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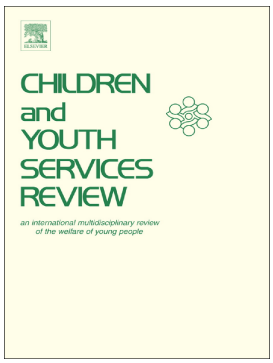

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Precarious participation: Exploring ethnic minority youth's narratives about out-of-home placement in Norway

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Abstract
Children's right to express their views and influence decisions that affect their lives is a strong legal and moral value in social work and beyond. What participation entails and how children's right to participate can be ensured in different contexts is, however, richly debated. In this study, we critically explore the narratives of six youth with ethnic minority backgrounds who had experienced out-of-home placements in Norway. We were interested in how youth narrated their agency (motives and strategies) as well as how structural arrangements enabled and limited their participation, before and during placement. Nancy Fraser's conceptualization of parity in participation and social justice directed our gaze towards the interplay between normative and economic structures in the child welfare service (CWS) context. We identified a pattern along three narrative themes: a) narrating participation, b) narrating ambiguous participation and c) narrating non-participation. The analysis unpacked how informants negotiated both normative and economic structures encountering CWS. Successful negotiation entailed constructing a credible story through striking a balance between maturity and vulnerability and thus performing as "a competent child". Subsequently, informants who did not succeed in articulating their experiences and wishes in a credible way risked being marginalized as participants. Participation in decision-making during placement was constructed as particularly precarious. Embedded cultural ideas of how "a competent child" should perform could be at odds with informants' identities. Ethnic minority youth might therefore struggle particularly hard to make themselves accountable within the normative structures of CWS. Youth participation also hinged on adults' ability and willingness to listen, and to take into account as well as act upon youths' concerns. However, case trajectories, bureaucratic characterizations and limited resources could hamper both the continuity and quality of such relationships. A key implication is an urgent need for theory and practice models that allow for how social categories such as ethnicity influence youth's participatory opportunities.
Keywords: child welfare services, youth, participation, ethnic minority, out-of-home placement

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1. Introduction

In child welfare and child protection services, children's participation is often perceived as a challenging goal to achieve (ten Brummelaar, Harder, Kalverboer, Post, & Knorth, 2017; Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011). On the one hand research has shown that social workers across Western countries acknowledge the importance of hearing children, building trust to ensure effective communication (Archard & Skivenes, 2009) as well as involving children in decision-making processes (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2015). On the other hand, a recent critical literature review by van Bijleveld, Dedding, and Bunders-Aelen (2015) indicates that participation does not happen often enough in practice, from the perspectives of both children and social workers. Research furthermore indicates that children involved in out-of-home placements are the least likely to be involved in decision-making processes affecting them (van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

To our knowledge, very few studies have investigated ethnic minority youth's experiences of child welfare service (CWS) during out-of-home care (Graham, 2007). In this article, we therefore critically explore CWS in Norway as a context of children's participation from the perspective of ethnic minority youth who have experienced out-of-home placements.

1.1 Children's participation in CWS

A myriad of studies have researched children's positions in social work institutions, including how professionals address their perspectives and wishes. Several facilitators and subsequent barriers to children's participation have been identified within CWS. First, participation has been found to hinge on trusting relationships with professionals and a climate promoting information sharing (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; McLeod, 2010). Such relationships are challenging to achieve within a CWS context, as scarce resources, case procedures, staff turnover as well as parents' negative attitudes are (some) factors that hamper building trust over time (Dillon, Greenop, & Hills, 2015; McLeod, 2007). Second, social workers have been found to differ in their perspectives on what participation entails and even might be ignorant as to how participation can be achieved (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Third, as Holland (2001) pinpointed, social workers often struggle to decide what weight to put on children's views as well as children's ability to know what is in their best interest. A dilemma emerges as children also have a right to protection and social workers therefore must assess whether including children and weighing their views is in their best interest. Scholars have nonetheless argued that challenges stem from prevailing vulnerability discourses that silence children's experiences, rationalities and competencies (Lee, 1999; Leeson, 2007; Warming, 2013). In line with this, there is little evidence that children's views determine decision-making outcomes in CWS, unless these views coincide with the social worker's assessment and opinion (van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2011). In Norway, the welfare state has set ambitious goals when it comes to children's wellbeing and participation in society. Skivenes (2014) has characterized Norwegian CWS as family oriented and child-centred, as cooperation and children's rights are emphasized in legislation and practice regulations. We apply the concept *child welfare services* with reference to services coordinated by local municipalities, regulated through the Norwegian Child Welfare Act (1992). Services entail both preventive in-home services to support vulnerable families (for example parent counselling, inter-agency teams) as well as out-of-home placement to protect children who are subject to neglect or maltreatment (for example foster homes, institutional care or independent living arrangements). The three main paths to out-of-home placement are a) voluntary placement based on parents' consent, b) a care order prepared by the agency and submitted to the county board and c) emergency placement issued by the agency when a child is in immediate risk of severe harm (Skivenes & Søvig, 2016). Concerning participation, the Child Welfare Act establishes that children must "be informed and given the opportunity to articulate a response before a decision impacting him or her is made"

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(Child Welfare Act, 1992, §6-3). A recent government regulation defines participation as a "process that must be carried out during the whole course of the child welfare case" (Participation and Person of Trust Regulation, 2014, §5). Facilitating children's participation should therefore be integral to decision-making processes, prior to and during placement. However, few standardized procedures have been put in place with regards to when and how children should participate . Archard and Skivenes (2009) found that Norwegian social workers acknowledge and value children's right to participate. Research nonetheless indicates that children struggle to be taken into account in out-of-home decision-making (see for example Magnussen & Skivenes, 2015; Paulsen, 2016).
We apply the concepts *children* and *youth* interchangeably as we draw on insights from a wide range of research investigating the participation of people defined as "not yet adult". Referring to our informants we use the term *youth* to stress that age is of relevance when discussing these issues (Berrick et al., 2015). Subsequently we do not aim to highlight the specific challenges that participation for very young children might encompass, but argue nonetheless that our analysis is of broad relevance.

1.2 Conceptualizing children's participation

Children's participation has been conceptualized in different ways; from Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, through Shier's (2001) pathways, to Archard and Skivenes (2009) deliberative model. We are theoretically informed by Fraser (2009) who perceived equal opportunities (parity) in participation to hinge on institutional arrangements that ensure all participants' voice in social interaction. Imparity and subsequent social injustices stem from normative, economic and representative structures that deny some social actors opportunities in participation. Children's involvement in out-of-home placements must thus be evaluated in relation to how institutional arrangements and embedded power structures position children in social interaction. Fraser's (2009) term *normative injustices* refers to value patterns that positon categories of people, and the traits associated with them, as of less value. Prevailing ideas about children's vulnerability and incompetence represents one normative structure that has been found to hamper children's participatory opportunities (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011). Moreover, Graham (2007) argued that child welfare institutions do not take into account how racialized discourses influence children's opportunities in life and consequently black children voices are silenced. Fraser's (2009) term *economic injustices* refers to how the unequal distribution of resources in society affects citizens' opportunities in participation, typically along categories such as social class and ethnicity. As noted, scarce resources within social work institutions is one barrier for building trusting relationships thus limiting children's participatory opportunities. Ethnic minority children are more often socio-economically marginalized, challenging their participation in wider society as well as increasing the likelihood of CWS involvement (Staer & Bjørknes, 2015). Lastly, the term *representational injustices* refers to inequalities stemming from democratic arrangements that deny categories of people voice, for example in the tailoring or evaluation of child welfare services (Fraser, 2009). In Fraser's model, social injustice must be addressed by first evaluating how injustices are produced, namely within a complex interplay between normative, economic and/or representational structures. For the purpose of this study, we focus on normative and economic power structures reflected in youth's accounts.
In addition to perceiving participation as an effect of embedded power structures, we also view children as active agents involved in the very construction of their social worlds (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Encountering welfare institutions and professionals, children draw on their diverse knowledge and experiences, convey their lived realities and wishes in ways that make sense to them and thus partake in the very processes that participation entails (Clandinin, Caine, Lessard, & Huber, 2016; Nybell, 2013). Even though most recent research investigating children's participation acknowledges

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children as active agents, we find that in-depth analyses of children's agency when encountering CWS are rare. Knowledge about how children experience their scope of action in these circumstances, how they are positioned as well as how they maneuver to position themselves as trustworthy participants is therefore critical. Their experiences can inform us about both their agency work and the particular contexts and power structures with which they engage.
Research points to a multitude of participatory obstacles ethnic minority families may face encountering CWS, in terms of language barriers, distrust, cultural gaps and discrimination (Fylkesnes, Iversen, Bjørknes, & Nygren, 2015; Skivenes, Barn, Kriz, & Pösö, 2014; Ylvisaker, Rugkåsa, & Eide, 2015). These factors may affect youth's participatory opportunities in placement processes, but we have little knowledge about how this particular group of children experiences their scope of action (Graham, 2007). How ethnic positioning effects children's opportunities in participation is also undertheorized (Graham, 2007; Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

1.3 Aims

The aim of this study was to explore how ethnic minority youth talked about their participation in out-of-home placements. We were interested in informants' motives and strategies (agency) as well as how structural arrangements enabled and limited their participation, before and during placement. Recruiting informants who were all positioned as "ethnic minority" we were also particularly interested in how their ethnic positioning came into play.

2. Methodology

In this study we were influenced by insights from narrative analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis is particularly suitable for exploring interactional processes and contextual complexity (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013) and can therefore elicit important knowledge in a field that is of great concern for social work – children's participation in out of home placements. A narrative perspective entails viewing youth as skillful storytellers, who make sense of their experiences and (re)construct their identities through narration, as links are drawn between past, present and imagined futures, to situations, places and relationships (Clandinin et al., 2016; Øverlien, 2011). Attending to youth's narrative work can therefore elicit important knowledge. Acknowledging that CWS is a field of complex power relationships we "pay serious attention to the possibility that narrative occasions and circumstances have privileged stories" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 23). Inspired by Gubrium and Holstein (2009) our narrative lens in this article is less focused on our own representational practices (co-construction) as we primarily explore the CWS as an environment of narration, i.e. how this environment mediates what youth say and assemble in their stories and how youth participate in the very construction of the participatory context.

2.1 Procedures and sample

We used several strategies to recruit youth with ethnic minority backgrounds, aged 16-23 years, who had been in contact with CWS. Several CWS offices, professional networks, as well as interests groups, non-governmental organizations and schools were approached. In addition, information leaflets were distributed in a variety of arenas. Where gatekeepers expressed reluctance to forward information about the project, pointing to their responsibility to protect youth from the potential stress participation might imply, we reassured them through providing thorough information about the research process and how youth's vulnerability would be taken into account. After six interviews we considered the sample to be rich in information (depth and breadth), thus allowing for a fruitful analysis of CWS as a context or participation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The Norwegian Data Protection Official whose ethical guidelines were followed approved the project.

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In 2014 and 2015 (initials first author) interviewed six minority ethnic youth, aged 17-19 years, regarding their CWS experiences. Four were young women and two were young men. All identified with a western, central or eastern African background. Five had resided in Norway more than ten years, one less than five years. One migrated with a family member and was registered as an unaccompanied minor on arrival in Norway. All were students living in larger cities in Norway and shared narratives of being placed out-of-home when they were in primary school or older. Five had experienced sudden placements out of their birth homes (three agreed with this decision), two of these for only a shorter period of time. Two had lived most of their adolescent years in foster and/or institutional care. At the time of the interview two lived with their birth parents, two in independent living arrangements and two in foster homes.

Interviews were held in a place of the informant's choice; in the apartment of a person employed by CWS, at the university, in a classroom and in a secluded place in a public library. Interviews lasted between 50 and 110 minutes. To ensure free and informed consent from participants, information about the aim of the research, role of the researcher and confidentiality was provided thoroughly. Acknowledging the vulnerable position of youth in research and power inequalities, we paid particular attention to non-verbal signs that might indicate distress or ambivalence towards sharing information (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). To initiate the telling of stories informants were encouraged to "tell their story of their CWS encounter" as freely as possible, emphasizing that the interviewer was interested in the issues they evaluated to be most important. An interview guide directed the interviewer's probes along the following themes: a) contact with CWS over time, (b) relationships with caseworkers and opportunities for participation and c) issues related to ethnic minority positioning such as language, migration trajectory and cultural perceptions.

2.3 Data analysis

We identified a range of interesting themes in our informants' accounts. Involvement in decision-making was however a key theme that warranted further exploration. Influenced by narrative methodologies, we gave thorough attention to meaning making processes within each narrative in the analysis. In line with a thematic narrative approach (Riessman, 2008) a first step was to identify thematic patterns across the dataset. At this stage, our attention was drawn to how disclosing information (unhappiness, neglect or abuse) to adults was linked to diverse participatory outcomes in the youths' accounts. These "accounts of disclosure" held a narrative form, as events were described and sequentially linked and evaluated (Labov, 1982). As a second step, we analyzed each narrative with thorough attention to participation and how events and experiences were linked and evaluated in the narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). We focused on a) agency, through asking how and with what purpose youth conveyed their experiences and wishes to the CWS and b) context, through asking what structural arrangements encouraged and limited youth participation. We identified that youth described a range of strategies to position themselves as trustworthy encountering the CWS, thus our analytical lens was directed towards elements of performance embedded in the narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Third, we identified three narrative themes across narratives: narrating participation, narrating ambiguous participation and narrating non-participation.

To highlight the complex interplay between personal agency and institutional structures that our overall analysis entangled, we present and discuss examples from all six informants. The narratives represent patterns that we interpreted were typical across the data, concerning how youth talked about their participatory opportunities encountering CWS. To present the chosen narratives as richly as possible without compromising the informant's confidentiality, all names, ethnicities and details regarding age of migration and country of origin as well as family structure were changed.

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3. Analysis

In this section, we delve into how our youth informants talked about their motives and strategies (agency) as well as how structural arrangements enabled and limited their participation, before and during placement. Across narratives, informants recounted playing a role in the events leading up to placement. Some had approached the CWS to initiate a placement. Others constructed that information they had disclosed to teachers or others had played an important part in decision-making processes leading up to placement. One informant primarily narrated playing a role in the choice of a foster home. All narratives included accounts of being both "voiced" and "silenced", and our analysis thus unpacks participation as a complex and ambiguous process. Concerning how our informants evaluated the impact of their voice in placements processes we interpreted a pattern. along the line of three narrative themes: narrating participation, narrating ambiguous participation and narrating non-participation.

3.1 Narrating participation

Narrating participation refers to youth's accounts of being listened to and having a say in decision-making processes. Embedded in these narratives were examples of successful agency work as well as institutional arrangements that enabled their participation. The narratives of Nawar, Amina and Christian serve as examples of this narrative theme.

Nawar was 18 years of age at the time of the interview and had lived in Norway for most of her life. She expressed that her childhood had been troublesome, even though the CWS had provided in-home-services to the family. About a year prior to our interview, threats involving a male family member had made Nawar think *"it is enough"*. She decided to raise the issue of an alternative care arrangement with the CWS:

I remember that one day […] I came to school. But I was late, because I sort of came to school crying. So… as I went to school I was crying because I thought that "Ok, now I have to go and tell my teacher". So I did. And we spent an entire day […] I told her about the situation and things like that. And I remember that it was like… At the time I thought "Ok, now it is enough! I can't take this anymore". And then we went to see the public health nurse, and then I thought "Now I have to tell". It was like, in a way, when I told how it really was, that was actually what led to the move and all of that.

The outcome of Nawar's disclosure (actions taken by teachers, out-of-home placement), indicates that both teachers and social workers evaluated her story to be trustworthy and important. What about her storytelling could have made her concerns come across as a credible, as well as a legitimate concern for the CWS? Nawar did not include detailed information about what she disclosed to her teachers (content) in the interview, but *"I told her about the situation"* refers back to what she had shared earlier on in the interview about her childhood years and the current threat involving a male family member. Nawar's story positioned her to be "a child in need" and thus with a legitimate claim for protection (Roets, Roose, De Wilde, & Vanobbergen, 2016). This implied negotiating different discourses of child vulnerability, including living in a child insensitive environment, being subject to threats from a *male* family member and so on. Her narrative also included information about her non-verbal expression, coming to school in tears, which might have supported the trustworthiness of her story. We interpret that Nawar also positioned herself as a resourceful child, a trustworthy storyteller (verbally and non-verbally) with an articulated purpose. She thus came across as rational, mature, with the ability to know what was in her "best interest" and thus "worthy of" participating in decision-making.

Like Nawar, Amina also expressed that the CWS had responded to her disclosure. Amina was 17 years old and had migrated to Norway a few years back to be reconciled with her mother who herself had migrated when Amina was a young child. Amina described traumatic experiences during

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migration (e.g. crossing the Mediterranean, residing in refugee camps). Arriving in Norway, she was however not happy with the care situation, as she did not come to terms with her mothers' husband. She had discussed her difficult situation with a friend who informed her about the possibility to contact CWS.

Then I said "Mother, I don't want your husband. I want to move to CWS". Then she said "okay, you want CWS? You can move". Then [her husband] moved out, and my mother divorced him. Then he lived in another town and I came back to my mother.[…] Now I love my mother very much. Because I did not know my mother at the time and now that I have lived (with her) two or three years and we know each other.

Amina expressed that the CWS had listened to her concerns and acted in accordance with her wishes. Her narrative reflects a resourceful young woman (migrating alone, initiating contact with CWS) but also vulnerability and need for protection (refugee, traumatic experiences, negative adult relationship in family). We thus interpret that, despite her limited knowledge of the Norwegian system and language at the time, she came across as both "competent" and "at risk", which enabled her participation.

Christian's story gives further illumination of the work involved in constructing a powerful story encountering CWS. He was 19 years old at the time of the interview and had migrated to Norway accompanied by an older sibling. He had lived in a Norwegian foster home for several years and expressed gratitude toward the care he had received from his foster parents. However, he had also experienced challenges along the way, as he had been frustrated with the strict rules the foster parents had set for him. When his social worker came for planned visits, he had told his social worker: "*I don't know if it is okay that I live here*". We probed Christian to tell us about how the social worker met these concerns:

[The social worker] said "let us have a meeting you and me". And it was always like… [the social worker] first talked with me alone. And then he talked with them (foster parents). And then… Normally we invited [the social worker] for dinner, a bit to eat or coffee or something, when he came to visit. Then we got the chance to talk.[…], so that we kind of didn't go behind each other's backs. We always talked together first, and then he followed up the issue if they had concerns, or I had concerns. We found a solution. So, [the social worker] was very quick in that way, kind of, to go into dialogue instead of letting things build up.

We interpret that several aspects of Christians negotiation strategies could explain why he successfully positioned himself as participant. Maybe most importantly, he expressed his concerns in a questioning form and participated in the dialogue processes initiated by the social worker. Moreover, he framed his concerns by putting into question the foster home placement. Preventing placement breakdown is a key professional concern for social workers, as stability is linked to positive outcomes for children in care (Zabern & Bouteyre, 2017). Placement breakdown, on the other hand, is associated with negative outcomes (Tonehim & Iversen, in review) and involves increased workloads for professionals working within scarce resources (finding a new family etc). Christian's strategy might thus have triggered both the social worker's professional knowledge and need to minimize the workload, thus amplifying his voice.

Directing our gaze towards institutional practices, relationships with adults are key narrative elements in Nawar, Amina and Christians accounts (McLeod, 2010). Nawar's teachers advocated her experiences and wishes to the CWS and social workers followed up by taking action. Amina felt listened to and taken seriously. Christian's social worker came for planned visits, thus providing continuity and stability in the relationship, and addressed the issues that Christian raised. Nawar and Christian's narratives also indicate that social workers and foster parents/school personnel worked together in a positive manner.

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3.2 Narrating ambiguous participation

This second narrative theme refers to youth's accounts of discontinuities in their participation. It reminds us of their precarious position when encountering CWS, as well as how placement trajectories and limited resources within CWS might hamper their participation. Lastly, the narrative theme reflects a pattern across the dataset, that narratives of "risk in the ethnic minority home" were privileged. Leyla's story provides an example of this theme.

Leyla was 18 years of age and had resided in an independent living arrangement provided by the CWS for more than a year. Like Nawar, Leyla expressed that she had developed a trustful relationship with caseworkers prior to the out-of-home placement. Social workers had initiated regular meetings over time and she had shared information about her difficult experiences at home and her wish to move. Leyla said that this had led to an out-of-home placement and that her general situation and wellbeing had improved, as CWS had engaged people that followed her up and supported her. Reflecting back, however, Leyla was critical of how the CWS had proceeded in the placement process. The social worker had disclosed her wish to move to her mother, without consulting Leyla beforehand: *"That's when I started to panic, and [I told the social worker] "Ok, that was not a good idea at all. She will be very angry and we will never be allowed to go out again" (sighs)."*

Consequently, Leyla had to move into a preliminary care arrangement the following day. Leyla expressed that moving so suddenly was a very distressing experience. We probed Leyla about what the CWS could have done differently:

They need to make a good plan. Like, when they asked me "how will your mother react to things like this?" Then I thought it was because that would help them understand how they could help. But I did not feel that they used the information that much, actually. It was more like, "Ok, now we know that. Now let's get going!".

By requesting Leyla's opinion, the social worker signaled that her views were important. However, when these views were not taken into account, Leyla felt overlooked. One can argue that this is an example of how contradicting interests compete in the CWS context, as social workers also have an obligation to attend to parents' participatory rights (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). However, Leyla does not dispute her parent's right to be involved, but contests not having a say regarding decision-making procedures.

Continuing her story, Leyla also articulated that relationships with social workers had changed after placement. They had been difficult to get in touch with and encounters were rare. Regarding whether she still shared information about her experiences, she said *"It doesn't feel like they… they are so interested in knowing about that any more"*. She elaborated:

I have a feeling that [I am] downgraded right now that [I] have moved. So I think [CWS] maybe (think that) "Now we have, sort of, done what we can. That's that. I can understand it, because there must be a number of youth, or children, who are in the situation that I was in a year ago. So they have to prioritize them. Right? So maybe… I think that it is about priorities and things like that. Yeah. I think it is kind of a bummer. But I can understand it.

Leyla pinpoints that social workers within limited resources have to prioritize who "is most in need". Leyla did not succeed in negotiating institutional structures when she moved out of her risky parental home. Leyla's narrative thus highlights how economic and normative structures interplay to hamper continuity in relationships - relationships that we previously unpacked as crucial for children's participation.

Leyla's narrative also directs our attention to a pattern that we identified across the dataset: while youth described struggles to be heard during placement, social workers took disclosures about their home situations very seriously. On the one hand, this is a positive finding indicating that social workers in Norwegian CWS take children's lived experiences seriously. On the other, one might speculate whether hegemonic discourses constructing immigrant parents as deficient are privileged

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narratives in the CWS context (Fylkesnes, Iversen, & Nygren, 2017). Hagelund (2008) wrote that the immigrant family often is viewed as a risky place for children to grow up in Scandinavian public discourses, as "instances of forced marriages, genital mutilation and honor killings have created moral panics where patriarchal immigrant cultures and family structures appear as the major culprits" (p. 71). Similarly, Hollekim, Anderssen, and Daniel (2016) argued that immigrant parents are construed as potential threats to children's well-being in Norwegian media debates. Our informants' stories of "risky childhoods" might have resonated with such sociocultural discourses, rendering their narratives credible in this particular context (Phoenix, 2013).

3.3 Narrating non-participation

The third narrative theme, *non-participation*, refers to youth's accounts of being overlooked and silenced encountering CWS. This exemplifies how not succeeding in coming across as "a competent child" is linked to limited and no participation in our informants accounts. Oscar and Ruth's narratives illustrate this theme.

Oscar was 19 years old and had been in care since primary school age. He shared experiences from multiple foster homes and residential care. He returned to the story of his first out-of-home placement at several times in the interview. To explore his involvement in decision-making, we probed Oscar about the events leading up to the emergency placement. He stated that he had had no prior contact with the CWS and that the placement happened suddenly, leaving him no opportunity for involvement: "*They just came suddenly. The police came. Took me, my [siblings], then we went.*" Like Leyla, Oscar expressed that moving without any prior planning was stressful. However, Oscar described the event in more dramatic and traumatic terms. We interpret that this might be explained by his young age and lack of trusting relationships with professionals prior to placement.

Oscar furthermore expressed that the decision to place him out of home had been wrong in his view and that moving into a foster home had been very difficult for him:

I was not a person who was happy. If they (foster parents) asked if I wanted anything, I just took it and threw it away. I was a mean kid. Because at the time I was kind of young, I couldn't hold in my 'grumpiness'. It was like a rage that just took control and made me do a lot of things. And I wanted my mum and all. Then one day they took me out of the foster home and into a children's home.

We inferred that Oscar disclosed his difficult situation; that his wishes were contrary to the CWS decision and he was hurting. Rejecting the help of adults and displaying his anger might have been his way of dealing with a disempowered positon. Contrasting Oscar's narrative with Nawar and Christian's, he did not succeed in telling a story that enabled his participation, verbally or non-verbally. On the contrary, the CWS moved him away from his siblings and into residential care. One can speculate whether adults could have enabled Oscar's participation through engaging with him, exploring his experiences and weighing his wish to move home even though it did not make sense to them. One can also reflect on whether youth have to work harder to position themselves as "at risk" residing in a public care arrangement as they have to negotiate a landscape consisting of other powerful voices and narratives (for example foster parents).

Ruth was 18 years of age at the time of the interview and shared her story of encountering CWS for the first time in her early teenage years. She had migrated to Norway as a young child with her parents and siblings. The situation in her family had been very challenging and the teacher convinced her that disclosing information to the CWS would help her family. However, after some time the CWS had issued an emergency decision and a short-term placement in a foster home.

Ruth expressed that her stay in the foster home had been very distressing, even though the foster parents had been sympathetic. She missed her parents and the everyday routines of the foster home were different from those of her birth home: *"Like, you have to get up at a certain time, eat dinner at*

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a certain time. I know it is important to eat dinner at a certain time, but, to me it was kind of strange because at home we all just sat down to eat when dinner was ready." Helping her siblings had felt comforting to her in this situation. However, the foster home and the social worker had encouraged her to leave the care work to the foster parents. Reflecting on her experiences Ruth said:

Those people tried to change me into something I was not used to and (something) that I was not. […] They wanted me to… for example the issue about me caring for my siblings.[…] I couldn't play when I knew that my siblings were there. I preferred to make sure they were doing fine first. Maybe it wasn't normal, but I felt a certain kind of relief by it, it made me happy. But, they saw it as a problem and I think it was wrong of them to complain about it, to use it against me. Because, in the end [CWS] was saying that my mum had given me too many responsibilities at home. And it wasn't … it was just because of me.

To explore this issue further the interviewer suggested that some claim that older siblings more often help caring for the young ones in African families. Ruth continued:

That is true. The older ones help more and things like that. In my opinion, I do not think I did anything special, but they were surprised that I could change a diaper and such. To me it was not a problem. I thought… […] It was not like my mother made me, I volunteered. It was not something I was forced to do, I was just happy to do it because when I see… saw my mother do it then I wanted to try. I could cook when I was like twelve years. […] I always wanted to be independent, show that I was independent. They wanted me to be helpless. […]

Ruth had conveyed how unhappy she felt and what she needed to feel better (for example in caring for her siblings). There was however, a discrepancy between her views and needs and what both the foster parents and social workers defined that she needed, which can be interpreted as a cultural tension. In the Norwegian context, several scholars have argued that good parents engage in child-centered activities and protect children from "adult" obligations (Hollekim et al., 2016; Stefansen & Farstad, 2010). We infer that Ruth's narrative reflects an institutionalization of this norm. The intention of social workers and foster parents was most likely to help her achieve the skills "a child should have", and thus to enable Ruth's participation as a child in society. These expectations were at odds with Ruth's identity. The interviewer introduced the topic of cultural differences by referencing "African families". Ruth acknowledged the interviewers statement but did not pursue this proposed "cultural" line of argument. To her this was a personal matter. Her feelings and wishes had been misinterpreted and consequently she felt silenced as a participant.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how youth talked about their motives and strategies (agency), as well as how structural arrangements enabled and limited their participation in out-of-home placement processes. In line with principles of narrative methods, we presented the narratives in depth, while simultaneously identifying patterns across the dataset (Riessman, 2008). A key finding in this study was that youth participation emerged within a complex interplay between individual agency and contextual factors. We unpacked how youth work to position themselves as credible participants encountering CWS. First, we argued that successful negotiation entailed striking a balance between maturity and vulnerability, and thus mastering the norms of how "a competent child" should act. Youth who did not succeed to articulate their experiences and wishes in a credible and accountable way, on the other hand, were marginalized in participation. Consequently, embedded cultural ideas of "how children should act" emerged as a potential barrier for participation, silencing youth's everyday experiences and wishes. Youth with ethnic minority backgrounds, whose identities might be at odds with prevailing norms, may therefore struggle to make themselves accountable within the structural arrangements of CWS.

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Second, and in line with previous research, youth participation emerged as hinging on adults' ability and willingness to listen, take into account as well as act upon youths' concerns. Case trajectories, bureaucratic characterizations and limited resources could however hamper both the continuity and quality of such relationships. Having a say during placement was talked about as especially challenging. This finding is in line with previous research stating that children in out-of-home placements have to work particularly hard to be heard, as their credibility is evaluated in a context of competing voices (parents, school personnel, foster parents) and discourses (Leeson, 2007). Relating these findings to Fraser (2003) framework, barriers and facilitators in both the normative (f.eg. legislation, ideas about children) and economic/material order (f.eg. resources) were identified. This study thus provides valuable knowledge concerning children's participation in CWS more generally. With regards to particular challenges that children and youth with ethnic minority backgrounds may encounter, the analysis demonstrated how cultural ideas run the risk of silencing some children's lived realities, for example children positioned as ethnic minority. This theme was especially highlighted by Ruth. In line with Hollekim et al. (2016) we also argued that an underlying discourse constructing the immigrant parent as "particularly risky" could be identified. On the one hand, acknowledging the potential negative effects (risks) parents' behavior can have on children's wellbeing, as well as their participatory opportunities in society, is a crucial prerequisite for the safeguarding of children. On the other hand, if such "risk" discourses are one-sidedly informed by "Norwegian", middleclass and developmental psychological frames of reference, some parents' resources and skills might be overlooked (Faircloth, Hoffman, & Layne, 2013; Maiter & Stalker, 2011). A potential consequence in the CWS context might be that social workers do not give sufficient weight to the views of parents with ethnic minority backgrounds and decisions might be biased or taken too quickly (Fylkesnes et al., 2017). However, within the limitations of this small scale qualitative study we are reluctant to draw conclusions on this issue. The impact of racialized discourses on families' participation in the CWS context nonetheless needs further exploration. Furthermore, our analysis substantiates Moosa-Mithas (2005) claim that participation models must be developed to take children's social positioning more into account.

Interpreting our informants' struggles to an issue of cultural value patterns might run the risk of oversimplification. Our analysis also demonstrated how participatory barriers in our informants' accounts could be linked to economic structures, for example, limited time to build relationships might affect groups of children differently. Hearing children whose lived realities are different from the majority norm might require more time, resources and particularly knowledgeable social workers. Warming (2011) claimed that children who are simultaneously categorized as clients and ethnic minorities, might be positioned as twofold and threefold vulnerable and therefore are at even higher risk of non-participation than majority representatives. Our analysis points in the same direction; the interplay between current economic and normative structures situates ethic minority children and youth in a precarious position as participants.

4.1 Implications and concluding remarks

Our conclusions are based on six youth informants' accounts, which allowed for an in-depth analysis of their narratives with regards to agency and context. Considering the limitations of our sample, we encourage researchers to further explore these questions in other empirical contexts to improve our understanding of how "difference" best can be conceptualized within children's participation. We are convinced that providing empirical analyses of children's agencies and the contexts within which they engage, is of particular value (Nybell, 2013). For practitioners, such analyses may contribute to a more complex understanding of how different factors come into play and determine children's opportunities in participation. It is also important here to reflect on the extent to which standardized approaches are followed or modified, when working with ethnic minority youth. For research, in-

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depth analyses are valuable points of departure for developing further research as well as building theory. In line with Moosa-Mitha (2005) we argue that our analysis gives reason to suggest that a more difference-centred approach might be needed. Such an approach would empower social workers with the perspectives, framework and methodologies needed to identify and address potential barriers to involving children in decision-making.

As a final point, the conformation of structural inhibitors raises the question of structural change mechanisms. Warming (2011) claimed that current normative and economic structures work against participation, and that social workers acting in empowering ways partly do so in defiance of structural incentives. Our analysis thus indicates that theory development should include perspectives on how structural arrangements can be transformed (Fraser, 2009).

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Highlights

- Narratives of six ethnic minority youth with experience of the child welfare system.
- Individual agency and contextual factors affecting participation are explored.
- Interplay of economic and normative structures situates youth in a precarious position.

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