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Ayan Handulle & Anders Vassenden

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'The art of kindergarten drop off': how young Norwegian-Somali parents perform ethnicity to avoid reports to Child Welfare Services

'Kunsten å levere i barnehagen': Hvordan unge norsk-somaliske foreldre fremfører etnisitet for å unngå meldinger til barnevernet

Ayan Handulle and Anders Vassenden

ABSTRACT

This paper departs from an ethnography of Somali parents in Oslo, Norway, which examined perceptions of the Child Welfare Services (CWS). We explore how young second-generation parents portray middle class identities when they interact with school and kindergarten personnel. These are institutions under legal obligation to report to the CWS if they suspect neglect of children. Drawing on Goffman, we analyse how parents conduct and meticulously prepare for encounters with school and kindergarten personnel. These preparations pertain to countering ethnic stigma and avoiding racial scrutiny, in large part to avoid referrals to the CWS. Our paper makes the following contributions. In the study of child welfare and ethnicity, we stress the importance of visible ethnicity – or 'race' – and show how scepticism of CWS derives from suspicions of racial prejudice; strained relations between migrants and the CWS extend far beyond interactions between caseworkers and clients as they also stem from interactions with adjacent institutions. Regarding the study of ethnic relations, we argue that understanding performance of ethnicity requires inclusion of institutional contexts, such as the schools, kindergartens and the CWS.

ABSTRAKT


Denne artikkelen bygger på en etnografisk studie av somaliske foreldre i Oslo, om deres syn på det norske barnevernet. I denne artikkelen utforsker vi hvordan unge andregenerasjons foreldre fremstiller en norsk middelklasseidentitet i interaksjonen med skole- og barnehagepersonell. Skoler og barnehager er juridisk forpliktet til å rapportere til barnevernet hvis de mistenker omsorgssvikt. Vi bygger på Goffman, og analyserer hvordan foreldre utfører disse møtene, og de nitide forberedelser. Disse forberedelsene handler om å motarbeide etniske stigma, og mye om å unngå meldinger til barnevernet. Arbeidet vårt gir bidrag til flere forskningsfelt. Til studier av barnevern og etnisitet, viser vi at skepsisen til barnevernet er knyttet til mistanke om fordommer basert på synlig etnisitet eller rase. For å forstå anstrengte forhold mellom migranter og barnevernet, viser vi videre hvordan problemer strekker seg langt utover møtet mellom saksbehandlere og brukere, da de også stammer fra samhandling med tilstøtende institusjoner. Til forskning om etniske relasjoner mer generelt, argumenterer vi for at studiet av 'performance' av etnisitet må innlemme institusjonelle kontekster, slik som skoler, barnehager og barnevern.

KEYWORDS

Child welfare; ethnicity; second-generation; stigma; performance

NØKKEORD

barnevernet; etnisitet; andregenerasjonen; stigma; 'performance'

CONTACT Ayan Handulle  ayan.handulle@uis.no  Ayan Handulle, Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway

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Introduction

Abdi is a 34-year old married Norwegian-Somali father, and is an engineer. He has two children in kindergarten, and one in primary school. When Abdi refers to the drop off and pick up of his children, he says: *'Each day I prepare myself before I walk in [kindergarten]. I have to put on a smile and speak with caution'*.

We interviewed Abdi for a study of Somali parents in Norway, and their perceptions of the Child Welfare Services (CWS). Abdi's experience is typical for how second-generation parents interact with school and kindergarten personnel: Dropping off one's child in the morning, especially in kindergartens, becomes almost an art form. The 'art' involves meticulous preparation of both children's appearance (e.g. clothing, food) and their own behaviour vis-à-vis teachers and other personnel. It also involves choosing weekend and leisure activities that portray middle-class identity.

Our paper examines this predominant concern of these parents. Importantly, it relates not mainly to kindergarten/schools as such, but to the Child Welfare Services (CWS). All professionals in Norway who work with children are legally obliged to report any worries about the well-being of children to the CWS. This requirement, along with scepticism towards the CWS, underlies parents' distress and their performance. Data consist of in-depth qualitative interviews and ethnography among first and second-generation Somalis in Oslo and Somalia (returnees). This paper primarily investigates the perspectives of participants who grew up in Norway, and are either graduates or in university. We focus, in other words, on parents who are both socially mobile and 'nationals' (in terms of citizenship and cultural 'know-how'; cf. Vassenden, 2010). We analyse the following research questions: (i) *Why do parents feel the need to exercise caution in their interactions with school and kindergarten personnel?* (ii) *How do parents relate their caution to the Child Welfare Services?* (iii) *What are the strategies that these parents develop and employ to exercise this caution?* We adopt a Goffmanian ([1959]1987, [1963]1990) approach to understanding these strategies. In so doing, we contribute to the scholarship on *performing ethnicity* (Clammer, 2015) by stressing the significance of institutional contexts – in our case the Nordic child welfare system. Scholarship on migrants and child welfare often highlights the issue of cultural differences when trying to understand the relationship between migrants and welfare institutions. Such perspectives fail to capture the nature of cases like ours, which, we claim, have more to do with visible ethnicity – or 'race' – and stigma in institutional encounters.

The article has the following structure. First, we discuss the relevant background and review existing research on Somalis, child welfare and ethnicity. Next, we present the theoretical framework. After presenting findings and analyses, we discuss their implications.

Background and previous research

Somalis in Norway

Of Norway's population of 5.3 million, some 940,000 – almost 18% – are immigrants or children to immigrants (2019, Statistics Norway). Somalis are among the largest groups, almost 43,000 people. Most Somalis came to Norway as refugees following more than 20 years of civil war. Norwegian and European studies typically describe Somalis as disadvantaged, in the labour market and in society in general (Fuglerud & Engebriksen, 2006). Norway is a homeownership country with more than 80% owning their dwellings. However, for Somalis, this figure is below 20%, which shows socio-economic problems (Statistics Norway, 2017¹). Somalis often have few formal qualifications from their home country. Furthermore, they frequently report experiencing discrimination and racism (Vrålstad & Wiggen, 2017). Being Somali is a stigmatised identity. Stereotypes pertain to not working, having (too) many children, being welfare-dependent and not speaking the Norwegian language well. Despite these problems, children of Somali immigrants fare better in the educational system than their parents' socio-economic resources would suggest. Several studies show that descendants of immigrants to Norway (including Somalis) have higher likelihood of pursuing higher education than native children with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Hermansen, 2016).

Child welfare and migrants

In numerous countries, ethnic minority and migrant children are disproportionately engaged by the CWS (cf. Barn, 2007). In Norway too, the CWS engages with immigrant families more than native families. It is however noteworthy, that overrepresentation in Norway concerns investigations and in-home support, *not* care-orders (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). Somali children align with this pattern.

Nevertheless, the relationships between the Norwegian CWS and several migrant groups are strained. Media accounts and a growing body of research (Berg et al., 2017; Fylkesnes, Nygren, Bjørknes, & Iversen, 2015; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019) provide evidence that many migrants fear the agency, with Somalis sometimes reported to be particularly distrustful. Although researchers have reported such fear in other countries too (Earner, 2007), deficiencies in existing knowledge are striking. Fear of the CWS is an under-theorized phenomenon and its causes are poorly understood. It may reflect cultural backgrounds, socio-economic marginalisation, or lack of intercultural knowledge, even ethnic discrimination in the services, but current knowledge precludes conclusions.

Besides mistrust, research on child welfare and ethnic/migrant issues abounds internationally. Identified problems include cultural gaps and language issues (Dalikeni, 2019; Earner, 2007; Fylkesnes, Iversen, & Nygren, 2018; Križ & Skivenes, 2010), and lack of cultural competence among CWS officers (Nordic examples are Anis, 2005; Willis, Pathak, Khambhaita, & Evandrou, 2017). Although some authors are critical of the emphasis on cultural sensitivity, arguing that social work should be more sensitive to how social problems relate to poverty (Barn, 2007; Dean, 2001), cultural sensitivity is a dominant theme in the existing research, and in professional practice.

Most studies on child welfare and migration issues depart from the perspectives of CWS officers (e.g. Križ & Skivenes, 2010). Although the number is growing, there are fewer studies on migrant or ethnic minority groups, and on how they perceive the CWS. Not pertaining to Norway alone, Fylkesnes et al. note that '(p)arents' perspectives only partially inform the current knowledge base' (2018, p. 197; cf. Vassenden, 2010). The studies of migrant parents that do exist tend to focus on those who are engaged with the CWS, i.e. 'users' (Dalikeni, 2019). Knowledge gaps pertain in particular to social processes within the wider migrant milieu.

Our study helps bridging these gaps, on several accounts: We have not seen previous *ethnographic studies*. Further, few authors comment that scepticism towards the CWS affects how parents relate to adjacent welfare institutions, or parent-teacher interaction. Importantly, most studies on the CWS and migration focus on *newcomers*. We show that scepticism can also apply to the second generation, but for reasons not yet identified. We highlight how people who are nationals/insiders in some aspects (citizenship, cultural knowledge) struggle for acceptance in other aspects, like race/ethnicity and religion (Vassenden, 2010). Visible ethnicity (or 'race') and visible religion are essential themes. Our article gives important insight into behind the scenes and beyond face-to-face interaction with CWS employees.

For adequate understanding of our case, we must recognise the 'child-centric' and defamilialised Nordic welfare model. The state takes extensive responsibility regarding children and families (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hantrais, 2004). Norwegian children begin school when they turn six. In compulsory schooling – primary and secondary school (grades 1–10) – 96% of pupils attend public school. Kindergartens are state-funded and affordable. Enrolment is optional, yet crucial to families such as those in this paper, who were both employed full-time (some were part-time students). More than 91% of Norwegian children aged 1–5 years attend kindergarten (Statistics Norway, 2017, 2018). Essential to our analyses is the before-mentioned legal obligation for professionals who work with children – school/kindergarten teachers, community nurses etc. – to report their concerns regarding a child's wellbeing to CWS. The threshold for reporting concerns to CWS is low (Studsrød, Ellingsen, & Willumsen, 2016). Regarding children aged from 3 to 5 years, kindergartens are the public institution that report the most concern notes to CWS (Statistics Norway, 2018²).

Theoretical framework

In exploring how parents construct strategies and enact encounters with school and kindergarten personnel, we adopted a Goffmanian framework ([1959]1987, [1963]1990). Goffman ([1963]1990) distinguishes between visible (or known about) stigma that leads to a person being discredited (or revealed), and invisible (or not-known-about) stigma of the discreditable. He employs the terms ‘passing’ and ‘covering’ as strategies that individuals use to control impressions and protect themselves. Passing refers to strategies that the discreditable use to be perceived as ‘normal’. Covering are attempts by the discredited to cover visible traits (e.g. racial markers). When covering, individuals do not reject their identities, but downplay them by employing techniques to reduce their interactional obtrusiveness (Goffman [1963]1990, pp. 102–103). Valenta (2009) shows how immigrants to Norway from Bosnia, Croatia and Iraq negotiate their identity in everyday life by activating both covering and passing strategies that reduce the importance of ethnic markers. Becker (2015) explores similar strategies among Albanian Kosovars in little Italy, New York. She suggests the concept of *assumed ethnicity*: They neither reject nor validate Albanian ethnicity (Becker, 2015, p. 110). In these studies, *whiteness* allows participants to pass as ‘non-ethnic’ Vassenden and Andersson (2011) highlights the same phenomenon about religion and whiteness/non-whiteness in Norway; whereas whiteness hides religious affiliation, or signals secularity, non-whiteness positions people as religious (e.g. Muslim). Parents in our study express a wish to be perceived as equal to natives, but emphasise that their non-whiteness, and to some extent religious symbols (hijabs), do not allow it. In short, they do not have the interactional freedom of whites. In Goffman’s terms, they are already discredited; their ethnic identity is evident on the spot.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois ([1903]2008) introduces the *double consciousness* concept. He poses a rhetorical question: ‘how does it feel to be a problem?’ (p. 1) and defines ‘double consciousness’ as ‘... the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul’ (Du Bois, [1903]2008, p. 3). Our participants repeatedly emphasised being viewed ‘differently’ and expressed the burden of carrying a stigma. Double consciousness is a concept frequently used in relation to the second-generation experience. Andersson (2010), for instance, argues that visible second-generation immigrants in Europe are often subtly exposed to exclusion and discrimination in various societal arenas, due particularly to a negative picture of immigrants in the media, which emphasises topics like crime and forced marriages. Ethnic discrimination is also well-documented, as shown by, for example, Midtbøen (2014): the children of immigrants tend to be overlooked in the labour market because employees make use of race and ethnicity as social cues when hiring, and educational and linguistic qualifications are rendered invisible in comparison. To understand the phenomena in question, we further engage with Essed’s (2002) notion of ‘everyday racism’, which she describes as a process and not a singular act – a multidimensional experience involving ‘unconscious exercises of power predicated in taken for granted privileges of whiteness’ (Essed, 2002, pp. 204–207). She emphasises the importance of examining when, where, and how racism operates and argues that, in order to minimise racial inequalities in society at large, one must look at everyday incidents.

Through conducting Goffmanian analyses of how young Norwegian-Somali parents experience and navigate such everyday incidents, our study also answers a call from Clammer (2015) for studies on *performing ethnicity*. Clammer suggests that ethnic studies should borrow from performance theory (Goffman, [1959]1987), ritual theory, and dramaturgical perspectives as well as the sociology of the body. He defines performance as ‘(...) the creation, presentation or affirmation of an identity (real or assumed) through action’ (p. 2160). Clammer suggests studies on, e.g. religious conversion and its bodily performance, the intersection of gender and religion, and consumerist performance of beauty, including how beauty relates to ethnicity. Ours is, in contrast, a case of *inescapable performance*, with people who deliberately highlight certain ‘national’ and ‘middle-class’ identities to debunk negative portrayals of ethnic identity. They ‘have to’ take such action, for matters of the most

existential nature – the ultimate fear being loss of children. Their performances involve both their own and their children's bodies, e.g. by way of clothing (see later).

We also engage with Vassenden's (2010) analytical scheme for the study of national and ethnic identities. Vassenden suggests that, when studying such identities (both lived and ascribed), researchers should distinguish between *citizenship*, *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture* (ways of acting, being, and thinking) – analytically. For our participants, presenting themselves as resourceful, middle-class, and *Norwegian* parents is essential.

Methods and data

The overall aim of our study was to understand how perceptions of the CWS form within migrant communities. We collected data from June to December 2016 in Oslo and from January to March 2017 in Somalia. In addition to observations, participation at seminars (etc.), numerous informal conversations, and focus-group discussions, data consist of approximately 32 h of in-depth interviews. The location for the first fieldwork was the District of 'Old Oslo' (Gamle Oslo), particularly the Grønland area. Although no longer the main residential area of migrants in Oslo, Old Oslo still has a large migrant population: Among 46,290 residents (2013), 38% are immigrants or their children (Høydahl, 2014). Moreover, Grønland is an institutional centre for many minorities; four of Oslo's five purpose-built mosques are located there, and smaller mosques and ethnic/migrant associations abound, as do Somali cafés and shops. Somalis are the largest immigrant group in the district, with 2670 people (ibid.).

Although an important fieldwork location, collection of data was far from restricted to Grønland. Several interviews, especially with second-generation parents, were undertaken outside the area. Access to the milieu and to interviewees was facilitated by Handulle being born in Somalia and raised in Norway. Her insider status provided access in ways that outsiders would not have. Participants typically assumed that she shared their experiences of marginalisation, lack of belonging/acceptance in Norwegian society. Some even warned her about how life will change when she becomes a parent.

In Oslo, Handulle initially spent time at Somali cafes and shops. She contacted a Somali newspaper, which published a request for participation. Information was also shared on social media. Moreover, Handulle attended events held by Somali organisations, which included international child development programme courses for fathers, a women's social club, gatherings at the mosque, debates about elections in Somalia and themed evenings about Somalis' situation in Oslo. Several events had the CWS as its topic.

During the Oslo fieldwork, Handulle heard numerous stories about people who returned to Somalia because of fears of losing their children to the CWS. She thus decided to extend fieldwork to one region in Somalia, the name of which is undisclosed to ensure anonymity. Contrary to expectations, the returnees whom she interviewed did not report such fears as motivation for moving back. However, they presented the exact same narratives about encounters with institutions such as school and kindergartens as the parents who live in Norway. We present further details on this in a forthcoming article.

In addition to informal conversations, observations, and field notes from both locations, Handulle conducted nine individual interviews and nine group conversations in Oslo, and 13 individual interviews in Somalia. While our sample covers both first- and second-generation parents, this paper focus on the latter, who were born or raised in Norway. (Data from first-generation parents form important background.) This paper thus focus on two group interviews (two participants in each), and seven individual interviews in Norway, plus six individual interviews in Somalia. The sample of 17 parents is gender-balanced (nine mothers). Occupations and educations include social workers, lawyers, dentists, engineers, and university students. Participants are between 26 and 35 years old, and have on average three children, in kindergarten and/or primary school.

Handulle conducted all interviews face-to-face. Interviews with the parents for this paper were typically conducted in a mixture of Norwegian and Somali, reflecting the bilingualism of both the researcher and the interviewees. Open-ended questions guided the interviews, which centred on e.g. perceptions and experiences of the CWS; views on Norwegian parenthood; social networks; transnational connections and information flows. Questions about the CWS typically spurred participants to talk about schools/kindergarten, and in detail.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis consisted of careful reading of field notes and transcriptions to identify dominant themes. We coded for themes such as parenthood, childhood, belonging/identification, social class, notions of 'Norwegianness', and social mobility.

Findings

The second-generation parents emphasise strongly that the Somali ethnic/racial stigma is a heavy one, and 'inescapable'. The data is homogenous, in the sense that all participants emphasised the importance of showing competence within Norwegian middle-class culture. They all typically utilised the same performative strategies in their encounters. Although we have no reason to doubt the parents' sincerity, we must underline that we do not have corresponding data from school/kindergarten personnel, which means that we cannot be conclusive about whether the parents' claims about discrimination reflect factual events or just suspicions of discrimination. However, the 'truth' of stories is to some extent irrelevant. 'True' or not, their experiences or suspicions of prejudice guide their choices in several domains of life, such as where to reside. They typically want to avoid areas with a high number of migrant or Somali families. They are highly attentive to the potential consequences of such choices. Knowing that Somalis (and Muslims) are subject to special scrutiny in Norwegian society, they suspect that such scrutiny will pertain to them too, despite their being socially mobile, resourceful parents. All these deliberations form an important backdrop to their encounters with kindergartens/schools.

Below, we identify three stages in parents' engagement with school and kindergarten personnel. These stages include: (i) preparation of the child(ren) and of self, (ii) actual face-to-face encounters, and (iii) debriefing the encounter, where parents reflect on their encounter and take measures to prevent (future) misconceptions.

Preparation of the child

Participants commonly highlighted the importance of their children having all the 'correct' things needed to make a good impression, including clean backpacks, expensive 'enough' clothes, and well prepared food. This involves a process of carefully preparing what parents believe will be deemed 'correct' in the eyes of school/kindergarten employees. Huda's statements are illustrative:

Huda: I worry about the food my kids take to kindergarten and what the staff will think. I worry whether they think it is not good or varied or nutritious enough. For instance, my daughter is very picky when it comes to food. I know that I could give her two slices of bread with mackerel in tomato sauce and one with something else, so it could be varied. But I know she won't eat it. She likes cheese and especially melted cheese. Even though I know what's best for my child that doesn't matter. I have to make sure I never send her [to kindergarten] with the same thing [i.e. same food as the day before]. I am afraid of how they [staff] will perceive me. I feel we [Somalis] cannot make any mistakes.

Huda knows how Norwegian society and childhood welfare institutions work. Still, she is anxious. We would expect such distress from newly arrived immigrant parents, because of language barriers and expectations that may be hard to understand. During fieldwork, Handulle heard numerous stories of first-generation parents who failed to understand information given by teachers. Those not proficient in the Norwegian language often misunderstood information about, e.g. school trips and need for extra clothes or an extra lunch packet from home. (Providing extra clothing is paramount in Norwegian kindergartens and primary schools, because of the amount of outdoor time). When told to pack

extra clothes or food for a school trip, many newcomers did not understand the oral or written information given them. Other misconceptions pertained to how ones prepares a 'Norwegian' lunch packet rather than traditional Somali food, which (according to our interviewees) teachers do not consider nutritious enough. Furthermore, the need for proper clothing in relation to weather changes is easily misunderstood. Whereas these are things that newcomers are often interested in *learning* about, the parents in this paper, who all grew up in Norway, know them by heart. Still, they often express the same distress as Huda.

What concerned them was thus not a lack of knowledge of 'Norwegian' parenting, but rather their suspicions that teachers or other personnel would interpret the behaviour, appearances, clothes, etc. of their children, *as if they did not have the knowledge*. Khadra, a 34-year-old dentist, compares herself to native parents.

Khadra: You observe the composition of parents [in school]. For example, you see two [white Norwegian] parents – maybe the dad owns a business and the mom is working somewhere. They are well educated and have good finances. Their children look healthy, and happy. I automatically think that never in a million years would they have received a note of concern from the CWS. I feel that appearance carries a lot of weight.

Parents described feelings of anxiety and distress, which lead them to carefully prepare their children for school. Participants typically emphasised the importance of making a good impression through, for example, buying expensive clothes. Clothing seems to be especially important in relation to school (Norwegian children do not wear school uniforms), perhaps because parents do not interact with grade school staff as much as with kindergarten staff. Whereas parents accompany children to kindergarten, most children walk to grade school themselves. Regardless of institution, clothing is a visible sign of good ('Norwegian') parenting which parents hope will detach them from the racial marker of 'Somaliness'; expensive clothing is used as a sign to counter ethnic stigma. Crucially, second-generation parents typically believe they are more likely than native parents to be reported to CWS. To prevent any bad impression, nutritious food, clean backpacks and nice, expensive clothing are used as signs.

Preparation of self

After ensuring that their children will make a good impression when they go off to school, or when dropped off at kindergarten – wearing 'correct' clothing and bringing 'correct' lunch – parents prepare themselves, psychologically. They carefully plan how they will act, speak and behave when meeting teachers and assistants. These preparations, apparently quite exhaustive, pertain to both institutions, but are most acute in relation to kindergarten.

A day in a Norwegian kindergarten starts and ends with a specific situation – the drop-off/pick-up procedure. Parents and personnel typically greet each other; the personnel may sit down and welcome the child, and chitchat with the parent about all sorts of things, but especially about the child. In the morning, parents inform the staff about how the child is doing, and if there is anything special – did s/he sleep well, eat well, is s/he being picked up at an unusual time, etc. In the afternoons, information goes the other way, and the staff informs parents about how the day unfolded: the day's activities, whom did the child play with, how did s/he eat, etc., and for the youngest children, how long was his/her nap. Although parents in general will want to make a good impression in these encounters, they ideally contain trust and intimacy, from the perspectives of both parents and staff. Some parents, migrants and others, may find them distressful, but these moments can also make a relaxing couple of minutes before one rushes to work. For the parents in this paper, these encounters are anything but relaxing. On the contrary, they entail mustering up strength and bracing oneself in advance. When they park the car or step off the bus, they go through the impending situation in their minds, and try to plan and envision how the interaction will unfold.

- Naima: There is generally a lot of negative focus on Somalis, and you cannot take the liberty of having a bad day. You have to be on the ball, the kids have to look good, you have to look good and it goes like that.
- Interviewer: What do you mean?
- Naima: Well, if my kids come one day with uncombed hair or bad clothes, they [personnel] would probably have a bad image of me, and as Somalis, we cannot afford that. Because if there is something wrong, it is so easy for them to say, 'oh, it's so typical immigrant', or 'it's so typical Somalis'. I have worked in a kindergarten and heard such comments. And it's like that, the one day you might have a bad day, you do not get the same excuse as the others (...) So you would prefer to be on guard as much as possible. Although sometimes you just want to breathe ... I usually say that Norwegians should know that I am really a Norwegian under this hijab. [32-year-old teacher]

Interviewees repeatedly expressed frustration about how draining it is constantly to think about how kindergarten employees perceive them. Naima talks about being downgraded and prejudged. By taking precautions, she hopes that the kindergarten personnel will not pay much attention to her being Somali. Other interactional strategies include remembering to smile, putting their mobile phone in silent mode, and thinking through how they talk, e.g. not loudly, to avoid substantiating ethnic stereotypes. It is of course common for parents to put their mobile phones in silent mode before they pick up their children in kindergarten, and considered common courtesy. However, these parents do so out of suspicion that personnel will interpret any breach of conduct in light of ethnic/racial stigma.

The encounter

Although interviewees seldom expressed having faced racism or overt discrimination, all agreed that Somali identity is associated with stereotypes. It is, in short, a stigma. They often referred to media discourses on immigration and Somalis and their low socioeconomic status. Negative narratives about immigrants and Somalis in particular is backdrop to parents' suspicion that teachers and kindergarten personnel undermine them as parents.

- Hassan: I think many [school, kindergarten, health clinic, etc.] personnel expect less of me because I am Somali (...) That I just send my kids to kindergarten or school, without expecting anything from them [staff] (...) Because apparently, all Somalis have six or eight children and do not have time to follow up their children.

One way to cope is by 'overcompensating' in ordinary activities, as Nasir shows us below. As mentioned above, small talk is important between parents and kindergarten personnel. It may be something that most parents simply do. Nasir, in contrast, carefully plans it, to give a good impression:

- Nasir: I must have a good relationship and communication with them [staff] I must even get to know them to figure out how they think [...] When they get to know you, it is easier to relate to you as a human being. Therefore, it is a conscious choice. I seek to get to know them and every day I do small talk, and that is very important.
- Interviewer: Why is it important in a kindergarten?
- Nasir: After talking to someone for a period, almost every single day, you will become more familiar and it may lead to longer conversations. ... I know that kindergarten employees wonder a lot about what kind of parent I am. (Nasir, male social worker).

Practically every interviewee stated that they want to be perceived as 'just a normal parent', one who is in command of everyday language and chitchat. Participants believed they had to work for it, by frequently engaging with the staff and hoping that thereby their ethnicity would matter less. In so doing, they emphasise their 'cultural Norwegianness' (cf. Vassenden, 2010), in order to make the ethnic and racial Somaliness (or 'non-Norwegianness') matter less.

A related strategy is to draw attention to occupational and educational statuses. Hodan recalls from her time as a kindergarten parent: *'I had several cards in my hand. I was self-employed, educated,*

active in politics, active in the local community and to top it off I did not wear the hijab'. Several interviewees told us how they deliberately talk about their education and their jobs to teachers/assistants. Doing so yield discomfort – a feeling they share with most Norwegians; highlighting social status collides with the moral and social requirements of egalitarianism (Vassenden & Jonvik, 2019). However, they felt they had no choice. Alternatively, perhaps middle-class status is such an effective countermove to the stereotype of lower-class, not well integrated Somalis, that the temptation to talk about their social position is too great to resist.

This does not guarantee a stop to one's worries, though. Some parents claimed that it is not 'enough', and described a supplementary strategy; they would sometimes deliberately complain about matters in school/kindergarten, even to some extent be confrontational towards employees. This too is something they do to appear resourceful, even though they know there is a risk that teachers will interpret it as reflecting not an engaged parent, but a troublesome one. *'I try to have a dialogue with the teachers all the time. I know it can be perceived as nagging, but I feel I must in some way appear resourceful'* (Hodan). Furthermore, concerns about self-presentation as a resourceful parent also influences the leisure activities in which they enrol their children. Some were preoccupied with sending their children to activities such as ballet and horse riding. These activities were selected not merely because of the child's interests, but also because of the impression, they would make on school and kindergarten employees: middle-class.

Parents apply these strategies vis-à-vis not only staff members, but also the others parents.

Debriefing the encounter

After drop-off/pick-up, parents reflect back on the interaction with the employees. Some spend a lot of time and resources on this. What was said during the conversation, and why?

Debriefing occurs especially after situations where the parents felt that their parenting skills had been pinned to ethnicity or religion. Even though teachers or other personnel had not said anything explicitly, it could be unspoken acts. *'You notice by how people talk to you, how they behave towards you, all these little things ...'* (Hassan). Many participants referred to subtle snubs, which made them uneasy. Hassan refers to unspoken acts. Others dwelt on spoken words: *'(...) Some of the questions they ask, you think like "what do you want ... " "Why is she [kindergarten employee] asking me that question?" You get a bit insecure'* (Hannah). Parents related these experiences to 'Somaliness' and Muslim identity. Carrying these markers in their everyday lives is clearly a burden, which they also connect to their past experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination. This makes them unsure about how they are perceived as parents. Hence, they evaluate the encounter, which includes figuring out how to act the next time, how to repair mishaps and miscommunications, and prevent future ones. Others take another step, by deliberately choosing written communication, with the aim of 'collecting evidence'.

Asha: Sometimes I feel I get challenged because I have a different skin colour (...) and I do everything in writing. I do everything by email or text message. I write everything because I do not want anything to be used against me.

The backdrop to Asha collecting evidence is the legal obligations of kindergartens and schools to report to the CWS. There is power involved: not primarily power exercised, but someone's *capacity* to exercise power (cf. Lukes, 2013). In the end, this is what makes these parents anxious, and the hidden threat underlying the preceding findings – coupled with lack of emotional/interactional freedom to be just an 'ordinary parent'. Unlike recent newcomers from Somalia, the parents in this paper are not outright afraid of the CWS to the extent of fearing easily losing custody of their children. Knowing the legislation and their rights, they stated clearly that they would be able to deal with a note of concern. What seems to distress them is the possibility of *intrusion* and of being questioned. There is also stigma attached to CWS engagement; a different stigma to the ones discussed so far, yet one that seriously threatens a parent's face and selfhood. The discomfort of potential intrusion, and

thus threat to parenthood, makes parents take what they believe are necessary measures, like evaluating the encounters and 'collecting evidence'.

Matters extend beyond evaluation. On the weekend, families intentionally do 'Norwegian' (middle-class) activities. During fieldwork, Handulle heard stories about the 'teddy bear activity', which is common in (Norwegian) primary schools. The class shares a stuffed toy, which the children take turns borrowing home over the weekend, together with a notebook that is the teddy bear's diary. Typically, families will be expected to write a page or two about the teddy bear's weekend. The intention is to build a communal class environment. The flip side is that all families will have one of their weekends on display for teachers, children and other families in the class (all of whom are free to skim or study the texts). When the child returns to school, the teachers may also ask what the teddy bear did during the weekend. Although the parents did not refer to the notebook specifically, the activity caused anxiety among both first and second-generation parents. Some said they felt they had to do a 'Norwegian activity', such as hiking in the mountains, to portray a good image for the family. They were, with Goffman's words ([1959]1987), conscious about the backstage as a preparation stage for front-stage encounters.

Discussion and conclusion

These second-generation Somali parents struggle in school/kindergarten situations, where they construct performative strategies to counter racial scrutiny. Dealing with embodied stigma – Somaliness – is crucial prior to, during and after drop-off/pick-up. It becomes an 'art form', which parents cultivate. When successfully performed, it provides cues that shows the family's 'Norwegianness', and resourcefulness. Making a good impression might be considered normal parenting behaviour when engaging with schools and kindergartens. For these parents, it entails planning and thought far beyond what is common. Whereas many parents display ordinariness in these encounters without reflecting much upon it, to the parents in this study, these encounters involve considerable deliberations, even distress. The meticulousness with which they plan their behaviour, carry out the interaction, and reflect on it afterwards is striking. Performance of Norwegian middle-class identity becomes a matter of great concern.

Goffman provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding these issues. As he states ([1963]1990), the point of *covering* is not so much to reject one's stigma, as it is to make it less noticeable. Parents never seem to reject their Somali identity, but then again, they lack the option of hiding ethnic markers in the way that white migrants may do (Becker, 2015; Valenta, 2009). They cannot pass as non-Somali. To make the Somali stigma less intrusive, parents emphasise a Norwegian middle-class identity strongly. Such impression management resembles what Du Bois (1903) characterises as 'double consciousness', as this performance entails acknowledging their visible markers while simultaneously performing self-checks, in order to prevent potential racial prejudice and ensure that (white) school/kindergarten personnel do not measure their parenting skills and the child's behaviour through 'ethnic lenses'.

Beyond the frontstage encounters, parents continue their performance in weekend activities, for instance, doing 'Norwegian activities' like hiking. They believe that such activities, even though they are outside the school/kindergarten, and thus not witnessed, will help them portray a Norwegian middle-class image. In Clammer's (2015) analogy of performing ethnicity, some engage in performance to the point where it becomes an obsession and a distressing factor in their everyday lives. The intentional and careful choices of 'correct activities' for their children was a striking finding. Parents put their cultural capital on display in order to be on equal footing with native Norwegian parents, and deliberately break with egalitarian norms (Vassenden & Jonvik, 2019) when they draw attention to their occupational/educational achievements. Our interviewees seem to believe that native parents have an unspoken privilege, due to whiteness; their 'white' peers can engage in the drop-off/pick-up situations without having to reflect much upon how they are perceived. This feeds into

the established insight that whiteness bears the hallmarks of invisibility and transparency (Garner, 2006).

Our data preclude conclusions about whether employees actually hold prejudice against Somali parents. Possibly, they exercise unconscious bias, but, largely, that is beside the point. For these parents, it is enough to *suspect* that employees hold prejudices. Knowing that professionals have the power and obligation to *potentially* report to CWS (capacity, rather than exercise) and knowing the content of the Somali stigma, parents may not allow themselves the risk of acting *as if* teachers do *not* hold racial prejudice (cf. Essed, 2002).

In line with previous research on migrants in Norway (Berg et al., 2017; Fylkesnes et al., 2015) and the media attention given to the topic (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019), our participants are sceptical of the CWS. However, the reasons are not fear of custody takeover, lack of knowledge, or a product of their cultural backgrounds – issues that are common among newcomers. Rather, this pertains to perceived stigma of ethnicity/race. Previous research (Andersson, 2010; Midtbøen, 2014) shows that children of immigrants may be subjected to exclusion and discrimination even though they, being brought up in Norway, have all the relevant cultural knowledge. This is demonstrated in our study as parents perceiving that the possibility of being reported to CWS is due to prejudice, which is the main reason why parents meticulously plan encounters with schools/kindergartens. They try to impress the employees in order to pre-empt notes of concern. Their performative strategies are not only stressful in their lives but might also have an adverse effect if teachers interpret them as mirroring a lack of parenting skills, especially if parents deploy critical strategies. Whether and how the ethnic/racial marker actually influences the work of teachers is a question that is impossible to determine and on which more research is needed – that is, whether and how the ethnic backgrounds of children influence kindergarten teachers' considerations and decisions to submit a note of concern. However, regardless of how teachers actually view these parents, the result of perceived stigma, by way of parents' actions, may be the same. Future research should address these questions, possibly by doing observational studies in kindergartens.

Notes

1. <https://www.ssb.no/bygg-bolig-og-eiendom/artikler-og-publikasjoner/lavere-eierandel-blant-innvandrerne>.
2. <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/list/barneverng>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Ayan Handulle is a research fellow at the University of Stavanger, dept. of Social Studies. Her research is within social work and child welfare with focus on perceptions of the Norwegian child welfare services (CWS) within migrant communities. Handulle's PhD-project investigates whether transnational information flow across the borders and transnational networks have an impact on the Somali parents' perceptions of the Norwegian child welfare services. Handulle's research area covers both first and second-generation Somali parents in Norway and Somalia (returnees).

Anders Vassenden is Professor of sociology at the University of Stavanger, dept. of Media and Social Sciences. He holds a doctorate in sociology from the University of Oslo. Vassenden's main research is within ethnic relations, child welfare studies, housing studies and cultural sociology. His broad orientation to such diverse areas of research is reflected in

that he has published extensively across academic fields, in journals such as *Housing Studies*, *Cultural Sociology*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Child & Family Social Work*.

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