

Talking about family with children in care proceedings: Constructions of “family” in an analysis of spokespersons’ accounts

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Abstract

In arrangements for children’s participation in child welfare systems, professionals’ interpretations of children’s views on family and their own constructions of family will impact children’s conditions for expressing feelings and moral agency. This article analyses the accounts of children’s spokespersons in Norway, whose mandate is to speak with and forward children’s views in care proceedings. The analyses show how constructions of loyalty, family interdependence, and individualism may inform spokespersons’ interpretations of children’s views, and thereby their exploratory practices in their conversations with the children. Children’s representatives need to be reflexive toward their own understanding(s) of family and family interdependence in order to discover the complex web of experiences, ambiguity, feelings, and expectations children have around family and familial relations in their lives. The findings point to the importance of reflexive exercises toward constructions of children and family in the field of social work.

Keywords

Family, child agency, loyalty, child participation, child welfare, guardian ad litem

Introduction

Care proceedings are characterized by state intervention into family life. Therein lies a duty to protect children from harm and the family from unnecessary interventions

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(Keating, 2009). Hence, care proceedings require rule of law, proper case work, and legal safeguards for families. Decisions in these contexts must therefore be properly informed, especially by the views and experiences of the children involved in and affected by the outcome of the proceedings.

In care proceedings, children have the right to be heard directly, or indirectly through a child representative, and to have their views weighted in accordance with their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989; art. 12; Parkes, 2013). In Norway, children under the age of 15 are given the opportunity to have their views heard indirectly through a spokesperson, who presents children's views on their behalf in the family court (Ministry of Children and Families, 1992b; ss. 6–3, 7–9). This indirect participation arrangement is aimed at upholding children's legal safeguards and properly informed decision-making in care proceedings.

There have been multiple calls for studies showing the ambiguities and complexities involved in children's participation in these contexts, especially with regard to family (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Spyrou et al., 2019; Horgan et al., 2017). Moreover, limited research explores social workers' views of children's situations in child welfare with a focus on family relations (Jensen et al., 2019), and there is a knowledge gap regarding how familial relationships and a "good enough" family are defined in the professional field of child welfare case work (Choate and Engstrom, 2014; Langsrud et al., 2017).

Further research on the family in this context is necessary, as children receiving child welfare services often have a range of family circumstances outside the "norm" and entails a complexity in relations (Boddy, 2018) that might not be easy to capture in participatory processes. In the Norwegian context, child welfare service practice has been found to be in violation of the right to family life in cases lodged with the European Court of Human Rights (see inter alia Strand Lobben and others v. Norway; Hernehult v. Norway, 2020). This has caused discussions on case practice and ideals and values relating to family and children's best interests (see Bendiksen, 2019; Søvig and Tjelmeland, 2019). Taken together, this highlights the importance of having knowledge on how children's representatives in care proceedings understand and approach the theme of "family" in their conversations with children. The following research questions thus informed this study: *How do spokespersons interpret children's views on family? What constructions of "family" can be analyzed from their accounts?* Findings provide insight into spokespersons' understandings and social constructions that may impact how children express their views about their families.

The context of Norway and the mandate of the children's spokesperson

The Norwegian welfare state is a family-oriented system with many welfare provisions for families. By extension, the Norwegian child welfare service is characterized by being child-centric and focused on early intervention (Burns et al., 2017). If there are concerns regarding the child's daily care, the child welfare service may introduce helping measures to improve the family's situation. If these measures are deemed insufficient, the service must seek a care order—that is, that the child be placed in public care (Ministry of

Children and Families, 1992, ss. 4–4, 4–12). Orders that are compulsory measures (against the will of the family) must be decided by the state “court-like” administrative body, the County Social Welfare Board (hereafter the “County Board”) (Country Social Welfare Boards, 2019, Ministry of Children and Families, 1992a).

To become a spokesperson, one must have extensive professional experience with speaking and working directly with children (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2013). Spokespersons’ professional backgrounds are predominantly in pedagogy (58%), followed by social welfare and health sciences (30%)¹ (Viblemo et al., 2014). They are typically recruited through a municipality’s intranet and are independent from child welfare services.

The role is not full-time and consists of case-by-case assignments given by the County Board. The indirect participation arrangement in Norway partly resemble guardian ad litem found in certain states in the United States, where volunteers (court appointed special advocates, CASAs) take on assignments depending on their availability (Cooley et al., 2019). The arrangement with spokespersons was originally inspired by the Guardian ad Litem arrangement in England. The latter involves a full-time social worker that reviews the case work of the child welfare service, makes own assessments with involved parties as he or she deems necessary, and furthermore speaks with the children involved in the case and present their views in court (see Cafcass 2022). Meanwhile, spokespersons are given limited details about each case, to ensure an impartial approach to their conversation with the child, and their tasks are thereby limited to speaking with and forwarding the child’s views.

Spokespersons take notes during the conversation, and to ensure that they have understood the child correctly, they summarize the conversation for the child. A written report is then sent out to the involved parties and decision-makers and also presented orally to the County Board (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2013). Spokespersons are instructed to elaborate on the child’s relationship with their parents and siblings; how the child is doing today; how the child is experiencing living in foster care; and the child’s wishes regarding where to live, visitation, and electronic/telephone contact (Central Unit of the County Boards, 2020). In the current study, spokespersons gave insights into how they interpret and respond to children’s views and feelings in these family-related areas.

Theoretical and analytical perspective

The concept of “family” takes many forms, both political, socio-cultural, and spatial (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990; Murray and Barnes, 2010; Morrow, 1998). Murray and Barnes (2010) state in a succinct manner that “family can be kin and non-kin, and is often about care and trust in the context of enduring relationships” (Murray and Barnes, 2010: 533). A traditional sociological unit of analysis is the “nuclear family,” one which contains a mother, father, and typically two or three children. In a child welfare context—particularly in care proceedings—the family unit may become disrupted, in that the child may need to move to another (foster) family and have less contact with immediate and extended biological family. This will necessarily lead to new kinds of relationships (e.g.,

having two moms instead of one), in which children's feelings and perceptions toward family members are affected. The child's experience of enduring and new relationships, primarily in their family of origin and in their foster family, should be explored in such proceedings and given weight in decision-making concerning where the child should live and grow up. It is thus important to study how children's representatives understand and explore the theme of family and ways of belonging in their conversations with children.

This premise calls for a social constructivist analytic approach to spokesperson's accounts. While "family" and the members it includes can be delineated using set legal categories with clear definitions and parameters, attention here is given to locating the *social constructions* of family in spokespersons' accounts: how spokespersons give meaning to family and family relations in a cultural, relational and social context, which then informs their course of action (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990; Bruner, 1990). The analysis of family and meaningful relationships necessitated broad attention; spokesperson's accounts of interpreting and responding to children's views, wishes, and feelings toward family, but also their attention to the child's interdependence with their carers and constitution of home (their relations, cultural identity, community, and peers) (Jans, 2004).

Perceptions of family as a theme in child welfare research

An expanded focus on family is a development echoed in child welfare research: for example, in Ellingsen, Stephens and Størksen's (2012) study, which identified three categories of young people's views on family, in the context of child welfare services. In the first category were young people who felt a bond with both the birth family and the foster family. The second category consisted of those who only included their birth family in what they felt constituted "family." The final category encompassed young people who viewed their foster family as their family, revealing a weak bond to their birth family.

Meanwhile, Boddy (2018) found that there is a complex temporality of family for young people who have been in care, in which bureaucratic language such as "contact," "reunification," and "permanence" fails to reflect their experiences. There is an ambivalence and ambiguity in their views and experience of family, rather than singular feelings of "good" or "bad." Related to family perception is the concept of loyalty, often understood as a hindrance both to establishing new relations and expressing one's views (Pölkki et al., 2012; Studsrød et al., 2017; Hovland, 2014). Seim and Opsahl (2014) noted that parents of origin may have fewer resources to support the child's involvement in activities within and outside of the home. This issue of social exclusion is relevant in exploring children's everyday life and experience of family; moreover, it shows that children experience a complex web of emotions in their views of family, which are also shaped by contextual, temporal, and socioeconomic factors. How practitioners make sense of their own practice around and approaches to family amidst this complexity is the focus of the current study: specifically, within a context in which children are often in a state of transition and complex family constructions are at the forefront.

Method and analysis

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 spokespersons. The spokespersons were recruited with assistance from County Board leaders (judges), who were asked to randomly invite 15 of the spokespersons on their list. Invitations were thus sent to 75 spokespersons via five County Boards (out of 10²) across four of Norway's five regions. Here, the aim was purposive sampling (King et al., 2019), to ensure that all levels of experience were represented in the sample. This resulted in 22 study participants. Spokespersons varied considerably in the number of assignments, from having one or two a year to five a month. Spokespersons spanned from having 1 year experience to having been spokespersons since the introduction of the arrangement in the early 1990s.

Spokespersons were informed at the start of the interview of their duty of confidentiality and to not relay any details that could identify or trace back to the cases they have been assigned to. Spokespersons were asked to talk through the last conversation they had with a child, from planning to concluding the meeting; this was to encourage "thick descriptions" of their practices and perceptions (Geertz, 2017). They were asked about their views and experiences concerning speaking with both young children and older children (typical age range is 7–14); presenting their report to the County Board; and training and support. They were also asked to answer a verbal vignette concerning confidentiality and risk (Aviram, 2012). Interviews lasted on average 2 hours and were recorded. Interview transcriptions amount to 848 pages.

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) provides expertise in data management and legal and ethical issues for scholars. NSD found the study to be in accordance with the Norwegian Personal Data Act. Ethical considerations have been made throughout the study. Names and identifying details were pseudonymized and altered to secure anonymity.

The topic of family was an all-encompassing theme in the interviews, much because the interview guide encouraged thick descriptions of their last conversation with a child. Looking back on the questions they are instructed to ask children (see chapter "The context of Norway and the mandate of the children's spokesperson"), the theme of family is current throughout and thus emerged as pertinent in the preliminary analysis.

When conducting an empirical analysis, a "sensitizing concept" is one which does not bear a clear definition, but which nevertheless gives its user a general sense and guidance (Blumer, 1954: 7). Particularly the issue of loyalty was a clear focus of several spokespersons ($N=17$), while differing slightly in the content and ways they would define it. Loyalty appears to be a common-sense concept which gives practitioners within the field of child welfare a general sense and guidance; as the author is a sociologist researching a professional field she is not native to, the use of the concept was considered quite novel and given attention in the analysis as a "sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1954). The research question arose from the theme of family and the sensitizing concept being prevalent in the empirical material, which, in turn, led to an analysis in the current study of social constructions of family in spokespersons' accounts (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990).

All talk related to family was coded in NVivo. Coded material was analyzed for the meaning embedded in spokespersons' accounts regarding what constitutes family and the

family's impact on the child (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). That is, the analysis sought to find collective meaning making spokespersons draw from as available to them, rather than the individual views of spokespersons—resulting from being members of a culture where there are shared and public meanings of family (Bruner, 1990). Spokespersons' quotes that provide detailed narration are presented: these are not meant to be representative of the study sample, as not all spokespersons' perceptions of family were analyzable from their accounts. Importantly, the included quotes are presented as they can illustrate discursive meaning making relating to family (Bruner, 1990; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990), specifically in their detailed narration of the conversations themselves, what they talked with the child about and how they responded to the child and the meaning making and discourses they presented in the interview. This gives a more concise insight into their constructions of family than any direct interview question would. Attention was given to similarities and contrasts between the spokespersons' accounts.

Taking inspiration from discourse analysis described by Allred and Burman (2005), the "object" of family was analyzed as it was "constructed," viewing the discourses that are at work in the interviews and the subject positions ascribed to the children (such as experiencing them as being in a conflict of loyalty or worried). It was the spokespersons' perceptions and interpretations that were analyzed, not the conversations they had with the children (as I did not have access to these).

Limitations to the study pertain to it consisting of a small sample of spokespersons in a Norwegian context, and that interviews do not provide comprehensive insight into spokespersons' practices. A wider understanding of constructions of family could have been reached with the inclusion of interviews with children who have experienced care proceedings. However, the study provides important insights into ways that family constructions may impact our understandings—and, in turn, our course of action—when speaking with children.

Talking with children about family

The presentation of the study findings will begin with a general insight into how the spokespersons' described their efforts to explore children's relationship with their mother and father. The spokespersons had some minor differences in their approaches to reach a child's view of their relationship with their parents of origin. However, their accounts all show that an important aspect of these questions—and the children's answers—is the spokesperson's own considerations regarding children's ability to talk about and elaborate on activities and feelings in relation to family. As touched on by several spokespersons, if a child has been in out-of-home care for some time, there are limits to the level of detail one can expect if months and years have passed since they lived with their parents. Moreover, there is the issue of what *has been* versus what *can be*. Time, past and future, and familial resources are central dimensions here. This will be shown in the following.

Generally, a common theme in interviews was children talking in more detail about their experience of living in foster care than with their family of origin. A spokesperson named Linda referred in her interview to a "glow" that children sometimes have when they speak of their foster home—for instance, when they share exciting events with her.

She contrasted this with talking to children about their parent of origin, giving the following example:

One of the questions is oftentimes to get the child to tell me about Mummy. And then it can be like ‘Yes, she is pretty’. I mean, heh. And then there’s nothing else. And then I might say, ‘But can you tell me what you like to do with Mummy?’ ‘Erm, go shopping’. And then there’s nothing else to elicit. If it had been alright, I think they would have had much more to say about Mum.

Linda presented the girl as an example of a child who is unable to talk in detail about what she likes to do with her mother, despite Linda’s attempts of encouraging talk with the prompts of “tell me about mummy/what do you like to do with mummy.” In the interview, Linda explained that she thought the girl’s short answers most likely stemmed from experiencing a lack of care in her original home. It appears from Linda’s account that she believes, if children offer few details when voicing their views about their parent(s), that they have had damaging family experiences—and furthermore that there is little she can elicit in such cases.

However, this particular perception about the child’s family of origin may also hinder curiosity about (and corresponding exploration of) the child’s views—for example, the curiosity shown by Josephine, another spokesperson. Like Linda, Josephine talked about experiences with children who say little about their parents of origin. In these instances, she tried to discover more about the children’s views and experiences:

That’s why I try to ask, ‘What do you want to do when you’re together with mom or dad?’ Well, they want to go to Tusenfryd [an amusement park], then they want to go shopping, but not in the stores for grownups—they want to go play games or go bowling. Those are their wishes. And, ‘Have you ever been to Tusenfryd before?’, ‘No, not with them’. [...] They want to do practical things. [...] Yeah, that’s how they want a family to be in a way, so...

Here, Josephine reiterated the kinds of views and wishes she may elicit from children by asking what they *want* to do with their parents. Her experience is that this approach to children who have said little about their relationship with their parents gives them the opportunity to say what they *imagine* their family could be like—in which the child emphasizes activities. There may be many reasons for why children are sometimes unable or unwilling to elaborate on what is nice to do or what they usually do with their parents. These may include a faint memory, a sense of shame, difficult feelings, or experiences of poverty and social exclusion (see [Seim and Opsahl, 2014](#)). Importantly, in this context, Josephine does not only ask what the child *does*, *have done* or *normally do* with her parents, but also what the child *wants to do*. In this way, she affords the child the chance to elaborate on the family life the child imagines and hopes for, without the aforementioned hindrances; here, the child can also express views that point to *not* wanting to be with the family of origin. Along similar lines, other spokespersons described how they expanded on the themes the County Board wished them to explore by asking children what they

might want to be *different*. The meaning making potential concerning family life that may then emerge was made clear by Olivia:

And then it's pretty crazy, how small children can present this *long* list of what they have—even if they don't want to move, they still present a pretty long list of what needs to change if it's gonna be good for them to live at home. [...] Sometimes it is quite general, but it also makes for quite an impression how they describe that something needs to change if they are to continue living at home. They gotta have—'I need to have grownups that have time to be with me', is an example of what they might say.

Olivia focused a great deal on presenting this question to children still living at home. It is, however, just as relevant to ask children questions relating to their experience with their foster home—both to discover whether anything could be done to improve the child's welfare, but also to avoid bias. Importantly, what a child imagines as a good family life is what might spur their requests for alternative family practices. This will be expanded on more throughout the article.

Understandings of children's emotional conflicts

Many spokespersons spoke of children's guilt, anxiety, and worry around having their views known, and that they might upset their parents. Some spokespersons elaborated on their approach to these conversations, which will be presented here. In the following quote, a spokesperson named Nigella described her experience of a child afraid of giving the "wrong" answer. This highlights the difficult feelings a child may experience when speaking about wishes and preferences regarding where they want to live:

I usually say, 'You have to feel what's in your heart and right for you. Now you have to say what *you* are thinking, not what you think that mummy or daddy wants to hear, or that the foster home will hear'. And then it's like, it seems as if it becomes a bit like okay, yes, now it's *me* [the child]. [...] He could say the wrong thing about whether he was doing well, wanted to live where he was living, you know, there's something about doing well in a foster home. [...] Children are *incredibly* loyal towards their parents, see, it's like 'Can I say that I'm doing well here? Will mom get upset?'

Here, Nigella depicted the dilemma, confusion, guilt, and conflict of loyalty she believes a child may experience from enjoying living in foster care, wanting to continue living there, and the worry that ensues from fear of upsetting their parents. Nigella tried to encourage him to overcome a potential urge to withhold or modify his views—to state what he is thinking, not what everyone else wants to hear. It can be analyzed as an attempt to separate his views from the *emotional impact* his views have on him (worry) and might have on his parents of origin (upset): to untangle the child's *interdependence* with his or her parents of origin to reveal the child's individual views. Based on the interview, Nigella did not speak of pursuing his emotions and experience further, to ask more about his

feelings and their origin. However, she offered a way to lessen those uncomfortable feelings.

Another spokesperson, Alex, spoke of a case with similarities to the one just presented. A boy asked her whether his mother would learn of his views: he was worried that she would be sad that he wanted to continue living with his grandmother, as he enjoyed and felt safe being with her. Alex encouraged the boy to be honest and “think of what is best for him.” Like Nigella, Alex encouraged children to think of themselves and what they want, reasoning that their loyalty to their parents is incredibly strong despite having experienced inadequate care. Nigella mentioned another child who was worried that her parents would hear her views. The girl did not want to move back home: she wanted to stay in her foster home and wanted to meet her parents as little as possible. An interesting difference between this and the above examples is that the girl in the following example worried not *for* her parents, but *about* the parents’ reactions and the negative repercussions she could face. Nigella’s account points to the girl’s concern being one of consequences and reprimands, more so than empathy:

She was worried that when she would meet her parents in the visitation, she would get this thrown in her face, what she had said. That was probably one of the reasons why she didn’t want to say anything. Because that’s what she said after a while—‘But they’re sitting there [in the County Board proceedings]’. ‘Yes’, I say, ‘they are sitting there, but now you have to think about what *you* want, not what you think that they wish to *hear*’.

This example provides perhaps clearer illustration of a child who might not want to voice an opinion and the way in which the spokesperson chooses to respond. From what she reiterated in the interview, it seems that Nigella did not further explore the girl’s uncomfortable feelings and experiences, although the girl presented them in the conversation. Nigella’s focus was instead on persuading the child about the importance of speaking her views—again, separating those from her emotional experience of her parents.

In another example, presented by Alex, the child’s relational connection and emotional expression are fully acknowledged. She described a boy who was terribly worried that his mother, an alcoholic, would not receive proper care for her illness. She said it was clear that this was a boy who had taken on considerable responsibility for his mother and worried a great deal about her:

He was very worried, he wanted her to get help so that he could come home to his mum, he worried how she was doing when he wasn’t there. And there’s something about being comforted that someone is taking care of the mother, you know, or that she is receiving help. There’s something to alleviating, relieving them of some of that responsibility they bring with them. [...] Then you kind of just have to comfort them, so that they won’t have to be saddled with it, that she gets—‘[that] there’s definitely someone who is helping her’, right, ‘that’s part of the reason why you’re here, so that she will...’

Alex's account can be analyzed as a practice informed by an impetus to acknowledge the boy's expressed worry and an urge to comfort him. She sees his experience not as something that can be fully separated from, but which is inextricably intertwined with, and affected by, his mother's welfare.

The other examples included above are dissimilar to the example just mentioned as those children were interpreted as expressing worry and doubts about having their views known; children being so concerned with the views of their parents that it comes at the expense of their own well-being. In other words, they were perceived as having lost the sense of agency and empowerment that the spokespersons then wished to reinforce and encourage by asking them to think of themselves. Thus, in contrast to Alex's example above in which the child is met with sympathy for his feelings, the other examples point to an understanding of children's experience as something that *can* be untangled, isolated, and separated from their experience of, and interdependence with, their family. Nevertheless, I argue that children portray resourcefulness in the strength and agency needed to voice such difficult feelings, which seem to have a greater potential of being acknowledged, received with sympathy, and explored by the spokesperson. This will be discussed further in the concluding discussion. The findings have thus far presented meanings and discourses of family that can be analyzed from spokespersons' accounts; what their practices are when children (do not) express their views, in light of time, contextual factors, and emotional conflict. The following will examine more closely spokespersons' practices in their accounts of children's loyalty.

A good family life—accounts of loyalty, doubt, and certainty

As presented earlier, several accounts display a certain focus on children who talk vividly and with joy about their placement in foster care. Drawing on the accounts of two spokespersons, this section highlights the meaning spokespersons may construct in such cases, seen together with their subject positioning (Allred and Burman, 2005) of the children as being in a conflict of loyalty. One spokesperson, Caroline, referred to a boy who loved his parents very much, but also enjoyed living in his foster home. She perceived him to be experiencing a conflict of loyalty, and as being pulled in two directions. She reflected on the immense doubt he expressed after she asked him where he wanted to live:

He was very concerned with... not knowing. Because he loved his parents very much. But, but it was very okay living where he lived, as well. [...] And I think it's about that love in a way, that exists for biological parents. [The boy] said 'No, I have so much doubt, I *do not* know where I would like to live in the future, I have *so many* doubts'. [He was] really despairingly uncertain. So I said to him, 'But it's not you who are meant to decide that, it is the grownups'.

Caroline recognized the boy's uncertainty without needing to resolve his doubts. She can be seen as acknowledging the interdependence the boy has with his family, and that he benefits from hearing that this weighty decision is not a responsibility he is meant to bear.

Amongst the things the boy told Caroline, he said his doubt also stemmed in part from fear of losing his culture and language. He wanted to have more free time with his friends instead of having to take care of his younger siblings all the time, and he wanted the family to eat dinner together around a table. Caroline recalled that he ultimately generated a list of 10 things that would need to change if he were to move back home—but that he still did not have the will to say that he wanted to grow up in another family. Caroline reflected further on this pattern:

I have encountered several that are in doubt. And in those cases, I feel that what they're saying is that they don't really want to move back home. It's just that it is very sad that they're not going to move back home. It is very sad that *home* is not a good place to be. [...] They can't bring themselves to say that... 'I don't want to live with—I don't want to move back home'. They can't say that out of loyalty, I feel.

Here, we see Caroline's belief that loyalty toward and interdependence with a family of origin hinders children from stating that they want to live with a foster family. However, another important aspect of Caroline's account also emerges: the meaning making the boy engages in with Caroline, through which he may have discovered "that home is not a good place to be." He is asking for the home of origin to become as good a place as the foster home he has experienced since. The following account also illuminates perceptions of a good family life. In his experiences of talking with children who want to move home, Michael said:

Sometimes I have thought that you... When you can't see that it may be better to live in a foster home where they actually have some structure surrounding them than a home with enormous chaos, and *that's* where they want to live—then I understand that the children are in fact incredibly loyal, there's no doubt.

Michael spoke about this specific juxtaposition a few times in the interview: that children would rather live in chaos with their family of origin than enjoy structure with their foster family. His understanding of what a family should entail may be located in this idea of structure—that a family should provide safety, stability, and predictability. In his view, children are displaying loyalty when they choose to move back home despite having talked about the joys of living on a farm (their foster home) with many animals. When asked whether children ever explain why they feel this way, he explained:

I can imagine that if you are 10, 11, 12 years old, during that period they start to be very focused on 'Well, after all, it is my mum'. So if you then confront [them] with, 'Yes, but you said that it wasn't so okay to live at home with mum, because she was angry a lot?', 'Yes, but it's not important'. [...]

I: Do you usually—do you talk around that, then?

I try to, but it's not what—that's when you start to... I think at that point you are so far into their souls that it becomes hard for the children to... There're extremely few who manage to put it into more words. Or they may just say, 'It's just the way it is'.

Michael said in the interview that he may remind the child of the negative experiences the child has told him about previously in their conversation. However, doing so seems to make the conversation halt to a conclusion, making the children “dig in their heels” (see Føleide, 2021). This quote furthermore points to older children expressing a preference for their parent of origin. This may be due to several factors, such as the child having appropriated the cultural value placed on family of origin, or feeling an emotional bond that is difficult to articulate. In particular, children who are entering their teens may begin feeling that their parent of origin is irreplaceable and of high worth (i.e., “blood is thicker than water”) (Hovland, 2014). Dissonance between the children's and their representatives' construction of what constitutes a “good family” might—as indicated here—cause difficulties in exploring children's relationship with their parent(s) of origin and ideas about a good family life.

Concluding discussion

Findings show that the culturally shared meanings and social constructions that are drawn on in talking with children about family, and the family discourses that arise therein, play a significant role in how those conversations are approached. These will be summarized and discussed in the following. If there is little that the child wants or is able to say about their parents, one may be too quick to assume that the child has only negative and painful experiences from their family of origin. Certain constructions of family of origin in a child welfare context may create assumptions that hinder curiosity and exploration in a conversation with a child. Meanwhile, some spokespersons displayed creativity and attentiveness in their efforts to explore family with the children—ways that might help circumvent features of social exclusion, shame, or fading memory. There are indications that if children are asked what they *want to do* with their parents and what they *want to be different*, this instills agency and enables them to talk about their hopes and wishes toward family life and their future. Such exploration could make it easier for children to voice whether or not they envision a good family life with their family of origin and foster family. Thus, the exploratory potential as affected by certain constructions of family was shown in the first part of the findings.

Findings also reveal that *loyalty* is a common feature in the spokespersons' meaning making on family and subject positioning of children (Alldred and Burman, 2005). While the category of “loyalty” is commonly viewed as a positive trait, it has negative connotations in this context. In the spokespersons' accounts, loyalty may be perceived as affecting children's expressed views in two main ways. In brief, the category of “loyalty” contains the perception of children who are wary of voicing their views and/or do not recognize what is in their own best interests.

In the first understanding, loyalty is perceived to limit and obstruct children's ability to *freely express their views* because of the emotional ramifications this might have for them

and/or their parents of origin. This was a central facet in findings related to children being seen to experience an emotional conflict, in which attempts are made to untangle their interdependence with their family of origin and lessen their emotional burden. Exemplified in discussing the account of Caroline, a child's doubt need not be interpreted as him being captive to his loyalty and restricted in his ability to voice his views. He has experienced a stable, loving foster family life but is also afraid of losing the culture and language practiced within his old family life. He displays an immense amount of agency when he exerts himself to formulate his familial, emotional, and moral deliberations, based on new, socially constructed frameworks of meaning around family life. This agency is furthermore encouraged when children are asked what they want to be *different*, as seen above.

The second facet of spokespersons' perceptions of children's *loyalty* and its impact on children's expressed wishes is that it reduces the children's ability to consider, or know, *what is in their best interests*. Michael's construction of a good family life emphasizes stability and excludes chaos, which seems to clash with the children's wishes to leave that stability and move home. Michael interpreted this as an expression of loyalty at the expense of recognizing what would be in their own best interests. Michael arguably struggled to understand these children, as their construction of a "good" family differed from his own construction. If there is a gulf or clash between the cultural meaning of a good family life as available and part of the spokesperson's constructions compared with those of the child, they may place the child in a subject position that can hinder the spokesperson's exploration of children's views in the conversation.

I argue the importance of recognizing a commonality among children who are wary of expressing their views due to the potential emotional ramifications they might have—that is, that children are demonstrating *moral agency* by exerting themselves to express difficult feelings. Moral agency implies children's ability to be empathetic toward others, to consider right from wrong, and to prioritize others' interests over their own with the aim of helping others (Mayall, 2002). The spokesperson's intention to empower children by encouraging them to think of themselves impedes their moral competence and may signal that they should disregard some spectrum of their feelings, and ultimately their interdependence with their family of origin. This, in turn, might hinder the spokesperson from facilitating a truly exploratory and sensitive conversation.

This is not to say that children should not be encouraged to put their own needs first. Children may in fact need an adult that help them understand they should not place heavy emotional burdens upon themselves. That being said, the conversation may be served by not progressing to such a stage prematurely and to recognize that children have, for better or worse, and with the ambiguity and complexity that follows (Boddy, 2018), an entrenched interdependence with their family.

This study underlines the importance of conscious practices informed by the practitioners' reflexivity concerning their own constructions and ideas of family and good family life. With the rise of children's rights, children bear the status of individual right-holders. The aim to relieve children of responsibility for their families and to empower them by encouraging them to "think of yourself" gives them new tasks and responsibilities to master individuated agency and to disregard their moral competencies and their

feelings toward their families (Ulvik, 2018). The ways in which individuated rights and agency are given meaning—with their parallels to the conception of loyalty—may have the unintentional consequence of marginalizing children by losing sight of their relationship and interdependence with their family of origin (Reynaert et al., 2009; Barnes, 2007; Boddy, 2018; Jans, 2004; Horgan et al., 2017).

If children are seen as loyal, vulnerable, or having only had negative experiences and thus potentially hindered in their ability to freely express their views, one may fail to approach the conversation with curiosity, explore their emotional experience and recognize the children's ambivalence and moral agency (see Mayall, 2002). It may further have negative impacts as children's interdependence with their family is neglected. This relationality and interdependence could itself be acknowledged as the child's expression of participation and moral agency, which could then be further explored to discover the family life the child imagines and hopes for. This acknowledgment points to a widening theoretical understanding of and nuance in viewing children as social agents that moves beyond the self-referential/self-explanatory individual and individuated agency for which childhood studies are criticized (see Spyrou et al., 2019; James, 2010).

What constitutes a “good enough” family in child welfare case work is oftentimes vague and unclear (Choate and Engstrom, 2014; Langsrud et al., 2017). The study shows how a given culture's shared meaning of family impacts practice within participatory processes. It is thus a contribution to broadening our understanding and ability to explore children's family relations and thereby be in a better position to protect their right to family life. In contrast to trichotomies created to inform how children define family (Ellingsen et al., 2012), the findings of this study shows that the emotional landscape the conversation enters is ambiguous and ambivalent and shaped by conflicting and contradictory feelings.

The current study provides a basis for reflexivity in social work; particularly education and training for professions in the field of child welfare. Exercising reflexivity toward constructions of children and family is required to avoid bias and ensure fully explorative and sensitive conversations with children about their family in child welfare. In conclusion, to discover the complex web of interdependence, experiences, ambiguity, feelings, and expectations children have around family and familial relations in their lives, children's representatives need to be reflexive toward their own understanding(s) of family and family interdependence.

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Notes

1. These statistics correlate with the current study's sample (two-thirds of whom were in pedagogic professions, the remainder in social welfare and health sciences).
2. There were 12 County Boards at the time interviews were conducted (April to September 2017).

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