The war within: Emotional experiences of children in Norwegian Child Protection Services

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how children's emotional experiences in the context of child protection services (CPS) impact their choices in everyday lives. It draws on a qualitative study examining the lived experiences of children from Pakistani backgrounds with Norwegian CPS. The data analysis shows that children's emotions are social and relational, interacting with their broader politico-cultural environment, as they are both shaped and being shaped by their experiences with CPS. We argue that analysing emotions is important for understanding children's complex lives and identities and that this can inform CPS policies and practices and contribute to framing their protection needs in the wider sociocultural and political contexts.

Key words: child protection, children's emotional experiences, ethnicity, interpretative phenomenological analysis

1. Introduction

Children from immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented in statutory child protection services (CPS), both in Norway and internationally (Berg et al. 2017; Sawrikar 2016). However, research involving the voices of children from immigrant backgrounds in CPS is lacking (Wilson et al. 2020). To bridge this gap, this article explores the lived experiences with CPS among children from Pakistani backgrounds in Norway. The aim of the research was to investigate children's lived experiences with CPS, where their emotional experiences emerged as a pertinent aspect of how being in CP affected them. Taking up Ahmed's (2014) call to discover what emotions do, we aim to present a nuanced understanding of the emotional experiences of these children in the context of CPS and their effects on their choices and actions. We argue that, by focusing on different facets of children's emotional experiences, researchers can contribute to the knowledge on what matters in children's lives and the role of emotions in the governance of childhood in CPS.

Internationally, statutory CPS is dominated by developmental psychology theories in the conceptualisation of childhood and child development that perpetuate the image of a child that needs to normally complete the development stages before becoming a competent adult at the end (Melindar et al. 2021; Holland 2001). Children are thereby objectified through evaluative processes (observation, assessment and judgement) by CPS that aim to elicit the truth about children's lived realities and prescribe necessary interventions (Cronin 2019). One such influential tool for measuring children's (emotional) development is a checklist to assess their attachment and bonding to parents, mainly the mother (Holland 2001). This is based on psychological attachment theories (Bowlby 1979), which view emotionally sensitive and child-centred parenting as a crucial condition for children's healthy development. However, these theories imply a universality and uniformity of children's experiences, irrespective of the sociocultural context, and represent a Western middle-class perspective (Keller 2018). Holland (2001) argues that evaluating children's attachment to their parents is difficult without considering the social and cultural contexts, life experiences and emotional relationships of the children involved. This article challenges the narrow perspective of emotions as psychological states by presenting an analysis of children's experiences of emotions as sociocultural and relational practices in the context of CPS.

In recent years, the recognition of children's emotions in children's geographies and childhood research has increased (Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013). This research explores the role of emotions in children's attachment to their neighbourhoods and public lives (Aruldoss et al. 2020; Bartos 2013; Den Besten 2010), their agency and control (Harden 2012; Hemming 2007), racialised and ethnic identities and relationships (Haavind et al. 2014; Zembylas 2011) and performances of intersectional belonging and identities (Kustatscher 2017). These studies have highlighted the significance of emotions in children's lives and their potential to reveal 'ways of knowing, being and doing things in the broadest sense' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8). Thus, emotions can be viewed as a form of relational meaning-making that is structurally embedded and socially situated, where emotions are expressed in people's reflections on their experiences (Wettergren 2019).

The relevance of emotions in social work practice, especially in child protection, has been acknowledged for some time (O'Connor 2020). However, scholars have been preoccupied

with the negotiation of the complex emotions experienced by social workers (Forsberg and Vågli 2006; Warner 2015) and how they are affected by emotional pressures, such as compassion fatigue and dealing with aggression directed at them by service users (McFadden et al. 2014). Some research has been conducted on the emotional experiences of parents in CPS (Tembo and Studsrød 2019; Thrana and Fauske 2014). Relatively less attention has been paid to research that explicitly focuses on children's emotions and their emotional experiences in CPS, with Warming (2019) and Drake et al. (2019) being notable exceptions. These studies provide insights into children's lived ambivalence between supporting autonomy and controlling practices in child protection work, as well as into the importance of acts of receiving and giving care for children's and young people's emotional well-being. Warming (2019) explored the emotional dynamics and power relations that unfold in intergenerational encounters, emotional management and youth policies in a residential care institution. She found that emotional recognition – that is, the need for love and care – was part of a daily struggle in encounters between staff and young people. Drake et al. (2019) showed that children's emotional relatedness with their families, friends and places is important for their well-being in CPS. Our article contributes to this turn towards children's emotions in child protection research. The authors of abovementioned studies conceptualise emotions as an embodied force and as outcomes of the ongoing production of institutional space, intergenerational relations, the broader political discourse of neoliberalism (Warming 2019) and emotions as relational practice (Drake et al. 2019). We similarly draw on the conceptualisation of emotions as relational and sociocultural practices that motivate children's (in)actions in the context of CPS.

This paper proceeds with a brief presentation of the conceptualisation of emotions. Next, we outline the research methodology, followed by an analysis of children's accounts of how they navigate complex emotions, such as guilt and regret, and the dilemmas in their everyday lives that have ensued from their involvement with CPS. We then discuss the findings and present the implications of the study for CPS practice.

2. Conceptualisation of emotions

In this paper, emotion is defined as the multicomponent response to individuals´ evaluations of external or internal events significant to their well-being (Frijda 2016). These components usually include the appraisal or interpretation of an event, action readiness, a motivational state to avoid pain and seek positive outcomes, expressive behaviour and subjective experience (Frijda 2016). Emotions contribute to how we relate to our social and physical worlds.

We draw specifically on a sociocultural and performative approach to emotions that views emotions not only as individually experienced but also as impacted by wider sociocultural and political contexts and enacted through performative practices (e.g., Ahmed 2014; Lutz 1985). Hence, the quality of the emotion experienced is mediated by cultural meanings, social structures, power dynamics and political discourses (Ahmed 2014). These are also imbued with moral meanings shaped by cultural expectations, the socialisation process and shared understandings of what is morally acceptable (Haidth 2003). Researchers have highlighted the importance of self-conscious moral and social emotions, such as guilt and shame, because

these often motivate individuals to conform to rules and uphold social order (Baumeister et al. 1994). These emotions are aroused by two main interpersonal sources: 'emphatic arousal' and the fear of social exclusion that threatens individuals´ sense of belonging and identity (Baumeister et al. 1994, 246; Burkitt 2002). Thus, these emotions can drive people to relationship-enhancing behaviour, even if it endorses harmful cultural norms and is not in their self-interest (Baumeister et al. 1994). This highlights the performative aspect of emotions, meaning that it is important to focus on what an individual's emotions do in a given sociocultural context and not just how they emerge. These performances should not be viewed as wilful or fully conscious actions or choices but rather as being formed within the social, cultural and political prescriptions and discourses about how one should relate to others.

We consider children active social actors who do not simply internalise what happens around them but are active producers of meaning (Corsaro 2017). Their emotional experiences are therefore likely to be shaped by their sociocultural and physical environments, as well as by their active engagement in the interpretation of social signals and how they make meaning of their experiences. Thus, emotions, morality and interpersonal relations are important in how children construct socioculturally acceptable ways of perceiving, feeling and responding to the phenomena they encounter in their everyday lives (Fosberg 2005; Sirota 2019). For example, research with children who have witnessed domestic violence shows that children may have ambivalent emotions towards a violent parent, based on their own interpretations of violence and its meaning in their lives (Fosberg 2005).

Children's and families' encounters with CPS are saturated with emotions (Hennum 2011). In light of this, it is clearly important to explore children's emotions and attend to their own accounts of these. Taking up the call of emotional geographers (e.g., Blazek 2015; Kraftl 2013), we critically examine Pakistani children's experiences of their emotions when in contact with Norwegian CPS and how emotions are socioculturally constructed and performed. For example, how do these children use emotions to perform their belonging in terms of the varied social identities they hold and the political decisions they must make – which aspects of belonging they foreground or silence and who they consider to be part of the group or not (Kustatcher 2017). Understanding Pakistani children's relational, moral and social emotions in the context of Norwegian CPS provides insights into how they navigate and express their emotions within the culturally and politically prescribed boundaries of being Pakistani and in contact with Norwegian CPS.

3. Study context

3.1. Norwegian Child Protection Services (CPS)

Norwegian CPS is often described as child-centric, as it considers children independent individuals with rights (Skivenes et al. 2015). CPS is mandated with ensuring that children at risk receive necessary care and timely support (Child Welfare Act 1992). This aspect of the Child Welfare Act gives precedence to children's best interests and their rights to participate in deciding on measures and interventions for children and families. The threshold to report concerns regarding children to CPS is low; all public employees (e.g., teachers, school nurses)

are obliged to report if they suspect child maltreatment or neglect. These surveillance practices shape the performance of parenting in Norway, but at times, they also create mistrust and fear of CPS among parents, especially those from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds (Tembo et al. 2021).

Norwegian CPS have been accused of exhibiting bias and insufficient cultural sensitivity in their engagement with migrant children and families, leading to misunderstandings and inadequate support (Fylkesnes et al. 2018). Conversely, CPS has also been criticised for being excessively focused on culture, leading to stereotyping and stigmatisation, as the broader context is overlooked (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021). This highlights the complex and delicate balance that must be navigated in CPS, as well as the need for developing inclusive and equitable practices that support children's well-being while respecting cultural diversity. Providing culturally responsive CPS services to diverse groups of immigrant children necessitates investigating their lived experiences of these services, especially through studies that consider the nuances of their multicultural identities and contexts.

Currently, immigrants from Pakistan and their children constitute one of the largest non-Western immigrant groups in Norway (Vassenden and Vedøy 2019). As such, their experiences are particularly relevant to understanding the situation for non-Western second-generation children in CPS in Norway. On the one hand, CPS is viewed by some young people from Pakistani backgrounds as a useful institution that balances the power relations in the family by safeguarding the rights of children (Friberg 2019). On the other hand, many Pakistani immigrant parents are concerned that CPS undermines parental authority by giving children a bargaining chip in their everyday lives (Friberg 2019). Common themes regarding perspectives and experiences of CPS among this migrant community include cultural misunderstandings, lack of acceptance of different parental practices, feelings of marginalisation, communication challenges, fear of child removal and damaged relationships between children and their families (Ali 2013; Friberg 2019). However, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the experiences of Pakistani immigrant children and to inform the development of culturally responsive and inclusive CPS interventions.

3.2. Pakistani immigrants in Norway

Norwegian-Pakistani immigrants are a diasporic community that maintains transnational economic, political, social and emotional ties to their country of origin (Erdal 2021). The first immigrants arrived as labourers in Norway in the late 1960s, mostly from the rural districts of Punjab (Vassenden and Vedøy 2019). Since then, they have increased, mainly due to family reunion, transnational marriages and the birth of children (Erdal 2017). While this group is ethnically and linguistically diverse, the centrality of religion, kinship, segregated gender roles and importance of family honour are often identified as commonalities among them (Erdal 2021; Østberg 2009; Ryst 2017).

Research with Norwegian-Pakistani children highlights the challenges of holding the multiple identities of being Pakistani and Muslim alongside that of being Norwegian (Østberg 2009). This leads to a complex interplay between children's religion, gender, sexuality and ethnic identity and their perceptions and experiences of integration and stigmatisation (Rysst 2017).

For example, Norwegian-Pakistani children, especially girls, risk being labelled 'Norwegianised' by their families and communities if they act and dress as majority ethnic Norwegians (Prieur 2004, 23). Conversely, they are 'othered' in the mainstream society and stereotyped as belonging to a 'conservative' culture if they wear traditional Pakistani clothes. This highlights the complexity of children's identities and how they experience and navigate between the two different and sometimes opposing cultures (Østberg 2009).

4. Research background and methodology

This article draws on an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study of children from Pakistani backgrounds in Norwegian CPS. The focus of the research was to investigate children's lived experiences of CPS, where their emotional experiences were identified as a pertinent aspect of how they felt being in CPS.

Kallio (2012, 82) argues that many 'projects that aim explicitly at children's empowerment through voice-giving may unintentionally mask, bury or silence their experiences and views'. Keeping this in mind, IPA was considered to be a useful approach to exploring children's emotional experiences in the context of CPS, as it aims to understand the participants' world. IPA takes a hermeneutic, idiographic and phenomenological stance that elucidates how individuals make sense of their experiences and is well suited to research that is complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden, such as the present study (Smith et al., 2009) exploring children's understandings and lived experiences of CPS.

4.1. Recruitment and participants

Eleven children (aged 13–19 years; eight girls, three boys) participated in the study. They were born in Norway but had at least one parent born in Pakistan and the other from Pakistani origin. They were either receiving or had received services (such as investigation, out-of-home care and in-home services, such as training programmes for parents) from CPS in the last 18 months.

Participants were recruited via gatekeepers (parents/guardians, teachers, community leaders, social workers) who informed the children about the research. Children and gatekeepers were given information about the research, including the study objective, inclusion criteria, voluntary participation and information about anonymity and confidentiality. Once a child expressed an interest in participating, their contact information was shared with the researcher (first author). Recruitment via gatekeepers was chosen because of the sensitive nature of the research topic and because they were able to identify potential children based on the inclusion criteria. However, a potential limitation of using gatekeepers is that it risks children being selected only if the gatekeepers consider them fit and/or competent to participate.

The interviews took place where the participants felt most comfortable, including children's homes/foster homes and cafes. Some of the participants had personally asked for help from CPS, while others were referred to CPS through external agencies, such as school, hospital and police. At the time of the interviews, six of the participants were living in foster care and five in their parental homes.

4.2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between September 2018 and May 2019. Interviews were experience oriented, and the interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' subjective experiences of being in CPS. This included questions like 'What it is like to be in CPS?' or 'What was your experience of being in CPS?', which enabled participants to direct the focus of the interview. Interviews were conducted by the first author, mainly in the Norwegian language, with a combination of English and Urdu. The interviews averaged 60 minutes in length and were all audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Expert language users of Norwegian and Urdu were used to ensure that the intended meanings were not lost during the translation process.

4.3. Ethics

This research was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Participants were informed orally and in writing about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation and their rights as participants. Signed consent was required for the children and for a parent/guardian for participants under 16. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. They could also choose which questions to answer or not.

Pseudonyms are used and quotations have been carefully presented to mitigate the risk of revealing participants' identities. '[…]' within quotations indicates editorial omission. Words in brackets are added to clarify the contextual meaning.

4.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed following the key principles of IPA through six analytical stages (Smith et al. 2009). Initially, each transcript was re-read multiple times alongside the audio recordings and field notes for each interview. The focus was on exploring how the participants made sense of their lived experiences of CPS. Second, initial observations and notes were created based on the participants' descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments to capture their experiences. Next, these notes were used to generate emergent themes, which were thick descriptions capturing the core features of the experiences and perceptions of CPS embedded in the participants' accounts (Smith et al. 2009). Then, the emergent themes were clustered based on key expressions, ideas or perspectives to develop superordinate themes. Emergent themes that were not readily developed or did not represent the children's experiences of CPS were set aside for later analysis. Afterwards, this process was repeated for each participant. Lastly, the superordinate themes were closely examined across cases to note recurrent topics, similarities, differences and interrelations. This article presents the four superordinate themes corresponding to the children's emotional experiences.

4.5. Rigour and reflexivity

IPA researchers engage in 'double hermeneutics', a process in which the researcher's and participant's frames of meaning intersect to try to make sense of the participant's world (Smith et al. 2009). Reflexivity strengthens rigour from data collection to write-up (Goldspink and Engward 2018). The first author is a Pakistani woman. Sharing the same ethnic background facilitated the establishment of rapport and empathy during interviews, and as such, there were some aspects of being an insider related to Pakistani cultural values. However, there were also differences in that, unlike her participants, she was born and raised in Pakistan and had no personal experience of being a child in CPS. Critical reflections of interviews and field notes by the research team enabled the researcher to assess her biases and emotions during the data collection.

All stages of research adhered to the principles of sensitivity to context, rigour, reflexivity and transparency (Yardley 2008). To demonstrate how interpretations were grounded in the participants' life-worlds, verbatim quotations are included throughout the analysis (Smith et al. 2009). The co-authors audited different stages of the analysis to ensure a rigorous level of iteration and to make explicit the endeavour of hermeneutic exploration.

5. Findings

Navigating emotions was identified as a central experience for children from Pakistani backgrounds in Norwegian CPS, and four superordinate themes relating to participants' emotional experiences in CPS were derived from their narratives.

The first, 'emotional scars of going through CPS processes', describes the impact of the participants' actions and inactions (decisions to not take an action) on their inter- and intrapersonal relations and expectations of others. The second, 'dilemmas and conflicted feelings evoked due to being in CPS', focuses on situations in which the participants had to trade off unreconcilable options, each relating to certain moral and emotional values. The third, 'feelings of despair and futility', highlights the hopelessness among the participants. Although contacting CPS often provided them with safety and care (until the age of 18), it could not bring back their childhood and/or reverse their trauma. Lastly, 'feeling split between the two contrasting cultures' shows how the participants' experiences of CPS were laden with conflicting emotions and belongingness between their Pakistani and Norwegian cultural backgrounds. The findings highlight the psychosocial phenomenon of emotions that shaped the participants' relationships and sense of self and impacted their choices. Moreover, it also highlights the effect that the children's emotions have – that is, how their emotions impact their choices and actions in the context of CPS.

5.1. Emotional scars from going through the CPS process

The participants' emotions were intersubjective and experienced mainly with regard to their families. Their interpersonal considerations, such as how their actions impacted others, led to feelings of guilt. For example, Sonia blamed herself for unintentionally involving CPS in her family and the way they scrutinised her parents:

> In the [CPS] report, it was written that my parents are bad parents [...] That made me
> [feel] very sorry because my parents felt that they are bad parents when they are the

world's best parents […] They [CPS] had put all the blame on my parents when it was my fault.

Sonia felt guilty for the negative outcomes faced by her parents, who were blamed by CPS for not doing their duty towards her. She compensated for this by calling her parents 'the best in the world', while also saying, 'there was nobody else to help me except for myself'. The contradictory statements can signal Sonia's efforts to normalise her family situation and defend her relationship with her parents, which was impacted by CPS involvement.

While the children wanted to improve their life situations, they did not want it at the cost of stress and negative feelings for their parents invoked by CPS. Mehak illustrated this point:

> When CPS came [for a home visit], I felt that it became more stressful for family here […] I got a feeling that it was my fault […] because things had gotten worse […] They [CPS], like, criticised too much […] I started to regret and be disappointed that I told [CPS].

Mehak hoped that CPS would improve her home situation, yet their negative behaviour towards her family led her to feel regret and disappointment. CPS affected the family dynamics in a way that left her feeling guilty and regretful about the disclosure, as their home visits had negative outcomes for the family and, consequently, for her. Her regret was not due to the action of contacting CPS but stemmed from their consequent actions.

Similarly, Bahar felt remorse over honestly telling CPS about her home situation:

> When I found out that […] this was going to happen [removal from home], right? Sooo, I went to bathroom and locked the door and just cried […] I was seven […] was like small in the head […] [Now] I would never just say such things [to CPS].

Bahar regretted disclosing physical violence at home and was extremely saddened by the consequences. She blamed her young age for her naivety in answering CPS' questions without understanding the implications. She expressed that one of her greatest wishes was 'to be a normal family again' and reunite with her parents.

Suraj related a similar experience:

> It just makes me sad […] to think about it [the case], you know? What has been said and what happened, right?

These examples illustrate that children do not emerge from CPS processes emotionally unscathed. However, regret can be caused not only by the children's actions and their consequences but also by their inactions. For example, Roohi regretted not contacting CPS earlier. She strongly recommended that children living in abusive homes seek help from CPS, even though it took her many years to do so:

> It is better that you tell [CPS] than to burn in the fire of the hell [at home] […] As long as you are silent, you aren't going to get anything other than regret and a lot more beating […] Be mentally prepared that things will get a bit tough, but it will always go well in the end. I, myself, am an example here.

In Roohi's view, children need to be proactive in contacting CPS, as their silence will only make things worse for them. She warned that the longer one waits, the more regretful one will be – something she experienced herself.

It was important for the participants to be reassured that it was not their fault and that what was happening to them was not right. Zoya talked about her meetings with a school counsellor that contributed to her not feeling guilty and regretting contact with CPS. Kiran demonstrated a similar experience:

> I was happy, in a way, that I told someone […] They [CPS] agreed with me that what was happening wasn't right […] There are many things that they [CPS] have done that I do not like, but if I look a little back […] I don't regret things that they have done […] Now I feel that I have it good.

Roohi was also happy to finally be able to share her problems and life situation with others; she received understanding, respect and care from adults (social workers, temporary foster parents).

5.2.   Dilemmas and conflicted emotions evoked by being in CPS

The participants experienced family and CPS as two opposing powers in their lives. They felt compelled to choose one or the other. While choosing CPS sometimes ensured their survival and safety, it came at the cost of their emotional well-being and relationships with their families and communities. Zoya described this dilemma:

> Everything in the home was the same, but I didn't feel the same, because I knew it [being taken out of home] was going to happen now [pause] … It was very sad because it was like: Shall I stay and have it awful and eventually die? […] Also, then, am I with my younger sibling or shall I go away from the sibling for [my own] good, right?

Zoya's family did not know about her meetings with CPS, as they were considered a threat to her life. Even though she had a terrible life at home and agreed to CPS intervention of out-of-home placement, it was not a simple decision for her. This shows how love for siblings or other family members can hinder children from seeking help, as they do not want to lose their relationships. Kiran illustrated this:

> I love my younger cousins very much, and when I received a video of her *[a younger cousin]* I became like, ok…now I must go home […] So I managed to get back home […] There was a moment I thought that maybe she [mom] had changed. But when I came, it seemed like, nooo […] She was her old [self].

Kiran missed her family despite being safe and happy in out-of-home placement and experiencing what she described as *'real parents'*. She hoped that her family would realise their mistakes and change. However, she was disappointed and later placed in kinship foster care. This highlights how children hope that their parents will change, and this affects their decisions and actions.

The wish to be a normal family also influenced children's choices. For example, Bahar wanted to go back to her home and be *'a normal family'* if CPS permitted:

> [If given a choice,] I would go back to my parents' place […] It can be a little difficult to be there since I haven't lived there for so many years, right? […] but it would have to be like OK, as they are our parents, and they know how it should be […] I would miss my friends who are here. But I will ask them [parents] if they move to this town. So, it is closer [to foster home and school].

Bahar's dilemma was not choosing between CPS and family but choosing between her life before and after moving into foster care. Although she was aware of the challenges in reunification with her family, she hoped and trusted that her parents would help with the transition. Simultaneously, she wanted to be with her friends and looked for ways to compromise.

Sometimes, the children's dilemmas resulted from the way CPS treated their families. Mehak succinctly described this situation:

> I understand that they [CPS] tried to […] Improve [things] here at home […] But… stress is very much dangerous for life and health as well […] It [CPS intervention] creates a bit too much stress in our lives. But if CPS should continue, I hope that they [social workers] can be […] mature, to put it like that. Like, a little more like calm and polite. Not so direct like the other social worker.

Mehak appreciated CPS' efforts to improve her home situation to some extent, but she also felt that CPS reduced her family's well-being by stressing them. The social worker's behaviour created a dilemma: whether to improve her situation or keep the family safe from stress. She desired a mutually respectful relationship between her family and CPS so that they could collaborate to make her life better.

As demonstrated by Mehak, the benefits received from CPS need to be greater than the costs of being in it. The perceived costs of being in CPS hindered Sonia from seeking their help, even though it seems that she needed it:

> I didn't feel like saying [to CPS] that I needed help […] I was scared to say that you [CPS] aren't helping me because that'll make my case go longer […] I didn't wish it to become a thing. I wanted them to go away because I had heard so many bad things about them.

Sonia was wary of CPS due to the negative feedback she had heard from friends. In her community, stigma was attached to being associated with CPS. Therefore, she did not want her connection with CPS to *'become a thing'*. These dilemmas and conflicted emotions can push children to despair, without any hope for improving their life situations, no matter which side (family or CPS) they choose.

5.3.   Feelings of despair and futility

The participants had troubling childhood experiences that had a lasting impact on their lives. These experiences were generated by both family and CPS – for example, violence at home

or being taken out of home by CPS. The participants shared their feelings of despair, as their attempts to improve their life situations and well-being came with costs, either through losing relationships with family or receiving too little help from CPS too late. Bahar shared her fears as follows:

> Relations with them [parents] have actually been destroyed [because of CPS] [pause]… [I'm] a bit scared […] about whether we are going to have them in our future.

Bahar felt that her relationship with her parents had been destroyed, as they had not lived together for a few years. However, the complexity of this point was the additional impact of the opposite situation: the perception that her parents were offended by CPS intervention and blamed her for breaking the family and ruining the family's reputation. Roohi also felt that her relationship with her parents was destroyed, but for different reasons:

> But I don't wish to meet them [parents] […] I have changed a lot, but mom and dad live in the same way, in the same culture […] I can't handle knowing them again […] when I was not well, then mom did nothing. Why is she coming now and asking? Now that I am really well […] I get nauseous.

Roohi felt disgusted by her parents' exhibition of care. Unlike her biological parents, her foster parents made her feel at home. The love, care, trust and freedom that she received from her foster parents helped her *'become mature'.* However, in the process, she became estranged from her parents, who neither changed themselves nor asked for forgiveness for their behaviour towards her.

Conversely, Hina's feelings of futility and despair arose from never receiving the necessary support from CPS, even though she had four different cases over a period of five years:

> I maybe wouldn't have been in the situation in which I am now if I had been moved out of my home […] They [CPS] never evaluated that option of moving me out of home.

Hina lamented the social workers' inability to understand her situation and recommend suitable interventions to protect her, such as out-of-home care. Her desperation resulted in self-harming:

> I had no control over what my family did. I had no control over what CPS did. The only thing that I had control over was the pain that I inflicted on myself.

Even when the participants were removed from their homes, the elimination of threats in their lives was not guaranteed. For example, Zoya described how CPS policies failed to make her feel safe:

> It feeelsss OK, but it is not exactly how I would like it to be. For example, we receive reports from the meetings, and since my parents still have parenting rights […] they have access to all the documents [pause] […] That, I think sucks a bit…that no matter how much I try to keep them out of my life, they still have access through CPS […] Protection for me is not having this fear that someone is after me.

Zoya had to overcome many external and internal emotional challenges to receive help from CPS. However, despite being removed from her parents' care, their constant access to her life made her feel vulnerable. These examples highlight that the participants (especially girls) perceive safety and protection differently than what CPS provided. Roohi presented this eloquently:

> Protection is where I am not scared to be myself […] without caring about whether, if I go out in shorts, Pakistanis are going to talk shit about me. Or if I go out with a boy, they are going to destroy my family's honour […] for a Norwegian girl is not scared to be seen with a boy and that people will talk shit about her.

Roohi highlighted the need for CPS to go beyond individual-focused interventions for children and their families and move towards a community-based approach, in which cultural challenges are properly addressed.

The family issues that the participants grew up with deeply invaded their lives. Zoya envied her friends' '*normal*' childhoods:

> It's like, when they [friends] show pictures from when they were kids and just talk about how good it is to be a child…and people say like, 'Ohh! I wish I could be four again', I am like…hell no!!! I don't want that time back [pause] …So, it's a little sad to think that, all my reality…my childhood […] I knew it was not the best, but it was horrible rather than different.

Many of the participants, like Zoya, did not know how troubling their childhoods were until they left their homes and experienced love, care and respect. This knowledge made it even more difficult to reconcile with their families. This was illustrated by Hina:

> I couldn't talk to people at home because they were all against me […] It was bad [pause] …But when I got very sick, they [family] changed themselves. Suddenly, they became very caring […] But if they had been there for me during the first round, I wouldn't have been caught up in it [pause] …I didn't have a normal youth because, when I was teenager, so I had all this chaos with family.

Hina felt failed by both her family and CPS, who were both responsible for ensuring her well-being; she blamed both for destroying her childhood. This situation had a drastic effect on her health, which made her family change their behaviour towards her. However, she considered it too late and having little effect, since the damage they did is irreversible.

Kiran found another way to deal with the despair over her lost childhood – not thinking about the past:

> The only thing I do is to not think about it […] It was new year, right? [pause] … so I thought, 'Why do you, like, in a way, think about the old things that have happened?' Right? One does not need to think about it. I started to think about the future instead [pause] [and] started managing things myself, right?

Kiran dealt with her troubling childhood experiences by focusing on the future and becoming independent. Her experiences made her realise that she could not depend on anyone, her

family or the state. She obtained part-time employment to gain practical experience and economic independence.

5.4.   Feeling split between the two contrasting cultures

The emotional reactions that the participants had towards CPS were situated in their broader social context. They were divided between two cultural identities: Norwegian and Pakistani. The former was considered 'liberal' and the latter 'patriarchal and conservative' by the children. In the CPS context, it seemed that they had to show loyalty to one culture or the other. For example, the children struggled with whether they should accept physical discipline from their parents as a part of Pakistani cultural practice or report it to CPS, as it is unacceptable in Norwegian culture.

Hina's family labelled her 'Norwegianised' – a term used by immigrant families to criticise their children for forgetting the values of their parents' culture and adopting liberal Norwegian values:

> They [older siblings] thought that I should shut up because it [social control] is totally normal in our families. I have been called very 'Norwegianised' actually [laughs]. Even though I think I wasn't […] but my siblings were like, 'Our parents are never going to change themselves.'

Growing up, Hina's family did not allow her to participate in the same activities as her Norwegian peers, such as having male friends, hanging out with friends after school and so on. She considered this '*negative social control'* and protested against it and being labelled Norwegianised. She resisted the social control by leading a '*double life'*. The consequences from her family for living a double life made her fearful for her life, and she thus sought help from CPS. Hina was not just seeking help against her family but also against the culture in which she was raised.

It is challenging for children to oppose their families and to fight the violence and gender discrimination that most of these children understood as part of 'Pakistani culture'. They felt that they had few choices other than contacting CPS. For example, Kiran shared feeling helpless:

> I get the blame, in a way, all the time. They [brothers] don't get it. You know how our religion works […] it is very strange. Here, it is also like that they don't say anything to the boys […] they blame the girls (…) It is very irritating. This must change! I have done one thing [called CPS], but I think I am done with it. [laughs] I cannot do anything.

Kiran and Hina found it strange that their parents and families tried to enforce the values of Pakistani culture that did not fit well with the liberal Norwegian law and social values. Contacting CPS was their way of showing resistance. However, a lack of desirable results from CPS and/or family made them give up the ambitious goal of changing the harmful cultural practices that they experienced.

Nevertheless, some participants conformed to these practices rather than resisting them. They considered it a part of their Pakistani cultural and religious heritage. In such cases, CPS was considered an intrusive institution that did not respect other cultural practices. As Bahar explained:

> I feel that they [CPS] don't have an understanding of the culture […] that we belong to […] It happens [parents using physical punishment]. Norwegians, they like think they [children] are dying in a way [...] The smacking/slapping that one gets if one has done, like, something wrong [pause] …maybe [if] they [CPS] had tried to understand how our religion is…

Bahar viewed physical punishment as a justified and fair consequence for children, allowed by both religion and culture; CPS' response was considered disproportionate. She seemed frustrated with the lack of tolerance for physical punishment or discipline among CPS and Norwegians generally. She considered this a lack of cultural understanding. CPS was considered as 'them', different from 'us', and thus not trusted.

From Suraj's perspective, it was CPS that treated his family as 'others/them':

> They [CPS] can be racist as well […] They are like that […] They [Norwegians] do it to their own children too, because they are children as well. But they go out and take other people's children. This is what makes others sad.

Suraj was convinced that CPS treated his family unjustly because they were not Norwegians. He was both angry and sad that Norwegians/CPS discriminated against them and gave them the worst outcomes.

6. Discussion of empirical findings

Through this research, we explored the lived experiences with CPS among Norwegian children from Pakistani backgrounds. The analysis highlighted the range and variability of emotions that the children experienced and the way they understood their sense of self and its impact on their actions and choices.

A key theme identified from the children's accounts involved emotional scars or distress in the form of severe psychological and social consequences resulting from exposure to CPS interventions, which can have long-lasting effects on their well-being. The participants reported experiencing complex moral emotions, such as guilt, regret and shame, in their relational context with family, CPS and society. According to Ahmed (2014), emotions are not fixed entities but are produced dynamically between the individual and collective and are closely related to power relations, sociocultural norms and political context. Within this framework, understanding children's experiences highlights the importance of sociocultural factors (norms, values, hierarchies, etc.) that construct the moral boundaries within which they interpret and navigate their emotions. The present study highlights how the children's experiences of guilt and regret in CPS were evoked both by their own actions and inactions and by the actions of CPS towards their family. This was because the children perceived their (in)actions to be evaluated negatively by themselves or others (e.g., friends and the

community), as they failed to uphold family norms and instead favoured their self-interest by involving CPS.

Many children in CPS report feeling conflicted loyalties and stigmatisation that may lead to guilt and shame (Wilson et al. 2020). However, since the distribution of these emotions is influenced by social hierarchies and inequalities, certain groups of children may be more vulnerable to experiencing them due to their marginalised position and/or the expectations placed upon them by others (Ahmed 2014). For example, one study found that children from collectivist cultures that emphasise interdependence and well-being of the group may experience guilt more intensely compared to their counterparts from individualistic cultures that prioritise autonomy and individual rights (Furukawa et al. 2012). Given that guilt and regret are functional emotions that enhance prosocial behaviour (Burkitt 2002), the participants dealt with their guilt and regret by (over)compensating for their parents' loss of a positive image and by vowing not to seek help from CPS in the future, even if needed. While these actions can enhance children's belonging to their family and community, they can also act as barriers for children seeking help from CPS and/or can block CPS from providing necessary support to children and their families in need. Thus, it is important that social workers consider not only the way CPS interventions impact family dynamics but also the influence of sociocultural context and moral reasoning on children's emotional well-being.

Another theme that arose in the children's narratives involved the dilemmas and feelings of dissonance invoked by their encounters with CPS, which increased their emotional burden. Ahmed (2014) emphasises the need to focus on what emotions do rather than what they are. The participants in this study felt compelled to trade off options of irreconcilable moral and emotional values, such as safeguarding their own best interests through contacting CPS or maintaining family cohesion and reputation by not cooperating with CPS. While the former choice fits an individualistic Norwegian culture, in which an individual's autonomy and independence are suitable goals (Engebrigtsen 2003), the latter adheres to the Pakistani collectivist and honour-based culture, in which values such as family hierarchy and absence of self-interest are promoted (Rodriguez Mosquera 2004). This highlights that emotions are not only individually experienced but are also embedded within the broader cultural values and political contexts (Ahmed 2014). However, it is not a simple binary between children's cultural heritage and the host society's norms and values. Attention should also be given to the intersectionality of children's multiple identities (e.g., age, gender, cultural affiliations) and belongingness (Kustatcher 2017). Their relationships and sociocultural context act as resources for how they make sense of their dilemmas; thus, the same emotion can be interpreted differently by different children. For example, while Bahar regretted telling CPS the truth about the situation at home, Roohi's regret arose from not contacting CPS earlier to seek help.

Our findings align with the conception by childhood researchers (Cosaro 2017) of children as social actors who do not simply internalise sociocultural norms and expectations but also shape their emotional responses and moral reasonings based on their perspectives, interpretations and desires. For example, we found that, to maintain or gain emotional security and a sense of belonging, children sometimes accepted their parents' power over them and gave precedence to family (collective) solidarity and honour over individual

interests, a finding also present in other studies (Abebe and Tefera 2015; Punch 2005). These emotional responses can be challenging for individualised and agency-oriented CPS practices to comprehend, as the risks and dilemmas faced by these children may seem unfamiliar to professionals (e.g., teachers and social workers) whose worldviews are shaped by secular Western society (Davies 2019). Studies show that experiences of emotional dilemmas and divided loyalties in family conflicts cause both immediate and long-term negative psychological and social consequences for some children (Maes et al. 2012; Smart 2006). Seen from this perspective, CPS has the potential to safeguard children's safety and protection, but it also risks jeopardising their emotional and psychosocial well-being.

The third theme revealed the participants' feelings of hopelessness over lost childhoods and the futility of their efforts to be free from the fear and oppressive power of their families. Children's emotional and moral boundaries of *doing* family (referring to family as a verb rather than a noun) are constantly under construction and 'shaped by comparisons with and judgements of others, rather than dictated by (any) absolute moral codes' of an ideal family (Holdsworth and Robinson 2008, 1089). Therefore, drawing on our understanding of participants' narratives, their reference to lost childhoods can be interpreted in two different ways: 1) instead of having an ideal Norwegian childhood in which one receives care, nurturing and love from parents, they received physical, psychological and emotional violence at home, and 2) instead having a normal Pakistani childhood in which children are a part of the private family sphere, they were taken away from their parents by CPS. In both cases, whether it was due to the family or CPS, the children felt oppressed due to the lack of possibilities of having a 'normal' childhood given to them by adults. Some of the participants attempted to save their childhoods by contacting CPS for help. However, these children, despite being removed from their homes by CPS, failed to feel protected emotionally and psychologically due to the constant interference and control of their families in their lives. This shows that the family's oppressive power can be complex and invisible. Thus, to address this, change is needed in the sociocultural norms (e.g., honour code) that constitute oppression, and not just changes in the specific circumstances of children's lives, such as removing the children from the home. Further research is needed regarding what children in CPS consider a good childhood versus a lost childhood and their understanding of protection.

The last theme highlights the role of emotions for children's social identities of nationality, gender, culture and religion and how they shape and are shaped by their experiences with CPS. Resonating with Ahmed's (2014) conceptualisation of emotions as politically charged, our findings highlight that immigrant children's emotional responses in CPS are not neutral but are influenced by wider sociopolitical factors, such as social attitudes towards immigrants, recognition of different cultural practices and power dynamics between majority and minority groups. Previous research with children from Pakistani backgrounds in Western countries has found that they are exposed to various discourses in the home and public institutions, which, in their essentialised forms, present the cultures and identities of the host country and their parents' home country as opposing each other (Dwyer 2000; Ghaffar-Kucher 2012; Østberg 2003). Hence, some of the participants, such as Hina, were considered by their siblings/families as too Norwegian and not belonging to the Pakistani group, as they took part in the majority's youth culture, for example, by being friends with members of the opposite gender. Conversely, some other participants, such as Kiran, saw themselves as belonging to

the Norwegian group and rejected living by the strict gender and generational hierarchies and power structure of Pakistani culture. This shows that children performed identities as a form of belonging to what they considered two distinct groups. This was not just dependent on how others viewed them but also on self-identification. Based on the participants' accounts, their frustration with the negative social control and their families' oppressive power resulted in their seeking help from CPS. This can be understood as their performance of asserting Norwegian social identity and citizenship, in which all citizens have equal rights to accessing the support of social services, such as CPS (Wilson et al. 2020). Simultaneously, the participants who were affiliated with Pakistani and Muslim groups achieved their identities by accepting their parents' power over them as an integral part of Pakistani culture and in the children's best interests. Their grievances with CPS were related to feelings of social injustice and perceived discrimination due to their religious backgrounds and to their cultural practices not being accepted in the society. Here, cultural background represents only one part of the children's complex lives and dynamic identities, which highlights the need to further explore how children's emotions and emotional experiences create their identities and vice versa.

During the past few decades, Norwegian CPS has incorporated several approaches, such as recognising adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care, that are significant for children's emotional well-being and developmental outcomes (Steinkopf et al. 2022). Our findings underscore the importance of the sociocultural dimension of emotions in the CPS context. Through our exploration of children's emotional experiences, we have not only examined how emotions emerge but also how they influence children's actions and choices. Following Blazek and Windram-Geddes (2013), our study demonstrates the interconnections that children's emotions and emotional experiences have with their inner worlds and other facets of their relational, social and political lives, both constituting and being constituted by these interactions. By adopting a sociocultural approach, this paper highlights that emotions are not merely psychological states but are intricately embedded in cultural and social contexts, resulting in variations in how emotions are expressed, understood and addressed across different cultural backgrounds. For example, children usually report conflicting loyalties and guilt due to CPS investigations (Wilson et al. 2020), but children from Pakistani backgrounds may experience stronger feelings of guilt and fear of consequences for breaking the honour code. These consequences can include being left involuntarily in their parents' homeland (Norwegian Ministry of Health 2020) and may impact children's (in)actions. By elucidating the emotional experiences of these children, we aim to provide a starting point for understanding the unique ways in which their emotions shape and are shaped by their encounters within the CPS context. Additionally, we hope this research will inform the development of policies and practices that effectively support children from diverse backgrounds in CPS and are tailored to meet their specific emotional needs not only at the micro sociopolitical level (CPS) but also with consideration of larger concerns, including discrimination, identity and citizenship.

7. Implications for CPS practice and policies

Emotions are present in CPS policies and practices through the discourses and theories of developmental psychology, for example, the dominant use of attachment theory and the focus on emotional regulation (Drake et al. 2019). However, these perspectives do not necessarily acknowledge the relational, social, cultural and political nature of emotions that

emerged in our analysis. This implies that practitioners working with children need to acknowledge the emotional and sociocultural nature of children's attachments; emotions 'colour' the relational bonds that can constitute identity and belonging (Ahmed 2014, 28). Furthermore, the child-centred model of attachment theory ignores the fact that children's experiences of safety and well-being are 'dependent on being cared for and caring for others', as found by Drake et al. (2019, 128; see also Warming 2019). CPS policies and practices need to recognise that children's choices can reflect different 'colours' of emotions, for example, from accepting parent's oppressive power dynamics to encompassing the minority's political struggle for recognition, thus raising the dilemma of whether to remain committed to this or not. Exploring and integrating various approaches to emotions in CPS can create a comprehensive framework that encompasses emotional well-being, trauma recovery and culturally sensitive support for diverse groups of children and families.

The child-centric approach in Norwegian CPS policies views children as individuals with opinions, interests and perspectives and provides them with opportunities to express themselves and influence decisions that affect them (Skivenes 2011). However, recently, scholars in childhood studies and children's emotional geographies have cautioned to consider the limitations of children's voice and participation (Blaisedell et al. 2021; Kraftl 2013; Tisdall and Punch 2012). They postulate that children's emotions and emotional relations play a key role in their participation and depend on the context in which their participation takes place (Blaisedell et al. 2021). While children's participation in CPS is deemed beneficial for children (Van Bijleveld 2015), our findings highlight the need to consider the complex emotional implications that their participation has for them. For example, the children who reported the truth about their maltreatment at home later experienced complex emotions of guilt and regret for breaking the honour code. Thus, it is important that professionals in CPS are aware of what is morally at risk for children experiencing maltreatment, as 'honourable families' and 'good children' do not disclose family matters to outsiders (e.g., mental health professionals and social workers) (Gunasinghe et al. 2018; James and Prilleltensky 2002).

By demonstrating the breadth and depth of children's experiences of complex emotions and moral dilemmas during their engagement with CPS, we highlight the importance of understanding children's individual emotional struggles as they search for the right thing to feel and do in their situated interactions with CPS and family.

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