

**Article:**

# **Narratives from parents in England and Norway: Power and emotions in child protection assessments**

by

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## **Abstract**

The framework for assessment in child protection, as well as the context of the welfare state, differs between England and Norway. Assessments in England are structured in terms of a set model (the triangle) and procedures to be followed, whereas in Norway there are few national guidelines and not a set model for assessments. This underpins professional judgement as the most important component in Norway. This is a study of parents' experiences from assessment in these two contexts, and patterns and themes of assessment experiences have been identified in the two countries through a narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with parents. When asked about their opinions of the current assessment framework, parents in both countries talk more about feelings than about framework and procedures, as their experiences of assessment are similar in both countries. First and foremost, they experience strong emotions in a stressful situation, including anxiety, frustration and powerlessness, but also relief. These cross-national emotions might provide information about how assessment is a stressful situation for the parents involved. However, we find some differences in the way social work is acted out according to the national assessment framework and policy context. In England, the framework and procedures seem to provide clarity with regard to process and power within the system. In Norway, the assessment is characterized by a professional judgement accompanied by more resources, which we find enables helpful decisions from a family perspective. However, this heavy reliance on relationships using professional judgement might also be viewed as a source of informal power. These findings are discussed in relation to theories of emotions and the concept of power. Regarding implications for practice, we would recommend a more explicit awareness of help and control in assessment among social workers involved, together with a clear communication on the topic of emotions and power in assessment.

## **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, service user perspectives have gained increased political and social interest, also in the field of child protection (Willumsen, 2005). The child protection literature is commonly divided between "Child Protection" in the liberal western countries (e.g. the US, Canada and England) and "Child Welfare" in the social democratic context (e.g. Sweden and Norway). Traditionally, "Child Protection" systems focus on risk assessments, while "Child Welfare systems" tend to have a wider therapeutic orientation

towards families' needs (Christiansen, 2011; Khoo, 2004). However, not many studies in England and Norway have assessment in child protection as their primary focus (Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2012; Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). In this study, we focus on parents' experiences on assessment in the child protection context in the two countries (we refer to "parents" even though one of the interviewed is a grandparent, see Table 1). How do parents retell their assessment experiences?

Assessment in child protection has a significant role to play in contributing to better outcomes for children and their families in terms of protection and provision (Kirton, 2009), as England and Norway have adopted different approaches towards assessment. In England, governmental responses to perceived failings in the child protection system have led to a system characterized by high levels of proceduralization and bureaucratization, as well as a downplaying of the role of professional judgement (Munro review, 2011; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). In Norway, the exercise of professional discretion and judgement has been seen as key to the assessment process, while the governmental response to the criticism of child protection practice has taken a different direction. Rather than introducing standardized procedures, there has been an increase in resources in terms of staff, interventions and post-qualifying education and training (NOU, 2000:12, p. 111).

We have not yet identified any comparative research in Norway and England on the parents' perspectives of assessment processes. In this small-scale, in-depth comparative study, parents from both England and Norway presented narratives of the emotions they experienced in the assessment process. When describing and discussing the parents' experiences, we turn to power theories and discuss power as both systemic and relational, together with theories on emotions. An overarching issue reflected in our interviews is the well-known duality in child welfare regarding help and control. The aim of this study is to develop knowledge on assessment from parents' experiences in order to contribute to improve practice in social work. What can we learn from these experiences that will facilitate a more fruitful practice in assessment?

### **Contexts for assessment: Structures and practices in Norway and England**

Cross-national research offers opportunities to look at patterns of similarities and differences between countries and, together with different contextual factors, this gives

us new perspectives in our search for knowledge (Ragin, 1994). In our study of assessment as social work practice in Norway and England, the two ways of practicing offer us opportunities to reflect on the differences and similarities (Baistow, 2000). Although our focus is on assessment practice, this practice is influenced by policy systems that have to be taken into account when making comparisons (Bochel et al., 2009). Between Norway and England, there are differences in both policy and practice in assessment frameworks. In Norway, there is no national assessment model/set framework for social workers to follow, whereas in England there is a national set model/framework that informs practice. Norway has few national mandatory procedures accompanying assessment, but has various local procedures and computer systems. On the other hand, England has a lot of national and local mandatory procedures accompanied by various computer systems (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). However, both countries have child protection assessments anchored in a specific law: in Norway, it is the “Child Welfare Act” of 1993, in England the “Children Act” of 1989. In this section, we set out the context for assessments in child protection in the two countries by looking at the different approaches in Norway and England.

*The English assessment framework:* As a result of serious cases of abuse and neglect, England has implemented national procedures for assessment in child protection. Between 1970 and 1985, 35 public inquiries were conducted in relation to serious cases of child neglect and abuse by caregivers, in which the child protection system had failed to reveal and prevent maltreatments (Bochel et al., 2009). This led to extensive public debate, and social workers were criticized for not recognizing the symptoms of child abuse and for putting too much emphasis on cooperating with the adults at the cost of the children. The UK Department of Health introduced the publication, “Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment” (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, 2000), which followed the introduction of the “Children Act” of 1989. The new assessment framework was designed to “provide a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context in which they live” (ibid., p. 8). This is the basis for the current assessment model, “The Assessment Framework”. The assessment model is called “The Assessment Triangle”, which works as the basis for assessment topics. In addition to this triangle, there are both national and various local procedures for doing

assessment, as well as computer systems to support the process. This triangle has three equally important sides: the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors. As the figure shows, every side of the triangle has further specific sources of information and issues to be investigated, including procedures regarding timescales to be followed and mandatory assessment reports to be written. The guidance for this model is evidence-based (Holland, 2011). Hence, at least in principle, we can say that English child protection assessments follow a structured model that includes procedures and specifically designed computer systems to support the use of the model.

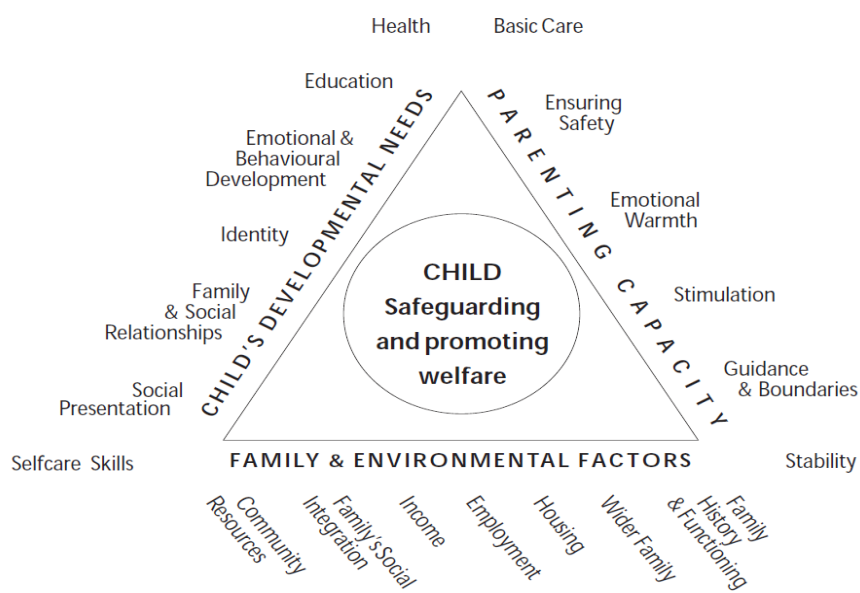


Figure 1: The Assessment Framework, Source: Department of Health (2000a: 17)

*The Norwegian assessment framework:* Historically, Norway was the first country in the world to have a public child protection/welfare system (Stang-Dahl, 1978). The Norwegian system is generally described as less risk-based than other Western child protection systems (e.g. US, Canada and England) and more centred on children's and families' broad needs for services and interventions (Christiansen, 2011; Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). In Norwegian, the term for the child protection system incorporates both the protection and welfare dimensions that are separate in the English language. This mirrors how the system is organized with no formal division between child protection and child welfare. The main guidance for social workers doing assessments lies in the fundamental principles of the "Child Welfare Act" itself, combined with a deadline of three months for completing assessments. The fundamental principles are to work "in the best

interest of the child”, to do the “least intrusive act” and to adhere to “the biological principle”. The first of these, the “best interest of the child”, is at the centre of every issue in child protection. Norway does not have an explicit assessment model or mandatory procedures for social workers to follow. Broadly speaking, the lack of an externally imposed structure is consistent with the idea that professional judgement is the primary component in social workers’ assessments when there are child protection concerns. The system should assess when the child appears to have a “special need for interventions and support” (Kane, 2006), though there are no further specific national guidelines or procedures to be followed when carrying out child protection assessments in Norway. However, there is freedom for municipalities to implement child protection assessment frameworks. Some municipalities have recently implemented an assessment model, structuring the information-gathering process on the basis of risk factors (Kvello, 2011), which is based on a private initiative that is not anchored in any national authority. The Norwegian assessment framework allows the local child protection office to decide on the best way to investigate any concern. The amount of information gathered, and the extent of family contact, will depend on the individual situation and on the professional judgement made about the situation. Although it is not mandatory to write a final assessment report, it is common for there to be some kind of record after an assessment is finished, either in the form of a report or in the form of a child’s file.

As we have set out, the framework and guidelines for social work assessment differ strongly between the two countries in terms of a standardized framework and procedures. A recent discourse in the two countries sheds some interesting light on these differences: In England, a government-commissioned review of child protection (Munro review, 2011) emphasized the need to reduce mechanisms of top-down control to help create space for reasoning and reflectivity. At more or less the same time, a similar report in Norway focusing on child protection decisions and services across the country highlighted issues raised by a lack of an agreed or generally accepted process. The report identified a heavy reliance on professional judgement as a potential problem for public justice in terms of differences in services and decision-making (Report of Auditor General of Norway, 2012).

### **Previous research on the topic**

What do we already know about parents' perspectives on child protection assessments? Earlier research on the child protection system highlights how important it is to take account of parents' experiences of their contact with this system (Chapman, Gibbons, Barth, McCrae, & NSCAW Research Group, 2003; Willumsen & Severinsson, 2005; Hardy & Darlington, 2008). There is a limited amount of knowledge about how those who have had involvement with the child protection system view their experience (Baker, 2007), as studies show inconsistent results about parents' perceptions of the child protection services (Studsrød, Willumsen, & Ellingsen, 2012). Research findings differ in both the experience of the process and in the outcomes of these services, with findings ranging from major satisfaction among parents (Winefield & Barlow, 1995; Dale, 2004) to major critical concerns (Bolen, McWey, & Schlee, 2008; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Houghes, 2008; Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In a recent study (697 respondents) of parents' perceptions of the Norwegian child protection system, 40.6% of the parents reported having only positive experiences and 30.7% reported having solely negative experiences, while 24% of the parents described having both positive and negative experiences (Studsrød et al., 2012). When it comes to assessment related findings in England, Turney et al. (2012) suggest that key factors in receiving a positive perspective from parents are the relational ability of the assessor, such as a willingness to listen and to demonstrate empathy and respect, as well as clarity about the specific purpose of the assessment. Assessment-related studies in Norway are limited, but findings from Scandinavia support Turney et al.'s review on the importance of relational skills (Samsonsen, 2009; Uggerhøj, 2011). A recent Norwegian study highlights the emotional aspects of parents' encounters with the child protection services and the importance of taking these emotions into consideration. The study shows that parents' rational arguments and their emotions are inextricably linked to each other (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Clarity about the purpose of the assessment has not been identified as equally important in the Scandinavian literature as in the English, although a Norwegian PhD study stresses the informal powers of social workers in assessment, and connects these powers with low levels of clarity in the communication (Midjo, 2010). The child protection literature is commonly divided between "Child Protection" in the liberal Western countries (e.g. US, Canada and England) and "Child Welfare" in a social democratic context. Previous research comparing these two contexts documents this division in terms of "risk" and "need" (Khoo, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2011). There are limited findings from comparative studies on assessment in child protection, and we have not yet been able

to find any comparative studies about parents' perspectives between "Child Protection" and "Child Welfare" systems.

### **Theoretical approach**

The aim of this study is to develop knowledge on the assessment from parents' experiences in order to contribute to an improved practice in social work. What can we learn from these experiences that will facilitate a more fruitful practice in assessment? With this explorative starting position, the research process developed in an inductive manner in regard to theoretical perspectives as a means to supplement and extend the analysis of the interviews. Two main themes that were identified in the material, namely "emotions" and "power", will be further elaborated in the section of findings and discussion.

#### *Emotions in assessment*

Emotions are understood to be something we feel internally, and that can have an external expression. Emotions are explained as primarily being social because they often occur in interactions between people (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Assessment in child protection is known to be a stressful situation for the parents involved (ibid. Midjo, 2010; Uggerhøj, 2011), and stressful situations tend to generate strong emotions. A small minority of caregivers will seriously harm a child, but these cases do not represent typical child welfare practice as they only constitute the most extreme cases (Holland, 2011). Regardless of how parental capacity is exercised, intuitive parenting as biological capacity and preparedness is a universal phenomenon occurring in caregivers across age, gender and cultural background (Smith, 2010). Emotions between children and parents can also be approached via different perspectives. Attachment theory is one way to consider these strong emotional ties between a caregiver and a child, explaining them as crucial for the survival of the child, but also for psychological belonging and well-being in a mutual understanding (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007). From a more biological perspective, this attachment and emotional union is something humans share with other mammals to reproduce and survive as a species, and it is characterized by nest-building and territorial defence (Fisher, 1998). This attachment behaviour includes maintaining proximity and displaying separation anxiety when apart, and is also affected and supported by hormones (e.g. oxytocin). This primal force of parenting does not ensure good quality parenting, but has to be taken into account when dealing with the caregiver-



child entity. What happens when the nest is “under attack” by child protection assessments? While social workers expect parents to be a secure base, providing safety and security for their children, (Bowlby, 1984; Klette, 2007), the parents’ need for social workers to act as a secure base might be underestimated (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Security is closely linked to trust, and assessments often generate insecurity because of the stressful nature of the situation. The duality lies in the question of whether the social worker is a friend or an opponent, and this duality may give rise to insecurity, which in turn may create anxiety, frustration and anger. Thrana and Fauske (2014) stress the importance of acknowledging these emotions as possible obstacles, and of addressing the fear by serving as the parents’ secure base. However, a fundamental problem in child protection assessment is the tension between parental rights and the fundamental needs of the child, which can be in conflict, and may be a genuine obstacle in the assessment process.

#### *Power in assessment*

Child protection assessment seems to be at the heart of one of the most problematic issues in social work: the duality of both helping and controlling families. A referral, based on concerns about a child, is to be investigated at the same time as help is to be provided from the family’s perspective. As previous research shows, there are different orientations toward helping and controlling in England and Norway (Gilbert et al., 2011). In a comparative perspective, one can say that England is more risk oriented in its assessment, while Norway is more therapeutically oriented. The available resources underpin these differences. In England, families’ broader needs are revealed during assessment, but targeted interventions are not always available because of a scarcity of resources in the system. In Norway, there are more tailored interventions available to meet the complex needs of families after assessment (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). In the child protection literature, power is mostly referred to as the formal positional power of the system to intervene (Kirton, 2009). The role of social workers performing child protection assessment is commonly linked to this legislative mandate: if a child is at risk, an out-of-home placement is a possible outcome of the assessment. For most parents, this is the ultimate exercise of power from the state, which is enforced by social workers, though a different power perspective sees power as more relational (Shaw, 2013). When approaching power as relational, power is not just a “fixed state” linked to roles and mandates, but instead is present in every moment and every relation in various

forms (Nissen, Pringle, & Uggerhøj, 2007; Midjo, 2010). Relational power implies a constant “power negotiation” between social worker and clients, with different sizes of power “battles” being present (Shaw, Briar-Lawson, Orme, & Ruckdeschel, 2013; Midjo, 2010). Through the use of their knowledge, skills and role to define a situation or make knowledge claims, social workers seem to have relational and interactional power as representing the system (Jarvinen, Larsen, & Mortensen, 2002). Professional judgement in assessment could be an example in which both formal- and relational power are played out. If we consider power to be relational, the power issues in assessment are both complex and influential, and may be used to help as well as to control.

## **Method**

This is a small-scale, in-depth study with a qualitative approach, which is considered meaningful when studying lifeworlds in terms of individuals’ own perceptions and subjective apprehensions (Berg & Lune, 2012). We started out the analytical process with a classic content analysis approach, but realized early in the process that the answers in the interviews did not entirely correspond with the questions asked. Quite a few questions from the interview guide were about the assessment framework and procedures, but the answers were stories about emotions. After a thorough consideration of how to be “faithful” to the stories when analysing and presenting findings, a narrative thematic analytical approach was considered most appropriate. Narrative analysis acknowledges to a wider extent that people are constructors of their own experiences. It sees narratives as a way of making sense of- and presenting these experiences (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). Chase (2008) states that narrators break through the interview structure and talk about what is most important to them, as what comes first tells us more than anything else. All the interviews were thoroughly transcribed and read several times as a starting point. We then approached each interview for stories to preserve the self-presentation of each person (Chase, 2008), before turning to a more thematic narrative analytical approach (Riessmann, 2008). In general, one of the key differences between a narrative thematic analysis and a content analysis is the greater possibility in narratives to keep a story more “intact”, instead of using component categories across cases. The difference between a thematic narrative analysis and narrative approaches is the former’s ability to interpret data in light of the themes identified by the investigator/researcher, rather than the chronology of the narration as presented by the individual (ibid.). In this study, themes were

identified across stories, both within interviews and between interviews, within one country and between two countries. We present selected quotes to illustrate the themes and findings, with the quotes presented labelled according to the parents being interviewed (e.g. E1=England participant 1, N1=Norwegian participant 1).

### *Recruiting the interviewed*

The main data source for this analysis was 10 interviews with 11 parents (actually one of them was a grandparent) who had experienced at least one assessment in child protection from 2010 onward. The sample was recruited through the city councils in Bergen, Norway (258,000 inhabitants) and Bristol, England (433,000 inhabitants). These cities share a similar maritime heritage and are relatively affluent. The service context seems quite similar in the way that frontline social workers are the assessors, and if more thorough interventions are the outcome of assessment, the case is referred to other service teams. We accessed the parents via social work teams in the two city councils. Social workers asked a broad range of clients on their lists, and the ones who accepted were interviewed. The Norwegian parents were interviewed previous to the English, and the English parents received a 10 pound gift card, whereas the Norwegians did it for free (we did not think about this at first, since in our experience it is not an equally common practice in Norway as in England). This might have influenced the sample in England according to a motivation for participation. In total, 11 parents (Norway=5, England= 6) were interviewed for approximately one hour each, with using a semi-structured topic guide (see Table 1). They were mostly visited in their homes, but two interviews took place at a café according to the interviewees' wishes. Parents were asked questions about their assessment experiences, how they saw the process, how they felt, what was good about the assessment and what could have been better, how service user participation was facilitated and experienced and what type of assessment improvements they would suggest.

This study is part of a larger research project exploring assessments in Norway and England, which includes interviewing social workers (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014) and analysing assessment reports (Samsonsen & Turney, 2015).

Table 1: Sample (parents interviewed)

	<b>Norway</b>		<b>England</b>
N1	Single mother, two children aged 9 and 11. Two assessment experiences.	E1	Single mother, two children aged 3 and 5. One assessment experience.
N2	Single mother, three children aged 3, 7 and 13. Two assessment experiences.	E2	Single mother, five children; two adult and three between ages 8-16. Two assessment experiences.
N3	Married mother, three children; one 16 and two adult. One assessment experience.	E3	Parents (mother and father), one child; baby under 1 year. One assessment experience.
N4	Single mother, two children aged 14 and 17. One assessment experience.	E4	Grandmother (mother's mother), two children aged 10 and 12. One assessment experience.
N5	Single mother, two children; one 15 and the other adult. Two assessment experiences.	E5	Single mother, three children; two teenagers and one 4 year old. One assessment experience.

### *Methodological reflections*

In our study of assessment from the parents' perspectives across two countries, the two different ways of practicing offer opportunities to reflect on differences and similarities (Baistow, 2000). We have validated the analytical process through transparency and through discussions between the authors and other research colleagues. Within narrative research, accountability and credibility lie in the narrators' experiences. But why should we believe it? Narrative as a research tool is viewed as stories from reality and not on reality (Riessman, 2008). The question is whether a small group represents the larger population: Even though representativeness is not of major importance, narratives are significant because they embody- and give insight into what is possible and intelligible within a special context (Chase, 2008). This is a small-scale study, the aim of which is not generalization, though the in-depth stories and perspectives from parents nonetheless yield valuable insight and knowledge into our research question. Ten of the interviewed were female with only one male, which may imply a gender-bias in the study. Validity checks can also be made through correspondence: Are the findings supported by other results on the topic? As our section on previous research shows, we have not yet been able to find comparative research on the specific topic. Thus, previous research on assessments supports our findings.

### **Findings**

As presented in Table 1, 11 parents were recruited, and none of them withdrew their consent during the study. When telling about their assessment experiences, stories of emotions became the overall story, as patterns of similarities and differences, both between countries and within countries, were identified in the stories told (Table 2). Even though the interview guide set some thematic questions, the responses were not answers directly corresponding to the questions in the interview guide. The families primarily told stories about emotions.

Table 2: Overview of findings

<b>Similarities between England –Norway:</b>		
Identified common narrations as the overarching theme: Stories of emotions; power in assessment System power Relational power (informal power)		
<b>Differences between England – Norway:</b>		
<b>“Risk” ----- “Need”</b>		
	<b>England</b>	<b>Norway</b>
Assessment expectations	Limited expectations of help; High expectations of placement/risk assessment	High expectations on help; Limited expectations of placement/risk assessment
Social Worker view	“We hate social workers”	More neutral view on social workers; include “social workers as helpers”
Clarity in assessment	Clear assessment, lot of standard questions	Lack of clarity in assessment; Honesty as risky
Service user participation	Little expectations of participation; Limited knowledge of the concept; Did not experience participation	High expectations of participation; Aware of participation rights; Various experiences on participation

We will now turn to an integrated section on findings followed by a discussion.

### **Similarities between England and Norway, overarching theme:**

#### **Stories of emotions, power in assessment**

#### **Stories of emotions**

The parents interviewed in England and Norway openly shared their experiences, and their motivation for telling these stories was primarily a wish for child protection services

to improve their assessments so that other people would benefit. The stories were not always told chronologically; the interviewed often told fragments of the process, stressing the emotional aspects, but this differed between the interviewed parents.. Overall, the respondents seemed confident about the importance of their stories, and had different levels of intensity and feelings when telling them, from very agitated to a very calm appearance. They were all in an emotional state when telling their stories, because the emotional pressure in assessment was strongly felt and expressed:

*It was very stressful. (E3)*

*I have got mental health problems after the assessment, it ruined me. (N1)*

*I was devastated, terrified and panicking. (N4)*

*I got desperate about the situation. (E4)*

The parents told that they were either in a state of fear when starting the assessment process or that the feeling of fear appeared during the process. The feeling of fear when going into the process seems to be based on general perceptions of child protection as being scary, as well as on the actual experiences in assessment. Therefore, negative feelings may either diminish or escalate during the assessment:

*I was so scared. I had heard so many stories. They told me not to worry, but when I was honest, they removed my child. (N5)*

*I was very pleased with the assessment and the help. I had a feeling of being listened to, and believed in, and they were easy to understand. Standing outside their office made me feel small, but it changed when we got to know each other. (N3)*

When parents talked about their assessment story, the role of the social worker conducting the assessment was emphasized, and was linked to the parents' feelings during the assessment period. Families were in a very emotional state at this point, and the ability of the social worker to ensure clarity and a good working relationship seemed very important in order to avoid or reduce strong negative emotions.

*How can we understand these cross-national emotions?*

The parents' experiences of assessment seem to go beyond national borders. First and foremost, they are experiences of strong emotions in a stressful situation: anxiety, frustration, powerlessness, but also relief. These emotional aspects "break through" the narrations, regardless of the questions being asked about structure and procedures. In line with earlier findings on parents' stories from child protection experiences, these findings show that rational arguments and emotions are inextricably linked to each other, and must be considered as influential in terms of how parents engage in and define the process (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). How can we understand this? Assessment can be viewed as a situation full of power, and these findings may illustrate how the power in assessment influences the parents. A possible outcome of assessment in child protection might be the loss of your child to an out-of-home placement. In light of attachment theory, which emphasizes the natural bonds between children and parents, one can see that the psychological preparedness to attach is present regardless of the quality of the attachment (Schoore & Schoore, 2007). Together with more biological perspectives on human nature (Fisher, 1998), this perspective could help shed light on this matter. If we view parents as strongly connected to their children, regardless of their parenting capacities, and as having a natural disposition to defend their "nest" and territory, an assessment can be viewed as a threat and put parents in a vulnerable situation. Another perspective to be considered is the parents' own need for a secure base during assessment and the social worker's ability to create a safe and trusting environment. Since assessment represents a duality between help and control, parents might wonder whether the social worker is a friend or an opponent. This gives rise to emotions such as fear, despair and anger (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). In this way, assessment is potentially a very stressful situation for families regardless of the national context, which supports the theoretical idea of parents' emotional bonds with their children and their preparedness to defend their "nest". Furthermore, the findings from this study support previous research findings in which parents emphasized the importance of the relational ability of the assessor in addressing emotions and in their willingness to listen and demonstrate empathy and respect (Turney et al., 2012). Parents' emotions play an important role in the process of assessment, and can represent both obstacles to successful cooperation or the path to change for parents and their children (Thrana & Fauske, 2014).

### **Power in assessment**

In the interview guide, there were no specific questions about power issues, apart from the questions regarding the levels of service user participation. When telling their stories, the parents frequently brought up power issues. Two levels of power issues were identified in the stories told: “system power” as in the power of child protection as a system and “relational/informal power” as the power of the social worker involved in defining the situation and exercising professional judgement:

*I kind of felt a bit invaded. It was almost like I didn't have any opportunity or personal life. It was like going on some sort of, "This is your life". There are all these powers they have. They don't come in and say we are going to/not going to take your children. They ask a lot of questions, you answer and then you think, Oh God! Have I said the right things. Terrifying and fear, because they are in my life and they have a higher power. (E1)*

*When I first got in contact with them, they told me nothing about rights, just asked questions and told me they knew what I was going through. They told me to open up, and I did, and it was turned against me in court, even though they told me that nothing would be used against you, just tell us. This terrified me. They ruined my head and my feelings, I was a wreck. (N1)*

*We had a horrible social worker. I could not sleep, I was sick, it was really bad. It was how you approach people, really. (E2)*

*So, it depends on who you are talking to, what day, and what state that social worker is in. They treat their reports as if it is the truth, and it doesn't matter what you say. Child protection has to be more honest and less judgemental. (N5)*

These quotations illustrate the complexity in power issues in child protection assessments. The formal powers of the system to intervene seem somehow interlinked with the approaches of the social workers involved.

*How can we understand these cross-national “powers” in assessment?*

The parents interviewed are all aware of the formal power of the system to intervene (Kirton, 2009), but at the same time they talk about more tacit/informal power, such as relational and interactional power in how situations are defined by using knowledge claims and personal variables in professional judgement (Jarvinen et al., 2002). Social workers set the agenda in the process by setting out the topics of conversation, and also require arguments from the parents about the parents' views and opinions. This



underlines the asymmetric power relationship (Midjo, 2010). Resistance from parents to social workers' definitions of the situation tends to increase the level of frictions in negotiations (ibid.). The findings from our study support the notion of power as relational (Nissen et al., 2007). In their stories, the parents in our study seem to appreciate it when power is an explicit topic, whether system power or relational power. They are aware that power issues are always present in child protection assessment, and explicit and honest talk about power seems to help reduce these issues. This again could be linked with the emotions in assessment. Since the emotional encounter between parents and social workers acts as either an obstacle or a facilitator to fruitful processes, it has to be addressed. We find both system and relational power issues present in the English and the Norwegian interviews, but we also find differences in how this is handled.

### **Differences in assessment experiences and expectations in England and Norway**

Even though the overarching theme is similar across the interviews, we find some differences between the two countries in the experiences from assessment and expectations regarding assessments in child protection (see Table 2).

#### *Assessment expectations*

The participants from Norway described expecting help from the system both during and after assessment, and had little expectations of risk evaluation as part of the assessment.

*I referred myself. I was ill and needed help. How they could support me. I was sceptical but it felt good at the same time to receive help. I believed they would help us. (N2)*

*I took the first phone call, because I needed help and support in my decisions. (N3)*

In England, the parents expected less help and resources than the Norwegians, and had a higher awareness of risk assessment. This is a quote that illustrates this:

*They are seeing how good a mum I could be. The safety of the children, they are there for the children I suppose to see if there is any risk where the children are living. (E5)*

These differences in the expectations of risk and help seem to be closely connected with resources in terms of money and interventions available in the child protection system:

*I am absolutely furious because of the hypocrisy of the social services saying they care when they are not prepared to put money where their mouth is. The ticking box mentality is prior to peoples' health. (E4)*

In Norway, the parents seem to expect help in terms of interventions to meet their needs, whereas in England they seem more aware of the risk assessment, but are positively surprised when they experience help and support in assessment:

*I became aware of my bad situation, and they pressured me into a break up. They helped me change locks and got me into a freedom programme, put me in touch with a family liaison officer and put my smallest in kindergarten. They encouraged me and said don't beat yourself up, you are a nice mum, and keep doing it. (E1)*

Views on the social worker role also differ between the two countries:

*Here in England, we think that social workers are going to take the kids. You think the worst things are going to happen. (E2)*

*When I first came into contact with the social workers I was very open and honest, and believed I could tell them everything. (N1)*

*If I meet people struggling with their child, I tell them to contact social workers in Child Protection to get advice. (N3)*

Regarding clarity in assessment we find quite big differences between the two countries. This is most likely a reflection of the differences in the assessment framework. In the stories from Norway, there are several instances of a lack of clarity in assessment. The parents do not understand the dynamics of the assessment, especially the shift from help to control:

*Even though they told me to tell everything, we will not use this against you. They are like wolves in sheep's clothing. (N1)*

*I suppose every question has to be answered. I have gone through questionnaires and got to tick things, but I could leave it if I did not feel comfortable. It doesn't bother me, they just try to get answers. (E5)*

Service user participation as a concept and as an element in assessment was also reported very differently between England and Norway. Knowledge about- and awareness of service user participation in social services seems more grounded in Norway than in England:

*It was very stressful. The 24 hour supervision, that was the hardest, no privacy. We had no deciding. As far as I understand, we were taken over. It was like being watched from a glass window. How can you blame us for being frustrated in that situation? (E3)*

These parents did not recognize the term “service user participation”. When the concept was defined as “how the social services listen and take your opinions into account”, they said: “*We didn’t have any of that.*” Participant E2 had also not previously heard about the concept. She elaborated on her opinions: “*They don’t ask you, they just say come to this meeting. They have a plan and a decision and you just have to go with it.*”

Consequently, the English participants did not have high expectations of service user participation, as only one out of the five English families experienced some elements of participation. Overall, the Norwegian families reported more satisfaction with service user participation, and all of them recognized the concept and what it constituted:

*I had a feeling of being listened to. They acknowledged what we were saying. It is important in this situation to be listened to and believed, not the social workers being moralistic about you and your children. (N3)*

*When they contacted me over the referral, I was scared and everything felt out of control. I felt we talked about different realities. But I felt listened to, and we had some really good conversations, and it felt very professional. This was not about me as a person, but about the case. It was safe and it was thorough. (N4)*

*How can we understand these differences in experiences of power in assessment?*

England and Norway differ in their assessment frameworks regarding structure, procedures and the space for professional judgement (Samsonsen & Willumsen, 2014). Research also shows that differences in the policy context influence social work practice in terms of the risk or needs the focus of child protection (Gilbert et al., 2011). The impact of assessment frameworks seems to be mainly on the level of the clarity and structure

of the assessment process and the level of power in the child protection system. Contextual factors such as resources seem to influence expectations of the outcome, with parents telling emotional stories about power in assessment, regardless of country. However, when these stories are further analysed, we find differences that might mirror differences in the assessment frameworks and contexts. The English parents talk more explicitly about system power and “hating social workers” as a group, whereas the Norwegian parents talk more about implicit power forms such as the informal power to define a situation. It seems that the differences in assessment frameworks frame differences in power issues; when the structure in assessment is clear and defined (a lot of set questions and procedures), the formal system power seems more explicit and the space for relational power seems diminished. When the assessment framework is less structured and relies more on professional judgement, the more informal powers in relations downplay the system powers. The use of professional judgement in social work reflects the need for flexibility and an adjustment to individual needs and situations. At the same time though, the use of professional judgement raises the possibility of arbitrariness and/or poor decisions based on personal biases. In this study, different levels of professional judgement in the two countries could help explain some of the differences in the parents’ experiences of the informal powers of social workers. In addition, this might also be a reflection of differences in expectations. The English parents seem to expect risk assessment and intrusion into family life, and have low expectations of help, which may make them far less likely to engage voluntarily with social services in the first place. The Norwegian parents tell stories of a more positive attitude to assessment in the starting point, and of expecting help from the social workers and the system. This could reflect differences in the orientation of child protection, with the Norwegian context being more therapeutic and need oriented, and the English more resource-constrained and risk-oriented. In this way, the classic duality of help and control in child protection might be even more complicated in Norway than in England: When the shift is made from therapeutic- to more risk-oriented action in assessment, the change in the situation is hard for the Norwegian parents to understand. The strong parental emotions about relational power in assessment could be explained in part by this change from help towards control without explicit communication. However, this relational power accompanied by more resources may represent a productive power force when social workers use their freedom for professional judgement to intervene according to the family’s needs and wishes.

### **Concluding remarks**

Regardless of country, the most crucial experiences from the perspective of the parents are the emotional aspects of assessment. This provides us with information on just how stressful an assessment can be, and emphasizes the importance of social workers taking this fully into account. In our material, it seems that assessments in England are clearer because the parents know what to expect and the questions are the same for everyone. The risk dimension in England is quite explicit, and this can be viewed as positive because the system power is more explicit. Nevertheless, the English parents had little expectation of help. This may be explained by the more constrained resources in the system and the general orientation in assessments towards risk above need. The assessment framework in Norway is characterized by professional judgement, and the findings from the interviews reflect this; it seems that professional judgement leaves room for helpful decisions. The parents who are pleased with their assessment are very pleased, and explain this with reference to the “tailoring” of interventions. Still, the parents with negative experiences in Norway connect professional judgement with power and tell stories about their own feeling of powerlessness, partly because of a lack of clarity in the assessment. Previous studies show inconsistent results on parents’ perceptions of the child protection services (Studsrød et al., 2012; Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Our study supports the variations between satisfaction and critical concerns, even when the same assessment framework is applied country-wide. However, this is a small-scale study with a single setting in each country, and care should be taken in generalizing the finding. Nonetheless, regarding the implications for practice, we would highlight that explicit communication about the topics of emotion and power seems vital, as is a more open awareness about the duality of help and control in assessment. This could contribute to a more fruitful assessment experience from the parents’ perspective.

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