

Introduction

Halvor Nordby Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences
Grethe Netland Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

What is the significance of family in a child welfare (CW) context? In this book, we discuss this question from three different perspectives. One is the perspective of children and families who are in contact with CW services – what we call the ‘recipient’ perspective. Another is the perspective of CW workers – what we call the ‘professional’ perspective. A third perspective is what we call the ‘system’ perspective – how organisational frameworks, family values and social conditions influence professional CW work.

Although the context for many of the discussions in the book is Norwegian CW work, the topics are general, recognisable and relevant to similar discussions in other countries. There is broad consensus that family is important both as a social institution and as a place of intimacy and care. Families can be of various kinds, but they often consist of children and one or two parents – whether they are biological parents or not – who live together or separately.

As part of a social institution, the family’s adult members have a responsibility to meet children’s basic needs. When this responsibility becomes too much of a burden for the parents, they may need assistance from professional CW services. Much CW work is based on voluntary participation, where help comes in the form of guidance or practical assistance. But when there are serious problems in a child’s care situation, such as abuse, and if the parents do not wish to cooperate voluntarily, the CW services may intervene against the will of the parents. There are also cases in which the child itself does not wish to receive help from CW services, sometimes in

accordance with parents' wishes, sometimes not. In all cases of conflict, the significance of family becomes particularly salient. The disagreement is not about family being important, but what weight family ties should be given in decisions about possible interventions and care arrangements, and how these ties should be acknowledged in CW work. The book's chapters illustrate how profound such disagreements can be.

Two main questions underlying the discussions in the book are what happens when CW services intervene in family life, in some cases by removing a child from its original family¹, and how this creates challenges for the child, the family and the CW services. Contributing to answering these questions requires awareness of the more general questions of what a family is, how parents and children have a right to decide how they wish to live their lives, and why families normally have great significance in people's lives. Understanding this is important for everyone who works with the welfare of children and their families, and for those who educate CW workers. This book is intended for CW workers, policy makers, researchers, and teachers and students in social work and CW study programmes.

Below we elaborate on the three above-mentioned perspectives – the recipient perspective, the professional perspective and the system perspective, but first we would like to emphasise that there is no sharp distinction between them. The perspectives overlap, the differences are not very strict and many of the chapters focus on more than one of them. We believe that the three perspectives nevertheless represent fruitful approaches to the book's theme in the sense that they complement each other. By using them to generate relevant knowledge, the book can help develop a comprehensive understanding of the significance of family in a CW context.

The book's authors have different professional backgrounds. Together, they bring in theory, practice and research experience from the social sciences, psychology, sociology, social anthropology, law and philosophy. This means that the book's theme is illuminated from different theoretical points of view and that it reflects how knowledge about CW work is based on contributions from many disciplines.

1 We use 'original family', not 'biological family', in order to include families where one or both parent(s) are not the child's biological origin.

The recipient perspective

Within the recipient perspective, we want to contribute to knowledge of how children and their families experience encounters and cooperation with CW workers. The aim is to highlight the voices and narratives of those who experience CW work with children as a form of social service – how children and their families understand and are affected by professionals' communicative acts and interventions.

Understanding recipient perspectives is important in all practical social work. It is especially important in relational work where professionals' decisions and choices of actions must be based on insight through communication and social understanding. In CW work with families, insight into the family's specific context, practices and understanding of the child's care situation is essential. CW workers must try to ensure that they and the involved parties share an understanding of the relevant facts to a reasonable degree, and they must try to meet families in a way that creates trust and cooperation in finding good solutions for the child concerned. CW work with children and families is definitely an area where it is important to secure both informative communication (giving and receiving information) and relational communication (establishing and securing appropriate relations).

The insight CW workers gain in specific encounters with families is unique and contributes to the goal of gaining a good understanding of the care situation of each child. At the same time, more general knowledge about how different groups of recipients typically, or at least often, perceive communication with CW services can also be useful in the specific meetings.² It is first and foremost this type of background knowledge we are concerned with when we focus on the voices of children and families. If the knowledge is not used uncritically, but adapted with care to each context where the knowledge is relevant, it can be valuable for professionals.

2 The importance of being able to adapt to each family and their context (individual adaptation) and being able to apply knowledge about groups has a clear parallel to the difference between the concepts of cultural sensitivity and cultural understanding. As these are commonly understood, the first is about being aware of how individuals relate to cultural frameworks to a greater or lesser extent. The second is concerned with general knowledge of different cultural frameworks.

This importance of contextual understanding is striking when compared with professional work with people where natural science knowledge is central. Consider, for instance, somatic health care. Health-related work of a medical nature is mainly based on general biomedical knowledge about disease, illness and bodily injuries. This type of knowledge does not, and should not, have a prominent place in ordinary CW work. Here it is necessary to think more comprehensively along a variety of individual, relational and social dimensions, and to make many assumptions and assessments that are not 'research-based' in a strict sense. Furthermore, all kinds of knowledge and preconceptions that CW workers bring when they meet families must be balanced against what may emerge as new and distinctive in each specific meeting. Nevertheless, knowledge of how various groups of families have typically experienced meetings with CW services can be valuable as a starting point in the meetings, if the knowledge is used tentatively and adjusted to each situation.

The authors of the empirically based chapters in the book use qualitative research methods to develop in-depth analyses of how children and parents have experienced their encounters with CW services. Attempting to elicit and describe such experiences – without significantly interpreting them in the light of theory – falls under what Gubrium and Holstein (1997) call a *naturalistic approach* in qualitative research. The basic idea of naturalism is to let what informants say – and typically the literal meaning of the words they use – be essential in analyses of the meaning of their narratives (Brekhus et al., 2005). In accordance with this, many of the chapters in the book seek to convey the genuine stories of families phenomenologically, in a wide sense of phenomenology. The presentations of the narratives aim to capture the informants' authentic experiences, and these experiences are then analysed according to various theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Another way of describing this phenomenological aim is to say that when we seek to convey the voices of children and their families, we aim to uncover aspects of their *horizons of understanding*. As the concept *horizon of understanding* is usually understood in the academic literature, it does not only include thoughts, beliefs and perceptions to which we have conscious access. Our horizon of understanding is our entire mental life – everything that lies behind our actions and interpretations of others' actions, including mental perspectives that we do not have our

attention directed towards at a given moment (Gadamer, 2004; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). Horizons of understanding also include values, attitudes and experiences that can contribute to explaining why we act and interpret other people the way we do. Several of the chapters in the book aim to present not only children's and families' specific thoughts and beliefs about their encounters with CW workers, but also to convey a wider understanding of their experiences and how these experiences have shaped their lives in various ways.

The recipient perspective is particularly salient in four chapters. In the chapters 'Narrative Identities in Children as Next of Kin. A Qualitative Interview Study' and 'How Parental Relationships Influence Young People's Identities and Meaning Constructions of Family and Family Life', children and young adults present their experiences as children of parents with substance use disorders or mental health problems. In the chapter 'Inclusion of Children and Youth in Foster Families: Aims, Challenges and Solutions', foster parents and youths who have been living in foster families were interviewed about their understanding of family. In the chapter 'Family Ruptures and Un-Belonging: Discomfort in the Norwegian Child Welfare and Migrant Minority Families', parents with minority backgrounds were interviewed about their experiences from meetings with CW services.

The recipient perspective is also important in chapters where new data is not presented, but where the importance of understanding the voices of parents and children is nevertheless highlighted. Common to the authors of these contributions is that they aim to show the significance of including knowledge and analyses of recipient perspectives in professional decisions and interventions. A variety of theoretical resources are used to elucidate how this is crucial.

The professional perspective

The importance of including families in decision-making processes falls under the more general point that the work of professionals does not start with a clean slate. Just as recipients of CW services understand decisions and interventions on the basis of their horizons of understanding, professionals act on the basis of their perspectives. In the book, the professional perspective is addressed in two ways.

First, we are concerned with norms and principles that govern professional practice. These are rules of legislation and normative principles

that are central in CW work, but can also include methodological procedures, procedures or internal rules of action, such as ‘internal rules’ in a CW institution for youths (for example, household rules). This part of the professional perspective is linked to formal frameworks. By this we mean conceptual understandings that are formalised in writing, often as norms for practice. In CW work, the most fundamental formal principle is ‘the best interest of the child’. CW workers should always attempt to find solutions that are best for the children they work with.

Second, we are concerned with informal and not conceptualised parts of professional practice: unarticulated preconceptions, ways of thinking and ideologies that characterise CW services’ work with families as essential aspects of professional practice. These are more underlying and implicit perspectives, often linked to basic and unarticulated normative assumptions, grounded in cultural practices, professional paradigms or interpretations of principles. In some cases, the use of normative assumptions can result in what Engebretsen and Heggen (2012) call ‘hidden power’, that is, the use of power that may be informal, unconscious and not always well-founded. Understanding hidden power is a particularly important point in CW work with children and families, because it can potentially be a highly powerful professional practice.

One way of highlighting the tension between the formal and informal aspects of the justificatory basis for practice is to link the tension to the distinction between requirements and limitations on the one hand and room of action on the other. CW workers’ room of action is limited by formal requirements such as legislation and regulations, but also by constraints such as finances, human resources and more individual issues like lack of experience or limited personal professional competence. The room of action represents the professional autonomy of each individual to make his or her own choices (Stewart, 1982). This does not mean that the room of action is a simple matter of preference for CW workers, but rather that they have a professional duty to make professionally justified choices within the possibilities that exist.

This is a particularly important point in CW services’ work with families, because the room of action is often significant and there can be a lot at stake. In order to create and maintain good working relationships, it is necessary to communicate well and to think actively, sometimes quite creatively – ‘outside the box’ – about what might be good choices. Normally, it is possible to choose between many alternatives of action, including

communicative acts, within the formal requirements of the work. Even minor choices that might seem insignificant can be of great importance in efforts to improve the child's care situation.

Within the professional perspective, our approach to what horizons of understanding include is wide. As in the recipient perspective, we are concerned here with capturing experiences phenomenologically. But we are even more interested in ways of thinking that characterise the work implicitly. This is especially important in our concern with values and attitudes that professionals express – as parts of the horizon of understanding that govern their actions, but which do not appear as literally in language as beliefs and thoughts normally do. Getting a handle on such aspects of horizons of understanding requires uncovering what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to in their influential discussion of thematic analysis as underlying 'latent' and not just 'semantic' meaning. The depth of explanation is greater than that provided by phenomenological approaches, and we use what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2017) call 'alethic' interpretive perspectives in analyses of data and discussion of results, as this is common practice in research based on qualitative methods.

The professional perspective appears in several of the chapters. The chapter 'Quality and Legitimacy in ECEC Mapping: How Can Mapping Contribute to the Protection of Children and Their Families?' builds on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workers' experiences in cooperating with families and welfare services. In 'Family Group Conferences and Discourse Ethics in Child Welfare Work', family group conferences as a professional working model for including families in decision-making processes are critically discussed. Several of the chapters that are concerned with the recipient perspective are, as mentioned above, also concerned with the professional perspective. An important aim of these chapters is to compare the understandings of professionals and families, and to highlight contrasting views and experiences.

In addition to the chapters that present professional understandings, several chapters are concerned with the professional perspective in a more theoretical sense. The chapter 'Family Ethics and Child Welfare' contains a discussion of how much parents should be allowed to decide over their own children. This question is highly relevant for how professionals should exercise their right and duty to intervene in family life, and how the value of family as a 'unit' can conflict with the professional mandate to do what is best for the child. Many chapters in the book contain discussions on how

influential conceptual frameworks about families and CW services have action-guiding implications for CW workers.

The system perspective

While the recipient and professional perspectives are viewpoints at opposite ends of the collaborative relationship between CW services and families, the system perspective concerns this relationship in a larger context. Here, background knowledge of professional and recipient perspectives is relevant, but this knowledge is more of a starting point for analyses within more comprehensive frameworks.

Within the system perspective, we seek to understand CW work with families both from structural and ideological perspectives, and on different levels of explanation. Some contributions focus on specific contexts of interaction between CW services and families. This can be the social arenas in which CW services' cooperation with families is initiated, such as ECEC institutions, but may also be the organisational frameworks for interaction, such as family group conferences. Other contributions focus more on overarching ideologies, structures and social conditions that influence CW work with families. Some chapters focus explicitly on normative value principles that are central in CW work, such as the biological principle and the principle of protection, in addition to the overarching 'best interest of the child' principle. Other chapters are more concerned with political, legal, economic and ideological structures.

In three of the book's chapters, such discussions are particularly evident. In 'Should Foster Care Replace the Family? Child Welfare and the Value of Family Privacy', the boundary between the family and the state's responsibility for children is thematised. The chapter 'As Beings, Children Need to Be at Home' is a discussion on the importance of having a home. In 'Children, Family, and State: Changing Relationships and Responsibilities', light is shed on how perceptions of the relationship between children, family and state change over time, and how this relationship is enshrined in legislation.

Underlying these discussions is the fact that international conventions on the status and rights of children and families express norms and values that states are obliged to follow. In many of the chapters these conventions are addressed, especially in light of the fact that the conventions provide the premises for how the right to family life is to be understood. Article 3 (1)

of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.' As the principle of the best interest of the child is understood in the Convention, it is linked to the right to grow up in a family. Article 7 (1) states that 'The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.' Article 9 (1) expresses the fundamental importance of the family in a child's life:

States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. (United Nations, 1989)

The most fundamental conflicts between families and CW services typically occur when the original family relation is challenged and when families disagree that separation is necessary to secure the best interests of the child. The child's original family members may think that family ties are so important that it is in the child's best interests to live at home despite major problems. The CW services, on the other hand, may believe that it is better for the child that the CW services take over the care.

This does not mean that CW services do not seek to acknowledge original family ties in cases of placement. Quite the contrary, the services will normally seek to acknowledge family ties as far as the care situation permits, for instance by looking for a possible placement in the extended family or the family's network when it is realistically possible. Sometimes, however, a foster home with an entirely new family is considered to be the best solution. In such cases, CW workers will normally attempt to maintain the bonds with original family, in line with legal regulations which emphasise the biological principle, usually by arranging regular meetings with the original parents. But if there are very special reasons for not doing so, it may be necessary to minimise contact with original parents, or even cut the bonds completely.

A child who is placed in a foster home may sometimes think of the foster family as their own family. For children who have a very close relationship

with their foster parents and little or no contact with original parents, it might be natural to say, 'This is my family now'. This illustrates how the ordinary meaning of the word 'family' does not imply that original parents necessarily represent family. But children can also say things like 'I miss my real family' if they are not happy in foster care. Children living in foster care, even though they are living in a foster family, may not necessarily regard it as their own family.

With regard to institutional placement, the concept of family is less relevant as a term for relationships between the child and others in the institution. Some children who have lived in an institution for a long time may refer to the place as 'my home', as in 'This is my home now'. But it would seem strange to talk about other residents or staff as 'my' family. So there is an intuitive difference between foster parents and institutions, even though neither of the arrangements represent original family. The difference illustrates how the concept of family is more complex than one might think. The term 'family' can refer to different family constellations. It is not easy to define the term in a way that includes all the nuances of common usage.

In a traditional sense, conceptual analysis is an attempt to clarify the meaning of words in the light of the different ways of using them, in more or less common linguistic practices (Wittgenstein, 1953; Harman, 1999). As just shown, intuitions about how it is possible to use the term 'family' can therefore help to clarify its meaning, the content of the concept 'family' in our shared language. An important aim of the book is to contribute to the debate on how the concept of family should be understood. Analyses of the meaning of family are especially important at the system level, as such analyses are important for understanding the frameworks of the meaning of family in CW workers' cooperation with families.

The chapter 'Norwegian Child Welfare Cases in the European Court of Human Rights – an Ethical Perspective on the Judgments' clearly shows that the concept of family can be understood in different ways and that there are disagreements about the importance of different forms of families. This issue also surfaces in other chapters concerning family rights and cooperation between CW workers and families. Common to the discussions in these chapters are their efforts to show that achieving a good understanding of the significance of family in CW work requires more than capturing the horizons of understanding of professionals or the families they work with. It is also necessary to describe, interpret and analyse

different perspectives on family. These may be political, cultural and religious frameworks, or frameworks based on experience, research or theory.

This does not mean that horizons of understanding are unimportant within the system perspective. But the importance is more directly related to our role as researchers. In the final instance, all the chapters in the book – also those that focus primarily on recipient perspectives and professional perspectives – are developed from our perspectives on the significance of family in CW work. When we as researchers focus on this, our descriptions, interpretations and analyses – and the conclusions we draw – are coloured by our beliefs, interests and preferences. What is often called ‘double hermeneutics’ is especially salient in the research presented in this book. Understanding the significance of family in CW work is to a large extent a matter of interpreting various expressions of meaning: texts, documents or the narratives of informants. But these interpretations are made by us as researchers on the basis of our horizons of understanding.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel is known for his objections to the idea that it is possible to describe the world from an objective point of view. No one can step out of their own horizon of understanding; it is not like a filter one can remove to understand an objective world as it is, independent of our own point of view. An idealistic research perspective completely independent of beliefs, values and attitudes can be called, according to Nagel (1986), ‘a view from nowhere.’ Nagel puts it this way:

The fundamental idea behind both the validity and the limits of objectivity is that we are small creatures in a big world of which we have only very partial understanding, and that how things seem to us depends both on the world and our constitution. (1986, p. 5)

This does not mean that it is impossible to carry out reliable and valuable scientific activity, but that it is crucial to be aware of how horizons of understanding do and should characterise research. This is a particularly important point in research on CW work with families, because the topics are heavily value-laden and linked to ethical beliefs. It can be challenging to relate to these topics without making assumptions about what constitutes good practice. Such assumptions can stand in the way of designing research in such a way that it can challenge practices that need to be challenged, and they may imply that one does not interpret phenomena and data from valuable approaches that do not fit with strong and limiting preconceptions.

It is therefore important to remember that research on CW work is, to a large extent, an interpretive practice. Since it is not possible to step outside of one's own horizon of understanding, the goal of research cannot be to gain an objective understanding. In line with modern hermeneutics, the aim is rather to be aware that one's own preconceptions characterise research and to critically evaluate how they should and should not do so (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). Ultimately, we see a parallel to an important goal in professional CW work with families. Here, too, the professional practitioners' own horizons influence how they act and understand families, whether they want them to or not. The crucial thing is therefore to understand how their horizons should influence their work. Hopefully, this book can contribute to critical reflection on this.

Overview of the chapters

As already indicated, the book's chapters cannot be precisely placed within one of the three perspectives: the recipient, professional or system perspective. Several of the chapters contain issues and discussions where these perspectives merge together. When we present the book's chapters in the following, we hope it will be possible for the reader to see how each chapter, and the chapters collectively, contributes with knowledge about child welfare and the importance of family.

In Chapter 1, Halvor Fauske, Camilla Bennin and Bjørn Arne Buer discuss how the right to family life is to be understood in the light of new and diverse family models, and extended expectations that parents provide proper childcare. The quality of the relationship between the child and its parents has increasingly become more important in the assessment of whether parents are fulfilling their duty to protect and provide care. Due to this development, the authors discuss what challenges CW services are faced with when assessing what is best for a child in the tension between the parents' right and duty to care for their children and the state's requirements. Fauske et al. conclude that CW work has become more complex since the CW services to a larger degree are expected to secure both proper care for children that are under the protection of the service and the continuation of the relations between these children and their original family and network.

Astrid Halså, in Chapter 2, explores how youth and young adults who have grown up with parents with serious substance abuse or mental health

problems have managed their situation and what relational practices have emerged in their families. The chapter is based on six in-depth interviews with youth and young adults. The chapter's theoretical point of departure is the sociological approach to the study of family practices and the concepts of children and children's agency as these concepts are understood in recent childhood research. The stories told by the young people show, on the one hand, the significance of childhood experiences for the development of identity and self-understanding, and how family relations create dependence and duties that are hard to escape. On the other hand, the results show that family is not a fixed entity, but something negotiable, and that parenthood in many families is associated with a biological mother and a non-biological, reliable father connected to the child through the mother's emotional relationship. A central point is that the youngest children told stories about how to handle their situation here and now, while for the older ones, their agency had to do with their understanding of their upbringing and how to deal with it.

In Chapter 3, Anne Sigfrid Grønseth explores the complex encounters between migrant minority families in Norway and Norwegian CW services, which may produce a fear in families that the services will 'steal our children'. Based on in-depth interviews with both groups, Grønseth paints a picture of a strong sense of insecurity and discomfort on both sides. Taking a critical phenomenological approach, such affects and emotions are seen to play into actions and decisions based on guiding principles for childcare workers, as well as the families' views and values. While acknowledging that differences in cultural practices and values may create troublesome meetings, Grønseth seeks to understand this further by suggesting that concern for the affects and emotions on both sides might improve migrant minority families' experiences of family and belonging, as well as the integrity of the CW services.

Mari Rysst, in Chapter 4, discusses the aims and challenges of including children and young people in foster homes. Rysst explores the relationship between seeing kinship as a biological fact and/or a social construction, and asks how this relationship influences the children's and foster parents' understanding of 'family' and their experiences of inclusion. On the basis of interviews with foster parents and teens who are or have been living in foster homes under the protection of CW services, she addresses questions about how the child's best interests relate to foster care and whether the saying 'blood is thicker than water' is a challenge to integration in

foster homes. Rysst suggests that the value of staying in stable foster homes, if that is what the child prefers, should not be underestimated. She warns against the cultural dominance of the biological principle and advocates instead for more emphasis on attachment quality and a culture of social inclusion and well-being as helpful for integration in foster families.

The topic of Chapter 5, written by Bjørg Midtskogen, is collaboration between families, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions and CW services. Based on participatory observation and interviews with parents, children and ECEC workers in two Norwegian ECEC institutions, Midtskogen explains how the mapping of children is carried out, and explores whether and how mapping may influence a family's way into CW services and/or other services that can provide needed support and help to ease difficulties in the family. She suggests that mapping of good quality, where the requirements of deliberative theory – such as involvement of the affected parties, argumentation, discussion and transparency – are fulfilled, may serve as a bridge between families and services that can provide support. On the other hand, mapping of poor quality might lead to an unjustified way into CW services, which may contribute to creating and enlarging care issues.

In Chapter 6, Kerstin Söderström sheds light on how childhood and family experiences may affect identity and self-understanding. Based on in-depth interviews with 32 children with parents who have substance use disorders or mental health problems and CW concerns, Söderström contributes with insights on how such circumstances play a role in forming the children's narrative identities: the stories they tell about themselves. She finds that the stories told by the youngest informants reveal that the children have little distance to what they have experienced and that meaning making of their experiences is in progress. The narratives of the older informants, Söderström suggests, indicate that increasing awareness of how cultural norms deviate from the inner life of their families contributes to meaning making and self-understanding.

Halvor Nordby, in Chapter 7, discusses whether ideas from discourse ethics are suited to supporting and framing the working model of 'family group conferences' (FGC), conducted by CW services in which they take the role of facilitator in meetings between family members and their networks. The aim of FGC is to enable the 'extended family' to find solutions to a difficult child care situation. Using a discourse ethical approach to FGC, participants in the meetings should focus on the 'case itself' and

the pros and cons for alternative solutions – not on the roles and powers each of them has. Nordby argues that discourse ethics is incompatible with FGC if the CW services use strong normative assumptions to define what counts as a problem, adequate information or a justified argument. He suggests, however, that ideas from discourse ethics are suitable to a certain degree as an ideal for the communication that takes place in the meetings. Discourse ethical ideals might help to mitigate conflicts and improve dialogue towards agreement.

The topic of Chapter 8, written by Cathrine Grimsgaard, is the significance of ‘home’, both in general and for children who are under the care of CW services in particular. She approaches the theme by taking a phenomenological point of departure, where ‘home’ is not confined to a physical place but extends to the sense of rootedness and familiarity. Grounded in this understanding of ‘home’, Grimsgaard explores how children establish important emotional connections with their dwelling. Based on the insights of Heidegger and Bachelard, she contends that humans have a deep need for a sense of being-at-home. From that point of view, she discusses the unfortunate consequences frequent moves might have for children who are in public care. Grimsgaard suggests that the need for children to emotionally connect with a ‘home’ places ethical demands on CW services. Instead of referring to ‘home’ only in terms of physical conditions and safety standards, the services should, in their reflections, give space to the deep emotional significance of ‘home’.

Grethe Netland, in Chapter 9, sheds light on one of the relatively frequent Norwegian child protection cases that have been dealt with in the European Court of Human Rights in recent years. In the Strand Lobben case, the Court found by a majority vote that Norway had violated Ms Strand Lobben’s human right to a family life (see Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights). An important lesson to be learned from the judgment is that Norwegian CW services must adjust their guidelines and practices to meet the goal of reunification – the goal that a child in public care is (almost always) to be reunified with its original parents. Netland focuses on the moral basis of the judges’ emphasis on this goal. She does so by analysing the family values and normative ethical thinking that can be traced in the judges’ reasoning behind the decision and the justification of that goal. She concludes by suggesting that a value-based duty ethical principle of reunification can lead to a risk that other considerations of what is best for a child in a particular case are set aside.

In Chapter 10, Eirik Christopher Gundersen starts by arguing that a family, understood as a small, private childcaring institution protected from intervention from outside, may hinder equal opportunity and the rights of the child. Due to these possible unfortunate consequences for the child, Gundersen explores whether organising families as foster homes, where the family receives the same level of support, supervision and monitoring as a traditional foster home does, is less morally objectionable than raising children in families. He discusses three strategies for rejecting that idea: a child-centred approach, a dual-interest approach (taking into account both the child's and the parents' interests) and an approach based on the philosopher John Rawls' idea of reasonable pluralism. A central point in this concept is that incompatible but reasonable values and beliefs are to be tolerated. Gundersen argues that only the third strategy provides good reasons to reject the foster home model he explores. He concludes by briefly outlining some implications for the CW system and professional practice.

In Chapter 11, Halvor Nordby discusses whether and how contributions from philosophical family ethics can contribute to CW work. Nordby's point of departure is an account of Brighouse and Swift's well-known defence of the family, consisting of arguments related to parenthood and paternalism. He argues that their ideas about paternalism and the interests of children seem incompatible with important principles of CW work, e.g. the principle of least intervention and the idea of the child as a competent agent. Nordby argues that Brighouse and Swift's suggestions are too abstract and insufficiently informed by contextual differences and real-world practical work with children and their families. His general point is that when normative ethical theories do not match a heterogenous reality that falls under the theories, the validity of the theories is weakened: the norms and principles of such theories pay too little attention to the need for a contextual evaluation of those norms and principles.

Author biographies

Halvor Nordby is a professor at the Department of Social Work and Guidance at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN) and holds a part-time position at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Oslo. He graduated with a DPhil in Philosophy from the University of Oxford in 2000. His teaching and research interests are communication, ethics and management in various forms of health and social work. At

INN, he is affiliated with the PhD programme Health and Welfare, as well as master's and bachelor's programmes in social work and child welfare.

Grethe Netland is a philosopher, appointed as an associate professor at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN) where she primarily works with research ethics. In addition, professional ethics and human rights are among Netland's areas of interest and among the topics that feature in her publications. Her work experience includes a period as Head of Department at the Department of Social Work and Guidance at INN.

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