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Clash with Barnevernet

Polish Migrants' Families Experiences with Child Protection Services in Norway: A Qualitative Study

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Why This Book Was Created

The research that laid the foundation for this book began with a clear declaration, which was included in an invitation sent by Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska to Poles and Norwegians who had agreed to participate in interviews. The declaration stated:

> The results of my research will have practical applications. On one hand, they will provide additional knowledge to Polish families in Norway who experience stress and difficulties in dealing with this institution (Barnevernet—ed. HGM). On the other hand, they will contribute to improving the education of social workers employed in Barnevernet.

This declaration was frequently referenced during interviews with participants who accepted the invitation. Fulfilling this promise became both an obvious obligation and a justification for the efforts made by the researcher and the interviewees.

As more interviews were conducted, the emerging picture became increasingly complex. The only clear conclusion was that interactions between Polish families and Barnevernet were difficult, often traumatic for both sides, and frequently characterized by a lack of understanding of the sources of these difficulties. The functioning of both parties—the Polish families and Barnevernet—did not lend itself to simple assessments of the causes of conflict. At the same time, strategies that could potentially help prevent such conflicts also began to emerge. To enable readers to follow the research findings, it was decided to present the picture that emerged from the interviews without adopting any predefined theses to be proven or disproven during the analysis.

The researcher approached this study with convictions shaped by the findings of an earlier research project, *Polish Migrants and*

the Norwegian Healthcare System: A Pilot Study (Anczyk, Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Krzysztof-Świderska, & Prusak, 2020). In that study, the topic of interactions with Barnevernet surfaced spontaneously in participants' statements—it was not introduced through specific questions, which is significant as that project focused on a different issue. Nonetheless, Barnevernet was identified as a major source of stress, one that affected respondents' health. It therefore became clear that this knowledge could not be ignored when launching a new research project; rather, it informed specific expectations regarding its outcomes.

The interaction between both sides initially appeared highly polarized. As the research progressed, the belief that Poles were entirely in the right and that Norwegian family support institutions were entirely in the wrong did not simply reverse. Instead, it became clear that the crises in these interactions had multiple underlying causes. A lack of mutual understanding of each other's cultures, differing expectations of "how things should be," distrust, and mistakes made by both parties all contributed to the overall picture.

Recognizing that not everyone who could benefit from this book would have the opportunity to read it, the key findings are summarized at the end in a concise, practical format. Separate sections present results that may support Polish families, as well as findings that may assist Barnevernet employees in their work with Polish clients.

Additionally, the findings were used in video materials by Professor Frédérique Bossard for teaching *Intercultural Work*, particularly in the *Theory of Science, Research Methods, and Research Ethics* (*Vitenskapsteori, forskningsmetoder og forskningsetikk*) course for social work students at VID Specialized University in Stavanger. This means that at least some future Barnevernet employees have been introduced to these insights. In this way, the promise made to research participants—that their contributions would influence the knowledge of Barnevernet professionals—has been fulfilled.

Adam Anczyk
Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska
Maria Baran

Introduction

Preface

In 2011, in Norway, the case of nine-year-old Nikola ignited an intense cross-border dispute that drew widespread media and diplomatic attention. Nikola, who had migrated with her family from Poland to Norway in 2006, lived with her parents for five years before Norway's child protection agency, Barnevernet, determined that she was not receiving adequate care. After a year of monitoring, Nikola was placed in foster care.

The situation escalated dramatically when Polish celebrity detective Krzysztof Rutkowski abducted Nikola from her foster home and brought her to Poland, where her parents were waiting for her return. Often referred to as a "double kidnapping," the incident sparked tensions between Norway and Poland. Norway demanded Nikola's return, while the Polish consul publicly denounced Barnevernet, comparing it to a fascist organization (Gajewska et al., 2016).

Media coverage in both countries amplified the controversy, exposing starkly contrasting views on child welfare and family rights. For Norwegians, the abduction was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of their legal system. For Poles, it symbolized resistance against what they perceived as an overreaching institution. The case concluded in December 2011 when a court in Szczecin, Poland, ruled that Nikola would remain in Poland (Winnicka, 2012).

A similar controversy unfolded in 2019 in the Norwegian town of Hamar, where a Polish family became the focus of a diplomatic dispute. Concerns raised by Barnevernet led to three of their children being placed into emergency foster care, while the parents were put

under observation. Their youngest child, an infant, remained with them. While dramatic, this incident was one of many similar cases occurring regularly within the Norwegian child protection system.

Polish Consul Sławomir Kowalski protested the measures and accompanied the parents during a visit to their children. When access was denied, Kowalski invoked his diplomatic rights, leading to a confrontation with the Norwegian police. The incident, analyzed in detail by Czykwin (2019) and widely reported in the media, sparked protests among Poles, many of whom viewed it as a defense of family and cultural identity. For Norwegians, however, Kowalski's actions were seen as inappropriate interference in a system designed to prioritize the welfare of the child.

These cases highlighted deep cultural divides between Poland and Norway when it comes to family and child welfare. In Poland, family bonds are considered nearly sacred, and institutional care is regarded as a last resort. In Norway, the welfare of the child takes precedence, often justifying state intervention. These opposing perspectives continue to fuel misunderstandings and tensions between the two nations.

Poles constitute the largest ethnic minority in Norway. While the country is increasingly popular among Polish (mostly economic) immigrants, they often struggle to adapt to Norwegian cultural and institutional norms. At the same time, Norway's child protection system, Barnevernet, is frequently criticized by Polish families for perceived cultural insensitivity.

As researchers, we set out to explore these cultural intersections by examining the experiences of Polish families in Norway, particularly their interactions with Barnevernet. This book presents our findings, offering insights into the challenges of migration, the importance of intercultural competences, and the complexities of navigating child protection systems in a foreign context.

Polish Migrants in Norway

Poles constitute the largest ethnic minority in Norway, establishing themselves as a group with considerable socio-cultural capital. According to the latest data from Statistics Norway (2024), the population of Polish citizens residing in Norway is estimated at 111,074, with the majority being male (71,125). This marks a significant increase compared to 2004, when only 2,741 Polish migrants were living in Norway. The number of Poles acquiring Norwegian citizenship has also grown substantially—rising from just 241 naturalizations in 2015 to a peak of 3,735 in 2022, before slightly declining to 3,358 in 2023. These trends demonstrate Norway's increasing appeal to the Polish community.

Polish immigrants make up 1.9% of Norway's population and are present in nearly every municipality, with a significant concentration in Oslo. However, in some municipalities, their share of the population is considerably higher than the national average. For example, in Moskenes, Poles account for as much as 10% of the local population. In central municipalities such as Oslo and Bærum, the proportions are smaller but still notable, at 2.12% and 3.01%, respectively (Gulbrandsen et al., 2021).

The Polish migrant population in Norway is predominantly characterized as labor migration (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Gulbrandsen et al., 2021). The first and most significant wave consists of post-accession migrants who arrived between 2005 and 2012, following Poland's entry into the European Union. This wave was relatively homogeneous, primarily composed of blue-collar workers or individuals who transitioned into blue-collar roles upon arrival. Many Poles found employment in Norway's civil engineering sector, reinforcing the stereotype of the "Polish construction worker." Even today, it is common to hear Polish spoken—often with trade-specific jargon—on construction sites in Oslo.

Beyond construction, Poles are also employed in healthcare and nursing—ranging from unqualified caretakers to mid—and high-level medical staff such as nurses, doctors, and paramedics—as well as in

the food service, hospitality, and education sectors. Notably, one-third of Poles in Norway hold university degrees (Gmaj, 2019a). Despite this, Polish labor migrants in Norway often face precarious working conditions (Kalleberg, 2018), which can lead to downward social mobility compared to their status in Poland, particularly in terms of education and employment (Rye, 2017; Przybyszewska, 2021).

Migration patterns among Poles in Norway are diverse and reflect the evolving dynamics of emigration. Initially, some migrants oscillate between Poland and Norway as transnational commuters who work in Norway and live in Poland (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016). Others view their stay as temporary, postponing the idea of returning to Poland to the distant future—or indefinitely (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016). Over time, however, many gradually settle, and often bring their families and children. This incremental process mirrors a broader trend of "putting down roots," which Katarzyna Gmaj (2018) aptly describes as "taming Norway."

According to Engbersen et al. (2013) and Friberg (2012), Polish labor migration—often marked by uncertainty and a lack of initial long-term planning (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015)—follows a gradual, stepwise trajectory. This process can be categorized into three stages, reflecting a shift from temporary arrangements to permanent settlement: (1) circular workers with no intention of settling; (2) transnational commuters with uncertain plans; and (3) long-term residents who eventually relocate their families to Norway. Notably, since 2010, Poland has been the leading country of origin for family reunifications in Norway (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016), which further underscores the transition from temporary migration to permanent settlement.

Bringing children to Norway may serve as a marker of Polish migrants' aspirations for integration. This is further exemplified by the naming practices of children born during the migration process. Parents typically adopt one of three naming strategies: (1) traditional Polish names, such as Stanisław or Bronisława, or Polish versions of foreign names like Agnieszka (Agnes); (2) "universal" names that are either identical across languages (e.g., Adam) or anglicized forms of Polish names, such as Alexander (instead of Aleksander) or Sophie

(instead of Zofia); and (3) distinctly Norwegian names, such as Bjørn or Astrid. These naming choices symbolically convey the parents' aspirations and the envisioned trajectory of their child's acculturation.

Recent findings in the field of migration psychology and acculturation (Bierwiaczonek & Kunst, 2021) suggest that acculturation strategies—although sometimes criticized by researchers (e.g., Boski, 2009; Chen et al., 2008) as being merely attitudinal rather than behavioral—do not significantly predict acculturation outcomes, such as psychological adjustment (how well one feels in the host country) or socio-cultural adaptation (how well one navigates interpersonal interactions and manages daily life challenges; Searle & Ward, 1990). This highlights that intentions alone are insufficient for effective functioning in the host society, particularly if not supported by cultural competence on both sides: the migrant's and the host society's.

It can be assumed that Polish migrants who settle in Norway with their families—despite not initially planning to do so—often arrive unprepared and without a deep understanding of the local culture. At the same time, Norwegian institutions may lack a nuanced understanding of the cultural background and specific needs of migrant groups. This mutual lack of cultural knowledge may create fertile ground for intercultural misunderstandings and conflict, especially when there are significant cultural differences unknown to both parties in the bidirectional acculturation process. This is particularly evident in the case of Poland and Norway, as shown by numerous media reports on the challenges Poles face in Norway, especially regarding Barnevernet.

As researchers, we decided to examine the experiences of Polish families in Norway with Barnevernet, and to interpret these experiences from a cultural perspective. In this book, we present an analysis of our findings, shedding light on the interplay of cultural differences and the challenges that Polish families face while navigating child protection services in Norway.

An important element in understanding the experiences of Polish migrants in Norway is the role of community institutions in building and sustaining their social capital. Numerous organizations and institutions assist the Polish diaspora in Norway, particularly in the

field of education. These include Polish schools in cities such as Oslo, Bergen, Fredrikstad, Ålesund, Bodø, Hitra, Hønefoss, Moss, and Porsgrunn. Catholic schools—often operated in cooperation with the Catholic Church—such as the John Paul II Saturday School in Oslo, the Catholic Polish Saturday School in Stavanger, and the Stanisław Kostka Catholic Polish Saturday School in Drammen, also play a pivotal role (Olszewski, 2011; Polskie Szkoły w Norwegii, 2021).

The Roman Catholic Church is a key institution for Polish migrants that deeply influences their cultural and social lives. It supports migrants by fostering social networks, assisting with interactions with Norwegian authorities, and providing a sense of community (Erdal, 2016; Giskeødegård & Aschim, 2016). Polish migrants have significantly revitalized the Norwegian Roman Catholic Church, increasing attendance and reinvigorating religious practices.

Poles also contribute to Norwegian cultural and academic life. They organize events that showcase Polish traditions, such as Christmas celebrations, and collaborate with Norwegian universities, particularly in the northern regions. Interviews conducted during various research projects with both Norwegian and Polish participants reveal that Polish migrants in Norway are often stereotypically associated with three themes: construction work, religion, and World War II. While these stereotypes are reductive, they are rooted in historical and cultural contexts.

Research on the Polish population in Norway has intensified since 2010, reflecting increased academic interest in post-accession migration. Norway, like Iceland, emerged as a relatively recent and less conventional migration destination; however the rapid influx of Polish migrants has made Poles the largest ethnic minority in both countries. Studies on Polish migration to Norway have predominantly emerged from fields such as sociology and migration studies, followed by anthropology, demography, history, and political science. To the best of our knowledge, our team is the first group of psychologists to contribute to this growing body of research. This contribution is especially significant, given that the psychology of migration is a relatively young subdiscipline (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021).

One of the foundational topics explored in the psychology of migration, which has also gained significant attention in sociology and demography, is the question of migration motivation. In the Norwegian context, Polish scholars have sought to answer the critical question: Why Norway? They have also investigated settlement patterns and the demographic structure of Polish migration (Gmaj, 2016, 2018, 2019a; Sokół-Rudowska, 2013). This line of inquiry is not only academically relevant but also valuable to local authorities and policymakers in Poland.

Polish researchers have examined various aspects of the Polish migrant experience in Norway, including family life, employment, and career trajectories (Erdal & Lewicki, 2016; Huang & Krzaklewska, 2016; Krys et al., 2018; Rancew-Sikora & Żadkowska, 2017; Stachowski, 2020; Żadkowska et al., 2020). Some studies have addressed the lack of professional engagement, such as research on Polish homelessness in Norway (Mostowska, 2013), while others have focused on identity formation among migrants (Pawlak, 2018). A particularly important approach in this field is the transnational perspective, which has gained popularity among both Polish and Norwegian scholars—especially those collaborating with Polish research teams (Bell & Erdal, 2015; Bjørnholt & Stefansen, 2018; Slany et al., 2018; Ślusarczyk, 2019).

Interestingly, although there was historically little research on child migration, this trend has changed in recent years (Czerniejewska & Main, 2019; Krasnodębska, 2016; Pustułka et al., 2016; Slany & Strzemecka, 2015, 2017). Studies from this period have explored children's adaptation to life abroad, their experiences in educational settings, and their general functioning in school environments (Ślusarczyk & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2014; Strzemecka, 2015; Strzemecka & Slany, 2019). Noteworthy among these is the work carried out by the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University as part of the Transfam project (2013–2016), which examined the transnational lives of migrant families (Slany & Struzik, 2016).

This earlier lack of attention to child migration is understandable in the broader context of migration studies, which historically viewed children as "luggage" brought along by their parents, rather

than as subjects of independent scholarly interest. However, this reductive perspective—which treated children as passive dependents in the migration process—may also reflect the way Polish society conceptualizes family and child autonomy. While there is a substantial body of research on family migration, children have often been regarded primarily as part of the family unit rather than as autonomous individuals.

In recent years, however, children's experiences have gained prominence as a research focus, joining topics such as family dynamics, migration patterns, and healthcare as key areas of interest among Polish migration scholars. This shift likely reflects both academic curiosity and the concerns voiced by study participants, who increasingly highlight the complexities and challenges children face in the context of migration. This evolving interest signals an important intellectual trend toward understanding children not only as integral parts of family systems but also as individuals with distinct experiences and needs.

A related area of research on families involves Polish female migrants in Norway. This topic has only recently garnered attention, likely because the initial waves of Polish migration to Norway were predominantly male (Czerniejewska, 2019; Gmaj, 2019b; Goździak & Main, 2020; Łobodzińska, 2016; Main et al., 2021; Main & Czerniejewska, 2017). Women, whether as workers or homemakers, represent an understudied demographic that deserves greater academic focus in the future. One particularly interesting contribution in this area is a study on Polish fathers in Norway, which offers a unique perspective on gender roles and family dynamics (Pustułka et al., 2015).

Beyond empirical studies on contemporary migration, there has also been growing interest in the historical aspects of Polish migration to Norway and the life of the Polish diaspora, both past and present (Olszewski, 2011; Sokol-Rudowska, 2011; Sokół-Rudowska, 2019). Norwegian scholars, as well as researchers affiliated with Norwegian universities, have primarily focused on pragmatic aspects of the Polish population in Norway. These studies explore Poles' presence in the labor market, their workplace experiences, the challenges of adaptation, and how these factors influence their acculturation processes (Friberg, 2011, 2012; Friberg et al., 2014; Ryndyk, 2020).

Another key area of study, often pursued through collaboration between Polish and Norwegian research teams, is healthcare. This line of inquiry examines Polish migrants' experiences with the Norwegian healthcare system, the difficulties they encounter, and the role of Polish medical professionals who work within it (Anczyk et al., 2020a; Czapka, 2010; Czapka & Sagbakken, 2016; Goździak & Main, 2021; Korzeniewska & Erdal, 2021; Pawlak, 2021; van Riemsdijk, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2019). Additionally, several studies have investigated the experiences of Polish children in Norwegian schools (Wærdahl, 2016).

As for the specific area of interest to our project—the relationship between children and child protection services—an important research report was published as part of the project *Trust Without Borders: Government Institutions, Families, and the Social Welfare and Child Protection System in Norway and Poland* (Korzeniewska et al., 2019). The report offers a comprehensive literature review and highlights areas that warrant further investigation. It compiles an extensive list of sources covering topics such as trust in government institutions in Poland and Norway, Norwegian child protection services, and the experiences of migrants and minorities in their interactions with child protection agencies, particularly trust in Barnevernet (BV) (the Norwegian Child Protection Services).

The report identifies recurring themes across various research projects, including some that do not directly focus on migrant interactions with Barnevernet. These themes include communication and trust, trust in Barnevernet as part of a broader crisis of trust, the role of media in building trust, and the specific needs of minorities, immigrants, and other Barnevernet clients (Korzeniewska et al., 2019). Notably, the report emphasizes the need for further research on the image of Barnevernet among immigrants in order to develop strategies that could improve trust in the institution.

Our project, although qualitative in nature and thus akin to "chamber research," employs an in-depth methodological approach to address these gaps in the literature. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies for strengthening the relationship between Polish migrants and Norwegian child protection services.

The Stereotypical Norwegian and the Stereotypical Pole in Migrants' Eyes: Conclusions from Original Research (2017–2018)

Our previous research on Polish migrants' interactions with the Norwegian healthcare system also included questions about their perceptions of Norwegians and fellow Polish migrants. In recent years, Polish society has gained some insight into Norwegian culture through popular journalism, especially the works of Ilona Wiśniewska, who spent many years living in Northern Norway (Wiśniewska, 2014, 2016), and Anna Kurek's *Happy as a Salmon: Norway and Norwegians*, an introductory guide to Norwegian culture written by a Ph.D. candidate in Scandinavian studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Kurek, 2018).

A notable contribution to the discourse on Polish-Norwegian relations is Marek Czarnecki's *Children of Norway: On the (Over)Protective State* (2016), which sparked heated debate in Poland about the Norwegian child protection system, Barnevernet. Additional perspectives have been offered in Nina Witoszek's *The Best Country in the World* (2017) and Ewa Sapieżyńska's *I'm Not Your Pole: Reportage from Norway* (2023). The increasing number of such publications likely correlates with the large waves of Polish migration to Norway. As the "new" Polish migrant community becomes more established, it has begun producing its own narratives and literature, often based on personal experience. Blogs and YouTube channels created by migrants—such as Anna Kurek's blog, which later inspired her book—have also gained popularity.

These media narratives represent individual outlooks and are inherently subjective, shaped by personal experience. While blogs, articles, and advice columns are generally more accessible to the public than academic texts, they mainly communicate the authors' personal interpretations of life in Norway. As the number of Polish migrants grows—including many who regularly travel between Poland and Norway—more people are exposed to these accounts, which further shapes the collective Polish understanding of Norway through

personal viewpoints. These narratives often include stereotypical images of Norway and Norwegians. This is not surprising, as stereotypes function as cognitive shortcuts (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)—simplified explanations of the world that encapsulate beliefs about specific groups and act as communication tools, which help people process information more quickly and efficiently. On the one hand, stereotypes aid communication by providing familiar cognitive schemas; on the other, they can distort reality, perpetuating partial or even harmful information about social groups and cultures.

Stereotypes are pervasive: almost everyone raised in a particular culture becomes aware of the stereotypes it holds at some point during the socialization process. This awareness may emerge through informal social interactions, formal education, or contact with institutions. Stereotypes can also be transmitted across generations. To think stereotypically about a culture, one must at least have a basic image of it. However, in the case of Norway and Poland, these images are not yet widespread—many Poles still know very little about Norway and its culture.

That said, interest in Norway among Poles seems to be growing, likely driven by recent waves of migration. For example, a Google search for the term *Norwegia* (Polish for Norway) yields approximately 26 million results. By comparison, *Szwecja* (Sweden) returns 17 million, while *Islandia* (Iceland) brings up 47 million. Results for *Dania* (Denmark) and *Finlandia* (Finland) are more difficult to estimate due to overlap with unrelated search terms—*Dania* also means "dishes" (as in food), and *Finlandia* is a well-known vodka brand. An image search for *Norwegowie* (Norwegians) typically shows skiers, ski jumpers, people wearing traditional *bunad* clothing, and Vikings. This suggests that the stereotype of Norwegians in Polish society is rather vague and imprecise.

To examine Polish immigrants' perceptions of Norwegians, we draw on insights from our earlier research,* conducted between 2017 and 2018 (Anczyk et al., 2020a). Although the project did not

* The project focused on Polish migrants' experiences with the Norwegian healthcare system, and the relevant questions arose during discussions about their sources of support.

specifically focus on intercultural relations, these themes emerged naturally in the course of interviews—particularly when respondents discussed their impressions of Norway and Norwegians. These narratives also shed light on how Polish migrants view themselves and their community in Norway. While the results of this analysis have not yet been published, we outline some preliminary findings below.

The study involved a relatively small sample (N = 20, plus two expert interviews), but many of the interviews were in-depth. When asked about Norwegians, participants frequently emphasized cultural differences, which became a key focus of our qualitative analysis. As a result, respondents' cultural insights on norms, values, and behaviors were often intertwined with simplified stereotypes.

One of the most common descriptors used by participants was that Norwegians are "cold"—that is, emotionally reserved, not particularly expressive, and generally hesitant to display emotions. While respondents acknowledged that Norwegians certainly experience emotions (obviously as all people do), they believed these emotions are typically confined to family or close friends. One humorous exception noted by several participants was alcohol consumption: after drinking, Norwegians were said to become noticeably more expressive—but by the following day, they would return to their usual reserved demeanor.

Participants also observed that Norwegians tend to keep others at arm's length, which makes it challenging to form close interpersonal connections. For many, this went beyond casual interactions and referred instead to deeper relationships—genuine friendships that require emotional investment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some migrants joked that Norwegians were "relieved to hear the three-meter social distancing rule was abolished because it allowed them to return to their usual five meters." Despite this perceived emotional and social distance, respondents consistently described Norwegians as "nice"—even nicer than Poles, though in a calm, understated way. They contrasted this demeanor with the more overt, sometimes dramatic friendliness they associated with Americans. This quiet kindness, they noted, contributed to a pleasant atmosphere for living and working.

At the same time, Polish migrants observed that Norwegians are not especially direct, which sometimes made it difficult to interpret their intentions and led to occasional miscommunication. They also noted that Norwegians value silence more than Poles, which some initially found awkward but later accepted as "just the way they are." Respondents frequently described Norwegians as helpful and supportive in everyday situations: willing to lend a hand when needed.

Another recurring theme in the interviews was Norwegians' deep connection to nature. Respondents commented on Norwegians' preference for spending time outdoors, living in remote areas, and even vacationing in locations that were more isolated. These descriptions highlight the cultural importance of nature and solitude in Norwegian life. However, terms like "remote" or "wilderness" carry different connotations depending on one's cultural and environmental background. For instance, the idea of remoteness can vary widely between cultures: what might feel isolated to a Polish migrant could seem far less so to someone from Turkey or Syria. Respondents also emphasized Norwegians' commitment to a healthy work-life balance—often phrased euphemistically as a national tendency to "not overdo it." They noted that many Norwegians live in small, tightly-knit communities where "everyone knows everyone." This social structure, while fostering close local ties, can also make it difficult for outsiders to integrate into these circles.

Additionally, interviewees pointed to key demographic and cultural differences between Norway and Poland. Norway's population of around five million people, spread across a vast territory with relatively few large cities, contrasts sharply with Poland's 38 million inhabitants. According to respondents, this difference influences not only the cultural character of each country but also day-to-day interpersonal interactions. Some also mentioned religious differences and observed that while Norway is historically Protestant, it is now largely secular. They described Norway as a tolerant society, particularly towards ethnic and sexual minorities—drawing a clear contrast with the more conservative social climate in Poland, the country they had left.

Out of fairness—and curiosity—we also asked respondents about their views of other Polish migrants. This quickly revealed an underlying psychological factor, or rather, a stereotype: a low opinion of their own culture and a general lack of trust in fellow Poles. However, our research demonstrated that this stereotype has little basis in the actual behavior or experiences of respondents. While members of the Polish diaspora frequently expressed the belief that one should avoid seeking help from other Poles to prevent being taken advantage of, they also listed family, friends, acquaintances, and organizations—mostly Polish—as their sources of support. This illustrates a common mechanism in stereotyping: the "exception to the rule." While Poles as a group were labeled untrustworthy, "our people"—those within one's immediate social circle or "tribe"—were considered dependable and trustworthy.

Two stereotypical traits commonly associated with Poles also emerged in the interviews—traits that may seem contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, Poles were described as quarrelsome or prone to conflict; on the other, they were seen as highly family-oriented and deeply invested in building long-lasting, close relationships. This focus on familial and social ties was often contrasted with what respondents perceived as the emotional distance or detachment of Norwegians. For example, some participants mentioned the Norwegian tendency to place elderly family members in retirement homes. In Polish culture, the concept of an "old people's home" often carries negative connotations, and placing a parent or grandparent in such an institution is sometimes referred to as "giving them away."

Although multi-generational households are becoming less common in Poland—particularly in urban areas—there is still considerable social and psychological pressure to care for elderly relatives personally. In Polish society, this responsibility is generally seen as falling on the children, whereas institutional care is considered a last resort. In contrast, in Norway, elder care facilities are more widely accepted and are supported by the welfare state. These differences in cultural norms and family expectations can make the migration experience particularly challenging for some Polish migrants. This contrast is further underscored by findings from the World Values Survey (WVS,

2022), which asked whether respondents agreed with the statement: "It is children's duty to take care of ill parents." While 72% of Polish respondents agreed, only 31% of Norwegians did. These disparities illustrate the cultural differences in perceptions of familial responsibilities—adding yet another layer of complexity to the acculturation process for Poles adapting to life in Norway.

Respondents also described Poles as emotional and expressive, especially when it comes to negative emotions, which they associated with a tendency to complain. Interestingly, this perception contrasts with feedback from exchange students from Spain, who described Poles as introverted and distant. This suggests that Poles may occupy a middle ground between the temperaments of Nordic and Southern European cultures. At the same time, Poles were noted for their expressiveness in humor.

One distinctly negative trait that emerged in respondents' narratives was a perceived tendency toward jealousy and envy—sentiments often considered quintessentially Polish. This idea is captured in the saying, "Poles even envy each other their failures." Respondents linked this perception to low levels of social trust and the belief that success is often achieved through dishonesty. It reflects a skewed sense of equality: the idea that everyone should suffer equally. Respondents noted that this attitude is rooted in Poland's historical experience. During both the communist era and the time of the partitions, those who found success were often viewed as collaborators with oppressive authorities. Scholars also trace this attitude to the mixed social origins of Poles, a blend of peasant and *szlachta* (noble) ancestry (see Boski, 2009).

Despite these negative traits, respondents emphasized Poles' reputation for being hardworking and diligent—sometimes to the point of overexertion. This may seem paradoxical, given the parallel stereotype that success is based on connections rather than merit. Nevertheless, Polish respondents frequently described Poles as working harder than Norwegians or members of other migrant groups.

The final two traits highlighted in our qualitative research were religiosity and a strong attachment to tradition. While being attached to tradition is not unusual—Norwegians, too, are deeply connected

to their own customs—many Polish traditions are closely intertwined with Catholicism, which creates cultural pressure to observe and celebrate them even among the non-religious. Examples include *pasterka* (midnight Mass on Christmas Eve) and All Saints' Day (November 1), when Poles visit family graves en masse to place lanterns, including on Jewish cemeteries. During such holidays, Poles tend to perceive time differently—not as personal leisure, but as a time meant to be shared with family, including distant relatives who may only gather on these occasions. Sociologists refer to this as "cultural Catholicism." For instance, the majority of Polish atheists still choose to baptize their children (Tyrała, 2014).

Despite these enduring traditions, Poland's social and cultural landscape is gradually changing. Research—including studies conducted by the Catholic Church on *dominicantes* and *communicantes* (people attending Mass and receiving communion)—indicates a trend toward secularization in Polish society (Pew Research Center, 2018), mirroring patterns observed in other Western and Northern European countries. Nevertheless, Poles remain one of the most religious populations in the European Union, a fact also visible in Norway, where Polish-language masses and parishes are a regular feature.

In summary, the stereotypical image of a Polish person—as revealed by our research and existing literature—is not particularly flattering. While some cultures are associated with more positive stereotypes, it is worth noting that this image reflects the opinions of Poles themselves. It may stem from the critical, judgmental, and often pessimistic tendencies commonly found in Polish culture.

Cultural Differences Between Poland and Norway

To understand the functioning of Barnevernet and the Polish response to its interventions, it is crucial to examine cultural dimensions that define the relationship between the individual and the group. While Hofstede's pioneering framework remains influential, its methodological limitations and increasing criticism (e.g., Boski, 2009; 2024) prompt us to adopt a more contemporary approach: the

GLOBE Project* (House et al., 2004). This framework provides a more nuanced analysis of collectivism, which is particularly relevant for examining cultural differences between Poland and Norway.

House et al. (2004) distinguish between two forms of collectivism: Institutional Collectivism and In-Group Collectivism. Institutional Collectivism refers to the degree to which organizational and societal practices encourage and reward the collective distribution of resources and collective action. In contrast, In-Group Collectivism pertains to the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesion within their organizations or families.

Scandinavian countries generally score high in Institutional Collectivism. However, Warner-Søderholm (2012) identifies Norway as an anomaly among Scandinavian nations, as it exhibits a relatively high level of In-Group Collectivism alongside strong institutional orientation. In Norway, In-Group Collectivism manifests in social expectations that the state—rather than the family or local community—bears primary responsibility for caring for the elderly, the sick, and other vulnerable populations. This form of collectivism is inclusive and grounded in egalitarian social values, consistent with Norway's low Power Distance (Warner-Søderholm, 2012).

This contrasts sharply with Poland, which also scores high on In-Group Collectivism but embraces a more traditional, family-centered cultural model. In Poland, the family is considered the primary "in-group," with a strong emphasis on close personal ties rather than broader civic or social responsibilities. For example, there is a prevailing expectation that families will care for elderly and dependent members. It is common for younger generations to live with their parents while studying and often until they start their own families (GUS, 2024), and multi-generational households are relatively widespread (Bartova et al., 2023).

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* The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) project, initiated by House, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004), is a large-scale, long-term research initiative that examines the relationships between societal culture, organizational culture, and leadership. In its initial phase, the project involved around 17,300 middle managers from 950 organizations and was conducted by 170 social scientists and scholars across 62 cultures worldwide.

While both Norway and Poland exhibit high levels of In-Group Collectivism, their manifestations differ markedly. In Norway, the "in-group" tends to encompass society as a whole, leading to strong civic engagement (Selle et al., 2019) and a collective sense of responsibility, expressed through widespread support for the welfare state and participation in taxation (Warner-Søderholm, 2019). Conversely, In-Group Collectivism in Poland remains focused on the family as the main source of support and obligation. This distinction underscores a fundamental cultural divergence: in Poland, collectivism is centered around the family, whereas in Norway, it is oriented toward the broader society. These differing models reflect contrasting understandings of collective responsibility and the respective roles of the family and the state in caring for those in need.

When exploring the Polish concept of family—particularly in contrast to social bonds—it is essential to consider the historical legacy of communism in Poland. During this era, political leaders were imposed and appointed by the USSR, often perceived as external oppressors, which profoundly impacted levels of societal trust. The state was regarded as artificial and disconnected from the people it was meant to govern. In contrast, Polish Catholicism—especially under the leadership of John Paul II—offered a unifying counterforce. The Pope encouraged the formation of a symbolic "parallel state," assuming a role of moral leadership. Simultaneously, a pervasive culture of surveillance and informing further eroded interpersonal trust. Together, these factors have left a lasting impact, contributing to persistently low levels of interpersonal trust in Poland, even decades after the collapse of communism (see Boski, 2009).

Survey data reinforces this trend: 64% of Polish respondents express general distrust, while only 22% report trust (CBOS, 2022). For instance, 77% believe that people should be cautious in dealing with others, and only 19% think most people can be trusted. Additionally, 58% say they distrust strangers. As Majcherek (2023) points out, this culture of distrust has prevailed in Polish society for over a decade. Poland—along with much of Central and Eastern Europe—ranks among the countries with the lowest scores on Uncertainty Avoidance, a dimension that reflects how much societies reduce

ambiguity through adherence to norms, rituals, and bureaucratic systems (House et al., 2004). Furthermore, research on tight vs. loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011, 2021) suggests that Poland leans toward a relatively loose cultural orientation, characterized by flexible social norms and greater tolerance for deviation. When combined with low trust in public institutions, this cultural looseness may pose particular challenges for Poles adapting to Norway's stricter and more structured social norms.

In stark contrast, Scandinavian countries—including Norway—exhibit both high levels of trust (IPSOS, 2022) and high Uncertainty Avoidance (Majcherek, 2023). Societies with high Uncertainty Avoidance aim to minimize unpredictability and implement measures to mitigate the impact of unforeseen events (House et al., 2004). This cultural trait is evident in Norway's social practices, particularly in institutions like Barnevernet, which emphasize safeguarding children's well-being as part of a broader commitment to social stability and predictability. Moreover, clear communication, punctuality, and detailed planning are highly valued in interactions with Barnevernet, in keeping with the structured and orderly nature of Norwegian society.

Moreover, Norway's cultural universalism—which emphasizes the uniform application of norms and values—stands in contrast to Poland's particularism, where exceptions based on context or personal relationships often take precedence (see humanism, Boski, 2009). This combination of high societal trust and strong efforts to manage uncertainty highlights a fundamentally different cultural model in Norway compared to Poland.

Cultural Differences in the Concept of the Child's Welfare

To provide full cultural context for our research, it is important to examine how the concepts of "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*) and "the best interest of the child" (*w najlepszym interesie dziecka*) are understood in Poland. Although both terms share a foundation in

European law, values, and international conventions, their interpretation in the Polish context differs significantly from the Norwegian perspective. Understanding these distinctions is essential for interpreting our findings.

The term "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*) is commonly used in Polish law, pedagogy, and social work, yet it remains vague and undefined, often raising philosophical questions about what "good" actually entails. Justyna Kusztal emphasizes the relativistic and contextual nature of the term. The author notes that its meaning depends on underlying anthropological and philosophical assumptions, which makes it susceptible to distortion (Kusztal, 2018, p. 46). From a cultural psychology perspective, the concept is not universal but highly dependent on cultural and contextual factors. It is also expansive—potentially encompassing "every possible harm" (Mazurkiewicz & Mysiak, 2017).

Methodologically, "the good of the child" may fall under the category of "intuitive semantics" (Anczyk et al., 2020b)—terms that seem self-evident but become ambiguous when attempts are made to precisely define or operationalize them. This phenomenon is common in academic discourse; for example, terms such as "religion," "myth," "ritual," or "New Age" in religious studies often require multiple typologies to capture their full meaning. In legal contexts, "the good of the child" functions as a broad and context-dependent term open to interpretation.

According to Kusztal, one of the most enduring definitions of this concept was formulated by Wanda Stojanowska in 1979:

> [The good of the child refers to] a set of nonmaterial and material values, indispensable for ensuring the child's proper physical and spiritual development and for preparing it to perform work suitable to their abilities; however, these values are determined by a variety of factors, the structure of which depends on the applicable legal norms and the specific, current circumstances of a given child, always taking into account that the good of the child is confluent with the public good. (Stojanowska, 2000, p. 63)

Kusztal identifies three main discourses through which the concept of the child's welfare is articulated, each reflecting culturally conditioned attempts to define the term (Kusztal, 2018).

The first is the discourse of needs, which is particularly prominent in welfare states. This discourse centers on caring for the child as someone who requires oversight, attention, and control. Kusztal links this discourse, which she maintains is culturally dependent and not universally applicable, to the Western emphasis on individualism, success, and adherence to culturally defined life models. She also draws attention to potential risks associated with this approach:

> When child care is defined solely through the discourse of needs, this may result in partial or misguided care when the abstract concept of "protection" is reduced to removing children from parental custody, placing them in isolation, applying *parens patriae*, or imposing indeterminate sanctions in criminal cases, as seen in the handling of underage offenders in the USA or the Scandinavian model. While meeting a child's developmental needs and prioritizing safety, this approach can lead to long-term family separation or withholding information about a child's family or social status. (Kusztal, 2018, pp. 64–65)

The second is the discourse of children's rights, which positions the child as an autonomous agent and citizen—subject to legal statues but also endowed with individual rights. This perspective foregrounds the child's independence and is often critical of the discourse of needs. As Kusztal observes, "actions taken in the child's best interest, characteristic of the discourse of needs, are, in fact, geared towards the adults' best interest" (Kusztal, 2018, p. 66). However, she also notes the idealistic nature of this rights-based approach, which often masks a dual reality: while the principles and laws it espouses appear progressive, they do not always align with prevailing social practices.

The third is the discourse of children's life quality, which seeks to offer an alternative to the two approaches above. Proponents of this discourse argue that it is more culturally universal—though this claim is contested from a cultural psychology standpoint—and highly context-dependent. For instance, within this framework, poverty is not necessarily viewed as direct harm, but rather as an indirect issue that may influence social status or reduce the amount of time parents can spend with their children.

This discourse emphasizes that life experiences, including hardships and crises, shape development and do not always yield negative outcomes. This view resonates with Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which posits that psychological crises can spur personal growth and may even be necessary for development (Dąbrowski, 1979). Moreover, this discourse stresses the importance of children's participation in decision-making and interventions designed to support them, centering on subjective well-being and the broader concept of mental health.

These discourses operate within specific cultural contexts and are closely tied to child—adult relationships and views on the role of the state in child-rearing and family support. Regarding child—adult relations, three main approaches can be distinguished:

1. The adult-focused approach, which prioritizes the parents' dominant role in the upbringing process.
2. The equality approach, which balances the parents' role with the child's independent growth and self-socialization within a community.
3. The autonomy approach, which grants significant rights and agency to the child in matters that affect them.

In terms of the second element—the role of the state—various models define the boundaries of state intervention in child-rearing (Kusztal, 2018). The first is the laissez-faire approach, where the state refrains from intervention except in extreme cases, limiting its role to observation or occasional involvement. The second is the blood-and-mental-bond model, in which the state acts as an auxiliary that provides support through child protection services and other institutions without attempting to replace the family's role. The third is the emancipation approach, which accords children extensive rights—sometimes based on the premise that they are not fundamentally different from adults and therefore deserve autonomy. However, this model may give rise to conflicts between the rights of children and those of adults (Kusztal, 2018).

Kusztal notes that Communist Poland leaned toward a state-intervention model, institutionalizing the socialist concept of the state as a central authority. Given Norway's political history and its current

status as a welfare state, a similar model may apply there. In contrast, modern post-communist Poland tends to follow the blood-and-mental-bond model, where the state primarily plays a supportive rather than interventionist role (Kusztal, 2018, pp. 83–84). In the Polish cultural context, blood ties are considered particularly important, and often take precedence over the public interest or the child's autonomy. This is reflected in legal frameworks, their implementation, and prevailing pedagogical practices, which adopt a systemic approach—viewing the child as part of the family system. In this model, support is directed at the family as a whole, and removing a child from their family is considered a last resort, as such actions may disrupt or even destabilize the system. (Though in some cases, disruption may be necessary for change.)

Unlike in Norway, where the preventive removal of children from their families is more common, such measures are rarely taken in Poland (Czarnecki, 2016). This difference points to a tension in the goals of child protection services, which can be viewed along a continuum: at one end, prioritizing the rights and welfare of the child, and at the other, preserving family bonds and maintaining the integrity of the family system. Poland leans toward the latter, with particular emphasis on the child's bond with their mother.

However, this approach reveals deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, which position mothers as inherently more competent caregivers. In Poland, fathers are often treated as "second-class parents." As a result, courts typically award custody to mothers, leaving fathers to pursue shared custody through lengthy legal battles or to organize advocacy groups such as the Fathers' Rights Movement or the Father and Child Rights Center. While this situation is gradually changing, the traditional view persists, as do significant cultural and legal challenges.

Another recurring issue in child welfare interventions—both in Poland and in migrant communities—is the use of corporal punishment and the attitudes of parents and educators toward it. Unfortunately, research findings in this area are concerning. In 2013, Katarzyna Makaruk of the Empowering Children Foundation conducted a nationwide survey of a representative sample (N = 1,000) examining Poles' views on corporal punishment, its legal prohibition, and

their personal experiences (Makaruk, 2013). Of those surveyed, 61% were parents, who were specifically asked about their use of corporal punishment. Although acceptance of such practices had declined since the Foundation began its research in 2005, the 2013 survey still found that 41% of respondents believed there are circumstances in which corporal punishment is justified, and 9% viewed it as an effective educational method.

The survey also revealed important nuances in public perceptions of corporal punishment. Public and pedagogical debates often center on the go-to example of the "disciplinary slap," which remains widely accepted. In contrast, more severe forms of punishment tend to be broadly rejected: 77% of respondents supported a legal ban on hitting a child in the face, 75% opposed using a belt or other objects, and 72% rejected strong hand strikes. Despite this, the slap remains a common practice—38% of respondents admitted to using it once, and 21% said they had used it multiple times. Alarmingly, 17% admitted to having used harsher methods, such as hitting with a belt or slapping a child's face. The survey also revealed that raising one's voice is a widespread disciplinary tactic used by 71% of respondents. Psychological violence, such as insults or verbal criticism, was reported less frequently, with 22% admitting to its use.

This research followed the 2010 ban on corporal punishment in Poland and coincided with public awareness campaigns drawing attention to its harmful effects. In 2017, Joanna Włodarczyk of the Empowering Children Foundation (Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę) conducted a follow-up survey as part of the EU project *From Policy to Reality: Shifting Attitudes and Practices from Corporal Punishment to Safeguarding Children*. The findings offered cautious optimism: the percentage of respondents who believed parents always have the right to hit their child dropped from 9% to 2%. However, the proportion of those who felt parents were justified in hitting a child under certain circumstances remained virtually unchanged at 48%. Overall rejection of corporal punishment rose to 49%, yet public opinion remained sharply divided over the emblematic slap—52% supported it, while 48% opposed it.

The 2017 survey also examined the reasons that parents gave for using corporal punishment. Respondents cited losing their temper

(56%), the child's temperament (37%), feelings of helplessness (36%), the belief in its effectiveness (24%), doing it "for the child's own good" (18%), lack of support (11%), lack of alternative methods (10%), and family tradition (8%). Włodarczyk categorized these motivations into two groups: those grounded in belief in the method's effectiveness or tradition (59%, mostly fathers), and those stemming from situational factors like frustration and helplessness (66%, mostly mothers).

While acceptance of corporal punishment is slowly declining, the process is neither swift nor widespread, largely confined to general awareness and public declarations. Respondents frequently distinguished between harsher beatings and the so-called "proverbial slap," yet both forms involve physical violence and reflect cultural norms. Although culturally rooted, this distinction is troublesome given the potential consequences for a child's emotional development.

Corporal punishment—even in its mildest form—constitutes physical aggression and should not be tolerated. Still, in 2017, only 34% of respondents believed it should be banned outright. This data suggests that many Polish parents lack access to effective parenting strategies and that harmful practices continue under the guise of "traditional parenting methods." For child protection professionals working in countries with different cultural or legal standards, this underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity. Education, preventive action, and awareness-raising should take precedence over radical intervention—especially when working with Polish families.

Magdalena Arczewska's study, conducted for the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, analyzed the semantic field of the term "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*, Arczewska, 2019). Her research included a sample of 81 professionals—family court judges, court officers, family assistants, social workers, and representatives of NGOs. Theoretically, the opposite of "the good of the child" was defined as neglect, especially attachment deprivation and social exclusion, shaped by a variety of environmental factors. Through semantic field analysis, Arczewska categorized the participants' responses into "equivalents" (words considered synonymous with "the good of the child") and "opposites."

The term most frequently identified as equivalent to "the good of the child" was *ensuring the child's legal rights and interests* (39%), an expected result, considering the respondents' professional backgrounds. The second most common equivalent related to *meeting the child's needs*, particularly material needs, was captured in phrases such as "the children are fed, clothed, not hungry." Respondents also spoke about the parents' role in ensuring the child's well-being, including providing physical care, ensuring safety, and engaging in activities like playing or taking walks. The third most cited equivalent (16%) was the child's *right to maintain contact with loved ones*, followed by references to *emotional bonds* (14%). Responses in this category included expressions such as "bonds," "strong relationship," "love for mother/father/grandparents," "a mother's worry about her child," "a strong need to be close to the mother," and "hugging."

These findings align with the Polish cultural model of childrearing, which places significant importance on blood ties and the maternal relationship. This stands in contrast to Norwegian practices, where, as noted in accounts like Czarnecki's (2016), emotional bonds and family relationships may be given less weight if a child's environment is deemed inadequate. In the Polish model, preserving the child's bond with their parents—especially the mother—is seen as essential to healthy development. Removing a child from their mother is considered a serious disruption to these bonds and is treated as a last resort. Systemic interventions in Poland generally aim to provide support within the family unit, with removal viewed as harmful unless absolutely necessary. Given these cultural differences, Polish families may respond differently than Norwegian ones to child protection interventions. While such measures are traumatic in any context, Polish individuals may react more emotionally or impulsively due to differing cultural expectations and norms.

On the opposite end of the semantic field, respondents most frequently identified *the failure to meet a child's* needs (42%) as the primary antithesis of the "good of the child." Again, this was often described in material terms—neglect involving insufficient food, poor hygiene, lack of medical care, or children having noticeable body odor. Some responses revealed entrenched gender stereotypes in the

context of childcare. For instance, neglect was often framed as "the mother not caring for the children," "the mother not wanting to care for the children," or "the mother being unwilling to offer care," while fathers were criticized for being "incompetent" or "inept." This embodies a traditional model of gender roles in which the mother is seen as the primary nurturing caregiver, naturally expected to care for and want to care for her child. In contrast, the father is typically cast as a capable and resourceful provider, whose main responsibility is to ensure material stability. Interestingly, the data suggest that a mother may be perceived as allowed to be incompetent, so long as she fulfills her caregiving role.

These stereotypes are closely tied to the cultural myth of the Polish Mother (*Matka Polka*), a uniquely Polish construct. The Polish Mother is portrayed as self-sacrificing, overburdened, and devoted entirely to her family and children. She willingly deprives herself for the sake of her loved ones and carries out her duties with tireless humility—often believing that no one else could do them better (Imbierowicz, 2012). This cultural construct is also deeply intertwined with Polish patriotism; one of her central roles is to raise children who love their country. The Polish Mother is an archetypal multitasker, who manages domestic duties, contributes to the family's income, and often steps in as the primary breadwinner when her husband is occupied with "higher" pursuits.

This image is rooted in Poland's tumultuous history, marked by wars, occupations, and resistance movements, during which men often left their families, leaving women to shoulder responsibilities beyond domestic life, including educating their children. The Polish Mother is typically portrayed as deeply pious, often longing for a husband or son who has gone off to war. In conservative and right-wing discourse, this myth merges with the ideal of the "normal woman," who—while she may have a career—derives her chief fulfillment from motherhood. This ideal is often contrasted with feminist women, who are criticized for "living for themselves."

Although the myth of the Polish Mother persists, particularly among older generations, conservative communities, and rural areas, its influence appears to be waning, especially in urban centers. This

shift can be attributed to several factors, such as women's increasing participation in a wide range of professions, growing awareness of gender equality (including the distribution of domestic labor), globalization, and exposure to alternative cultural role models through media, literature, and film. Nevertheless, as Slany and Strzemecka observe, the myth still holds sway among Polish migrants: "Polish families in Norway continue to anchor their functioning in an internalized representation of the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother)." (Slany & Strzemecka, 2017, p. 98).

Interestingly, Poland has a relatively high percentage of women in managerial positions. Between 2014 and 2017, the country was even led by two female prime ministers from opposing political parties—Ewa Kopacz and Beata Szydło. However, most women in leadership occupy mid-level positions, and significant gender disparities persist at the highest levels of power. This dynamic has historical roots: during the Warsaw Uprising and in the aftermath of World War II, women assumed many roles traditionally held by men who had perished. Communist propaganda also contributed to this narrative with its myth of the "Working Woman," exemplified by slogans such as "Women onto tractors" in the 1950s (Boski, 2009).

While alternative models of femininity and motherhood exist in modern Poland, the Polish Mother remains a cultural touchstone. This is especially relevant in the context of child protection services, which must recognize the central role of the mother in Polish child-drearing practices. For many Polish families, even temporary separation from the mother is often perceived as a severe punishment rather than a rehabilitative measure, one that can be deeply traumatic for the entire family.

In recent years, there has been growing academic interest in the experiences of female migrants, gender equality, and in how migration reshapes gender roles. This is apparent in studies conducted by Polish research teams—such as the Transfam project based in Cracow—as well as in joint Polish-Norwegian grant projects like *Socio-cultural and psychological predictors of work-life balance and gender equality: A cross-cultural comparison of Polish and Norwegian families*

(2013–2017), led by the University of Gdańsk and the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

However, as Ryndyk and Johannessen noted in a 2015 interim report, Norwegian scholars have historically paid relatively little attention to Polish migrants compared to other migrant groups—although this trend began to shift around 2017. As they observed:

> there is a tangible lack of academic literature focusing specifically on parenting styles among Polish migrants living outside Poland. This may be due to the negligence of the fact that Polish migrant families living in other Western societies may, in fact, experience serious constraints in adapting to host country's values and attitudes in the area of childrearing. (Ryndyk & Johannessen, 2015, p. 4)

This could be seen as an example of "positive discrimination," wherein Polish migrants and their culture are perceived as relatively similar to that of Norwegians—which possibly results in less scrutiny than that directed toward migrants from regions such as the Near East. However, Ryndyk and Johannessen argue that studying family dynamics and childrearing practices among Central and Eastern European migrants is both intellectually and practically important. They point out that when the EU and Northern European countries opened their borders and labor markets, they primarily expected the arrival of temporary migrant workers or commuters—not entire families with children. This highlights the need to examine family migration and its broader social and institutional implications.

One particularly interesting aspect in this field is the influence of migration on family models, childrearing practices, and cultural gender roles. Ryndyk and Johannessen's findings align with our own observations regarding the importance of the family system for Polish migrants. They note that in migration contexts, Poles often adopt the model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker. However, this does not necessarily stem from traditionalist views or the direct transplantation of cultural gender roles from Poland. Rather, economic factors appear to play a critical role, with families adapting to the social structures and labor market realities of the host country.

In Norway, for instance, physical laborers, blue-collar workers, and skilled professionals in traditionally "male" occupations are particularly in demand, and salaries in these sectors tend to be higher than those in fields more commonly associated with women—such as eldercare, cleaning, childcare, kindergarten teaching, or lower—to mid—level medical roles. Consequently, it is often financially advantageous for men to work full-time, while women either manage household responsibilities or work part-time. In these cases, household gender roles may result more from practical adaptation to the host country's conditions than from culturally ingrained traditions brought from Poland.

In 2019, a survey found that 80% of Poles identified family as the most important value in their lives (Boguszewski, 2019). However, the number of people who believe that one can live just as happily without a family as with one has increased—from 6% in 2008 to 11% in 2019. When defining what constitutes a family, Poles place significant emphasis on the presence of children. Respondents most commonly identified a family as a married couple with children (99%), a single parent with children (91%), or an unmarried couple with children (83%). A married couple without children was seen as a family by 65%, while only 31% considered a childless, unmarried couple as a family. Same-sex couples were recognized as families less frequently; however, the presence of children again proved decisive—23% identified a same-sex couple with children as a family, compared to just 13% for a childless same-sex couple. (As of 2025, Poland does not legally recognize same-sex relationships.)

Compared to a 2006 survey, Polish society has become more accepting of informal relationships—especially those involving children—as well as same-sex relationships. Interestingly, preferences for large, multi-generational families have also increased: 32% of respondents favored this arrangement in 2019, compared to 26% in 2008 (Bożewicz, 2019). This shift may reflect generational changes, as today's grandparents tend to be more professionally active than those of two decades ago. The trend could also suggest a desire for grandparents to play a greater role in childcare, akin to the model experienced by today's parent generation. Notably, 45% of respondents

strongly preferred that their own family resemble the one they grew up in, with an additional 39% somewhat agreeing. However, in urban areas, the model of grandparents providing childcare appears to be less common, potentially prompting parents to wish for its revival. This may also point to gaps in institutional support for single parents or dual-income households, where parents may be seeking relief or opportunities to rest and recharge.

Poles also place a high value on maintaining close ties with extended family members. In a nationwide survey on family relationships, 73% of respondents reported seeing their parents at least once a week, followed by 62% who saw their grandchildren, 59% their adult children living independently, and 45% their parents-in-law (Feliksiak, 2019). While parent—child relationships—particularly with adult children—can be complex, frequent contact is clearly valued in Polish culture, as evidenced by these responses.

This cultural emphasis on maintaining close familial bonds offers important insights for child protection services operating in countries where such ties may be less central or where greater parent—child autonomy is the cultural norm. Misunderstandings or conflicts may arise when child protection interventions clash with Polish expectations of frequent family contact and interdependence—tensions that have become particularly evident in interactions with Norway's child welfare agency, Barnevernet.

Barnevernet

Barnevernet is a municipal-level institution in Norway responsible for overseeing the welfare and safety of children, directed especially toward the quality of parental care. Among Polish families residing in Norway, Barnevernet is often perceived as one of the most stringent and anxiety-inducing aspects of life in the country, particularly for those with children or those considering relocating with children.

Every private individual who suspects that a child is being harmed is legally obligated to report it to Barnevernet. In addition to individual reports, the agency also responds to notifications from various

institutions—such as schools, kindergartens, and healthcare providers—which are legally required to report any concerns about a child's well-being. It is important to note that Barnevernet's mandate is limited specifically to matters of parental care and does not extend to other areas of a child's life, such as academic performance or disability support. Once a report is received, Barnevernet has one week to assess whether the situation warrants further investigation, a process usually initiated without parental knowledge to avoid influencing the family's behavior or triggering a potential attempt to leave the country.

If the issue is deemed serious enough to warrant intervention, Barnevernet may first speak with the child at school—again, before informing the parents—and subsequently arrange a meeting with the family. Unlike broader social services, Barnevernet is highly specialized and usually steps in only when other, less targeted support systems are unable to adequately address a child's situation. Its goal is not to perfect a family's circumstances but to ensure a minimum standard of care that prevents harm.

For example, seemingly minor issues—such as poor dental hygiene or children being out late at night without supervision—may indicate potential risks. In such cases, Barnevernet may initiate a formal three-month investigation. During this time, information is collected from the child, parents, neighbors, and other relevant institutions to identify the root of the problem and help parents make necessary changes. About 60% of these cases are closed within the initial three-month inquiry.

While parents cannot prevent Barnevernet from launching an investigation, they can now choose to decline the agency's support services—a relatively recent policy shift aimed at encouraging voluntary cooperation. The only procedure that parents are legally required to comply with is court-ordered drug testing in cases where substance abuse is suspected. If serious concerns remain, a judge may authorize temporary out-of-home placement for up to six weeks while additional assessments are made. In urgent cases, children are often placed with relatives or a familiar adult as a first option, rather than being immediately transferred to foster care.

Goal of the Project

The project pursues two closely intertwined objectives: one academic and one pragmatic (applied). Academically, it seeks to examine what happens when two ostensibly similar yet fundamentally different cultures intersect within the institutional framework of childcare. As we elaborate, Polish and Norwegian models of childcare differ substantially, which influences parental and caregiver roles and shapes underlying assumptions about concepts such as the child's best interest, parent-child relationships, children's autonomy, agency, and the authority to act in the child's welfare—whether derived from familial ties or based on the judgment of an external authority. These two cultures represent contrasting "ideal types" of childcare models in Weberian terms and hold divergent understandings of the role of government institutions in family life.

On a pragmatic level, the project offers applied value as it analyzes the real-world consequences of these cross-cultural encounters. It identifies both the obstacles and potential benefits that emerge in this intercultural exchange, while also anticipating future tensions. The context is particularly unique, as power dynamics (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021) significantly influence interactions between migrants and host society institutions, framing them within a "guest-host" paradigm. In such situations, the power relationship is inherently asymmetrical—hosts operate from a position of authority on their home ground. While acculturation ideally enables migrants to feel at home in the host country, they often continue to experience aspects of "guest" status.

This project focuses on the relationship between Polish migrants in Norway and child protection services, drawing on both migrant narratives and expert interviews to gain insights into these interactions.

The project's goals can be distilled into the following research question: *How do Polish migrants experience, perceive, and navigate their interactions with Barnevernet—including the cultural differences, coping strategies, and sources of support they rely on—and what broader insights do these encounters offer regarding differing Polish and Norwegian interpretations of child welfare concepts, such as the*

child's best interests, autonomy, and the roles of family and institutional relationships?

To answer this question, we designed and conducted a qualitative study that included interviews with Polish individuals who had personal experience with Barnevernet, as well as interviews with Polish and Norwegian experts specializing in the research topic (Bogner et al., 2009).

This book has been prepared as part of the *Decisions and Justifications in Child Protection Services* project, conducted in collaboration with Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences in Lillehammer. It presents findings from a sub-project titled *Polish Migrant Families in Norway and CPS: Different Outcomes of Contact. A Qualitative Case Study*, which constitutes a component of WP2 within the grant. The project was fully funded by a grant from the Research Council of Norway (Norges forskningsråd), grant no. 273607, for the period from September 2019 to November 2021.

Method

Sample and Recruitment

We began recruiting respondents in January 2020. A Polish woman who had previously shared her experiences with Barnevernet facilitated our access to a Facebook group for Polish families living in Norway. In this group, we published a letter explaining the research project and inviting members to contact us:

> Dear all,
>
> I am a psychologist working for the Jagiellonian University. I shall be very grateful for any assistance in contacting Poles who had any kind of contact with the Barnevernet and would feel ready to tell me about them. I am conducting research which aims to showcase and analyze the full spectrum of these experiences, from negative to positive.
>
> The research is completely anonymous—I collect no data pertaining to the persons I talk to and any such information as names or places which may appear in conversation will be removed from the publication.
>
> My results will have practical use, supplying Polish families in Norway with additional knowledge in the stressful situation of Barnevernet interventions, and improving the competences of Barnevernet staff.
>
> I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the study. My phone number is [redacted] and my email address is [redacted].
>
> I would be very grateful to anyone who chooses to reach out.
>
> Best regards,
>
> Professor Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska

The letter received a response from Dorota, who had previously shared her story with Maciej Czarnecki for his book *Dzieci Norwegii* (Children of Norway). Dorota is an informal leader in the Polish diaspora who has had contact with Barnevernet and provides guidance in the most serious cases. She provided us with email contacts for several individuals who later became respondents in our study.

In January 2020, we reached out to these individuals, explained the objectives of the study, and invited them to participate in interviews. While some agreed promptly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 significantly disrupted our ability to follow through with these initial plans. As a result, only one interview was conducted in person, while the rest were held online via Skype, WhatsApp, or Messenger.

Additionally, some of our respondents were recruited from among parents and teachers affiliated with Polish schools in Norway. Before the pandemic, the Wspólnota Polska association facilitated our outreach to these schools. In return, the schools requested that Grzymała-Moszczyńska deliver a series of webinars addressing the psychological and educational challenges faced by migrant children. At the end of each webinar, Grzymała-Moszczyńska invited attendees who were willing to share their experiences to contact me directly. In summary, respondent recruitment was achieved through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling.

Our sample consisted of 23 individuals, including 13 parents (quotes from them are labeled P for Parent) and 10 professionals such as teachers, kindergarten teachers, Barnevernet workers, pedagogues, or lawyers (quotes from them are labeled E for Expert). Each quote is also accompanied by a number indicating the specific interview from which it was taken. This letter-number combination is the sole identifier for respondents cited in the study.

Among the parent group, mothers constituted the majority (11), with only two fathers participating. The fathers had completed high school and worked in construction, while the mothers held university degrees and were employed as clerks (5), family services workers (3), or homemakers (3). Most of the Polish families who had contact with Barnevernet had migrated to Norway for economic reasons, often

due to either prolonged financial instability or a sudden economic crisis such as job loss or business failure. Migration to Norway was viewed as a means of improving their family's circumstances.

To pursue this goal, families adopted various strategies. Some chose parental separation, with the mother and child remaining in Poland while the father worked in Norway. Others left their child in the care of grandparents in Poland while both parents sought employment in Norway. In some cases, families migrated together, uprooting the child from their familiar surroundings and separating from extended family members. Employment in Norway required adapting to a new cultural environment—an adjustment that Polish migrants often underestimated. Many assumed that the cultural differences between Norway and Poland would be minor, due to geographic proximity, ease of travel, and the predominance of Christianity in both countries.

For the most part, parents encountered Norwegian culture through their workplaces, as well as through educational institutions such as the schools and kindergartens that their children attended and the healthcare system. However, their private lives remained largely rooted in a Polish context, as they primarily associated with members of the Polish diaspora and maintained close ties with friends and family in Poland through social media and periodic visits. A subsequent section of this analysis will explore the interplay between Polish and Norwegian family systems and their respective cultural frameworks.

In total, respondents discussed 41 children whose circumstances were linked to Barnevernet interventions. Of these, 33 were Polish children, while 8 were non-Polish children whose cases were described by respondents. Among the non-Polish children, 3 were mentioned by parents and 5 by experts. The sample of experts included 8 Poles, one Norwegian, and one non-Polish migrant who has lived in Norway for 50 years and, for the purposes of this study, is considered a Norwegian expert. To ensure anonymity, quotes from experts are labeled E for Polish experts (followed by the interview number) and EN for Norwegian experts (also followed by the interview number). For example, E8 refers to Polish expert number 8, and EN2 refers to Norwegian expert number 2.

The Polish expert group consisted of individuals employed in Norwegian schools and kindergartens, various Norwegian government institutions, and private Polish schools in Norway. Many held dual roles, working both in Norwegian institutions and in Polish private schools. At the time of the interviews, nine of these experts were residing in Norway, while one, employed at a university in Poland, was based in Poland. The Polish experts had diverse educational backgrounds, including specialized pedagogy, early childhood education, social work, psychology, law, anthropology, and natural sciences. The Norwegian experts, by contrast, were educated in social work and psychology.

Polish experts offered valuable insights into the functioning of Norwegian educational, governmental, and administrative institutions, particularly regarding the procedures for reporting concerns to Barnevernet. They described how Norwegian staff assess whether a report is warranted, the expectations placed upon them by their workplaces regarding such reports, and the training they received from Barnevernet. They also shed light on Barnevernet's strategies when dealing with children from different national backgrounds.

A significant characteristic of the Polish expert group was their immersion in Polish culture while simultaneously working within a Norwegian cultural framework. This dual perspective allowed them to critically assess their professional experiences through both cultural lenses and to interpret situations with an awareness of both Norwegian and Polish viewpoints.

One Polish expert (E10) provided a detailed overview of the legal and administrative processes involved in placing children into foster care or institutional care in Poland, drawing on both her own research and personal experience as a foster parent. Norwegian experts contributed insights into the practical workings of Barnevernet—one (EN1) described their experiences as a Barnevernet staff member, while another (EN2) shared perspectives as a psychologist with extensive experience in institutions shaping Norway's policies toward migrants from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Despite extensive and varied efforts to recruit participants, our sample remained relatively small. One Polish expert (E9) identified

two key reasons for the reluctance to share experiences with Barnevernet. Firstly, in her view, Polish parents often wish to assimilate and avoid being labeled as a "problem family" targeted by Barnevernet for child removal. Secondly, they fear further scrutiny from Barnevernet, which they perceive as a potential threat to their families—even after returning to Poland.

> No one wants to be identified as a pathological case. But that's not pathological. But people think it is. I had this [?], I thought that if we win, after four years of battle, then we could write about it, anonymously, but no. No interest. But by then people go back to being like the rest. They're not standing out in any way and they don't want to. … I know parents who live in Poland, they left, they had a talk with the Barnevernet, … the parents left and they are not interested at all in talking about it. Because they also think that... they're afraid of the situation repeating, if the Barnevernet... you see, I also have this acquaintance who talked about her case to the media, and then the Barnevernet came after her, immediately, asking dozens of questions, "is this you, is this our case? Is this about that?" Although of course they keep an eye on such things, no one likes to be criticized. (E9)

The same expert expressed the opinion that challenging Barnevernet could carry serious risks for those involved:

> In one of my interviews, someone said that lawyers in Norway avoid taking cases against Barnevernet because something bad might happen to them. Did you ever feel that way? I did not and I don't take cases locally where I live. That's one thing. And I fight the Barnevernet all the time while having my own children, which could be described as risky, but you've got to practice your profession... (the proof is that—HGM) people switch from their attorney to me, say you get a local attorney provided by the government, the parents say that the attorney is afraid to act against the local Barnevernet and the authorities where he lives because he has his own children. No one says this outright, but it can be seen by the case being at a standstill. Handled very delicately and ineffectively, really. So you shouldn't take cases from the region you live in. Because you're in it, too. (E9)

We also consulted an individual who was not an official respondent in our study but had direct experience with Barnevernet, both as a parent and as an early childhood educator in a Norwegian kindergarten. This person is also the founder and administrator of a social

media group for Poles employed in Norwegian preschools. Their feedback and suggestions were taken into account in the final version of this report.

Causes and Consequences of Polish Families' Contact with Barnevernet

Polish families came into contact with Barnevernet for a wide range of reasons. These included reports from outside institutions—such as schools, kindergartens, social assistance organizations (e.g., BUP—Barne og Ungdomspsykiatrisk Poliklinikk, or Children and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinic; Familievernkontoret, or Family Counseling Office)—as well as medical facilities acting on their own initiative. Other notifications came from individuals in the family's social network or those in conflict with the family. In some instances, reports even originated from within the family itself—either from the parents or the children.

Among our respondents, there were 16 separate instances of notification to Barnevernet—more than the number of respondents (13)—as three people had experienced multiple interventions. For example, in one case, a mother contacted Barnevernet with concerns about her child's treatment at school. Later, the school filed its own report, based on the child's statements about their home life.

In another instance, there was a sequence of three separate notifications. The first came from the school, where teachers reported that they were unable to establish verbal communication with the child. The second came from the Familievernkontoret, which raised concerns about the mother's refusal to pursue a diagnostic evaluation for the child. The third report came from BUP, which identified the father's mental illness as a potential danger to the child. Later, the child independently contacted Barnevernet, stating that the home environment made it impossible to study and rest.

The sources of these notifications were relatively evenly distributed across various institutions: two came from the police, two from kindergartens, and two from local social assistance institutions (BUP and Familievernkontoret). Schools accounted for three notifications.

Family members were the source in four cases—three submitted by parents and one by a child. In two cases, reports came from individuals in conflict with the parents, and one notification was made by a doctor who had been treating one of the parents.

This diversity of sources highlights the complexity of circumstances that lead to Barnevernet interventions, as well as the varied paths through which families come under scrutiny.

The motivations behind the notifications were just as varied. They came from external institutions (such as schools, kindergartens, social service providers like BUP and Familievernkontoret, and healthcare professionals), as well as from within families—parents, children, or acquaintances involved in disputes with the family. Analyzing these cases shows that Barnevernet often acts as an intermediary between the Polish family and the reporting institution, navigating a wide range of complex and context-specific situations.

Notifications from the police involved two distinct scenarios. In one, an adult endangered a child by driving under the influence. In the other, parents were reported for exhibiting aggressive behavior in the presence of their child. Reports from kindergartens also involved two cases. In the first, a child began displaying aggression after receiving a hearing implant that altered their auditory perception. In the second, a child was diagnosed with ADHD after the mother sought assistance from a child psychologist.

Schools submitted three notifications. In one case, a child told exaggerated or fantastical stories about their home life, which raised concerns among the staff. In another, a child who had demonstrated aggression at school expressed fear of corporal punishment at home. In the third case, the child struggled with the Norwegian language, which created communication barriers with teachers and staff. Notifications from local social services involved two cases. In one, BUP raised concerns about a father's suspected mental illness and its potential effect on the child. In the other, Familievernkontoret reported a mother who refused to comply with a psychiatrist's recommendations regarding her child's diagnosis.

Family members were the source of notifications in four cases. In one instance, a mother reported alleged mistreatment of her child by

kindergarten staff. In another, a mother—under pressure from the school—contacted Barnevernet after more than a year of no contact with the child's father. In a third case, a father reported his wife to Barnevernet as an act of retaliation after she left him. In the fourth, an adolescent independently reached out to Barnevernet, citing home conditions that made it impossible to study. Two notifications came from individuals outside the family. One stemmed from a workplace conflict, while the other arose from a dispute related to a romantic relationship. In another case, a doctor reported a patient who was experiencing domestic violence in a household where children were present.

These diverse sources and circumstances underscore the multifaceted nature of Barnevernet's involvement and the complex dynamics at play in its interventions with Polish families. The outcomes of these notifications varied significantly. In six cases, Barnevernet conducted the standard three-month investigation and determined that no further action was needed, which resulted in the cases being closed. In one case, a child was placed in foster care, and the mother regained custody after four years. Another case led to the child being granted their own apartment and a stipend from Barnevernet, allowing them to live independently. In two cases, investigations were still ongoing at the time of the interviews. In one instance, custody and the right to cohabitate with the child were awarded to one parent, while the other was granted 30% custody. At the time of the interviews, two respondents had returned to Poland following their contact with Barnevernet, while the remainder were still residing in Norway.

Materials

The research sample consisted of 17 participants, purposefully selected based on their direct contact or experience with Norwegian Child Protection Services—Barnevernet. Respondents were recruited through networks connected to the Polish diaspora in Norway, individual Polish residents, and snowball sampling techniques. Additionally, six expert interviews were conducted with individuals who offered unique perspectives on the topic: a teacher at a Polish school

in Norway (Polish), two pedagogues (Polish) working in a school and a kindergarten, a lawyer (Polish), a psychologist of Hindu background with extensive experience in Norway, a Norwegian Barnevernet employee, and a Polish anthropologist affiliated with the Nasz Bocian Foundation, which specializes in professional foster care in Poland. This final interview served as a comparative reference point, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of the issue from a Polish institutional perspective and providing context to migrant narratives by juxtaposing them with child protection practices in Poland that migrant respondents may not have been fully aware of.

In total, 23 interviews were conducted, averaging one and a half hours each, and resulting in approximately 520 pages of transcription. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out between February 2020 and June 2021. Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, all but one interview were conducted remotely using online communication platforms. One interview was supplemented with a phone call and documented in real time. All respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the project details, and the intended format of publication. Each respondent gave their consent to participate, to have their interviews recorded, and to allow anonymized excerpts to be included in publications associated with the project.

Interviews were conducted in Polish, with the exception of two expert interviews held in English, and were later transcribed. Given that the project examines both the experiences of Polish migrants in Norway and perspectives from Norwegian experts—and in light of the importance of replicability in qualitative research (Anczyk et al., 2019)—all interview transcripts were translated into English. This step ensures the data can be used by other research teams for further analysis and supports future replication studies or related inquiries by other scholars.

The study followed a constructivist research paradigm, which emphasizes the role of cultural context and meaning-making. This distinguishes it from post-positivist approaches that seek to study "objective" facts (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, the interviews were analyzed as personal narratives and interpretive accounts rather than

factual statements. We employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as our key analytical method. Commonly used in psychology, IPA is aimed at deeply exploring individual or group experiences with an emphasis on understanding the respondents' perspective. This method is inherently idiographic and interpretive and is especially suited to qualitative research involving specific, relatively homogeneous groups—such as the participants in this study.

The chief goal of IPA is to understand how individuals experience events and how they make sense of those experiences. This method entails a dual interpretative process—capturing both the participant's perspective and the researcher's interpretation of that perspective. Thus, two hermeneutic layers—those of the respondent and the researcher—emerge in the analysis. IPA is widely used in psychological and medical research, particularly in studies that rely on rich, qualitative data—such as this one. Rather than testing hypotheses, IPA seeks to describe and interpret lived experiences, which makes it especially relevant for cultural psychology and migration research. As Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p. 9) note, "Community psychologists, as well as psychologists of migration and acculturation, can find it useful to examine how various groups construct their ethnic (or group) identity, what meaning they attribute to social roles, and how they perceive phenomena."

This project was conducted by a research team from the Institute of Psychology at Ignatianum University in Cracow as part of the broader project titled *Decisions and Justifications in Child Protection Services*. The team comprised Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska and Adam Anczyk, whose diverse academic backgrounds enriched the project's analytical and interpretive depth. Adam Anczyk specializes in cultural psychology, religious and cultural studies, and education, while Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska brings expertise in cultural psychology, the psychology of migration, and clinical psychology. Their combined knowledge allowed for a robust, interdisciplinary approach to the study. Additionally, Maria Baran—a cross-cultural psychologist with a focus on migration, acculturation, and intercultural competence—joined as a co-author, further broadening the project's interpretative framework.

The team also brought prior experience working in the Norwegian context. Notably, they conducted a qualitative study titled *Health Habits, Attitudes, and Experiences of the Norwegian Health System by Polish Work Migrants* in collaboration with the Innlandet Hospital Trust in Hamar (2017–2018, Anczyk et al., 2020a). This project provided insights into the healthcare experiences of Polish migrants in Norway. Additionally, exploratory research into the spirituality of Polish migrants, including the influence of Norwegian culture and spiritual traditions on their beliefs, further demonstrates the team's interdisciplinary approach (Anczyk, 2019). By applying methodologies and theories rooted in psychology, the team integrated a psychological lens into their research, enriching the analysis and expanding the scope of interpretation.

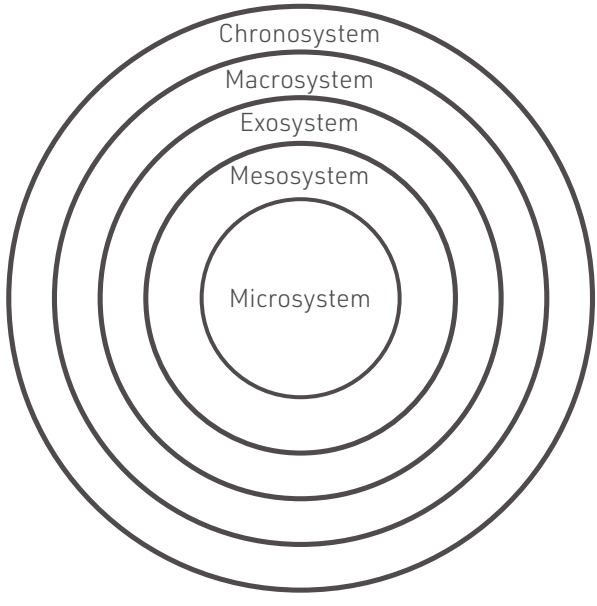
Analytical Framework: The Bio-Ecological Model

When discussing culturally sensitive issues—such as the role of children in the family and the serious consequences of potential parental rights loss—it can be difficult to remain objective and avoid taking sides, whether with Barnevernet or the family. To mitigate potential bias in our analysis, we applied Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model (1979). This framework provided us with a structured way to understanding how different environmental influences condition Polish families' behaviors and experiences in their interactions with Barnevernet. It enabled us to systematically map out the many factors involved and to adopt a more balanced perspective: one that looks beyond a single narrative and recognizes the complex forces at play.

Bronfenbrenner's model can be likened to ripples spreading across water: a single event or influence generates expanding circles that spread outward, radiating into broader and broader layers of the environment. Each of these layers—represents a distinct system that uniquely affects a family's experience. By examining these interconnected systems, we were able to situate families' stories within a larger socio-cultural context, revealing the specific factors that shape their perceptions and responses.

Based on Brofenbrenner's model, we identified five key systems that influenced Polish families' interactions with Barnevernet: the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model: The Five Interconnected Systems–Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem



The Microsystem encompassed the family's immediate environment, which is shaped by influences from both Poland and Norway. This included culturally ingrained Polish views on family roles, support from extended family back in Poland, and everyday interactions with Norwegian institutions such as schools, healthcare providers, and social networks. These closest, most direct influences formed the first ripple—those that most immediately structured the family's perceptions and experiences.

The Mesosystem referred to the interactions between elements of the microsystem—for example, when family members in Poland, influenced by Polish media reports about Polish children being

removed from Polish families in Norway and placed in Norwegian foster care, expressed fear or concern. This interplay between family and media further molded the family's perceptions of Barnevernet, extending the ripple effect to other areas of their lives.

The Exosystem included broader contextual forces that did not directly involve the family but still had an impact. For instance, cultural or religious differences between regions in Norway affected how Polish families were perceived by their local communities. Although less immediate, these indirect influences created additional ripples that determined how families experienced life in Norway.

The Macrosystem encompassed the larger cultural and legal landscape surrounding the family. For Polish migrants, this included Norwegian laws on child protection, as well as the cultural norms and legal assumptions they brought with them from Poland. Like the outermost rings in a ripple, the macrosystem influenced how families interpreted and responded to the actions of Barnevernet.

The Chronosystem reflected changes over time within and across the other systems. Factors such as migration trends, shifts in family dynamics after Poland's accession to the European Union, and evolving child protection policies all influenced the families' experiences. This temporal ripple showed that these influences were not static but developed and adapted over time.

Using Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological model as our analytical framework allowed us to systematically organize and interpret the wide range of factors affecting Polish families' experiences and perceptions of their interactions with Barnevernet. By examining the data through the lenses of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, we were able to identify distinct patterns and common themes. This structured approach provided a comprehensive view of how these varied contextual influences informed the families' understandings and responses to the Norwegian child protection services.

In the following section, we present our findings organized according to each system. We explore the specific ways in which each layer impacted the families' interactions with Barnevernet, revealing the nuanced and multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Results

The data analysis led to the identification of five main themes, each corresponding to one of the five systems in the Bio-Ecological Model:

1. The Cycle of Fear and Misunderstanding in Interactions with Barnevernet
2. Media-Driven Fear and the Negative Image of Barnevernet
3. A Roulette of Unequal Treatment
4. A Clash of Cultural Values
5. Changes in Norway's Integration Policies Over Time

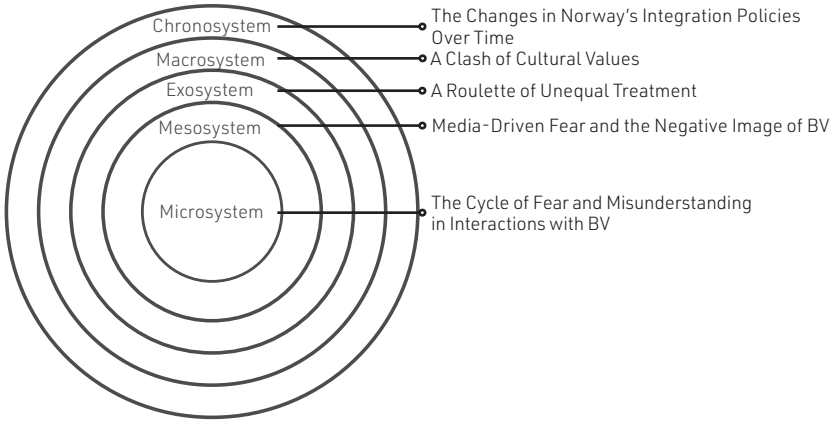
These themes reflect the different levels of interaction and influence described in Bronfenbrenner's model, encompassing the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem (see Figure 2).

The results, organized according to the individual systems in the Bio-Ecological Model, are discussed below.

Microsystem: The Cycle of Fear and Misunderstanding in Interactions with Barnevernet

The microsystem involves direct interactions between Polish families and local institutions in Norway, including the child welfare agency Barnevernet, and is characterized by a recurring clash of perspectives. On the one hand, institutions such as schools, kindergartens, and healthcare providers perceive their actions as providing "help" by reporting concerns about child welfare. On the other hand, families often interpret these actions as intrusive, overly secretive, or even

Figure 2
Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model illustrating the five systems–Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem–is integrated with the results of the analysis. It highlights the five main themes: The Cycle of Fear and Misunderstanding in Interactions with Barnevernet, Media-Driven Fear and the Negative Image of Barnevernet, A Roulette of Unequal Treatment, A Clash of Cultural Values, and Changes in Norway's Integration Policies Over Time.



harassing. This fundamental misunderstanding fuels fear—particularly regarding Barnevernet's authority to intervene in family matters, sometimes without the parents' knowledge or consent. The central concern voiced by many parents is the fear of losing custody of their children—a fear that deeply influences their attitudes toward Barnevernet and drives defensive behaviors that can have far-reaching consequences. Polish parents express significant anxiety over Barnevernet's legal ability to question children at school without notifying their parents. These confidential procedures are often seen as betrayal. One respondent described the emotional toll of such an encounter, recounting a situation in which Barnevernet questioned children at school without parental consent, thus reinforcing the image of Barnevernet as intrusive and authoritarian:

> In Norway this constant observation, harassing children at school, questioning them about what's going on at home—they come to school during lessons. Sometimes the teachers that work at school also have a contract in the Barnevernet to find children to take away and sell. The Barnevernet

> claims to look after the children but that's not true. I was lied to, duped, no one was willing to listen to me. (P14, 41–41)

Such experiences contribute to the perception of Barnevernet as an intrusive force disrupting family unity, rather than as a source of support. Another respondent shared a similar reaction:

> Where the ladies were all smiling politely and tried to explain the Barnevernet offer to me. If I knew that the Barnevernet was. They asked me if I knew what it was. So I smiled and said yes, I do, I heard you take children away. So the ladies... I got them all discomfited. They just lost heart. (P8, 43–45)

Viewing Barnevernet as adversarial, if not as an outright enemy deepens the sense of mistrust felt by many Polish families in Norway and leaves them feeling vulnerable. First-hand encounters with Barnevernet often provoke intense fear and suspicion, which can spill over into broader aspects of daily life, sometimes escalating into generalized anxiety. Many participants expressed the belief that nothing feels secure when dealing with Barnevernet—any contact with the institution is experienced as a direct threat to their sense of safety and stability. As one participant put it: "I stand no chance with the Barnevernet. No chance. They're like a mob." (P9, 127–127) Another reiterated this fear: "Well, you know, every Pole here would be scared. They have a really bad press." (P2, 109–109).

These pervasive fears reveal a broader narrative of uncertainty, exacerbated by Barnevernet's legal authority to act on reports from institutions such as schools, healthcare providers, or even dentists—often without informing the family beforehand. The perceived lack of transparency in Barnevernet's investigative procedures frequently leaves parents feeling excluded from the process, further exacerbating their anxiety and mistrust. This systemic issue creates an environment in which any interaction with these institutions may be perceived as a threat. This perpetuates a cycle of fear and apprehension anxiety that profoundly impacts Polish families' experiences in Norway.

Compounding the problem is Barnevernet's policy of non-disclosure. The institution typically refrains from publicly commenting on individual cases, disclosing charges, or explaining the reasons behind

child removals. While this practice is intended to protect privacy, it often amplifies rumors and misconceptions in the community. For example, a Polish community group once arranged a meeting with a Barnevernet representative in an attempt to clarify the agency's role and procedures. However, the official's strict adherence to a scripted presentation and reluctance to engage with the audience or answer questions only deepened community skepticism and distrust. This "silence strategy" seems to widen the communication gap between Barnevernet and the Polish community.

For some families, the negative perception of Barnevernet can even influence major life decisions. One mother admitted that her fear of Barnevernet delayed her family's migration to Norway, which illustrates just how pervasive and powerful the institution's image can be: "The only thing I was afraid of was, in fact, Barnevernet, and that was what gave us pause for a few months in Poland. Needlessly, but that's how it was. It was my fear" (P3, 2–2). Another participant described the impact this fear has on Polish families deciding whether to reunite in Norway: "They wonder whether to go over there and join him, often the Barnevernet gets in the middle of that. Yes. I get a lot of messages like that, too. People are simply scared of it" (P4, 725–728).

Furthermore, suspicions surrounding potential conflicts of interest among Barnevernet workers exacerbate negative perceptions within the Polish community. One respondent described how the same individuals involved in child welfare investigations may also operate foster homes, which creates the impression of biased motivations and financial self-interest behind Barnevernet's actions:

> When they've overstepped their boundaries, the Barnevernet can always explain it away, always by citing the good of the child .... It's allowed, if the Barnevernet does not have—that's one side of it—enough staff, then they can hire out a company, or private agents. They're often people who worked for the Barnevernet in the past, but it pays more to create a company and take commissions. And they can obtain the official status of a government official who investigates a case. ... The same person, the one I'm talking about, who first investigated and then, when the child was taken away, had ... and was the appointed contact person for the Barnevernet, turned out the same person ran foster homes. So they appeared in three copies, so to speak. (E9)

Parents' fear of Barnevernet's direct contact with children often leads to significant anxiety about how such interactions might be conducted. Many parents are particularly concerned about young children, who, due to their age and developmental stage, may not fully understand the implications of certain questions and might give answers that do not accurately reflect their true experiences. There is a widespread belief that Barnevernet's questioning techniques may be suggestive—subtly prompting children to agree or give answers based on perceived cues rather than actual experiences. One mother explained her reluctance to allow Barnevernet to speak with her young children:

> I was afraid, I didn't want it and didn't agree to them talking to the children. I thought a five year old, or a three year old is not a good target for certain type of topics, certain questions. Maybe also because you hear so much how does the Barnevernet approach the children, and you can easily suggest an answer and a child will just say yes, right? And a child can say anything and I was afraid of that, but my husband calmed me down, said it won't be like this, something, something, he, too, and I agreed. (P13, 18–18)

Some parents also reported experiencing what they perceived as manipulative behavior by Barnevernet staff, aimed at influencing their decisions regarding foster care. They recounted instances in which Barnevernet staff allegedly falsified reports or exerted undue pressure to sign documents in Norwegian, despite their limited proficiency in the language. One respondent recalled a situation in which Barnevernet's documentation allegedly misrepresented the facts:

> I don't think much of the Barnevernet, it might be of interest to you that the meeting minutes did not reflect the truth. During one court sitting I proposed that we write those minutes from meeting my child simultaneously, and then we exchange copies. I asked them to stamp those copies. And the report were complete tosh, that I don't cross the sidewalk with the child properly, I even took pictures and Andrzej [mother's partner] took pictures to document it all. All the meetings with the child were overseen by the Barnevernet, I didn't talk to them, only exchanged documents. They twisted words a lot, for instance once when my son met us they claimed that Tom can't focus at school the next day. The Barnevernet

> asked if everything was okay, but there was no offer to help, never asked if we needed help even though he [the respondent's husband] was arrested for drugs. (P1, 1–15)

Several parents reported feeling coerced into signing documents that they did not fully understand. One mother described how Barnevernet staff attempted to manipulate her into agreeing to her child remaining in foster care by presenting it as her own voluntary decision:

> When they gave me that calendar [a gift] for my son, they also gave me this paper to sign—let me see, where is it... I'll look for it in a minute... the paper said, in Norwegian, that I am freely consenting for my son to stay with the foster family. I gave the paper to the translator and asked if it was what I thought it was, and he said yes. So I said to the Barnevernet I have to think about it and will let them know on Monday. They just wanted to keep my son under the pretext that I wanted it. (P1, 25–25)

Another mother described how she was repeatedly pressured to sign documents and eventually accused Barnevernet of harassment:

> Point 4.4 saying they were helping me due to my request, that I was freely agreeing to it, and I said I don't understand because I haven't actually consented to anything. I got a great evaluation from the school. Two days ago they wanted to make me sign that paper again, and I said I won't sign it. The new Barnevernet woman says, "think about it," she says, and asks if I can come on Tuesday and see Tom. I agreed, but now I'll write a document and make them sign it, I'm gonna accuse them of harassment because my son doesn't need anything and they want to invigilate us. (P1, 36–37)

This quote illustrates the contrasting perspectives between the parties involved. While Barnevernet asserts that their actions are intended to offer help and support, the mother perceives them as coercive or invasive—reinforcing an ongoing tension between the institution and the families that it aims to serve.

The pervasive fear of Barnevernet significantly shapes the daily routines, public behavior, and decisions of many Polish families in Norway. This fear often extends beyond direct encounters with the

institution itself and influences how parents behave in public spaces with their children. For example, one mother explained how she avoided taking her children shopping to prevent situations in which their child's behavior might draw unwanted attention, fearing it could be reported: "I went shopping. I did it without the children because they might start crying, and they'll take them away there and then—I had those kinds of thoughts." (P13, 64–64).

Some parents also pointed out that perceived hostility from Norwegians contributed to their heightened anxiety. Some felt that Norwegians used the threat of Barnevernet as a form of control or intimidation: "The stress factor is the way Norwegians behave toward Poles—how they threaten us with the Barnevernet at every turn. From the very first day I came here" (P10). In extreme cases, this anxiety can manifest in dysfunctional, even self-destructive behaviors, as evidenced by one respondent's refusal of medical care out of fear that hospitalization might lead to her child being taken away by Barnevernet:

> The principal saw me and asked if I was all right? I said, no, not alright. I told her I still had that pain. And she asked me why wasn't I going to see a doctor? And I said that either I'll get nothing, or I'll get sent to the hospital, and I can't allow myself to go to the hospital. And she said I was to call the clinic this minute, get an appointment, and that she won't let me go till I help myself. So I did that. I called the clinic, got an appointment on the same day and went there. And in the meantime she told me not to worry, that if the father can't take care of the child then the Barnevernet can help. Can take her to this sort of temporary care house and when I'm discharged from the hospital I will get her back without trouble. And she was such a trustworthy, kindly person, one you could really believe, so I believed it must have been like she said. But still, deep down, I was afraid of it. Very afraid. (P3)

Another mother described how she hid her postpartum depression out of fear that asking for help would result in her child being taken away:

> After having the baby I had great problems with postpartum depression. And I did nothing to find a psychologist or a doctor, exactly because of

> that, because I was afraid these institutions would consider me a sub-par mother or an unstable parent and that the Barnevernet would come in and take the child away, so the fear was very strong. I've been living in Norway since 2006, Weronika was born in 2014, so I've been in Norway for eight years by then, and yet the fear was so deep-rooted that I was afraid of doing anything contrary to the Norwegian society and the Barnevernet standards, or rather my idea of those standards because that was just my subjective opinion. I was afraid I'd never be good enough to meet their expectations, that I was just so much below that. (E4)

This persistent fear often drives parents to shield their children from any interaction with Barnevernet staff without their presence. This protective instinct can also deeply impact the children. One mother described how her son reacted when he heard that Barnevernet would be coming:

> The contact with the Barnevernet brought a lot of stress into my child's life. That was because... in November there was this situation where one of my son's friends was taken away from his mother. By the Barnevernet. They took him in the middle of the night. The child was taken away in the middle of the night, and it went like this, I got a phone call from an unknown number, at 11PM, in the night, on Wednesday. I pick it up and they say, "Good morning... good evening, this is the Barnevernet, do you know such and such child." I say, yes, of course. And they... they say they have this situation that they must take that child away quickly... and the child said it would feel safe at my place. And can they bring him in for the night. I said, of course, no problem. So two ladies from the Barnevernet came, at thirty minutes to midnight. My child almost got a heart attack when he heard "Barnevernet" but they brought that boy to spend the night at our place. These ladies had their standard interview with me. The boy stayed. I drove him to school the next day. And later I got a call from the Barnevernet asking if I'd be interested to take care of that boy. I said, well, I like the kid very much, but what with my work and all the business trips, I can't really take care of someone else's child. The boy was taken away because the mother really did have a drinking problem, and... well, that was what the report said, alcohol and drug problems.... The mother cooperated with the Barnevernet for over five years. Practically from the moment she came in. She cooperated quite closely. I told her many a time not to be so open in her contact with them, because it won't end well for her. (P10, 126–126)

Another mother described how she made a conscious effort to reduce her child's fear when interacting with a Barnevernet worker:

> I know that when she talked to my son she introduced herself as this sort-of-aunt who makes sure he's doing fine, so I don't know, he did tell her some things, no one has tried to spook him about the Barnevernet before, I made sure of that. He told me later that this lady came to talk to him, and I said, "yeah, she's a lady who works similarly to your school nurse" is what I told him. And in fact the school nurse does really handle social matters more than health matters, so I don't think I told him a lie. Anyway, I tried to paint this meeting—because on one hand he has spoken to her but on the other he was a bit confused what was it all about—so I tried maybe not to downplay it, but to make him see clearly that I know about it, that and I'm not worried. about it. So my son took it calmly, and then later, when last year, I remember, it was 27th August 2019, we had a house call from them, so I took the kids... My other son was a bit apart from all that, he's generally introverted, says little and shows himself little, but then, as it happens, I'll admit I was very afraid of that house call on some level. I mean, my rational brain level knew this lady would only come, talk and go, but the emotional brain and the reptile brain were not calm. But I tried to remain calm, it was a strange experience, really, but anyway, she came as we agreed. I told my son beforehand, "you know, this lady who talked to you at school, she wants to see our flat, see how we live." "Why does she want to see how we live?" "Well, to see if it's clean, if we have food, electricity and water and all such things, she just wants to see if we're comfortable and well." And so, okay, the lady really did talk to me a bit and to my older son. (P6, 9–10)

The mother managed the situation proactively. While Barnevernet viewed their actions as a form of support, she anticipated her son's potential confusion and anxiety and carefully guided the narrative to minimize any perceived threat. By introducing the Barnevernet worker as a familiar and non-threatening figure, likening the worker to a school nurse, and offering explanations in advance, she aimed to make her son feel secure. This coping mechanism likely helped her maintain a sense of control over a situation that otherwise felt overwhelming.

Yet even the mere prospect of direct contact with Barnevernet can be very stressful—sometimes even traumatic—for children, especially when their parents' anxiety amplifies their own. One mother

recalled her son's reaction when he found out Barnevernet was coming to visit:

> "Mum..." he got pale when he heard it, because we were talking about it there, right? "Mum, I would escape them!" And I said, "Son, we would not let that happen." Our family sticks together, right? But as to his memories, he didn't mind all that much. Once, he locked himself in, when the Barnevernet was to come for the first time. The little blighter locked himself in his room. "Adrian, open up.—No!" Really, I said, I'll have his head, right? I went to the door, I said, Adrian, if you don't open, I'll let them take you. (P4, 245–245)

This moment reveals a paradox. The mother's intention was to reassure her child and downplay the threat, yet in a moment of stress, she inadvertently reinforced his fear by resorting to using Barnevernet—the very institution he feared—as a tool for discipline. The quote illustrates the constant emotional tension that parents live with: for them, Barnevernet often symbolizes a threat rather than a source of support. This fear is further intensified by the methods Barnevernet and the police use when questioning children, which, according to one Polish legal expert, can be highly traumatic and prone to suggestive questioning:

> B: The children are interrogated very professionally, but they don't have their parents there, only strangers. They're told that "I work for the police, I will interrogate you, I want to know what's going on in your house." They know they're talking to a police officer, that they can't lie and all. But the questions are kinda leading. That's one thing. Often the child has said something earlier and now they say "you can't lie now" so of course it repeats what it said. That's one pitfall. The procedure itself... there's procedures, but I'm not convinced those children are safe. Besides, the whole interrogation, when I came to Norway I was all "what do you mean, interrogating children, am I getting this right? You interrogate children?" Yes, it's normal, the child sits down, there's two chairs and the child is to answer questions, 3–4 hours sometimes, with pauses. I mean, that's torture for a child.
>
> A: What age are those children?
>
> B: Any age they can speak for themselves and answer questions. Depending on development. Well, OK, not a three- or four-year-old, though that

> may happen. But 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and more. Or someone asks leading questions so the child finally gives up and confirms it. So the easiest cases, well, I mean, they should be easiest, but they're often not, are when the children are older, because then, if they want to go back home they contact the parents themselves, borrow a phone and call and meet on the sly, make such trouble in the foster home that they give up, right? A smaller child is completely helpless. Maybe not helpless but goes along with it, right? (E9)

Polish experts emphasize that children may experience trauma during the Barnevernet's foster placement process. This procedure, described as highly stressful, often leaves children in emotional distress without access to adequate psychological support. One Polish legal expert comments on the absence of independent mental health professionals during this critical period:

> A child is taken away to a foster home and no one is able to tell it how long will it be there, why is it there, when will it get any answers and what happened to its parents. This child gets zero psychological help in the biggest crisis of its life. They say these children get so traumatized, irrevocably traumatized... The child is alone with this new situation. ... It's supposed to cope like an adult. In my opinion these are unrealistic expectations. (E9)

The responsibility for addressing children's emotional and psychological needs often falls on foster parents, who may lack the necessary expertise to provide adequate support. This reveals a significant gap in the Barnevernet's approach. While they may follow Barnevernet's official guidelines, foster parents are not mental health professionals:

> But the foster parents are doing it for the first time in their lives. They have to keep to the Barnevernet guidelines and they're not psychologists, to talk to the child. That, in my opinion, is the greatest violation. In my opinion a child should get professional help. (E9)

The Polish legal expert also expressed concern over the way children's well-being is evaluated in foster homes. Specifically, they raised ethical concerns about allowing foster mothers—who are not neutral parties—to conduct assessments of the children in their care. This overlap of roles, according to the expert, raises ethical issues,

introduces the risk of bias and may compromise the objectivity and reliability of the assessment:

> I also had a situation recently, during the coronavirus outbreak, that the child was asked by, who do you think? By the foster mother, who was now acting as the interrogator, so that's shocking in itself, because it should be an independent person. (E9)

The expert stresses the need for stricter oversight within the foster care system and emphasizes that children placed in foster homes should undergo regular, thorough evaluations to ensure that their needs are genuinely being met. A particular concern is the system's failure to ask essential questions—most notably, whether a child wants to return to their biological family, which can indicate a tendency to favor administrative convenience over the child's actual wishes:

> I had a case recently where the child was never asked if it wanted to go home. What do we care, I mean it's nice that it's doing fine, but the main question to ask was supposed to be whether it wants to come back or not. (E9)

This perspective resonates with that of a Norwegian expert of Indian descent, who draws attention to the long-term psychological challenges often faced by children raised in foster care: "Children growing up in foster homes over longer periods develop a lot of difficulties." (EN2) The expert illustrates how Norway's reliance on foster placements contributes to a persistent sense of loss for these children, which can impact their psychological well-being. Reflecting on their experience in New Delhi, the expert explains how children adopted at a very young age may still experience lifelong trauma due to the loss of their biological parents. Even children who never knew their birth parents may develop "fantasies" or a strong need for cultural identification. This underlying sense of loss and disrupted identity is significant, as the expert notes, with adopted children sometimes experiencing "slight depression" around their birthdays—an observation that underscores the lasting psychological effects of separation from their biological family.

A Polish expert lawyer (E9) argues that Barnevernet's approach to placing children into foster care urgently needs reform, particularly in terms of ensuring cultural continuity, providing psychological support, and maintaining independence in evaluations. The current system often falls short in addressing the child's comprehensive needs during this vulnerable period, with limited attention given to the cultural disconnection and psychological trauma that fostered children may experience.

One Polish parent (P1) described their child's foster care experience as emotionally destabilizing. Initially placed with caregivers of grandparents' age in a setting that lacked warmth and affection, the child was later moved to a different foster family with a complex structure that further strained their emotional stability.

> They took my child to a foster family. There were these two grandparents, and they gave my son to them. He had no love there, no warmth. After a year, they moved him to another patchwork family, where there were five children and two others from a patchwork family who spent 50% of their time with one parent and 50% with the other. (P1, 16–17)

The parent added that their son was transferred to different families on weekends while his primary foster family took paid recuperation leave, compounding his emotional disruption: "For three years, my son was with a foster family, and on weekends they transferred him to yet another family while they took a recuperation leave for which they got paid." (P1, 19–20) Another Polish parent shares a clear example of challenges with Norwegian foster care placements, describing how, during the first six weeks, her child was placed with a Norwegian family, where the arrangement quickly proved unsuitable: "For those first six weeks, her son was with... with a Norwegian family, but that didn't work at all." (P10, 142–150).

This case shows that placement with Norwegian families does not always guarantee adequate care.

A Polish expert lawyer further emphasizes the potential long-term harm of extended foster care, suggesting that such experiences may contribute to "emotional stunting" that could affect the child's future ability to parent. They worry that children raised in foster homes may

struggle to care for their own children effectively, perpetuating a cycle of inadequate care:

> If a child grew up in a foster home, that's already a risk, risk that it won't be able to give proper care to its own child. This is already counted as a factor, a possible danger that a child won't be properly cared for because the adult who grew up under their own care will not be able to pass proper care on. And those children who have been through the system, who have been taken away—let's say they have their own children, and then it's a feedback loop. (E9)

Polish experts observe that Barnevernet's interventions often seem rushed, poorly coordinated with parents, and narrowly focused on immediate child protection, with notable communication gaps and inconsistencies across regions. One Polish expert points out that Barnevernet sometimes removes children from their parents without advance notice, which creates a sense of suddenness and aggression: "When there's serious suspicion and grounds for that, then they take the child away without telling the parents.... They act more aggressively, in that they protect the child first and clear up the parent's stance later" (E7, 55–57). This perception of abrupt actions is echoed by a parent's account of her child's sudden removal by Barnevernet: "Of course they put him in a car and drove him off, immediately" (P5, 76).

A Norwegian expert further comments on Barnevernet's rapid response times and close collaboration with schools, which can alarm Polish families. In cases where a child's welfare is questioned, Barnevernet often takes swift action, which can include immediate police intervention if the risk is assessed as serious. However, not all situations are handled urgently; some are scheduled for later evaluation if the perceived threat is less severe:

"There's suspicion and immediate action; the school sends, or the kindergarten or whoever, a private person, sends the note informing they suspect a child is being hurt, and the Barnevernet reacts very fast" (E1). In this example, the expert recounts how Barnevernet acted immediately after a child reported a potentially alarming but ultimately harmless interaction with a new family member: "The mother was told not to pick the child up, that the child was staying

elsewhere… and in the meantime that new partner was already at the police station testifying, this was done in one day" (E1). The case was later dropped after it was understood to be an innocent situation.

Although swift responses can be seen as protective, they contribute to heightened anxiety in immigrant communities, with some families preparing to flee Norway as a precaution. Experts also mention cases where Barnevernet notifications triggered abrupt, drastic actions by families. One expert recounts an instance where a Polish family left for Poland overnight after receiving a letter from Barnevernet—a standard notification, not an urgent intervention. This tendency to respond defensively, even to routine communications, shows heightened sensitivities within immigrant communities:

> You probably remember the case of that family from Oslo, or near Oslo. They had 5 children… ran away to Poland overnight. Just because they received a letter from the Barnevernet. Sometimes these letters are sent as part of a routine, without even any notes sent in… Sometimes they just put it in which office is sending this so that you know the office exists. (E5, 64–64)

For migrant families, particularly those facing financial difficulties, immediate departure from Norway is often seen as the safest option when Barnevernet intervenes. When Barnevernet becomes involved, many migrant parents view fleeing the country as their only viable choice, with growing numbers reportedly taking flights back home to keep their families together. As a Norwegian expert of Indian origin observes, "If you are a migrant worker, you know the only option for you is to run away... the statistic showing how many parents leave Norway with their children suddenly" (EN2). There is a trend of families, including those from countries like Iran, choosing to leave to avoid potential custody loss. Another expert notes the heightened state of alert in the Polish community: "I know people who are so afraid of the Barnevernet calling or coming down that they have their bags ready and a plan to flee, people who will take their child to Poland in an emergency (E1).

Polish respondents frequently perceive Barnevernet as overly assertive in removing children from families, often acting abruptly and without sufficient transparency, particularly when handling issues

within foster families. However, a Polish expert argues that these perceptions—especially the view within the Polish community in Norway that Barnevernet excessively removes children—are often exaggerated. Based on her experience, many cases are resolved without the need for child removal:

> In my personal experience, I can say that no case that I ever helped in, interpreting and so on, never ended with the child being taken away. And this taking-away myth really grew out of proportion in the Polish diaspora here; it really became absurd. (E5, 26–26)

While the majority of Polish parents highlight Barnevernet's overly prompt and simplistic reactions to minor issues, others express frustration with the institution, accusing it of disregarding their concerns. As one respondent stated: "I was cheated by them. I arranged a meeting, but they did not listen to me." (P14, 42–42).

This sense of being unheard and unsupported was echoed by another participant, who voiced dissatisfaction with Barnevernet's perceived ineffectiveness and the overly generic nature of its advice. A recurring complaint was that once Barnevernet assessed a situation and determined there was no immediate cause for concern, they would cease involvement, leaving parents without the support they had hoped for:

> No, no, tell you what, they have washed, in my opinion it's a stupid institution which, at this point I can say that it's a stupid institution, or maybe I just happened across these, I don't know, silly people because during this first visit everyone said, oh my God, the Barnevernet snatches your children and you manage to run away to Poland immediately and so on. And it did cross my mind at first to do that, but I figured, no, they really do want to help, they talked to us and didn't accuse us of anything and so on, but at this point they're not helping at all, maybe they're helping my wife but they're not helping me at all to understand this situation or to reach a compromise, talk or anything, they've just washed their hands of the whole situation, they said the whole matter is finished, the children are not hurt, it's ok. (P12, 65–66)

> Furthermore, the guidance provided was often perceived as vague and unhelpful: No tangible pointers for you to do this or that. It's all vague. They tell you you have to be firm and show that you can set limits and

> that you're wiser and stronger than the child. They all repeat that all the time, but as for specifics, for specific situations, they've got nothing. (P3, 232–232)

These experiences suggest a fundamental mismatch between the needs of Polish families and Barnevernet's actions. Poles report not receiving support when it is needed, yet they live in fear of Barnevernet overstepping its role in other instances.

While many Polish families initially view Barnevernet with apprehension, direct interactions with the institution and a broader understanding of its role sometimes lead to more nuanced perspectives. For some, these experiences reveal that Barnevernet's interventions may be less invasive than anticipated. One respondent commented on this shift:

> And many Poles, like I was, are so scared of the Barnevernet that they take the children away at once and all that. After my experiences I think it's not like that at all. I realize that there are various pathological situations in families, Polish families as well as Norwegian, and they require this help, and if the help were needed then it would have a tangible effect. But due to the language barrier, and problems finding a translator, because there's always something... well, they have to be sworn in and stuff, and so it's all scary and uncertain. (P13, 48–48)

Despite developing a more balanced view, the respondent noted that persistent communication challenges continued to fuel confusion and anxiety in her interactions with the institution. Another study participant noted that much of the fear surrounding Barnevernet stems from misinformation: "People are terrified of the Barnevernet because they think their only goal is to take a child away, and that's not true." (E5, 26). Another person described the situation this way: "During this first visit, everyone said, oh my God, the Barnevernet snatches your children, and you manage to run away to Poland immediately and so on." (P12, 66–66).

A Polish expert offered another layer of understanding. They suggested that Barnevernet staff's behavior, interpreted by some as excessive, might be linked to the pressure to fulfill their responsibilities:

"Not doing your duty gets you punished, so maybe that's why those Barnevernet workers are overzealous sometimes" (E5, 42–42). Ultimately, the cycle of fear and misunderstanding between Polish families and Barnevernet remains difficult to break. While some families, over time, develop a more nuanced view of the institution, others continue to view Barnevernet with suspicion, shaped by initial encounters or the opinions of others. Persistent communication barriers and early negative perceptions continue to fuel deep mistrust, significantly shaping these families' lives and experiences in Norway.

Mesosystem: Media-Driven Fear and the Negative Image of Barnevernet

The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between elements within the microsystem, emphasizing the interconnected dynamics that shape Polish families' experiences in Norway. A critical factor within this system is the role of both traditional and social media in influencing perceptions of Barnevernet. Social media, in particular, serves as a platform where families share personal stories, seek validation, and exchange information, which can either ease or intensify fears surrounding child protection services.

For some families, social media offers a space to share positive experiences with Barnevernet, as one respondent recalled:

> As I've seen on Polish online forums, the Barnevernet has helped. Like you asked if I knew Polish families, and I've just remembered that my coworker, she's Polish, and she has a daughter, Anna, twelve or thirteen by now, and she has this terrible fear of being among people. … A social phobia, but really terribly serious, and she's schooled individually. She can't handle, like, being in class, or on a plane or in a shop or wherever. And she's been working with the Barnevernet for two years now, and they help her. She's got a good relationship with them. (P13, 164–166)

However, this opinion is not universal. Many parents encounter a predominantly negative portrayal of Barnevernet, fueled by both social media and Polish press reports. Sensational stories circulate:

Barnevernet is painted as a looming threat, which reinforces anxiety among Polish families: "I heard, and that was bad for me. For those two weeks, sitting and waiting for their report, I did nothing else but sit on the internet and read, who lost a child and when, and so on." (P7, 93–93). Another respondent remarked: "I looked up on the Internet things like 'domestic violence in Norway, what to do,' and everywhere they said 'the Barnevernet takes the child away then,' 'the Barnevernet takes your child away and you can't do anything about that.'" (P3, 12–12).

Some parents recognized that these online narratives might be exaggerated and that one needs to keep things in perspective:

> I mean... it seems, from all these stories that go around, the parents' accounts, who complain on Facebook... but, well, after all, like I said, those are all very one-sided, right? One side's account, so to speak, so I think it needs a little perspective. I know, and I realize that it's different in Oslo because when I had my Barnevernet case, I looked into the statistics a bit. And actually, in Oslo, there were far more children taken away. (P8, 217–217)

Some parents actively rejected the one-sided, overwhelmingly negative image of Barnevernet that is prevalent in Polish media and in the Polish community in Norway. For example, one parent mentioned avoiding discussions about Barnevernet with other Poles because of their deeply entrenched negative views:

> But usually, we avoid talking to other Poles about it because most of them have certain opinions. We know we can't convince them, and we don't want to be pestered by these talks on the subject. There's this group of people that if they started talking about the Barnevernet at 6PM they'd finish at 5AM. And only on the basis of what the Polish media say, or what they imagine, so we just stepped away from all that. (P13, 106–106)

The influence of Polish media on perceptions of Barnevernet extends beyond personal anecdotes. Respondents noted that the Polish media often portrays Barnevernet in sensational terms, with limited objectivity and, in some cases, significant distortion for dramatic effect. A Polish expert pointed out that translations of Norwegian media are often biased or sensationalized:

> You know, newspapers are looking for stories, for sensation—but not always... My attention was drawn to the fact that the translation was not at all objective; it was quite biased. So it was a bad translation. It wasn't a translation, really, it was a distortion of an article for the Polish reader. (E5, 22–68)

High-profile cases, such as the Bhattacharya* family and the story of Nikola, further fueled these perceptions. The Bhattacharyas' case, widely reported in the Polish media, involved Norwegian authorities removing two children from their parents due to alleged inadequate care. In his notable article *Piekiełko dzieci w norweskim raju* (The Hell of Children in the Norwegian Paradise), Jacek Pawlicki delves into this widely publicized case:

> The nightmare began in May 2011, when Stavanger social services took away two children the three year old Abhigyan and one year old Aishwarya—from Anurup and Sagarika Bhattacharya, who were living in Stavanger temporarily. The reason? The parents had supposedly lost emotional contact with the children and were not bringing them up properly, and so they were not able to ensure the children's proper development. The parents say they are victims of a cultural war. According to the Bhattacharyas, the Norwegian social services did not like the children sleeping in the same bed with the parents (a common practice in India) or that they were fed by hand (Hindis, much like most of Asia and Africa, use their right hand to eat). This happens because according to the Norwegian cultural tradition, the good of the child (often defined arbitrarily) is more important than the parents' rights. With more and more immigrants coming to the fjords, the rigid Norwegian system clashes with cultural and social differences. An estimated 1000–3000 children are taken away each year from their families, mostly immigrant or mixed families—under various pretexts. (Pawlicki, 2012)

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* The case involved two Indian children, Abhigyan (3) and Aishwariya (1), who were placed in foster care by the Stavanger Child Welfare Service in Norway in May 2012 due to concerns that the parents were not adequately caring for them. The parents, Anurup and Sagarika Bhattacharya, attributed the situation to cultural differences, while local authorities cited reports of neglect. The case drew significant media attention in India, sparking diplomatic efforts to return the children to their cultural and linguistic environment. However, reported marital issues complicated these efforts, making it uncertain whether relocation to India was in the children's best interests (BBC, 2012).

This case heightened fears of cultural misunderstanding and raised concerns about systemic bias against immigrant families. Similarly, the case of Nikola*—whose family enlisted a Polish celebrity detective to "rescue" her from Norwegian foster care—reinforced Barnevernet's image as an antagonist to family unity. Stories like these, amplified by the media, intensified anxiety among Polish families in Norway, often leading to pressure from relatives in Poland to return home:

> My father immediately went, "Get back to Poland, the kids need Polish passports, no problem, we'll fix that up, nothing left but coming back." My dad is a bit of a panic-prone person in all things. My mum was certainly shocked. (P13, 98–98)

In extreme cases, media discourse introduced conspiracy theories about Barnevernet 's motives, fueling fears of organized schemes targeting Polish children. As one respondent observed:

> Even a cursory glance at the BV-related content in social media, or on the largest Polish-language website about Norway, shows the magnitude of unverified claims and gossip about the Barnevernet. People repeat stories of children being taken away having had no contact with the families in question. Discourse about the BV is rife with suspicion about deliberately choosing pretty children, about organized crime, mafia-like structures. (P4, 709–715)

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* The case centers on the 2011 abduction of nine-year-old Nikola from her foster home in Norway by Polish celebrity detective Krzysztof Rutkowski, who subsequently brought her to Poland. Nikola and her family had migrated from Poland to Norway in 2006, where she lived with her parents for five years. However, Barnevernet determined that Nikola was not receiving adequate care from her parents and placed her in foster care after a year under its supervision. Following her removal, Nikola's parents sought assistance from the Polish embassy and legal advisors. Ultimately, they enlisted the help of Krzysztof Rutkowski, who orchestrated the abduction and transported Nikola to Poland, where her parents were awaiting her return. This dramatic incident, often described as a "double kidnapping," sparked widespread media attention and diplomatic tension. Norway demanded Nikola's return, while the Polish consul compared Barnevernet to a fascist organization (Gajewska et al., 2016). Both Norwegian and Polish media closely followed the case, which concluded in December 2011 when a court in Szczecin, Poland, ruled that Nikola would remain in Poland (Winnicka, 2012).

The 2015 film *Obce Niebo* (Strange Heaven), which tells a fictional story of a Polish family's clash with Scandinavian child protection services, further reinforced these fears. The film's portrayal of desperate parents battling for limited visitation rights resonated strongly with the Polish diaspora and intensified concerns about Barnevernet's role.

Not only did the Polish media shape Polish migrants' perceptions of Barnevernet, but the Norwegian press also played a significant role by critically examining the functioning—and particularly the shortcomings—of the institution. A review analysis by Czapka (2021) covering three Norwegian publications—*Aftenposten*, *Verdens Gang* (VG), and *Klassekampen*—provided valuable insights. *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest print newspaper, maintains a center-right stance; *VG* is a tabloid and the most widely read online newspaper; and *Klassekampen* is a left-wing daily. The analysis examined articles published between January 1, 2016, and December 31, 2020, except for *Klassekampen*, which was analyzed for the years 2016–2018. The Norwegian media's critical coverage highlighted systemic issues within Barnevernet, including the insufficient number and inadequate qualifications of its employees. Reports indicated that many staff members earned their qualifications in a short period, prompting calls for more rigorous standards—such as requiring five years of formal education, ongoing post-graduation skill development, and improved competencies to handle cases involving both Norwegian and migrant families.

Attention was also drawn to the high employee turnover rate, with an average tenure of just two and a half years. This instability often led to burnout, with some employees exhibiting symptoms of PTSD as a result of working under the heavy pressure of managing numerous and complex tasks, compounded by limited access to supervision. The heavy caseload further contributed to delays in case processing, exacerbating stress for families and potentially jeopardizing the safety of children under Barnevernet's care.

Criticism was also directed at the thoroughness of Barnevernet's child welfare assessments. Reports raised concerns about rushed evaluations and the rapid placement of children into foster homes, often bypassing opportunities to provide support aimed at keeping children in their family environments. One particularly controversial

intervention method was the premature implementation of *enetiltak*, which involves placing a child alone with one or more social workers in an isolated house for a designated period. Media accounts noted that this measure was sometimes applied without consensus among the institutions involved in the child's case and came at an exorbitant cost, estimated at 6.8 million NOK per child annually.

Another contentious issue was the commercialization of care services, such as the use of foster families contracted by Barnevernet through organizations like "Aleris." The Norwegian press also emphasized the frequent misunderstandings between migrant families and Barnevernet. Language and cultural barriers often led migrant families to reject proposed measures, which, in turn, escalated conflicts and resulted in the removal of children from their biological families. Barnevernet's actions also sparked political and international controversies. A high-profile case involved Polish Consul Sławomir Kowalski, who was declared *persona non grata* by Norway for supporting a Polish family embroiled in a conflict with Barnevernet. Ethnic organizations, such as African Cultural Awareness Norway, criticized the lack of funding for cultural mentors who could mediate between migrant families and Barnevernet. Furthermore, communication issues—including inadequate access to interpreters—were cited as factors that intensified conflicts in cases involving other migrant families.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg has found irregularities in Barnevernet's decisions, issuing rulings that frequently concluded that there were violations of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to respect for family life. Legal commentators have linked these rulings to cultural differences between family models in Eastern and Southern Europe—where family-centered care is prioritized—and child welfare approaches in Norway and other Western countries, where the child's well-being often takes precedence over preserving family unity.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Barnevernet appealed for heightened vigilance from individuals, including neighbors and family members, to identify children who might need assistance. This appeal arose as schools and other institutions significantly

reduced their contact with children due to lockdown measures, delaying the provision of necessary support. To address this gap, Barnevernet encouraged the reporting of concerning cases through electronic channels.

This dynamic within the mesosystem reveals how both social and traditional media shape and reinforce the attitudes and anxieties of Polish families regarding Barnevernet, often amplifying fear rather than providing balanced perspectives. The ripple effects of these media portrayals extend into the exosystem, where the broader societal and cultural context contributes to an increasingly challenging and complex experience for Polish families interacting with child protection services in Norway.

Exosystem: A Roulette of Unequal Treatment

Local and Regional Variability in Barnevernet Practices

The exosystem, which refers to the larger social structures influencing individuals and families, plays a key role in shaping Polish families' experiences with Barnevernet across Norway. Policies and regional variations in Barnevernet's operations create significant disparities in how child welfare interventions are implemented. These disparities stem from both Norway's geographic diversity and the varying population densities across municipalities, which lead to differences in resources and Barnevernet staff allocation.

In larger cities such as Oslo, Barnevernet offices may be well-resourced, with over a hundred child protection staff, whereas in smaller, rural communities, Barnevernet might be staffed by only two workers. This shortage of personnel is compounded by recruitment challenges, as professionals are often reluctant to move to remote or isolated areas. A Norwegian expert pointed to the stark contrast in staffing between urban and rural regions:

> B: The problem is that, you know, Norway is a big country, and there are huge differences. So you can have my municipality where we are more than a hundred people working in child protection, and you can have...

A: It's huge!

B: Yeah, it's huge, but still, you have a neighboring municipality where you have two people because of the size of the municipality, and so when it comes to recruiting people, you can have the smaller municipalities that are very rural. You will not get people working there because no professionals are available or willing to move, basically. (EN1)

This inconsistency in staffing and local capacity significantly influences how Barnevernet operates and how families experience its interventions. Polish families navigating the system often feel as if their fate is subject to a kind of "roulette," where outcomes depend largely on where they live and who handles their case. One lawyer expert explained:

And that's how it is. Though of course cases vary wildly, this whole Norway thing is generally a roulette, because of how different regions handle cases differently. There's even talk about it varying by region, like, where is it good to live, where is it bad, and where you absolutely shouldn't.

A: Really? And which region has the worst press, so to speak?

B: I don't know if I can tell you because I have a lot of cases against them right now. There happen to be a lot of them at the moment and that's also cases of ... and currently in ... in Strasbourg. That particular commune. I don't know if it's a coincidence or they have some bad procedures. I don't want to say because I have that on right now, and I've seen weird things. (E9)

The expert also noted a lack of accountability within the Barnevernet system, where staff face no consequences for their decisions or inaction, which can lead to varying responses depending on the commune. This discrepancy—particularly in responses to violence—reveals inconsistencies in case handling across different regions: "Or a family doesn't get help for a long time, and then the only solution is to remove the child... the variance between communes in recognizing the problem is especially marked when it comes to violence." (E9)

These inconsistencies are further illustrated by the contrasting approaches of Barnevernet: in one instance, they honored the family's wishes by arranging a culturally aligned foster placement, while in

another, a swift intervention—carried out without parental consultation—had lasting repercussions, ultimately prompting the family to leave Norway.

For example, one mother described a situation in which her son was initially placed with a Norwegian family. When this arrangement did not work, she was able to find a suitable Polish family among her friends, and Barnevernet agreed to her suggestion:

> Plus, her son is with... with her friends, a foster family … So she says, she's not afraid he'd come to any harm. She knows it's a good family with no problems. Actually, he's with Poles. A Polish family. A Polish foster family ... It was like... she was looking around among friends for someone to take care of the child, because someone from the Barnevernet told her she could do that, and for those first six weeks her son was with... with a Norwegian family … but that didn't work at all. They wanted to move him. So she started to search for something, fast, and she found this Polish family. … Polish family has had this child with them. No problems. … The clerks agreed to her proposition. (P10, 144–153)

However, the same respondent shared a contrasting story involving a Norwegian coworker, which underscores the more aggressive actions taken by Barnevernet in some cases. In this instance, a Polish family's children were removed from their school and kindergarten without prior notice to the parents after a report about a bruise on the child's arm. The decision was made swiftly, without Barnevernet first consulting the parents, leading the family to ultimately leave Norway for Poland after the children were returned six weeks later:

> And one day he came to the office and said to me, "you know, you were right!" So I asked what happened, and he said, "the Barnevernet came and took those children from the school." The Polish boy, and his little sister from the kindergarten. The children were taken away, without any notice to the parents, taken to some foster family, I don't even know where. The parents were notified by the school via phone call... and the whole thing came up because that boy had a... I think he had a bruise on his arm? And he was angry with his parents, you know, like a nine-year-old, or an eight-year-old can be. And he told the teacher that his dad had hit him. No one asked... no one asked the parents for their side of the story... In six weeks the matter was resolved and the children came back to the parents... they

> just went straight back to Poland, just ran away... they only came back to sell the house and close off bank accounts and all that, and they just went back, back to Poland. (P10, 215–215)

Overall, these accounts bring to light an inconsistent application of Barnevernet policies that often feels arbitrary and unfair to Polish families, which underscores the systemic issue of local and regional variability in the handling of child welfare cases.

An Ethical Dilemma of Profiting from a Child's Harm

When Barnevernet's own resources fall short, it relies on external providers, particularly private companies, to deliver care. This highlights both logistical challenges and ethical concerns surrounding Norway's child welfare system. Due to understaffing, Barnevernet sometimes contracts commercial facilities, such as those operated by large multinational companies like Humana and Aleris, which offer specialized child welfare services, including private hospitals and care institutions in several countries. EN1 notes this dependence on commercial entities, particularly in Norway and Sweden, explaining: "there's a huge company in Norway and Sweden called Humana. ... They can have branches in Norway and Germany, many other countries."

The significant expenses associated with such placements impact municipal budgets, as much of the funding comes from local taxes—thus intensifying public scrutiny of Barnevernet's reliance on for-profit entities. This outsourcing to private companies raises ethical concerns among some Norwegians, who believe that child welfare services, as part of the welfare state, should not be profit-driven. A Norwegian expert (EN1) acknowledges this ethical dilemma, reflecting on public discomfort with private profits in child welfare by stating: "So that's why it is a debate. Should someone profit from children being abused, you know? So it's kind of an ethical debate." Although Barnevernet's operations do not directly benefit financially from these placements, public perceptions can still be influenced by outsourcing to for-profit companies—as illustrated by a Polish parent's concerns:

> I've been delivering newspapers and I know what the Barnevernet writes there. The Barnevernet is overseen by the one who sells children. They claim to be doing adoption, but the newspapers said that the Barnevernet made such and such income on adoption, you can find information about it on the web. (P14)

A Norwegian expert (EN1) clarifies that while Barnevernet strives to prioritize placements within a child's extended family or known network, this is not always feasible. Approximately 80–90% of children in Barnevernet cases are placed with relatives or within familiar networks whenever possible. However, when such placements are unavailable or pose potential risks (for example, if a child faces honor-related violence within the same cultural group), Barnevernet turns to external placements, such as commercial facilities, to ensure the child's safety. Efforts are made to maintain cultural connections through holiday or weekend visits with biological relatives when family placement is not achievable. Barnevernet's goal is to balance safety with cultural continuity.

The expert further criticizes Barnevernet's reliance on private entities and consultants for foster care and case handling, which suggests that these arrangements may foster conflicts of interest. For example, some individuals involved in investigations also run private foster homes, which creates financial incentives to keep children in foster care:

> The same person, the one I'm talking about, who first investigated and then, when the child was taken away, had ... and was the appointed contact person for the Barnevernet, turned out the same person ran foster homes. So they appeared in three copies, so to speak. So there's a lot of private business going on. (E9)

This quote sheds light on the complexity of Barnevernet's reliance on external consultants, where former employees or private agents, hired as "consultants," can bill the agency independently while retaining significant influence over child welfare cases. A Polish expert illustrates how flexible the system can be for private consultants:

> In Norway, you can be a private consultant to the Barnevernet—you can sit at the desk, you get a different title because you're not a Barnevernet employee, you're a Barnevernet consultant. And you run your own company, you send your bills to the Barnevernet. (E9)

Prioritizing Foster Families Over Biological Ones

Some respondents highlighted the apparent lack of support offered by Barnevernet to biological parents compared to foster families. A Polish expert observed that foster families receive financial and structural support that biological parents do not, which exacerbates the perception that Barnevernet's focus is on removing children from families rather than helping them: "The things the biological parents would have to pay for, the government can help with if the foster parents ask for it" (E9).

This imbalance in resource allocation further feeds the fear of Barnevernet's interventions. Polish respondents frequently argue that the level of support provided to foster families is disproportionately higher than that offered to biological families. They note that while Barnevernet has extensive resources to invest in foster care, the same level of care is not always applied when biological parents report concerns. As one respondent comments:

> While the Barnevernet has endless means and can always invest in the foster parent, but it's not always that way. Often the biological parents meet their child and find it completely neglected. Totally uncared for. Dirty, overlong nails. And when you say this to the Barnevernet, they criticise you, say you're focusing on the wrong thing. Instead of spending time with the child they were busy looking for problems. And that's not important. (E9)

A Polish expert (E9) also emphasizes the considerable government support provided to foster families, such as covering costs for extracurricular activities and other needs. In contrast, biological families typically lack access to such financial resources that could be instrumental in addressing issues in the family. This disparity makes it difficult for biological parents to afford necessary services, such as psychological evaluations for their children:

> The things that the biological parents would have to pay for, the government can help with that if the foster parents ask for it. So if the biological parent got the same care package as the foster parent gets, there'd be no problem. But biological families usually can't afford a psychologist to give an expert opinion. (E9)

Another concern raised by the expert is the tendency for courts, as well as the institutions responsible for training foster families, to view foster placements as permanent. In Norway, there is a preference to keep children with foster families long-term, which makes reunification with biological families unlikely. As one respondent recounts:

> The court always asks, how can the biological parent think to tear the child away from the foster home, say the child has lived there for two years, how can they tear it away and move back to the biological parents. So I ask this middleman, the one who trains the foster homes, what options do they have to prepare the foster families, to gradually get them and the child mentally ready to return. And he replies that they've never had a case like that and it's hella improbable. (E9)

Additionally, E9 points to an inherent bias in the training of foster parents. They argue that it focuses primarily on ensuring that children remain in foster care rather than be reunified with their biological families: "People, private institutions who train those foster homes—and this training, from what I've seen, is only focused on one thing: on not letting the child go back." (E9)

Another Norwegian expert (EN2) also comments on the economic aspects of foster care in Norway. They observe that the position provides sufficient financial support to sustain a family without the need for additional income. The expert further explains: "A lot of foster homes, foster parents are childless... it is position that's pretty well paid in Norway... you don't need to work," making it an attractive option for families, especially those unable to have children of their own.

In a Polish expert's view, financial incentives significantly motivate Norwegian families to become foster families, often with the aim of improving their living standards or even enabling them to stop

working altogether. Some of these families, particularly those without children, view foster care as a source of income, and if a child is returned to their biological family, they typically seek another foster placement immediately. As the expert describes:

> With families who have no children, who get their first charge. That's special. Usually the foster families have had like five children before, they're adults, they take care of grandma and they take one more so they don't have to work for a pension anymore.
>
> These are not the cases where they really want the child, apply for it, want to give themselves to it. It's usually a sort of bonus... Because the families, in cases where they fought not to give the child back, when we've won the case and got custody back, these families often get another child right away. Immediately they get a next one. (E9)

A Norwegian expert (EN2) underscores the need for Barnevernet to shift its focus from institutionalized foster care to supporting biological families in crisis. They assert that, according to Norwegian law, "the best place for children to grow up is their biological homes," noting that even though children may receive adequate care in foster homes, the loss of biological connection can have a lasting emotional impact.

Regional Variability in Cultural Competence

In addition to regional disparities, cultural diversity and cultural competence significantly impact Barnevernet's practices. In regions dominated by traditional and religious communities, such as South-West Norway, Barnevernet workers may adopt stricter or less culturally tolerant interpretations of family welfare than in more liberal, multicultural areas like Oslo. This disparity contributes to the perception that Barnevernet's approach to child welfare can vary dramatically depending on location.

One Polish expert noted how these regional differences fuel rumors and speculation among the Polish community. For instance, in Oslo, Barnevernet has historically been involved in more cases where children were removed from immigrant families, leading to suspicions of targeted interventions:

> A: Actually, in Oslo, there were far more children taken away, yes. Plus there were things related to... how do you say that... those scandals, the children, babies contracted to be taken away... Newborn babies of immigrant parents were taken away and given to Norwegian families who were looking for children to adopt and they've commissioned them.
>
> A: Polish newborns?
>
> B: Not necessarily Polish, no. I don't know if they were just Polish. It was a big case. (P8, 217–225)

Moreover, the lack of cultural understanding among Barnevernet staff exacerbates these tensions. Although there is growing recognition of the need to include more workers from minority backgrounds within Barnevernet to better understand the cultural needs of immigrant families, progress in this area is limited. As one Norwegian expert emphasized: "We need more workers with a minority background, especially in Barnevernet, but those voices are still few and far between" (EN2).

This lack of cultural diversity within Barnevernet contributes to misunderstandings and reinforces the perception that Barnevernet does not fully grasp the cultural contexts of the families it serves. These cultural disconnects complicate Barnevernet's efforts to support immigrant families, particularly those from Poland, whose cultural norms regarding family structure and child-rearing may differ significantly from Norwegian practices.

The variability in Barnevernet's practices, driven by both regional resource disparities and a lack of cultural sensitivity, creates an unpredictable and often anxiety-inducing experience for Polish families. In some regions, families may encounter a robust support system, while in others, the scarcity of staff and rigid local procedures lead to inconsistent outcomes. This unpredictability, combined with cultural misunderstandings, greatly affects Polish families' trust in Barnevernet and reinforces the perception that its interventions are not only inconsistent but potentially harmful to family unity.

In sum, participants' observations reveal systemic issues in the foster care system, including financial motivations for foster families, disparities in support for biological families, regional differences in

recruitment, potential conflicts of interest among private consultants, and a lack of uniform standards for addressing cases, particularly those involving violence. Barnevernet's efforts to prioritize family-based and culturally sensitive placements reflect a commitment to minimizing these conflicts, yet challenges persist—particularly where privatization may inadvertently determine child welfare practices.

Macrosystem: A Clash of Cultural Values

Child-Centrism vs. Family Preservation

The macrosystem shaping the experiences of Polish families in Norway intertwines Norwegian and Polish cultural, legal, and social norms. Although these families reside in Norway, they often remain deeply connected to the Polish diaspora, where practices and conventions surrounding child welfare continue to influence their perceptions of Barnevernet. The stark differences in legal frameworks and attitudes toward child-rearing between Norway and Poland often lead to conflicts when Barnevernet intervenes in Polish families' lives.

In Poland, child protection interventions are typically reserved for the most severe cases, such as those involving chronic alcohol abuse or extreme neglect. In the aftermath of a tragedy, media coverage often focuses on failures by social workers, probation officers, or police to prevent the incident, highlighting a reactive rather than preventive approach. For Polish immigrants in Norway, this contrasts sharply with Barnevernet's preventive model, where interventions may occur even in "normal" families based on reports of children's behavior or statements about their parents. While Barnevernet's primary goal is child protection, Polish migrants frequently view the trauma of removing children from their families as an unintended consequence, believing that such families require support rather than additional distress.

Norwegian law, by contrast, adopts a child-centered stance that emphasizes children's rights independently of parental authority. Child welfare and protection are prioritized over family unity when

a child may be at risk, and corporal punishment is strictly prohibited. This child-centric approach can be difficult for Polish families to reconcile with values rooted in family preservation, which prioritize supporting struggling families over separating them.

Polish child protection practices, in contrast, focus mainly on preserving family integrity. Polish laws and cultural norms place strong emphasis on the importance of biological family bonds, and often view children as extensions of their parents' rights, even though official discourse suggests otherwise: "In Poland, we have an illusory reality, and we can't always tell what's real and what isn't." (E10). Polish practices in this area were detailed through an interview with E10, a Polish expert who has extensively researched the subject and has firsthand experience as a foster parent in Poland.

The central element of the children's rights discourse in Poland is that the biological family's perspective is the basis for the entire process. Theoretically, the child is not considered the property of their parents, but in practice, this view often persists. Support provided to a child typically occurs through actions centered on supporting the family itself. This systemic focus on family preservation frequently results in prioritizing biological relatives for placements whenever possible. If that is not feasible, children are often placed near their birth families to allow for visitation and potential reintegration, even in situations where the family has posed serious risks to the child.

A Norwegian expert explains that in less affluent countries, extended family structures are often the primary safety net for children during family crises—a tradition that is less prevalent in welfare-oriented societies like Norway, where the state assumes this responsibility. In contrast, "In countries like India, Somalia... the family is more important," EN2 notes, pointing out that extended family members such as "cousins, aunts, and grandparents" frequently step in when parents are unable to care for their children. This approach is similarly typical in family-centered Poland.

Another consequence of this family-centered model is the prolonged duration and uncertainty of temporary placements, as noted by a Polish expert:

> A child can't be secured away from a family without giving the family a chance first. So... and then, of course, when the child is secured away, you still have to give them the chance, right? So we're working on that family again. I feel that the system is overall really redundant. It's on a loop. It's a sequence of actions that were already performed once and gave no effect. Maybe no one knows that, maybe no one reported it, but no one... sort of... no one cared, no one drew any conclusions. The curators also often bang their heads against a wall. Judges have their own ideas here. That's of course a generalization, because they're always, well, it's just like that, there are great judges and great curators out there. But if I were to give you my general impression, then the system is collapsing. It's just ineffective. In very many cases. Well, even just the fact that a child stays with a foster family for 3 years 7 months on average. In care that was supposed to be, as per the Act from 10 years ago, a short-term solution. So that's... that's absurd, right? How can you have a short-term thing that takes 4 years? (E10)

This approach underscores systemic inefficiencies within Poland's child protection system, further compounded by a lack of standardized data on foster placements. In Poland, a dominant cultural narrative often casts suspicion on foster care, framing child removal as unjust or conspiratorial. This context is vital to understanding the amplified challenges Polish families face when interacting with Norwegian child welfare services. Myths surrounding foster families profiting from taking in children remain prevalent, despite such claims often being exaggerated or unsupported. E10 describes how public discourse in Poland regarding foster families is frequently fueled by inaccurate media portrayals:

> So, the stories about how much money foster families are making by taking care of children, I've heard tons of those, and they're quite colorful. They circulate in society, too. Not just among the families whose children have been secured. I think they've' become a stereotype by now. It's also strengthened by the media, which I find quite surprising. I mean, it tells you a lot about the level of research the media do—it proves that often, no one checks even the most basic information, the kind that can be reached very easily. Because, for instance, the Act specifies how much a foster family gets per child, it's a fully accessible fact. And it's the same throughout the entire country, it's always the same. It's 1052 PLN. So... turning that

> into, say, six thousand per month... I'm referring now to one of the episodes of the journalist TV show in public TV, and then such information appears there, and there's no errata, no comment, so why would the viewer think it's false, right? So I think that argument, that being a foster family is a business, is … present … not just among the biological parents but in society overall. (E10)

In addition, persistent notions suggest that child protection interventions might be ideologically or politically motivated. Cases involving religious families, for instance, have sparked suspicions that child removal undermines Polish identity or religious values. E10 recounts a case where a Catholic family claimed that their children were taken in retaliation for their religious practices, although the actual cause was domestic abuse:

> ... a family... it's a case that... Ordo Iuris picked that up some time ago, and the biological family's defense was that they have been accused because they were a good Catholic family, and the local authorities did not like... did not like their religious practices, right? So it was an action... caused by hostility to Christianity. Let's put it that way. I mention this case because it ended with the children going back to the parents and then just being taken away again, because of course the real reason was domestic abuse and not any kind of Catholicism practice, not any kind of institutional hostility towards practicing Catholics, right? So I think these are the explanations for children being taken away. (E10)

Another common misconception is that children are removed due to poverty, a belief often perpetuated through social media despite court records documenting severe abuse as the actual cause. This narrative, combined with Polish confidentiality laws that restrict social workers from discussing case details, creates a one-sided narrative that fosters misunderstanding. Polish confidentiality regulations, similar to those of Barnevernet in Norway, prevent workers from publicly sharing details, which allows families to shape public opinion without an official counter-narrative. This often amplifies perceptions of injustice and fuels media portrayals of such interventions as arbitrary or malicious:

> The only people allowed to say what happened are the adults, the parents. Because they're talking about their own image. They own their children's image in this case, and they shape the narrative, and the people who were part of it and who could contradict them, who could say "that's not how it was at all," "can't do that." They're obliged to keep it confidential. And I think that's the core of all these family cases where children were secured away. No matter the country, it will always be easy to sway the public opinion, convince them of injustice, discrimination, some sort of plot, child trafficking and so on. Because the people who could say "that's not true," cannot. While the parents can say anything. (E10).

In many instances in Poland, interventions such as assigning a parole officer or offering parental support are attempted before child removal is considered. However, these steps are often perceived as inadequate, particularly when a child remains in a dangerous environment. A Polish expert notes that despite Poland's range of social services, interventions are often uncoordinated, which leads to public perceptions of them as last-minute and unjustified:

> We have psychopedagogy clinics. We have free... we have the free legal counsel offices, right? And law clinics. We have state healthcare offering psychological or psychotherapy help. We have addiction clinics. We have parenting courses, right? We have all the... well, psychiatry is in shambles now, particularly children's psychiatry, but nevertheless... there are some options somewhere, right? We have family help centers, Caritas, all the parochial work. …So, back to what I said about the curators, this statement that no one works with the family and then suddenly shock, someone comes in and takes the child away. In my opinion, that's not borne out by the fact, because it's quite possible that the various institutions and organizations, the local common rooms or the children's help centers and all, right? And the school pedagogy experts and all. It's possible that those places don't cooperate, don't pool their information, so you can't really see a help network that really is there, around the family. But if you were to really look, then there rarely is a family that never got any help, that was cut off from any help and support and then suddenly one day the police came in and shocked everyone because no one expected it. Well, I don't think it's as great an assistance offer as, I don't know, in the UK, right? But it's not a desert either, and these curators led me to think that, hey, if assistants are working longer and longer with families each year—and they do, you can see that clearly in the statistics, they work longer and

> longer before securing a child—then we're putting more and more time and effort into families. If curators work for four years on average, then what surprise taking-away are we talking about? It's not a surprise. What it means is that we're putting a lot of energy and probably money too, and human resources, into saving a system, a constellation, which, and this is what pops up in conversation. (E10)

In Norway, interventions that prioritize a child's safety over family unity are viewed as protective, but Polish parents often perceive them as threats to family cohesion and traditional values.

In the context of examining cultural differences between Norway and Poland regarding child- versus family-centered approaches, it is worth citing a participant's account of their experiences with both Barnevernet and the *familiekontor**. This narrative provides insight into how differing priorities in child protection and family functioning are reflected in the practices of the Norwegian system. The participant's perspective sheds light on the contrasting roles and attitudes of these institutions: the tension between child-focused and family-oriented approaches:

> But as of right now the Barnevernet did nothing, no help at all, didn't want to help, it was more like papering over the cracks than really repairing anything. But the *familiekontor*, that woman, I really felt she wanted to help, she was a mediator who tried to, well, get those two halves to meet, to make it function somehow, for both the father and the mother to be content and for money matters to be acceptable and first of all for the children not to suffer. While the Barnevernet only said they didn't want the children to suffer but they don't care if they're with the Dad or the Mum or a friend of a friend, because they're not interested in that. They only care for the children not to be hungry or hurt and that's it, and if they are, then you need to have very strong proof, photos, recordings, I don't know, testimonials of I don't know how many people, for them to accept that and to even talk to them openly. I'm very disappointed when it comes to, to, to them. (P12, 38–38)

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* It is a colloquial term used by Poles in Norway to refer to *Familievernkontoret*.

Barnevernet is also often unfavorably compared to other institutions, such as Familievernkontoret,* because Barnevernet's child-centric focus can overlook parents' needs, which clashes with Polish views that see the child as part of the family unit rather than as an independent entity. As one expert observes, this neglect of parental concerns is another reason Poles may regard Barnevernet with skepticism: "The Barnevernet refusing to assist the parents in an inter-family crisis is one reason why Poles judge the Barnevernet negatively." (E10). Another participant shared a similar sense of frustration with Barnevernet's lack of responsiveness. One person sought advice and assistance; however, the authorities decided to close the case, leaving the participant feeling unheard and unsupported.

> Basically, they told me during this last meeting that they want to close the case, because they see no problems. I told them, well, if you don't see a problem then I'm coming in here with a request. I ask for your advice, your help. And you, well. They think nothing's up and want to close the case. (P12, 52–52)

These viewpoints illuminate a key cultural tension: while Barnevernet prioritizes child safety, it is often seen by Polish families as neglecting family dynamics and the needs of parents. In contrast, institutions like the Familievernkontoret are valued for their focus on mediation and solutions that benefit the entire family.

In contrast to Polish parents' perception of Barnevernet as centered solely on the child while neglecting the broader family's needs, experts often view Barnevernet more positively. One Polish expert argues that Norwegian institutions help more efficiently than their Polish counterparts: "When it comes to support, it seems to me that institutions are better at helping than in Poland" (E7, 17–17).

Other experts view Barnevernet not only as an institution that intervenes in child protection cases but also as one that provides diverse

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* Familievernkontoret, or the Family Counseling Office, is a Norwegian public service institution dedicated to supporting individuals, couples, and families in navigating relationship challenges and family dynamics. Its primary goal is to foster healthy family environments and prevent conflicts from escalating.

forms of assistance aimed at strengthening family dynamics. According to these experts, Barnevernet offers broader support that helps families function more effectively and connects them to additional resources when needed. For example, Barnevernet may guide parents toward other institutions that can provide specific forms of assistance:

> A: And the Barnevernet helps with unemployment?
>
> B: It can help, because for instance it can give them competent answers, what can the parent do. Where to go for help. Dole or something, right? (P4, 281–285)

In some cases, Barnevernet has coordinated with NAV (the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration) to help parents enrol in courses that improve job prospects:

> Barnevernet helped her with many things, with the NAV, she went to some sort of course at the NAV, to get into the workforce. They did get in touch with NAV and helped that woman in her dealings with NAV. (E7, 49–49)

Barnevernet also arranges and funds courses for families, especially when there is a need to address children's mental health or improve family functioning:

> There were several courses, the Barnevernet organized them and the hospital, the children's mental hospital ward. It varied, but overall there were like five courses. We went to all of them, and the kindergarten didn't put in an appearance once. Neither did the school, in fact. (P7, 47–47)

In addition, Barnevernet may cover the costs of extracurricular activities, such as sports or tutoring, to enhance children's development and well-being: "A: It can finance tutoring? B: Some classes, or horse riding, something like that" (P4, 281–285). An expert comments: "It may mean that a family gets, say, two or three hundred crowns per month, to pay for football classes for instance." (E4, 18–18) Sometimes Barnevernet also supports low-income families by providing financial assistance to cover fees associated with child care: "And it can happen that a low income family can get support, they can get

extra money to spend on that. Money sent directly to that class, say the sports class or whatever else." (E7, 103–103). However, administrative issues can occasionally disrupt this support:

> They had some problems. The boy was speaking quite good Norwegian and all, and he went to this dayroom place, and for some time they got that free of charge, but I think they neglected some formalities or something and suddenly the bills for the dayroom came, quite big ones. It turned out that the parents filled a wrong application form. .... And these parents did it wrong, as far as I made out there was another person helping them and they filled the wrong form and got those bills. (E7, 43–43)

Polish experts emphasize that Barnevernet also extends assistance to Norwegian families, many of whom actively seek help when they are facing family issues:

> Norwegian parents themselves often apply to the Barnevernet when they can't handle things themselves. They expect help, support. Sometimes some training, sometimes a Barnevernet worker comes to the house for half of a day, observes the family and tell them what to do to make it better. (E5, 26)

Barnevernet's assistance can be comprehensive, focused on improving family dynamics and communication. For instance, it might organize family meetings to encourage parents to spend quality time with their children or address specific needs within the family: "It's actions like, like having the whole family in to talk, actions aimed at making the families spend more time together." (E4, 18–18). Another expert said:

> The Barnevernet called the mother to school and it turned out the child just wanted more contact with her, right? And it was a cry for help, turning to the school, the school passes these things to Barnevernet automatically and the children know that. And it turned out the mother did work from sunrise to sunset. And the Barnevernet prohibited that [excessive working hours]. They said she had to reduce her hours drastically. And so she did. That was the end of it. That talk with the Barnevernet. (E5, 86–86)

Guidance from Barnevernet may also include practical tools, like communication exercises, to help parents build a closer relationship with their children:

> Guiding families to communicate and build dialogue with children, they have all those question lists and tasks for the parents to do, and there's one that's called *pupwerde*, on the floor, it's meant to make the parents meet the child where the child is. (E4, 18–18)

It is important to note that positive or neutral opinions about Barnevernet's family assistance come mainly from experts, while Polish parents often view these interventions as unwarranted intrusions into family dynamics and childrearing practices. However, one form of support that both experts and parents view positively is the respite care Barnevernet offers, which is particularly helpful for single parents. This service gives parents a break from childcare responsibilities, allowing them time to rest or manage personal tasks: "The children spend a day playing in a group, three or four children of similar age, and the parent gets to go shopping, or just rest, have coffee in peace, go out, and so on." (E4, 52–52) Another parent noted: "I have this support care from the commune, so I don't need it from them. They offered me, the first time, to help if the commune refuses." (P3, 202–202). One Polish mother who took advantage of this support emphasized the importance of making the choice independently, as such arrangements require trust required.

Some parents also shared positive experiences regarding Barnevernet's willingness to consider family preferences when selecting foster families, even when Polish families were involved. This contradicts the view that no Polish foster families are available and supports EN1's perspective that Barnevernet often strives to place children with families from similar cultural backgrounds. Barnevernet's sensitivity to specific family situations can extend beyond child-related matters. For example, one expert shared a story about Barnevernet's thoughtful approach to supporting a young single mother by arranging opportunities for social engagement:

> I even heard, I don't know if it was our commune, I'm not sure. But I heard about a single mother who was young and the worker she met was very intent on her having the chance to meet a new partner, it went as far as that, and they set her up with the *awlasting*. (E4, 50–52)

However, despite these supportive efforts, parents often remain skeptical of Barnevernet's intentions. Some view mediation attempts as potentially biased, fearing that Barnevernet might favor one parent over the other during disputes:

> Parents fight, can't reach an agreement, bam, we take children away. There, sort it out—we'll give you a sausage and you can fight for it or try to share—and the children are taken away for two, three months. That's what I was afraid of. (P12, 102–102)

Other Polish parents have recounted instances where individual Barnevernet workers behaved poorly or where the agency appeared to conceal problems within foster families. For example, R4 describes a situation in which Barnevernet seemingly tried to avoid accountability for misconduct by a Norwegian foster child by removing a Polish child instead:

> But then I thought logically, I said, you got the child away, and you'll come back, right? And we'll prove all this. Polish psychologists, the documents, we'll translate them so you have proof in hand... And later I thought, actually, the Barnevernet just tried to hush it up, sweep the whole problem under the rug, because it was their pupil who was the problem, right? Who did the bad... (R4, 295–303)

In summary, while experts highlight Barnevernet's role in providing a wide range of support services—including support for families, not just children—many Polish parents often view its interventions with suspicion, interpreting assistance as unwarranted intrusions into family life. This divergence in perception underscores the complexities and cultural tensions surrounding Barnevernet's role in Norway's child welfare system.

Fear of Assimilation

Polish families often worry that if their children are placed in Norwegian foster care, they might lose their cultural ties. One parent described how their child, placed with a Norwegian foster family, was no longer exposed to Polish culture: "There's no expectation for the child to have contact with the language or culture anymore." (P7) The fear of cultural assimilation adds to Polish families' concerns about Barnevernet, as they worry it could sever their children's connection to their heritage.

Norway's approach emphasizes treating children as individuals with their own rights, which stands in contrast to Polish norms, where children are typically seen as dependent on their parents for decision-making. Norwegian practices that allow children to participate in legal proceedings without their parents' involvement are very different from Polish traditions. This can be especially upsetting for Polish parents when Barnevernet interviews children without the parents present:

> There's also another thing, a lot of people rebel because the Barnevernet, when they talk to the child, they forbid the parents to speak. Or in fact, they talk... without the parent present. In any case, the parent doesn't get a say. The parent has to listen to the child, who becomes a party in the case. (E5, 86–86)

While Barnevernet's focus is on child independence, Polish families expect that children should be shielded from adult concerns, which deepens the cultural divide between Polish families and Barnevernet.

A Norwegian expert (EN2) sums it up by stressing the universal human need for continuity and identity: "We human beings need continuity and our identity... We need to know where we came from and where we are going." They argue that losing connection to one's roots can cause identity issues, which underlines the importance of placing children with families that share their cultural background whenever possible, rather than with unfamiliar families.

A Polish expert (E9) raises serious concerns about placing Polish children in Norwegian foster homes, particularly the risk of losing

their cultural, religious, and linguistic ties. According to the expert, there is generally no expectation that children in foster care will maintain a connection to their native language or cultural traditions:

> There's no expectancy for the child to have contact with language. The children often get accustomed to Norwegian really quick, in kindergarten. No one is going to drive the child to Sunday schools or whatever. I only had one such case, really nice, it was a Norwegian foster mother, she made this little altar for the child. I was really impressed. (E9)

The shortage of Polish foster homes presents an additional challenge for preserving children's cultural identities. Respondents express frustration that children are often placed in Norwegian foster homes where there is little to no understanding of Polish culture, which can lead to a loss of cultural roots:

> There are no Polish foster homes. And even if they are, they're made so that the children... in my experience, if the Barnevernet works and you can set up a foster home with acquaintances, somewhere nearby, in your own milieu, then you can save the child that way. But if not, then 99% it goes to a Norwegian foster family, where they have no idea about the culture. (E9)

These observations highlight Polish respondents' concerns about the foster care system within Barnevernet, particularly regarding its cultural sensitivity. They point to gaps in support, the potential long-term effects on children, and the challenges of maintaining cultural continuity.

A Need for Cultural Competence

Cultural differences between Poland and Norway go beyond child- versus family-centered values. For instance, Poles tend to show greater tolerance for minor legal infractions, such as buying smuggled alcohol and cigarettes to avoid Norway's high prices. Against this backdrop, Barnevernet's interventions for behaviors like spanking or shouting at a child are often seen by Polish families as overly strict and unreasonable, which amplifies feelings of cultural disconnect.

A Norwegian expert, who is involved in developing national child protection policies explains that Barnevernet's decisions to place children in foster care or temporary custody are heavily influenced by cultural factors. For many minority families, ideas about how to express love or what is considered best for a child often differ sharply from Norwegian norms. To illustrate, EN2 notes that cultural differences surrounding corporal punishment can be especially salient—such as between Norwegian and Indian practices. In India, corporal punishment is widely accepted and seen as having little psychological impact precisely because it is so common, whereas in Norway it is strictly forbidden and viewed as harmful and abnormal. The expert points out that a significant portion of Barnevernet's cases involve minority families, with corporal punishment being a leading cause for intervention. As EN2 explains, "fourth of children investigated by the Barnevernet are children of minority families, and half of the reasons for notifying the Barnevernet about them concerns corporal punishment." The institution tends to criminalize corporal punishment instead of addressing the underlying socioeconomic pressures that might lead to its use.

Another example of this short-sightedness is seen in cases of parentification, where children act as intermediaries for parents who struggle with Norwegian institutions. As a Polish expert explains: "In school, a child is the most important individual, while at home... they often take on all the responsibilities. It's the kids who go to the institutions, to translate things for their parents who haven't learned Norwegian." (E5, 125–125) While Barnevernet views parentification as harmful to the child's well-being, Polish families often see it as essential, providing necessary support in navigating life abroad.

Another significant cultural difference lies in the interpretation of *melding*. Polish experts emphasize the need to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted notifications (*meldings*) to Barnevernet. In Norway, "melding" tends to carry a neutral connotation, simply denoting a report, whereas in Poland, "informing" often implies bad intentions or even betrayal. As one Polish expert explains:

> Melding does not have the same negative connotation, like "informing" would have in Poland. It's sort of a "nice informing," because, you know, everything is nice here… And it's not that they inform out of ill will, like spite or something. Here in Norway, they do it benevolently. (E5, 16–52).

Even though *meldings* are usually made with good intentions, some Polish individuals perceive them as intrusive or exaggerated, particularly when they come as a surprise. One expert shares an example of a Polish man who filed several complaints against them, accusing them of absurd things like spying on his house late at night to kidnap his child. This expert underscores the discrepancy between the benign Norwegian perspective and the more accusatory Polish interpretation:

> He wrote informing letters about me, wrote to my bosses saying, I don't know, that I'm watching his house at night because I want to kidnap his child, or flirt with his wife… of course I've got nothing better to do at 3 AM than such things. (E5, 107–107)

In order to bridge the gap between Polish families and Barnevernet there is a need for deeper understanding of cultural differences. A Norwegian expert (EN2) also sees this need when discussing foster care placements. EN2 stresses the importance of hiring more minority staff within Barnevernet to better support culturally sensitive placements. They emphasize that more foster homes should match the child's cultural and religious background. EN2 recalls a case involving a young mother from Somalia, where the child was placed in a non-Muslim home, and Norwegian authorities ultimately lost the case at the European Court. "I've said to you, greater amount of workers within child care system should have minority background, we must open for foster homes... with the same religion, for example," EN2 explains. They also cite other examples, like that of an Indian couple in Stavanger with strong ties to India, who successfully used media and political channels to regain custody of their children.

One Polish respondent also points out the cultural differences that can complicate interactions and cause misunderstandings between Polish immigrants and Norwegians. Polish communication tends to be open and expressive, with intentions and emotions easily conveyed

through non-verbal cues. In contrast, Norwegian communication is often perceived as more reserved and difficult to interpret, with an emphasis on political correctness and a tendency toward neutrality in expression. This difference can be particularly difficult for Eastern European immigrants, as expressed by one respondent:

> Us Poles, we're quite open; usually when you talk to someone you can tell, from their expression, their body language, their attitude… The way they… their intonation, when you talk… you recognize their intention, their feelings and things. But when you interact with Norwegians, they are so remote, so shut off and introverted, that it's practically impossible. And even if... and they're always smiling, even if you think they've got benign intentions that's not always true. They're super politically correct. ... I think it's very difficult, for us, not just us, everyone from more, for Eastern European immigrants to.. it's very hard to deal with. (P10, 188–189)

Fundamental Challenges in Barnevernet Staff Qualifications and Recruitment

These structural and cultural differences in child welfare approaches are magnified by challenges in Barnevernet staff qualifications and recruitment, which impact the effectiveness and perception of Barnevernet among immigrant communities, including Polish families. Norwegian law does not mandate specific educational credentials for Barnevernet workers, although universities have recently introduced specialized courses to train future child protection professionals. According to EN1, social work education in Norway follows three main tracks, two of which are most relevant for child protection: traditional social work for case management, and welfare pedagogy, with a focus on child-centered approaches.* According to E5, one should appreciate that a Barnevernet-specific academic track was created at all:

> Just the fact that there's a Barnevernet major at all is telling, really. Before, you called that a social worker. Now it's narrowed down to the Barnevernet,

* A third path prepares social workers for roles supporting people with disabilities, including training in medical administration.

> just that institution, so it's probable that in a few years you'll only be allowed to work there if you have that major. (E5, 97–97)

At the same time, E5 notes that the quality of this Barnevernet-focused university program has declined, partly due to adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic. For a time, the requirement to have a high school diploma for university admission was suspended. E5 also mentions that practical coursework is increasingly being replaced by theoretical subjects, which may leave graduates less prepared for real-world practice. Previously, students had to pass final exams evaluated by external experts, but these were canceled during the pandemic, and diplomas were instead awarded based on general course grades. As E5 puts it:

> I know people who got into those courses, children of women I know. I'm surprised they even graduated high school, but now due to coronavirus you don't have to have the maturity diploma to go to university, so that's not gonna be good, either. (E5, 95–95)

EN1 points to an ongoing debate about the educational requirements for Barnevernet staff. Although some argue that Barnevernet workers should be required to hold a Master's degree, EN1 stresses that this alone wouldn't solve the deeper issues. Legally, there is no minimum qualification required for Barnevernet caseworkers, and even small decisions must be passed on to higher-level managers. As EN1 explains: "As a caseworker, I cannot decide to pay for a bus fare for a foster parent. I have no ability to make decisions. I have to address everything to my manager and there are different requirements to the managers." (EN1, 88–88)

This contrasts with the greater autonomy granted to social workers in many other countries. EN1 argues that more attention should be given to competencies such as intercultural sensitivity, trust-building skills, and the willingness to learn from experience: "We are in danger of using [a Master's requirement] as a quick fix to a much bigger problem…What you really need is cultural sensitivity…a set of

values and attitudes…to provide people in need, people in crisis, with a safe meeting." (EN1, 122–122).

This limited authority held by Barnevernet caseworkers clashes with how many Polish parents and experts perceive the institution. In their view, Barnevernet staff seem to wield considerable power—an impression shaped in part by differences in qualifications and experience between the two systems. Polish critics often describe Barnevernet staff as underqualified, noting that many caseworkers are young graduates with limited practical experience and no background in parenting. In Poland, many professional roles typically require a five-year Master's degree, and shorter degrees are commonly viewed as incomplete or insufficient.

Consequently, Polish parents and experts frequently question the competence of Barnevernet staff with regard to their age and level of training. Many Barnevernet caseworkers are perceived as young and relatively inexperienced, often holding only a three-year degree—a qualification considered insufficient by Polish respondents.

Polish participants—including both parents and experts—emphasize that while their observations are based on personal experiences and not meant to generalize to all Barnevernet staff, they commonly view Barnevernet employees as lacking sufficient qualifications. Additionally, the fact that many Barnevernet workers appear to be unmarried and childless reinforces this perception, as Polish parents often interpret this as a barrier to fully understanding the realities and complexities of parenting. As one respondent put it: "They're psychologists or pedagogy specialists—often very young people, straight out of college, out of touch with reality, with no children of their own, no experience." (P10, 188–189)

Some respondents argue that Barnevernet staff should receive better training to communicate more effectively—particularly in ways that foster trust and openness. One respondent explained:

> They should be trained to deal with these situations, to express themselves properly, to lead the conversation in such a way so as to make the other party show their true intentions, and not just picking a side and sticking to

> it. That's what it seems to me, but I don't know, maybe I was unlucky and happened across the wrong people. (P12, 94)

Others described the Barnevernet system itself as flawed, with one respondent commenting:

> As for their system, they have a very bad system. I'm not saying all of them. Like I said. Maybe I'm repeating myself a bit. We met the wrong people. But I suspect there's a lot of them here. If they only do a three-year course, and that's all. (P2, 173–175)

In another exchange, a respondent remarked on their experience with young Barnevernet employees:

> I chanced upon these very nice ladies, very direct, very… but well, they were quite young and you could see they had no children of their own, so them talking to a mother was without knowing what really… From what I hear, most people working for the Barnevernet are single, so that's generally talking about things they've never experienced and have no idea about. (P8, 24)

This perception was echoed by another parent who had anticipated a more formal and professional encounter with Barnevernet, but was surprised by the workers' youth and casual demeanor:

> The women who worked on our case were both a chit of a girl, so to speak. Very young and with this casual approach. My vision of that institution was a little different. I thought it was a serious institution, and here were these... well, all casual. They were 22, 23 years old, no more. (P13)

Additionally, some experts suggest that despite recent education reforms, it is difficult to address the stigma surrounding Barnevernet work, which discourages many qualified candidates from entering the field:

> That job is so socially stigmatized that people don't want to work there .... People work there who could not get anything else. ... and from my experience of my city, no one wants to work there. There was a shortage this year, it doesn't happen often that there's a shortage of candidates for

> a public university course in Norway. There was a big shortage of candidates for the Barnevernet major, which means that no one wants to... that this profession is socially ostracized and people don't want to study that. (E5, 93–93)

Due to the negative public perception, the university track for Barnevernet professionals is rarely students' first choice, which further risks a decline in the academic quality of the program itself. Legal controversies such as cases brought against Barnevernet at the European Court of Human Rights, add to this stigma. Experts point to several high-profile cases against Barnevernet—some of which Norway has lost. One expert explains: "There were, what, three Norwegian cases lately that were denounced by the Court, one of which was a case of a Polish woman, and I can find that easily because that was just a few months back .... I think there's some 106 cases that are being re-heard because of the Hague tribunal (E4). Another adds: "The European Court of Human Rights—I think that's the name—there are about 30 cases against the Norwegian Barnevernet. I looked it up once before, and it was already up to 40" (E5, 18). The perception that Barnevernet staff are young and inexperienced adds to Polish families' concerns about the institution's overall competence. This impacts their trust in Barnevernet's decisions and interventions and heightens their skepticism toward the decisions made on behalf of their families.

The fundamental issues with staff qualifications suggest that while developing cultural competence is clearly necessary to resolve tensions between Polish families and Barnevernet, it may not be realistic under current conditions. The stigma surrounding Barnevernet not only discourages strong candidates from applying, but also makes it harder to attract professionals with the expertise needed to build trust and improve communication.

Cultural Competence Challenges

Both Polish and Norwegian experts agree that there are systemic issues within Barnevernet that hinder cultural competence and make it difficult for the agency to effectively meet the needs of immigrant

families. The limited qualifications of Barnevernet staff also contribute to the perception that the agency lacks cultural awareness. According to a Polish expert, the involvement of Polish families with Barnevernet may, at times, be influenced by negative stereotypes about Polish people that persist in Norwegian society. These stereotypes often relate to issues such as absenteeism at work, alcohol use, and criminal behavior. The expert noted that such generalizations may indirectly influence how Polish families are treated:

> Naturally, a Norwegian will not say that, they don't even think badly of people, but it certainly does influence the job market chances. A Polish name will lower your chance of being employed. This is surely related to, like I said, crime statistics, or industrial accident statistics, drinking at work. (E5, 117)

Polish respondents also observed that Barnevernet's culturally uniform approach creates a disconnect with non-Norwegian families. They argue that Barnevernet's methods lack cultural flexibility and tend to treat all families as if they were Norwegian and fully familiar with Norwegian norms and expectations. One Polish expert remarked: "Barnevernet doesn't take that [cultural differences] into account at all. ... They have the same expectations for Poles as they do for Norwegians. That's the thing." (E9) This reflects the belief that Barnevernet's procedures don't accommodate families who may not be familiar with Norwegian child-rearing standards.

A Norwegian expert—a psychologist working at a government institution (EN2), argued that Barnevernet lacks diversity due to systemic discrimination and the preferential treatment of Norwegian candidates in Barnevernet hiring practices. As a result, the agency misses out on perspectives that could improve its service to immigrant communities. The expert said that hiring more Polish, Indian, and Turkish professionals could help broaden how Barnevernet interprets the behavior of children and parents:

> And Norwegian Barnevernet system has very few minority workers. We need these institutions…to become multicultural, multiethnic. We need more Polish people within Barnevernet, we need more Indian, we need more

> Turkish. Because then they can bring more different kinds of interpretations to how behaviors of … children and parents can be understood… Structural discrimination [affects] the Polish population in Norway; they are mostly from working-class communities, yeah?... They've been recruited as migrant workers, you know, often in jobs that are not secure. … A whole lot of minority people with a minority background are very well educated and can do a very good job in all these institutions. But somehow, we are very few. Even today. (EN2)

One Polish parent shared an opinion similar to that of EN2, expressing the belief that if more Polish staff were employed within Barnevernet, Polish families would feel more culturally and linguistically understood. This, in turn, might reduce the tendency of Polish families to flee back to Poland when contacted by Barnevernet. The parent observed, "The people I know—they often say, well, be it my hairdresser or just an acquaintance, many of them were at the point where they packed up and were ready to flee through the window, so to speak, any way they can." (E4)

Another issue identified by a Norwegian expert is the scarcity of minority foster families in Norway, despite evidence that children benefit from placements with foster families who share their cultural background. EN2 remarks on the lack of targeted recruitment campaigns for minority foster families, unlike in some other countries where such initiatives have been successful. The expert noted, "There are a lot of [minority families] who want to do this and would love children and who will get very good care of these children and they grow up in a culture context which they are used to and know very well." EN2 noted that fostering programs should prioritize cultural alignment between biological and foster families, as research indicates that children fare better when raised in culturally familiar environments.

The expert also mentioned that some foster families within Barnevernet are of Polish descent, which may offer more comfort to Polish families concerned about cultural disconnection. In one case, a child who was initially placed with a Norwegian family was later moved to a Polish foster family, which proved to be a better fit:

> It was like... she was looking around among friends for someone to take care of the child… and for those first six weeks her son was with... a Norwegian family, but that didn't work at all. So she found this Polish family... Since Christmas that Polish family has had this child with them. No problems. (P10, 142–150)

Some local branches of Barnevernet acknowledge gaps in their cultural competence. One Polish expert, employed at a municipal agency overseeing a local Barnevernet office, said that the branch expressed interest in collaborating with Polish academic institutions to address these deficiencies:

> She asked immediately if you'd like to cooperate with our commune, come and see, and whether you'd like us to cooperate, our Barnevernet supervisor and the university, or you directly. She took it great. And why? She took it great because our Barnevernet work has very little cases of contact with multilingual children, while our commune has a huge percentage of multicultural or multilingual children, but there's very few people in our Barnevernet with the education or the experience or any kind of theoretical basis for cross-cultural communication or psychology. We're doing very badly with that. And my boss, I think she knows about this stuff, and she's aware that we're not up to snuff with that and she'd like to know how can the Barnevernet work with the multilingual children or those from other cultures, how can the Barnevernet workers, the staff who handle their cases and talk to these people, how can they talk or try to understand the different cultural basis for raising a child, right? … Yes, she's very open and very interested, especially if it's grounded in theory and in academic work … That's very interesting, professor, because like I said, if your team is open to cooperation then I think it would be great. (E4, 3)

This willingness shows an awareness within parts of Barnevernet that enhanced theoretical and practical training is needed to better serve Norway's increasingly diverse population. However, as one Norwegian expert notes, many Polish families remain reluctant to become foster parents due to fears of being ostracized by their community for "collaborating" with Barnevernet, which many perceive as an adversarial institution.

> I meet a lot of people who are willing to become foster parents, but it's difficult within their own group to raise their hand and say I would like to become a foster parent because they are looked upon by some people as collaborators with Child Protection Services, you know, they are people who want to profit from Norwegian… They are working with the enemy. (EN1)

Employing workers from the same ethnic background as the families they serve can also be problematic. Families may expect special treatment or leniency from someone who shares their background, which can create a conflict for Barnevernet employees balancing institutional standards and community expectations. These pressures often force minority members to choose between their role in the community and their professional tasks. Combined with the emotional strain of Barnevernet work, this tension has led some minority workers to leave the agency and seek another job. One Polish Barnevernet worker shared that she resigned after receiving death threats:

> B: She got death threats and other such unpleasant situations.
>
> A: You mean from the families?
>
> B: From the families, yes. And that's draining, because they must make those decisions, often unpopular decisions. It's difficult work ... It's very draining work, because they have this great responsibility, and like I said my friend had to leave work for the Barnevernet and started working as a pedagogy specialist because the mental strain was too big. (E1, 108–110)

EN1 also criticizes the strategy of closing cultural gaps simply by hiring staff from minority backgrounds, calling it inconsistent and problematic. While candidates from migrant backgrounds unrealistic expectations, may bring valuable perspectives, relying on them to universally bridge cultural differences is unrealistic and can lead to tokenism. As EN1 observes:

> When we want people to apply for jobs here we specify that we want diversity when it comes to background. So in a way if you have a migrant background, you are more likely to get a job here because you have some insight that others won't have. At the same time… it can kind of again be that pillow to rest on for like my managers 'oh check we have someone

> within Albanian background now we can deal with that' you know, but she is one Albanian, she cannot speak for every abandoned family entering our... Again that's cultural sensitivity that you know, you can't just think that okay, so we have Margaret working now we can say check we know how to deal with intercultural cases. You need to be cultural sensitive in every meeting you have with families both Norwegians and others and it's very often not a good idea to just think that you can match sort of background with background. (EN1)

The expert adds that what is truly needed is cultural sensitivity:

> What you really need is cultural sensitivity. You have to learn about how to be sensitive to others I see a lot of people who they can go to school for as many years as possible, but they will never be well equipped. I think it has to do with kind of your set of values and your attitude. I think the most important skill you need in this job is to be able to provide people in need, people in a crisis, to provide them with a safe meeting. To provide them with a feeling of being comfortable enough to tell their story. To build trust. (EN1, 122)

It is equally important to remember that ethnocentrism can go both ways. According to Polish experts, many Polish migrants in Norway come from backgrounds with relatively low cultural capital, often from small towns, and may carry biases—particularly toward other ethnicities and religions. Negative or condescending views of other social groups, including Norwegians, are common. In some circles, Norwegians are even derogatorily referred to as *Norki*.* These views extend to institutions like Barnevernet. Many Poles exhibit strong ethnocentrism when interacting with Norwegian culture, often preferring separation as a coping strategy, particularly among blue-collar workers. These individuals frequently limit their lives to work and socializing within Polish circles, show little interest in learning Norwegian, and may regard Norwegian society as inferior.

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* "The term "norek" (singular; norki—plural) originates from the word "Norwegian." ... Calling a Norwegian a "norek" is akin to calling a Pole a "polaczek," implying disdain or contempt. A typical "norek" is often an employer—one who delays payments, exploits workers, and only looks out for their own interests. Of course, not everyone uses this terminology, but dismissive remarks like "those stupid norek" are heard quite often (Filaber, 2014).

In summary, the contrasting cultural and legal frameworks of Poland and Norway significantly shape how Polish families perceive Barnevernet. The Polish foster care system places a strong emphasis on family preservation, which differs markedly from Norway's child-centered approach. In Poland, the role of the biological family is prioritized, and prevailing cultural narratives surrounding child welfare tend to view children as extensions of their parents' rights. As a result, interventions like foster care placement or the removal of children from their biological families are seen as last resorts. Polish policies typically favor placing children with relatives—such as grandparents or siblings—and the system often works toward family reunification, even in cases where family conditions are less than ideal.

This perspective—influenced in part by inefficiencies in the Polish child welfare system feeds into how Polish families in Norway interpret Barnevernet's interventions, which they often view with suspicion. One practice that particularly alarms Polish parents is the ability of Barnevernet workers to interview children at school without the parents' knowledge or presence. In Polish culture, children rarely make decisions about family matters independently, especially not without a guardian present. Polish parents are accustomed to maintaining close oversight of their children's interactions with outside institutions, so Barnevernet's practice of speaking with children without informing parents feels like a violation of family norms.

This stands in stark contrast to Polish expectations. In Polish culture, children, especially in matters involving family welfare—are not typically asked to speak or decide without a guardian present. For example, although Polish law allows teenagers to legally consent to sexual activity at age 15, the same adolescents cannot visit a gynecologist or seek contraception without parental consent. In Norway, however, children are granted far more autonomy in their dealings with institutions, which can be unsettling for Polish families who are used to a more hands-on parental role. This cultural disconnect intensifies their discomfort with Barnevernet's practices, especially when children are encouraged to express their views independently of their parents.

Norway's approach, by contrast, prioritizes the child's personal safety and well-being, even if that comes at the expense of parental involvement. For instance, in suspected cases of domestic violence or abuse, Barnevernet may interview a child without informing the parents. Whereas this is intended as a protective measure, Polish families often see it as invasive and undermining parental authority. Similarly, in Norway schools may provide children with education on sexual abuse prevention without notifying parents to ensure that children receive crucial information even if their parents might object or attempt to prevent it. This child-centered model, designed to protect children from violence and abuse, is often at odds with the Polish model that focuses on family cohesion and parental authority.

This cultural divide between Poland and Norway, along with the legal frameworks governing child protection in each country, leads Polish families to interpret Barnevernet's interventions as anti-family rather than child-protective. For many, Barnevernet's actions feel like an affront to deeply held cultural values centered on family unity and parental rights. The perceived secrecy and the autonomy granted to children in Norwegian child protection practices further exacerbate these fears and reinforce the belief that Barnevernet's interventions are arbitrary or even harmful to family life.

Ultimately, the cultural and legal differences between Norway and Poland condition how Polish families perceive Barnevernet. Poland's family-oriented foster care system clashes with Norway's child-centered approach, contributing to a perception among Polish families that Barnevernet's actions undermine family values. This clash of values—exacerbated by a perceived lack of cultural competence within Barnevernet illustrates how essential cultural context is in interpreting Barnevernet's interventions. What is intended in Norway as a protective measure may be seen as violations of family rights by Polish parents.

Cultural Missteps and Systemic Shortcomings: Barnevernet's Approach to Family Support

One of the key aspects of assistance available to families in Norway is educational support, primarily provided through parenting courses designed to enhance parental skills. This responsibility falls under the jurisdiction of Barnevernet. The most prominent of these courses is the International Child Development Programme (ICDP), developed at the University of Oslo in the 1990s. According to the program's official description:

> Based on recent research in child development, the ICDP psychosocial intervention programme aims to enhance and enrich the relationship between caregivers and their children. The ICDP programme is designed to identify and reactivate local cultural practices, in order to stimulate development that is authentic, sustainable and long lasting. The task of ICDP training is to sensitise, build competence and confidence in members of a community or an existing child caring system, so as to withdraw after some time and transfer the project to the local resource persons. (ICDP, 2024)

This approach affirms the program's priority of supporting parenting practices that are culturally responsive and built for long-term sustainability. Experts describe such support as an integral part of the Norwegian system. As one expert remarked, "Of course there's educational help, too." (E7, 17). They point to the wide range of resources available to parents, tailored to address common parenting challenges: "There are all sorts of courses available, including classes for parents, aimed at helping them deal with stress or manage their emotions." (E4, 18–18). Some parents also acknowledge the intention behind these courses, which are designed to improve parenting practices and provide guidance: "They wanted to teach us how to function at home, how to be better parents, how to deal with the children." (P2, 73–75).

While some parents recognize the potential benefits of these courses—especially when they are described as non-judgmental and easily accessible—others remain hesitant to participate. This reluctance

often stems from discomfort with being referred to a course or fear of being labeled as inadequate. Some view the courses with mixed feelings, seeing them as both potentially helpful and intrusive or stigmatizing, particularly when recommended in response to perceived parenting struggles:

> If someone sees me struggling as a mother, for instance, if my child is yelling, they might decide I need help. They can report me, and I might be directed to attend a mandatory parenting course. Such courses are offered, even by the kindergarten staff. My children often test my limits—they don't behave the same way with my husband—but I think many mothers experience that. The staff noticed this and suggested I could attend a parenting course if I wanted. Apparently, many parents, especially younger ones or those having children later in life, take advantage of these courses without any stigma. It's considered normal. The courses are free, organized by the municipality, and focus on things like getting children to listen or setting boundaries. They can be useful. I didn't attend, but we have friends in Oslo who did, and they were satisfied. (P13, 40–40)

Experts, on the other hand, tend to discuss these programs in a neutral way, highlighting their availability without expressing particular expectations or judgments. However, a significant issue arises from the fact that parenting courses organized by Barnevernet for families involved in ongoing cases are rarely attended by Norwegian parents. Many parents interpret this as evidence that Barnevernet treats them as second-class parents while favoring Norwegian families, which fuels considerable controversy. As a result, the original goal of promoting culturally embedded parenting practices is often undermined.

This disparity is exacerbated by a fundamental cultural difference in views on child-rearing. Norway's mainstream approach emphasizes respect for children, open dialogue, and a balance between personal boundaries and respect for others. In Poland, however, these principles remain relatively niche, largely associated with alternative parenting movements such as Nonviolent Communication or Attachment Parenting. Consequently, reports of Barnevernet removing children from their biological families to ensure physical safety—while

seemingly neglecting their emotional well-being—can be particularly bewildering and distressing for Polish parents.

In Polish culture, parenting courses are generally attended by parents who are already conscious of the importance of developing their parenting skills and are actively seeking to support their child's development. Participation in such programs often requires parents to first acknowledge that they may not inherently know everything about parenting and that psychological or pedagogical guidance could be beneficial—a step not all parents are willing to take. Polish teachers observe a similar pattern: when schools organize parenting workshops, attendees are typically already engaged and cooperative parents, whereas those who might benefit the most often fail to recognize the need or avoid participation altogether.

Barnevernet also supports families through other educational initiatives, such as assigning a school assistant. This person helps the child at school or kindergarten and acts as a liaison between the parents and support institutions. In some cases, the relationship with the assistant has gone beyond the formal arrangement, leaving a lasting positive impression of Barnevernet's involvement:

> But really, without the help we had from the Barnevernet, I don't think we'd be at the point we are now, with my son. He got the assistant thanks to the Barnevernet. I'm in touch with that woman till this day, a very professional woman, actually both of them. She said she can't really take us on as a Barnevernet worker, because we've finished our case and she has no grounds and so she has to end it, right? But, privately, she said, I have her number and she had mine and she says, "Iwona," she says, "if anything happens, call me." (P7, 93–39)

The positive impact of such assistance is further emphasized in accounts of successful outcomes for children:

> I don't wish that on anyone, but like I said, I can't say anything against the Barnevernet. They really helped me, helped me with an assistant for Krzyś in the kindergarten, because they were dragging their feet. And later in school, too, a lot. (P7, 59–59)

However, there were also instances where Barnevernet failed to follow through on promised support or denied assistance even when it was explicitly requested, leading to frustration among families. This was particularly evident in the case of a child on the autism spectrum: "I said, whether I want some, I said, assistant or something, but they said no because the child would have to be broken up or mentally ill." (P4, 117–125)

The lack of adequate support in such cases placed considerable strain on families, as illustrated in another account:

> The whole school practically admitted they are not a competent institution for our Adrian. Because they don't know how to deal with him. And Arek [husband] said "And why did you do it, Anna [teacher], you grabbed my child's face, you squeezed his cheeks like this, with your hand?" "But not hard." ... right. When I think of it, really, for me it was, I cried so much, we went home then, when we took him away. (P4, 107–107)

These contrasting experiences reveal the dual nature of Barnevernet's role: while their interventions and support can lead to transformative outcomes for some families, failure to provide appropriate assistance in other cases can intensify difficulties and leave parents feeling abandoned. In some instances, the support provided by Barnevernet fails to align with the actual needs of children or their families, causing frustration and disappointment. Unfulfilled promises, in particular, can erode trust, as one parent recalled:

> Barnevernet promised to pay for skis and skiing clothes for the children, but they did not. They said there was language barrier, that the children can't speak Norwegian, and neither can we, just a bit of English, and when I asked them to at least pay for a language course, they said they have no money, so they've been lying all along. (P14, 54–55)

Criticism also extends to the living conditions provided by Barnevernet in some cases, which parents perceive as contradictory to the standards expected of them as immigrants:

> Norway expects the immigrants to provide great conditions for their children, so and so many square meters living space per child in a room. So

> why do they take the children to those centers where in a 10 square meter room were four people, shared kitchen and bathroom? (P14, 9–9)

Additionally, both Polish experts and parents have observed that Barnevernet struggles to effectively handle cases involving teenagers, particularly those exhibiting problematic behavior. One parent recounted the following incident:

> She didn't go to school, and even the Barnevernet... that was why the Barnevernet got interested, that the parents couldn't cope, that she played truant etc. And the Barnevernet couldn't cope with her either. The mother knew where that daughter was, that she was in some Arab house. She even gave them the address, because she had that in her phone, the location, the address, all that. The police went there and all. But they couldn't take her away because they couldn't get into that flat. And they left her there, in that Arab house. Because it was over in Oslo. And, well... and they go after the parents! (P4, 305–305)

This frustration surfaces again in other comments on Barnevernet's limitations in responding to teenage behavioral issues: "And, overall, they can't, you know, react, do something, with the child [teenager]. From the upbringing point of view." (P4, 310–311) One method that Barnevernet uses to support teenagers is providing social housing and a living allowance. Experts note that some teens use this option to leave home by reporting to their school that their living conditions are unsuitable for studying. The school then informs Barnevernet, which steps in to intervene.

These accounts reveal the gaps in Barnevernet's interventions—particularly when dealing with specific needs such as language barriers, housing standards, and the complexities of teenage behavior. While the assistance can be beneficial in certain cases, these shortcomings highlight systemic challenges in responding effectively to diverse family dynamics. In some cases, Barnevernet's support not only fails to meet the actual needs of children or parents but also results in unintended consequences. This is especially apparent in interventions involving teenagers:

> It was a child of seventeen applying. So that was a last-minute thing, really. It was that family who has been in Norway for 20 years. Interestingly enough, that family came apart, after that child went voluntarily to a foster family. Or to a foster home where it was on its own. (E5, 86–86)

Teenagers, in particular, appear to benefit from financial and housing assistance, although this support has drawn criticism:

> They [teenagers] got help. Even financial help. Sometimes that's a lot of money. They certainly get a flat and some minimal income to live on. That's supposed to be 6000 crowns per month, but in practice, I know it can be much more. (E5, 88–88)

Experts have noted that such provisions can lead to exploitation of the system:

> Every social care system can be exploited, so naturally among those people, and especially the Norwegian youths, they often just naturally pass on to independence, sacrificing their relationship with their parents, right? (E5, 88–88)

Polish experts were particularly critical of this form of support as enabling teenagers to manipulate the system for personal gain, often at the expense of their relationships with family.

It is also important to recognize that some children require complex diagnostic assessments or psychological and psychiatric interventions. The increasing prevalence of neurodivergence among children further complicates the situation. Behavioral issues in children are not always indicative of parental incompetence—just as the lack of improvement following Barnevernet's involvement does not automatically imply institutional failure. Some cases may simply require long-term, individualized interventions to achieve meaningful progress.

Parents expressed strong criticism of the medical and psychological services available, especially when their requests for help were ignored or when the support provided was considered inadequate. One mother described her frustrations with BUP, a government-run child psychology center:

> And she took therapy, here in Norway, in a BUP. It's a psychology center, right? If a child has problems it goes there, right? So we went there. She was, it was like this. We said she had anorexia, that we read up on it. They gave her a therapist. That therapist gave her some paper sheets and went out. She was alone there, during therapy. So, you know, during those three months of therapy she was supposedly getting help, but she kept on losing weight, till she got to those 38 kg. (P2, 27–27)

Despite the mother's efforts to secure a proper medical evaluation for her daughter, such as requesting a heart ultrasound, the system remained unresponsive:

> I asked them to do an ultrasound on her heart. They didn't want to. I went to the hospital, I begged them. I also had a psychotherapist opinion saying it was indicated, right? They didn't. I started fighting that whole BUP thing because I learned a lot about anorexia, we had therapy in Poland. (P2, 35–35)

Distrust toward BUP was further intensified by what parents perceived as dishonesty and a lack of transparency: "And I object the most to that BUP. Liars and cheats, they write what they feel like writing. And if you ask to see any papers they wriggle out of it with excuses." (P2, 51–51) Parents cited specific incidents where they believed BUP's mishandling of their child's case had serious consequences:

> On the other hand this whole BUP, it's a government institution, too, they shot themselves in the foot. Oh, and there was this moment, I remember, when my daughter ran away from them. She went to therapy and ran away. She called my husband. He dropped his work, she called him in tears saying she was standing about somewhere, crying, anxious. That's anorexia. She did various things, ran away from home while she was ill. I remember, in Warsaw, she tried to throw herself under a train. She was hitting her own head, you know, the malnourished brain does not function normally. They let her go like this, left her like this. That was a big mistake, too. We made that known. We said it, in front of them, of the Barnevernet people, at BUP, we said they left her. They denied it, and my husband said, "I can tell you when the call was, when I called you, or my daughter, when the meeting was, that's when she ran away." The hour and everything. So then they're all "well maybe it was like this." And my husband goes, "No. Not maybe, it was like this. You left an ill girl. You let her

> go from therapy. She ran away. Crying, trembling. And you let her go out into the street." (P2, 177–177)

Other parents shared similar sentiments about the lack of meaningful support, especially for serious conditions such as eating disorders: "And no one helped me [with child's eating disorder] .... They were casual about the whole subject, right. 'Aah, this thing you say, like you were talking about my own children.'" (P4, 62–63)

Even when psychological support was offered, it was sometimes perceived as dismissive or unprofessional:

> A: Did the Barnevernet offer any kind of psychological help for you or for the children?
>
> B: For me, no. I only could, oh, sorry, I could, they did offer me a psychologist. That Sigbrid woman, who, like I said, came in and said I did it and that's that.
>
> A: The one who worked at the mental hospital?
>
> B: Yes, but she worked at the Barnevernet. She was a psychologist there. Only, I said, about her competence, she was the one who dragged all that in, I remember, so that's why I mentioned her working at the nuthouse and all that. Because I wanted to, I mean, I was really indignant about her treatment of me and I said I don't think she's qualified for the job, so then she brought all her diplomas in.
>
> A: Ah. And that's how you know.
>
> B: Yes, exactly. My attorney and I, we, well, it was funny.
>
> A: Tell me about this.
>
> B: I mean, when she, when I told her she's not qualified. (P9, 116–123)

Further concerns were raised about Barnevernet's reluctance to intervene in conflicts involving children at school, often leaving such matters to the school or police—even when additional threats were made:

> The Barnevernet did not intervene when a child was in conflict with other children at school, leaving the matter to the school or the police, even though the parents of the child attacking the Polish child made further threats.

These accounts underline the dissatisfaction that many parents feel regarding the medical and psychological support provided, as well as Barnevernet's overall approach to addressing these issues. The perceived failures in responding to urgent needs, coupled with instances of dismissiveness or incompetence—further strain already fragile relationships between families and the system. The consequences of insufficient intervention by Barnevernet are exemplified in a parent's account of ongoing threats and inaction by authorities:

> That girl's parents made threatening phone calls to me, and nothing could be done about that. The police also said they couldn't do anything. As long as they don't do anything, actually. Until I have physical proof. My child was accompanied home by a teacher, every day, after school, because that girl was a danger. … It was the kind of situation... that he... he was Polish... (P10, 48–50)

This testimony signals a broader criticism of Barnevernet's perceived failure to protect vulnerable children. A widely known lawsuit further illustrates the gravity of these issues, concerns, as well as the long-term consequences of inadequate intervention. Respondents referenced this case as a powerful example of systemic flaws within the institution:

> It's a very publicised case, well-documented and there's many films about it that were shown on NRK, of course, so public television, and it went on for years. … this girl got millions paid for damages, permanent health damage and growing up in those terrible conditions, in her own family. This girl was, I don't know, thirty-five, maybe thirty. As an adult she sues the giant institution that has never had a trial like that and it's… a breakthrough, really a breakthrough. (E4, 34–36)

These accounts reflect the serious consequences of failing to respond to the needs of vulnerable children. The lawsuit—widely regarded as a landmark case—is a powerful indictment of systemic shortcomings and a call for reform within Barnevernet. Barnevernet faces two key challenges in its approach to family support: cultural insensitivity and systemic inefficiencies. While initiatives like parenting courses and school assistants are designed to provide valuable

support, their impact is often diminished by a lack of cultural competence and a disconnect between Barnevernet's methods and the realities of diverse families. This disconnect is particularly pronounced in interactions with immigrant communities—such as Polish families—whose family-oriented values often conflict with Barnevernet's child-centered model, which creates significant tension.

Parents frequently view Barnevernet's interventions as either overly intrusive or insufficient, which is indicative of larger systemic failures to deal with complex family issues and specific needs, such as support for neurodivergent children or adolescents with behavioral challenges. Furthermore, measures like mandatory parenting courses are often perceived as stigmatizing rather than supportive, which erodes trust between families and the institution. Despite these obstacles, there are positive examples—such as the assignment of school assistants—that demonstrate Barnevernet's potential to make a meaningful difference when support is effectively tailored to family needs. However, persistent issues, including broken promises and inadequate responses to critical situations, point to deeper institutional problems. These failures not only alienate families but also underscore the urgent need for structural reform and improved cultural sensitivity within Barnevernet's practices.

Chronosystem: Changes in Norway's Integration Policies Over Time

The Gradual Erosion of Language Support

Over the years, shifts in Norway's immigration and integration policies have profoundly shaped the experiences of Polish immigrants, making clear the importance of considering these experiences in their historical and policy contexts. One significant shift concerns access to Norwegian language courses—a crucial resource for aiding Polish immigrants in integrating into Norwegian society. In the 1980s, when Poles were classified as political refugees, they were eligible for free language instruction. Today, however, only privately run, often costly courses are offered, which creates significant financial

barriers—especially for those in unstable employment situations or families living on a single income.

Polish immigrants often compare their situation to that of other immigrant groups, particularly those from Eastern Asia and Northern Africa, who still receive free language instruction. This perceived discrepancy fuels feelings of inequality and frustration in the Polish community, as one expert notes. The lack of accessible, affordable language education limits opportunities for social integration and deepens divides within Norway's immigrant population:

> The problem is, maybe, that when those hardworking Poles have to pay—I think this is also a barrier, a problem with learning the language, that we have to pay for Norwegian lessons. We don't get it free, right? … I think that, here, well, the ones who work here and pay taxes here, if they got free courses, I think it would benefit the entire society. Maybe more of them could socialize with Norwegians, too … We don't get it free, right? While the people who come for asylum, refugees, they get it for free. So they get more support. (E7, 69–69)

This growing gap has led some Poles to feel marginalized. However, another expert pointed out that while private language courses are costly, they may still be affordable for many:

> But there's a large offer of private courses. And they're not expensive, they are, really—they cost the equivalent of, I don't know, three days' work. So we're not talking about a lot of money. (E5, 133–133)

The situation changed notably after Poland joined the EU, at which point Poles lost access to free language instruction—a benefit that had previously been standard. Currently, free courses are mainly reserved for specific groups, such as asylum seekers or those experiencing long-term unemployment. In contrast, EU citizens—including Poles—must either pay for private language courses or rely on local programs aimed at combating unemployment:

> Poles don't qualify for free courses anymore. They may still get them in some cases, for instance a commune program to combat unemployment and so on, but not just on principle. ... Parents don't get free courses from

> the state. They might if they're chronically unemployed or something. But on principle, there's no free courses for adults. (E5, 131–133)

This policy shift represents more general changes in Norway's approach to immigration and integration. Before Poland joined the EU, Polish immigrants were eligible for free language instruction as part of the pathway to permanent residency. Now, under EU regulations, Poles have the right to reside in Norway without meeting language requirements, which makes access to language courses a privilege rather than a necessity. One expert explained how these changes in immigration law have affected Polish immigrants' access to essential resources:

> Norway decided that—this was before we were part of the EU—that if Poles need... I mean, citizens, if they need a language course to stay here for good, then the courses will be offered for free. Particularly to keep families together, and for the asylum-seekers, like I said. (E5, 129–129)

In the 1990s, as migration patterns evolved, many Poles—particularly women—migrated to Norway through marriage to Norwegian men, a trend known as "matrimonial migration." This route allowed them to settle in Norway without the language training previously required for residency. After EU accession, language instruction was further deprioritized, shifting from a necessary tool for integration to a costly service often beyond reach:

> Later on, to stay, after the laws were changed to be less restrictive, EU citizens were not obliged to do that course just to get a permit to live. You get a permanent residence permit after five years. And of course, since EU law allows us to live in any country without learning the language, then something that was our duty becomes a privilege. (E5, 129–129)

These historical shifts in language policy have had a far-reaching impact on the integration efforts of Polish immigrants. Without accessible language education, many Poles struggle to fully participate in Norwegian society, which reinforces feelings of isolation and exclusion. Those who arrived in earlier decades had greater access

to integration resources, while more recent immigrants face steeper challenges in learning the language and adapting to Norwegian culture. As a result, evolving immigration and integration policies have created noticeable disparities in how different generations of Polish immigrants experience life in Norway.

Growing Cultural Pluralism: Integration as an Empty Slogan

Norway's evolving approach to integration policies mirrors changes in other areas of Norway's support systems, including child welfare services. Both Polish and Norwegian experts, as well as parents, acknowledge that Barnevernet's competence has improved over the years—though additional adaptations are necessary. This evolution is especially important as current child protection laws must now accommodate Norway's increasingly culturally diverse society, in striking contrast to the more homogeneous social structure of 30 years ago.

A Polish expert notes that Barnevernet's approach has progressed, with fewer unwarranted interventions stemming from cultural misunderstandings: "They weren't very diligent about their job, their thinking and work system was primitive, they've learned a lot by now." (P1, 16–17) Recalling earlier practices, another Polish expert remarks that two decades ago, serious cultural misunderstandings frequently led to misguided decisions with severe consequences for immigrant families:

> Some 20 years ago, there were a lot of misunderstandings when a lot of immigrants started coming to Norway. And they couldn't, the cultural misunderstandings were so serious that the decisions to separate a child from its family were often made in error. (E1, 110–110)

A Norwegian expert supports this view, saying that as Norwegian society has grown more diverse, social workers and child protection services have had to adapt their methods. However, they point out that legislation has often lagged behind these social changes:

> Meaning that when society changes because of the individual within the society then the social worker and the child protection and the services we provide has to follow, you know we have legislation saying this and that is how child protection is, but that society has changed within these 30 years and normally society changes and then legislation follows. (EN, 110, 124–124)

Reflecting on previous decades, another Norwegian expert notes that conversations around multiculturalism were more common—and approached with greater openness—during the 1980s and 1990s, especially in education policy. At that time, there was stronger support for teaching minority children in their mother tongues. Today, however, the discourse has shifted toward "integration"—a term that is often loosely defined and, in practice, frequently used interchangeably with assimilation.

True integration, as the expert suggests, should entail incorporating individuals into social institutions and communities without requiring them to abandon their cultural identities. In Norway, however, integration is often narrowly interpreted as language acquisition:

> B: Multiculturalism has been discussed, it was in the 80s. and 90s. There was a greater understanding of multiculturalism let's say in schools. But in the 90s and since the 90s there is less emphasis on children learning their mother tongues, people like me have been stressing that multiculturalism, multilingualism, are a great benefit to society but here this is more about integration, right. Integration is a concept which a lot of people talk about, but it is not very defined.
>
> A: Is that really integration or assimilation...
>
> B: It is assimilation. Because it's mostly [?] culture. I mean if you want to integrate people then you should integrate them into work life as well, integrate them into all institutions in society. Why just change their cultures? So I would a more conception what integration is all about. I'm not going to even argue it's not culture change, culture change doesn't lead to integration. Integration leads to culture change. Here in Norway they don't see it that way they think that integration is basically language shift and cultural shift, yeah? As soon as you start speaking Norwegian then you you integrated. Which is not very true ... I was working at the National Center

> for Multicultural Education before I retired. And this National Centre was established because in 2004 it become very clear that minority children were doing poorly in all levels of schooling from kindergarten to University... so, yeah, they not getting as much having equal access to education (confusing this concept is Norwegian) because they understand less of what is important of education. (EN2)

The laws governing Barnevernet are now more than 30 years old and were developed in a very different social and cultural context. Norwegian experts stress that these laws must be adapted to the current cultural landscape to meet the needs of today's increasingly diverse society.

A Possible Shift Towards Family Preservation?

Recent legal changes are beginning to influence Barnevernet's practices, pushing the organization into "new territory" as it adapts to updated mandates in the field of child protection. As one Norwegian expert explained:

> A few years ago, there was a change in Norwegian legislation so we were able to use sort of help by force in a few cases. It's not something that we administer by ourselves, because there's a court, a specific court for family cases called the County Board. The rights on having information and their rights in seeing the child and how they can proceed to claim those rights basically. But I would have played this is quite new for us. So we have had a few cases kind of the minute after the 30 was ratified. So we had to learn that then. So we've done it a few times, but we get quite a few calls from other municipalities other child protection services asking how should we do this? How did you do it because it's kind of new territory in Norway. (EN1)

Both Polish parents and Norwegian experts have observed considerable changes in child protection laws, with Norwegian experts noting a move toward a more family-centered approach—one that prioritizes placing children within their extended families. This strategy enables children to maintain ties with their grandparents, cultural heritage, and native language, thereby mitigating the sense of loss that can accompany separation.

One Norwegian expert highlighted these legal developments in child protection laws and children's rights. They explained that the system has gradually shifted from a narrow focus on protection through removal to placing greater importance on what is genuinely in the child's best interests. They commented on how, in the early 1990s, prevailing attitudes often favored placing children in Norwegian foster homes over kinship care, due to concerns about family circumstances. That view, however, has evolved, particularly under the influence of international conventions on children's rights, as the expert noted:

> But there was no understanding, this was in the early 90s. Even in the supreme court, the supreme court basically told to psychologist who have other opinion they want the child to be, to grow up in the Norwegian foster home and the reason was if the child is given to the sister then there will be too close relationship, the sister will not be able to keep the mother out. Now there is greater understanding that we should at least, and that was on the positive things that National Convention of 1989. Which also the European Human Rights Commission has a greater understanding for, and that is the right of the family, the right of the child to live with the family and the culture. Basically all international conventions on the child... on protecting the child... prior to 1989 were speaking about protecting the child... yeah... the convention from 89' talks about what is best for the child considered, because there is no... nothing known as universal rights over here, it's all based on cultural differences. The children law was changed in 2010, any kind of corporal punishment of the child was totally forbidden. This is in 2010, and basically there are still only 35 countries in the world that have this kind of the law Sweden was the first country which in 1974 introduced the law that it was forbidden to punish the child one generation that grown up without being punished would never, never accept punishing their own children because they haven't experienced it by themselves. (EN2)

A Polish respondent referenced a more recent law requiring Barnevernet to prioritize placing children with close relatives in their home country, in line with the growing shift toward family preservation. However, they also expressed skepticism about the law's actual implementation, suggesting that, although it was formally passed, it may not be effectively enforced:

> I mean, a law has been passed, I read about it some two, three years ago, that when a child is taken away, the Barnevernet must find it the closest family in the country they live in. In Poland, I mean ... But I haven't heard of them actually observing that law. So I don't know how alive, so to speak, that law is, it may be dead. But there is such a law, it was passed. (P8, 287–293)

Interviews with kindergarten staff suggest a cautious shift within Barnevernet toward fewer child removals. This may be due in part to financial considerations, but also to an evolving institutional focus on supporting families. The fact that many kindergarten staff have limited direct experience with removals may point to a growing preference for alternative solutions that keep children within their existing environments, which is an encouraging sign of gradual reform in Barnevernet's approach to family preservation.

However, some staff also noted recent criticism from local communities, accusing Barnevernet of not acting quickly enough in situations where there were concerns about a child's welfare. This shows the ongoing tension between preserving family unity and ensuring timely protective interventions. Insights from both Polish parents and Polish and Norwegian experts underscore the need for ongoing reform within Barnevernet to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse society. They stress that genuine integration should involve inclusive participation in society—not merely acquiring the language or conforming to dominant cultural norms.

Two important factors should be taken into consideration in this context: (1) proper planning and (2) ongoing reassessment—both of which are needed at multiple levels: starting from the global aspects of the chronosystem and ending with considerations to specific micro-system applications. BUFDIR (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs) explicitly addresses this need in a document created specifically for Child Protection Services, first released on March 30, 2022, and updated most recently on November 1, 2024 (see: Bufdir, 2024).

The following excerpt (Section 34.3) illustrates how clearly the institution emphasizes and recommends this process:

> After a decision on an emergency [intervention—added by Authors], the social welfare service must prepare a plan for further investigations, determine the child's care situation and provide for the follow-up of the child and his/her parents. The plan must be amended if the child's needs require it. This is provided for in the Child Protection Act, Article 8–2, paragraph 3 ... The plan will be an important tool for systematic work involving the conduct of investigations, the assessment of the need for other measures, the assessment of access and contact with parents and other close persons, and the daily monitoring of the child. In order to be able to properly assess whether the decision to apply emergency measures should be annulled or replaced by other measures, the social welfare service must base its assessment on investigations, and for this purpose there should be a plan. This plan can be important in ensuring that appropriate measures are taken for the child after emergency placement. In the case of emergency placements, where the decision to place a child in a care facility is made quickly and suddenly, there is a particularly great need for predictability for those affected by the decision. A plan can provide greater predictability for both the child and the parents. The social welfare service should, where possible, prepare the plan in cooperation with the child and the parents, cf. Child Protection Act, Article 1–9. The specific content and scope of the plan should be assessed in detail, taking into account the circumstances of the individual case." (Prop. 133 L (2020–2021) item 14.4.5.)

This excerpt demonstrates that proper planning and regular reassessment of both the child's and the family's situation should be an integral part of best practices within the child protection systems—both in Norway and in Poland.

Discussion

The concept of the acculturation process provides a valuable theoretical framework for interpreting these findings. The literature on this topic identifies two primary approaches to understanding acculturation: one focuses on explaining the universal principles that govern the process, while the other seeks to explore why the process unfolds as it does in specific groups and contexts.

The first approach—explaining general principles—is typically pursued through quantitative research, often involving hypothesis testing using surveys administered to large groups of migrants. In contrast, the second approach—understanding particular cases—relies on ecologically contextualized research, in which data is drawn from individuals and interpreted in a wider context of cultural similarities and differences (Chirkov, 2009). While this contextual method does not entirely rule out the potential for generalizations, achieving a broad perspective requires the gradual accumulation of numerous individual narratives.

Guided by the latter approach, this study seeks to examine the cultural dynamics that emerge where two cultures meet. It is important to acknowledge that both Polish economic migrants and Norwegian society actively participate in the acculturation process, which results in changes on both sides. However, host societies often operate under the mistaken assumption—implicit in many theories of acculturation developed by intercultural psychologists—that this process is unidirectional, with cultural change occurring only within the migrant community while the receiving society remains unaffected.

Our findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating clear changes in Norwegian society in response to the influx of migrants

over time (Chronosystem). These include revisions to laws governing the Barnevernet (Child Welfare Services), the development of Barnevernet staff competencies within the agency, and expanded eligibility for institutional support for Polish migrants. Nevertheless, acculturation is a demanding process for both sides, requiring each to adjust their preconceived notions to the perspectives of others, especially in sensitive areas of interaction. Importantly, the relationship is not equal, as the receiving society holds the greater decision-making power.

In our analysis, we place special emphasis on the concept of appropriate childcare. We examine how the roles of parents and children are understood by various representatives of the Norwegian state and by Polish families, both deeply embedded in their own cultural frameworks.

A central theme in this discourse is the notion of "the good of the child." Phrases such as "what's most important is what's good for the child," "we all just want what's best for the child," or "a child should have a happy childhood" generally receive broad agreement across cultures, including both Polish and Norwegian. However, while there may be a shared consensus around these overarching ideals, disagreements often arise regarding what is truly "best" for a child or how to define and measure a child's happiness. The universal principle that children deserve care and nurturing manifests differently depending on the cultural context. When the culturally dominant group (often the host society) and a culturally marginalized group (such as migrants) have differing foundational beliefs, these differences frequently lead to tension. Such conflicts are often stem from divergent cultural values that shape both parenting goals and practices.

At this point, the concept of "cultural blindness" warrants consideration. Marcel Epure (2011) defines cultural blindness as "the phenomenon in which a person follows the cultural tradition and values without judging whether it is good or bad… many people …remain insensitive towards cultural differences. They somehow fail to respect differences because they believe that it is the duty of the minority to adapt to the dominant culture and not the other way around."

The *Psychological Dictionary* offers a complementary definition: "Cultural blindness—the incapacity to comprehend how specific

situations may be seen by individuals belonging to another culture due to a strict alignment with the viewpoints, outlooks, and morals of one's own society or culture." (Sam, 2013). Boski (2009) further elaborates on cultural blindness as the inability to recognize the influence of one's own culture on one's thoughts and behavior. This perspective is particularly relevant here, as it highlights the difficulty of acknowledging that, in any intercultural interaction, we bring our own meanings, perspectives, and interpretations into the exchange.

The concept of cultural blindness is also explored in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (Hammer et al., 2003), which outlines a progression from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. This model describes a gradual development in how individuals cognitively process cultural differences. The starting point, ethnocentrism, involves viewing one's own worldview as the only valid and central with other behaviors interpreted solely through the lens of one's own culture. The initial phase, denial, reflects an inability or unwillingness to recognize cultural differences, often due to isolation, limited exposure, or intentional separation from other cultural groups. The second phase, defense, involves recognizing cultural differences but perceiving them as threats, which often leads to efforts to assert the superiority of one's own culture over others.* This is followed by minimization, where cultural differences are acknowledged but downplayed, with emphasis placed on presumed universal similarities.

The subsequent phases represent a shift toward an ethnorelativistic perspective, in which cultural differences are understood in their own specific contexts. The first stage of this perspective, acceptance, involves recognizing and respecting the values, behaviors, and worldviews of others, even when they differ significantly from one's own. This is followed by adaptation, in which individuals begin to integrate other cultural perspectives into their own behavior. At this stage, empathy—the ability to understand and take the perspective of others—becomes a key element. The final stage, integration, entails synthesizing multiple worldviews into a broader, coherent whole. Importantly,

* Reversal is also possible.

integration does not imply abandoning one's cultural identity, but rather involves the recognition and coexistence of diverse viewpoints, with personal identity evolving as a result of cross-cultural experiences.

As Hammer et al. explain:

> The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases. According to this constructivist view, experience does not occur simply by being in the vicinity of events when they occur. Rather, experience is a function of how one construes the events (Kelly, 1963). The more perceptual and conceptual discriminations that can be brought to bear on the event, the more complex will be the construction of the event, and thus the richer will be the experience. In the case of intercultural relations, the "event" is that of cultural difference. The extent to which the event of cultural difference will be experienced is a function of how complexly it can be construed. (2003, p. 423)

Our analysis shows that behaviors exhibited by both sides in interactions between Polish migrant families and Barnevernet are situated within the ethnocentric stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Polish participants typically display signs of denial (prior to arriving in Norway) or defense (after confronting cultural differences in Norway), while the Norwegian side tends to exhibit defense or minimization. Neither group appears to have reached the ethnorelativistic stages of the model, nor are they likely to do so without undergoing a structured process of cultural education. Such a process would require not only the transfer of foundational knowledge about each group's values and practices but also the creation of educational space where the complexities of the acculturation process can be unpacked and explored.

Currently, there is no systematic effort in place to help Polish migrants understand the core cultural values of Norwegian society. Katarzyna Karp (2021), drawing on her research under the Polish-Norwegian Transfam project (conducted in collaboration with Jagiellonian University, Agderforskning, NOVA in Oslo, and the International Relations Center in Warsaw), points out the consequences

of this oversight. Without intentional efforts to facilitate intercultural understanding, individuals on both sides tend to interpret behaviors exclusively through the lens of their own cultural values—often assuming those values to be universally correct.

This assumption—that one's own cultural norms are inherently superior—manifests not only in both individual attitudes and institutional practices. When confronted with differing approaches to child-rearing, individuals frequently conclude that their own methods are morally and practically superior and should apply universally. This ethnocentric stance, which is common among both parents and educators, also underpins the structures and operations of many social and political institutions. Furthermore, it extends into research methodologies and theories developed within dominant Western cultural contexts. These frameworks are often applied uncritically to assess individuals from non-dominant cultural groups, such as migrants, thereby reinforcing cultural bias.

The psychologist Muzafer Sherif (1936) warned of the dangers of such attitudes nearly a century ago. In his research on social norms in both the United States and Turkey, Sherif cautioned against imposing the norms of one culture onto another: "When, in his studies, a psychologist or sociologist imposes the norms of his own community-centrism upon the community-centrism of other people, the outcome is an impossible confusion" (Sherif, 1936, p. 16).

This raises the question of whether Sherif's observations—based on interactions between the markedly different cultures of Turkey and the United States—are applicable to the relationship between Norwegian and Polish cultures, which share a broadly defined Western heritage. Our analysis suggests that this presumed cultural proximity—often reinforced by similarities in physical appearance—is misleading. It fosters cultural blindness, reducing the perceived need to understand the underlying frameworks that shape differing practices and values. As a result, the other culture is often dismissed as misguided or inferior.

These value clashes are particularly evident in Barnevernet interventions involving Polish families. Polish migrants—including school-aged children—frequently remain invisible within the system

and receive no targeted support in their acculturation process. This invisibility perpetuates misunderstandings and reinforces ethnocentric attitudes on both sides, leaving significant potential for cultural dialogue and mutual understanding untapped.

Thus, Polish migrants receive no structured support in understanding the fundamental cultural values of Norwegian society. Karp (2021) discusses the consequences of this lack of support:

> When refugees come to Norway, they are led into the new reality step by step. They get assistance learning the language, the culture, adapting to the new environment. Economic migrants get no such aid. There are no free language courses, obligatory courses. There is no immigration programme. No formal introduction to school. Each commune has its own process. ... A Norwegian social worker, asked about Polish children integration, was surprised. He said, "since when is that a problem?" He said we are the same as Norwegians, why would we need integration. ... One could say Polish children are invisible in Norwegian schools. If problems pop up, they are very rarely attributed to a different nationality, even though this may very often be the case ... Most Polish children do not differ in skin or hair colour, which furthers the illusion. If the "immigrant" status is invisible, the integration process will be harder for the child, because everyone around the child will assume it is well adjusted to its reality. While, in truth, the child might struggle with different expectations put on it in school as opposed to home.

Polish parents face similar challenges. They are often left to navigate Norwegian systems independently, relying on their default, parenting practices rooted in Polish cultural norms. These practices, while familiar to them, must now be enacted in a vastly different cultural and institutional context. The cultural blindness and ethnocentrism present in Norwegian society are exacerbated by the physical resemblance between Poles and Norwegians, which conceals meaningful cultural differences regarding parental roles, children's social positions, and the structure of the educational system. As Karp (2021) explains:

> Polish parents do not really know what the Norwegian school is about. Many complain about the low academic level or the lack of grades (some

> of them change their mind after some time). However, in most cases their opinions are only based on how they imagine the Norwegian school to be: no one tells them how the system works, or what is expected of them as parents. And all the while, the differences between the systems are staggering. The Norwegian school aims to help a child develop and gain not encyclopedic knowledge, but such knowledge as is rooted in the child's everyday experience. Whereas in the Polish school, a teacher transmits their knowledge to a child. This is a fundamental difference that influences the way classes are organized and what the children remember. Besides, activities other than actual classes are just as important in Norway as the school itself, and many parents don't know that. Their children don't take part in those, and this sets them apart from their peers, makes making friends harder. (p. 32)

This overview of the goals of the Norwegian educational system reveals its fundamental differences from the Polish model. According to the *Core Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education and Training* (2014), the objectives of basic education in Norway include:

1. Teaching pupils a fundamental set of facts, theories, and practices related to subjects and phenomena relevant to their personal experiences.
2. Developing pupils' ability to apply this knowledge in performing tasks and solving problems.
3. Fostering attitudes necessary for effective and responsible participation in modern society.

The approach to early childhood education in Norway also differs significantly from more academically oriented systems. As described in a widely read Polish newspaper article, a Norwegian pedagogy specialist explained: "learning is not our goal. Children do not learn a second language, maths or reading and writing in kindergarten. They've got time for that when they start school. Now, the goal is to gain social competences and to play" (2012).

In contrast, the Polish Ministry of Education (2014) outlines a more structured and academic schedule for kindergartens:

> A Polish kindergarten should devote one-fifth of its time to children playing indoors under teacher supervision, one-fifth of its time children should spend outdoors (garden, sports field, or park visits with teacher

> supervision), and one-fifth of its time children should spend in educational classes. The rest of the appointed time can be spent however the teacher sees fit (organization, caretaking, etc.).

Another notable distinction between the two systems lies in the child-to-staff ratio and professional responsibilities in kindergartens. In Poland, each group of 25 children is supervised by one teacher and one assistant. In contrast, Norwegian kindergartens maintain significantly lower ratios: one adult per three children (ages 0–3) and one per five children (ages 3–5). Typically, a Norwegian kindergarten group includes four staff members, accommodating a maximum of 12 or 20 children, depending on their age.

One respondent (P6) offered further insight into the Norwegian system:

> I remember once, in the youngest group, there had been one grownup present with four children. And the parents lodged formal complaints that the kindergarten was not safe enough. They get most children at one time around midday, and then sometimes kindergartens get in additional caretakers, they call them *ringevikar*. Students or interns may also be there. There's a hierarchy among those caretakers. Every group must have this *pedagogisk leder*, a person with a degree in pedagogy, who will design and run classes, aside from normally watching the children. You need a master's in kindergarten pedagogy to be that. Apart from the *pedagogisk leder* you also have *pedagogisk medarbeider* and fagarbeider. Aside from that, each child, regardless of age, has a contact person assigned. This person's job is to know exactly how the child is faring in the kindergarten. This information is passed on to the *pedagogisk leder* who informs the parents about this every six months during an individual interview. This is scheduled beforehand, takes about half an hour, with both parents present or just one. The ped led gives them details on the child's development and overall feeling based on this special form, which is divided into subjects. Body mobility, manual dexterity, speech development, social skills development. The kindergarten keeps these files. (P6)

These structural and philosophical differences in both school and kindergarten education reflect broader cultural values that distinguish Norway from Poland. These disparities often lead Polish migrants to

view Norwegian education critically and to perceive the Polish system as superior. One respondent (P8) expressed this sentiment:

> The school does not care about talent development. So they help with the learning if someone doesn't reach that line, but they don't help with any further development. What I have going on with my son now, because he's very gifted with languages and mathematics. And, well, right now I can see he's missing out a lot, because in Poland he'd get much better development, and faster. Here, he reaches their maximum and they don't let him go further. (P8)

Parents often base their expectations of Norwegian education on their own experiences with the Polish system, lacking both information about the Norwegian educational framework and an understanding of the underlying cultural values, such as those influencing parental roles and expectations for children. This knowledge gap frequently results in Polish parents dismissing the Norwegian educational system and its associated childrearing practices as inadequate or inferior.

In the worst-case scenario, this disconnect can lead Norwegian teachers to view Polish parents as uninvolved or incompetent, which can potentially trigger referrals to Barnevernet. These interventions, however, are often viewed by Polish parents as unjustified intrusions by an "inferior" Norwegian system into what they see as a "superior" Polish model of parenting. As one parent (P12) put it: "They're trying to teach us how to raise our children," which captures a widely held belief that Barnevernet's interest in home life amounts to "unlawful spying on our family."

Differences in parenting styles further illustrate these cultural clashes. For instance, Polish mothers often express discomfort with their children spending the entire day outdoors in kindergarten regardless of the weather, or returning home untidy. Norwegian staff, by contrast, may interpret these concerns as parenting errors: interference in the child's autonomy and self-reliance. Polish mothers, on the other hand, view such situations as signs of negligence by the staff.

The educational philosophies of both systems reveal major cultural differences. Norwegian kindergartens and schools emphasize trust in

children's abilities and encourage them to take on challenges and develop autonomy by providing them with time and space to play. Schools often avoid grades and diplomas in the early years, relying instead on mediation to resolve conflicts and even training older students to act as peer mediators. Instruction is focused on class time, with little homework to allow afternoons for outdoor activities, sports, or family time. Yearly competency tests are the main means of evaluating both the student's and the school's performance.

In contrast, the Polish educational system is highly structured, built around strict discipline, frequent testing, academic achievement, and grades. It places a strong focus on memorization of large amounts of material, which contributes to a more stressful learning environment. These pronounced differences expose deeper philosophical divides between the two cultures—especially concerning the issues of children's autonomy, freedom, and overall well—being.

To help bridge these cultural gaps, one Polish expert proposed a practical solution: providing Polish parents with a basic informational guide upon their child's enrollment in a Norwegian kindergarten. This could include key details about Norwegian childrearing expectations, such as the importance of appropriate clothing for outdoor play in all weather conditions, restrictions on sugary baked goods as snacks, and recommended sleep routines. While these may seem like minor matters, they reveal significant differences in cultural norms and expectations between Poland and Norway.

Differences in social roles for both parents and children are also striking—particularly in attitudes toward discipline and systems of reward and punishment. Norwegian society generally rejects corporal punishment, while Polish society tends to be more tolerant of it, with a notable gap between stated beliefs and actual practices. Similarly, alcohol consumption in the presence of children, including during child-centered celebrations like first communions, is socially acceptable in Poland and seen as natural. In Norway, however, such behavior is viewed as inappropriate and may trigger intervention by the Barnevernet.

Another major point of cultural tension involves the role of state institutions in children's lives. Polish parents often have a vastly

different perspective regarding any official institution contacting their children without parental knowledge, consent, or presence. Barnevernet has the legal authority to speak with children—sometimes at school—without informing the parents in advance. Parents are often notified only afterward and may be called in for a follow-up meeting. Such interactions, regardless of whether they escalate to a child being removed from the home, often leave Polish parents feeling paralyzed, caught in a spiral of fear fueled by alarming stories about Barnevernet "stealing children." In such situations, it is natural for parents to seek information online, where they frequently encounter sensationalized narratives and worst-case scenarios portraying Barnevernet as acting arbitrarily. The uncertainty and fear that "the worst" might happen are intensified by the possibility that a child's impulsive or aggressive behavior at school could be interpreted as evidence of problems at home. Under this kind of stress, it becomes extremely difficult for parents to remain calm—especially when they are already overwhelmed by anxiety or anger. This heightened tension also makes them more sensitive to how their behavior may be perceived by neighbors, and whether such perceptions could lead to reports of suspected danger to the child.

One respondent—a parent and expert who lived in Norway for several years—shared their opinion:

> I came back to Poland for completely different reasons, but still I feel relieved knowing that no one can overreact this way towards me anymore. And I can't really agree with the whole "the innocent have nothing to fear". narrative. In my experience, life is not black and white, and everyone might lose their temper, might shake a child or slap it, or say something they regret later.

The respondent also mentioned differences in communication styles between Poland and Norway:

> Another matter that might be significant here is the difference in communication styles, both with adults and children. In Poland, children are still expected to be fully obedient. And contact with institutions, or even cooperation with schools, is mostly focused on finding the guilty party, defining whose actions are directly responsible for the child's behavior.

> Whereas psychology has shown that every situation has many reasons, that behavior supplies information about needs met or unmet. And the point is to find a method for parent—institution cooperation that will benefit the child, not to assign blame.

They further noted cultural tendencies common in Poland:

> Polish society, however, is used to evaluations, interpretations, and referring only to one's own experiences, often conveniently labeling people as 'difficult' or 'entitled.' With this kind of default approach to others, Poles find it hard to cooperate with any kind of official personnel. In Norway, it did happen to me once that school called to tell me that my son got into an actual physical fight with other boys, but the teacher called me to say that this had happened. When I thanked her and said I'd give him a talking-to, she said, "No, you don't have to do that; we did and we dealt with the problem at school. I don't want his afternoon to be ruined."

However, this does not mean that only Polish parents require education about Norwegian approaches to childrearing and education. As previously emphasized, acculturation is a two-way process—even if it is not a balanced or symmetrical one. Norwegian teachers, social workers, and child welfare staff often lack awareness of parenting practices common in Poland, and this can also contribute to misunderstandings. Perhaps the Norwegian side might benefit from resources that decode the cultural logic behind behaviors perceived as "strange" or "wrong" in Polish families. Promoting this kind of mutual understanding could help facilitate more constructive cross-cultural communication and improve collaboration between institutions and migrant families.

For the acculturation process to be successful, there must be multiple points of contact between the two communities—interactions that go beyond workplaces, schools, and healthcare settings. Our research indicates that one natural venue for such interactions could be collaborative community initiatives. Norway has a long-standing tradition of *dugnad*—a form of voluntary collective work—which can provide an organic space for such encounters, irrespective of language proficiency.

However, this tradition is not easily understood by many Poles, who may associate it with the *subbotnik*, a similar practice in Poland that was historically tied to ideologically motivated coercion, poor organization, and limited resources. These historical associations may explain some of the hesitation among Poles in Norway to participate in community building efforts, such as repairing a fire-damaged school. As one respondent remarked, "Our children don't go there." Another factor contributing to this reluctance is a perception among Polish migrants that their stay in Norway is temporary, which makes them less inclined to invest in long-term community engagement. Nevertheless, participation in *dugnad* can yield tangible benefits. One respondent, P6, shared how attending a *dugnad* meeting led to valuable connections that later proved invaluable in her interactions with the Barnevernet.

It is also important to recognize that tensions surrounding migration and integration have, in some cases, led to extreme and deeply troubling incidents. While such acts are not representative of the broader Polish migrant community, they can significantly damage trust and reinforce negative perceptions. One expert described a shocking event:

> A few years ago, near Bergen, one Pole decided to rid Norway of refugees and he set fire to a hotel where children were to sleep. Fortunately, those Syrian children were not actually there, but they were supposed to be … it was the Poles who created those "stop the asylum-seekers" parties in Norway. Norwegians couldn't understand that at all. Their first question was, "You're migrants too, where's the balance here?" So Poles started voting for other parties—anti-immigration parties—and those parties did actually rise in popularity or even came to power in communes they hadn't ruled since the 80s. (E5, 121–121)

Private relationships with Norwegians also play a crucial role in easing Polish migrants' fears—particularly in relation to Barnevernet. In interviews, Polish mothers often said that their initial reaction to contact from Barnevernet was to consider fleeing to Poland. However, many changed their minds and partially overcame their fears when they had a trusted Norwegian partner or friend by their side.

This demonstrates the importance of personal connections in building trust and understanding.

A Norwegian friend or partner can be crucial in supporting Polish parents during interactions with Barnevernet not only by providing emotional reassurance: they can also help explain the institution's goals and procedures from a Norwegian cultural perspective. For instance, they may clarify that Barnevernet also intervenes in Norwegian families and that its primary mission is to support—not punish—families. This support might involve referrals to specialized institutions, advocacy in dealings with other organizations, institutions, or guidance aimed at strengthening parenting skills. Understanding this supportive role can help Polish parents view Barnevernet's actions as less threatening and more oriented toward the family's well-being.

By contrast, respondents who limited their interactions to the Polish diaspora and social media—platforms that often amplify and perpetuate fears of *Barnevernet*—demonstrated markedly different acculturation patterns. Their approach typically reflected an entrenched ethnocentric stance, which hindered their ability to engage constructively with Norwegian society.

As Anna Kwiatkowska (2012, p. 29) observes:

> When interpreting the motives of social services, we usually refer to political categories, which describe a welfare state as an inhumane system that hovers over the citizen from birth till death. However, at the base of those controversies lies something more than just a rigid set of bureaucratic rules which strive to execute political goals established by a country's current government. The way government institutions function, and the laws that govern them, are inscribed into a less visible system of meaning—the culture, which is built from the values, norms and behaviors, all of which determine parental goals and strategies far more than legal regulations.

The acculturation process, arising from the interaction between Polish and Norwegian communities in the context of child welfare often leads to both sides adopting rigid, ethnocentric positions. This echoes what social psychologist Muzafer Sherif described in 1936 as "an impossible confusion."

Viewed through the lens of the Bio-Ecological Model, Polish families' experiences with Barnevernet are shaped by multiple, interacting levels of context. These range from direct interactions (microsystem), influences from media and community (mesosystem), institutional structures and regional policies (exosystem), overarching cultural norms and legal systems (macrosystem), and evolving changes over time within these systems (chronosystem). Together, these layers contribute to a climate of anxiety and mistrust toward Barnevernet among Polish families—despite the agency's stated mission to safeguard children's welfare. The core challenge lies in bridging the cultural and institutional gaps between Norwegian child protection practices and the expectations, experiences, and values of Polish migrant families.

Conclusions

The analysis identifies two primary challenges facing Barnevernet in its support of Polish families: a lack of cultural sensitivity and systemic inefficiencies. Although Barnevernet's programs and interventions are designed to provide meaningful assistance, their impact is frequently compromised by limited cultural competence and a disconnect between the agency's methods and the specific needs of immigrant families. Barnevernet's child-centered approach, while well-intentioned, frequently clashes with the family-oriented values of Polish migrants, leading to perceptions that its interventions are either intrusive or inadequate.

Many parents view Barnevernet's actions as overly invasive or insufficiently supportive, which exposes systemic flaws in addressing diverse family circumstances and specific challenges, such as providing appropriate support for neurodivergent children. These issues erode the already fragile trust between families and the institution, which makes it harder for Barnevernet to provide effective support to the communities it serves.

This disconnect has significant implications. For families, it contributes to feelings of alienation and deepens mistrust of Norwegian institutions, potentially impeding their broader integration into Norwegian society. For Barnevernet, these challenges undermine the effectiveness of its efforts and limit its ability to fulfill its mission of child protection and family support. Our findings underscore the urgent need to integrate cultural competence into child welfare practices through comprehensive training for social workers and the development of culturally responsive policies that address the diverse needs and values of immigrant communities.

Barnevernet's negative image among Polish parents is amplified by a variety of factors. These include its portrayal by Norwegian citizens, sensationalized stories on Polish internet forums, critical coverage in Polish media—including a widely publicized case involving a Polish celebrity detective who claimed to have "rescued" a child from a Norwegian foster family—and firsthand experiences of what many perceive as Barnevernet's intrusiveness. Together, these factors reinforce the view of Barnevernet as an extension of Norwegian cultural authority, which poses a threat to Polish children and traditional family structures.

Narratives from Polish parents indicate that this negative image is unlikely to improve without a fundamental shift in how the agency communicates with Polish families. Future policy reforms must prioritize bridging this gap through culturally tailored interventions, stronger collaboration with immigrant communities, and systemic improvements that will rectify pressing issues, such as support for neurodivergent children and teenagers with complex needs. Such measures could help rebuild trust and foster a more inclusive and effective child welfare system. This topic will be explored further in the recommendations section.

Epilogue

Despite Poland's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, significant challenges persist in fully protecting children's rights in the country. Hernandez (2024), in her analysis of CRC implementation in Poland, highlights the lack of comprehensive, systemic solutions to fully realize the CRC—particularly with respect to children's subjectivity and agency. She observes that "treating children as fully-fledged members of society with individual needs and rights is the foundation of a fair and humane approach to social life" (Hernandez, 2024, p. 34).

In 2023, the KidsRights Foundation published its annual ranking on children's rights, placing Poland 124th out of 193 countries—the lowest among European Union member states. The report identifies critical shortcomings in respecting children's opinions, preventing discrimination, safeguarding the best interests of the child, and enabling children to participate in public life (KidsRights Foundation, 2023). Wybrańczyk (2024) further criticizes the current framework of family law in Poland. The author argues that it fails to uphold the principle of prioritizing the best interests of the child and that "it often does not shield children from parental conflicts" (p. 61). Hernandez (2024) adds that barriers such as insufficient access to information, limited opportunities for children to express their opinions, inadequate consideration of their voices in decision-making processes, and a lack of access to appropriate mental health care continue to undermine the full realization of children's rights.

Recent efforts to improve CRC compliance in Poland show some signs of progress. The establishment of the Children and Youth Council, operating under the auspices of the Ombudsman for Children

seeks to amplify the voices of young people in public discourse. Additionally, courts are increasingly taking children's perspectives into account during legal proceedings, thereby strengthening their sense of agency and empowerment. Legislative reforms—including amendments to laws concerning child hearings—have further reinforced children's subjectivity by requiring that their opinions be included in judicial decision-making (Hernandez, 2024).

The "Kamil case" of 2023, involving the brutal death of an 8-year-old boy at the hands of his stepfather—with complicity from the boy's mother—exposed severe deficiencies in Poland's child protection system. This tragic event prompted widespread public outrage and led to the adoption of the so-called "Kamil Act," which aims to facilitate quicker and more effective interventions when a child's safety is at risk, while also enhancing oversight of at-risk families. Under the Act, institutions such as schools are now required to respond promptly to reports or signs of potential child abuse. Moreover, the "Kamil Act" brings Poland closer to the Norwegian model by shifting from a family-centered to a child-centered approach. It prioritizes children's rights and introduces safeguards such as granting children greater influence in selecting their legal representatives (Hernandez, 2024).

Norway's recent reforms in child protection—particularly those related to Barnevernet—are characterized by a comprehensive, evidence-based, and human rights—oriented approach. Ongoing oversight by institutions such as Norges institusjon for menneskerettigheter (NIM, n.d.) and rulings by the European Court of Human Rights have underscored persistent human rights concerns in Norwegian child welfare cases. An analysis of European Court (EMD) rulings reveals that between 2017 and late 2023, Norway was found to have violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights—the right to family life—in 24 cases. NIM reports that many of these violations involved overly restrictive measures on parental contact following care placements, which, in some cases, caused irreversible harm to family relationships. These findings have prompted calls for further reforms, such as including the appointment of independent representatives for children in every case and the development

of mechanisms to repair the harm caused by past violations, such as financial compensation and formal apologies.

In March 2023, the Barnevernsutvalget (2023), chaired by Professor Marit Skivenes, released a detailed report with 118 proposals to strengthen legal protections and improve the quality of the child welfare system. The report calls for empowering and informing families by improving communication and access to information for all parents, with special attention to minority communities. It also recommends clearer procedures related to temporary placements and visitation rights, as well as the establishment of a dedicated child representation system (BRO) to safeguard children's rights from the start of any intervention.

Another major development is the new child protection law, which went into effect on January 1, 2023. This law represents a radical modernization of a legal framework that had remained largely unchanged for 30 years (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2022). According to the official government announcement, the new legislation aims to increase accountability through stricter documentation requirements and through limiting the outsourcing of foster care to private providers, with Barnevernet retaining direct oversight. It also seeks to strengthen the rights of both children and parents by ensuring that decisions regarding temporary placements and visitation are based on thorough, individualized assessments, while simultaneously enhancing preventive work and early intervention by requiring municipalities to implement comprehensive prevention plans.

The Norwegian model, underpinned by expert recommendations, modernized legislation, and rigorous human rights evaluations—offers a strong counterpoint to the challenges faced in Poland. While Poland has begun taking important steps, such as introducing the "Kamil Act" to accelerate interventions and enhance oversight, Norway is working to balance its child welfare efforts with fairness, transparency, and a commitment to preserving family life. At the same time, it is gradually moving toward better accommodating the needs of minority families through more culturally sensitive practices.

Both the Polish and Norwegian systems are continuing to evolve, learning from past shortcomings and aligning with international

standards, with the ultimate goal of creating environments where every child's rights are respected and protected. This comparative analysis, presented in this volume, underscores the importance of cross-national dialogue and the exchange of best practices in safeguarding children's rights in today's complex and rapidly changing societies. Both systems share common goals: ensuring that children are treated as full rights-bearing members of society, that their well-being is safeguarded, and that they are included in decisions that affect their lives. Norway's human rights institution has been vocal in its concerns regarding Barnevernet, sometimes also with respect to families belonging to minority groups. Their reviews indicate that while some changes are underway, institutional reforms are proceeding rather slowly, and many structural issues have not yet been fully resolved, although there appears to be at least some recognition of the need for change within Bufdir.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Polish Migrants

1. *Familiarize Yourself with Norwegian Culture and Laws Before Moving.* At the planning stage, take the time to learn at least the basic facts about Norwegian culture and child protection laws. Rely on trustworthy sources rather than social media posts or comment sections under sensationalist articles. In particular, understand that corporal punishment, shouting at children, and drinking alcohol in their presence are strictly prohibited and universally followed norms in Norway. Violating these rules can result in serious legal consequences.
2. *Learn About Key Cultural Differences.* Before arriving in Norway, deepen your understanding of the cultural differences between the two countries. It is not enough to know that the flight is only two hours, the dominant religion is Christianity, and that people may look physically similar. Norwegian society is guided by a different set of social values and norms. Additionally, Norway is home to a diverse population, including ethnic minorities from Estonia, Lithuania, Pakistan, and India, as well as a significant Muslim community whose practices differ from those of both Polish and Norwegian Christians.
3. *View Cultural Differences as Opportunities, Not Threats.* Approach cultural differences with curiosity and a willingness to understand their origins. Recognizing and respecting these differences can promote mutual understanding and lead to smoother integration.

4. *Engage with the Local Culture and Community.* Strive to integrate into Norwegian society by actively participating in local initiatives. Consider joining community events, including those that provide opportunities to share Polish culture locally. Invest in learning the Norwegian language, get involved in your child's school or kindergarten activities, and take part in *dugnad* events—community volunteer projects like cleaning natural areas or helping maintain kindergarten facilities. These activities not only help build connections but also demonstrate a commitment to being an active, positive member of the local community.

Recommendations for Barnevernet

1. *Educate Minority Communities About Institutional Functioning.* Provide comprehensive education to minority communities on how government institutions operate, the laws they follow, and how those laws are interpreted. Focus especially on institutions that minority citizens frequently interact with, such as Barnevernet.
2. *Use Practical Examples to Build Understanding.* Illustrate potential issues between Barnevernet and minority families using hypothetical, anonymous scenarios that demonstrate how Barnevernet might act in such situations. Collaborate with representatives from minority communities to ensure that the examples are culturally relevant and avoid reinforcing stereotypes.
3. *Respond to Media Narratives About "Child Stealing."* Instead of remaining silent to protect family privacy, offer contextualized explanations of the issues involved without naming specific individuals. Silence often fuels misconceptions and further harms Barnevernet's public image.
4. *Diversify the Workforce and Match Staff to Families.* Actively recruit employees from minority backgrounds. When

assigning cases, consider matching the age of Barnevernet workers to that of the parents to foster greater relatability and trust.

5. *Increase Transparency About Worker Training.* Share information with minority communities about the training Barnevernet staff undergo. Greater transparency can help counter misconceptions and build confidence in the institution's expertise and professionalism.
6. *Establish Minority Ambassadors for Barnevernet.* Create a network of Barnevernet ambassadors from minority communities. Provide these ambassadors with appropriate training and support, enabling them to act as advocates for their communities rather than being perceived as collaborators with Norwegian institutions.
7. *Prioritize Psychological Well-Being in Child Placement.* Train Barnevernet workers to consider the psychological impact of foster care placement and family separation. Provide comprehensive psychological support to children separated from their biological families, and aim to place them with foster families who are culturally similar or culturally empathetic. Prepare foster families to build healthy relationships with the child while supporting the possibility of reunification with the biological family.
8. *Support Families During Community Challenges.* Provide culturally sensitive support to families experiencing difficulties in their neighborhoods or schools after a Barnevernet case is opened. Prioritize family preservation and use foster care only as a last resort, not as a preventive measure.
9. *Enhance Intercultural Competence Among Workers.* Educate Barnevernet staff on the cultural norms and values of different ethnic groups, particularly regarding parenting practices such as raising one's voice during conflict or corporal punishment. Promote understanding and dialogue rather than defaulting to punitive measures that strictly adhere to Norwegian law.
10. *Collaborate With and Support Minority Organizations.* Actively fund and support minority organizations that educate

their communities about Norwegian language and culture. This approach can bridge cultural divides, reduce perceptions of unequal aid distribution, and mitigate defensive or separatist acculturation strategies, particularly among Polish migrants in Norway.

11. *Apply New Interpretations and Explanations of Norwegian Law in Day-To-Day Practice.* Introduce mandatory training sessions and make sure that staff are familiar with the latest interpretations and applications of legislation, as issued by relevant authorities such as Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet (Bufdir). Consider training Barnevernet staff on legal processes in migrants' home countries to increase their understanding of foreign legal procedures. This would provide a stronger legal basis for interventions and help prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations at the macro-legal level.

Recommendations
(Polish translation)

Rekomendacje dla Polaków

1. *Zapoznaj się z norweską kulturą i prawem przed wyjazdem.* Już na etapie planowania wyjazdu warto poświęcić czas na poznanie przynajmniej podstawowych informacji o kulturze norweskiej i przepisach dotyczących ochrony dzieci. Należy korzystać ze sprawdzonych źródeł, a nie z mediów społecznościowych czy komentarzy pod sensacyjnymi artykułami. W szczególności trzeba mieć świadomość, że w Norwegii obowiązuje całkowity zakaz stosowania kar cielesnych, krzyku wobec dzieci oraz spożywania alkoholu w ich obecności – są to normy powszechnie akceptowane i ściśle przestrzegane. Ich naruszenie może prowadzić do poważnych konsekwencji prawnych.
2. *Przed przyjazdem do Norwegii warto pogłębić swoją wiedzę na temat różnic kulturowych między oboma krajami.* Nie wystarczy sama wiedza, że lot trwa tylko dwie godziny, dominuje religia chrześcijańska, a ludzie mogą wyglądać podobnie. Społeczeństwo norweskie kieruje się innym zestawem wartości społecznych i norm. Dodatkowo Norwegia jest krajem o zróżnicowanej populacji, zamieszkiwanym także przez mniejszości etniczne z Estonii, Litwy, Pakistanu i Indii, a także przez znaczną społeczność muzułmańską, której praktyki religijne różnią się zarówno od polskich, jak i norweskich chrześcijan.

3. *Traktuj różnice kulturowe jako szansę, a nie zagrożenie*. Podchodź do różnic kulturowych z ciekawością i chęcią zrozumienia ich źródeł. Uznanie i szacunek dla tych różnic mogą sprzyjać wzajemnemu zrozumieniu i prowadzić do łatwiejszej integracji.
4. *Angażuj się w lokalną kulturę i społeczność*. Staraj się integrować ze społeczeństwem norweskim poprzez aktywne uczestnictwo w lokalnych inicjatywach. Rozważ udział w wydarzeniach społecznych, także tych, które umożliwiają prezentowanie polskiej kultury na miejscu. Inwestuj w naukę języka norweskiego, angażuj się w życie szkoły lub przedszkola swojego dziecka, a także bierz udział w wydarzeniach typu dugnad, czyli wspólnych akcjach wolontariackich, takich jak sprzątanie terenów zielonych czy pomoc w utrzymaniu przedszkoli. Takie działania pomagają nie tylko budować relacje, ale również pokazują Twoje zaangażowanie i chęć bycia aktywnym członkiem lokalnej społeczności.

Rekomendacje dla Barnevernet

1. *Edukacja mniejszości na temat funkcjonowania instytucji Barnevernet w zakresie obowiązującego prawa oraz jego interpretacji*. Konieczna jest kompleksowa edukacja społeczności mniejszościowych na temat tego, jak działają instytucje rządowe, jakie obowiązują ich prawa i jak te prawa są interpretowane. Należy skupiać się zwłaszcza na instytucjach, takich jak Barnevernet, z którymi obywatele wywodzący się z mniejszości często wchodzą w interakcje.
2. *Należy używać praktycznych przykładów, aby budować zrozumienie*. W miarę możliwości warto ilustrować konkretne problemy anonimowymi scenariuszami, które ilustrują możliwe działania Barnevernet w takich sytuacjach. Konstruując takie przykłady warto współpracować z przedstawicielami danych społeczności, aby przykłady były kulturowo adekwatne i nie utrwalały stereotypów.

3. *Konieczne jest reagowanie na medialne narracje o „porywaniu dzieci"*. Zamiast milczeć w imię ochrony prywatności rodzin, trzeba udzielać kontekstowych wyjaśnień na temat problemów leżących u podstaw decyzji BV, bez wskazywania konkretnych osób. Milczenie często pogłębia nieporozumienia i szkodzi wizerunkowi Barnevernet.
4. *Potrzebna jest, mimo trudności, aktywna rekrutacja pracowników BV z mniejszości etnicznych.* Przydzielając sprawy, trzeba dopasować wiek pracowników Barnevernet do wieku rodziców.
5. *Zwiększenie przejrzystości w zakresie szkoleń pracowników.* Należy przekazywać społecznościom mniejszościowym informacje na temat szkoleń, jakie przechodzą pracownicy Barnevernet. Większa przejrzystość może pomóc przeciwdziałać błędnym przekonaniom oraz budować zaufanie do kompetencji i profesjonalizmu tej instytucji.
6. *Powołanie Ambasadorów Mniejszości dla Barnevernet.* Należy stworzyć sieć ambasadorów Barnevernet wywodzących się ze społeczności mniejszościowych. Powinni oni otrzymać odpowiednie szkolenie i wsparcie, aby mogli pełnić rolę rzeczników swoich społeczności, a nie być postrzegani jako kolaboranci współpracujący z norweskimi instytucjami.
7. *Priorytet dla dobrostanu psychicznego przy umieszczaniu dziecka poza rodziną*. Należy szkolić pracowników Barnevernet, aby uwzględniali psychologiczne skutki umieszczenia dziecka w rodzinie zastępczej oraz rozdzielenia z rodziną biologiczną. Dzieciom oddzielonym od rodziców należy zapewnić kompleksowe wsparcie psychologiczne. W miarę możliwości powinny być one kierowane do rodzin zastępczych, które są kulturowo podobne lub wykazują się empatią kulturową. Rodziny zastępcze należy przygotować do budowania zdrowych relacji z dzieckiem, przy jednoczesnym wspieraniu możliwości ponownego połączenia z rodziną biologiczną.
8. *Wspieranie rodzin w obliczu wyzwań społecznych*. Należy zapewnić rodzinom, wobec których wszczęto postępowanie Barnevernet, kulturowo wrażliwe wsparcie w sytuacjach trudności

w ich społecznościach lokalnych lub szkołach. Priorytetem powinna być ochrona integralności rodziny, a umieszczanie dziecka w pieczy zastępczej powinno być ostatecznością, a nie środkiem zapobiegawczym.

9. *Zwiększenie kompetencji międzykulturowych wśród pracowników*. Należy edukować pracowników Barnevernet w zakresie norm kulturowych i wartości charakterystycznych dla różnych grup etnicznych, szczególnie w kontekście praktyk wychowawczych, takich jak podnoszenie głosu w sytuacjach konfliktowych czy stosowanie kar cielesnych. Zamiast automatycznego stosowania środków o charakterze represyjnym, opartych wyłącznie na norweskim prawie, należy promować postawę zrozumienia i otwartego dialogu.
10. *Współpraca i wsparcie dla organizacji mniejszościowych*. Należy aktywnie finansować i wspierać organizacje mniejszościowe, które prowadzą działania edukacyjne na rzecz swoich społeczności w zakresie języka i kultury norweskiej. Takie podejście może pomóc w zmniejszeniu dystansu kulturowego, ograniczyć poczucie nierównego traktowania w dostępie do pomocy oraz złagodzić postawy defensywne lub separatystyczne w procesie akulturacji – szczególnie wśród migrantów z Polski w Norwegii.
11. *Stosowanie nowych interpretacji i wyjaśnień prawa norweskiego w codziennej praktyce*. Należy wprowadzić obowiązkowe szkolenia i zadbać o to, aby pracownicy Barnevernet byli zaznajomieni z najnowszymi interpretacjami i zastosowaniami przepisów prawa, publikowanymi przez odpowiednie instytucje, takie jak Dyrekcja ds. Dzieci, Młodzieży i Rodziny (Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet – Bufdir). Warto również rozważyć szkolenie pracowników w zakresie procedur prawnych obowiązujących w krajach pochodzenia migrantów, co pozwoli lepiej zrozumieć zagraniczne systemy prawne. Takie podejście mogłoby stanowić solidniejszą podstawę prawną dla podejmowanych interwencji oraz zapobiegać nieporozumieniom i błędnym interpretacjom na poziomie systemowym.

Recommendations
(Norwegian translation)

Mange kulturelle misforståelser skyldes mangler i kommunikasjonen mellom grupper som kommer i kontakt med hverandre. Kontaktintensiteten er høy mellom polske migranter i Norge og det norske samfunnet (spesielt Barnevernet), og misforståelsene og konfliktene som oppstår, kan også bli ganske intense. De følgende bemerkningene tar sikte på å vise hva som kan gjøres for å mildne disse konfliktene. De to partene, den polske familien og Barnevernet, har et felles mål – nemlig barnets velferd og velvære.

Anbefalinger for polske migranter

1. *Gjør dere kjent med norsk kultur og norske lover før dere flytter.* I planleggingsfasen bør du ta deg tid til å lære grunnleggende fakta om norsk kultur og lover som beskytter barn. Stol på pålitelige kilder, i stedet for innlegg på sosiale medier, eller kommentarfelt under sensasjonspregede artikler. Det er spesielt viktig å forstå at fysisk avstraffelse, å skrike til barn og å drikke alkohol i deres nærvær er strengt forbudt, og at dette er normer som følges i Norge. Brudd på disse reglene kan få alvorlige juridiske konsekvenser.
2. *Lær om viktige kulturelle forskjeller.* Før du kommer tik Norge, bør du skaffe deg en dypere forståelse av de kulturelle forskjellene mellom Polen og Norge. Det er ikke nok å vite at flyturen bare tar to timer, at den største religionen er kristendom, og at

folk ofte er fysisk like. Det norske samfunnet har et annet sett av sosiale verdier og normer. I tillegg har Norge en mangfoldig befolkning, blant annet etniske minoriteter fra Estland, Litauen, Pakistan og India, og et stort muslimsk samfunn.

3. *Se på kulturelle forskjeller som muligheter, ikke trusler*. Møt kulturelle forskjeller med nysgjerrighet, og forsøk å forstå hvor de kommer fra. Hvis du anerkjenner og respekterer disse forskjellene, kan det fremme gjensidig forståelse og skape smidigere integrering.
4. *Engasjer deg i den lokale kulturen og lokalsamfunnet.* Forsøk å bli integrert i det norske samfunnet ved å delta aktivt i lokale initiativer. Delta gjerne på arrangementer i lokalsamfunnet, også de som gir muligheter til å dele polsk kultur lokalt. Bruk tid på å lære norsk, engasjer deg i aktiviteter i barnets skole eller barnehage, og delta på dugnader – altså frivillige prosjekter i lokalsamfunnet, som å rydde naturområder eller hjelpe til med å vedlikeholde barnehagens eiendeler. Disse aktivitetene gjør at du blir kjent med folk, og du viser at du ønsker å være et aktivt og positivt medlem av lokalsamfunnet.

Anbefalinger for Barnevernet

1. *Gi minoritetssamfunn kunnskap om institusjonell funksjon.* Forklar minoriteter hvordan offentlige institusjoner opererer, hvilke lover de følger og hvordan disse lovene tolkes. Fokuser spesielt på institusjoner som minoritetsborgere ofte kommer i berøring med, for eksempel Barnevernet.
2. *Bruk praktiske eksempler for å bygge forståelse.* Når du skal illustrere potensielle problemer mellom Barnevernet og minoritetsfamilier, kan du bruke hypotetiske, anonyme scenarier som viser hvordan Barnevernet kan handle i gitte situasjoner. Samarbeid med representanter fra minoritetssamfunn for å sikre at disse eksemplene er kulturelt relevante, og unngå å forsterke stereotypier.

3. *Reager på mediefortellinger om «barnetyveri».* I stedet for å tie for å beskytte familiens privatliv, kan du gi forklaringer på problemene som oppstår, uten å navngi spesifikke individer. Taushet kan gi næring til misoppfatninger, og skade Barnevernets offentlige image ytterligere.
4. *Sørg for at de ansatte har ulike typer bakgrunn, og match ansatte med familier.* Forsøk å rekruttere ansatte med minoritetsbakgrunn. Når du tildeler saker, kan du forsøke å matche alderen til den Barnevern-ansatte med foreldrenes, for å gjøre det lettere å forstå og stole på hverandre.
5. *Lær Barnevernets ansatte om kulturelle normer og verdier hos ulike etniske grupper*, spesielt når det gjelder ting som å heve stemmen under konflikt, eller gi fysisk avstraffelse. Arbeid for forståelse og dialog, i stedet for å bruke straffende tiltak for å følge norsk lov strengt.
6. *Bidra til åpenhet om opplæring av ansatte.* Fortell minoritetssamfunn om den opplæringen Barnevernets ansatte gjennomgår. Større åpenhet kan bidra til å motvirke misoppfatninger, og kan bygge tillit til at Barnevernet har ekspertise og er profesjonelle.
7. *Etabler minoritetsambassadører for Barnevernet.* Skap et nettverk av Barnevern-ambassadører fra minoritetsgrupper. Gi disse ambassadørene egnet opplæring og støtte, slik at de kan fungere som talsmenn for sine lokalsamfunn, i stedet for å bli oppfattet bare som samarbeidspartnere med norske institusjoner.
8. *Prioriter psykisk velvære ved plassering av barn*. La Barnevern-ansatte lære om hvordan det påvirker foreldre at barna blir plassert i fosterhjem. Gi omfattende psykologisk støtte til barn som er atskilt fra sine biologiske familier, og forsøk å plassere dem hos fosterfamilier som er kulturelt like, eller i alle fall empatiske. Forbered fosterfamilier på å bygge gode relasjoner med barnet, samtidig som de gjør det mulig for barnet å bli gjenforent med den biologiske familien.
9. *Støtt familier som opplever utfordringer*. Forsøk å bevare familier intakte, og bruk fosterhjem bare som en siste utvei, ikke som et forebyggende tiltak.

10. *Samarbeid med minoritetsorganisasjoner.* Finansier og gi støtte til minoritetsorganisasjoner som gir sine medlemmer opplæring om norsk språk og kultur. Dette kan bygge bro over kulturelle skillelinjer, redusere oppfatningen av at hjelp fordeles ulikt, og dempe defensive eller separatistiske tilpasningsstrategier, spesielt blant polske migranter i Norge.
11. *Anvende nye tolkninger og forklaringer av norsk lov i det daglige arbeidet.* Innføre obligatoriske opplæringsøkter, og sørge for at ansatte er kjent med de nyeste tolkningene og anvendelsene av lovgivningen. Vurdere å lære Barnevern-ansatte om juridiske prosesser i migrantenes hjemland, for å øke deres forståelse av utenlandske juridiske prosedyrer. Dette vil gi et sterkere juridisk grunnlag for intervensjoner, og bidra til å forhindre misforståelser eller feiltolkning av lover.

Translated by Kati Indrefjord

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This book examines the complex relationships and tensions between Barnevernet, Norway's child welfare service responsible for protecting children's well-being, and members of the Polish migrant community who arrived in Norway after Poland joined the European Union. At first glance, the subject may appear narrow, if not niche, but in my opinion, the work offers far more than a specialized case study. It is, in fact, a model investigation of the important role that psychology can play in understanding migration processes.

I would recommend this book not only to those interested in contemporary Polish–Norwegian relations. The account of this particular chapter in Polish–Norwegian history should be treated primarily as a springboard for broader considerations of the psychology of migration. From this perspective, it will interest a far wider audience—not just psychologists, but also other social scientists and students researching global social change. Given how rare this type of scholarly reflection is in Poland, the value of this outstanding work is all the greater.

Dr. hab. Piotr Szarota (*Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences*)

Poles are the largest ethnic minority in Norway. According to current statistics, more than 100,000 Polish citizens now reside there. The book centers on the much-debated subject of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (Barnevernet), an agency tasked with protecting children's rights, overseeing educational processes, and, when necessary, intervening in family life, which can involve removing a child from their biological parents and placing them in foster care.

Through interviews, the authors seek to uncover the roots of Polish parents' fears and resistance toward Barnevernet, as well as the agency's own goals and motivations. They investigate the broader context and working methods of Barnevernet, including its ability to communicate with Polish clients, the professional quality of its staff, and regional variations in its approach.

Of particular interest to both Polish and Norwegian readers are the discussions on Norwegian "child-centrism," Polish fears of assimilation, differing approaches to family support, cultural misunderstandings and missteps, and limitations of the Norwegian care model. The book closes with practical recommendations for both Polish newcomers to Norway and for the Norwegian Child Welfare Services itself. In this way, it combines scholarly analysis with real-world relevance.

Dr. hab. Barbara Weigl (*SWPS University, Wrocław*)

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