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Pakistani children's lived experiences of relationships in the context of child protection services in Norway: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines how children from immigrant background experience and negotiate power relations with family and social workers in the context of child protection services (CPS) in Norway. Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, 11 children from Pakistani background were interviewed about their lived experiences with CPS. Analysis of the data highlights that children have to negotiate and navigate generational and gendered power relations both within the families and the CPS to exercise their agency. The analysis contributes to a limited research field focusing on immigrant children's multidimensional lived realities in the context of CPS, where children's voices are largely missing.

KEYWORDS

child protection, ethnic minority children, interpretative phenomenological analysis, power relations

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) focuses internationally on children's legal and social positions in society. Hereby, a spotlight is placed on seeing all children across member countries as rights-bearing citizens and experts in their own lives, with rights to provision, protection and participation (Alanen, 2009). This child-centred approach supports the value of accepting children as active service users and autonomous individuals with a relation to the state and independent of their parents or family (Slettebø, 2013). To uphold these values, professionals and policy-makers, especially in national child protection services (CPS), must listen to and draw on children's expert knowledge (Horgan & Kennan, 2021) in an 'ongoing process, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect' (UNCRC, 2009, p. 3). Their meaningful participation in CPS delivery has shown positive results, such as improvement in self-esteem, appropriate and suitable interventions and overall risk reduction (van Bijlevald et al., 2015; Toros, 2021).

Through the UNCRC, child participation in service delivery is becoming increasingly prevalent and influential in CPS, particularly in the Nordic countries, such as Norway, where children's rights to attend meetings, be heard and be informed of the CPS process are embedded in policy (Skivenes, 2011). Despite this, research with children in CPS has shown that protectionist and paternalistic approaches still prevail in practice (Wilson et al., 2020). This gap between policies and practice demands attention, as it points towards tensions between practitioners who view children as either vulnerable or capable and as either harmed or supported by participating in CPS (Diaz, 2020). It also raises relational and power dimensions when seeking to better understand children's participation and social inclusion (Prout et al., 2006).

In the context of CPS, children's relationships with adults, such as social workers and parents, are central to their effective participation rights (Van Bijleveld et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). However, these intergenerational power differentials can also act as obstacles (Collins et al., 2021). For example, Henriksen (2022) argues that, from the youth's perspective, they navigate an adult-centred system of assessing children's needs and decision-making that impairs their meaningful participation and empowerment. However, assuming that children are powerless underestimates their role as social actors and denies diverse spaces for their actions (Caputo, 2017). Furthermore, an overemphasis on participation rights that focuses only on giving children voice through formal and often adult-centric spaces can obscure the significance of other forms of participation, such as the consideration of children's everyday actions, their social relationships, and how they manage power dynamics and negotiate their rights within these. Hence, there is a need to explore children's power relations in their everyday lives by looking at factors such as how they participate, 'who participates, for whom the participation is [un]productive, and whose interests are served through participation' in their given context (Caputo, 2017, p. 80). This approach values children's diversity, their experiential knowledge, and an interdependent position in which children are a part of their structural and sociocultural context and their lives are enmeshed with those of the adults around them (Fitzgerald et al., 2009).

Given the lack of research on children's 'lived dimensions' of participation and power relations in the context of CPS that foregrounds the importance of children's social relationships and sociocultural settings (Toros, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020), this paper presents the findings of a study of children's lived experiences with CPS. It specifically focuses on the experiences and sociocultural context of children from Pakistani background who were in contact with Norwegian CPS. Here, we ask: *How do children from Pakistani background negotiate and navigate their power relations and the impact on their everyday actions in the context of CPS?* Our

research is situated in Norway, where the tradition of children's rights and participation in CPS stands strong and aims to equally provide welfare and protection services to all children (Hennum, 2017).

This paper aims to illuminate children's lived experiences of power negotiations in their interdependent relationships with family and social workers in the context of CPS. We further discuss the processes through which children negotiate, conform or resist generational and gendered power in their everyday lives. We illustrate that children's participation is dynamic, rather than passive and static, and is performed in their everyday actions.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Norwegian CPS is considered a family-oriented and child-centric system that aims to provide support for families and children by using the least intrusive measures (Skivenes, 2011). All children aged 0–18 years are eligible to receive support from CPS; however, these services can be extended up to the age of 23 years. In 2003, the UNCRC was formally incorporated into the Child Welfare Act of 1992 to emphasise the child-centred nature of CPS, which is further evident in its strong focus on children's best interests and participation rights.

To be able to help children, CPS relies on obligatory or voluntary reports of concern by public service employees or referrals about a child's situation by private individuals (Child Welfare Act, 1992). The most common reports are related to physical violence rather than psychological violence or sexual abuse (Løvlie & Skivenes, 2021). Once a case has been reported, CPS has 1 week to decide whether the case will be investigated. Investigations may lead to either certain interventions, such as family support and out-of-home placement, or case closure. Out-of-home placements can be undertaken voluntarily, whereby parents agree to their child's placement or can be implemented involuntarily or as emergency care orders individuals (Child Welfare Act, 1992). Decisions about out-of-home placements are made by the county boards (CB) and can be appealed by parents in the district court. However, in cases where there is an acute concern about a serious threat to the child's well-being and safety, emergency placements can occur before the CB reviews the case (Storhaug et al., 2019).

Norwegian CPS and immigrant families and children

Children from immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented in Norwegian CPS (Berg et al., 2017). Research with immigrant parents regarding Norwegian CPS has highlighted feelings of mistrust, powerlessness, perceived lack of freedom in deciding how to raise their children and fear that CPS will take their children away (Fylkesnes et al., 2015; Tembo et al., 2021). However, little research has focused on the experiences that children from immigrant background have with CPS despite their overrepresentation in the system (Wilson et al., 2020). Our study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of Norwegian CPS among children from Pakistani background. While this group is not overrepresented in CPS, they make up the largest second-generation immigrant group from a non-Western country in Norway (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). These children lead complex lives, negotiating multiple identities (ethnic, national and religious) and moving between Norway's liberal culture and Pakistan's patriarchal and conservative culture, in which male dominance is promoted (Rysst, 2017).

TABLE 1 Description of participants.

Pseudonyms (gender)	Age	Reason for contact with CPS	Who reported the case to CPS?	Status at time of interview
Alice (F)	17	Violence	Self-reported	In kinship foster care
Haley (F)	16	Neglect	Self-reported/school	At home (case open)
Jane (F)	16	Suspected neglect	School	At home (case closed)
Julia (F)	19	Violence	Self-reported	At home (case closed)
Monica (F)	17	Suspected neglect	Not clear	At home (case closed)
Rachel (F)	17	Violence	Self-reported/youth worker	In foster care
Summer (F)	12 (soon 13)	Violence	Kindergarten (self-reported not clear)	In kinship foster care
Zoe (F)	17	Violence	Self-reported/school	In foster care
Luke (M)	15	Neglect	Sibling	At home (case open)
John (M)	17	Not known	Police	At home (case open)
Martin (M)	15	Violence	Sibling	In kinship foster care

METHODOLOGY

This study implemented an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design, which emphasises that individual's meaning-making stems from their subjective lived experiences and is situated in their sociocultural environment (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenological approaches are considered valuable in eliciting children's unique voices and understanding what it is like to experience a phenomenon, particularly of those who are in marginalised circumstances (Mant et al., 2019). In this study, IPA was used to understand and describe how it is to be children from Pakistani background in Norwegian CPS. Ethical approval for this research was awarded by Norwegian Data Protection Services (NSD Project #57527).

Positionality

IPA acknowledges the layers of interpretation involved in both experiencing and researching a phenomenon. This process is referred to as 'double hermeneutics', whereby participants interpret their world based on their present and past experiences and their hopes for the future. This is, in turn, interpreted by the researcher, who brings their own worldview and understanding to the process (Smith et al., 2009). Given the nature of double hermeneutics in IPA, the positionality of the researcher and how they present themself to participants are important.

The first author of the current research interviewed the children in person. She is originally from Pakistan and could therefore relate to some of the immigration-related challenges faced by the participants. She also has extensive experience working with different sociocultural communities in Pakistan. Thus, while she did not always share the direct cultural and religious experiences of the participants, she understood the context. For example, she could relate when children discussed certain cultural aspects, such as forced marriages, polygamy (the father having more than one wife) and family dynamics, particularly the negative control exerted by extended family over children. These factors contributed to setting some important contextual features for the participants and how they expressed their experiences. Furthermore, using multiple languages (Norwegian, English and Urdu) during the interviews contributed to eliciting rich descriptions of children's experiences and to communicating nuances that otherwise could have been lost in translation.

Participants

Eleven children (aged 13–19 years) were interviewed in Oslo between September 2018 and May 2019. (Table 1) All participants were born in Norway and had parents of Pakistani origin (either first or second generation). Contact was initially made with the gatekeepers (teachers, youth workers and local Pakistani community leaders), who shared the participation information letter with children fulfilling the following criteria: a Pakistani background and recipient of services from CPS in the last 18 months. Both in the letter and during the interview, the children were informed about their rights as research participants and about their voluntary participation.

Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with the guide comprising open-ended questions, such as 'What is your experience of being in CPS?' or 'How is it to be in CPS?', and using prompts, such as 'Can you tell me more about it?' Interviews lasted about 60 min and were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated into English and anonymised by the first author. Native Norwegian and Urdu speakers were used to assist with back-translation methods to ensure quality.

Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of the findings, and quotes have been carefully reformulated to mitigate the risk of revealing participants' identities. '[...]' in quotes denotes editorial omissions.

Analysis

IPA guidelines were used to conduct the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). This entailed the first author familiarising herself with the data by reading each transcript multiple times while also listening to the audio recordings and reviewing field notes. Following the IPA's analytical process, the researcher engaged in a double hermeneutics process by which she sought to interpret the participants' understanding of their world. The focus was on exploring children's lived experiences and sense-making regarding CPS. Initial observations and notes were made based on each participant's descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments. This involved seeking things that mattered to children in their experiences with CPS, what those things meant for them, and what kind of language (such as metaphors or cultural expressions) they used to discuss these. These notes were transformed into shorter statements (emergent themes), which captured the core features of the child's experiences and perceptions embedded in their accounts (Smith et al., 2009). Connections were sought among emergent themes to develop superordinate themes, and the process was repeated separately for each interview. Following this, superordinate themes were closely examined across all interviews by noting recurrent topics, similarities, differences and interrelationships between them to generate themes. This was an iterative process that required going back and forth between the aforementioned steps.

THEORETICAL STANCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES

While this first level of IPA discussed above aims to understand and describe what matters to the participants, scholars recommend taking interpretations to a deeper level by importing other theories and perspectives as lenses through which to view the findings at the discussion stage (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Our findings provided in-depth insight into the relational experiences that children from Pakistani background had with families and social workers in the context of CPS in Norway. Their narratives of experiencing feelings such as fear, a lack of control and powerlessness highlight the importance of power relations in shaping their interactions with adults and the world around them and are thus key to understanding their social experiences (Davis, 1991). Therefore, sociocultural perspectives on childhood and children's power relations were used as the theoretical lens for interpreting and discussing the experiences of the children described.

Childhood is considered a relational concept in which children's lived experiences are embedded within generational order and broader relationships of power and affection (Huijsmans, 2016). Alanen (2009) describes generational order as 'a structured network of relations between generational categories that are positioned in and act within necessary interrelations with each other' (p. 162). Thus, it can be argued that childhood and adulthood are connected and interdependent. As Punch (2007) demonstrates regarding children's experiences with social interactions in rural Bolivia, interdependent generational and gendered relationships inform and influence children's subjectivities, sense of meaning, possibilities of action and the opportunities and limitations that shape their lives. Thus, a relational and contextualised framework can be pertinent to examining children's experiences and actions, allowing for the emergence of their diversity of voices.

The relational approach to children's experiences also requires an orientation towards social power relations. Here, power is defined as the capacity to act and influence the actions of others (Lukes, 2005). While it is generally accepted that adults often use their generational power to regulate children's bodies and minds, children can negotiate to assert their power and gain some control over certain aspects of their lives (Punch, 2007). This points to a dynamic model of power that does not view power as a commodity that can be accumulated or held on to, but rather as circulating, relational and distributed depending on the context (Caputo, 2017). This paper draws on Gallagher's (2008) interpretation of Foucault's theorisation of power as relational. This perspective highlights that power is not just exercised by those in positions of authority or holding formal power, such as parents or state institutions, but is also present in everyday social relations and practices through the exercise of 'actions upon the actions of others' (Gallagher, 2008, p. 341). However, these actions may or may not have the intended consequences. Therefore, we should ask how children 'exercise power to comply with, resist, evade, colonise, appropriate, or reproduce the power exercised over them' (Gallagher, 2008, p. 403). In the context of CPS, these are particularly relevant in creating a broader understanding of how, when, and in which relationships children feel powerless and how they negotiate power in their relationships through their actions and non-actions.

Rigour and limitations

Like other qualitative approaches, IPA does not seek to produce a generalisable narrative; rather it strives to offer a credible and context-specific interpretation (Creswell et al., 2021). The depth, richness and context-specific insights provided by IPA research offers unique and essential perspective in understanding human experiences, which is important for social work practice and can contribute to theoretical generalisation (Pringle et al., 2011). While the strength of IPA lies in the in-depth exploration of individual experiences, the subjectivity of the researcher in the interpretation of the data (double hermeneutics), the small sample size and the transferability of the findings to other contexts are caveats to be considered in examining our findings. To maximise trustworthiness, the four authors were all involved at different stages of analysis to explore agreements in analytical interpretations of the arising themes and to be as consistent with the participants' narratives as possible (Smith et al., 2009). Quotes that best represented the subthemes were selected by the first author and reviewed by the co-authors. Furthermore, the context in which these children were living was described as richly as possible to facilitate a degree of transferability to other contexts.

FINDINGS

Children's experiences were multifaceted, and relationships emerged as important topic in children's accounts of their experiences with CPS. The analysis reported here is based on the interviews with eight girls and three boys. It focuses on two main themes related to the power negotiations that children experienced in their relationships with the adults surrounding them (both their parents/families and the social workers/CPS). While all participants contributed to the development of following themes, some children such as Zoe and Alice were particularly effective in articulating experiences that closely aligned with key emergent themes. Consequently, their excerpts are represented more frequently relative to those of other participants. This approach was adopted to offer readers depth and clarity in understanding the nuanced lived experiences of children in the context of CPS.

Theme 1: Power negotiations in relationships with family

The first theme explores how children experienced and made sense of their family relations in the context of CPS.

Feeling powerless and out of control

All children described family dynamics in which adults held unequivocal power over them, but with shifting forms: visible or invisible and physical or coercive, depending on their situation and context. Most of the children felt that their parents had physical power over them and described in their interviews the different forms of physical abuse and maltreatment that they suffered. Zoe, for example, described her experience as follows:

> She [mom] was not like a human towards me when I was at home [...] I wasn't seen as a human [...] [Mom] tried to throw me out and asked me to go kill myself.

Zoe felt like a worthless object due to inhumane treatment by her mother. She was later diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder because of the physical, psychological and emotional suffering she experienced at home.

Alice also revealed a similar experience regarding her mother's visible power over her, but in the form of physical punishment:

> There was a lot of violence [at home] [...] when your parents beat you, it hurts, right? It's very painful [...] Mom was very sad, and she took it out [on] me, not on my brothers. She always took her anger out on me.

Alice's description of her experience highlights the complexity of what made it traumatic for her. While physical pain was the 'top layer' of her reaction to maltreatment, feelings of humiliation and indignity were also present, which made her feel less valued, especially in comparison to her brothers. She acknowledged her mother's sadness, but she was also frustrated at being her mother's only 'punching bag'. Furthermore, her use of words such as 'things were a little difficult' and 'a lot of violence' to describe the situation at home can be interpreted as

her attempt to minimise the severity of her situation and also demonstrates the normalisation of violence for her.

The visible power and control that parents have over children like Alice was not only generational (parent–child) but also had a gendered aspect, as illustrated in the previous quote in which Alice was singled out instead of her brothers. Julia complained about this gendered demonstration of power and referred to the cultural aspects of this violence:

> All my friends had a proper/normal life [...] while I lived under constant surveillance. I couldn't go out and meet a male friend without my brother and father finding out.

Julia's comments show how power is not always expressed through visible physical violence but can also be coercive through the control that parents have and the restrictions that they impose on their children's freedom. Her interview showed that this coercive power was exerted not only intergenerationally but also intragenerationally: Julia's brother had the responsibility of watching over her to keep the family's honour safe by, for example, not allowing her to have any male friends. She was frustrated by not having a 'normal' life, which would have entailed her being allowed to participate in activities similar to those of her Norwegian counterparts.

Many children reported the role of extended family and local community in condoning the strict discipling practices of parents and justifying it as a part of their culture. This, along with lack of clear and positive information about CPS, hindered children from seeking help. Rachel, for example described how she kept her maltreatment at home hidden:

> They (extended family) are very old fashioned. They say that whatever my parents are doing is good. (They believe that) children should be beaten more to help them become well-disciplined and such [...] So there was nobody I can ask (for help or about CPS) [...] Whatever happened to me at home, I kept it hidden very well, so nobody could see it.

It took many years for Rachel to seek help against her parents' maltreatment. Similar to Rachel, most of the children interviewed lived under the coercive and physical power and control of their families for years and they felt that this remained hidden from their wider Norwegian networks (in schools, kindergarten or youth clubs). However, their experiences of the physical and coercive power exerted by various family members adversely affected them. Some children also expressed a dissonance between being part of both a Pakistani family and Norwegian society, whereby they knew that, as children, they have a right to non-violence, freedom, integrity and dignity irrespective of their age, gender or ethnicity. Zoe illustrated this awareness along with her frustration and helplessness:

> Throughout my childhood, I always knew that what was happening at home wasn't right. We had learned about it at school... about home, about harassment, and everything there [...] but nothing was done about it.

Although Zoe knew her rights as a Norwegian child, it did not translate into her everyday life experiences as a child in an immigrant family. It took over a decade before she sought help from CPS, despite suffering from constant physical and emotional abuse during that time. This failure to report her family to CPS shows the coercive power that families exert over these children's freedom through (in)visible control and restrictions—as mentioned earlier by Julia—but also

in their rehearsal of the common narrative of '*family comes first'* (Luke). Thus, not all children resisted the coercive power over them, rather it was considered a normal part of what they perceived as Pakistani culture. For example, Jane justified her parents' behaviour as follows:

> In Pakistani culture, it is very normal that parents talk loudly and such (corporal punishment) [...] We can handle it. But they (CPS/Norwegians) do not handle it. They think 'Oh God! Here are bad parents', but I do not think so. I know they love me. I know it is the culture where I am from.

Here, Jane attributes her acceptance and understanding of her parents' actions to their cultural background. Like Jane, some children accepted these practices as a 'normal' part of their culture and as expressions of care rather than harm. For example, Summer believed that '*you (only) get smacked because you have done something wrong*'. Consequently, these children were critical of the perception that their parents were flawed, a sentiment echoed by Jane, and felt that their parents' practices were pathologized by CPS and broader Norwegian society. These perceptions influenced the children's willingness to seek help or co-operate with CPS, both in the short and long term, rendering them powerless.

Feeling pushed to the edge

Most children felt that contacting CPS was a last resort, and when sharing their experiences of contacting CPS, they described a particular trigger event that made them reassess their situation and report neglect and maltreatment to CPS. They contacted CPS either directly or indirectly (through a professional, such as a teacher, school nurse or youth worker). Ironically, it was children's anxiety about their futures, hopelessness and fear for survival that made them report their parents and thereby attempt to gain some control over their lives. Such incidents involved parents attacking something that the children valued, such as school, friends or a boyfriend. The children felt violated, as if something had broken inside them, making it increasingly difficult to hold on to their family life. Zoe described her trigger incident:

> I tolerate that she kicks me... she hits me... [but] she showed zero respect in a period when I needed to do schoolwork [...] It was like something cracked [...] I just lost it and said, "Shall I call the police?" [...] ten times. She, like, said yes every time [...] so I did it.

The above excerpt shows how Zoe felt she finally 'lost it'. This could be interpreted as her finally passing over a threshold of patience, tolerance and fear towards her family in that key moment, leading her to protect something that she deemed important—her studies. In the abovementioned incident, Zoe tried different negotiating strategies to stop her mother's violence, including threatening to call the police when she did not stop. Zoe's repeated warnings seem to show that she felt fear of her mother or perhaps a sense of loyalty towards her family. However, her mother's challenging response triggered her into action, pushing her to call the police. The initial description of the futility of her repeated threats shows the psychological and emotional battle that Zoe experienced during this process of standing up to her mother and asserting her rights as a child.

Alice illustrated a similar 'cracking' feeling:

> It was I who called them [CPS] because I got tired of what my parents did. So, I thought I must take matters into my own hands, right?

This seems to show that Alice lost all hope that her parents would change their behaviour towards her. She felt a weariness of the situation and started feeling 'sick and tired' of it. While she was assessing the option to contact CPS over time, one incident in particular pushed her to the cracking point. She reported that:

> Mom and I had an argument, so she started to beat me. So, I pushed her back and she started to beat me even more. I was so angry that I went (...) and called CPS emergency helpline.

Alice, similar to other children in this study, shared feeling compelled to act in the face of her parents' continued maltreatment. She could no longer wait, as things at home were already worse than they should have been. Thus, there was a 'now or never' element to her understanding and lived experience at home and in contacting CPS.

The children in this study strived to find a balance between their own desires and needs and complying with their parents due to family obligations and the fear of consequences. When they finally experienced that the former outweighed the latter, they felt that they had no other choice but to seek help from CPS. For example, Rachel was regularly beaten badly by her father for years, but she kept it a secret from everyone, including friends, teachers and youth workers. However, in her interview, she described a critical incident: her parents taking away a friend. She shared her experience of being pushed to contact CPS:

> I needed someone who really valued me and cared for me... Mom and Dad never did that. And when they took that person away from me, I had to tell someone [CPS] [...] I had no choice.

Children felt empowered as a result of their experiences of making initial contact with CPS, seeking help, and finally being able to share their secret family situation with someone. This feeling seemed to be generated by the very act of reaching out to a formal authority, regardless of whether CPS eventually fulfilled their expectations. Children seemed to be motivated to engage with CPS in the hope of receiving help and changing their situations.

Fear of harm and reinforced family control

Despite the children's sense of empowerment—achieved through contacting CPS—they experienced opposing forces in the form of feelings of fear, isolation and being blamed for bringing shame to the family because of having contacted CPS. In many ways, this reinforced the control that the families had over them and the fear that they felt towards their families. Children described fears of psychological and physical ramifications for their actions (seeking help from CPS), as illustrated by Zoe:

> I can just be picked up and kidnapped and [...] thrown in the sea or murdered or kidnapped to be sent away to another country.

She has continued to feel exposed and unsafe as a result of contacting CPS, despite living with a foster family that she loves. This has impacted her everyday life, especially when she passes through areas close to her family's neighbourhood. Many participants hoped that contacting CPS would act as a warning for their parents and would make life better for them and their younger siblings and cousins. Instead, in a few cases, the children felt that their families' control and coercive power over them (or other siblings) increased. For example, one of the children mentioned that her younger sibling was sent to Pakistan because of their parents' fear of CPS. Some of the biggest fears that the children had regarding the consequences of contacting CPS involved being sent to Pakistan, where they do not know many people, the local culture or language and/or, for girls, the risk of being forced into marriage.

> During that period [in contact with CPS], I was very afraid that I would be forcibly married to someone.
>
> (Julia)

Traditional cultural and religious values were used, at times, as a form of hidden and invisible power and control by families to make children comply with their will. This was illustrated by Zoe, whose older siblings—despite suffering similar maltreatment from their mother—did not contact CPS. They expected the same level of 'loyalty' from her that they considered themselves to have, and they attempted to coerce her into coming back into the family:

> My eldest sister, at the end, started to blame me [for contacting CPS] and said that I was destroying the family's reputation... and called me, like, sick in the head [crazy] [...] if this is how our relationship is going to be, so I would rather not have it now. I am waiting until they [sisters] become more mature and understand why I did what I did.
>
> (Zoe)

Zoe felt sad and disappointed due to the lack of understanding and empathy from her siblings, who had first-hand knowledge of her situation at home. Contacting CPS and taking care of her own interests damaged her relationship with her siblings. However, she said that she had not given up on them and hoped that they would understand her actions in the longer term.

Children not only felt coerced by their close family but also shamed and forced by their extended family. For example, Alice shared that she '*received hate messages from the whole family*' due to being placed in out-of-home care by CPS.

Children felt that being in contact with CPS was a taboo issue in the Pakistani community. They were isolated from not only their families but also their community, as illustrated by Julia:

> I lost many Pakistani friends because I had a case with CPS [...] at the age of 14–15 years, I lost all my close friends [...] because they were scared that they would get a case themselves, too.

She shared her experiences of being ostracised by both her family and her community, which demonstrates the interplay of both intra- and intergenerational power in children's relationships.

Theme 2: Negotiating control and power with CPS

The second theme highlights children's expectations and experiences of CPS, especially in relation to social workers.

Feeling at the mercy of social workers

All of the children had experienced powerlessness in meetings with social workers, especially at the start of their contact with CPS. They felt that they had no control over their lives once CPS was involved and that they were at the mercy of social workers, who had the power to decide the credibility and severity of their experiences. The initial contact with CPS was vital for children, as this decided whether their case would be taken forward and the kind of support they would receive.

Children reported feeling vulnerable and scared about talking to social workers because of the consequences, such as their home situations worsening or that they would be taken away from their families. They did not take for granted that social workers would listen and believe them. Nevertheless, they felt both confident and understood when social workers listened to them, acknowledged their experiences and showed support. For example, Alice shared:

> I was glad, in a way, that I told somebody. I couldn't have taken that for granted [that CPS would support her], right? [...] They agreed with me. It was they who said that it's not OK to be beaten, right?

Alice knew that her mother was not allowed to beat her and found it painful. Simultaneously, she perceived that it was part of Pakistani culture, in which parents are allowed to beat their children. In such cases of cultural disparity, the children felt confident and secure when their experiences were believed by social workers. However, children felt misjudged when social workers imposed their preconceived understandings on them. For example, Zoe felt helpless when her social workers did not believe her due to their stereotypes of girls from immigrant/Pakistani background:

> They [social workers] didn't completely believe me because they had clearly received many cases [...] where girls would just want to get out [of their homes] for other reasons, such as not being forced married [...] They thought that [things] I have said about her [mom] at home was just to get out.

Zoe kept this part of her life a secret for many years. In her interview, she described feeling vulnerable and powerless when social workers not only discredited her lived experience but gave it an entirely different meaning. Social workers have the power to define children's lived realities; therefore, children perceived their support to be crucial in the CPS process. Similarly, Julia felt that not being heard or understood by her social workers had dire consequences for her life:

> Both my caseworkers were ethnic Norwegians, and it felt like they didn't fully understand the culture. I tried to explain it to them that, in some families, they are very strict [...] but they meant that "that's not how it is in Norway". I tried to talk over and explain it to them, but it didn't matter.

Julia felt invalidated by her social workers because they rejected her lived experience of the social control within her family. From her perspective, the social workers failed to understand her situation and concerns because of their romantic/narrow understanding of Norwegian society, which led them to not believe such control could be possible. Since the children perceived that social workers had the power to construct children's experiences, feelings and motives, some children felt threatened by the number and the personal nature of the questions that social workers asked. For example, Luke was afraid that he might say 'something stupid' to social workers who could have been used against his family. A similar fear was shared by Haley, who felt deceived and manipulated by social workers into providing information against her family:

> I had a feeling that I got tricked by the adults [social workers' [...] when they asked some questions. So, I got a feeling that they were trying to use me to give proof [against family].

These excerpts highlight the power differentials that unfold in the relationship between children and their social workers. Children perceived that their relationships with the social workers were crucial; however, they experienced the assignment of social workers as a lottery.

Perplexed by an ambiguous system

Children complained about ambiguities in CPS policy and practice; the very system that is supposed to protect and empower children sometimes made them feel disempowered and unsafe. Once in CPS, children were dependent on many adults (e.g. parents, social workers, lawyers and judges) making decisions about their lives. Most of the adults did not know the children well enough to understand their situations completely or to know what was important to them. Children were perplexed and found it difficult to comprehend the system's logic. Zoe described feeling powerless due to her status as a 'child' lacking autonomy and self-determination:

> I thought that they were crazy, cuckoo, bananas [...] I am totally done with this [...] just adult people sitting and deciding if you have it so bad that you cannot go home [...] It's not a case; it is my life. Open your eyes, pay attention to my feelings. I am not an object to be moved back and forth based on your [CPS and parents] judgement: you must listen to me.

Zoe described feeling anxious while waiting for the court to decide whether her situation was bad enough for her to be granted out-of-home care. She was frustrated by her treatment as an object 'owned' by the state and her parents and devoid of thoughts and feelings. This kind of treatment can leave children feeling disempowered and intimidated, rather than being at the centre of CPS. From the children's point of view, CPS policy favours the parents' perspectives over theirs; for example, they can be removed from their homes with their parents' consent or even at their request

(a 'voluntary placement'). Alice felt forced to live in kinship foster care, which she did not want to do, due to the dynamics and politics of the extended family system:

> I don't feel it is a voluntary placement, at least not for me. Because I didn't want to live at my aunt's place. But I had to because CPS didn't have any choice, right?

Alice's family wanted to keep her in kinship foster care, and CPS complied with that. While Alice was grateful that CPS protected her from physical violence, she felt that the placement did not protect her from psychological and emotional abuse from her extended family, who blamed both Alice and her mother for CPS being involved with their family. The child's best interest is fundamental in CPS; however, it seems that this principle was used to override Alice's wishes and participation in the decision, even though it had serious and long-term implications for her. This made her feel controlled by both her family and CPS.

Similarly, Martin reported feeling afraid and controlled due to CPS surveillance:

> We cannot be free ... [CPS] keeps an eye on us, like ... to see what we do and everything.

Martin explained that he feels there is no room for him to make any mistakes. For example, at school, everything he does is reported to CPS first and then to his foster parents. He believes this could result in both short- and long-term problems, such as a prolonged stay in foster care.

Taking back control

Children are not passive recipients of the control held over them by CPS. They use various strategies to negotiate some control over their important life decisions. However, as they face an unequal adult–/CPS–child relationship, they have to negotiate more and, at times, feel forced to take drastic steps to assert their control. Some, like Zoe and Alice, said they feel frustrated about the perceived lack of power over what CPS does to them. Their hopelessness and anger them revert to extreme measures, such as attempting suicide, to gain CPS's attention.

> I was ready to, like, jump out [in the sea], right? They [CPS] did not take me seriously before I had totally come to an end.
>
> (Zoe)

Children contacted CPS when their families mistreated them. However, they felt even more vulnerable when they perceived that CPS was not listening to them and was exerting control based on their understanding and beliefs of what would be best for the children. Zoe negotiated this control by providing concrete evidence to verify her story:

> But I did not say it at the start, right? That I have recordings. But when I started to feel that they doubted me [...] then I said that I have audio recordings, as well. Then they were just like, huhhh? [...] After that day, they did not doubt me because I had concrete proof.

Zoe's experience shows that providing proof increases children's chances of being believed and receiving support from CPS. However, it also puts an undue burden on children, which Zoe felt. The struggle for control between children and CPS also emerged in small acts of resistance; for example, Alice did not feel safe returning home after reporting her parents to CPS, even though CPS told her to do so. Instead, she stayed at school, who contacted CPS and arranged for her to stay with a friend temporarily:

> They [CPS] said that I must go home [...] but I didn't want to go home after the first meeting because I thought I would get more beating, right? So, I didn't go home [...] I went to a friend afterwards.

Other children negotiated control with CPS by withholding information about their home situations. In such cases, they used their power with their families and attempted to mediate the power of CPS over their families. Luke illustrated this:

> I didn't tell them [CPS] everything, and so I said that they could write "good" [for the situation at home]'.

Furthermore, children reported that choosing not to participate in the CPS process resulted in what they considered better outcomes from CPS. This strategy was particularly used by children who had experienced undesirable consequences for telling the '*truth about (the) situation at home'* (Summer). Martin felt that, since '*they [parents] are older, it is better that they talk [to CPS], instead of what we say*'.

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this study is the first to use IPA to explore the lived experiences of children from Pakistani background regarding Norwegian CPS. It provides novel insights into children's experiences of their relationships with family and social workers in the context of CPS, which are characterised by power dynamics that are complex and generational as well as gendered and multidimensional. The analysis highlights the ways children may feel powerless or subordinate to both parental authority and institutional mechanisms like CPS. However, children are not passive recipients, they actively make sense of their experiences and respond by using different strategies and actions to negotiate or resist adults' power and take back some control. Using Gallagher's interpretation of power as a lens, we further discuss how children's experiences of power are dialogically constructed in their relationships with parents/families and CPS. The way children interpret and respond to these power imbalances manifests differently depending on their social and cultural understandings.

Gallagher (2008) argues that there are different forms of power rather than one dominant power. The children in our study described experiencing generational and gendered powers, not only in their family lives but also in the local community. Families' power was experienced in the forms of physical disciplinary practices and oppressive control, such as not allowing girls to have male friends or participate in activities that are considered normal for most teenagers in Norway (e.g. having a boyfriend/girlfriend). However, the families' and community's power was also invisible (Lukes, 2005), which influenced children to believe that practices such as physical abuse and gender discrimination are part of their Pakistani cultural and religious norms, as illustrated

by Jane and Alice. This impacted children's help-seeking behaviour in relation to CPS. For example, Jane was critical of how CPS pathologized her parents' practices. The distrust in CPS, born out of fear of cultural misunderstanding, can potentially perpetuate cycles of harm or neglect by preventing children from receiving timely and appropriate intervention. Smith (2008) argues that relational power, if not confronted, can be self-reinforcing, whereby its exercise confirms its legitimacy. Therefore, it is important that CPS is aware of the different forms of oppressive power that exist between children and their families and communities and does not focus only on the visible ones (such as physical maltreatment). This would help promote equity and social justice for all children.

Resonating with Gallagher's (2008) view of power and participation as unevenly distributed and as exercised through actions upon actions in everyday life, the children were found to employ different strategies to resist and navigate their family's dominating power. This was done through actions such as leading a double life, seeking care outside the home, developing a tolerance for physical punishment or threatening to report parents to police or CPS. However, the scope and choice of actions available to them were limited in this context. Contacting CPS was the children's last resort, considering that most of the children suffered for many years before they contacted CPS themselves. This supports the argument that child abuse and maltreatment are underreported and underestimated in most Western countries (Gilbert et al., 2011).

Our findings further show that children not only have to deal with the disciplinary power of family, peers and community after contacting CPS, but they also have to navigate CPS's controlling power over them. This highlights that children's actions can sometimes have unintentional consequences (Gallagher, 2008). In line with previous research (Wilson et al., 2020), the children in our study were acutely aware of social workers' power, for example how they defined children's lived realities of maltreatment from their perspectives. Rather than making the children feel empowered, the bureaucratic procedures made them feel powerless, as important decisions about their lives and 'best interests' were taken over by professionals and their parents. However, the children were not passive recipients; they negotiated to take back some control, even if this meant jeopardising their well-being. Morrison et al. (2019) argue that social workers must work creatively to provide children with viable choices of actions in the restrictive framework of CPS and should share their resources (social, cultural, etc.) with them to balance the asymmetrical power.

Power in generational relations can be a both productive and repressive force (Gallagher, 2008). Our findings support the relational understanding of children's capacities and subsequent actions beyond those that resist adult power. For example, not all the children resisted their parents' dominating power. Rather, some children like Summer, considered it part of their cultural identity and, as such, a justified consequence of them making mistakes. In these cases, children resisted CPS intervention by feigning cooperation. However, children's sociocultural understanding of, and response to, maltreatment at home changed as they grew older, gained more information and redefined their situation as repressive, a finding also present in other research (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018). In such cases, CPS/social worker's power was considered a positive force by the children. Hence, they collaborated with social workers by participating in the CPS process and providing necessary information that could help CPS fulfil its mandate. Therefore, to avoid slipping from a collaborative to oppressive power, spaces must be created for open discussion between social workers in CPS and children so that they can learn from each other's knowledge, make sense of children's experiences and identify challenges and strategies for action.

Gender is an important aspect of inter- and intragenerational power dynamics (Montgomery, 2005). Previous research has shown that children can participate in the (re)production of generational and gendered hierarchy and marginalisation (Bell, 2007; Klocker, 2007). Thus, our findings warn against treating all Norwegian-Pakistani children as though they are all the same. Ignoring the varying levels of power in family–child relations impact the design and success of CPS's response. Arguably, given the role of these children's siblings, extended families and communities in presenting parents' power over children as a norm, CPS interventions and programmes should focus on families and communities rather than an individual child and their parents.

The power and powerlessness that children experience in generational and gendered hierarchies play a crucial role in determining their actions in the CPS context. However, this is not a simple dichotomy. For example, while participants resisted generational power (standing up for themselves by contacting CPS), they were, in fact, powerless, with no choice other than to seek help from CPS to change their situations. However, not all children were dissatisfied with their parents' controlling and disciplinary power; some conformed to family norms and felt oppressed by social workers' power. Thus, power is experienced as a continuum (powerlessness at one end and powerful at the other) upon which children's positions vary depending on the relational and situational context. Nevertheless, in this context, all participants moved from 'little' to 'non-existent' power rather than to an 'empowered' position on the power continuum. This highlights the importance of enhancing sensitivity towards the issues of power and power relationships when working with children in CPS to improve their participation rights and well-being.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study argues that children are an integral part of a complex network of power relations, however, their levels of power are not static; rather, they are in constant state of negotiations. In the context of CPS, children can find themselves in both powerful and vulnerable positions, with regard to different aspects of their social worlds and depending on how their unequal power relations are negotiated and renegotiated. This challenges the taken-for-granted assumption that children are powerless and subject of asymmetrical adult power (Gallagher, 2008). The study's findings demonstrate the relational nature of children's power and emphasise the impact of their dual realities, as Pakistani or Norwegian. In doing so, it sheds light on how they navigate the balance between adhering to what might be considered acceptable societal norms in a culturally diverse society as Norway on the one hand and the 'harmful cultural practices', on the other. These negotiations highlight the complexity of their positions and the challenges they face.

Further research is required to explore in greater depth how lived experiences of children in CPS might differ based on factors such as age, gender and the nature and source of the original referral to the CPS. This could add more depth and complexity to our understanding of how minority children experience the CPS. Acknowledging the gender imbalance among the participants in this study, we particularly call for future research to explore the lived experiences of boys from minority backgrounds within CPS more thoroughly. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their encounters with CPS and the role of gender in children's power dynamics in this context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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