

Sensibility to the Role of Child Welfare Services in the Machinery of Stigma

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Abstract

Sensibility to stigma in child welfare systems is important to prevent harmful acts against marginalised groups in society. This case analysis centres around one family in the child welfare service (CWS) that could be considered marginalised across several dimensions. The empirical material consists of three separate in-depth interviews with the child, their parents and their caseworker. We explore how the stigma attributed to the family was enhanced through the relationship with the CWS and the role stigmatisation played in the interactions between the family and the CWS. The analysis showed how the parents were constructed as 'outsiders', compared to the ideal; they lacked money, good looks, and character. Although the parents were somehow subjugated and the caseworker perceived them as submissive, they also resisted stigma in both open and subtle ways. However, this was not always sensed by the CWS. We discuss the importance of addressing stigma in all its forms and acknowledge that stigma is power, which is also intertwined with the broader policy. This is crucial knowledge to mitigate the role of the CWS in the stigma machine and in turn reduce structural bias within the CWS.

Keywords: child protection, everyday resistance, inequality, marginalisation, stigma power

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Introduction

There are many myths and prejudices amongst welfare workers about families who live on marginal incomes (Ejrnæs, 2019). This sometimes results in families being trapped in systems such as child welfare services (CWS), even when there is no real concern about a child's care environment. Although rarely stated explicitly, most experienced practitioners could easily think of some families they 'know' will always be in the system—and they would probably point out that the parents were in the system too. These families are often termed 'multiproblem' families or families with 'cumulative risk' (Bryce, 2020); these families are likely to be marginalised across several dimensions, such as the dimensions of health, income, employment and living conditions, and their problems can be characterised as 'wicked' (Bywayters *et al.*, 2016; Fauske *et al.*, 2017; Kojan and Storhaug, 2021). Less attention has been given to how child welfare (CW) systems reinforce the marginalisation of families dealing with wicked problems related to poverty.

Although the intentions of the CWS to help families considered at 'risk' or 'in need' are difficult to contest, CWS policies can have unintended outcomes. Research on low-income parents' experiences of CWS involvement reveals that the interactions are often experienced as humiliating and shameful and that parents often do not feel recognised by the service (Fauske *et al.*, 2018; Gibson, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2016). Shame is closely connected to stigma, and over the last decade, there have been growing attempts to expand the frameworks within which we usually think of stigma and to reorient the focus from the individual to sociocultural structures (Tyler, 2020). The current study was carried out in Norway, which is generally perceived as a robust welfare state with abundant opportunities for social mobility; however, this has also resulted in a heightened feeling of shame amongst individuals who have not been successful (Pellissery *et al.*, 2013).

An important purpose of this article is to understand how the processes of stigma are activated within the context of the CWS. The article adds to the critical literature discussing how good intentions of the CWS may reproduce inequities and even strengthen existing inequalities (Järvinen, 2002, Lonne *et al.*, 2019; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014; Gupta and Saar-Heiman, 2020). We focus on the gap between the intentions behind CWS policies (to ensure that children grow up in good care and living conditions) and the unintended implications of these mandates in practice. To explore this, the research question are as follows: *In what ways is the stigma attributed to families enhanced through the relationship with the CWS, and what role does stigmatisation play in the interactions between families and the CWS?* The analysis is guided by a focus on how a

caseworker perceived a family's situation and how stigma and shame were expressed by the child, the parents and the caseworker. In a broader analytical sense, we attempt to understand how stigma at the individual level may be connected to broader social policy. Knowledge about the role of the CWS in this stigma machinery (Tyler, 2020) is crucial for the awareness of stigma and to develop means to reduce it.

Stigma and resistance

Erving Goffman (1963), one of the most influential theoreticians on the phenomenon, defines stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting', describing people who are considered to deviate from social norms. Although Goffman advised that we need 'a language of relationships, not attributes', there has been a tendency to apply a static and individualistic focus towards stigma (Goffman, 1963; Tyler, 2020). In this article, we draw on later theorisation of stigma, where stigma is seen as a form of power and political economy (Tyler, 2020; Link and Phelan, 2014). Imogen Tyler (2020, p. 100) criticises Goffman for constructing a stigma concept that is 'so toothless, and so emptied of power'. She uses the metaphor 'stigma machine' and illustrates that stigmatisation as a practice can be experienced through, for example, stigmatising looks or comments and material practices of bodily marking—but that stigma is always enmeshed with wider capitalist structures of expropriation, domination, discipline and social control. Tyler (2020, p. 27) considers stigma a form of classificatory violence 'from above' that devalues people, places and communities and functions as a technology of statecraft. However, Tyler emphasises that stigma power is not just passively accepted; it has always been resisted throughout history. Resistance can be defined as 'a response to power, a practice that can challenge, and undermine power' (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007). The individual form of opposition performed by parents in contact with the CWS can further be grasped by the concept of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985; Johansson and Vinthagen, 2020). Everyday resistance is largely disguised or hidden (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2020), but some scholars argue that it should be considered a process that happens along a continuum, and can also be more visibly performed (Murru, 2020). Combining the concept of everyday resistance with stigma power is considered an alternative to traditional stigma research, where the internal state of the stigmatised such as feelings of shame, and how to manage it, has been the main focus (Frederick, 2017). Combining the concepts encourages taking the parents agency seriously and may prevent research from unintentionally pathologising the parents (Frederick, 2017).

Methodology

The empirical material in this article was collected as part of the research project ‘Poverty, children's caring environment and child welfare’ in Norway, which had a mixed methods design and consisted of two sub-studies. The study was approved by the Data Protection Services of Sikt and assessed in accordance with national guidelines for research ethics (NESH, 2021). We conducted a survey with 256 parents with different socioeconomic backgrounds and in-depth interviews with parents ($n=37$), children ($n=9$) and caseworkers ($n=16$; these caseworkers were interviewed about their contact with twenty-one of the thirty-seven parents). In the qualitative follow-up interviews, the parents were asked to provide consent to undergo interviews with their child(ren) and with CWS caseworkers regarding their case. In this article, we focus on *one* family and the family situation from the perspectives of the parents, their child and the caseworker. To understand a complex phenomenon such as stigmatisation, we needed to analyse the perceptions of and dynamics between different stakeholders in a concrete family in contact with the CW system. The interviews with this family and the caseworker were chosen due to their empirical richness and theoretical opportunities. This case—or, as we prefer, family—allowed us to link private troubles experienced by the family to public issues regarding the policies, practices and mandates of the CWS (Mills, 1959).

Both authors interviewed the parents at different stages of the research project. The parents were first interviewed for the survey; thus, we already had some experience with the family situation. Then, an in-depth interview was conducted, in which we had the opportunity to go get more detailed information regarding the life experiences and circumstances of the family. The in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and read by both authors (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the empirical material used in the analysis.

Interview type (face-to-face)	Who	Interviewer
Survey	Both parents	Author 2
In-depth interview	Both parents	Author 1
In-depth interview	Male child	Author 2
In-depth interview	CW caseworker	Author 1

The parents’ frustration was sensed by both authors during the separate interviews that we conducted with them, which sparked our interest to try to understand more about the interactions between this specific family and the CWS. After both interviews, we shared our reflections from the interviews with each other. We agreed that this family probably had some of the most complex challenges that we encountered during

the entire in-depth interview phase, and the caseworker also explicitly stated that he considered this family to be marginalised.

The idea of focusing on stigma and dynamics in the interactions between families and the CWS was derived from our meetings with parents and the thematic categorisation of the interviews as well as literature readings. Our analysis can be characterised as abductive; in our further analysis, we tried to think similarly to Tyler (2020), who urges us to be students of stigma power and to add vocabulary to the language of stigma power. The survey interview was used to add background information to the analysis, such as the parents' education levels, income levels and income types. We have taken several steps to preserve the anonymity and protect the privacy of the family and the caseworker, such as changing their background information and situational details in the transcriptions used in the article.

Limitations and strengths

The following analysis is an in-depth exploration of how the processes of stigma can be played out in a CW context, and the rich empirical material from different perspectives is a strength. Although 'the stigma machine' was also evident in parts of the larger empirical qualitative material, our analysis cannot say much about the frequency of stigma and shame in the (Norwegian) CW context, and we want to state again that the family focused on in this article was the most marginalised family that participated in the qualitative interviews, for whom the stigma machinery was most obvious.

The Pedersen family

The Pedersen family consists of the mother, Petra, the father, Ola, their son, Noah (aged eight years) and their older son, Peder (aged seventeen years). Peder has multiple functional disabilities and lives in an individualised social housing apartment. He usually visits the family home one day per week, although the house is not suitable for his needs. For example, his wheelchair cannot get into the bathroom, so his parents must change his diapers on the couch in the living room. The second child, Noah, lives at home. He has been diagnosed with ADHD and, according to his parents, requires close attention and follow-up.

The mother, Petra, did not complete elementary school, and the father's highest level of education was elementary school. Both parents receive disability pension because they are not able to work, and they have lived with low income for many years. The parents rent an apartment, but they

are not satisfied with their housing situation, which is related to the flat not meeting Peder's needs and also to the overall standard.

Before Petra became a mother, she experienced drug problems. Due to her history of abusing pills, Petra has performed regular drug tests for many years. Petra and Ola both report having difficult backgrounds, in the sense that their parents did not give them proper care. According to Ola, they use their own experiences from childhood as a guide on what *not* to do as parents; 'We were left a bit more on our own' and 'We spent a lot of time to not be the parents we experienced ourselves [...] we use it as a kind of warning sign'.

Everyday life

The caseworker and the parents mostly provided very similar descriptions of the family's life situation. Petra and Ola have trouble with their health, and they both have chronic pain. Ola has chronic back problems, and he takes medicine for his pain every morning. He is not always able to perform physical activities with Noah because of his health situation. The parents emphasise how it is difficult for them and their child to find both the time and energy for activities in their spare time:

Father: But back again to this with everyday life and different things. So it's like that because... there is such a complicated system to... get things in the right place, take medicine, get help at school. All these things. So it's like that when we start talking about leisure activities...

Mother: ... it is not time then ...

Father: ... to a boy who comes home from school and is quite exhausted.

Father: Then, he doesn't really want anything either. Just getting him to do homework ... it is ... it takes a bit of persuasion and ... creativity to make it happen. So ... he doesn't want to ... yeah. He just wants the rest of the day to be a little quieter. Because he is quite touchy ... so ... then he gets upset more quickly ... Yes ... he ... there are things with him, that he is either extremely happy about things, or extremely disappointed about small things. So ... it ... it ... can be all kinds of things in everyday life.

Mother: Something as stupid as the PlayStation locking up, then he might find himself crying.

Father: Yes, or that dinner ... we cook too late or too early and ... or it could be small things. So ... it's just normal everyday life ... that we have to ... so we have to deal with it, and I feel that we can. [...] I myself feel that we are very good. I think so.

The parents experience their everyday life as demanding. The parents say that they spend a significant amount of time in meetings with different welfare and health institutions, such as Noah's school, the home where Peder lives, the hospital, the child psychiatry clinic and the CWS,

as well as with doctors, dentists, and psychologists. They express that there is little time left to spend on leisure activities, and they emphasise that their son is very tired after being at school and that he needs the family routines to be followed.

The contact between the Pedersen family and the CWS

Contact between the family and the CWS has been ongoing for several years. However, it seems difficult for the caseworker to point out how the parent's challenges in everyday life affect Noah. The caseworker said, 'They love both their children very, very much' but added that he wonders how much of the child's ADHD is in fact due to marginalised care over a long period:

I mean, yes, he has ADHD, but there are probably elements of neglect in the picture. It's probably somehow a concurrence there. What is ADHD, and what is... probably marginalized care over a long period.

He was not specific regarding what he meant by marginalized care, but when asked how the parents handle disagreements with their child, he said the following:

No, I'm a little unsure about that. It's hard to say anything about it. But we have no reason to suspect they're hurting him. Eh... we are not concerned that he is a victim of violence, for example. [...] We have no reason to believe that. No.

Noah, the boy, said that he does not know the reason why he and his family are in contact with the CWS: 'They [CWS] are not taking children, as long as they do not have a bad life at home. But I feel good about my mum and dad. And how it goes at school, it is better there. But they [the CWS] do not believe me when I say that I am feeling fine, and it is going well. I am well. They do not really believe me there'.

Currently, the parents receive general guidance and advice from the CWS, and they participate in a parenting programme (Circle of security, COS) based on attachment theory (Hoffman *et al.*, 2006). The parents expressed that they have learned a lot from the program, and when asked about what they have learned, they replied, 'Both how to see ourselves' (the father), 'how to see our son's needs and how to meet him in specific situations' (the mother). The father mentioned that he had 'learned to be a better parent, everything from A to B'. Simultaneously, they felt the programme was too professionalised with little flexibility. The father said, 'they have a norm, and when parents have a different way of explaining things, then it is wrong'.

From the perspective of the CWS, the caseworker was not clear about the reasons behind offering the COS programme to the parents. The caseworker stated that the parents 'have good enough caring capabilities.

But we [the CWS and the parents] have different interpretations of... different matters. This is an eternity project, they... they won't get rid of our service'. The parents did not seem to grasp what the CWS assesses 'their problem' as: 'We are not bad parents or bad... the CWS has nothing on us as parents. But once you are in the CW journals, they won't let you out again. That is the feeling we have'.

Regarding 'good enough' caring capabilities, the caseworker probably meant that their parenting was good enough to not take custody of the child, but at the same time, the caseworker seemed to have difficulties articulating exactly what the challenges are and how they affect the children. This resonates with the parents' experience of not knowing what the concrete reason for the concern of the CWS, which probably explains their feeling of being 'trapped' in the system.

The parents expressed that they are feeling misunderstood by the CWS and have handled this by giving the CWS consent to obtain any information about them from all public institutions. The father stated that he lives as transparently as possible to get the best possible help for his kids and to get the 'best possible understanding [of us] as humans'. However, the parents felt that their openness just makes the CWS more worried and that their transparency is used against them. The caseworker commented about how he considers the parents' tendency to act in a submissive way in meetings with the CWS and other professionals:

Interviewer: What do you mean by them [the parents] tending to be submissive?

Caseworker: No, they are a bit, well... when we meet either here or when we have interprofessional meetings, they say that they are grateful and finally they are seen for who they are, and they don't take it for granted—But it's something that often comes as a repetitive statement. [...] Beneath the surface, there is probably something more, but it's difficult to burst that particular balloon.

The caseworker sensed that unspoken issues are going on in the interaction between the parents and the CWS, but he struggles to grasp what lies beneath the parents' apparent submissive acts.

Activation of stigma

Poverty

Since we had rich interviews with both the caseworker and the family, we were able to better grasp the subtle and unspoken interactions between the parents and the caseworker. The parents receive disability pension and experience poverty. The parents are open about their difficult living conditions, and the caseworker also thematises the parents'

bad financial situation. When asked if the CWS paid attention to their low income level, the father said:

Father: Yes, they are very, yes, focused on that. But in a negative sense, to push us out of.... eh... To make us feel less worthy.

Mother: mmm.

Father: In those settings: 'Yes, because you are someone who is in the weak group in society' [...] Sometimes it nearly boils over for me because I *know* that I am in the box named 'receiving disability pension'. But I cannot just get well and work a little bit extra and earn more money.

Interviewer: So they [the CWS] think that this... affects you in any way, is that what you are saying?

Father: Yes, at least they are good at reminding us that we have a weaker position in society. And it isn't always good for us to have this feeling... as if it is to take us out of play or...

Interviewer: Have you had any economic support or?

Mother: No.

Father: ... and not ... if they think that we have a weak position, maybe they should have helped us apply for the support that we are entitled to have. Because we are not world champions in waiting at NAV [Social Security Service] to submit applications. We try to manage with what we have, making the best out of the situation. So, instead of making us feel awful, they could have helped us better in the other end—if they are worried about our economic situation.

The parents expressed how they feel shamed by the caseworker's stigmatisation and labelling of them, and herein, we sensed how they felt that they were blamed for living in poverty. In another section of the interview, the father stated that 'to be on disability pension in Norway Ltd, is not exactly lucrative', which could point to the government's responsibility for their low income level.

The caseworker was aware of the family's poor financial situation. He stated that the parents cannot give their son everything and are worried about not being able to pay for what Noah needs.

Caseworker: "No, I think that he has parents who... which in a way is a bit different, he has parents where nobody is at work, for example, they lack money. The parents talk openly that they can't afford it... eh... that there are things they can't afford to buy, that there are things they can't afford to give him... that... they haven't had a car that works for a long time and that they start to worry, because they know that this and that part will soon have to be replaced, and how will they be able to afford it [...] The boy does not go to SFO [the after school programme]."

The caseworker emphasised that they spend time with him mainly inside, which should probably be understood in light of outdoor activity

norms as an important element of the Norwegian construction of ‘good’ parenting (Herrero-Arias and Hollekim, 2020). The CWS also wants to pay for a leisure activity for the boy, but the parents do not easily accept this offer, as they think it is good for the boy to spend time at home with them. The caseworker stressed again that he has to be strict and try to explain the purpose of the activities to the parents: ‘The purpose with leisure activities is that he is going to be a part of a social activity, at school or outside school’. Noah says that he enjoys spending time at home: There is a lot going on at school and he thinks it is much better to stay home. When asked what he does at home, Noah said, ‘I play with Lego, cars and a lot of other cool stuff’.

Physical characteristics

As previously mentioned, Noah stated that he has a feeling that the CWS and the school do not believe him when he says he is enjoying his life at home and that he thinks well of his parents. The caseworker said that he thought the boy is keeping something secret from him/the CWS and that he does not tell the whole truth about his situation at home: ‘He is probably a boy that is putting a lid on a lot, he has ... he probably has much to hide. If not necessarily very important issues, there are probably a lot of small issues that boy puts a lid on’.

When the interviewer followed up by asking, ‘What can it be, then?’ the caseworker tried to explain what he thinks is not being directly expressed. Here, he very explicitly stated that ‘he has parents that, in a way, are a bit different’. The caseworker also explained what he meant by ‘different’ more in-depth by demonstrating what can be interpreted as marks of stigma distinctions. He mentioned up elements that he believes the child is hiding and that he will increasingly notice that his parents are ‘different’ as he gets older. The following physical stigma distinction marks were mentioned:

Caseworker: “They also look a little different. When the mom came in here, the first time, we helped her get new teeth. She had very few teeth in her mouth when she came here. They...they are not parents who care about their looks. Eh ... in a way they use ... I think in a way the mum wears a lot of the father's clothes for example ... I... and ... eheh, when the son grows up, this is something that I think he, as he gets older, will take notice of more and more.”

It became clear that the subtle and unspoken ‘something’ relates to the caseworker’s concerns and judgements of the physical appearance of Noah’s parents. Tyler (2020) argues that stigma is not just a metaphor or an abstract construct; it is a material force, and we can see that, in the case of the Pedersen family, stigma is attached to the parents’ bodies. A paradoxical situation is constructed, where stigma itself becomes a risk

factor that keeps the Pedersen family in the CWS system. In this way, it can be argued that the caseworker reinforces the stigmatisation of the family. This elucidates how stigma can operate as a machine in the context of the CWS.

Character

The parents are classified as outsiders and stigmatised for lacking both material goods and physical attributions, which are also connected to specific understandings of the parents' characters. The parents are judged for lacking moral character and for making lifestyle decisions that the caseworker sees as bad choices. For example, the caseworker expressed that the parents should have done more to smoke less, and he thinks that Petra and Ola should exercise more self-control and self-discipline:

They have a small gazebo outside their apartment that they use as a smoking spot. ... eh... and I think that if you make it very comfortable to smoke, then your smoking will increase. But if you did not have a gazebo that you could smoke in, then it would be more uncomfortable and less cosy being outside and freezing while smoking. Maybe you would smoke less then.

The parents expressed that it is a burden to smoke, but, at the same time, they saw smoking in contrast to their previous life experiences, especially thinking back to Petra's problems with pills. The parents were proud to have gotten out of that situation and that they can now live together; for them, the fact that they do not smoke too much, inside the house or with the children seems good enough. Furthermore, the caseworker also raised concerns about the parents' financial prioritisations:

If you're going to put your finger on the things that cost a lot of money, like, for example, soft drinks. Like a small soft drink doesn't usually cost much, but when you have a soft drink with you in every conversation eh... so that sum is quite large. But that's it, it's very narrow if I'm going to focus on that in addition to the things I must have focus on, I can't prioritize that, and I don't think it benefits a collaboration either, if they need to have a soft drink during the conversation. Sometimes it's a bit difficult to... eh... sit and listen to how difficult it is for them in relation to finances, when I see that they always come with soft drinks. So I think that I, who works full-time, can't afford to drink soft drinks every day, and it's not good for me either, but eh... and then I think that... when you are lacking money and still take that freedom, so... yeah. That was poorly explained, now I feel that it's late, but...

The caseworker judged the parents' choices, and he was aggravated by how the parents 'take the freedom' to buy soft drinks, whilst he puts restrictions on himself because he wants to be economically responsible

and healthy. At the same time, he was also clear that he cannot focus on this in meetings with them, and he stated that it ‘was poorly explained, now I feel that it’s late’, reflecting how his moral judgement was expressed in a way that he may have regretted. Furthermore, the caseworker seemed to understand the parents being unable to work as equal to having a lot of leisure time, and he doubted what the parents had told him about it being too much for them to have one appointment with different health and social services each day:

These are two parents who are not working, and they have quite a few appointments around. Eh... but I find that they want things adapted to them, and if eh... I have to be determined to say that "no, we can't do this the way you want, we have to do it the way I want", then I especially think about when we have to make appointments for example, so... then it's not suitable for them, and I feel that it's less suitable for the mother than it is for the father. He finds it easier to accept, but the mother is... she gets upset very quickly, a little... uh... a little irritated. She can be short with me, and a bit rude, when I have to be determined [in my communication]. She can be very friendly when I try to meet them halfway or behave permissively. And it's a bit like that, I have to consider it from time to time. When should I be strict, and where should loosen up a little bit...

The parents were constructed as people who did not understand their own best interest and who lacked self-discipline, and the caseworker saw himself as an educator. The caseworker explained that, from time to time, he must consider when to be strict and when to be more permissive. It became evident how the stigmatisation of their character functioned as a form of power that legitimises the caseworker taking control or even ‘taming’ the parents. In this sense, stigma operated as a technology of discipline (Tyler, 2020).

Resistance to stigma power

The caseworker said, as quoted initially, that the parents tended to act submissive in the meetings with the CWS, and it seemed that the caseworker sensed that there were many unspoken and subtle ‘goings-on’ in the interactions. We identified how stigma functioned as a productive force that marked and classified the parents, which can function to subjugate them (Tyler, 2020). However, the parents had several strategies to handle the stigma and shame they experienced. On the one hand, they coped and tried to maintain their dignity by focusing on how they try their best as parents, despite their difficult situation. On the other hand, they also challenged stigma power through acts of everyday resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2020). Sometimes these acts were subtle and hard for the caseworker to grasp. By seeing the parents’ interview in

conjunction with the caseworker's interview, we obtained a thicker description of what can be interpreted as avoidance acts (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2020). The parents worked to prevent their son from being stigmatised. After the parents mentioned how living on disability pension is not lucrative, they also gave insights into their struggle to take their son on vacations, such as when they go camping:

Father: So ... to prevent Noah from being labelled in a way that leads to him going to ... you know, a municipal summer camp or ... a bunch of offers from the welfare office or child services, I feel like we're pretty good at setting aside a little bit [money] at a time.

From the caseworker's perspective:

[...] They often express that they have poor finances, that they're struggling financially ... um ... We have also offered them, like vacation opportunities, [...] through organizations like the Red Cross [...] [A]nd they had secured a spot for "Vacation for All" during Easter, at [the] Mountain[s] ... if they wanted it. [...] Initially, they were positive about it ... and I hurried back to the office and made the arrangements, [...]. but then they changed their minds later that day, just a few hours later, saying they could go if we covered it [...] It was difficult for them to take the bus provided by the Red Cross; they wanted us to cover the expenses so they could drive their own car to [the] Mountain[s], [laughing], which was something that I couldn't get approval for from my superiors, you know, and then I told them it would be difficult, okay, and they said they would think about it. And then they decided to accept. I was ready to register them again, and then I received feedback that they could join, but they wanted to bring their dog. Um ... so I contacted "Vacation for All" just to ask if it was possible if they could bring their dog. They have a fairly medium-sized [dog], um ... and I received feedback that, of course, pets are not allowed, [...], and they chose to decline [...]. You know, it's really ... it makes it a bit difficult because their son, little Noah, is the one who loses out on a long weekend in the mountains, with skiing, grilling, fun, swimming, and everything ... you know, they don't always manage to see the bigger picture.

Analysing the interviews in parallel, we can see the parents' constant new requests regarding the 'vacation for all' as a creative and subtle way of resisting possible stigmatisation. In this manner, they did not have to take the risk of declining the offer directly. The caseworker interpreted the situation as a sign of the parents not acting in Noah's best interest.

As shown earlier, the parents expressed ambivalence towards the norms of parenting conveyed through the parenting programme in which they participated in. Whilst they mentioned having 'learned to be better parents', they also faced stigma associated with not adhering to some of the professionalised parenting practices, which they openly and directly resisted:

Father: He [the CWW] got caught up in that I used the word “but”. Instead of that I preferably could have said “because” [...] So actually, I only chose to discuss because ... I felt I had to let him know that there are many roads to Rome. And it’s not *just* the highway that *he* believes, or is trained to think that everyone should follow, because [in] society ... No one is the same. I really just wanted to say to him—and I said that too, that *no one* in the country is the same. And prior to teaching us to be better at being us as parents, he should know us enough to have that as a foundation. I might just as well use the word “because” instead of “but”, but I think that was a hair-splitting thing to be caught up in.

In this light, the parenting programme can be considered as part of the stigma machinery. The level of detail in the expectations placed on the parents does not appear to consider the complex and marginalised life situation the family is situated in—which probably also is an important background to understand the parents’ resistance.

Discussion and implications

This analysis has shown that despite having good intentions, the case-worker stigmatised the parents in several ways; the parents were constructed as ‘outsiders’, compared to the ideal; they lacked money, good looks and character. The stigma was very visible; it was ascribed to their bodies, so to speak, like a penal tattoo, a body marking that expresses subordination (Tyler, 2020). Tyler (2020) urges us to not only simply investigate how stigma is activated on an individual level but also to raise the question and try to understand more about *where the stigma comes from*. With the metaphorical concept of a stigma machine, we are encouraged to explore the wider context for stigma activation on an individual level. Both parents receive disability pension, and as Ola stated, ‘to be on disability pension in Norway Ltd, is not exactly lucrative’. Despite receiving disability pension, they live below the poverty line, and Ola pointed indirectly to the government’s responsibility for their economic situation. Even if social reforms in Norway may not be as austerity driven as those in many other countries, policy-induced stigma is an important phenomenon that should be taken seriously (Pellissery *et al.*, 2013).

CWS have been criticised both internationally and in Norway for mostly focusing on internal family dynamics and for not seeing the poverty that affects many families in contact with the CWS (Andenæs, 2004). Past research has pointed at structural factors related to CWS mandates—they have limited resources to change the economic positions of the families (Ericsson, 2000). The caseworker in this article understood that the family was living in poverty, but the measures they received were in line with the international trend to focus on risk before

need (Gupta and Saar-Heiman, 2020) as well as on changing the parents more than supporting them in their parenting; this seems to be characteristic of how the Norwegian CWS perceives intervention goals (Picot, 2015). Activation of stigma in the relationships between caseworkers and parents is entangled in both policy decisions regarding people receiving disability pension as well as political decisions about what the CWS should be.

Taken together, in the interactions between the family in focus and the CWS, stigma seemed to be reenforced and difficult to avoid. This analysis has shown how the stigma they experienced functioned as a form of power that devalued both the parents and the child and risked, in turn, stripping away their agency. Stigma is a disabling force (Tyler, 2020), constructing the Pedersens as people who did not know what was best for them, nor what was ‘best for their child’. The parents and the caseworker had very different perspectives regarding Noah’s needs, and the parents’ viewpoints were not recognised as an important source for understanding Noah’s needs. Hence stigma is not first and foremost a static attribute; rather, it is a social process, a stigma machine, that ‘feeds upon, strengthens and reproduces existing inequalities’ (Parker and Aggleton, 2003, Tyler, 2020).

Even if the stigma machine seems overwhelming, this analysis has shown that there is also space for acting otherwise in the CW context. The caseworker expressed some reflexivity, and the parents resisted stigma power to some extent. Both research and practice should explore parents’ acts of everyday resistance in relation to various forms of power, which could provide an increased understanding of families and potentially reinforce their agency and participation. Independent of whether CWS interventions are legitimate, we have to understand how welfare systems can reduce the stigmatisation of poor families. Acknowledging stigma as a social problem that operates on different levels means that it cannot be completely ameliorated by changing individual attitudes, providing more education or teaching stigmatised individuals how to better manage the stigma directed at them (Tyler, 2020). The CWS needs to be conscious of its role in the machinery of producing and reproducing social inequalities (Parker and Aggleton, 2003; Tyler, 2020). Combating stigma on an individual level will not stop the stigma machine. An important step would be to recognise poverty as a violation of human rights (Gupta and Saar-Heiman, 2020), and more research on the role of caseworkers in policy engagement is needed.

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