

Relational rights and interdependent wellbeing: Exploring the experiences of an ethnic minority girl with the Norwegian Child Welfare service

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Abstract

In this article, we draw on a case study where the Norwegian Child Welfare services placed an ethnic minority girl, Amara, into foster care. Her sensemaking around being moved into foster care is used as entry point to explore tensions between Amara, her family, and Child Welfare services. Amara's responsibilities within the family conflict with the ideal childhood model in Norway. The case demonstrates a limited view on wellbeing and an ethnocentric understanding of what is in the best interest of the child among Norwegian social workers. We propose the use of ubuntu and African ethics in Child Welfare services to cater for more diverse understandings of childhood and upbringing. Furthermore, we approach children's rights relationally to acknowledge how children's lives and wellbeing are deeply entangled in interconnections and interdependencies.

Keywords

child welfare, children's rights, relational rights, ubuntu

Introduction

Norway has been a pioneer when it comes to ensuring children's rights and is renowned for legally affording children's rights of co-determination since 1981 (Ursin and Lyså, 2019). The country's child and family policies are perceived as being child-centric, with a strong focus on children as independent agents and individuals within the family (Pösö et al., 2014). Thus, many were surprised by the massive critique of the country's Child Welfare services in recent years. Both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE, 2018) and the UN Children's Committee (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018) have raised concerns about Norway's Child

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Welfare services' treatment of ethnic minority families and use of forced removals, and several cases have ended up in the European Court of Human Rights.

The rights and responsibilities of children and adults are social constructions that vary depending on time and place. In multicultural societies, diverging views and tensions may arise between families and state actors. In this article, we aim to investigate some of these tensions through an interview with a young girl of West-African origin, "Amara" (aged 16), who was moved into foster care. With this aim in mind, we first turn our attention to the socio-cultural context of Norway as a site for child upbringing and the Child Welfare services' treatment of ethnic minority families. We then present the philosophy of ubuntu (Ramose, 2003; Ramose and Hook, 2016), African ethics (Gyekye, 2013), and relational rights (Minow and Lyndon, 1996). Thereafter we explain the methods and ethics that guided our research. The analysis consists of four sections, exploring: (1) how Amara's family responsibilities resonate with African ethics as a social ethics of duty; (2) how these responsibilities are interpreted by the Norwegian Welfare services; (3) how Amara's work experiences connect with ubuntu and interdependent wellbeing; and (4) how Amara's case calls attention to the reconceptualization of children's rights as relational. At last, we offer some final reflections.

Norwegian child welfare services and ethnic minority families

In contemporary Norway, parents commonly see formal education as children's prime focus and responsibility, and one-way caregiving obligations from parents to children is expected. Any work that interferes with the child's formal education is prohibited and most children contribute minimally to household chores (Ursin and Lyså, 2019). Instead, their engagements in organized activities are prioritized. Child and family policies are child-centric, treating children as individuals with their own interests and rights (Pösö et al., 2014). As in other societies in the global North, the goal in childrearing is for the child to become an independent and self-sufficient agent in a capitalist society (Gullestad, 1996; Ursin and Lyså, 2019).

In most instances, children are taken care of and raised by their biological families. However, in cases of suspected neglect or abuse, the Child Welfare services offers supportive measures to families. The Child Welfare Act (Barnevernloven, 1993) regulates their work, stating that they need to detect neglect and behavioral, social, and emotional problems as early as possible (§ 3–1). Child Welfare services must cooperate with and respect children and their parents (§ 1–7). If guidance and relief measures do not improve a child's situation, the Child Welfare services may remove the child to foster or institutional care (§ 4–4). The best interest of the child should be given paramount weight in all care given under the law, with particular emphasis on providing children with stability, continuity, and good care (§ 4–1). Following amendments implemented in 2018 when the Child Welfare Act became a rights-based act, children have the right to be informed and share their opinions regarding all areas that affect them, and their opinions should be taken seriously (§ 1–6).

Numbers from 2019 show that 54,592 children and young people (0–22 years) were assisted by the Child Welfare Services; 44,821 received help while living at home (out of which 7199 are immigrant children) and 9771 were under the care of the Child Welfare Services (out of which 884 were immigrant children) (SSB, 2021). In 2015, 25 % of the children under the care of Child Welfare services were from immigrant backgrounds (Dyrhaug, 2016). Paulsen, V Thorshaug and Berg (2014) found that children with ethnic minority backgrounds are overrepresented in Child Welfare services for interrelated factors such as: (1) cultural and minority group-related factors (divergent understandings and expectations of childcare); (2) living conditions (immigrant

populations are socio-economic disadvantaged); and (3) refugee-related factors (war, having to flee, long periods in reception centers, and exile).

Sensitivity toward intersectional life experiences, cultural difference, and communicative skills is needed to avoid normative underlying middle-class convictions of good childhood and culture, leading to miscommunication and processes of othering (Paulsen, V Thorshaug and Berg, 2014). Recent reports investigating the Child Welfare services' encounters with and treatment of families with ethnic minority background reveal a general lack of culture sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences in childcare (Aarset and Bredal, 2018; Helsetilsynet, 2019). In addition, the UN Children's Committee has raised several concerns: whether removal of children from their families is in the children's best interests; the use of coercion in cases of separation of children from their families; children belonging to minority populations losing connections with their native culture and language while in state custody; and insufficient communication and information exchange between the Child Welfare services and migrant families (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018).

The philosophy of ubuntu, African ethics, and relational rights

As Quintero (2017) asserts, scholars in the Global North “seldom highlights aspects of theories, philosophies, and practices that have been long ingrained in childrearing, daily life, and scholarship from the Global South” (p. 186). We find it troublesome that the perspectives and theories of the Global North continue to impose a colonial gaze among researchers and practitioners, and we see a need to expand our onto-epistemological horizons. We support Quintero (2017) in that world-views, childrearing practices, and theories from the Global South can problematize dominant understandings of childhoods, also in the Global North. The theories we employ must resonate, reflect, and be true to the empirical material we analyze. Our choice of the pan-African philosophy of ubuntu and African ethics to grasp the childhood experiences of Amara is however not only valuable due to their context-sensitivity to her West-African origin, but more importantly because they offer ontological possibilities of approaching human rights in ways that better appraise and operationalize rights as relational.

Ubuntu comes from the Zulu proverb - *umuntu ngomuntu ngabantu*—a person is a person through others, or I am because we are (Ramose, 2003; Ramose and Hook, 2016). The pan-African concept combines philosophy, ontology, and ethics in a holistic approach to human-ness (Ramose and Hook, 2016). Ubuntu is not about being dependent, but rather translates into symbiotic and cooperative relationships (Tutu, 2009). It offers a theoretical framework for understanding human life as relational and inseparable from others. Tutu (2009) describes that the concept of ubuntu is challenging to the Western world where individualism and competition are positive values. Ubuntu is rather “an African concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community” (Tutu, 2009: 1). It is based on compassion, solidarity, belonging, interdependence, collectiveness, and care. Despite the collective aspect entailed in this philosophy, ubuntu does not represent community or collective rights. Ubuntu highlights the importance of relationships with others to “attain ultimate wellbeing” (Murove, 2012: 37). Inherent in the philosophy of ubuntu is the importance of the extended family in African societies, whether the families are in their country of origin or not.

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (2013) states that African ethics are characterized by their social character, highlighting the ethics of duty (rather than rights) and the value of common good. African ethics refer to the moral beliefs and presuppositions reflected in moral language and social structure (Gyekye, 2013). African ethics is a social (non-individualistic)

morality, where reciprocity and interdependence are paramount. It is a character-based ethics, meaning that maintaining the quality of the individual character is fundamental (Gyekye, 2013). Good character, that is, being compassionate, generous, and honest, is *acquired* and a person is responsible for the formation of character, which results from habitual actions. Likewise, a person's character is defined by her habits, deeds, and actions. This moral system thus encapsulates an approach to communality, interdependence, and reciprocity that is based on a social ethics of duty.

To better connect to the child-rights perspective and child-centered policies of the Norwegian Child Welfare, we also use relational rights in our analysis, bridging the contemporary child rights discourse of the North and epistemologies of the South. The child-rights perspective is legally and ideologically anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989). Although the UNCRC is of paramount importance in the practice field, we continue to struggle to translate children's rights into local arenas of policy and practice. In addition, contemporary interpretations of children's rights are often fundamentally individualistic, drawing heavily on enlightenment's liberal ideas (Aitken, 2018; Laufer-Ukeles, 2016; see also Ellingsen et al., 2019 in Norwegian context). Despite this, few scholars within Childhood Studies have approached "rights" from alternative ontological and ethical standpoints. An exception is Abebe's (2013) analysis of children's rights in the Ethiopian context as intricately entwined with and inseparable from that of the family collective. Although Abebe's notion of interdependent rights to a certain degree captures what we find in Amara's case, we find that relational rights are conceptually more open and flexible, and more attuned to the relational onto-epistemology of ubuntu and African ethics. While a "relational turn" has advanced theorization within Childhood Studies (Eßer, 2018), exploring notions of relational agency (Eßer, 2016), relational participation (Mannion, 2007), and relational citizenship (Lawy and Biesta, 2006), a reconceptualization of rights as fundamentally relational has not gained much attention.

Legal theorists contend that contemporary understandings of children's rights and the liberal rights-based model are problematic because their individualistic character separates parental rights and state interests from children's rights (Laufer-Ukeles, 2016). A traditional rights-based approach entails that every freedom of action guaranteed to an individual demands a correlated constraint for another individual (Minow and Lyndon, 1996). The model of relational rights on the other hand infuses the meaning of rights with the notion of responsibility toward the people with whom the rights-bearer has caring relationships (Zafran, 2009). Minow and Lyndon (1996) explicate that "rights" neither belong to individuals nor arise from a need for self-preservation; rather they are grounded in and arise from human relationships. The concept is inspired by "ethics of care," first defined by Gilligan (1982), resting on the premise that humans are inherently relational, responsive beings, and that the human condition is one of connectedness and interdependence.

The relational rights approach is sensitive to interpersonal ties, facilitates their formation, and protects those that already exist (Zafran, 2009). As Zafran (2009) and Laufer-Ukeles (2016) elaborate, children's rights discussions need to focus on supporting and preserving the interdependent relationships between children and caregivers. Relational rights fit well with White's (2015) relational approach to wellbeing. She rejects the hegemonic model of wellbeing common in the Global North, originating from psychology and economics, where wellbeing is considered to reside in the individual and abstracted from context. Relational wellbeing, she contends, is based on the idea that wellbeing is culturally and socially constructed and rooted in a specific time and place. In the following analysis, we aim to show that relational rights and wellbeing together with the philosophy of ubuntu and African ethics offer a more holistic understanding of children's rights.

A case study as entry point: Reflections on methods and ethics

The following interview excerpts stem from a life story interview conducted with a 16-year-old girl, Amara. The interview was part of a qualitative study with students with ethnic majority and minority background in upper secondary schools in rural Norway. By using a narrative approach, the study sought to increase our understanding of what affects young people in their future choice of residence, educational aspirations, and sense of belonging. The participants were recruited at school where they received information that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were conducted at school in school hours, but confidentiality and the study's independence from school were explained. To ensure Amara's anonymity, we have given her a pseudonym, removed geographical locations, and altered or concealed revealing biographical details. As she had resided in Norway for over 10 years, Amara spoke fluent Norwegian, decreasing possibilities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the interview situation. The study followed the ethical guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities and was ethically approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The interview guide was open-ended and sought to encourage participants to tell their life stories with as little interference as possible (Atkinson, 1998). The main section of the interview was threefold, focusing on retrospective childhood, contemporary youth life (emphasizing identity work and sense of belonging), and future aspirations. By employing a narrative approach, Amara is perceived as a social actor in her own right, assigning subjective meanings to events and conditions in her life (Chase, 2005). The empirical material is Amara's life story as it is told at a certain time and place through a process of retrospective meaning-making, communicating Amara's point of view, emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. Such a narrative and interpretive orientation is more human-focused than other biographical approaches (Bochner and Riggs, 2014). In analyzing the interview transcript, we engaged in a community of validation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014), turning our research group into an interpretative community where we chose excerpts describing Amara's sensemaking of her encounter with the Child Welfare services, explored theories to better understand these encounters, and discussed and validated analytical points.

In agreement with contemporary narrative research, we find the singularity of Amara's narrative valuable because it represents what is possible within a specific social context (Chase, 2005). Amara's life story is treated as an intrinsic case study (Stake, 2005). As in other case studies, the study draws forth experiential knowledge as it conveys the experience of an actor through narrative and situational descriptions (*ibid.*). However, in intrinsic case studies, the case (e.g. person) itself is of primary interest and the exploration is driven by a desire to learn about the particularities of the case rather than to generalize or build theory (Stake, 2005). As the intrinsic case strives to capture richness and complexity, Amara's case is used as a venture point to tease out some of the tensions that might emerge between an ethnic minority family and the Child Welfare services as experienced by a child. By offering thick descriptions of the case and aforementioned contextualization through statistical data and previous research, we hope that readers can interpretate the particularities of the case and ponder the possibility of transfer of findings (see Chase, 2005).

Amara's experiences with the Child Welfare services

In the remaining parts of the article, we delve into Amara's reflections, experiences, and sensemaking of her encounters with the Child Welfare services. Amara was born in a West-African country and moved with her father to Norway as a 5-year-old. Her life story is marked by relocations and ruptures, migrating transnationally and later nationally with her family as well as being moved

twice into foster care by the Child Welfare services. Due to the limited scope of this article, we have chosen to focus on the first time she was moved into foster care, as a 12-year-old. We divided the empirical analysis into four sections, starting out with an examination of how Amara's sense-making of her responsibilities and caring roles can be understood in light of African ethics as a social ethics of duty.

Responsibility and a social ethics of duty

After having moved to Norway, Amara lived with her father, stepmother, and younger sister. Her stepmother ran her own business and spent long periods traveling while her father worked late hours to make ends meet. With the parents away from home, Amara was left with a lot of responsibility from an early age.

When my mum travelled a lot [. . .] we became sort of a mummy-less home. And then I had to, because of my culture, it goes without saying. . . you as the oldest daughter take [. . .] responsibility. I became kind of a mini mum. And it became a lot of responsibility for me.

The socio-cultural expectations that Amara experienced were based on both gender and birth order. Studies in Africa show that children frequently participate in unpaid and gendered work from the age of 7–8, where girls perform a wide range of activities including cooking, cleaning, and minding siblings (e.g. Chant and Jones, 2005; Evans, 2010; Evans et al., 2019). Children commonly take part in household chores, and their participation is valued. Children's contribution in the household can be said to constitute a social ethics of duty, emphasizing the value of the common good (Gyekye, 2013). This is also emphasized in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC; Organization of African Unity, 1990):

every child shall have responsibilities towards his family and society [. . .] and shall have the duty: to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors, and elders at all times, and to assist them in case of need (Article 31a).

The child is situated not only as a rights-bearing individual, but also in terms of responsibilities for family and community, where individual's rights are imbricated and interdependent with the rights of others.

At the age of 12, Amara's stepmother stayed abroad for a long period. Meanwhile, Amara continued to be a "mini mum," recounting:

I had to clean and I had to tidy, and I had to. . . at that time, my dad had two jobs [. . .] so we hardly got to see my dad, during the day, that is. He left at five and came back. . . I don't know, perhaps eight-nine-ish.

Amara also minded her younger sister and had responsibility for her kindergarten attendance. In many African societies, sibling caregiving is widespread, where older siblings are expected to look after their younger siblings without adult supervision to free up time for parents to engage in paid work (Evans, 2012). Children's caring roles are a normal part of the socialization process, arising from their reciprocal responsibilities to their families and communities (Evans et al., 2019). Comparing sibling caregiving across cultural contexts reveals that definitions, interpretations, and cultural norms surrounding such relationships vary; whereas sibling care relationships might be discretionary in Global North contexts such as in Norway, they are obligatory and overall given a

much greater importance in Global South contexts (Cicirelli, 1994). In the latter societies, sibling care relationships are often hierarchical in nature, where older siblings care for younger siblings. Such caregiving practices are perceived to encourage a closer relationship of solidarity and interdependence in the sibling group and enhance transfer of values, knowledge, and skills between siblings. These practices also put greater emphasis on the maintenance and survival of family and establishes a backup system of care in the event of parental absence (Cicirelli, 1994).

The hegemonic ideal of care-free childhood

Over time, Amara's substantial care-giving tasks started to conflict with the obligations of schooling, affecting her school performance:

Then there was this day, or it had happened several times, that I was late at school because I had to drop by kindergarten first. And I don't drive [laughs], so I had to wait for the bus and all that. So, I always came late, and I overslept, and I never remembered my homework.

It became hard to juggle between sibling care and schoolwork, and time became a scarce resource in Amara's life. Eventually her teacher started asking questions:

My teachers saw that something was going on. "What is. . . what is going on at home?" Right? They started to realize – the problem was not school, so it had to be at home. Then I spoke with my teacher and [. . .] I told her the truth, of course, that there are a lot of things going on.

Amara and her father came to understand that her responsibilities at home stood in stark contrast to the common view on children, childhood, and parenthood in Norway. In her teacher's opinion, these were adult responsibilities.

[S]he said: "No, this is too much responsibility" [. . .] She said that "you should *not* do this much, you should be a *child*, you're only 10-12 years old." I don't know how old I was [laughs]. "You must relax. . . ." She told me that this is not something that I *have* to do. So, I didn't know that I had a lot of responsibility before she told me. Because for me, it was so ordinary (emphasis in original).

I was coming late and I had to apologize because I know you shouldn't be late. But I never knew that it was *wrong* [to have this kind of responsibility], kind of. It was actually she who told me, and I didn't realize it before she told me. "Ok, perhaps you're right, I am a bit tired."

The teacher confronted Amara's father to find a solution. Although he understood her worries, there was not much he could do, as Amara reasons: "He needed my help, he needed help from the authorities, from someone." They contacted the Child Welfare services.

According to Amara, the caseworker at the Child Welfare services explained that she would be moved temporarily into foster care for six months so that "your dad can work as much as he wants, and you get to relax [. . .] Just be a child again." Amara was given "a break" from her father, family home, and caregiving responsibilities to relax and "be a child." This resonates with Gullestad's (1996) account of socialization processes in Norway, where young people must establish a sense of self apart from family members, identifying with people and activities outside the family. The caseworker's (and teacher's) view on which activities Amara should engage in is rooted in an individualistic perspective on childhood. What is perceived as normal in Amara's socio-cultural background is interpreted as deviant and problematic. As Evans (2010) notes, the work children do challenges ideological constructions of childhood as a *care-free* period in which children are cared

for within the family home and their time is spent predominantly on full-time education and recreation. This kind of upbringing is enabled by a strong welfare state in Norway, providing caregiving services that might be considered family obligations in other cultures and socio-economic contexts. Most children in Norway are not expected to cook, clean, or deliver siblings in kindergarten. When Amara does this, she is perceived as parentified in the eyes of social workers, taking on roles and responsibilities perceived to belong to parents (Hooper et al., 2014). This is associated predominantly with negative outcomes for the child, blurring the boundaries between parents and children and impeding a sense of self and independence (Anderson, 1999).

Ubuntu, feeling useful and interdependent wellbeing

When thinking back on her first period in foster care, Amara recalls:

When I lived here, I got to relax and be with youth, right? [. . .] So, I understood that it was nice, kind of good. But at the same time, I realized that it wasn't for me – honestly. Because I wanted to be active and cook and vacuum-clean and be . . . because I realized that I was useful, I became useful in the family, and that dad couldn't do without me, you know? That was a very nice feeling.

When Amara was reunited with her father again, he had a new job that allowed him to be at home by dinner time:

[My dad] became a mum-dad-role, right? So of course, he cooked, he did *everything*, so I became. . . more or less a regular teenager. Until I thought: "You know what, I *want* to be a mini mum again" – I *wanted* to. It came from me and my own instincts, kind of.

In Amara's sensemaking, it is evident that even though she enjoys having time to relax, she wants to contribute to her family. The way she talks about *wanting to* work and contribute to the family, stating that it came from her own *instincts*, resonates with the valuing of "good character" in African ethics (Gyekye, 2013). This kind of ethics of care is also an ethics of duty – a duty to care. Through the lens of the UNCRC, where only adults and the state have duties, Amara's work is interpreted as a burden. However, interpreted through the ACRWC, where duties always accompany rights, duties have different connotations. Duty is not perceived as a damaging weight that reduces attention for self-care and self-realization. Instead, it is associated with enhanced and positive feelings of contribution, communal wellness, and pride—valued practices and ways of preparing children for their future. Care thus signifies mutual interest and compassion, connecting children to the community while enhancing a sense of belonging.

Reflecting on her life in-between socio-cultural contexts, Amara reasons that she became "more or less a regular teenager" and like "everyone else," concluding that "it was a bit boring." This shows not only her cultural sensitivity and awareness of youth and family life of the ethnic majority, but also a rejection of it. Whereas not complying to her duty of care is "boring," engaging in such care work makes her feel valuable and special. Despite her father's skepticism and their promises to the caseworker, Amara made the decision to engage herself in household responsibilities again:

So, I began again. I began cleaning a lot, and my dad saw it and said: "Don't end up in the same track again." And I said: "No, no, no. I won't. You're here, you're home, right. So, we share the tasks. Everything will work out fine."

The wellbeing of the family is important to Amara: To be active is part of her identity, she feels good when she is needed and can contribute, and she appreciates feeling useful. This is aligned with notions of childhood and care predominant in certain socio-cultural contexts in Africa, as described earlier, where children, families, and communities have reciprocal rights and responsibilities as part of intergenerational expectations. Family members rely on each other for daily survival, emotional and practical support, opportunities to succeed in life, and to manage times of crisis, conveying an understanding of “family” as a collective unit (McCarthy et al., 2020).

The notion of ubuntu—*I am because we are*—emphasizes how one becomes a human being in fellowship with others (Tutu, 2009). Amara’s relationships with important others are crucial for her to attain wellbeing. Amara’s wellbeing is conditioned by and interdependent with the wellbeing of others (Murove, 2012) as the wellbeing of her father and sister is also *her* wellbeing. If her father is stressed or over-worked, it curbs Amara’s happiness and wellness. Her feeling of reciprocity within the family plays into her sense of wellbeing. To approach Amara’s sense of wellbeing relationally involves, according to White (2015), understanding “a particular context or individual in its own terms” (pp. 5–6). This fundamentally relational understanding of social life in which community and individuality are valued and mutually constituted emphasizes the profound connectedness of human existence and the centrality of co-presence in shared family and community life (Evans et al., 2019). In co-constitutive relational spaces, personhood, family relations, embodiment, emotional connections, and materialities are woven together (Evans et al., 2019).

Relational rights and child welfare services

Amara’s experiences bear witness of tensions and conflicts that might arise in the encounter between ethnic minority families and Child Welfare services in Norway. For Amara, this culminates when she must fit into a childhood model that she does not easily identify with. Although Amara affirmed that she likes to have spare time, she also enjoys and wants to contribute to the care of the family. As we do not have empirical material that informs us on the perspectives and arguments of the caseworkers, we can only offer reflections on her experiences in relation to the legal principles of the Child Welfare Act previously described and suggest how relational rights might solve some of the described tensions. As the Child Welfare Act states, the Child Welfare services must cooperate with and respect children and their parents and take children’s opinions seriously. Despite Amara’s dissent regarding the caseworker’s suggestion of temporary foster care, her father agreed:

First, it was devastating because I . . . I didn’t want that. . . , I didn’t want to leave my dad. No child in the world wants that. [. . .] So, I wasn’t 100% content with it [the decision to be moved into temporary foster care]. But dad—he was a bit more mature and understood it—said that “This is the best that can happen to you, you need this. Just go.” And since my dad said so, I thought “Ok, that’s fine.”

Amara’s father appears to have seen this as a good opportunity—or perhaps more correct, the *only* opportunity—to improve Amara’s situation. Yet, as the Child Welfare Act contents that the Child Welfare services must offer guidance and relief measures before moving the child to foster care, we are left wondering why economic or domestic assistance was not provided to assist the family and lessen Amara’s responsibilities.

The Child Welfare Act is based on the core principle of the UNCRC, namely the “best interest of the child,” relating it to the assurance of stability and continuity in children’s lives. In this lies an obligation to prioritize children’s right to family life and rooted existence, something that was not adhered to in the case of Amara. Rather, her “best interest” is interpreted as an existence that

is separate of and disconnected from family life, familial responsibilities, and the wellbeing of her father and sister. This individualistic understanding of children's rights segregate Amara's rights from her father's and overlook their interdependent wellbeing. The way of interpreting Amara's best interest as moving her into foster care "so your dad may work as much as he pleases, and you get to feel relaxed" (as the caseworker reasoned according to Amara), ignores the ways in which humans are inherently embedded in relations of connectedness and interdependence (Gilligan, 1982).

The concept of relational rights includes the responsibilities that an individual has as part of her caring relationships without compromising her as a rights-bearer (Zafran, 2009). As such, it calibrates children as rightsholders within the nature of parent-child relationships (Laufer-Ukeles, 2016). The concept is sensitizing in terms of gender, generational and cultural variation as it does not rest upon a fixed definition or ideology. Furthermore, it recognizes humans' relational interconnectedness and interdependencies within and beyond family. In the case of Amara, ensuring her relational rights is to embrace the philosophy of ubuntu—*I am because we are*—and acknowledge that her wellbeing is contingent on the wellbeing of her family.

Contemporary conceptualizations of rights often have an excessive focus on the child, sometimes to the detriment of the family (Ellingsen et al., 2019; Zafran, 2009). This prompts polarization due to disputes of competing rights rather than attempts of compromise and search for common ground. Such an approach, Zafran (2009) and Laufer-Ukeles (2016) contend, fails to do justice to the domestic reality and the nature of family bonds and fails to encompass the full array of children's needs vis-a-vis their parents'. While an individualistic rights-based approach tends to sharpen conflict and result in state intervention, impeding the court's ability to see the picture in its entirety, relational rights underline the state's responsibility of protecting and supporting relationships for the benefit of children and caregivers and finding laws and measures that help their well-functioning (Laufer-Ukeles, 2016; Zafran, 2009). In Child Welfare services, it requires caseworkers to find inventive and flexible solutions, dovetailed to the needs of all parties involved and to the uniqueness of the case. Approaching children's rights as relational rather than isolating the child from their surroundings repositions the conversation and safeguards children's wellbeing in a more contextually sound and culturally sensitive way. By focusing on relational rights and interdependent wellbeing, unnecessary separations might be avoided, and cultural tensions dissolved.

Concluding reflections

In this article, we have presented a case that demonstrates some potential tensions that might arise in encounters between the Norwegian Child Welfare service and ethnic minority families, resulting in unnecessary family separations. Amara was neither neglected nor maltreated. Rather, the tensions revolved around perceptions of what Amara should or should not do and how much responsibility for the family she should have. Not only did she comply with socio-cultural expectations, but she also conveyed that being useful to her family "was a good feeling." We proposed the suitability of African ethics and the philosophy of ubuntu to expand our ethical and onto-epistemological horizons to better grasp the legal concept of relational rights.

In addition, we proposed relational rights as a valuable concept to increase social workers' ability to understand diverse family relations and ways of upbringing, and, in some instances, to better comprehend the lifeworlds of ethnic minority families in Norway. However, in this lies a risk of viewing certain "cultures" as fixed, monolithic entities, in which divergences are highlighted as categorical "differences" (McCarthy et al., 2020). This fails to account for the fluidity and intersectionality of such patterns and ignores what is common across diverse contexts. For instance, middle class childhoods in many African countries and among many ethnic minority families in

Norway bear many similarities with the Norwegian ethnic (and middle class) majority, where children are perceived first and foremost as care-receivers and their rights are more prevalent than their responsibilities. Our intent is to open the discussion of how we relate to the idea of children's rights in cultural heterogeneous societies. A cross-cultural lens poses important questions about constitutes "normal" caregiving and when or how this may become harmful to children's and young people's wellbeing, highlighting the need for careful analysis of cultural constructions of care (Evans et al., 2019).

Child Welfare services represent state engagement and regulation and play a vital role in defining and controlling children's best interests. As demonstrated by Amara's case, concerns raised by the UN Children's Committee and recent cases in the European Court of Human Rights, the Norwegian Child Welfare services struggle to comprehend and attend to the needs of ethnic minority children. We perceive an urgent need to move beyond the individualistic conceptualization of children as rights-bearers and understand rights as constituted relationally. This involves an understanding of the principle of the "best interest" of the child through the notion of interdependent wellbeing. A relational approach affords ways for caseworkers to comprehend children's rights and wellbeing as essentially relational, improve their cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills, and seek solutions that maintain children's familial as well as cultural bonds (all issues of concern of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018). We find Laufer-Ukeles (2016) three principles based on relational theory of use for the practice field: (1) Proactive state involvement that supports relationships, particularly at-risk relationships, as opposed to instilling fear of state interference; (2) Support for the multiplicity and variety of relationships; and (3) Balance individual harms against the harm of state interference on relationships in the context of children's rights. Finally, we contend that an emphasis on relational rights and interdependencies in families benefits not only ethnic minorities, but all children, independent of ethnic or class background.

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