

Article

# Private and public families: Social workers' views on children's and parents' position in Chile, England, Lithuania and Norway

by

Siv Oltedal (corresponding author)  
Professor  
Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger  
Norway  
E-mail: [siv.oltedal@uis.no](mailto:siv.oltedal@uis.no)

Lennart Nygren  
Professor  
Department of Social Work, Umeå University  
Sweden  
E-mail: [lennart.nygren@umu.se](mailto:lennart.nygren@umu.se)

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## **Abstract**

### *English*

Social workers around the world work with families and family complexities in their everyday practice. In this cross-national study, we explore social workers' family intervention practices related to family definitions and functions, and how social workers balance children's and parents' rights and social policies in the proper context. Data derives from focus group interviews with child welfare workers from Norway, Lithuania, Chile and England based on discussions of a common fictitious complex family case (vignette). The four countries chosen for this comparative study are examples of four different welfare systems/regimes. The findings related to this broad area of caring topics are related to how the dimensions of a 'private' and a 'public' family manifest in social work in the four countries. Social workers in Chile and Lithuania refer to the idea of the private family, while their Norwegian counterparts lean more to the public family. English social workers combine public and private family conceptions in their focus groups, reflecting a system that is partly de-familialized.

*Keywords:* private family, public family, children's position, parent's position, family policy regimes, child welfare workers' discretion

### *Spanish*

#### **Familias públicas y privadas. La visión de los trabajadores sociales sobre la posición de hijos y padres en Chile, Inglaterra, Lituania y Noruega.**

Los trabajadores sociales en todo el mundo lidian con familias y sus complejidades en su práctica cotidiana. En este estudio de comparación internacional exploramos las prácticas de intervención en familias de trabajadores sociales en relación con sus definiciones y funciones, así como los modos en que los trabajadores sociales equilibran los derechos de padres e hijos y las políticas sociales en el contexto apropiado. Los datos provienen de entrevistas grupales con trabajadores sociales de servicios de bienestar infantil en Noruega, Lituania, Chile e Inglaterra, basadas en la discusión acerca de un caso común ficticio de familia compleja (viñeta). Los cuatro países seleccionados para este estudio comparativo ejemplifican cuatro regímenes o sistemas de bienestar. Los resultados relativos a esta amplia área del tema del cuidado tienen que ver con cómo las dimensiones de "familia privada" y "familia

pública” se manifiestan en el trabajo social de estos cuatro países. Los trabajadores sociales de Chile y Lituania hacen referencia a la idea de la familia privada, mientras sus colegas noruegos se inclinan más hacia la familia pública. Los trabajadores sociales ingleses apuntan hacia una combinación de las concepciones de familia pública y privada en sus grupos focales, reflejando un sistema que es parcialmente de-familiarizado.

*Palabras clave:* familia privada, familia pública, posición de los hijos, posición de los padres, regímenes de políticas familiares, discrecionalidad de los trabajadores sociales de bienestar infantil.

## **Introduction**

Social workers around the world deal with family complexity in their everyday practice, and with different societal contexts. Changing family patterns add to the complexity that is already prominent in the field (Costello, 2003; Kuronen et al., 2010; Walsh, 2012). The welfare of families and family policy are closely linked, thereby influencing the ways in which social workers work with families facing complex problems.

The aim of this article is to explore how the tension between the private and the public family appears in the notions of child welfare workers in four different welfare states. We present an analysis of a sub-sample of a larger empirical study, ([bit.ly/FACSK2](https://bit.ly/FACSK2)), of family policies and social workers in different countries. The chosen countries of this sub-sample, Chile, England, Lithuania and Norway, were selected as examples of Linda Hantrais' four-folded family policy typology (Hantrais, 2004). The family policies of these four countries can be classified in this way: Chile's family policy familialized, England's partly de-familialized, Lithuania's re-familialized and Norway's de-familialized. A de-familialized policy relieves families from the burdens associated with supporting and caring for individual family members (Lister, 1994), while familialized policies place these responsibilities on the family and not on the state. The re-familialized policies of Lithuania reflect the transition that the country went through after its independence from the Soviet Union (Hantrais, 2004).

Besides changing family patterns, the relationship between the family and the state has changed worldwide (Thévenon, 2011; Lohmann & Zagel, 2016). In some countries, as in Norway, an increasing number of family issues appear to be considered as public affairs. In other countries, e.g. Lithuania, previously extended state interventions into family life are replaced by moving back responsibilities to the family as a private domain, combined with diminished state interventions and controls over family issues. These different orientations reflect a tension between the public and the private family, a tension that appears on a continuous scale, and on different practice levels, and which is a crucial element in social policy.

The tension between a public and a private family is particularly pronounced in child welfare and child protection (Burns et al., 2016). At the national level through laws and welfare services, and on the international level through conventions and human rights, the view upon the child as an independent subject with its own rights has gained increased attention. There are doubts as to whether this has really led to improved levels of participation of the child in important decision processes. Consequently, there are differences in how children's participation is implemented around the world (Bijleveld et al., 2015; Križ & Skivenes, 2017).

To focus upon the state's surveillance of how the individual in a family is coping is one way to visualize the importance of the public family. On the other side, the idea of the family as a private sphere has a focus on the parents' responsibility and role for the custody of their children, in which the state should hesitate to overrule and interfere. Negotiations about the border between the public and private are pivotal in the national public debates in this area, such as, e.g., in Norway (Ellingsæter, 2012). With regard to the 'public/private' family, the research literature indicates various approaches. According to Cherlin and Calhoun (2010), the private family is where we live most of our personal lives, whereas the public family is where we deal with broader societal issues, such as the care of the frail elderly, the increase in divorce and childbearing outside of marriage. Rather differently, Riggs et al. refer to the concepts as more dynamic in terms of the impact of government policies and practices, and 'the degree to which families are treated as public property' (Riggs et al., 2016, p. 6).

Wyness (2014) challenges the dichotomy between the public-private and the state-family, and proposes that we should focus more on the complexities *between* these spheres. He means that we have historically seen a change from a state-family relationship towards a state-child relationship. Social workers have a specific position in the family-state relationship, as they need to address both children and families, e.g., asking the question about what is 'good enough' parenting. There are different ways of looking at the family as public or private within various welfare regimes. The complexities in the relationships between the child, the family and the state spheres have different regime-typical blendings, which makes comparisons particularly fruitful.

### **The four countries of the study**

The four countries of our study, Chile, England, Lithuania and Norway, show various traits when it comes to the state-family relationship, traits that partly constitute these countries as representative of four family policy regimes. In this section, these four countries are presented briefly, in order to provide a contextual framing to the social workers' focus group discussions.

Chile is developing a child welfare system in which they are striving to adapt to international UNCRC<sup>1</sup> standards, thus indicating a more active role of the state in relation to families in the future. Child protection for children and young people in Chile is primarily managed by private institutions, but supervised and financed in part by the National Service for Minors (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014). Still, Chile, as in most Latin American countries, relies to a high degree on the family as the responsible institution for individuals' (women, children, persons with disabilities, etc.) welfare (Franzoni, 2008).

In terms of Hantrais' four-folded typology of family policy, Chile stands out as a familialized system with characteristics similar to southern European countries. To group Chile together with, e.g., Spain, Italy and Greece, makes sense, even if the Latin American countries also have some more unique traits in terms of 'regulative social rights that reinforce class and group differentials' (Aspalter, 2011, p. 737). Aspalter concludes that 'Latin America's dominant welfare regime hence exhibits the highest levels of stratification of all welfare regimes worldwide... and one of the lowest levels of decommodification' (Aspalter, 2011, p. 736). The welfare systems in Chile are family-based and residual, while, e.g., Norway has a universal and egalitarian system with comprehensive state responsibility for welfare services and benefits. The question is whether such fundamental macro-level differences are filtered down to the level of professionals in the field. A study comparing professionals' discussions in those countries indicates that being an educator in the same field has an impact on their reflections independent of the welfare system they work in: 'The main finding is that these well-known differences do not seem to have a

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<sup>1</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

substantial impact on educators' apprehensions of important issues in social work and social policy' (Lyngstad, 2015 p. 18).

In England, the Children's Department was founded in 1948 as the result of a child killed in a foster home (Barn & Kirton, 2015). Later on, the Children Act from 1989 attempted to balance the support for families and children in need. Nonetheless, there has been consistent tensions between the Act, insofar as emphasizing the supporting of birth families and protecting the children (including out-of-home placements) (ibid.). Children's organizations that have been campaigning have broadened the gaze of the child welfare system (ibid.). England has a child protection-oriented system characterized by governments that use an individualizing and moralistic way of protecting children and legal procedures (Križ & Skivenes, 2013). The child protection orientation tends to be legalistic, thus emphasizing an investigatory approach that puts demands upon front-line workers to focus on bureaucratic procedures and mandatory reporting rather than professional discretion (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). As part of the UK, England has been categorized as a hybrid social policy model with elements of universal policies and, increasingly, residual elements with a neo-liberal framing (Grimshaw, 2012).

Lithuania is also a country where the adaptation to UNCRC standards is ongoing. Even if there are similarities with Chile in terms of families' ongoing responsibilities, Lithuania has a history that implies that responsibilities were transferred *back* to the families. After the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, social policies shifted from the previous state-run Soviet welfare system (Bernotas & Guogis, 2006), to liberalization and marketization (Aidukaite et al., 2012). In accordance with this, Lithuania is labelled by Hantrais as being re-familialized (Hantrais, 2004). The family policy, governed by the Lithuanian Ministry for Social Security and Labour (MSSL), aims to enable the family to be a responsible, stable and active institution capable of functioning independently of outside assistance (MSSL, 2017). In recent decades, the aim of family policy has been to reduce poverty to help enhance parents' responsibilities toward their children (Aidukaite, 2006), to help reduce income inequality and to protect children and families (MSSL, 2016/2017).

Nygren et al.(2018) exemplify the specific issues of parental rights and duties in Lithuania as:

... for example, parents have the right to have contact with their child in the case of a custody dispute, and parents have a duty to care for, supervise, educate and create favourable conditions for the child. In case of child abuse, parents avoiding parental responsibilities or neglect, the Civic Code (2000) regulates a possible restriction (temporary or permanent) of parental authority. Still, parents maintain the right to have contact with a child.

Lithuania is typical of the re-familialized countries in Eastern Europe in these matters, increasingly sharing similarities with familialized states (such as Chile). Social workers work under the permission that the state is reluctant to intervene into what is considered a family responsibility.

As one of the northern European countries, Norway is characterized by de-familialized family policies. In Norway, the regulation of family life is influenced by labour market and gender equality policies, thereby resulting in more individualistic support for family members. While women are encouraged to participate in the formal labour market, men experience a greater pressure to be active fathers and report supportive practices among employers (Aarseth, 2011; Brandth & Kvande, 2019), e.g., through the daddy quota system. Norway provides a wide range of public welfare such as education, health and social services. Social benefits and services are universal and paid for by tax money. Consequently, there is an aim to diminish the reliance of individuals on their families.

The Norwegian child welfare act provides a set of principles, including the child's best interest and the least intrusive principle. Home services are provided to support family preservation and stability for the child. Moreover, the child welfare system has a family service-orientation focusing on a social and psychological frame, with parents considered as important partners in care. Family service systems assume that the state should play a proactive role in supporting a caregiver's ability to improve their lifestyle and behaviour (Pösö et al., 2014). Family service systems also provide public services to help prevent more serious harm to the child, though the threshold for intervention is low compared to the child protection-oriented system (Križ & Skivenes, 2013). Social workers' discretion appears to play a major role,

since the workers can practice a comprehensive variety of interpretations of the cases (ibid.).

## **Methods**

In this article, we draw on material from the (xxxx) Project (xxxx). This international project compares family policies and family-based social work across different welfare states. Qualitative data collected from focus groups with social workers was based on a vignette (see below) developed within the international research team of project members from Mexico, Chile, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Ireland, England, Norway and Sweden. Hence, the vignette describes a complex family situation that enables social workers from different countries and working in different service areas, e.g., child welfare, to disclose their conceptions of family interventions. The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated to English from the languages locally used.

The analysis presented in this particular article is based on data from 12 focus groups with 61 participants in total, varying in size between two and eight participants: one Norwegian focus group, one Lithuanian group, two Chilean groups and eight focus group interviews from England with child welfare/protection workers. The higher amount of focus groups from England follows from the design of a larger sub-study in England added to the (xxxx) project.

The international (FACSK) research team agreed on a coding framework with 16 overarching categories, of which we selected categories that addressed state-family relationships for a more in-depth analysis for the purpose of this paper. The selected categories contained interview excerpts specifically relevant for the study of state-family relationships and the role social work can play in this relationship.

We applied thematic analysis as a method for identifying themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Author 1 coded Norwegian and Chilean focus group interviews in detail, whereas Author 2 coded the Lithuanian material. For the English data, we relied on the summarized coding done by the UK (FACSK) team. As the first step of the analysis, we became familiarized with the material by extensively reading the coded material. We developed sub-themes based on extracts from the

transcribed material, and after discussing this material we went through the codes a second time to check for additional themes, or for the reformulation of the themes that emerged. We developed a comprehensive table with material from the four countries divided into four parts: a) definitions of family and acceptable family practices, b) approaches and views on reunion, trusted parenthood and balancing children and parents perspectives, c) the responsabilization of individuals, extended family and context, and d) social policy service structure context. We then reviewed the themes that emerged from the coding, and collapsed them into three major themes: 1) Definitions, complexity and acceptable family practices, 2) Children's and parents' rights and roles, and 3) Resources, extended families and discretion within social political contexts.

The design of the study share limitations with other studies that apply focus group methodology, e.g., the effects of group dynamics (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Additionally, our comparative study faces extra challenges. It brings about possible translation errors, but also issues about analytical levels, since child welfare services may vary in their organization *within* countries. Due to these limitations, we need to be cautious in how we phrase country-specific patterns. The studies were reviewed by ethical committees linked to the project's cooperation partners in the four countries. Because there are no direct interviews of clients and no sensitive questions, the project was regarded as ethically unproblematic.

## **Findings**

The analysis of data gathered from focus groups with child welfare workers in Chile, England, Lithuania and Norway revealed patterns of children's and parents' positions in different family policy contexts/regimes. These patterns were related to the three major themes presented above: definitions, complexity and acceptable family practices; children's and parents' rights and roles; and resources, extended family and social workers' discretion. The first theme indicates country-specific understandings of families with complex needs as the target for child welfare work. The second theme contains the divisions of responsibilities for children within families, while the third theme is about the space in which professionals' can act, both as a function of their discretionary freedom and in terms of their access to both human and organizational resources outside the 'needy' family.

In the following, we present how focus group accounts from child welfare workers in the four countries are represented in relation to these three major themes. Hence, the presentation of findings is thematic, and focus group accounts are summarized country wise under each theme.

Notable is that the focus groups in all countries were provided with the same specific case vignette within a complex family situation. The social workers therefore referred to this specific situation and to their own experiences and professional contexts. The full vignette, including the instructions given to the focus groups, is available at [the \(FACSK\) project website \(bit.ly/xxxx\)](#). The vignette is constructed as an evolving story in three stages about a complex family situation that the focus groups were asked to respond to. The vignette is summarized below for the readers' orientation (adapted from Walsh et al., 2018, p. 4).

Maria and David live with their three children, Beth (5), John (8) and Thomas (20), who has a different father with whom he has lost contact. Maria is unemployed, and David works unpredictable hours. David migrated to Chile/Lithuania/Norway/UK, and has no relatives living there. Maria's and David's relationship is volatile. Maria has a history of heavy drinking and drug use. Sometimes, Maria and the children have gone to stay with Maria's brother (Paul) and his wife (Hannah) ... Maria and Paul's parents live outside of the city; they have expressed negative views about Maria and David's relationship, and there is also little contact with them.

The three stages in the focus group address different angles for discussion: mental health problems, alcohol abuse, migration and child welfare, and include extended family and organizational resources.

### *Theme 1: Definitions of 'family', complexity and acceptable family practices*

In *Chile*, the focus group referred to the family as the fundamental core of the nation, and that a general understanding of a family is 'man, woman and child', i.e., the traditional nuclear family. However, the focus group discussed the idea of family as a bond, and not always blood, and of a love that unites people. Children were important in family definitions, and family connections were considered to give value to these children.

Based on the vignette, Chilean social workers exemplified complexity in terms of different family forms, and specifically mentioned the recomposed family, i.e., a family with many parents, as a risk factor. Such complex families included multiple problems. It was also mentioned in the focus group that the family of origin appeared to be important in relation to the problems that families experience.

Family practices were talked about as helping families to solve their own problems, and families were considered to be responsible for the children's problems. Family practices included home visits to see what was happening, as the family itself often does not provide enough information.

In *England*, a more relativistic conception of family appeared. The focus group described the family as constituted by at least one child and a number of caregivers. They marked the idea that family is about people who are significant and what is called 'family'.

The focus group (with reference to the vignette) referred to complex families as troubled or fractured families. They referred to the structure of the family, such as several fathers: 'Lots of different fathers makes it complex.' But complexity was also seen as contextual, mentioning issues about troubled families due to generations of unemployment and children who do not go to school.

In terms of family practices, social workers regarded it to be their professional role to secure that children are not abused, although they cannot work with them without working with the parents as well. They would work with the mother, and on a general level they would also ask for the participation of the father. Furthermore, they would explore resources among family and friends, and try to keep the child within the family or the extended family. The English focus groups referred to the families with respect, about being professional in their approach, and sometimes there was an empowerment flavour to how they described their approach to families. Good enough family practices were defined as a public responsibility, with developed routines, manuals and a system to secure that the public provides this responsibility.

In *Lithuania*, focus group participants began to underscore that a family first of all consists of biological parents and child(ren). However, later on in the group session they expressed a more open definition of people 'living under the same roof', and possibly including close relatives. The group's conception of family complexity can be summarized as having to do with contextual factors, such as issues about how the culture affects family roles, as well as the function of mental health problems and dysfunction.

Discussing family practices, the Lithuanian focus group would look for how parents demonstrate responsibility, and they would also look for strengths. As social workers, they may use 'tick-off' measures, such as asking the addicted parent to participate in a specific addiction treatment programme, as a requirement to get their children back. Children's security was considered important, while there was less of a focus on children's rights, and more on when and how parents can have their neglected children taken away. The social workers in the focus group talked about the mother's responsibility, whereas the fathers were seen as the irresponsible parent. An impression from the focus group was that parents can be manipulative, unreliable, irresponsible and unwilling to work, and need help to understand their roles.

In *Norway*, the focus group defined family as being supportive. An immediate answer was to think about family as biology, but later on in the discussion they conveyed that it would be more correct to define family as a network. They referred to a broadened conception of family due to the changes in family forms that have taken place.

The complexity of families could come from having too many children, and with reference to the vignette the focus group participants identified how the family can cause trouble, but also that the family in the vignette was in crisis. As social workers, they meant that parents must be able to understand their children and see the tempo they are developing at, and provide supportive care. There was a focus on the relationship, on the attachment. Social workers must evaluate whether it is 'good enough', and secure that children are safe in the family. In the focus group, they argued for the need to evaluate for how long children (like the ones in the vignette) can tolerate such an unpredictable situation.

To summarize the first theme: Family definitions varied between the focus groups in the four countries, from resting on traditional biological bonds to metaphors like 'networks'. Also, the idea of complexity varied in that it can stem from individual problems (mental health, dysfunctionality) to structural and cultural backgrounds. Regarding family composition, some defined complexities as too many children, while others as too many parents or fathers. This could be related to normative assumptions about families and problem definitions, i.e., whether too many children or too many parents is the main problem. Finally, the practice models the focus groups referred to also varied from more controlling to structured and more supportive in the four countries.

*Theme 2: Children's and parents' rights and roles*

In *Chile*, the focus group discussed challenges in how to balance children's and parents' rights, in addition to demands on social workers' need to focus on what is best for the children and to make sure that they are protected. They prioritized letting the children stay within the family. If children are to stay with their uncle and aunt, it takes a formalized court procedure. The social workers put effort into working with the mother, supporting her and giving her time to rehabilitate from her addiction. The father in the vignette case was not regarded as a possible care provider, so the solution was to ask the mother to leave her husband. According to the focus group, the welfare system puts more of an emphasis on the parents, and especially on the mother's role, than on children's roles and positions. However, the social workers in the focus group also stressed that it is important to interview the children: 'They have the right to be listened to.'

In *England*, children's rights were in focus, and the child has independent personhood entitlements. In the balance between children and parents, the children, and what they are experiencing, were the primary concern for the focus group members. As a result, they mentioned the importance of seeing the children alone, and to try to obtain the feelings and wishes of the child. The primary concern was what the children are experiencing. Even so, it is the birth family of the child, or those who have consent from them, who social workers can ask for information. Social workers who work with children with many problems could not work with them without working with the parents as well. For example, the focus group members would not

provide therapy for the families. Instead, they were looking for clients' resources, e.g., observing that the mother in the vignette shows responsibility when phoning for help. They would work with the mother, but on a general level they would also ask for the participation of the father.

In *Lithuania* the focus group focused on children's security and the right to know who is responsible. There has to be a legal representative in situations like the one in the vignette. In the focus group discussion, there was not much emphasis on children's rights, but more on when and how parents can have their children taken away due to neglect.

In relation to the case in the vignette, the focus group put a strong emphasis on the mother's responsibility, and that she should stop drinking, shape up and understand the problem. They also exemplified this more in general as a gender issue: 'Men are like ... you go many times, you go and say and the next day you find them sitting and drinking with the neighbour. The woman is working day and night, and the man goes backwards.'

In *Norway*, the focus group stated that 'First you ensure that the kids are ok'; in other words, priority was given to protecting the child. They referred to the demand to always speak to the child. The focus group mentioned a question of balance: What is worst and what is best for these children? The focus group members also argued for the importance of family. And, they exemplified how they would talk with biological children in the family, asking them how things are going, and how it is to get new children in the family. They would also be observant if any changes appeared between the mother and the stepfather (with reference to the case vignette).

Regarding gender there was a bias, with a focus on mothers. Social workers would like to speak to the mother to acquire an overview of the situation, while it was mentioned as only a possibility to talk to the father. According to their practices, they could eventually ask the violent father to move out of the house.

The second theme can be summarized as that on one level there seemed to be similarities between the focus groups in the four countries in that they all stressed the

importance of the child being safe, and to ensure this, different efforts had to be taken. There appeared to be significant differences in how the parents would be (or would not be) involved in the process as they understood it in the focus groups. The support social workers would offer to the parents (mainly the mother) seemed to vary between supporting resources, to more repressive demands to undergo treatment for addiction. The role of the father was also different in the four focus groups, whether he should be separated from the family due to his addiction or, as in England, where in the long run the participants of the focus group would ask for the father's participation.

*Theme 3: Resources, extended family and social workers' discretion*

In *Chile*, when discussing the vignette, focus group members would try to use available resources, and contact 'the whole world', e.g., the school system, to protect the children. On the other hand, they referred to the lack of resources and to the strong emphasis on the family's responsibilities, 'The residence system is terrible in Chile.' The argument for separating children from their families was related to a categorization of 'child welfare families', and not to the needs of the individual child. Social workers in the focus group were positive to the presence of an extended family in the vignette. It was seen as a resource in the child welfare system, sustaining family bonds for the children.

In terms of discretion, the social workers in the focus group specifically stressed the importance of legal procedures and the problematic gap between the court system and the social workers, 'The court is almost obsessed with separating the kids from their family of origin.' The child welfare workers wanted to have more discretionary power. They would try to make themselves responsible for cases, but were aware of the limitations that follow from a hierarchical social policy tradition, where an authoritarian state is exemplified by a court decision about what is in the best interest of the child.

The *English* focus group discussed how they would utilize resources through collaboration, e.g., they would arrange meetings with schools and health services. This would not always be easy since different organizations work differently, and the experiences with mental health services were not good; they minimize their concern.

The extended family could be a resource, and may support more if they get information through a family meeting.

In terms of discretion, child welfare was considered to be in a field in which 'good enough' parenting is judgmental and difficult. When there are problems in families, it is a public responsibility to provide care for the children. The English child welfare workers noted that their discretionary action was audited by the public opinion and media. Professionals must make sure that they are not 'failing' or doing something wrong. There is a public awareness related to child welfare, which creates anxiety for being accused of failure. The primary responsibility seemed to be the protection of the child, and this can cause critique: ... 'We all know that we're one case from being a page in *The Sun*. We are damned if we do, and we are damned if we don't.'

In *Lithuania*, the focus group emphasized that access to resources requires cooperation with other professions and institutions. Services are sometimes far away or unavailable, e.g., family therapy depends on available resources. Benefits to families are low, which reduces the options to achieve changes.

Regarding the involvement of extended family, the Lithuanian focus group was not entirely positive: 'If you address the relatives too early, so then they [the biological parents] transfer their problem to them and stop looking for a job or do anything.' The social workers seemed to work under a system where they were expected to exercise control in relation to social allowances, and to support the client in finding a job. This included working with motivation and responsabilization, but also putting pressure on clients. Parents need to be educated, and encouraged to not exploit public resources, or even resources in the extended family. The focus group referred to previous periods when Lithuania was under the Soviet system, when the state had a strong role, whereas it was now the policy to demand more of the families in the area of child welfare.

In *Norway*, the focus group referred to the Norwegian comprehensive public child welfare, where resources are allocated to focus on child security and well-being across different health and welfare services. Social workers would look for resources within the extended family, and strive to formalize such placements by referring to

specific paragraphs in the child welfare legislation. The focus group emphasized the importance of the quality of the relationships, i.e., on the attachment, as criteria for out-of-home placements.

The connection between policy and practice was considered to be strong, with child welfare workers often referring to paragraphs in the laws that regulate the child welfare system. Child welfare workers mediated that the child welfare system is coherent, and that they themselves had confidence in the system. The range of their discretionary action is reflected in how they discussed specific situations, and interpreted the law as a help to balance what is the worst or the best for the child. They exemplified this with whether they should accept a lower foster home standard that may follow from placing children safely in the extended family, compared with a higher standard that the children could get in an ordinary family foster home.

To summarize the third theme, the focus groups in the four countries reflected different orientations in how they as child welfare workers are part of a system where responsibilities for the children are either a private or a public matter. In Chile and Lithuania, the lack of public resources in combination with neoliberal policies and familistic values were parts of a construction of the private family. In England and Norway, the groups showed preferences for using public interventions and the space for action given by legislation, which indicates that families with complex needs are at least, to some degree, a public matter. In Norway, there are more resources allocated to this area than in England. The concepts of 'private' and 'public' family will be elaborated on further in the discussion.

## **Discussion**

The analysis presented above reveals significant and thematic differences between the four countries, differences that can be linked to the family policy regime types that the countries are clustered into. A summary of the findings is represented in the following table.

Table 1: Key issues in child welfare workers' positioning of family complexities, children's and parent's roles and private versus public approaches in family policies, Chile, England, Lithuania, and Norway.

Themes of focus groups			
<i>Themes of focus groups</i>	<i>Definitions, complexity and acceptable family practices</i>	<i>Children's and parents' rights and roles</i>	<i>Resources, extended family and discretions within social political contexts</i>
Key Issues			
CHILE	<b>Complexities as problems</b> These are inherited in generations, but also due to lacking public resources.	<b>Parents focus</b> Social workers are focusing on family and class background, and thus on the parents in a family.	<b>Private families</b> Family life is a private domain. However, the state/public can remove children to fulfill the UN children's declaration.
ENGLAND	<b>Complexities as problems</b> With too many parents and troubled families, and a challenge with defining which services are responsible.	<b>Partly parents focus</b> Social workers work with children with many problems, but they cannot work with them without working with the parents as well.	<b>Public families</b> Public approach as controlling individuals, with restrictions related to the implementation of laws regarding family life.
LITHUANIA	<b>Complexities as problems</b> References to individual's failure and lacking supportive structures.	<b>Parents focus</b> Social workers focus on improving mother's/parental abilities and parents' rights to keep their children.	<b>Private families</b> Lack of public resources and culture places much responsibility on the family.
NORWAY	<b>Complexities as problems</b> With too many children and a need for more societal support.	<b>Children focus</b> A focus on children's voice interpreted by the social worker.	<b>Public families</b> Public approach as supporting and controlling individuals in families.

In this study, we have explored how child welfare workers in four different family policy contexts reason about family complexity, the role of family in child welfare practices, and how the political context sets conditions for social workers. The four countries of the study can be classified as typical of different family policy regimes, in which the role of the family for the welfare of its members varies from the Norwegian de-familialized policy to the Chilean (and increasingly Lithuanian) familialized policy. The major themes represented in Table 1 indicate different patterns among the child welfare workers in the four countries. These patterns are related to the family policies, and reflect historical, ideological and economic differences in how the welfare states are developed and constructed.

In familialized contexts, the differences in how child welfare workers regard *family complexity* appear to be linked to the predominant view on the 'normal' family, thereby indicating both strong responsibilities for the parents of the nuclear family, not least for the mother, and for the family's way of functioning. This was emphasized in Lithuania, but also to some extent in England and Chile, whereas Norwegian child welfare workers seemed to define complexity and the responsibilities of the biological parents a bit differently, in which, e.g., expectations of gender equality put more pressure on fathers' presence in family life (Brandth & Kvande, 2019).

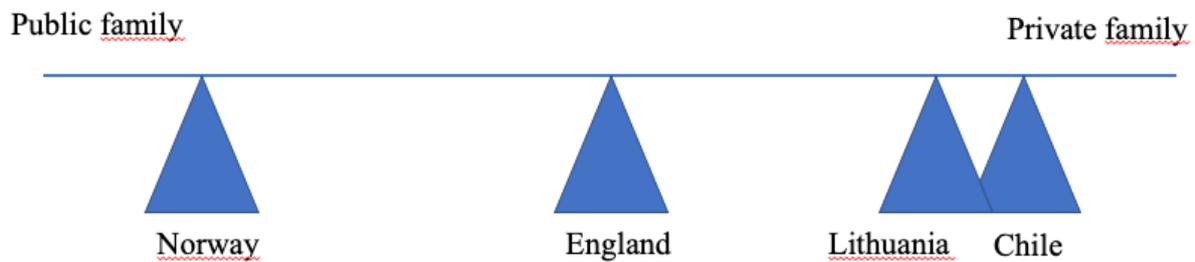
However, when it comes to *child welfare practices*, the differences are more pronounced and the Norwegian child welfare workers stood out as much more open to intervention in the family from the public service system than their colleagues in the other countries. The Lithuanian workers indicated both the responsibility of the biological mother and the need to educate and provide conditional incentives through demands to participate in addiction treatment. English child welfare/protection workers applied a broad definition of family, emphasizing the role of the family, but with their strong child protection approach they also made use of distinct criteria of what is 'good enough parenting', as well as what conditions the responsibility for a child is taken over by the public sector. On the other hand, the Chilean workers look upon the family as the responsible part, talking about how to support the mother, and how interventions into the family regarding the children may require court orders.

In terms of the *child welfare workers' position in a social political context*, the patterns we saw in the focus groups indicate differences on the public-private family scale, perhaps most underscored in access to other public resources. Chile has an underdeveloped system for residential care, Lithuania has low benefits and less available services and England has an existing but challenging cooperation with other public organizations, while there is more established cooperation with school and health services and access to other resources in Norway, e.g., an ambulant team, as was mentioned in the Norwegian focus group. The patterns revealed in this study indicate that the family as a concept and institution appears as either a private matter into which the welfare state hesitates to intervene, due to both ideology and a lack of resources, or as a public matter into which the state has a legitimate role and resources to supervise and if necessary, to intervene into. Across this private-public

division, the extended family is regarded as increasingly important, with some referring to research telling them about the importance of the family connection for the children.

Different child welfare practices reflect variations of *more or less proactive social workers* in the child welfare services. These variations in proactivity are constructed and negotiated in welfare policies as a tension between the public and the private family. The family as a private sphere has a focus on parents' custody of their children, in which the state should hesitate to overrule and intervene. To focus upon how the individual in a family is coping is one way to visualize the importance of the public family. Another way to visualize the public-private family distinction is to place our four countries on a scale. There are elements of both public and private family conceptions in all countries, but to various degrees. For example, Norway contains several elements that we want to classify as policies and practices that reflect the idea of a public family, but there are also elements that lean more towards the private side. In our material, thinking biological and talking about attachment appear as signs of this. Both Chile and Lithuania do have elements of policies, resources and traditions that lean towards a public family, but still, the private family is significantly stronger as the organizing principle. In Figure 1, we have illustrated a small difference between Chile and Lithuania. Their different historical and traditional roots indicate that the idea of the private family dominates. However, remaining traits from the Soviet times, and possibly also the closeness to the northern European context, may partly explain that Lithuania has more generous benefits than Chile (e.g. schemes for parental leave), and Lithuania is also more highly ranked in terms of gender equality (Hausmann et al., 2014). The 'partly de-familialized' welfare state of England is also reflected in our material, in which child welfare workers not only put responsibility on the parents, but also practice working methods and public interventions into the family sphere. A schematic picture of our four countries is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Balancing public and private family in four different welfare states



Our analysis indicates that the terms *public* and *private* family are useful but also ambiguous conceptual constructs, which are also reflected in variable discourses in previous research (Cherlin & Calhoun, 2010; Riggs et al., 2016). We agree with scholars who say that we need to challenge the dichotomies between the public-private, the state-family and the state-child relationships in different welfare regimes. Wyness (2014) proposes that we should focus more on the complexities *between* these dichotomized relationships. Differences related to the four family policy regimes (Hantrais, 2004), where Norway is de-familialized, Chile familialized, England partly de-familialized and Lithuania re-familialized, may exemplify some of these complexities. The complexity in the relationships between the child, the family (parents) and the state spheres has different blendings within different welfare regimes. Both in Chile and Lithuania, the construction of the private family has followed the implementation of neoliberal policies with selective welfare provisions that risk the stigmatization of marginalized families. This is in contrast to the construction of a public family (as in Norway), which are more associated with universal policies that strive to overcome inequalities between wealthy and marginalized families. England's position in-between the public and private family positions reflects the turn to neo-liberalism in the 1980s, when the focus from the male bread-winner 'Beveridge family' shifted towards individualism and the 'collapse of the family agenda' (Pascall, 1997, p. 303).

What then are the implications of this analysis for child welfare work? The division between child welfare approaching users as private families or public families says something about how important child welfare is regarded for the welfare of citizens of a country. Leaving this as more of a private matter gives the parents more freedom to decide within their family. When this is regarded more as a public matter, the welfare services in the society have an obligation to report worries about the conditions

children are living in. Regarding families as more of a public matter puts expectations on the social workers and the institutions they represent to focus on this area with allocated resources, developed systems and skilled employees. When a society regards families as more of a private matter, they delegate more of the responsibility to those staying closest to the children. This position also requires resources and public support if they want to be recognized as following international conventions regarding the living conditions for children. When anything goes wrong, the blaming is different in relation to the categorization of families as private or as public. Societies focusing on families as a public matter set high ambitions for their welfare services. A question for them would be to consider what is 'good enough', while societies focusing on families as a private matter are possibly starting from a position recognizing the social political dependency of families in the welfare provision in the society. Their question would be how to strengthen the families to cope with the challenges in their situation.

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