

Parents at war: A positioning analysis of how parents negotiate their loss after experiencing child removal by the state

Qualitative Social Work
0(0) 1–18

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14733250211048546

journals.sagepub.com/home/qsww



Marte Tønning Otterlei 

Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger,
Norway

Eivind Engebretsen

Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This study explores how parents involved in care order processes in Norway perceive being positioned by Child Welfare Services (CWS) in this process, how they negotiate these positions and whether their loss is perceived as legitimate or illegitimate in the face of societal expectations of parenthood. The data consist of qualitative interviews with 13 parents who have experienced child removals initiated by CWS. Drawing on positioning theory, the article provides an analysis of parental experiences of being positioned by CWS and investigates how cultural notions may affect their perceptions. The analysis showed that parents experienced being at war against a highly powerful CWS, which they felt dehumanised them and positioned them as failing. Moreover, parents challenged such positions by introducing alternative explanations that presented themselves as victims. However, the analysis also showed that parents would adopt positions of becoming their own judge and internalising the stigma. Parents experienced disenfranchisement of their grief due to the perception of their loss as illegitimate. Nonetheless, several parents launched a position of becoming a renewed parental figure by turning their prior parental failure into a storyline of growth and

Corresponding author:

Marte Tønning Otterlei, Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger, Norway.

Email: marte.t.otterlei@uis.no

prosperity. The article concludes that parents, through language, challenge stigmatising positions to negotiate parental failure, which could be interpreted as valuation work of their identities and parenthood.

Keywords

Child protection, birth parents, stigma, child removal, care order, positioning

Introduction

This article investigates how parents who have experienced a child removal by the state perceive being positioned by Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWS) in this process and how they engage with and negotiate these positions. By doing so, it explores whether parents perceive the loss of the everyday care of their child as legitimate or illegitimate in the context of parental failure and societal expectations of parenthood. The term 'parenthood' can be understood as a social practice influenced by societal structures (Juhl, 2016). Placing children in out-of-home care impacts families' futures (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2014; Morriss, 2018), moreover, challenging parents' parenthood (Salem and De Wilde, 2021) and identity (Nixon et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2011). Child protection services may present negative characteristics of parents when arguing for a child removal (Burns et al., 2018; Masson, 2012). Hence, as they are based on a notion of inadequate parenting, child removals imply that parents are to blame (Morriss, 2018; Schofield et al., 2011). Consequently, child removals are strongly related to shame and stigma (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2014; Morriss, 2018; Schofield et al., 2011).

According to Memarnia et al. (2015), when parents experience a child removal, few societal rituals offer support in the grieving process. Moreover, people who experience losses that are culturally or socially unrecognised or unvalidated may suffer from disenfranchised grief, thus feeling deprived of the 'right to grieve' (Doka, 2002: 5). In such cases, when the loss does not garner sympathy, the stigma may influence the grieving process and the individual's psychological adjustment to the loss (Doka, 1989, 2002). Attig (2004) argued that disenfranchisement of grief may be understood as a social failure of empathy and ethics as well as a political failure through the abuse of power and the neglect of the mourner. Additionally, the bereaved may also suffer from self-disenfranchised grief, as they perceive their loss as stigmatised and unworthy of sympathy and support (Kauffman, 2002). Moreover, when experiencing primary losses, such as the loss of a daily care for a child, this may also implicate secondary losses (Rando, 1993). Broadhurst and Mason (2017: 54) have, for instance, shown how child removals could lead to formal and informal collateral consequences for parents, such as grief, social stigma, third party ripple effects, legal stigmatisation and reductions

in welfare entitlements. However, Broadhurst and Mason (2017: 49) underlined the lack of studies that ‘explicitly capture social stigma, empirically’, and called for ‘research that offers insights into how individuals manage social stigma and strategies of survival or self-definition’. Hence, by investigating how a care order intervention is experienced by parents and their negotiations of perceived positions, the current empirical study sheds light upon the social implications of child removals. Additionally, it may create awareness of power relations and provide knowledge of parents’ challenges in care order processes. This knowledge can ultimately contribute to improved outcomes for parents experiencing what is understood as a ‘sensitive and controversial’ intervention by the state (Burns et al., 2017: 1).

Background

The Norwegian care order system

Norwegian CWS should intervene as little as possible, work in the child’s best interest and respect biological bonds (NOU, 2016). However, when children are at risk of or subject to abuse or neglect, or when the child’s security, health or development are threatened, CWS can initiate a care order process (Child Welfare Act (CWA), 1992: 4–12, a–d). The term care order ‘refers to court-ordered removals of children from their birth family’ (Burns et al., 2017: 13). Care order measures in Norway are intended to be temporary (NOU, 2016). In 2016, 13.80 per 1000 children (aged 0–17 years) in Norway were placed in care outside their homes (Nordic Statistics Database, 2021). Care orders are settled by the County Social Welfare Boards (CWA, 1992). Compared with other Nordic countries, care order rates in Norway are noticeably higher (Hestbæk et al., 2020), although they have slightly decreased over the past years (Bufdir, 2020). Nonetheless, Norwegian authorities have been internationally criticised for intrusiveness regarding care orders, and numerous cases have been assessed by the European Court of Human Rights (Falch-Eriksen and Skivenes, 2019).

Parental experiences with child removals

In general, parents’ experiences when facing child protection systems are mixed, as they have reported both positive and negative experiences (Smithson and Gibson, 2017; Tembo and Studsrød, 2019). However, regarding child removals in particular, parents have primarily emphasised negative emotions, such as pain, shock, crisis, grief, anger, powerlessness, despair, guilt and shame (Salem and De Wilde, 2021; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Syrstad and Slettebø, 2020). Moreover, they may lack social support (De Wilde and Vanobbergen, 2020) and experience social condemnation (Schofield et al., 2011). Studies (Broadhurst and Mason, 2020; Morriss, 2018; Nixon et al., 2013) have shown that mothers may experience profound strain and stigma related to child removals by deviating from the norms of motherhood.

Although gendered expectations might indicate different experiences with removals, research on fathers' experiences (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Clapton, 2007; Clifton, 2012) has shown that men also experience grief, guilt and shame when losing daily care.

Previous research has shown that parents search for new ways to parent and define their parenthood when their children are living in foster care (Salem and De Wilde, 2021). Morriss's (2018) study showed how mothers challenge perceived stigma by presenting subsequent re-narrativisations of their possibilities. Angel (2016) found that Norwegian parents alter their self-management and internal dialogues, changing their perceptions of 'self' through normalisation work. Juhasz (2018) examined how Norwegian parents' legal argumentations are presented in court. She found that pointing blame and claiming change, moral justifications or ethical excuses about age and life histories are used to defend their parenthood. According to Midjo (2010), parent's identity work could be perceived as an inappropriate protection of parents' own self-image and lack of insight or as a destructive opposition to Norwegian CWS. In care order processes in particular, research has indicated (Tonning Otterlei and Studsrød, 2021) that Norwegian CWS caseworkers may be less sensitive to parents' pain, focusing more on the gain and CWS's objective, namely the protection of the child.

This article adds to the research by exploring the interplay between social norms and personal experiences of child removals and related losses and how such experiences are socially conditioned. We ask how parents perceive being positioned by Norwegian CWS in care order processes and, more broadly, how they perceive their loss as legitimate or illegitimate in the context of parental failure and societal expectations of parenthood.

Theoretical framework

Positioning theory

The analysis is inspired by positioning theory and draws on the Foucauldian concept of subject position, which refutes the idea of identity as a fixed entity outside language and insists that subjects are constantly created and recreated through discursive processes (Foucault, 1999). Accordingly, Davies and Harré (1990: 48) defined positioning as 'the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines'. People constitute their positions in the world through ascribed, claimed or assumed rights and duties (Harré et al., 2009). Positioning theory attempts to reveal how perceived identities and moral standards are conditioned by social metanarratives or storylines. According to Harré et al. (2009), positioning theory focuses on interpersonal encounters and how normative frames and moral standards affect how people perceive situations, live, think, feel and act.

Briefly explained, positioning theory is concerned with people's perceived rights and duties (what they can or cannot do) in respect to their ascribed positions or rejection of such positions. We use this theory to explore how parents perceive their ascribed positions when deprived of daily custody of their children and how these positions are conditioned by social metanarratives or storylines regarding legitimate or illegitimate experiences of loss.

Stigma

We draw on Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma to explore whether parents' perceived positions are influenced by stigmatising labels. Goffman (1963: 3) defined stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting'. Goffman's (1963) concept describes how people, through negative personal traits, are considered to deviate from social norms. Stigma describes a characteristic that is perceived as negative in a particular context or interaction and is strongly related to socially produced labels (Goffman, 1963). For instance, individuals can be stigmatised by discrediting labels regarding race, nationality or religion as well as physical disabilities or psychological deficiencies, such as mental illness, suicide attempts or drug addiction (Goffman, 1963). Furthermore, stigma is closely linked to anxiety and shame (Goffman, 1963). However, Goffman's concept of stigma has been criticised by Tyler (2020: 100) for being 'toothless, and so emptied of power'. Tyler (2020: 22) claimed that Goffman failed to understand stigma as being related both to everyday social interactions and to larger societal structural and structuring power relations. According to Tyler (2020), stigma must also be understood as a political function, being an instrument of state coercion.

Methodology

Recruitment and sample

For this study, parents were recruited through CWS, a support organisation for parents (OBF) and Family Counselling Offices. Participation was emphasised as being voluntary. There were two criteria for participation: parents must have experienced a child removal, and the experience should have been no less than two years ago. The last criterion was an ethical consideration aimed at avoiding harm by re-traumatisation based on the assumption that parents would need some time to process the experience.

The sample consisted of 13 parents: 10 mothers and three fathers. Two parents were immigrants. Although gender and cultural background were not the main emphases of the analysis, a maximum variation through purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was desirable to encompass heterogeneity to reflect different perspectives on parenthood. Parents were recruited through invitations distributed by CWS, the Family Welfare Service and OBF. The parents had experiences with a

total of 16 CWS offices in Norway and with the removal of 31 children. Two children have since moved back home. Most of the removals took place between 2000 and 2015, but some experiences extended into the mid-1990s. In these cases, the parents also experienced later placements of younger siblings.

Interview design and data collection

Individual interviews were conducted in 2018–2019. The interviews followed a semi-structured thematic interview guide (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014) and lasted 1–1.5 hours. They were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Parents were invited to speak freely about how they experienced being informed by case-workers of the CWS decision to initiate a care order process. However, during the interviews, parents also shared their experiences of being positioned in stigmatising positions and told of collateral consequences related to the loss of a child. This made us interested in exploring parents' understanding of positions, shame, stigma and possible disenfranchisement of grief related to child removals.

Analysis

The interviews were analysed with principles from discursive analysis and positioning theory, as described above (Harré et al., 2009). In addition, Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and theories on disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002; Kauffman, 2002) formed the analytical backdrop. The transcripts were read several times, and immediate impressions were noted. After the readings, six positions were identified (Table 1).

The positions were discussed with and validated by the co-author. We then asked whether these positions were considered legitimate or illegitimate and possible experiences of stigma based on collective storylines. Third, we asked whether or how parents perceived their bereavement as legitimate or illegitimate in the context of parental failure.

When presenting the findings, we have omitted some filler words in the quotes to increase readability.

Ethical concerns

The study followed research ethics guidelines (ALLEA, 2017; NESH, 2016) and was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Because the research topic is considered particularly vulnerable (Liamputtong, 2007), ethical considerations were important in all parts of the research process, especially regarding possible unintended consequences for volunteering parents. Moreover, the data have been thoroughly anonymised, and the informants have been given fictitious names in the findings section.

Table 1. Six positions identified in the data. ■ Growth and prosperity ■ Renewed parenthood

At war	Failing parents	Dehumanised	Victims (of)	Judged (by)	Becomings
■ Powerless	■ Deviant	■ Animals	■ Unfair treatment	■ CWS	
■ Without resources	■ Dangerous	■ Monsters	■ Own childhood	■ Their children	
■ Without rights	■ Incompetent	■ Stigmatised	■ Drugs	■ Society	
■ Survivor	■ Egocentric	■ group of people	■ Abusive partner	■ Themselves	
	■ Clueless		■ CWS		
	■ Sinner		■ Lies		

Findings

Parents at war

Facing a powerful system. The analysis showed that participants perceived CWS as a highly powerful and persistent system. Simon said, 'It is an incomprehensible machine—unstoppable.' Furthermore, parents described the care order process through warlike metaphors, which showed a perception of being positioned in a 'battle'. Simon noted,

We have to defend ourselves from CWS—attack, defend, attack, defend. We have not spoken normally with any people in this system . . . There has been a war between us, which we are doomed to lose. They have one thousand billion up their sleeve, and we have no billion.

Simon described an uneven situation against a system he has perceived as highly powerful. Moreover, he expressed how he has experienced coming up short on resources in spite of being physically strong: 'These Gestapos stand there and decide. I am a big, strong guy who has to let go of my child, which is the last thing I want to do, and give him to the torture chamber.'

Like Simon, many participants shared experiences of being in a war and feeling powerless against an authoritarian system. Thomas stated, 'CWS operates like a court of law . . . They just decide, and that's it.' Karen noted, 'I thought that CWS had to adhere to the same rules, but they do not. I have experienced that they have made their own rules, which work for them.' Moreover, parents felt that CWS limited their legal rights by restricting dialogue and paying little attention to parents' perspectives, which Adam challenged: 'The attitude needs to change . . . in advance of such a decision . . . There must be a dialogue, something that . . . can be talked about.'

Resisting fallible labels. The analysis showed that participants felt positioned as failing, deviant and unsafe parents through harsh judgements of their parental skills. Anna said she was described as risky, egocentric and incompetent: 'I was a dangerous mother. I only think about myself and I have no knowledge. I do not have parenting skills when it comes to caring for children.' Additionally, parents experienced CWS workers as patronising, as Karen expressed: '[The caseworker] talks . . . in a condescending manner, as if I am completely clueless, that I do not know anything.'

A dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' was largely present in the data. Parents perceived that caseworkers would position themselves as the opposite to the failing parents—as infallible. Adam stated, 'It was like the style that the sinner sits on that side [of the table], and we sit here and have never made mistakes in relation to anything.' Also, Sonja's use of 'we' and 'they' show opposite positions: 'We have made mistakes, but . . . we are people, not monsters. They have to speak . . . not just

as if we were a dog. We are people, not crocodiles and snakes.’ Sonja experienced being dehumanised, as seen in her comparisons to monsters and animals. Although she admitted parental failure and ‘mistakes’, she also linked the failure to human nature through the word ‘people’, which could be interpreted as an attempt to resist dehumanising labels. Hermine also fought the perception of being positioned as non-human: ‘They could have treated me like a person, with feelings, with worth, with respect.’ Adam compared his experiences of inhuman treatment to the persecution of Jews and poor people: ‘I draw parallels with the persecution of the Jews, put somewhat extremely... Taking care of the poor was [previously] a part of child welfare. I think many attitudes remain: old slag and power.’

Through these comparisons, the participants used strong metaphors already related to stigma, which could be interpreted as a form of counterpower from the parents, where they challenge the stigma through its deconstruction.

Nonetheless, the analysis showed that facing CWS workers, previous helpers who have become judges, was hard for parents. Many of them had long relationships with the CWS workers and now felt deceived. Karen stated, ‘As far as I am concerned, they can fucking die... I have nothing left for them.’ However, through language, parents exercised a form of counterpower, positioning their prior helpers in less flattering positions as deceitful, incompetent, authoritarian and arrogant. This could be interpreted as attempts to enforce their own alternative storylines (Harré et al., 2009) as victims of inhuman and cruel treatment by a two-faced, inhuman and deceitful system.

Renegotiating the blame. Parents varied in expressing responsibility for the situation that led to the care order, and several attempted to negotiate blame. Some, like Simon, stated that CWS had exaggerated the situation: ‘The problems we had at home were never so great.’ Adam described the child removal as groundless and expressed distrust of CWS’s motives, which could be interpreted as a storyline undermining CWS’s handling of the case: ‘I have been accused of having conspiratorial thoughts... but in that system, I believe that it is very healthy... These people [employees at the institution] had a task... from CWS... to find things out that would allow them to take our child.’ Thomas also expressed distrust: ‘We actually felt a little duped... There had been a dialogue between CWS and our child over a period of time where the teacher and CWS had, in a way, conspired together. And then, this came right out of nowhere.’

Amanda was confused and unsure of CWS’s reasons for the removal and positioned herself as innocent: ‘I do not know what I have done wrong... but I know that I have not done anything. I have not hit, not hurt the child.’ Mia, however, partly admitted parental failure, although arguing for a shared responsibility by pointing at the institution’s duties (Harré et al., 2009) to help her:

It was very unfair that everything was put on me... [I was committed] 24 hours per day, seven days a week... There were meetings with psychologists... family

therapy... I ran around like a whipped dog, and things worked very badly between the authorities... poor communication... very disordered.

Other parents pointed at causation (Harré et al., 2009), positioning themselves as victims of unfortunate circumstances. Karen said, 'It is not my fault that my parents got divorced. It is not my fault that he chose to be unfaithful to me while we were married... I ended up being punished.' Hermine expressed disagreement at the time of the child removal but acceptance later on: 'When I look back... I understand... It was for the best.' Hermine's reference to parental failure in the past could be interpreted as an excuse or a possible strategy to avoid stigma. Moreover, it could be understood as an enforcement of her position as a now-present mother by presenting a dichotomy between her motherhood before and now. In contrast, Melinda justified losing custody of her children by referring to her own childhood and positioning herself as a victim and CWS as an accomplice: 'It had a lot to do with my childhood... I can't do much about that. But I also feel that [CWS] is partly to blame too, that my childhood was like it was, so I felt very judged... for things I was not responsible for or could not have done anything about.' Nevertheless, Melinda considered possible parental mistakes, opening up the likelihood that CWS's definition of her might be accurate: 'I have surely made mistakes I am unaware of though... I did not completely manage the task.'

The analysis showed that prior drug addicts in particular identified themselves as failing parents. As the following citation shows, Ruth has become her own judge, positioning herself as responsible and internalising the position as a failing parent: 'I was unwell before... things are different now... Primarily, I think that I am the one who is responsible for things ending up like they did.' However, Ruth's storyline is not entirely congruent. She also points at causation, positioning herself as a victim of drug addiction. However, as previously argued, pointing at the past may also be interpreted as an avoidance of the stigma. By saying 'before', Ruth is positioning herself as something else 'today'.

The analysis found that being positioned as a failing parent was highly related to shame, and occasionally, parents not only blamed CWS but also their children or spouse. Children were accused of exaggerating the situation or even lying. Adam stated, 'My son had said that I hit him... but I have the best conscience.' Here, Adam positions himself as innocent even though his son devaluated his position as a father to CWS. Thomas took the same innocent position as Adam, but in a more indirect way, by blaming his daughter for not being resistant and his spouse for being too firm: 'So, the child is likely a little sensitive, and mom is quite strict, so she could not totally handle the way mom dealt with her.' Overall, the analysis showed a mixture of positions where parents negotiated the blame and alternated between taking responsibility for the situation and introducing external explanations.

Threatened identities

The impact of loss. Being deprived of everyday custody of their child was hard, as Adam expressed: 'It is . . . frighteningly . . . overwhelmingly negative. Every single day.' As previously shown, parents attempted to challenge their position as fallible parents by negotiating blame. Nonetheless, the loss of daily care was a fact, and parents were still affected by the experience many years later. Several participants positioned themselves as survivors. Like Adam, Simon did so with a comparison to the experiences of the Jews: 'People can get used to anything; a person can survive in a concentration camp too. We have to survive.'

The analysis showed that child removals challenged the participants' identities. Melinda explained, 'You lose a part of yourself, I feel. You can't . . . be the mom you want to be. You have to . . . be mom from afar . . . You miss out on a lot.' Furthermore, participants described secondary losses (Rando, 1993) due to the child removal, such as the loss of the right to participate in ordinary family events like birthdays or holidays. Karen explained how the children's absence affected several aspects of her life: 'I sit there like a person who does not have routines . . . My daily routine, that was with kids. To not hear the word "mom" anymore [cries], a hug, to hear laughter, go for walks together. I do not have any of that.'

The analysis found that losing custody heavily affected the parents both physically and emotionally. Moreover, parents expressed their grief as feeling disenfranchised (Doka, 1989, 2002). Parents described feeling unworthy to grieve or receive support since the child removals were linked to parental failures. Mia stated, 'It is very like taboo . . . I strongly feel that it is sorrow you are not allowed to have . . . You have been a shit parent, so . . . you do not have any right to grieve or to hurt.'

The impact of stigma. The analysis showed that, despite parents' attempts to challenge or negotiate positions, CWS workers' reasoning for the child removal negatively affected their self-esteem. Participants felt devaluated, and several internalised the position as a failing parent. Eva stated, 'Everything was wrong. That we did not have enough friends . . . did not partake in enough activities . . . We ate incorrectly . . . After we had read [the report], we said that, if we are such terrible parents, then [the kids] are probably better off somewhere else.' As in Eva's case, parents became their own judge and internalised shame and stigma. Ruth explained, 'There is a lot of shame, ashamed; you have such a bad conscience. That is the worst part. The self-loathing is intense.'

Moreover, parents feared being judged by society, and several kept the removal a secret from family, friends and co-workers. In this way, parents may suffer from a self-disenfranchised grief (Kauffman, 2002), becoming secretive, as they perceive the loss as stigmatised and unworthy of sympathy and support. Melinda stated,

'I was afraid that people would look down on me and judge me . . . I have friends with children, and I was afraid that they would not let me be around them.'

Although fathers expressed shame and embarrassment, the analysis showed that mothers perceived it as especially stigmatising, as the gender itself represents a specific parental duty. Hermine expressed, 'You have failed as a mom . . . one of the female things. It goes without saying that we should be good moms.' Female participants experienced fathers collaborating with CWS against them, and some perceived that fathers could more easily avoid parental responsibility, as seen in this exchange with Hermine:

Hermine: I have many male friends and they have kids at the weekend and such . . . but it is not normal to be a mom in that way.

Interviewer: [Is it] more shameful as a woman . . . ?

Hermine: Yes.

Interviewer: Because the ideal to be a woman and mother is closely connected?

Hermine: . . . Yes, that is how society is.

Ruth felt her children punished her more than their fathers for the child removal: 'I wonder . . . in relation to the fathers . . . who have not tried . . . [but] get . . . to be a part [in the children's lives] . . . [The children] do not expect the same at all.'

The stigma and taboo were largely present in the participants' lives. However, for some, the shame and self-loathing became easier to deal with over time, as Hermine expressed: 'Before, I was very embarrassed to tell people . . . It was very difficult in the beginning . . . I felt a lot of shame about it . . . but I don't anymore.' Although experiencing stigma and shame in society in general, parents experienced alleviation of the stigma by sharing their history with other parents in the same situation. Rebecca stated, 'Meeting other parents in the same situation . . . was unbelievably good. They knew . . . the same pain, the same shame, the same grief . . . It is very taboo to be deprived of custody . . . To . . . meet others . . . was . . . a relief.'

Valuing abnormal parental positions. Participants contrasted their retrospective positions as failing parents through storylines of growth and prosperity, positioning themselves in renewed parental positions. Ruth described how she discovered inner strength: 'When they placed [the child], I thought that it was not possible . . . to breathe, but I . . . carried on . . . did what I usually did . . . went to work . . . I discovered that I had a strength in me that I was unaware of.' Several others also emphasised the removal as a positive turning point, making them become drug-free, leave an abusive partner, change their job or pursue an education. Hermine found meaning in her rough experiences: 'What happened with me is that time has played a role in shaping me and made me the person I am. To get up, to sober up, to get myself an education, to be a good mother to my children.' Thomas also highlighted positive changes: 'What has happened since then is that mother and me

have better communication and dialogue and take care of each other in a completely different way.'

Through renewed positive storylines of their parenthood, participants challenged negative positions. Participants argued for a changed yet still valuable position in their children's lives. Hermine stated, 'I am a very good mom, even though I am from a distance. So, I have a very good relationship with my children.' Eva valued how she became a good mother by taking care of herself: 'You have to be social... You must not shut yourself in... Get out of the door and try to live normally... There are nevertheless many ways to be a good mother. Stay active, find a skill.' Melinda valued participating in her child's lives from a distance: '[I] get pictures throughout the year, get messages when there is a birthday. The foster mother is very open about the biological and that the child is aware that she has two moms and is content with that.' The parents' storylines could be understood as a form of identity or valuation work to re-narrate their parenthood. Nonetheless, despite presenting valuable and renewed parental positions, the parents still experienced being in an abnormal parental position, as expressed by Mia: 'I have not lost her. She is there [in foster care]... Yes, you are in a strange predicament.'

Discussion

The power of positioning

The study found that child removals were perceived as highly disqualifying and stigmatising for parents. Parents perceived being positioned as failing parents, and they experienced being dehumanised and given negative and unflattering labels by caseworkers as condescending and judgmental. Smithson and Gibson (2017) also found that parents may feel dehumanised when facing the child protection system. Not surprisingly, child removals often increase parents' experiences of conflict with CWS and emotional chaos (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Syrstad and Slettebø, 2020). As CWS will argue for parental failure to meet the threshold for the decision of a child removal (Burns et al., 2018; Masson, 2012), a care order process might in its nature be a rejection of parents' positions and their parenthood. Hence, the devaluation of parents may be an unavoidable fact in care order cases (Tonning Otterlei and Studsrød, 2021). Nonetheless, findings indicate that care orders become a threat to parents' identities and parenthood, supporting previous research (De Wilde and Vanobbergen, 2020; Nixon et al., 2013; Salem and De Wilde, 2021; Schofield et al., 2011). Featherstone et al. (2014: 1–18) warned against how institutional categories or rhetoric may create distance or 'othering' that could amplify shame and harm. Hence, how CWS workers interact with (Smithson and Gibson, 2017; Tonning Otterlei and Studsrød, 2021), characterise or label parents (Burns et al., 2018; Masson, 2012) may inflict shame and stigma.

Nevertheless, the findings show how parents, through language, challenge perceived positions, which supports previous studies (Juhász, 2018; Morriss, 2018). This could be understood as an exercise of counterpower. Participants attempted

to reposition caseworkers, who were previously helpers, as enemies. Moreover, parents challenged perceived positions as failing parents through alternative storylines (Harré et al., 2009) to reposition themselves as victims and innocent, renewed or strengthened parental figures, which could be interpreted as a form of valuation work. Such strategies were also found by Juhasz (2018), who showed that parents, in their legal argumentations, included attempts at blaming, claims of change, moral justifications, ethical excuses and normalisation. Such negotiations could be, as Juhasz (2018) noted, a defence strategy or, as Midjo (2010) claimed, identity work. Angel (2016) previously described how parents' self-perceptions could be altered through normalisation work through courses aiming to contradict the conventional conception of parents' inability to contribute to their children. However, such a focus on altering the individual could be criticised as an individualised understanding of the family's struggles or a political project to make individuals personally responsible. In our study, we understand parents' negotiation of positions as an attempt to create a counterpower to CWS's power to define and position them and, moreover, as a form of valuation work through speaking up against devalued positions and inflicted stigma to create value in a highly threatened identity.

The power of stigmatisation

In line with Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, the findings show how parents perceive the deviation from social norms due to their parental failure. Being labelled as deficient parents exposes parents to societal stigmatisation, as Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma indicates. Moreover, stigma is closely related to shame (Goffman, 1963). Experiencing a child removal was described as painful and shameful, supporting previous research on parents' experiences with care orders (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Morriss, 2018; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Syrstad and Slettebø, 2020). Furthermore, despite challenging positions through metanarratives, findings showed that parents perceived themselves as powerless facing CWS's definitions of them. This supports Tyler's (2020) argument of understanding stigma in relation to power. Moreover, despite attempts to renegotiate positions through alternative storylines (Harré et al., 2009), experiencing a child removal negatively affected participants' self-esteem, as parents seemed to internalise positions and stigma. Additionally, findings indicate that care orders might be especially stigmatising for mothers, which supports findings from previous research (Broadhurst and Mason, 2020; Morriss, 2018; Nixon et al., 2013). According to Nixon et al. (2013), being a woman is closely intertwined with motherhood. There are high societal expectations of motherhood; hence, to deviate from such norms may have extensive consequences for women's identities (Nixon et al., 2013). Interestingly, the few fathers who participated in our study also pointed to mothers as a causation of the child removal. In contrast, female participants perceived fathers as escaping responsibility or blame more easily due to their role and gender. However, studies (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Clapton, 2007; Clifton, 2012) have shown that fathers also may experience shame in child removals.

The study found that parents perceived their grief, being socially unrecognised or unvalidated, as disenfranchised (Doka, 1989, 2002), which is supported by similar findings in previous studies (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Morriss, 2018; Nixon et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2011). Moreover, the current findings showed that parents may also suffer from self-disenfranchised grief (Kauffman, 2002). Furthermore, participants described secondary losses (Rando, 1993), such as the loss of family gatherings or holiday celebrations, as being intertwined with the primary loss (Rando, 1993) of the child. A likely collateral consequence of experiencing a child removal is that parents become disconnected from social arenas, such as kindergartens, schools and activities, which are related to parenthood. Additionally, if inflicted stigma reduces social support, as research has indicated (De Wilde and Vanobbergen, 2020), parents are at risk of further alienation, as they experience both deprivation of the child, social arenas and their parenthood as a whole. To build on Attig's (2004) arguments, understanding disenfranchised grief as a social failure, the inflicted stigma from a child removal seems to limit parents' options in the grieving process and their possibilities of overcoming their suffering and participating in society.

Conclusions

This study provides important knowledge on how cultural notions of parenthood affect parents' perceptions of a child removal, how they experience being positioned by CWS in a care order process and how they challenge such positions. Moreover, the study sheds light on parents' experiences of disenfranchisement of their grief due to parental failure and societal expectations of parenthood. The findings correspond with previous research (Baum and Negbi, 2013; Morriss, 2018; Nixon et al., 2013; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Syrstad and Slettebø, 2020) showing how child removals are closely intertwined with shame and stigma. However, the findings indicate that parents try to challenge and negotiate stigmatising positions through alternative storylines and arguments, supporting previous research (Juhasz, 2018; Morriss, 2018). By shedding light on the stigmatising aspects of child removal, the study seeks to provide awareness of the unintended implications of social processes and ultimately contribute to improved outcomes for parents experiencing an intrusive intervention by the state.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants whom contributed to this study.

Ethics approval statement

The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017) was implemented in the design and data collection.

Patient consent statement

Participants has signed consent forms before participation in the study. Permission to reproduce material from other sources: not applicable to this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study has received financial support from the University of Stavanger, Norway.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

ORCID iD

Marte Tønning Otterlei  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9369-7446>

References

- ALLEA (2017) The European code of conduct for research integrity. Available at: <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/> (accessed 12 February 2020).
- Angel BØ (2016) Client self-management: Promoting self-help for parents of children in foster care. *British Journal of Social Work* 46(4): 1027–1043.
- Attig T (2004) Disenfranchised grief revisited: Discounting hope and love. *Omega - Journal of Death and Dying* 49(3): 197–215.
- Baum N and Negbi I (2013) Children removed from home by court order: Father's disenfranchised grief and reclamation of paternal functions. *Children and Youth Services Review* 35(10): 1679–1686.
- Brinkmann S and Kvale S (2014) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Broadhurst K and Mason C (2017) Birth parents and the collateral consequences of court-ordered child removal: Towards a comprehensive framework. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 31(1): 41–59.
- Broadhurst K and Mason C (2020) Child removal as the gateway to further adversity: Birth mother accounts of the immediate and enduring collateral consequences of child removal. *Qualitative Social Work* 19(1): 15–37.
- Bufdir (2020) Oppsummert status for tall i barnevernet. Available at: www.bufdir.no/Statistikk_og_analyse/Barnevern/Oppsummert_status_i_tall_for_barnevernet/ (accessed 23 January 2020).
- Burns K, O'Mahony C, Shore C, et al. (2018) What social workers talk about when they talk about child care proceedings in the district court in Ireland. *Child & Family Social Work* 23(1): 113–121.
- Burns K, Pösö T and Skivenes M (eds) (2017) *Child Welfare Removals by the State: A Cross-Country Analysis of Decision-Making Systems*. Oxford University Press. NY, New York.

- Child Welfare Act (1992) Norway Child Welfare Act of 17 July 1992 (Lov om barneverntjenester). Available at: <https://lovdata-no.ezproxy.uis.no/dokument/NL/lov/1992-07-17-100> (accessed 23 January 2020).
- Clapton G (2007) The experiences and needs of birth fathers in adoption: What we know now and some practice implications. *Practice* 19(1): 61–71.
- Clifton J (2012) Birth fathers and their adopted children: Fighting, withdrawing or connecting. *Adoption & Fostering* 36(2): 43–56.
- Davies B and Harré R (1990) Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20(1): 43–63.
- De Wilde L and Vanobbergen B (2020) ‘Several times I have asked the judge to get my children back’: 10 years of foster care complaints at the Flemish office of the children’s rights commissioner. *Child & Family Social Work* 25(4): 725–732.
- Doka K (1989) (ed.) *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- Doka K (2002) (ed.) *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Falch-Eriksen A and Skivenes M (2019) Right to protection. In: Langford M, Skivenes M and Søvig KS (eds) *Children’s Rights in Norway: An Implementation Paradox?*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp.107–135.
- Featherstone B, White S and Morris K (2014) *Re-Imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Foucault M (1999) *Diskursens Orden. [L’ordre du Discours, 1971]*. Oslo: Spartacus Forlag.
- Goffman E (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Harré R, Moghaddam FM, Cairnie TP, et al. (2009) Recent advances in positioning theory. *Theory & Psychology* 19(1): 5–31.
- Hestbæk AD, Höjer I, Pösö T, et al. (2020) Child welfare removal of infants: Exploring policies and principles for decision-making in Nordic countries. *Children and Youth Services Review* 108: 104572.
- Juhasz IB (2018) Defending parenthood: a look at parents’ legal argumentation in Norwegian care order appeal proceedings. *Child & Family Social Work* 23(3): 530–538.
- Juhl P (2016) Parenting on the edge: Doing good parenthood in child protection services interventions. In: Sparrman A, Westerling A, Lind J, et al. (eds) *Doing Good Parenthood. Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life*. Champaign, IL: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.41–52.
- Kauffman J (2002) The psychology of disenfranchised grief: Liberation, shame, and self-disenfranchisement. In: Doka K (ed.) *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, pp.61–77.
- Liamputtong P (2007) *Researching the Vulnerable*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Masson J (2012) ‘I think I do have strategies’: Lawyers’ approaches to parent engagement in care proceedings. *Child & Family Social Work* 17(2): 202–211.
- Memarnia N, Nolte L, Norris C, et al. (2015) ‘It felt like it was night all the time’: Listening to the experiences of birth mothers whose children have been taken into care or adopted. *Adoption & Fostering* 39(4): 303–317.
- Midjø T (2010) *En Studie av Samhandlingen Mellom Foreldre og Barnevernarbeidere i Barnevernets Undersøkelse*. Trondheim: NTNU.

- Morriss L (2018) Haunted futures: The stigma of being a mother living apart from her child (ren) as a result of a state-ordered court removal. *The Sociological Review Monographs* 66(4): 816–831.
- NESH [Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee] (2016) *General Guidelines for Research Ethics*. Oslo: NESH.
- Nixon KL, Radtke HL and Tutty LM (2013) ‘Every day it takes a piece of you away’: Experiences of grief and loss among abused mothers involved with child protective services. *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 7(2): 172–193.
- Nordic Statistics Database (2021) SOCI27: Children and adolescents aged 0–17 years taken into care outside the home, per 1000 in age group, by reporting country, age and time. Available at: www.nordicstatistics.org/population/ (accessed 26 January 2021).
- NOU Ministry of Children and Family (2016) NOU 2016:16 Ny barnevernslov – Sikring av barnets rett til omsorg og beskyttelse. Available at: www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2016-16/id2512881/ (accessed 23 January 2020).
- Palinkas LA, Horwitz SM, Green CA, et al. (2015) Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health* 42(5): 533–544.
- Rando T (1993) *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Salem RS and De Wilde L (2021) Life after an out-of-home placement: What biological parents in foster care tell us about parenthood. *Child & Family Social Work* : 1–9.
- Schofield G, Moldestad B, Höjer I, et al. (2011) Managing loss and a threatened identity: Experiences of parents of children growing up in foster care, the perspectives of their social workers and implications for practice. *British Journal of Social Work* 41(1): 74–92.
- Smeeton J and Boxall K (2011) Birth parents’ perceptions of professional practice in child care and adoption proceedings: Implications for practice. *Child & Family Social Work* 16(4): 444–453.
- Smithson R and Gibson M (2017) Less than human: A qualitative study into the experience of parents involved in the child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work* 22(2): 565–574.
- Syrstad E and Slettebø T (2020) To understand the incomprehensible: a qualitative study of parents’ challenges after child removal and their experiences with support services. *Child & Family Social Work* 25(1): 100–107.
- Tembo M and Studsrød I (2019) Parents’ emotional experiences of their contact with the child welfare services: A synthesis of previous research – A research review. *Nordic Social Work Research* 9(2): 184–115.
- Tonning Otterlei M and Studsrød I (2021) Breaking bad news: Child welfare workers’ informing parents of care order proceedings. *Child & Family Social Work* ■: 1–11.
- Tyler I (2020) *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*. Zed Books: London.