that [...] she wants to focus on what is important for her to focus on, and that's that Mats returns to school. She doesn't want to spend time and energy and ... uh ... use force when she doesn't have to. So I think that we should respect her for that. Since we assessed that [...], we have had the same goal all the way, and that has been a positive development [of her son].

The CWS gave the mother the choice of whether she wanted to end her contact with the CWS, and the mother asked whether the CWS could cover the expenses of a psychologist for her because of her conflicts with different institutions regarding her son, which the CWS agreed to do.

- I: You mentioned that she was very well-off. In what way is that expressed?
- C: She is educated, highly educated [...], and has worked a lot. She has adapted her work so that she has worked intensively and then she has been off for long periods. Uh, yes, and I think that, even now, in the situation she is standing in [...], she invites Mats's friends over, and she ... she brings both Mats and [his] friends to activities, and they go on camping trips. I think that may be very difficult to achieve while under pressure, but still, she makes it work, so I think she is a well-off lady.
- I: If you're going to compare, in some way, the CWS's view of parenting and being a parent and her way of being a parent, do you think there are any similarities or any differences there?
- C: Yes. Like I said earlier, [she] hands things to him on a plate, right? She may have been very kind and very available. Uh ... there is some need to make Mats more independent so that he becomes an independent individual and that she may have been a bit ... a bit ... overprotective, quite simply.
- I: Do you have an example of that?
- C: She has done everything with the best intentions, but she has, in a way, [...] set her own needs very much to the side [...] for Mats's sake.

A three-level positioning analysis

There are both similarities and differences in the CWWs' narrations about the families. Both stories concern willingness to change the children's situation for the better. In the case of Karianne and her husband, the story is about the parents' willingness to change their parenting practices, and the narration about Marit relates to her efforts to change how the school treats her son. Both stories also address the role the CWS plays in these processes. In the following analysis, the three levels of positioning are presented separately, but in the narratives, the levels are interwoven.

Level 1 – Positioning of story characters

Both social workers explicitly position Marit and Karianne as well-off parents. Karianne's CWW relates this to her children's participation in leisure activities, social networks, and favourable living conditions. The CWW in contact with Marit emphasises her high level of education, work flexibility and involvement with her son's friends. As well-off parents, they are considered to be able to do more for their children and to be more involved than they could otherwise be.

The CWWs position the parents in terms of who is responsible for the family's situation. In both cases, the underlying understanding is that the parents have done everything 'right' and that they came up against a situation they could not control where the cause of the 'problem' came from the child. This logic also appears in a former study from the Norwegian CWS. Defining the child as the cause of the 'problem' was found to be more common in middle-class families – in contrast to working-class families, where the 'problem' is often defined as rooted in the parents (Kojan & Fauske, 2011). The CWW in contact with Karianne's family said that they are a 'quite ordinary family' but that they 'came into a difficult situation' and 'lacked some tools to handle this challenge'. Marit is positioned as more proactive than Karianne and her husband and is more exempted from guilt for the child's situation. The CWW said about Marit that 'the mother is a well-off mother whom ... we assess does everything in her power for her son ... and then he has challenges that lead to him not having attended school for a long time'.

As the stories move back and forth, the parents are constructed as active agents of change. The CWW in contact with Karianne and her husband provided parental counselling. Asked how she thinks the counselling worked, the CWW said that 'they have been committed, interested, reflective, [and] made use of the counselling to a very great extent. [They've] been open, brought up different problems, tried out what we have been talking about in the counselling'. One of the things they worked on was increasing their understanding of how to regulate their son's feelings; they 'realised [it] quite quickly themselves', which 'had an effect rather early in the counselling'. Karianne and her husband are positioned as active adaptable agents through their ability to reflect, be open and be committed. The CWW explained that she provided the parents with tools to try at home and saw that this improved the family's situation; thus, the CWW positioned herself as a catalyst for change.

Marit is positioned as the parent with the greatest agency. However, in contrast to Karianne's case, the focus in Marit's case is not on changing parenting practices directed towards her son but rather on how she works to change the way the school treats her son. Marit works with her child's assistant at school to ensure that they know how to 'handle the boy, and know what to do if he gets sad, or what to do to motivate him'. The CWW positions the mother as an active expert agent who is more professional than the school in supporting her son. The CWW positions herself as a support for the mother and less as a catalyst, as did the CWW in the case of Karianne and her husband. The CWW noted that Marit 'doesn't want to spend time and energy and ... uh ... use force when she doesn't have to. So I think that we should respect her for that'. Expressing her support for the mother's view seems to be connected to the CWW's interpretation that they all had the 'same goal all the way, and that has been a positive development [of her son]'.

There are differences and similarities in the CWWs' positioning of the mothers and fathers in the two families, and Bamberg (1997) suggests looking for who are constructed as antagonists and protagonists as one approach to analyse the positioning in relation to each other. The mothers are both

positioned as protagonists and play the main role regarding responsibility and willingness to change, while the fathers are positioned as antagonists. Mats's father is, from the start of the story, positioned as a totally absent antagonist, present only through a photo. In the CWW's narration of Karianne and her husband, two stories about parenting occur at the same time. The CWW talks about the parents as a unit in which they are both protagonists ('They have been committed, interested, reflective [...]') and in parallel describes Karianne as the protagonist and her husband as an absent antagonist ('both parents were here at the beginning, and mom continued, and the father quit'). The CWW said that they have focused mainly on the relationship between the mother and son (13) and that the mother has talked with her husband about the counselling at home. The CWW accepts the father's detachment, and the mother is positioned as the most important actor for change: 'mom may have started to make more changes than the father'.

Level 2 – Positioning in the interactive setting

At this level, an important question to ask is why a certain story is told at a particular point in time. The empirical material is not simply 'collected' but partly constructed in the intersubjective context. At the time of the interview, the CWWs had been informed about the topic of research, which probably influenced how they framed their stories. The CWWs received an informed consent letter with information about the research project, including that the researcher wanted to 'investigate how CWWs perceive parenting in different families' and that parents with low socioeconomic status (SES) as well as parents with high levels of education and/or income would be interviewed. In emphasising the parents as well-off at level 1, both CWWs may have been influenced by how they perceived the project. However, the CWWs did not just 'label' the parents but also provided thorough descriptions of how they were 'well-off', and they demonstrated that the parents' position influenced their child's welfare case, indicating that the CWWs' stories were not *just* locally produced by the interactive setting.

The audience for the story is another important focus. The stories were being told to a female PhD student studying parenting in the CW context. This inevitably influenced how the CWWs talked about the parents as well as their own role as CWWs. For example, the CWW in contact with Karianne and her husband described how the parents (mainly Karianne) changed their parenting practices through parental counselling. However, when asked *directly* whether their parenting practices changed after their work with the CWS, the CWW said, 'It will be based on what they told me' and noted that she thinks it is 'sometimes a bit frightening to do'. It is possible that the direct question from the researcher caused the CWWs to reflect more critically on what they could actually know about the parents' parenting practices. Additionally, in the case of Marit, the CWW said that it is difficult for her to know whether the mother had changed her parenting practices since her work with the CWS began 'because we haven't observed them at home'. However, the CWW did have opinions on Marit's parenting, and she believed that the CWS and Marit had the same goals.

Level 3 – Positioning in the dominant narrative of good parenting

When the CWWs position the parents as 'well-off' at level 1, they provide classed descriptions of the families, even though the term class is not explicitly mentioned. The CWWs closely connect being 'well-off' with what we at level 3 can identify as norms of good parenting and normative conditions for good parenting. The children's participation in leisure activities and the family's social network, decent income, high level of education, flexibility at work and involvement in the children's activities are examples that the CWWs use to show that the parents are well-off. These classed descriptions of the parents form an important foundation that the CWWs draw on when assessing the situation of the children and the families, and the underlying, taken-for-granted understanding seems to be that the middle-class position of the parents means that the CWWs should not be overly concerned about the children's situation. An interesting contradiction in the CWWs' stories is how the families, particularly Karianne and her family, are at level 1,

positioned both as 'well-off' and 'quite ordinary' at the same time. With reference to the broader social and cultural processes at level 3, the CWWs are somehow normalising the parents' middle-class life.

The CWWs express that good parenting consists of *skills* that must be learnt. Karianne and her husband 'have learnt techniques and obtained tools' that made it easier for them to handle challenging situations. These skills seem closely related to the scientific discourse about child development and attachment theory, which is reflected in the CWWs' discussion of how the parents gained 'an increased understanding of the regulation of his [13-year-old son's] feelings' through parental counselling. This understanding of good parenting as skills that must be learnt through reference to scientific evidence on child development is an important component of intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2014).

The positioning of the mothers and fathers as protagonists and antagonists cannot, at level 3, be understood in isolation from gendered expectations of parenting. At level 3, it may be more accurate to talk about middle-class parenting, motherhood, and fatherhood than the more generalised concept of parenting. As the relationship between Karianne and their son (13) is the CWW's main focus and the father's absence is accepted, we can employ counterfactuals (Paulsen, 2014): How would the CWS react if the mother chose not to attend parental counselling? Would the CWW have changed her focus to the relation between the father and son (13), even though the mother had also been violent against the son? Of course, these questions cannot be conclusively answered, but the dominant narrative about motherhood in the culture makes it less likely that the mother would have been positioned as an absent antagonist without also being accused of being a 'bad mother'.

At level 3, the mothers in both stories easily live up to the CWS's expectations of parenting, which are 'classed' and 'gendered'. Their parenting is assessed based on 'skills' as well as lifestyle. The CWWs position both themselves and the mothers close to the dominant story of 'good parenting', which seems to be equivalent to 'intensive mothering'. However, the CWW's narration about Marit also demonstrates that she not only embraces Marit's parenting according to the norm but also partly distances herself from what she seems to think are signs of *too* intensive motherhood, as she has not managed to make her son independent and prioritise herself. The CWW said, 'There is some need to make Mats more independent [...] and that she may have been a bit ... a bit ... over-protective, quite simply. [...] She has done everything with the best intentions, but she has, in a way, [...] set her own needs very much to the side [...] for Mats's sake'.

Discussion

We have explored how CWWs construct the identities of middle-class parents in contact with the service and how the CWS ideals about parenting are expressed through their stories. The analysis has shown how the 'internal grammatic' or logic of the often taken-for-granted middle-class norms can play out in CWWs' narratives about parents. Both families are positioned as well-off, and the CWWs provide classed and gendered descriptions of the parents that coincide with dominant narratives of intensive parenting (or, more specifically, intensive mothering) – in which the parents engage closely with the children in their daily lives and provide professionalised emotional support. The CWWs also strongly emphasise the parents' ability to demonstrate reflexivity in their meetings with the CWS.

Since the CWWs and the parents are interdependent, so is the construction of their identities as clients and professionals (Juhila & Abrams, 2011). Through the narration, change was described as coming easily, and the mothers were quickly regarded as parenting authorities. As mentioned, at level 1, Karianne and her husband are constructed as active adaptive agents, while the CWW positions herself as a catalyst for change. Marit is constructed as an active expert agent, and the CWW positions herself as a support for the mother. The CWWs' stories can metaphorically be seen as a process of 'status maintenance ceremonies', in contrast to

'status degradation ceremonies' (Garfinkel, 1956). The parents have both their parenting practices and the conditions for parenting 'approved'; the CWWs seem to relate to the mothers, and the mothers are implicitly regarded as 'insiders'. During the CWWs' stories, the parents' position is strengthened, and the analysis provides insight into how the middle-class ideal is almost unnoticeably solidified as a standard.

There are interesting contradictions between level 1 and level 2 regarding how parenting and change are approached. At level 1, parenthood and conditions of parenthood are described by the CWWs, but at level 2, in the interactive setting, the CWWs realise that what they can truly know about their parenting is questionable, as their impression is based mostly on what the parents have told them. The CWWs' professional reflexivity is activated in dialogue with the researcher, demonstrating that the CWWs are aware that interpretations are vulnerable to taken for granted assumptions when relating first and foremost on parents' abilities to engage with the CWS. According to Lareau (2011), the capability of parents to negotiate with institutions to acquire optimal help is one of the advantages enjoyed by middle-class children. The contradiction between the levels shows how the resources and interaction skills of middle-class parents can pose a challenge to the CWS's knowledge and decision-making process. Former research has shown that this dynamic can make it difficult to assess whether the child is exposed to harm (Sudland & Basberg Neumann, 2021).

The CWWs' perspectives on the parents' abilities to reflect on their parenting seem, together with the conditions for good (middle-class) parenting, to make the CWWs trust the parents and allow them ample space and agency. There seems to be a 'perfect fit' between the CWW perspectives and how they perceive the parents' practices and way of life. We could ask whether these kinds of stories are the stories that become hegemonic stories, the stories that parents who do not have the time, money, and knowledge to meet the standards are also measured against. When CWWs relate their understanding to currently dominant ideas about what good parenting is, they risk passing over smaller stories that are different but still matter (Marlow et al., 2022).

Limitations

The analysis and discussion of this article must be understood in context. We have studied the narrations about two middle-class families, where the CWWs defined the family's challenges as not as bad as they initially thought they might be. Even though the narrations are seen in relation to the complete material, earlier research and the broader societal context, we cannot make any claims about the frequency of the phenomenon studied. The strength of the analysis is related to its complexity as well as the unusual move to address norms by studying families that are defined as 'insiders'. Another obvious limitation that must be considered is that we have not included the parents' narration, and we make no claims about whether the parents feel that their position is maintained.

Concluding remarks and implications

NPA is, from the authors' point of view, not only fruitful in research but also a framework that can be further developed and used to increase reflection in social work practice and education. As shown in the analysis, NPA is well suited to exploring narrations about encounters with people who live up to the normative standards of the services, and critical reflections on these encounters and narrations can provide insights into how norms are strengthened in the services. The learning potential will probably increase through discussion and critical reflection on narration about families with a wide range of backgrounds, enabling power relations to be illuminated to a greater extent (Mattsson, 2014).

Notes

1. Norwegian abbreviation.
2. The Norwegian term used by both the CWWs is 'ressurssterk'. It literally means 'resource-strong' and reflects a person or group of people who are well-equipped, often with a good economy, education, experience, and social status (Ressurssterk, 2023). The meaning is close to that of 'privileged' [priviligert], but 'ressurssterk' has less connotation of hierarchy than 'privileged'. 'Well-off' seems to be the best fit for ressurssterk, even though it emphasizes *primarily* a good economy. 'Ressursterk' is a broader concept.

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