



Article

Monitoring of Norwegian Foster Homes

Esben S. B. Olesen ^{1,*} and Lea Louise Videt ²

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, 8049 Bodø, Norway

² Section for Welfare, Health and Upbringing, Nordland Research Institute, 8049 Bodø, Norway; llv@norsk.no

* Correspondence: esben.s.olesen@nord.no

Abstract: Based on interviews, this article explores how the monitoring of foster homes is experienced by children and youths who have been exposed to what they consider abusive behaviour by foster parents. Using a thematic narrative theoretical framework, the article shows that a common narrative in the youths' accounts is a story of mistrust towards social workers and monitoring officers, which relates to a general mistrust towards the child welfare service. The young individuals are reluctant to tell monitoring officers about how they truly experience their situation in their foster home. At the same time, some of the youths have difficulty comprehending what normal parenting behaviour is like, due to previous experiences of neglect from adults. The article discusses how successful monitoring of foster homes largely stands or falls on the children's and youths' ability to disclose their experiences to their supervisors and monitoring officers. We argue that the youths' narratives tell a story of disempowerment. This represents a dilemma in the monitoring of Norwegian foster homes and in the children's right to protection.

Keywords: foster homes; monitoring; supervision; foster children

1. Introduction

Approximately 1% of all children aged 0–17 in Norway live in foster homes¹. Since the 1950s, there has been an explicit policy to reduce the use of institutional placements and prioritise foster care when the authorities determine that children cannot live with their parents due to severe neglect (Hagen 2001; Larsen 2002). The idea of 'the best interest of the child' is a fundamental principle guiding all cases in the child welfare service (Norwegian: barnevernet). According to the *Child Welfare Act (2023, § 1–6)*, all children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to participate in all matters concerning themselves. The child should receive adequate information, have the right to freely express their views, and be listened to. The child's views should be given weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. For children placed in foster care, the law states specifically that the child should be given the opportunity to express their opinion on the choice of foster home (*Forskrift om fosterhjem 2023, § 4*). The safeguarding of children's rights in Norway has been strengthened by the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been embedded in Norwegian legislation.

Supervision and monitoring of foster homes and child welfare institutions is pivotal to ensure that the abovementioned rights are carried out and to uncover neglect and mistreatment of children and young people placed away from home (*Barne- ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet 2015*).

The research literature that explores how the monitoring of foster homes and child welfare institutions in Nordic countries is executed and experienced is very limited. A Danish research project investigated the degree to which children living in child protection institutions in Denmark are involved in the inspection of institutions (Gjørup et al. 2022). The article illustrates that when one authority is responsible for monitoring at an institutional level, while another authority oversees inspections in individual cases (as is the case in Denmark), it creates a barrier for children and young people to express their individual



Citation: Olesen, Esben S. B., and Lea Louise Videt. 2024. Monitoring of Norwegian Foster Homes. *Social Sciences* 13: 65. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010065>

Academic Editors: Hanne Warming and Sarah Alminde

Received: 28 November 2023

Revised: 10 January 2024

Accepted: 15 January 2024

Published: 18 January 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

experiences and opinions. The article concludes that despite multiple monitoring visits being conducted in child protection institutions, children who are not thriving may be overlooked due to a poorly organised monitoring system. Studies specifically exploring the monitoring of foster homes are scarce, both internationally and in a Scandinavian context (Kjelsaas et al. 2018; Verpe 2007). Norwegian research exploring children's and young people's experiences with monitoring visits in the foster homes in which they live is, to our knowledge, limited to one specific research project conducted by Olesen et al. (2023). This study delved into broader issues of boundary setting and the use of coercion toward children and young individuals residing in foster homes and, in connection with these themes, also examined experiences with monitoring visits. The data from this research project serve as the empirical foundation for this article.

This article examines the narratives of young individuals who, by their own accounts, have faced inappropriate or abusive behaviour from foster parents in Norwegian foster homes. It specifically delves into their experiences with monitoring visits conducted by independent municipal monitoring officers. We explore, from the perspective of foster children, some of the social and institutional mechanisms that can make it difficult to uncover inadequate caregiving in foster homes. We will discuss how successful monitoring of foster homes to a large extent stands or falls on the children's and youths' ability to disclose their experiences to the monitoring officer who visits them. To analyse the accounts of the young individuals, we utilise a thematic narrative theoretical framework (Riessman 2008).

Foster Homes and Monitoring

Foster homes are used both as a voluntary measure with consent from the biological parents and as a coercive measure in cases where biological parents do not consent to the placement. The latter is the case in 80% of all foster care placements². The decision to place a child in foster care without parental acceptance can be made only if less-intrusive measures do not meet the child's needs and if there are serious deficiencies in the care the child is receiving (Child Welfare Act 2023, § 5–1).

Approximately 60% of children and young people living in foster care reside in municipal foster homes. Nearly 30% of children and young people living in foster care reside in family or network foster homes, where the child knows the foster parents from before the placement. Around 5% of children and young people reside in specialised foster homes organised by The Children, Youth and Family Agency (Norwegian: Bufetat). Emergency foster care homes are also available. These are homes where children and adolescents who need to be moved urgently can be temporarily placed until a more permanent care solution is established³.

The child welfare services that are responsible for the daily care of a child living in foster care are accountable for following up and supervising the situation of each individual child placed in a foster home and must provide the foster home with comprehensive follow-up, guidance, and support adapted to the individual foster family.

In addition to the child welfare services' ongoing assessment and follow-up of the child's and foster family's situation, the municipality where the foster home is situated is obligated to carry out independent monitoring visits to ensure that the individual child is receiving appropriate care in the foster home. The municipalities are responsible for ensuring that the assigned monitoring officers (Norwegian: tilsynspersoner) are given the necessary training and guidance that enables them to carry out the monitoring in a responsible manner (Child Welfare Act 2023). According to the law, the monitoring officers must have an independent position in relation to the child welfare service, the foster parents and the child's biological parents. A minimum of four monitoring visits should be carried out in all foster homes every year. The monitoring visits can be reduced to twice a year if the child has turned 15 and has lived in the foster home for more than two years and the municipality considers the conditions in the foster home to be stable. The law states that municipalities shall assign these monitoring tasks to individuals 'deemed suitable for the task'. It is also

stated that the foster home municipality should assign the task to individuals capable of performing the task over time ([Forskrift om fosterhjem 2023](#)). Monitoring officers are not required by law to have a specific education or background in children's work, although it is stated in the national guidelines for monitoring officers that they should have experience working with children ([Barne- ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet 2015](#), p. 29). While some municipalities have assigned the monitoring task to educated professionals as a part of their municipal job, most monitoring officers are 'private' individuals who take on the task in their spare time as compensated volunteers ([Kjelsaas et al. 2018](#); [Olesen et al. 2023](#)). The law specifies that the monitoring officer must make contact with the individual child and that children who can formulate their own opinions must be given the opportunity to express their views on the situation in their foster home. In addition, it is specified that the monitoring officer must facilitate conversation with the child without the foster parents' presence ([Forskrift om fosterhjem 2023](#)). The law also states that children placed in foster care should be informed that they may raise any issues in the foster home or in their relationship with the child welfare service with their monitoring officer at any time. In other words, the monitoring officer should be a person whom the child can confide in and who can build a trusting relationship. After meeting with the child, the monitoring officer is required to write a report containing an assessment of the child's situation in the foster home. It should be evident in the report whether there have been conversations with the child, how the child has been given the opportunity to express their views, what the child has communicated, and whether any additional information ought to be obtained. The report must be delivered to the municipality, which shall verify that the monitoring report provides sufficient information for the objective of the monitoring to be considered fulfilled. The child welfare services in the municipality shall follow up on the report and promptly address any concerns raised by taking appropriate action.

2. Data and Method

The analyses in this article are based on data from the abovementioned research project investigating boundary setting and the use of coercion towards children and young people living in foster homes ([Olesen et al. 2023](#)). The research project was commissioned by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. Thirty-three interviews were conducted with young people with experience of being in foster care, aged 13 to 25 years (21 participants in the age group 13–17 years and 12 participants in the age group 18–25 years). The majority of the participants under the age of 18 were living in foster care during the time of the interview, while the majority of the young adults aged 18–25 had moved out of their former foster home. The interviews were conducted from spring 2021 to summer 2022. The gender distribution included one non-binary individual, nine boys/young men, and 23 girls/young women. It is not easy to provide an overview of the exact types of foster homes in which the young people lived, as many of the young people have moved between different types of foster homes throughout their upbringing. The participants took part in an in-depth interview with a duration varying from 30 min to 1 h and 15 min. The interview guide consisted of three overall themes covering (i) everyday life in the foster home, (ii) experiences with house rules, boundary setting, and coercion, and (iii) experiences with child welfare workers, supervision, and independent monitoring. The interview guide served as a starting point, yet each interview evolved in its own direction in accordance with Holstein and Gubrium's understanding of the active interview approach ([Holstein and Gubrium 1995](#)). The young participants were given the choice between being interviewed via Teams or face-to-face.

Five participants provided accounts of what can be categorised as abusive behaviour or questionable caregiving from foster parents, e.g., restricted access to food, communication, and freedom of movement, as well as being exposed to violent verbal expressions. Due to space limitations in this paper and similarities in the accounts of the interviewed youth, we have selected two interviews that will constitute the main data material. The entirety of the interviews will be referred to when relevant. The two informants are Julie (18)

and Marie (22). These two informants were selected because they represent different backgrounds among the five participants who had experience of abusive behaviour from foster parents; Julie has lived in foster care for many years, while Marie lived in foster care only for a short period. They therefore also have different experiences with the monitoring system. However, as mentioned, their experiences are quite similar to the other accounts of questionable caregiving from foster parents. We wish to emphasise that the majority of the 33 children and youth who were interviewed described their foster parents as good and caring, with no experiences of abuse of any kind. When we focus on the 'negative' stories in this article, our intention is not to overemphasise these, but to explore the factors that hinder such situations from being uncovered.

Ethical Considerations

All participation in the research project was based on informed consent. In accordance with Norwegian national research ethical principles, all individuals over 15 years of age provided their own consent to participate in the study, while children/youth between 12 and 15 years participated with consent from the person with legal parental responsibility. In addition to these formal ethical principles, we applied a situated ethical perspective. This implies being continually attentive to how participation in the research project affected our informants and considering moral and personal boundaries concerning the participants throughout the research process (fieldwork, analysis, and representation) (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Hastrup 2009). The participants have been anonymised. This study has been assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

3. Storytelling

Narratives are the stories we tell about ourselves and others. They constitute a pivotal function in social interaction by constructing meaning and regulating social life (Riessman 2008). Among other things, they put identifications and subject positions into words. 'Identification' describes how a person's identity emerges from a dialectic process in which a person's self-identification is linked with how other people identify the same person. This is what Richard Jenkins calls "the internal–external dialectic of identification" (Jenkins 2008). A subject position more narrowly describes an individual position in a given society and culture and the duties and obligations that are attached to a specific social position (Davies and Harré 1990). The subject position projects discursive guidelines to what is considered normal and desirable in a social situation or cultural environment (Torronen 2001). As an illustration, in an interview with a social worker from a child welfare service, a caregiver from a foster home would often be discursively positioned as a 'foster parent' and be expected to conduct him or herself in a certain way towards the child welfare service and the foster child (Olesen et al. 2023). At the same time, being positioned as a 'foster parent' does not necessarily mean that the person identifies as such. The person being positioned as a foster parent could speak of themselves as a grandfather or uncle in a situation where a child is placed with relatives (Holtan et al. 2020). Thus, the way we talk about ourselves and others when we tell stories influences how we understand, perceive, and act in specific situations and towards other people.

A fundamental element in narratives is the 'plot'. A plot organises how 'characters' (human and non-human) engage in an 'event' or 'action' (Ricoeur 1984). The plot ties the individual characters and events together into a whole and creates an appearance of cause and effect in a particular narrative. The plot determines which identities, positions, and events are important in order for the narrative to make sense. Directly or indirectly, the plot thereby conveys the narrative's message, moral, or purpose.

When we use a thematic narrative approach in this article, we highlight which themes in the young people's accounts create content and progress and, thereby, are meaningful. In other words, we examine what their story is about and not how the story is told. (Riessman 2008).

The youths we interviewed told the story of their experiences of living in foster homes. Their narratives are articulated in a more or less spontaneous and unstructured way (even though the interviews were guided by the researcher's questions). Like other researchers using narrative analysis, we argue that small or unstructured narratives will always be affected by dominant discourses that, on an overall level, structure the meaning of our linguistic repertoire (Glavind et al. 2016; Gullikstad et al. 2021). The dominant discourses define how social, cultural, and scientific phenomena in a historical period are understood and categorised (Foucault 1983). The meanings attached to terms such as 'family', 'childhood', or 'foster parents' in a particular culture and period in history will affect the stories people produce in their everyday lives.

In the following section, we delve into the accounts of Julie and Marie to understand how these young individuals articulate their experiences of living with foster parents who displayed offensive behaviour. We will also explore how the young individuals related to the monitoring officers who were meant to assess their situation in the foster home. As mentioned, we found similar themes across the interviews conducted with the young people, and we will relate the stories of Julie and Marie to other parts of the data material when relevant. We argue that insecurity and mistrust are the main themes in the young people's narratives of their experiences.

4. Two Accounts of Inappropriate Caregiving

Julie, who is now 18 years old, has lived in four different foster homes during the last ten years—two different emergency foster care homes and two different regular foster homes. In the first foster home she lived in, she felt excluded from her foster parents' and foster siblings' family life. She lived there from the age of 12 to the age of 15. In that foster home, she felt like "a burden that always was wrong", as she puts it. She describes her foster parents as controlling and verbally abusive. When Julie describes herself at that time, she tells of a child who was not doing well, who was insecure and sometimes caused trouble in school. She explains that all episodes of misbehaviour would cause her foster parents to react aggressively, especially her foster mother. She describes that her foster mother would 'lose it':

Interviewer: [...] when you say she lost it, was it like she got really angry or...

Julie: Yes, it was scolding, and she would start screaming. And if I started crying as a reaction, she would be like, why are you crying? You're just crying because you were caught, or because you didn't get your way. And then I'm like, no, I'm crying because you're standing there screaming at me! [...] These things stuck with me for a very long time.

Julie says that she experienced that in the foster home she never was allowed to voice her opinion, because "I was wrong anyway", as she formulates it.

Julie also tells that on some occasions she was forced to stay in her room for several days in a row. As she describes it, this was a punishment that the foster mother would use, for example, if the school informed her that Julie had misbehaved in class. Julie explains this in the interview:

Julie: [W]hat happened when I got grounded, was that I went... she bloody locked me in my room! She took my mobile phone and everything. I had to sit in my room for like several days. I was only allowed to come downstairs for dinner, and when I got home from school, it was straight up to my room. Eat dinner, and then it was straight up to my room again. And that's how it went for a week straight.

Interviewer: You just had to sit in your room?

Julie: Yes, just that. I wasn't allowed to watch TV, and it was, well... I wasn't sure... but I don't think that's how it is supposed to be. I understand now that when a child is just placed in a room [...] you just sit there alone with your

thoughts. You don't even have a phone, you can't talk to your friends, your mother, you. . . ah now I'm starting to cry...[. . .]

Interviewer: Was the room locked or how was. . . how was it?

Julie: Sometimes it was locked, sometimes, but it was, it was only the first few days it was locked because I had to. . . I had to go to the toilet somehow. After all, it was. . .

Interviewer: Just so I understand it right. They locked the door from the outside so you couldn't get out?

Julie: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay, if you had to go to the bathroom, you had to knock on the door and say I have to go to the bathroom?

Julie: Yes, my God, it was quite a prison system, it was quite sick. . . [. . .]

Julie explains that the experience of being confined was made even more violent by the fact that she was deprived of the opportunity to communicate with friends and family. As the quote shows, she compares her treatment to being in a prison system and labels it as *sick*. Analysed as a narrative, Julie, in this account, defines the foster home as a form of imprisonment, and her foster parents (especially her foster mother) are described as wicked characters who are manipulative, aggressive, unreasonable, and uncaring—the opposite of a loving and caring parent. As mentioned, Julie depicts herself as a somewhat difficult child, and she reports that she would often lie and did not share her thoughts with adults. She felt lonely and misunderstood, and in the interview, she elaborates on her behaviour by saying this:

I don't think they [adults] understood that I was acting out because I wasn't getting the care I needed. Which eventually became a problem and I felt like I was never seen or heard.

In summary, the characters in Julie's story about the foster home in which she used to live are the wicked foster parents and the poorly behaved but misunderstood teenager. The actions she describes occur in situations where she is punished and disciplined. The themes in Julie's story are 'control' and 'repression', but there is also a theme of not really understanding what was going on at the time. We will discuss these themes later. In the interview, Julie reports that after three years in that foster home, she was moved to a new home where she had loving foster parents and felt safe. As she tells it, she was not moved because of her former foster parents' abusive behaviour but because they no longer wanted her in their home.

Marie is another youth who reports experiences of abusive behaviour from her foster parents. Marie lived in a foster home for about a year when she was 14 years old. As Marie (who is now 22 years old) depicts it, she was not a child who made trouble or was engaged in any risky behaviour. She describes her younger self as quiet and uncertain. She explains that she was afraid of her foster parents because they smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol, which made her uncomfortable. Marie describes her foster parents as very strict. For instance, Marie was not allowed to go out at all in the evening. Marie said in the interview that she felt that she did not have any privacy in her foster home, and she often sneaked out to get away from the house and go for a walk, which made her feel safe. If the foster parents discovered that Marie had been out of the house or was not following their strict rules in other ways, they would become "very angry". When she was asked about what happened when her foster parents became angry, Marie answered:

Marie: It could vary a lot [. . .] so sometimes it was just like a reprimand in a way. While other times it was more like screaming and it was, well, things happened that weren't so good... Among other things, she [the foster mum] got the oldest foster brother to hold me down and lay me down on the floor.

Interviewer: Can you try to describe it? What happened?

Marie: I had been on a walk and then. . . I don't really know if that was exactly what triggered it, because I'm still a bit shocked after that incident because it was so dramatic in a way. But I think it was just that I had been out for a short while and then I came back and then she got quite mad. She was yelling, and then I got really scared, so I sat on the inside of the door to my room [. . .] I sat against the door and pressed against it so she wouldn't come in. And then she got the foster brother to break open the door, and then I fled to the corner of the room because I was so scared. Then he kind of just came in and took me out and, yes, pinned me to the floor.

Marie explains that her foster parents ordered the older foster brother to restrain her against her will on a couple of occasions. Marie recalls that when it happened, she was "very scared" and she almost had what she describes as a "blackout". Throughout the entire interview, Marie makes it clear that she felt insecure when she lived in the foster home. She frequently uses the word 'scared' to describe how the foster parents made her feel. Like the account given by Julie, this emphasises how Marie's story is centred around her former foster parents' abusive behaviour. Both Marie and Julie, and the other youth we interviewed who had similar accounts of inappropriate care giving, describe that the experiences they had in these foster homes enhanced a distrust in adults generally. We will elaborate on this aspect later. Marie's time in the foster home ended after approximately a year, when she was transferred to live with biological relatives.

4.1. *A Lack of Understanding*

An important aspect that emerges in the stories of Julie and Marie, and in other interviews we conducted, is that the young individuals who have experienced inappropriate or abusive caregiving in their foster homes have had a difficult time deciphering what to consider normal parenting behaviour.

In her narrative, Julie looks back at her life in the foster home with the belief that her foster parents manipulated her. She explains that her foster mother would tell her that it was normal for parents to treat their children the way she was treated in the foster home—e.g., locking children into their rooms when they misbehaved. Julie says that this made her believe that her foster parents' behaviour was indeed normal parenting and that the punishment was in fact her own fault. "I thought that was how it was supposed to be in a family", as she puts it.

As Marie's story unfolds, it becomes clear that she too did not have a good yardstick by which to judge her foster parents' behaviour. When asked how she dealt with her foster parents' strict and aggressive behaviour, she says:

I think I was very used to it and so I didn't react to it back then, and it's almost like I don't react so much to it now afterwards. Or at least, it has taken a very long time to understand that a lot of what happened in that foster home, but also what happened at home, it hasn't been quite right.

What both Julie and Marie explain when reflecting in the interview is that, at the time of the neglect in the foster home, they were not capable of understanding what was good or bad parenting and that this lack of understanding was enhanced by their earlier upbringing marked by neglect. Even at the time of the interview, they to some extent doubted their own judgement, especially Marie, expressing doubt as to whether the foster parents' reactions were 'normal'. Julie gets more upset when telling her story and uses swear words to emphasise that she now realises that the way she was treated was not all right.

4.2. *Mistrust*

As explained in the introduction, the law dictates how municipalities should carry out regular supervision and monitoring of all children living in foster homes to ensure that they receive proper care and that their opinions are heard. So how come is it that the situations of inappropriate care described by young people like Julie and Marie (and

others we interviewed) were not uncovered by supervision from child welfare workers and independent monitoring officers?

When asked what Julie told her monitoring officer about her situation in the foster home, she says that she tried to tell her monitoring officer about the abuse but that she did not trust her enough to say it directly. Julie elaborates that, in general, she was not fond of the child welfare service:

I didn't like the child welfare service [...] every time the child welfare service came to visit, I always went into a very, eh, defensive mode. I just sat and was a bit rude, and I was very closed off and I never opened up about how I really felt. Because I've always felt that the child welfare service didn't do their job as they should, like the fact that I wasn't allowed to see my mum as I wanted and stuff like that. I had a lot of, not hate, but sort of mistrust of the child welfare system, if you know what I mean.

In the interview, Julie refers to the monitoring officers that had been assigned to her case as if they were working for 'the child welfare service', which, officially, is not the case. In other words, Julie's way of talking about the people she was in contact with makes it clear she was not aware of the different roles they have. Julie explains that she had four different monitoring officers over a period of five years. She did not consider them people to put her trust in, as they rarely showed up at the foster home. Over a period of nearly two years, she cannot recall that she talked to or met her monitoring officer at all. She reports that *during that period, I had no safe adults I could talk to*. She adds that she also felt that her case manager (from the child welfare service) sided with her foster parents and that she could not talk to her about the punishment and confinement that she experienced. In addition to having a distant relationship with the monitoring officers, Julie recalls that one of the monitoring officers revealed things to her foster parents that Julie had told her in confidence, which damaged her trust in that person.

In Julie's narrative of her story, it is worth noting that she does not refer to individual child welfare workers but rather to the institution as an entity. When she refers to specific monitoring officers and her relations with them, it is because she is answering the interviewer's specific questions. Otherwise, she refers to all adults related to her case as 'barnevernet' (the child welfare service). This impersonal account signals that Julie distances herself from her case managers, a fact that is clear in the quote above. Since she is not aware of the official role of the independent monitoring officers or of the rights that these officers are supposed to safeguard, she also distances herself from them, seeing them as a part of 'the system', which she mistrusts. Like Julie, Marie also tells that she did not trust adults from the child welfare service. She explains that her parents always told her not to talk to people from the child welfare service and that she should never trust them. Therefore, she did not tell them how she felt about the foster home and how she was treated. Marie cannot recall that she ever met a monitoring officer in the period she lived in the foster home. She explicitly states in the interview that she was not aware before the interviewer asked about it that such a role existed or that they were supposed to be somebody she could talk to.

Many of the young people we have interviewed explain in similar ways that they do not trust their monitoring officers and case managers. This is the case not only for the informants who experienced abusive behaviour from their foster parents, but also for those who describe their relationship with their foster parents as good and caring. In these latter cases, some of the informants explained that they had a general mistrust towards 'barnevernet' (the child welfare service) and that they were afraid that they would be taken away from their foster parents. In general, many of the young people we interviewed simply do not trust adults from, or associated with, the child welfare services. Just like Julie, many are not aware of the differences between the positions of 'case manager' from the child welfare service and 'independent monitoring officer' from the municipality. Both positions are viewed as official authorities, towards which these young people express feelings of mistrust.

Furthermore, a common story in the interviews with foster children and in interviews we conducted with foster parents is, as Julie explained, that the relationship with monitoring officers is very unstable. They are often replaced—some of the youths have had more than ten different supervisors in less than six years—and in many cases the municipalities do not conduct the four mandated monitoring visits. Earlier studies have also demonstrated systematic failures in municipalities to consistently conduct the required number of monitoring visits (Kjelsaas et al. 2018). However, even when monitoring visits are carried out correctly, the young informants express that it is difficult to build a secure and confident relationship with an adult person they meet only four times a year. Many of the interviewed young people expressed that they did not really understand the point of meeting these people. The concern of establishing a trusting relationship in four meetings per year is also raised by monitoring officers themselves, who have been interviewed about their experiences of carrying out the task (Olesen et al. 2023).

Even though the stories of Julie and Marie (and other young people we interviewed) depict different kinds of inappropriate caregiving by foster parents, the plots of their narratives are somewhat similar. Simply put, the plots in their narratives follow this logic: (i) The child welfare service placed me in a foster home with foster parents I did not know. (ii) The foster parents treated me really badly, which made me feel very uncomfortable and scared. (iii) Although I was unhappy in the foster home, I was not really sure at the time if that was how a normal family was supposed to be. (iv) I had a general mistrust towards all adults from 'barnevernet' (case workers and monitoring officers). Therefore, I was not able to talk to them about my experiences in the foster family.

If we abstract the central elements of the youths' narratives, we find three pivotal positions: (i) themselves, who are adolescents or youth that have been neglected by most adults in their lives; (ii) foster parents, who are described as scary, controlling, and abusive, and (iii) official authorities (monitoring officers and case managers), who are characterised as unstable, untrustworthy, or absent. The two main themes are 'insecurity' and 'mistrust'. Based on these narrative elements, we will discuss in the following section how these stories convey a discourse of disempowerment. We argue that the foster children's reluctance to share their experiences clashes with the principles of the monitoring system and the notion of children's right to have their opinions heard.

5. Discussion

As shown above, 'insecurity' and 'mistrust' are the main themes in the narratives of Julie and Marie. In their accounts, the two young women identify themselves as persons who were subjected to coercion and control by their former foster parents and the child welfare services. They both express that what they experienced in the foster home has had a largely negative effect on their lives. Insecurity is presented as a fundamental condition in their narratives; they were born into unstable families, placed in insecure foster homes, and have uncertain relationships with case workers and monitoring officers. Previous research shows that the feeling of insecurity is a characteristic experience among children who live in foster homes. In a Danish study based on interviews with youths who used to live in foster homes, Bengtsson et al. (2020) described how uncertainty is embedded in the placement itself. The foster child often does not know how long the placement will last, whether he or she will remain in the foster home, or what the relationship with the foster parents will be like once the child eventually moves away. Bengtsson, Lumby, and Poulsen illustrate how youths with experience from living in foster homes constantly carried a sense of uncertainty about their place in the family, even if they were doing well and had good relationships with their foster family. A latent feeling of not truly belonging to the family was a part of their experience. The insecurity described by young people who have experienced inappropriate caregiving or abusive behaviour by foster parents is different. On the one hand, it is highly tangible: a feeling of insecurity and fear about the reactions of the foster parents, and a fear of verbal or physical punishment. On the other hand, they

also experience insecurity related to their own reactions and feelings, not knowing whether 'this is how it is supposed to be in a family', as Julie very clearly described it.

As we have demonstrated, many of the young people who live, or have lived, in foster homes express a general distrust towards the child welfare services. In their stories, Julie and Marie describe both the foster parents and the impersonal 'barnevernet' as entities holding negative power over their lives. Their stories clearly demonstrate that they do not believe that the monitoring officers or case managers safeguard their interests. On the contrary, in the young people's stories the authorities most often protect their own interests—e.g., siding with foster parents, not listening to the children, or not visiting them. Many of the children in foster care position themselves in opposition to the child welfare authorities and deliberately hold back information from the monitoring officers and case managers because they are afraid that what they say will be used against them. Even the foster children in the extreme cases we have described in this article are still reluctant to provide information to frontline professionals and monitoring officers, who are supposed to protect them. The combination of the insecurity the foster children experience and the mistrust that makes them reluctant to share their experiences results in a situation of *disempowerment* that becomes a broader narrative in the stories of these youths. As a consequence of this disempowerment, the otherwise comprehensive rights of the children to be heard and to have their perspectives taken into account are not activated. Disempowerment and lack of agency are characteristic of the way Julie and Marie narrate their stories; for instance, when Julie describes how she was locked in her room, comparing it to a prison, and when Marie describes how she would sneak out of the foster home to gain a sense of freedom. The lack of understanding about their rights to be heard that their stories reveal exacerbates the situation of disempowerment and lack of agency. At the same time, there is a timeline in the narratives of Julie and Marie, who are now in a different place in their lives. In the interview situation, they express agency by being able to tell their story and retrospectively judging that the events they were submitted to were not acceptable. Especially in Julie's narrative, there is a clear 'message' stating 'I was mistreated and misunderstood, and I should not have been treated like that'. This also shows, as the anthropologist Michael Jackson argues, that storytelling is "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson 2013, p. 34).

While the youths' narratives reveal a situation of disempowerment, the system of independent monitoring is in fact dependent on the foster children's ability to perform agency and voice their opinions. In other words, the monitoring of foster homes is, to a large extent, based on the premise that the children and youths placed in foster care will share information with the monitoring officers. When the children will not or cannot do so, the system is hindered from uncovering the children's experiences in foster care. As shown, some of the challenges in the monitoring system are related to systemic 'failures', such as the number of monitoring visits not being fulfilled or the frequent turnover of the individual monitoring officers, despite the legislatively prescribed standard of assigning the role to individuals capable of performing the task over time. What we highlight here is a paradox that goes beyond such formal obstacles. The children's mistrust towards 'the system' becomes a hindrance that prevents them from obtaining help from that same system and from exercising their rights. The principles of 'the best interests of the child' and of 'the child's right to be heard' (Barnekonvensjonen 1989) are at the core of the dominant discourse of Norwegian childhood, but they were not a part of the experiences that Julie and Marie convey.

The discrepancy between foster children's experiences of disempowerment and mistrust and the system's expectation that these children will express their opinions can be understood in the context of a unique Nordic trust discourse (Svendsen and Svendsen 2016). In this discourse, which is characteristic of the Nordic welfare state, the population, authorities, and politicians strongly believe in a common interest that bridges the state and civil society together. The ideal that the modern welfare state can provide services that cover the needs of the population in an equal and just manner is perceived as a reality by

significant portions of the population and service professionals rather than an aspirational ideal (Romøren et al. 2011; Vike et al. 2016). This logic makes it ‘natural’ for authorities to believe that by default, they have shared interests with the children living in foster homes and that by default the children trust the authorities. From this point of view, it therefore seems reasonable to send a person (without any required formal qualifications) to visit the children living in foster homes a couple of times a year in the belief that the children will simply trust this person and tell them about potential abuse.

The social mechanisms described in this article, through the narratives of Julie and Marie, highlight a dilemma within the current framework of monitoring Norwegian foster homes. It becomes evident that those individuals who are most in need of exercising the rights granted to them by the welfare state are often the least inclined to do so. Despite the comprehensive formal rights afforded to children in foster homes and the presence of an independent monitoring system designed to safeguard them, Julie’s and Marie’s narratives underscore that not all children possess the capacity to assert these rights and benefit from the protective measures the system aims to provide. Consequently, the monitoring system appears to be at risk of assuming a symbolic role rather than a practical one.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.S.B.O. and L.L.V.; methodology, E.S.B.O. and L.L.V.; writing—original draft preparation, E.S.B.O. and L.L.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs.

Institutional Review Board Statement: In Norway, individual research projects are not approved by an ethics committee at local universities. Research projects in the social sciences are assessed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (formerly the Norwegian Centre for Research Data). The research project that the manuscript, “Monitoring of Norwegian Foster Homes,” is based on, is assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data with reference number 356701 on 10 January 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: To safeguard the complete anonymity of our informants, which is fundamental to their consent, the raw data supporting the findings of this article is not made available.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See: <https://www.bufdir.no/statistikk-og-analyse/barnevern/barn-i-fosterhjem> (accessed on 15 October 2023).
- ² See: <https://www.bufdir.no/statistikk-og-analyse/barnevern/barn-i-fosterhjem#section-30> (accessed on 8 January 2024).
- ³ See: <https://www.bufdir.no/fosterhjem/ulike-typer-fosterhjem/> (accessed on 1 October 2023).

References

- Barne- ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet. 2015. *Tilsyn Med Barn i Fosterhjem: Veileder 2015*. Tønsberg: Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet.
- Barnekonvensjonen. 1989. Konvensjon om Barnets Rettigheter (20-11-1989 nr 1 Multilateral). Available online: <https://lovdata.no/traktat/1989-11-20-1> (accessed on 1 October 2023).
- Bengtsson, Tea, Ditte Lumby, and Juliane Poulsen. 2020. Skrøbelige relationer—tidligere anbragtes fortællinger om familie. *Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift* 4: 68–87.
- Child Welfare Act. 2023. Act Relating to Child Welfare (lov-2022-06-17-45). Lovdata. Available online: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2021-06-18-97> (accessed on 1 October 2023).
- Davies, Bronwyn, and Rom Harré. 1990. Positioning and the Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20: 43–63.
- Forskrift om fosterhjem. 2023. Available online: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2003-12-18-1659> (accessed on 5 October 2023).
- Foucault, Michel. 1983. The Subject and Power. In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. Edited by Hubert Lederer Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Gjørup, Jesper Buchholdt, Matilde Høybye-Mortensen, and Anette Braaby van Deurs. 2022. Inddragelse af anbragte børn ved tilsynsbesøg. *Udenfor Nummer: Tidsskrift for Forskning og Praxis i Socialt Arbejde* 21: 40–51.
- Glavind, Bo Inger, Ann Dorthe Christensen, and Trine Lund Thomsen. 2016. *Narrativ Forskning: Tilgange og Metoder*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Guillemin, Marilys, and Lynn Gillam. 2004. Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 10: 261–80. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gullikstad, Berit, Guro Korsnes Kristensen, and Angelina Penner. 2021. «Den gode borgeren» og «den flinke flyktningen»: Fortellinger om dugnad, ideer om homogenitet og rasialisering. In *Fortellinger om Integrering i Norske Lokalsamfunn*. Edited by Berit Gullikstad, Guro Korsnes Kristensen and Angelina Penner. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 134–55. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hagen, Gerd. 2001. *Barnevernets Historie: Om Makt og Avmakt i det 20. Århundret*. Oslo: Akribe.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 2009. Videnskabelig praksis—det etiske felt i antropologien. In *Mellem Mennesker—en Grundbog i Antropologisk Forskningsetik*. Edited by Kirsten Hastrup. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Holstein, James, and Jaber Gubrium. 1995. *The Active Interview*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Holtan, Amy, Renee Thørnblad, and Jeanette Skoglund. 2020. *Slektsfosterhjem: Mellom Barnevern og Familie*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Jackson, Michael. 2013. *The Politics of Storytelling*. Copenhagen: Museum Musculanum Press.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2008. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Kjelsaas, Iselin, Annegrete Bruvoll, Dag Ellingsen, and Maren Basso. 2018. *Evaluering av Tilsynsordningen for Barn i Fosterhjem*. Oslo: Menon Economics.
- Larsen, Guri. 2002. *Barnevern i Hundre år: Et Overblikk på Lovreformhistorien*. (Bd. nr 2/2002). Oslo: Institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi, Avdeling for kriminologi, Universitetet i Oslo Unipub Distribuertes av Akademika.
- Olesen, Esben S. B., Trond Bliksvær, Lea Louise Videt, Marius Storvik, Lena Augusta Ulfseth, and Willy Lichtwarck. 2023. *Grensesetting og bruk av tvang overfor barn i fosterhjem*. Bodø: Nordlandsforskning.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative: 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler. 2008. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Romøren, Tor Inge, Stein Kuhnle, and Aksel Hatland. 2011. *Den Norske Velferdsstaten*, 4th ed. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Svendsen, Gunnar Lind Haase, and Gert Tinggaard Svendsen. 2016. *Trust, Social Capital and the Scandinavian Welfare State. Explaining the Flight of the Bumblebee*. Northampton: Edgard Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Torronen, Jukka. 2001. The Concept of Subject Position in Empirical Social Research. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 31: 313–29. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Verpe, Anne Marie. 2007. Å føre tilsyn med barn i fosterhjem. *Norges Barnevern* 84: 25–35.
- Vike, Halvard, Jonas Debesay, and Heidi Haukelien. 2016. *Tilbakeblikk på Velferdsstaten. Politikk, Styring og Tjenester*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.