



What are the perspectives of children in child protection work among social workers in Norway and Chile?

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines universal standards for children's welfare and position in society. Among other aspects, the convention advocates for a balance between seeing children as part of a family and as competent individuals in their own right. Nonetheless, countries have different conditions for meeting the rights outlined in the convention. This study explores social workers' perspectives of children in child protection work in Norway and Chile. Q methodology was applied, as it is suitable for exploring and comparing perspectives. Thirty-eight social workers participated in the study (21 in Chile and 17 in Norway). Analysis revealed three distinct perspectives, with perspectives 1 and 2 predominately held by Chilean participants and perspective 3 by Norwegian participants. Perspectives 1 and 2 understand children through relational and structural lenses. Workers with these perspectives believe children's needs are insufficiently met in family practices and at policy levels. Nevertheless, while perspective 1 tries to compensate for these inadequacies by giving children agency in local child protection work through child–social worker interactions, perspective 2 sees limited space for children's agency in child protection work due to structural restraints. Perspective 3 sees children's independence and believes children have agency in child protection work and family practices. Results are discussed in light of ideas regarding agency and child protection and welfare characteristics of Chile and Norway.

1. Introduction

As argued by James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), children are structurally differentiated within societies, and their needs and rights are variously ascribed and restricted along dominant ideologies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) can be understood as a harmonising factor for this variability, as it outlines universal standards for children's welfare and position in society (Hämäläinen, Littlechild, Chytil, Šramatá, & Jovelin, 2012). The CRC requires governments to commit to these standards and contribute to reducing potential variance in political and policy decision-making practices for children across societies. The CRC encompasses a broad array of rights and balances aspects like children's vulnerability and agency, welfare and participation and acknowledging them as part of a family and as single individuals.

While individual countries collaborate to promote children's rights worldwide, countries have different resources to meet these rights and are asked to undertake measures "to the maximum extent of their available resources" (CRC, art. 4). This makes international variation in how the CRC is enforced in practice plausible. Comparative research is relevant in this regard, as it can function as a springboard for reflecting on divergent perspectives (Bryman, 2016) of children and children's rights. Engaging in this type of research may uncover similarities, differences and taken-for-granted meanings that could otherwise remain

unattended. For example, Rasmusson, Hyvönen, Nygren, and Khoo (2010) found substantial differences in how "child-centred" social work was conveyed in the training materials and guidelines relevant to child protection work in Australia, Canada, and Sweden. Moreover, how policy comes into action may be best studied close-up through specific levels of practice (Nygren, White, & Ellingsen, 2018). This makes social workers' perspectives of children central because, as "street-level bureaucrats", social workers translate policy and other guiding documents into practice, thus producing *real* policies (Lipsky, 2010) that affect children and families in contact with child protection services.

This article uses Q methodology (QM) to explore social workers' subjective perspectives of children in child protection work in Chile and Norway. It is informed by childhood studies and specifically acknowledges childhood as a sociocultural rather than universally or biologically determined variable (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). The starting point is that multiple competing perspectives of children may coexist (Graham, 2011) and ultimately affect how children are perceived and treated in child protection work. To understand social workers' perspectives of children, ideas regarding *agency* are useful. Agency orients attention to social workers' perceptions of their capacity to act according to their ideal perspectives of children and how these perspectives relate to understandings of children as competent social actors, which is a cornerstone of the CRC.

This study relates to a larger NORFACE funded research project on

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Family Complexity in Social Work (FACSK) that explores and compares social workers' understandings of family and family policy across eight countries. Norway and Chile were two of the countries strategically selected due to, for example, assumed differences in welfare regime types (Nygren et al., 2018). In the FACSK project, social workers from four service areas, including child protection, participated in focus group interviews, where they deliberated on a vignette describing a complex family situation (see, e.g. Ellingsen, Studsrød, & Muñoz-Guzmán, 2019; Oltedal & Nygren, 2019; Studsrød, Ellingsen, Muñoz-Guzmán, & Espinoza, 2018).

This article extends the scope of the FACSK project by drawing on data from a distinct QM study which explicitly explores social workers' perspectives of *children* in child protection work in Norway and Chile. QM can be understood as a qualitative method which uses quantitative techniques to reveal some of the main perspectives of a group of participants about a subject (Watts & Stenner, 2012). QM is suitable for comparative research because it explores and compares differences and similarities in subjective perspectives both within and across groups of participants (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

With the exception of Nybom (2005), limited comparative research has explored social workers' views or perspectives of children in child protection work. Most comparative research published in English has targeted social workers' reflections about specific issues related to children, such as child participation (e.g. Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2015; Križ & Skivenes, 2017). Moreover, the aforementioned comparative research was conducted within Northern European and Anglo-American countries, illustrating "regional" research gaps. Some research contributions in the FACSK project, however, have compared child protection workers' perspectives of family and children in Chile, Norway, and additional countries (Ellingsen et al., 2019; Oltedal & Nygren, 2019; Studsrød et al., 2018). Similar tendencies are identified across these three research articles, notably that social workers in Chile are more inclined to be oriented towards the family as a unit of analysis, while social workers in Norway are more oriented towards the individual child.

This article extends this limited but growing body of comparative research on social workers' perspectives of children in child protection work in Latin American and European contexts by exploring the perspectives of 38 social workers in Chile and Norway. Before presenting the methodology and study findings, the contexts and theoretical framework will be provided to help better understand the findings in a larger context.

2. Background

2.1. Contexts and child protection systems

Child protection services can be understood as structures and interventions that have a state mandate to intervene in children's and families' lives when children's well-being is at risk (Waterhouse & McGhee, 2015; Wilson, Hean, Abebe, & Heaslip, 2020). Child protection characteristics are however found to vary across countries (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). Gilbert et al. (2011) suggested three orientations—child protection, family service, and child-focused—but argued that these orientations insufficiently describe country-specific child protection characteristics, as orientations may blend, coexist, and shift (Gilbert et al., 2011).

Although Latin American countries are not part of Gilbert et al. (2011) analysis, Chilean child protection services have been described as child protection oriented, with recently adopted practices that are more family service orientated by focusing on family dysfunction and therapeutic interventions (Studsrød et al., 2018; Ursin, Oltedal, and Muñoz-Guzmán, 2017). Norwegian child protection services have been identified as shifting from a family service to a child-focused orientation (Gilbert et al., 2011), where the child is positioned to have an independent relation to the state. This may, in turn, lead to

defamilialisation, reducing family and parental responsibility for raising children (Studsrød et al., 2018). These orientations are important when exploring perspectives of children in child protection work because, although Norway and Chile have ratified the CRC, different child protection orientations may promote differences in how children's rights are balanced and, consequently, how children are viewed (e.g. a child at risk, in need of family belonging, a child's need to be heard).

Chile adopted a neoliberal market-driven economy enforced during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990) (Muñoz Arce, 2019). While the country has experienced economic growth, Chile's income inequality is among the highest of the OECD countries (OECD, 2020). Social programmes are targeted, and education, pensions, health, and other welfare services are primarily privatised (Muñoz Arce, 2019). Such characteristics have associated Chile with a familialised welfare regime (Nygren et al., 2018), with the state taking a liberal and noninterventionist approach towards family life, whereby the responsibility for well-being rests more on family resources and income (Hantrais, 2004).

Child protection services in Chile are mainly managed by private institutions, partly financed and supervised by the state (the National Service of Minors [SENAME]). However, statutory subsidies are insufficient, and child protection services depend on charity for funding, which likely impacts service quality (García Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014). Services are regulated by various legislation, and there are discussions about creating an integral legislative framework to protect children's rights. In 2017, the population of children under 18 years of age was approximately 24.2% in Chile (4,259,155) (UNICEF, 2020). About 4.5% (195,099) of the child population (0–18 years) received services from the Chilean child protection services in 2019 (SENAME, 2020).

Norway is characterised by democratic values and a redistributive policy through high taxation, which enables the state to provide a wide array of public welfare services, such as education, health, pensions and other social services. In contrast to Chile, Norway's income inequality is among the lowest of the OECD countries (OECD, 2020). Norway has been associated with a defamilialised welfare regime (Nygren et al., 2018) due to, for example, the broad array of tax-funded social services and a shared responsibility between state and families on family-policy issues. Moreover, the Nordic countries have shifted away from the family unit to the promotion of more individualistic values (Hantrais, 2004).

In Norway, the state and municipalities have a joint responsibility for child protection services. Child protection services are regulated by the Child Welfare Act and have a dual mandate to support families in preventing neglect and abuse and taking necessary compulsory actions in cases of child maltreatment. On 1 January 2019, the population of children under 18 years old was 21.1% in Norway (1,122,508) (Statistisk sentralbyrå [SSB], 2020a). In Norway, about 4.3% (47,899) of children (0–18 years) received child protection services in 2018 (SSB, 2020b). While a more interventionist approach could be expected in a defamilialised welfare state exemplified by Norway, Chile and Norway do not differ significantly in terms of the proportion of children receiving child protection services. That said, caution must be taken when comparing statistics across countries, and there may be multiple reasons for these seeming equalities in the number of children in the child protection system. For example, variations can be found in the reasons for entering the system. While the most common reason in Norway is lack of parental skills (22%) (Bufdir, 2020), in Chile, it was maltreatment or abuse (57.2%) (SENAME, as cited in García Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014). Lack of parental skills is a rather vague label that may or may not suggest a lower threshold for child protection intervention in Norway. Hence, drawing conclusions can be difficult regarding whether the thresholds for child protection interventions into family life differ between Norway and Chile based on these statistics. Every country has country-specific challenges in terms of social and psychosocial problems connected to the needs of child protection

(Hämäläinen et al., 2012). Moreover, while the various welfare and child protection characteristics for Norway and Chile may illustrate overarching structures and policy logics, their links to social workers' perspectives of children in child protection work are less clear.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Ideas regarding *agency* are used to discuss social workers' perspectives of children in child protection work in Norway and Chile. Agency is a key concept in childhood studies and can be understood as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2012, p. 3). A key notion in childhood studies is seeing children and youth as *competent* social actors and advocating for their agency in constructing their own worlds (James et al., 1998). The rise of agency has been linked to a shift from a Marxist notion of structural dominance to a belief in the independent capable responsible individual, which is characteristic of today's neoliberalism and modes of governance (Asad, 2000). However, today, there are more anti-individualistic understandings of agency pointing towards "agency as socially produced and culturally constructed activities" (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 97).

Correspondingly, Klocker (2007) claimed that structures, contexts, and relationships may act as "thinners" and "thickeners" of children's agency and suggested a continuum of agency along which all people are placed. While *thick agency* involves "having the latitude to act within a broad range of options", *thin agency* involves "decisions and everyday actions that are carried out in highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives" (Klocker, 2007, p. 85). Some argue that agency is relational and best understood as a product of interdependence rather than independence (e.g. Raithelhuber, 2016). Social workers may, for example, enable or restrict children's choices based on their perspectives of children. As Norway and Chile are marked by different welfare and child protection characteristics, there may also be dissimilar structural and contextual "thinners" and "thickeners" for children's agency in child protection work.

Just as children's agency is shaped by structures, so is the agency of adults (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Lipsky (2010) "street-level bureaucrat" perspective may illustrate the limits of social workers' agency in the sense that child protection work is performed within a context of constrained resources and contested roles, interests, and functions (Lipsky, 2010). Hence, there are a range of structural thinners of social workers' range of viable choices for actions, and as argued by Morrison et al. (2019),

Child protection social work throws into sharp relief some of the challenges that arise when applying the concept of agency in practice. It brings to the fore the idea that children may be both vulnerable and agentic and the collision between the discourses of children's rights to protection and participation. (p. 109)

This argument points to the entanglement of vulnerability and agency and how different CRC principles may conflict with each other in child protection work. In fact, Morrison et al. (2019) argued that children's agency in child protection work may be best understood as thin due to these entangled considerations. A related term is *ambiguous agency*, which refers to situations where children's agency is contested or when it may threaten social and moral order (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012).

3. Method

This study uses QM to explore social workers' subjective perspectives about children in child protection work. QM has increased in popularity across an array of research disciplines, including social work (see Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010, for an overview of QM in social work research) and child protection research specifically (e.g. Steenbakkers, Ellingsen, Van der Steen, & Grietens, 2018; Wilkins, 2017). QM has also been proven suitable for cross-national comparative

research, for example because shared views are based on statistical similarities between participants' ways of sorting statements and not on researchers' a-priori assumptions about cultural commonalities (Stenner et al., 2006). Specifically, QM aims to reveal clusters of shared subjective feelings, views, perspectives, or experiences among participants. QM studies commonly ask participants to express their perspectives by sorting a set of statements along a dimension (e.g. from "most agree" to "most disagree"). How participants sort these statements is then subjected to correlation and by-person factor analysis, which discloses participants' shared and divergent perspectives (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

3.1. Developing statements for the Q study

Statements in a QM study are derived from an identified "concourse", which can be explained as "the flow of communicability surrounding any topic" (Brown, 1991/1992, p. 3). The concourse may be identified through different sources, such as interviews, relevant literature, and everyday talk. The significant matter is that the concourse reflects various views on the topic to enable different perspectives to emerge (Brown, 1991/1992).

To grasp various perspectives of children and childhood, the concourse in this study was identified through six types of data materials: (i) focus group interview data with child protection social workers in Mexico ($n = 7$), Chile ($n = 4$), and Norway ($n = 15$), all collected by researchers in the FACKS project; (ii) semi-structured interviews with child protection social workers in Norway ($n = 3$); (iii) two dialogue seminars with international social work master's students and; (iv) reflections from child protection experts in Chile and Norway, (v) previous research, and (vi) the CRC. The rationales for including multiple data materials to identify the concourse was to ensure statements were mutually relevant to social workers in Chile and Norway. Moreover, multiple perspectives on children and childhood coexist, for example, in the literature, the CRC, and legislation (Graham, 2011). To enable different perspectives to emerge, it was important that statements covered a broad range of understandings of children.

These data materials comprised a large pool of potential statements. A modified version of the Fisher's balanced block design (Stephenson, 1953) was used to preserve the variation of statements in the identified concourse and to reduce it to a suitable number of statements for QM studies (which is recommended to be somewhere between 40 and 80) (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Statements were grouped into cross-matched themes, and a final set of 39 representative statements were selected (see Table 2). Translations into Norwegian and Spanish were produced by a thorough consultative process with experts on child protection, fluent Spanish speakers, and native Chileans. Additionally, pilots were performed with social workers in Norway ($n = 2$) and Chile ($n = 2$) to ensure relevance and to avoid ambiguity in content or wording.

3.2. Participants

Large numbers of participants are not required in QM studies because QM is more interested in exploring which subjective perspectives exist within a group of participants rather than the prevalence of these perspectives (Brown, 1980). An important consequence is that the results of this study may be generalised to the social workers from which the perspectives were sampled but not to a larger population of social workers, as in survey research (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

The data for this study were collected from May 2017 to February 2018. Participants were recruited from the countries' capitals (Santiago and Oslo), and 21 Chilean (19 females, 2 males)¹ and 17 Norwegian (11

¹ For an analysis of the Chilean data material only, see: Jensen, I. B., Ellingsen, I. T., Studsrød, I., & Garcia Quiroga, M. (2019). Children and childhood in Chile: Social worker perspectives. *Journal of Comparative Social Work*,



Fig. 1. Illustration of a completed Q sort and the Q sorting grid used in this study.

females, 6 males) social workers participated. The 38 participants have different functions in the child protection system; a strategic choice made to explore whether shared and divergent perspectives exist among social workers across services. As definitions and mandates of child protection systems vary across countries, equating these services and translating them into English yields challenges (Gilbert et al., 2011; Pösö, 2014). Nevertheless, the work conducted by the participants can be characterised as reception work, assessment, intervention, rehabilitation, residential care, foster care, and work with young unaccompanied minors. The majority work with assessment and intervention ($n = 23$). Seven Chilean and three Norwegian participants hold leader/coordinator/consultant positions.

3.3. Q sorting procedure

After filling out a questionnaire regarding age, gender, tenure, work tasks, and so forth, participants were asked to sort the 39 statements, which were randomly numbered and printed onto separate cards into a predefined grid (Fig. 1). The grid ranged from + 4 (most like) to - 4 (most unlike) their perspectives or experiences, with a centre (0) signifying statements that were neutral, irrelevant, or triggered ambivalence. Fig. 1 shows that the grid decided the number of statements participants could assign to each ranking position (three statements at the + 4 position, four statements at the + 3 position, etc.). The grid had 39 spaces, one for each of the 39 statements. Asking participants to rank-order statements into a predefined grid may help participants differentiate nuances across statements and hence reveal more finetuned perspectives (Ellingsen et al., 2010; McKeown & Thomas, 2013).

Participants were informed that there was no correct/incorrect way to sort the statements, as the guiding instruction was to sort them according to their individual perspectives and/or experiences. In QM studies, the same statement may elicit different responses from different participants (Watts & Stenner, 2012). To retain a deep and detailed understanding of participants' reflections on the statements and the reason(s) they placed a statement where they did in the grid, the "think-

aloud technique" (Ericsson & Simon, 1984) was deployed. In this study, this involved instructing all participants to read the statements aloud and share their immediate reflection on each of the 39 statement, which elicited a great amount of qualitative data material. Upon completing the Q sorting, participants were asked to elaborate on why some statements were ranked "most like" or "most unlike" their perspective/experience. They were also given the opportunity to add information if they felt aspects were missing because, although efforts were made to develop a representative set of statements covering different perspectives of children, other aspects relevant to this study may not have been included. In general terms, however, participants felt they were able to express their perspectives through the statements provided. The think-aloud reflections and additional participant comments on Q sorts were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and included as data used in the interpretation process.

3.4. Analysis and interpretation

In the analysis, participants' ways of sorting the statements (the Q sorts) were entered into the PQ Method software (Schmolck, 2002) to perform the correlation and by-person factor analysis. High correlations between participants' Q sorts indicate that statements are sorted similarly, while by-person factor analysis identifies significant clusters of shared perspectives among participants (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Clusters of correlations between two or more Q sorts are considered shared perspectives. Different factor solutions (based on principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation) were examined to search for the most informative factor solution for interpretation. A three-factor solution was ultimately selected, with 36 of the 38 participants loading significantly on a factor/perspective. Table 1 illustrates the factor loadings for each participant's Q sort. Two participants, N8 and C20, had a perspective that was split between different factors.

The interpretation process followed the logic of abduction by looking for plausible explanations for the identified perspectives. Attention continually moved between gaining a panoramic overview of the perspectives and how individual statements were ranked for each perspective. Distinguishing statements (underlined factor scores in Table 2) were examined, meaning significantly unique ways of placing

(footnote continued)

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Table 1

Factor matrix with X indicating that the participants' Q sort loads significantly ($p < 0.05$) on the respective perspective and that it explains more than half of the common variance.

| Participants' Q Sort | Perspective 1 | Perspective 2 | Perspective 3 |
|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| C1 | 0.5014 | -0.0313 | 0.5059X |
| C2 | 0.5479X | 0.0106 | 0.3690 |
| C3 | 0.7196X | 0.2387 | -0.0496 |
| C4 | 0.6348X | 0.1023 | 0.2182 |
| C5 | 0.5886X | -0.0459 | 0.3958 |
| C6 | 0.8161X | 0.0598 | 0.1868 |
| C7 | 0.6452X | 0.3166 | 0.0697 |
| C8 | 0.3451 | 0.5802X | -0.0142 |
| C9 | 0.1972 | 0.7220X | 0.1676 |
| C10 | 0.6202X | -0.0262 | 0.0686 |
| C11 | 0.0065 | -0.0001 | 0.3767X |
| C12 | 0.4823X | 0.0341 | 0.1735 |
| C13 | 0.5080X | 0.2045 | 0.2050 |
| C14 | 0.4660X | 0.3827 | 0.1949 |
| C15 | 0.6046X | 0.3846 | 0.2531 |
| C16 | 0.7030X | 0.3376 | -0.0093 |
| C17 | 0.8050X | 0.1278 | 0.0709 |
| C18 | 0.6052X | 0.3266 | 0.1540 |
| C19 | 0.3283 | 0.5181X | 0.1213 |
| C20 | 0.4284 | 0.3016 | 0.4751 |
| C21 | 0.6527X | 0.3907 | 0.1434 |
| N1 | 0.1286 | -0.0204 | 0.5182X |
| N2 | 0.0980 | 0.1083 | 0.5396X |
| N3 | 0.4213 | -0.0547 | 0.5383X |
| N4 | 0.3562 | -0.0824 | 0.5722X |
| N5 | 0.4469 | -0.0990 | 0.6487X |
| N6 | 0.1361 | 0.2901 | 0.6745X |
| N7 | 0.0446 | 0.1494 | 0.7303X |
| N8 | 0.5240 | -0.3952 | 0.5782 |
| N9 | 0.3979 | -0.0952 | 0.5815X |
| N10 | 0.0298 | 0.4225 | 0.4633X |
| N11 | -0.0073 | 0.3177 | 0.7381X |
| N12 | -0.1031 | 0.3097 | 0.7353X |
| N13 | 0.4996X | 0.2223 | 0.2286 |
| N14 | 0.2212 | 0.0742 | 0.7011X |
| N15 | 0.3259 | 0.1171 | 0.6664X |
| N16 | 0.1109 | 0.2112 | 0.6185X |
| N17 | 0.5156 | -0.0519 | 0.6418X |
| Total significant Q sorts | 16 | 3 | 17 |

C = Chilean participant and
N = Norwegian participant.

statements for each perspective. In addition, the "crib sheet system" was used, which allows statements with a particular position within a perspective to be identified (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This system entailed identifying four categories of statements for each perspective: (1) statements ranked higher or (2) lower by one factor than by any of the other factors, and statements given the (3) highest and (4) lowest rankings on each factor. This system makes sure all perspectives are attended to in similar ways in the interpretation process (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Lastly, participants' qualitative reflections on statements during and after the Q sorting procedure were pivotal to interpreting the perspectives.

3.5. Ethics

Research ethics were secured in both countries. The QM study was declared to the Norwegian Data Protection Official of Research and it received the necessary approval (project number 49334). In Chile, a researcher at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile was involved in securing ethical requirements as part of the FACSCK project. All participants were given written and verbal information about the project prior to participation, and all gave their written consent. Participants did not provide identifiable information about children or cases. The author was present during all Q sorts, and in Chile, a research assistant who spoke Spanish fluently was also present to safeguard ethical issues

and to prevent potential language-related misunderstandings.

4. Results

Three perspectives of children were identified in this study (Table 2). Perspective 1 was defined by the views of 15 Chilean and one Norwegian social worker, perspective 2 was defined by the views of three Chilean social workers, and perspective 3 was defined by the views of 15 Norwegian and two Chilean social workers. Correlations between perspectives are moderate, highest between perspectives 1 and 2 (0.525) and lowest between perspectives 2 and 3 (0.344), indicating some shared characteristics across perspectives. A shared characteristic is that social workers across all perspectives have an ideal of giving children the opportunity to contribute (for a complete list of consensus statements, see statements marked with * in Table 2). Notwithstanding, there are distinctive characteristics for each of the three perspectives. A description of the perspectives is presented below, with inclusion of participant quotes on the statements to add richness. The letters and numbers following the quotes are used to designate participants (e.g. C12 for Chilean participant number 12 and N11 for Norwegian participant number 11). See also how participants' Q sorts loaded on the three perspectives in Table 1.

4.1. Perspective 1: Children as relational agents

Prominent characteristics for the perspective held of children among the workers (15 Chileans and 1 Norwegian) associated with perspective 1 are that children are seen through relational and structural lenses. These workers believe children's needs are insufficiently met in family practices and at policy levels, and try to compensate for these inadequacies by giving children agency in relational child protection work.

They see children as part of a larger context, including the family, above seeing them as single individuals (1, +4 [statement number and perspective ranking in Table 2]):

Children are [in a way] inserted into a family group, into a community, into an environment. Therefore, all their characteristics, whether positive or negative, have an origin or an explanation in their environment and in their family group. Considering the child isolated, only as an individual, will not allow an effective intervention process in the long run. (C16).

This account emphasises the importance of seeing children in relation to the family, community, and environment, not only to understand children but also to perform effective child protection work

This, however, does not exclude these workers from seeing children's competence in their own right and advocating for children's agency in child protection work. They disagree with the statement that children are not sufficiently independent to make their own decisions (8, -1), and they do not think it is difficult to trust what children and youth are saying (2, -4; 17, -3). Moreover, these workers strongly disagree that many social workers talk with children out of obligation (21, -3). One worker stated,

I love what I do. [...] That is, for me it is not an obligation to talk to a child. It is part of my job, and I feel that, in addition, it allows me to improve the living conditions of the child as much as possible. The issue of contact with the child, of talking with the child, is vital. (C2)

Perspective 1 participants also place importance on communicating the child's viewpoint in *written documents* (16, +3) and letting children read what social workers write about them (25, +1). Moreover, these workers believe it is important to document all details in the case so that children, with time, get to know their own history (29, +2).

While these workers advocate for children's agency in child protection work, they do not believe children's needs are sufficiently met in family practices and at policy levels. For example, these Chilean

Table 2
Statement rankings for the three perspectives.

| No. | Statements | Perspectives | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 1 | In the child protection sector, it is first and foremost important to view the child as part of the family and not as a single individual | +4 | +4 | <u>-1</u> |
| 2 | It's often difficult to trust what teenagers are saying, because I'm not always sure they are telling me the truth | <u>-4</u> | <u>+2</u> | <u>-3</u> |
| 3 | Children with other ethnical-cultural backgrounds are less seen and heard in child protection practice than other children | <u>+2</u> | <u>0</u> | <u>-4</u> |
| 4 | I think children inherit their parents' problems | <u>+1</u> | <u>-1</u> | <u>+2</u> |
| 5* | Children that on own initiative express their personal opinions get to participate to a greater extent than children that don't do it | +2 | +1 | +3 |
| 6 | The worst that can happen to a child is that we separate him/her from his/her family | 0 | <u>+2</u> | 0 |
| 7 | I never trust second-hand information about how the child is doing, therefore I always talk to the child myself | <u>0</u> | <u>-2</u> | -1 |
| 8 | Children are not sufficiently independent to make their own decisions | <u>-1</u> | <u>+2</u> | <u>0</u> |
| 9 | Frequently the social worker defines the interests and needs of the child (and not the children themselves) | 0 | <u>-4</u> | +1 |
| 10 | There exists the danger that children's needs are not covered in certain forms dependent on the family compositions | <u>-2</u> | <u>+3</u> | <u>+1</u> |
| 11* | I always give the child opportunity to contribute, independent of age and maturity | +4 | +4 | +4 |
| 12 | As a social worker I think that it is more difficult to work with children in families from higher social classes than lower social classes | <u>-2</u> | <u>0</u> | <u>+2</u> |
| 13 | Some children receive help more easily because they appeal more to the social worker | -3 | -2 | <u>+2</u> |
| 14* | It's important for me to hear the parents' story before I hear the children's story | -2 | -3 | -3 |
| 15* | Many social workers think it's difficult to know what to talk to the children about and how to do it | +1 | -1 | +1 |
| 16 | It's important for me to communicate the child's point of view of the case in written documents | +3 | <u>+1</u> | +4 |
| 17 | It's difficult to trust what children are saying because they are manipulated by their parents | -3 | -1 | 0 |
| 18 | The child's gender plays a role for how they are talked to and involved in their own case | -1 | +1 | <u>-3</u> |
| 19* | I feel less responsibility for children when they are approaching age of majority | -4 | -3 | -3 |
| 20* | I think physical punishment can be fine, so that the child will learn | -4 | -4 | -4 |
| 21 | Many social workers talk to children because it is mandatory and not because it is important for the child | <u>-3</u> | <u>+3</u> | <u>-1</u> |
| 22* | Parents decide if the child becomes visible in their own case | -1 | <u>-3</u> | -2 |
| 23* | Children's challenging behaviour easily becomes dominant and prevent that I see other aspects of the child | -1 | -1 | -2 |
| 24 | It is unethical that the child should reveal parents' problems | -3 | -2 | -1 |
| 25 | It is important for me that the child gets to read through what I write about them in written documents | <u>+1</u> | <u>-3</u> | <u>0</u> |
| 26 | Our responsibility is first and foremost to make sure that children's basic needs are covered | <u>+4</u> | +1 | +1 |
| 27 | We quickly create an image of the child, even though we don't know the child that well | 0 | 0 | <u>+3</u> |
| 28 | It is expected that we evaluate children's needs based on standardised formats | +2 | 0 | -1 |
| 29 | It is important that we write down all details in the case so that the child with time get to know his/her own history | +2 | +1 | +1 |
| 30* | We have knowledge that makes us best capable of evaluating what's in the child's best interest | +1 | +3 | +2 |
| 31 | Children don't tell because they are afraid of possible negative consequences | <u>+3</u> | <u>0</u> | <u>+4</u> |
| 32 | You shouldn't involve the child at all costs, the protection aspect is the most important in the end | +3 | +3 | <u>0</u> |
| 33* | Children have a strong position in the child protection sector in comparison to the parents | 0 | <u>-2</u> | 0 |
| 34 | It's too much focus on talking with the child in today's child protection sector | <u>0</u> | <u>-2</u> | <u>-4</u> |
| 35* | It is problematic if the parents get to know what we have talked with the child about | +1 | 0 | 0 |
| 36 | The framework we work within makes it difficult to make sure that children receive good enough help/what they need | +3 | <u>+4</u> | +3 |
| 37 | Adults can contribute to inform about children's situation better than what the child can | -2 | <u>0</u> | -2 |
| 38 | Generally speaking, I think we have a good way to raise children in Chile/Norway | <u>-1</u> | <u>-4</u> | <u>+3</u> |
| 39* | Often children do not want to talk to us, but we need to talk to the children even though they don't want to | 0 | -1 | -2 |
| Explained variance | | 22% | 8% | 20% |

Note: Underlining values signify distinguishing statement values for the specific factor at significance level $p < 0.05$. Statements marked * signify consensus statements.

workers do not see upbringing as sufficiently good (38, -1), and several societal reasons are emphasised, including the lack of focus on children's emotional needs, rigidity in gender roles, and parental absence in upbringing (for example due to long working hours), as addressed by this participant:

In general, children spend more time with their grandparents or [other] family members who are willing to give a hand, or with the nanny and other people who help the mothers, or in front of a television. But they [the children] don't spend [time] with their mother or father. (C16)

Moreover, these workers described a negligent focus on the child's point of view in upbringing, emphasised in this quote:

[...] because the child's opinion is not taken. I think we still think of the child as an adult in formation [...] I feel that even from public policy, to parenting styles, we are thinking from the adult to the child, not from the child[']s viewpoint]. (C3)

These examples suggest a concern for whether children's needs are sufficiently met in Chilean families and for not giving children's perspectives sufficient attention. They also address a lack of push for changes at the policy level.

Perspective 1 workers view children with other ethnic-cultural backgrounds as especially vulnerable in society. They expressed that

these children are less seen and heard relative to their native peers (3, +2). As part of this picture, participants described restrictive immigration policy and discriminative attitudes and actions as reasons for this invisibility of minority children. An example given by one worker was that school personnel close their eyes to the abuse of immigrant children.

These workers do not think the child protection system sufficiently meets children's needs (36, +3), and they lack confidence that the situation for children and youth will improve due to inadequate political initiatives:

At the integral level, SENAME, for example, is for the photo. I don't think it's real. That's what I mean. I think that from the speech, "we will integrate our children", for me it is for the speech of May 21st [the Navy Day] [...] but it does not translate into reality. (C3)

The baseline in this argument is a disbelief in that political rhetoric regarding children's rights will have an impact at the street-level, such as in child protection work.

An additional layer of concern expressed by these participants involved the expectation that they should evaluate a child's needs through standardised formats (28, +2): "Because of SENAME, all the models are standardised in the programmes, and I believe that the child is lost there. Because in the end, one child is not equal to another" (C2). These workers described incongruity between their views of children,

denoting that children are unique, and the “view” of children that is embedded in the standardised formats, denoting that children are alike.

While perspective 1 participants see their main responsibility as covering children’s *basic needs* and protecting children from harm (26, +4; 32, +3), they tend to define “basic needs” broadly. For these workers, basic needs not only include food, clothes, and housing but also the need for healthy relationships, a secure attachment, and other psychosocial needs. For example, these workers do not necessarily believe that different family forms or compositions (e.g. the “nuclear family”, a single mom or dad) play a significant role in whether children’s needs are met (10, –2):

I believe it is linked to the dynamic, to the style of parenting, to the bond, and other things than the composition. For instance, here we sometimes state that grandparents are like saviours, because at times there are no alternatives or anyone to resort to for help, and the grandparents jump into the task and meet the needs just the same. Or sometimes, a single father or a single mother meet those needs. So, it’s not about the composition. (C17)

This account underlines two important points: first, that these social workers may depend on assistance from the child’s extended family, such as grandparents, to meet children’s needs; second, that the ability to cover children’s needs is rooted deeper than the family composition and/or the number of caregivers. What seems to be highlighted here is the *quality* of parenting and the emotional bonds between children and their caregivers. As an extension to this point, these workers do not believe it is more difficult to work with children in families from higher social classes than lower social classes (12, –2). One worker explained, “The issue of violence has nothing to do with the economic condition of people. It is a transversal theme. It is a topic that has to do with the people themselves, with the subjects” (C10). This quote implies that wealth cannot buy family functioning. Yet, an interesting observation was that several workers explained that the child protection system in Chile is for “*niños de segunda categoría*” (C2) (children in poverty), with few child protection offices in the affluent regions of Santiago.

4.2. Perspective 2: Children as structurally constrained

Perspective 2 workers shares some characteristics with perspective 1 workers, particularly in that the participants understand children through relational and structural lenses. Nevertheless, this perspective sees limited space for children’s agency in child protection work due to structural restraints and a child at risk. Two of the three Chilean participants defining perspective 2 work in residential care, which may impact their perspective, as they work with children who are associated with higher levels of risk.

These participants hold a perspective emphasising the strong value of family in society and in people’s lives (1, +4); consequently, they believe family separation is the worst that can happen to a child (6, +2):

The family is the main system that we have as a person, and to be separated from it, obviously that will generate a lot of impact in the life of a child, both as a child and as an adult. (C19)

This account suggests that family separation produces a missing piece in a child that will perpetrate a child’s present and future well-being. Notwithstanding, these workers strongly disagree that Chilean upbringing is good (38, –4), and they believe that different family forms or compositions play a significant role in whether children’s needs are met (10, +3). These viewpoints may stem from experiences they have had working with children and families in residential care. At the same time, they do not think the child protection system sufficiently covers children’s needs (36, +4). One worker explained this through a lack of preventive intervention measures for children before they enter residential care and a lack of resources *in* the care homes to provide for children’s needs:

SENAME, which is like the base, they tell you what to do in residential care, but for example, what I see now is that they are intervening more in the reparation and treatment, and they have left something very important, which is prevention, which has to do with participation, with listening to children [...] and then the system has few resources, there is little money, people move a lot, the teams change and rotate, and that does not give much [resources] to facilities. (C8)

These views reflect a critical perspective of that children’s needs are not met in the child protective system. They raise a concern for children’s risk, which the workers argue that the child protection system is unequipped to prevent and handle adequately. The argument is that the child protection system lacks resources and preventive measures but also that frequent shifts characterise the system.

Moreover, these workers are more reluctant to let children make their own decisions (8, +2). Although they think it is important to communicate the child’s point of view in documents (16, +1), they strongly disagree that children should read what is written about them (25, –3):

Because many times they have misinterpreted the information or they tend to be ashamed of themselves—“Auntie knows that my mother was beaten” or “Auntie knows that I am the product of a violation”—and that produces shame and pain. (C9)

This quote highlights the complex act of balancing protection and agency considerations. Furthermore, a distinguishing view for these participants is that some children conceal the truth about their situation (2, +2), which may impact the workers’ reluctance to involve children in child protection work.

These participants see their primary task as protecting children, and that protection is superior to participation (32, +3). This can be understood in different ways, either that children should not be involved in child protection work because they are children or that inadequate resources lead to a need for tightly ranked priorities in child protection work, with limited space for children’s participation and involvement.

4.3. Perspective 3: Children as independent agents

The 17 workers defining perspective 3 (2 Chileans and 15 Norwegians) have characteristics in common with perspective 1 regarding giving children agency in child protection work. Nevertheless, there are contrasting characteristics among these two perspectives. In general, workers defining this perspective believe children’s needs are met in society, and they regard upbringing practices as good in general terms. Moreover, these participants underscore children’s independence, whereby children’s relations to their family and the community are less emphasised. Lastly, when these workers point to aspects that make it challenging to strengthen children’s agency, they highlight local barriers in the child protection services.

These workers strongly disagree that there is too much focus on talking with children in child protection work (34, –4), and they give high relevance to communicating the child’s viewpoint in written documents (16, +4). As one worker explained,

We have a basic idea that it is the children who should be at the centre of what we do. Indeed, because it is the child and the child’s voice and the child’s experience that is important for the way we work. (N11)

Although these participants are ambivalent or neutral (zero score) about how to balance children’s protection and participation rights (32, 0), these rights are not necessarily seen as contradictory, as this same worker argued:

I do not necessarily think it will harm a child to talk to the child welfare services. I think that it is indeed “a right” they have, by law,

that they should be able to express themselves about themselves and say something about what they need. (N11)

Here, the worker embraces the image of a *right-bearing* child and the perspective that children should be talked to because it is their legal right.

These workers believe children are given agency in society, and, as mentioned, the Norwegian workers defining this perspective generally perceive upbringing in Norway as good (38, +3): “It is about the child being the focus of the family” (N4). This type of logic was common among the Norwegian participants, and having “the child in focus” was typically translated as being in dialogue with the children, listening to their perspectives, and giving them arenas to express their opinions. Hence, having the child in focus is an ideal for these workers, which they believe is reflected in upbringing practices and child protection work. Furthermore, perspective 3 workers do not see covering children’s basic needs as their foremost task (26, +1). They underscored that most children in Norway have their physical needs met (e.g. housing, clothes, food) and that responsibility for covering these (physical) needs rests primarily on the parents. Yet, if parents are unable to cover children’s physical needs, participants said that they will help parents or connect them with other services that can. However, these workers experience that it is more challenging to work with children from families of higher social classes than with those from lower social classes (12, +2). One worker explained, “Some experience it as a bit more challenging, [particularly] when it becomes a lot of lawyers and “domination techniques” and that people try to put you out of play” (N12). They emphasised that some of these families struggle emotionally, which leads to difficulties for the children. More prominent for workers representing this view is focusing on children’s emotional needs: “it is more about the care situation” (N14). As such, perspective 3 participants tend to focus on the emotional dimension of children’s care situations.

Although workers defining this perspective may find it more difficult working with families from higher socio-economic classes, they do not experience that children are treated differently because of gender or social or ethnic-cultural background (18, -3; 3, -4). Nevertheless, unlike the views represented by perspectives 1 and 2, perspective 3 participants have experienced that they quickly create an image of who the child is, even though they do not know the child that well (27, +3). This image of the child is created, for example, “through the parent’s story, through the note of concern, through what the teachers are saying” (N7). Moreover, these workers agree with the statements that some children might receive help more readily because they *appeal* more to the social worker (13, +2). These tendencies were linked to a lack of time and resources in the child protection system to get a profound understanding of children and their situation.

Finally, these workers underscore children’s independence and think that viewing children as individuals should come before seeing them as part of the family (1, -1). This is not to say that the family is not important, as one worker described: “It is primarily important to see the child, and then see [the child] in relation to the family afterwards” (N9). Yet, one worker problematises the practice of viewing children and parents as separate, suggesting that it is more useful to view children and parents collectively:

I feel that it is a big challenge to nuance, in the child welfare context, that of thinking about the child as part of the family and this with looking together [...] to introduce the concept of “family conversation” in the child welfare context because it is absent as a term. It is “the parent conversation” and “the child conversation” that have been the concepts, before only “the parent conversation”, and now in recent years, “the child conversation”. (N1)

However, the overarching message is that perspective 3 participants, dominated by Norwegian workers, focus more consistently on the individual child and tended to make a distinction between “the

parent(s)” and “the child(ren)” in the qualitative comments. For example, several workers linked the challenges of working with families from higher socio-economic classes to the *parents* and not the *children*. This logic sits well with primarily seeing children’s independence.

There was congruity across all three perspectives in the belief that the child protection system fails to sufficiently meet children’s needs (36, +3). Notwithstanding, it became clear throughout the qualitative comments that perspective 3 participants were more inclined to translate “the child protection system” to local regulations within the child protection services that were detrimental to their work (e.g. tight deadlines, caseload, and documentation/paperwork). Perspective 1 and 2 participants, in contrast, tended to concentrate on more overarching incongruities, such as between political principles and regulations and the situation in front-line child protection work.

5. Discussion

This article has explored the perspectives of children in child protection work among social workers in Norway and Chile. Results show that, while there are similarities in how participants view children, three perspectives were identified, each representing distinct views of children. While perspectives 1 and 2 are dominated by Chilean social workers, perspective 3 is dominated by Norwegian social workers.

An overall tendency was that the Chilean social workers defining perspectives 1 and 2 are more oriented towards seeing children’s interdependence to various structures, contexts, and relationships, while the Norwegian social workers defining perspective 3 are more inclined to see children’s independence. These results resemble that of relatable research in Chile and Norway (Ellingsen et al., 2019; Oltedal & Nygren, 2019; Studsrød et al., 2018). Among other aspects, the CRC advocates for a balance between seeing the child as part of the family and as a single individual. Results from this study suggest different orientations towards these considerations among participants.

Several factors may illuminate these tendencies, such as differing cultural value systems and/or professional ideologies in Norway and Chile. Nevertheless, a likely factor is differences in welfare contexts, with divergent degrees of defamilialisation of welfare arrangements in Chile and Norway (Nygren et al., 2018). Specifically, Chile, with its extensive neoliberalism, privatisation of welfare services, and underfunded child protection system (Hogar de Cristo, 2017), makes the family a likely cooperative partner with the child protection services. This is in contrast to the comprehensiveness of the Norwegian welfare state. A broad range of service provisions for the parent(s) and child(ren) may lay grounds for a more individualistic focus on the child.

It is clear that these tendencies give children’s agency “different faces” in child protection work. Specifically, while perspective 1 and 2 workers understand children as relational and contextual beings, they contrast in terms of believing in the realism of facilitating for children’s agency in child protection work.

Perspective 1 participants seem to describe that children’s room for agency is relationship-based (Raithelhuber, 2016), made possible in local child protection work through child–social worker interactions (Morrison et al., 2019). At the same time, they describe a lack of top-down political initiative and resources being granted, for example in realising children’s rights in child protection work and family practices. This may reflect what Tisdall and Punch (2012, p. 256) call “the spatial limits on the ‘reach’ of children’s action spaces”, specifically a “thickness” for children to influence and be involved in local situations but a “thinness” at more macro levels. Given the structural barriers described by these workers, it is salient to ask whether there is adequate space for children’s feelings and wishes to lead to changes in actions and decisions being made within these child protection contexts (Morrison et al., 2019). That is, while these workers seem to work towards thickening children’s agency through child–social worker interactions at the street-level, it is difficult to know how far social workers’ discretionary powers extend (Lipsky, 2010) in terms of going beyond

children's perspectives being heard to actually having an impact on the decisions being made. The agency described by these workers may therefore be thin (Klocker, 2007) due to the lack of resources and top-down efforts to realise children's agency in practice.

Perspective 2 workers are more inclined to underscore how structures restrict their room for actions at the street-level and a reluctance towards letting children make their own decisions. According to perspective 2 workers, children are at risk due to the reactive nature of the child protection system and the underfunding of the services provided. This makes children's need for protection a primary concern for social workers. Perspective 2 workers raised several concerns regarding the ambiguities of agency (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). Based on their accounts, vulnerability and agency are deeply entwined, and in these contexts, there are few viable options for action (Klocker, 2007). What the child thinks, feels, or wants seems to be secondary in these contexts, as neither the child nor the social worker can interpret themselves away from shortages of resources and opportunities. Here, the social worker's task may be not only to work towards alleviating risk or thickening children's agency but also to help them understand the constrained situation in which they live (Morrison et al., 2019).

Perspective 3 participants, dominated by Norwegian workers, are oriented towards seeing the independent child. These workers portray children's wishes and feelings as the primary concern in child protection work. This is not to say that they do not focus on the child's interrelationship with various contexts and individuals. Rather, these workers seem to describe a "synthesis approach" in which children and parents are seen separately and subsequently synthesised into a whole. This may point towards a humanist, individualist, and unconditioned image of children's agency (Raithelhuber, 2016), which generates a different starting point for understanding children in child protection work relative to that portrayed by perspectives 1 and 2. Concerns have been raised that Western views of children's participation undervalue inhabitants' interdependence (Raby, 2014), and it is salient to ask whether this synthesis approach enables these social workers to examine the dynamic connections and relations between the child and other significant individuals, contexts, and structures.

5.1. Conclusion and directions for future research

This study draws on data from a small sample of participants, and caution is advised when drawing conclusions. However, it is interesting that perspectives 1 and 2 predominantly are held by Chilean participants, while perspective 3 predominantly is held by Norwegian participants. Moreover, for the social workers in this study, their function in the system do not seem to be of particular relevance for their perspectives of children. The only indication that function in the system seems to matter is for residential care workers in Chile, as two of the three workers defining perspective 2 are residential care workers. While this may solely be a product of the small sample, studies have pointed towards the underfunded nature of residential care in Chile (e.g. Garcia Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014).

Findings from this study may suggest two directions for future research in particular. First, whether a perspective emphasising a relational and structural child, which was reflected among Chilean social workers, and a perspective emphasising children's independence, which was reflected among Norwegian social workers, is found at more general levels. As Latin American countries are not included in research on child protection systems (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2011), such research may also extend knowledge regarding child protection orientations and how children's rights are balanced among social workers in different systems. Second, this study does not have a sufficient empirical basis for exploring the relevance of demographic variables on the perspectives, except that two of the three workers defining perspective 2 are residential care workers. A suggestion for future research is hence to include various variables (e.g. social workers' function in the child protection system, gender, age, experience level, ethnic background, and

their satisfaction with various aspects of the child protection system) to explore if and how these may be linked to social workers' perspectives of children in child protection work.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105410>.

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