Clash with Barnevernet

Polish Migrants' Families Experiences
with Child Protection Services
in Norway: A Qualitative Study

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Why This Book Was Created

The research that laid the foundation for this book began with a clear declaration, which was included in an invitation sent by Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska to Poles and Norwegians who had agreed to participate in interviews. The declaration stated:

> The results of my research will have practical applications. On one hand, they will provide additional knowledge to Polish families in Norway who experience stress and difficulties in dealing with this institution (Barnevernet—ed. HGM). On the other hand, they will contribute to improving the education of social workers employed in Barnevernet.

This declaration was frequently referenced during interviews with participants who accepted the invitation. Fulfilling this promise became both an obvious obligation and a justification for the efforts made by the researcher and the interviewees.

As more interviews were conducted, the emerging picture became increasingly complex. The only clear conclusion was that interactions between Polish families and Barnevernet were difficult, often traumatic for both sides, and frequently characterized by a lack of understanding of the sources of these difficulties. The functioning of both parties—the Polish families and Barnevernet—did not lend itself to simple assessments of the causes of conflict. At the same time, strategies that could potentially help prevent such conflicts also began to emerge. To enable readers to follow the research findings, it was decided to present the picture that emerged from the interviews without adopting any predefined theses to be proven or disproven during the analysis.

The researcher approached this study with convictions shaped by the findings of an earlier research project, *Polish Migrants and*

the Norwegian Healthcare System: A Pilot Study (Anczyk, Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Krzysztof-Świderska, & Prusak, 2020). In that study, the topic of interactions with Barnevernet surfaced spontaneously in participants' statements—it was not introduced through specific questions, which is significant as that project focused on a different issue. Nonetheless, Barnevernet was identified as a major source of stress, one that affected respondents' health. It therefore became clear that this knowledge could not be ignored when launching a new research project; rather, it informed specific expectations regarding its outcomes.

The interaction between both sides initially appeared highly polarized. As the research progressed, the belief that Poles were entirely in the right and that Norwegian family support institutions were entirely in the wrong did not simply reverse. Instead, it became clear that the crises in these interactions had multiple underlying causes. A lack of mutual understanding of each other's cultures, differing expectations of "how things should be," distrust, and mistakes made by both parties all contributed to the overall picture.

Recognizing that not everyone who could benefit from this book would have the opportunity to read it, the key findings are summarized at the end in a concise, practical format. Separate sections present results that may support Polish families, as well as findings that may assist Barnevernet employees in their work with Polish clients.

Additionally, the findings were used in video materials by Professor Frédérique Bossard for teaching *Intercultural Work*, particularly in the *Theory of Science, Research Methods, and Research Ethics* (*Vitenskapsteori, forskningsmetoder og forskningsetikk*) course for social work students at VID Specialized University in Stavanger. This means that at least some future Barnevernet employees have been introduced to these insights. In this way, the promise made to research participants—that their contributions would influence the knowledge of Barnevernet professionals—has been fulfilled.

Adam Anczyk
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Introduction

Preface

In 2011, in Norway, the case of nine-year-old Nikola ignited an intense cross-border dispute that drew widespread media and diplomatic attention. Nikola, who had migrated with her family from Poland to Norway in 2006, lived with her parents for five years before Norway's child protection agency, Barnevernet, determined that she was not receiving adequate care. After a year of monitoring, Nikola was placed in foster care.

The situation escalated dramatically when Polish celebrity detective Krzysztof Rutkowski abducted Nikola from her foster home and brought her to Poland, where her parents were waiting for her return. Often referred to as a "double kidnapping," the incident sparked tensions between Norway and Poland. Norway demanded Nikola's return, while the Polish consul publicly denounced Barnevernet, comparing it to a fascist organization (Gajewska et al., 2016).

Media coverage in both countries amplified the controversy, exposing starkly contrasting views on child welfare and family rights. For Norwegians, the abduction was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of their legal system. For Poles, it symbolized resistance against what they perceived as an overreaching institution. The case concluded in December 2011 when a court in Szczecin, Poland, ruled that Nikola would remain in Poland (Winnicka, 2012).

A similar controversy unfolded in 2019 in the Norwegian town of Hamar, where a Polish family became the focus of a diplomatic dispute. Concerns raised by Barnevernet led to three of their children being placed into emergency foster care, while the parents were put

under observation. Their youngest child, an infant, remained with them. While dramatic, this incident was one of many similar cases occurring regularly within the Norwegian child protection system.

Polish Consul Sławomir Kowalski protested the measures and accompanied the parents during a visit to their children. When access was denied, Kowalski invoked his diplomatic rights, leading to a confrontation with the Norwegian police. The incident, analyzed in detail by Czykwin (2019) and widely reported in the media, sparked protests among Poles, many of whom viewed it as a defense of family and cultural identity. For Norwegians, however, Kowalski's actions were seen as inappropriate interference in a system designed to prioritize the welfare of the child.

These cases highlighted deep cultural divides between Poland and Norway when it comes to family and child welfare. In Poland, family bonds are considered nearly sacred, and institutional care is regarded as a last resort. In Norway, the welfare of the child takes precedence, often justifying state intervention. These opposing perspectives continue to fuel misunderstandings and tensions between the two nations.

Poles constitute the largest ethnic minority in Norway. While the country is increasingly popular among Polish (mostly economic) immigrants, they often struggle to adapt to Norwegian cultural and institutional norms. At the same time, Norway's child protection system, Barnevernet, is frequently criticized by Polish families for perceived cultural insensitivity.

As researchers, we set out to explore these cultural intersections by examining the experiences of Polish families in Norway, particularly their interactions with Barnevernet. This book presents our findings, offering insights into the challenges of migration, the importance of intercultural competences, and the complexities of navigating child protection systems in a foreign context.

Polish Migrants in Norway

Poles constitute the largest ethnic minority in Norway, establishing themselves as a group with considerable socio-cultural capital. According to the latest data from Statistics Norway (2024), the population of Polish citizens residing in Norway is estimated at 111,074, with the majority being male (71,125). This marks a significant increase compared to 2004, when only 2,741 Polish migrants were living in Norway. The number of Poles acquiring Norwegian citizenship has also grown substantially—rising from just 241 naturalizations in 2015 to a peak of 3,735 in 2022, before slightly declining to 3,358 in 2023. These trends demonstrate Norway's increasing appeal to the Polish community.

Polish immigrants make up 1.9% of Norway's population and are present in nearly every municipality, with a significant concentration in Oslo. However, in some municipalities, their share of the population is considerably higher than the national average. For example, in Moskenes, Poles account for as much as 10% of the local population. In central municipalities such as Oslo and Bærum, the proportions are smaller but still notable, at 2.12% and 3.01%, respectively (Gulbrandsen et al., 2021).

The Polish migrant population in Norway is predominantly characterized as labor migration (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Gulbrandsen et al., 2021). The first and most significant wave consists of post-accession migrants who arrived between 2005 and 2012, following Poland's entry into the European Union. This wave was relatively homogeneous, primarily composed of blue-collar workers or individuals who transitioned into blue-collar roles upon arrival. Many Poles found employment in Norway's civil engineering sector, reinforcing the stereotype of the "Polish construction worker." Even today, it is common to hear Polish spoken—often with trade-specific jargon—on construction sites in Oslo.

Beyond construction, Poles are also employed in healthcare and nursing—ranging from unqualified caretakers to mid—and high-level medical staff such as nurses, doctors, and paramedics—as well as in

the food service, hospitality, and education sectors. Notably, one-third of Poles in Norway hold university degrees (Gmaj, 2019a). Despite this, Polish labor migrants in Norway often face precarious working conditions (Kalleberg, 2018), which can lead to downward social mobility compared to their status in Poland, particularly in terms of education and employment (Rye, 2017; Przybyszewska, 2021).

Migration patterns among Poles in Norway are diverse and reflect the evolving dynamics of emigration. Initially, some migrants oscillate between Poland and Norway as transnational commuters who work in Norway and live in Poland (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016). Others view their stay as temporary, postponing the idea of returning to Poland to the distant future—or indefinitely (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016). Over time, however, many gradually settle, and often bring their families and children. This incremental process mirrors a broader trend of "putting down roots," which Katarzyna Gmaj (2018) aptly describes as "taming Norway."

According to Engbersen et al. (2013) and Friberg (2012), Polish labor migration—often marked by uncertainty and a lack of initial long-term planning (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015)—follows a gradual, stepwise trajectory. This process can be categorized into three stages, reflecting a shift from temporary arrangements to permanent settlement: (1) circular workers with no intention of settling; (2) transnational commuters with uncertain plans; and (3) long-term residents who eventually relocate their families to Norway. Notably, since 2010, Poland has been the leading country of origin for family reunifications in Norway (Bygnes & Erdal, 2016), which further underscores the transition from temporary migration to permanent settlement.

Bringing children to Norway may serve as a marker of Polish migrants' aspirations for integration. This is further exemplified by the naming practices of children born during the migration process. Parents typically adopt one of three naming strategies: (1) traditional Polish names, such as Stanisław or Bronisława, or Polish versions of foreign names like Agnieszka (Agnes); (2) "universal" names that are either identical across languages (e.g., Adam) or anglicized forms of Polish names, such as Alexander (instead of Aleksander) or Sophie

(instead of Zofia); and (3) distinctly Norwegian names, such as Bjørn or Astrid. These naming choices symbolically convey the parents' aspirations and the envisioned trajectory of their child's acculturation.

Recent findings in the field of migration psychology and acculturation (Bierwiaczonek & Kunst, 2021) suggest that acculturation strategies—although sometimes criticized by researchers (e.g., Boski, 2009; Chen et al., 2008) as being merely attitudinal rather than behavioral—do not significantly predict acculturation outcomes, such as psychological adjustment (how well one feels in the host country) or socio-cultural adaptation (how well one navigates interpersonal interactions and manages daily life challenges; Searle & Ward, 1990). This highlights that intentions alone are insufficient for effective functioning in the host society, particularly if not supported by cultural competence on both sides: the migrant's and the host society's.

It can be assumed that Polish migrants who settle in Norway with their families—despite not initially planning to do so—often arrive unprepared and without a deep understanding of the local culture. At the same time, Norwegian institutions may lack a nuanced understanding of the cultural background and specific needs of migrant groups. This mutual lack of cultural knowledge may create fertile ground for intercultural misunderstandings and conflict, especially when there are significant cultural differences unknown to both parties in the bidirectional acculturation process. This is particularly evident in the case of Poland and Norway, as shown by numerous media reports on the challenges Poles face in Norway, especially regarding Barnevernet.

As researchers, we decided to examine the experiences of Polish families in Norway with Barnevernet, and to interpret these experiences from a cultural perspective. In this book, we present an analysis of our findings, shedding light on the interplay of cultural differences and the challenges that Polish families face while navigating child protection services in Norway.

An important element in understanding the experiences of Polish migrants in Norway is the role of community institutions in building and sustaining their social capital. Numerous organizations and institutions assist the Polish diaspora in Norway, particularly in the

field of education. These include Polish schools in cities such as Oslo, Bergen, Fredrikstad, Ålesund, Bodø, Hitra, Hønefoss, Moss, and Porsgrunn. Catholic schools—often operated in cooperation with the Catholic Church—such as the John Paul II Saturday School in Oslo, the Catholic Polish Saturday School in Stavanger, and the Stanisław Kostka Catholic Polish Saturday School in Drammen, also play a pivotal role (Olszewski, 2011; Polskie Szkoły w Norwegii, 2021).

The Roman Catholic Church is a key institution for Polish migrants that deeply influences their cultural and social lives. It supports migrants by fostering social networks, assisting with interactions with Norwegian authorities, and providing a sense of community (Erdal, 2016; Giskeødegård & Aschim, 2016). Polish migrants have significantly revitalized the Norwegian Roman Catholic Church, increasing attendance and reinvigorating religious practices.

Poles also contribute to Norwegian cultural and academic life. They organize events that showcase Polish traditions, such as Christmas celebrations, and collaborate with Norwegian universities, particularly in the northern regions. Interviews conducted during various research projects with both Norwegian and Polish participants reveal that Polish migrants in Norway are often stereotypically associated with three themes: construction work, religion, and World War II. While these stereotypes are reductive, they are rooted in historical and cultural contexts.

Research on the Polish population in Norway has intensified since 2010, reflecting increased academic interest in post-accession migration. Norway, like Iceland, emerged as a relatively recent and less conventional migration destination; however the rapid influx of Polish migrants has made Poles the largest ethnic minority in both countries. Studies on Polish migration to Norway have predominantly emerged from fields such as sociology and migration studies, followed by anthropology, demography, history, and political science. To the best of our knowledge, our team is the first group of psychologists to contribute to this growing body of research. This contribution is especially significant, given that the psychology of migration is a relatively young subdiscipline (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021).

One of the foundational topics explored in the psychology of migration, which has also gained significant attention in sociology and demography, is the question of migration motivation. In the Norwegian context, Polish scholars have sought to answer the critical question: Why Norway? They have also investigated settlement patterns and the demographic structure of Polish migration (Gmaj, 2016, 2018, 2019a; Sokół-Rudowska, 2013). This line of inquiry is not only academically relevant but also valuable to local authorities and policymakers in Poland.

Polish researchers have examined various aspects of the Polish migrant experience in Norway, including family life, employment, and career trajectories (Erdal & Lewicki, 2016; Huang & Krzaklewska, 2016; Krys et al., 2018; Rancew-Sikora & Żadkowska, 2017; Stachowski, 2020; Żadkowska et al., 2020). Some studies have addressed the lack of professional engagement, such as research on Polish homelessness in Norway (Mostowska, 2013), while others have focused on identity formation among migrants (Pawlak, 2018). A particularly important approach in this field is the transnational perspective, which has gained popularity among both Polish and Norwegian scholars—especially those collaborating with Polish research teams (Bell & Erdal, 2015; Bjørnholt & Stefansen, 2018; Slany et al., 2018; Ślusarczyk, 2019).

Interestingly, although there was historically little research on child migration, this trend has changed in recent years (Czerniejewska & Main, 2019; Krasnodębska, 2016; Pustułka et al., 2016; Slany & Strzemecka, 2015, 2017). Studies from this period have explored children's adaptation to life abroad, their experiences in educational settings, and their general functioning in school environments (Ślusarczyk & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2014; Strzemecka, 2015; Strzemecka & Slany, 2019). Noteworthy among these is the work carried out by the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University as part of the Transfam project (2013–2016), which examined the transnational lives of migrant families (Slany & Struzik, 2016).

This earlier lack of attention to child migration is understandable in the broader context of migration studies, which historically viewed children as "luggage" brought along by their parents, rather

than as subjects of independent scholarly interest. However, this reductive perspective—which treated children as passive dependents in the migration process—may also reflect the way Polish society conceptualizes family and child autonomy. While there is a substantial body of research on family migration, children have often been regarded primarily as part of the family unit rather than as autonomous individuals.

In recent years, however, children's experiences have gained prominence as a research focus, joining topics such as family dynamics, migration patterns, and healthcare as key areas of interest among Polish migration scholars. This shift likely reflects both academic curiosity and the concerns voiced by study participants, who increasingly highlight the complexities and challenges children face in the context of migration. This evolving interest signals an important intellectual trend toward understanding children not only as integral parts of family systems but also as individuals with distinct experiences and needs.

A related area of research on families involves Polish female migrants in Norway. This topic has only recently garnered attention, likely because the initial waves of Polish migration to Norway were predominantly male (Czerniejewska, 2019; Gmaj, 2019b; Goździak & Main, 2020; Łobodzińska, 2016; Main et al., 2021; Main & Czerniejewska, 2017). Women, whether as workers or homemakers, represent an understudied demographic that deserves greater academic focus in the future. One particularly interesting contribution in this area is a study on Polish fathers in Norway, which offers a unique perspective on gender roles and family dynamics (Pustułka et al., 2015).

Beyond empirical studies on contemporary migration, there has also been growing interest in the historical aspects of Polish migration to Norway and the life of the Polish diaspora, both past and present (Olszewski, 2011; Sokol-Rudowska, 2011; Sokół-Rudowska, 2019). Norwegian scholars, as well as researchers affiliated with Norwegian universities, have primarily focused on pragmatic aspects of the Polish population in Norway. These studies explore Poles' presence in the labor market, their workplace experiences, the challenges of adaptation, and how these factors influence their acculturation processes (Friberg, 2011, 2012; Friberg et al., 2014; Ryndyk, 2020).

Another key area of study, often pursued through collaboration between Polish and Norwegian research teams, is healthcare. This line of inquiry examines Polish migrants' experiences with the Norwegian healthcare system, the difficulties they encounter, and the role of Polish medical professionals who work within it (Anczyk et al., 2020a; Czapka, 2010; Czapka & Sagbakken, 2016; Goździak & Main, 2021; Korzeniewska & Erdal, 2021; Pawlak, 2021; van Riemsdijk, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2019). Additionally, several studies have investigated the experiences of Polish children in Norwegian schools (Wærdahl, 2016).

As for the specific area of interest to our project—the relationship between children and child protection services—an important research report was published as part of the project *Trust Without Borders: Government Institutions, Families, and the Social Welfare and Child Protection System in Norway and Poland* (Korzeniewska et al., 2019). The report offers a comprehensive literature review and highlights areas that warrant further investigation. It compiles an extensive list of sources covering topics such as trust in government institutions in Poland and Norway, Norwegian child protection services, and the experiences of migrants and minorities in their interactions with child protection agencies, particularly trust in Barnevernet (BV) (the Norwegian Child Protection Services).

The report identifies recurring themes across various research projects, including some that do not directly focus on migrant interactions with Barnevernet. These themes include communication and trust, trust in Barnevernet as part of a broader crisis of trust, the role of media in building trust, and the specific needs of minorities, immigrants, and other Barnevernet clients (Korzeniewska et al., 2019). Notably, the report emphasizes the need for further research on the image of Barnevernet among immigrants in order to develop strategies that could improve trust in the institution.

Our project, although qualitative in nature and thus akin to "chamber research," employs an in-depth methodological approach to address these gaps in the literature. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies for strengthening the relationship between Polish migrants and Norwegian child protection services.

The Stereotypical Norwegian and the Stereotypical Pole in Migrants' Eyes: Conclusions from Original Research (2017–2018)

Our previous research on Polish migrants' interactions with the Norwegian healthcare system also included questions about their perceptions of Norwegians and fellow Polish migrants. In recent years, Polish society has gained some insight into Norwegian culture through popular journalism, especially the works of Ilona Wiśniewska, who spent many years living in Northern Norway (Wiśniewska, 2014, 2016), and Anna Kurek's *Happy as a Salmon: Norway and Norwegians*, an introductory guide to Norwegian culture written by a Ph.D. candidate in Scandinavian studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Kurek, 2018).

A notable contribution to the discourse on Polish-Norwegian relations is Marek Czarnecki's *Children of Norway: On the (Over)Protective State* (2016), which sparked heated debate in Poland about the Norwegian child protection system, Barnevernet. Additional perspectives have been offered in Nina Witoszek's *The Best Country in the World* (2017) and Ewa Sapieżyńska's *I'm Not Your Pole: Reportage from Norway* (2023). The increasing number of such publications likely correlates with the large waves of Polish migration to Norway. As the "new" Polish migrant community becomes more established, it has begun producing its own narratives and literature, often based on personal experience. Blogs and YouTube channels created by migrants—such as Anna Kurek's blog, which later inspired her book—have also gained popularity.

These media narratives represent individual outlooks and are inherently subjective, shaped by personal experience. While blogs, articles, and advice columns are generally more accessible to the public than academic texts, they mainly communicate the authors' personal interpretations of life in Norway. As the number of Polish migrants grows—including many who regularly travel between Poland and Norway—more people are exposed to these accounts, which further shapes the collective Polish understanding of Norway through

personal viewpoints. These narratives often include stereotypical images of Norway and Norwegians. This is not surprising, as stereotypes function as cognitive shortcuts (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)—simplified explanations of the world that encapsulate beliefs about specific groups and act as communication tools, which help people process information more quickly and efficiently. On the one hand, stereotypes aid communication by providing familiar cognitive schemas; on the other, they can distort reality, perpetuating partial or even harmful information about social groups and cultures.

Stereotypes are pervasive: almost everyone raised in a particular culture becomes aware of the stereotypes it holds at some point during the socialization process. This awareness may emerge through informal social interactions, formal education, or contact with institutions. Stereotypes can also be transmitted across generations. To think stereotypically about a culture, one must at least have a basic image of it. However, in the case of Norway and Poland, these images are not yet widespread—many Poles still know very little about Norway and its culture.

That said, interest in Norway among Poles seems to be growing, likely driven by recent waves of migration. For example, a Google search for the term *Norwegia* (Polish for Norway) yields approximately 26 million results. By comparison, *Szwecja* (Sweden) returns 17 million, while *Islandia* (Iceland) brings up 47 million. Results for *Dania* (Denmark) and *Finlandia* (Finland) are more difficult to estimate due to overlap with unrelated search terms—*Dania* also means "dishes" (as in food), and *Finlandia* is a well-known vodka brand. An image search for *Norwegowie* (Norwegians) typically shows skiers, ski jumpers, people wearing traditional *bunad* clothing, and Vikings. This suggests that the stereotype of Norwegians in Polish society is rather vague and imprecise.

To examine Polish immigrants' perceptions of Norwegians, we draw on insights from our earlier research,* conducted between 2017 and 2018 (Anczyk et al., 2020a). Although the project did not

* The project focused on Polish migrants' experiences with the Norwegian healthcare system, and the relevant questions arose during discussions about their sources of support.

specifically focus on intercultural relations, these themes emerged naturally in the course of interviews—particularly when respondents discussed their impressions of Norway and Norwegians. These narratives also shed light on how Polish migrants view themselves and their community in Norway. While the results of this analysis have not yet been published, we outline some preliminary findings below.

The study involved a relatively small sample (N = 20, plus two expert interviews), but many of the interviews were in-depth. When asked about Norwegians, participants frequently emphasized cultural differences, which became a key focus of our qualitative analysis. As a result, respondents' cultural insights on norms, values, and behaviors were often intertwined with simplified stereotypes.

One of the most common descriptors used by participants was that Norwegians are "cold"—that is, emotionally reserved, not particularly expressive, and generally hesitant to display emotions. While respondents acknowledged that Norwegians certainly experience emotions (obviously as all people do), they believed these emotions are typically confined to family or close friends. One humorous exception noted by several participants was alcohol consumption: after drinking, Norwegians were said to become noticeably more expressive—but by the following day, they would return to their usual reserved demeanor.

Participants also observed that Norwegians tend to keep others at arm's length, which makes it challenging to form close interpersonal connections. For many, this went beyond casual interactions and referred instead to deeper relationships—genuine friendships that require emotional investment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some migrants joked that Norwegians were "relieved to hear the three-meter social distancing rule was abolished because it allowed them to return to their usual five meters." Despite this perceived emotional and social distance, respondents consistently described Norwegians as "nice"—even nicer than Poles, though in a calm, understated way. They contrasted this demeanor with the more overt, sometimes dramatic friendliness they associated with Americans. This quiet kindness, they noted, contributed to a pleasant atmosphere for living and working.

At the same time, Polish migrants observed that Norwegians are not especially direct, which sometimes made it difficult to interpret their intentions and led to occasional miscommunication. They also noted that Norwegians value silence more than Poles, which some initially found awkward but later accepted as "just the way they are." Respondents frequently described Norwegians as helpful and supportive in everyday situations: willing to lend a hand when needed.

Another recurring theme in the interviews was Norwegians' deep connection to nature. Respondents commented on Norwegians' preference for spending time outdoors, living in remote areas, and even vacationing in locations that were more isolated. These descriptions highlight the cultural importance of nature and solitude in Norwegian life. However, terms like "remote" or "wilderness" carry different connotations depending on one's cultural and environmental background. For instance, the idea of remoteness can vary widely between cultures: what might feel isolated to a Polish migrant could seem far less so to someone from Turkey or Syria. Respondents also emphasized Norwegians' commitment to a healthy work-life balance—often phrased euphemistically as a national tendency to "not overdo it." They noted that many Norwegians live in small, tightly-knit communities where "everyone knows everyone." This social structure, while fostering close local ties, can also make it difficult for outsiders to integrate into these circles.

Additionally, interviewees pointed to key demographic and cultural differences between Norway and Poland. Norway's population of around five million people, spread across a vast territory with relatively few large cities, contrasts sharply with Poland's 38 million inhabitants. According to respondents, this difference influences not only the cultural character of each country but also day-to-day interpersonal interactions. Some also mentioned religious differences and observed that while Norway is historically Protestant, it is now largely secular. They described Norway as a tolerant society, particularly towards ethnic and sexual minorities—drawing a clear contrast with the more conservative social climate in Poland, the country they had left.

Out of fairness—and curiosity—we also asked respondents about their views of other Polish migrants. This quickly revealed an underlying psychological factor, or rather, a stereotype: a low opinion of their own culture and a general lack of trust in fellow Poles. However, our research demonstrated that this stereotype has little basis in the actual behavior or experiences of respondents. While members of the Polish diaspora frequently expressed the belief that one should avoid seeking help from other Poles to prevent being taken advantage of, they also listed family, friends, acquaintances, and organizations—mostly Polish—as their sources of support. This illustrates a common mechanism in stereotyping: the "exception to the rule." While Poles as a group were labeled untrustworthy, "our people"—those within one's immediate social circle or "tribe"—were considered dependable and trustworthy.

Two stereotypical traits commonly associated with Poles also emerged in the interviews—traits that may seem contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, Poles were described as quarrelsome or prone to conflict; on the other, they were seen as highly family-oriented and deeply invested in building long-lasting, close relationships. This focus on familial and social ties was often contrasted with what respondents perceived as the emotional distance or detachment of Norwegians. For example, some participants mentioned the Norwegian tendency to place elderly family members in retirement homes. In Polish culture, the concept of an "old people's home" often carries negative connotations, and placing a parent or grandparent in such an institution is sometimes referred to as "giving them away."

Although multi-generational households are becoming less common in Poland—particularly in urban areas—there is still considerable social and psychological pressure to care for elderly relatives personally. In Polish society, this responsibility is generally seen as falling on the children, whereas institutional care is considered a last resort. In contrast, in Norway, elder care facilities are more widely accepted and are supported by the welfare state. These differences in cultural norms and family expectations can make the migration experience particularly challenging for some Polish migrants. This contrast is further underscored by findings from the World Values Survey (WVS,

2022), which asked whether respondents agreed with the statement: "It is children's duty to take care of ill parents." While 72% of Polish respondents agreed, only 31% of Norwegians did. These disparities illustrate the cultural differences in perceptions of familial responsibilities—adding yet another layer of complexity to the acculturation process for Poles adapting to life in Norway.

Respondents also described Poles as emotional and expressive, especially when it comes to negative emotions, which they associated with a tendency to complain. Interestingly, this perception contrasts with feedback from exchange students from Spain, who described Poles as introverted and distant. This suggests that Poles may occupy a middle ground between the temperaments of Nordic and Southern European cultures. At the same time, Poles were noted for their expressiveness in humor.

One distinctly negative trait that emerged in respondents' narratives was a perceived tendency toward jealousy and envy—sentiments often considered quintessentially Polish. This idea is captured in the saying, "Poles even envy each other their failures." Respondents linked this perception to low levels of social trust and the belief that success is often achieved through dishonesty. It reflects a skewed sense of equality: the idea that everyone should suffer equally. Respondents noted that this attitude is rooted in Poland's historical experience. During both the communist era and the time of the partitions, those who found success were often viewed as collaborators with oppressive authorities. Scholars also trace this attitude to the mixed social origins of Poles, a blend of peasant and *szlachta* (noble) ancestry (see Boski, 2009).

Despite these negative traits, respondents emphasized Poles' reputation for being hardworking and diligent—sometimes to the point of overexertion. This may seem paradoxical, given the parallel stereotype that success is based on connections rather than merit. Nevertheless, Polish respondents frequently described Poles as working harder than Norwegians or members of other migrant groups.

The final two traits highlighted in our qualitative research were religiosity and a strong attachment to tradition. While being attached to tradition is not unusual—Norwegians, too, are deeply connected

to their own customs—many Polish traditions are closely intertwined with Catholicism, which creates cultural pressure to observe and celebrate them even among the non-religious. Examples include *pasterka* (midnight Mass on Christmas Eve) and All Saints' Day (November 1), when Poles visit family graves en masse to place lanterns, including on Jewish cemeteries. During such holidays, Poles tend to perceive time differently—not as personal leisure, but as a time meant to be shared with family, including distant relatives who may only gather on these occasions. Sociologists refer to this as "cultural Catholicism." For instance, the majority of Polish atheists still choose to baptize their children (Tyrała, 2014).

Despite these enduring traditions, Poland's social and cultural landscape is gradually changing. Research—including studies conducted by the Catholic Church on *dominicantes* and *communicantes* (people attending Mass and receiving communion)—indicates a trend toward secularization in Polish society (Pew Research Center, 2018), mirroring patterns observed in other Western and Northern European countries. Nevertheless, Poles remain one of the most religious populations in the European Union, a fact also visible in Norway, where Polish-language masses and parishes are a regular feature.

In summary, the stereotypical image of a Polish person—as revealed by our research and existing literature—is not particularly flattering. While some cultures are associated with more positive stereotypes, it is worth noting that this image reflects the opinions of Poles themselves. It may stem from the critical, judgmental, and often pessimistic tendencies commonly found in Polish culture.

Cultural Differences Between Poland and Norway

To understand the functioning of Barnevernet and the Polish response to its interventions, it is crucial to examine cultural dimensions that define the relationship between the individual and the group. While Hofstede's pioneering framework remains influential, its methodological limitations and increasing criticism (e.g., Boski, 2009; 2024) prompt us to adopt a more contemporary approach: the

GLOBE Project* (House et al., 2004). This framework provides a more nuanced analysis of collectivism, which is particularly relevant for examining cultural differences between Poland and Norway.

House et al. (2004) distinguish between two forms of collectivism: Institutional Collectivism and In-Group Collectivism. Institutional Collectivism refers to the degree to which organizational and societal practices encourage and reward the collective distribution of resources and collective action. In contrast, In-Group Collectivism pertains to the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesion within their organizations or families.

Scandinavian countries generally score high in Institutional Collectivism. However, Warner-Søderholm (2012) identifies Norway as an anomaly among Scandinavian nations, as it exhibits a relatively high level of In-Group Collectivism alongside strong institutional orientation. In Norway, In-Group Collectivism manifests in social expectations that the state—rather than the family or local community—bears primary responsibility for caring for the elderly, the sick, and other vulnerable populations. This form of collectivism is inclusive and grounded in egalitarian social values, consistent with Norway's low Power Distance (Warner-Søderholm, 2012).

This contrasts sharply with Poland, which also scores high on In-Group Collectivism but embraces a more traditional, family-centered cultural model. In Poland, the family is considered the primary "in-group," with a strong emphasis on close personal ties rather than broader civic or social responsibilities. For example, there is a prevailing expectation that families will care for elderly and dependent members. It is common for younger generations to live with their parents while studying and often until they start their own families (GUS, 2024), and multi-generational households are relatively widespread (Bartova et al., 2023).

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* The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) project, initiated by House, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004), is a large-scale, long-term research initiative that examines the relationships between societal culture, organizational culture, and leadership. In its initial phase, the project involved around 17,300 middle managers from 950 organizations and was conducted by 170 social scientists and scholars across 62 cultures worldwide.

While both Norway and Poland exhibit high levels of In-Group Collectivism, their manifestations differ markedly. In Norway, the "in-group" tends to encompass society as a whole, leading to strong civic engagement (Selle et al., 2019) and a collective sense of responsibility, expressed through widespread support for the welfare state and participation in taxation (Warner-Søderholm, 2019). Conversely, In-Group Collectivism in Poland remains focused on the family as the main source of support and obligation. This distinction underscores a fundamental cultural divergence: in Poland, collectivism is centered around the family, whereas in Norway, it is oriented toward the broader society. These differing models reflect contrasting understandings of collective responsibility and the respective roles of the family and the state in caring for those in need.

When exploring the Polish concept of family—particularly in contrast to social bonds—it is essential to consider the historical legacy of communism in Poland. During this era, political leaders were imposed and appointed by the USSR, often perceived as external oppressors, which profoundly impacted levels of societal trust. The state was regarded as artificial and disconnected from the people it was meant to govern. In contrast, Polish Catholicism—especially under the leadership of John Paul II—offered a unifying counterforce. The Pope encouraged the formation of a symbolic "parallel state," assuming a role of moral leadership. Simultaneously, a pervasive culture of surveillance and informing further eroded interpersonal trust. Together, these factors have left a lasting impact, contributing to persistently low levels of interpersonal trust in Poland, even decades after the collapse of communism (see Boski, 2009).

Survey data reinforces this trend: 64% of Polish respondents express general distrust, while only 22% report trust (CBOS, 2022). For instance, 77% believe that people should be cautious in dealing with others, and only 19% think most people can be trusted. Additionally, 58% say they distrust strangers. As Majcherek (2023) points out, this culture of distrust has prevailed in Polish society for over a decade. Poland—along with much of Central and Eastern Europe—ranks among the countries with the lowest scores on Uncertainty Avoidance, a dimension that reflects how much societies reduce

ambiguity through adherence to norms, rituals, and bureaucratic systems (House et al., 2004). Furthermore, research on tight vs. loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011, 2021) suggests that Poland leans toward a relatively loose cultural orientation, characterized by flexible social norms and greater tolerance for deviation. When combined with low trust in public institutions, this cultural looseness may pose particular challenges for Poles adapting to Norway's stricter and more structured social norms.

In stark contrast, Scandinavian countries—including Norway—exhibit both high levels of trust (IPSOS, 2022) and high Uncertainty Avoidance (Majcherek, 2023). Societies with high Uncertainty Avoidance aim to minimize unpredictability and implement measures to mitigate the impact of unforeseen events (House et al., 2004). This cultural trait is evident in Norway's social practices, particularly in institutions like Barnevernet, which emphasize safeguarding children's well-being as part of a broader commitment to social stability and predictability. Moreover, clear communication, punctuality, and detailed planning are highly valued in interactions with Barnevernet, in keeping with the structured and orderly nature of Norwegian society.

Moreover, Norway's cultural universalism—which emphasizes the uniform application of norms and values—stands in contrast to Poland's particularism, where exceptions based on context or personal relationships often take precedence (see humanism, Boski, 2009). This combination of high societal trust and strong efforts to manage uncertainty highlights a fundamentally different cultural model in Norway compared to Poland.

Cultural Differences in the Concept of the Child's Welfare

To provide full cultural context for our research, it is important to examine how the concepts of "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*) and "the best interest of the child" (*w najlepszym interesie dziecka*) are understood in Poland. Although both terms share a foundation in

European law, values, and international conventions, their interpretation in the Polish context differs significantly from the Norwegian perspective. Understanding these distinctions is essential for interpreting our findings.

The term "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*) is commonly used in Polish law, pedagogy, and social work, yet it remains vague and undefined, often raising philosophical questions about what "good" actually entails. Justyna Kusztal emphasizes the relativistic and contextual nature of the term. The author notes that its meaning depends on underlying anthropological and philosophical assumptions, which makes it susceptible to distortion (Kusztal, 2018, p. 46). From a cultural psychology perspective, the concept is not universal but highly dependent on cultural and contextual factors. It is also expansive—potentially encompassing "every possible harm" (Mazurkiewicz & Mysiak, 2017).

Methodologically, "the good of the child" may fall under the category of "intuitive semantics" (Anczyk et al., 2020b)—terms that seem self-evident but become ambiguous when attempts are made to precisely define or operationalize them. This phenomenon is common in academic discourse; for example, terms such as "religion," "myth," "ritual," or "New Age" in religious studies often require multiple typologies to capture their full meaning. In legal contexts, "the good of the child" functions as a broad and context-dependent term open to interpretation.

According to Kusztal, one of the most enduring definitions of this concept was formulated by Wanda Stojanowska in 1979:

> [The good of the child refers to] a set of nonmaterial and material values, indispensable for ensuring the child's proper physical and spiritual development and for preparing it to perform work suitable to their abilities; however, these values are determined by a variety of factors, the structure of which depends on the applicable legal norms and the specific, current circumstances of a given child, always taking into account that the good of the child is confluent with the public good. (Stojanowska, 2000, p. 63)

Kusztal identifies three main discourses through which the concept of the child's welfare is articulated, each reflecting culturally conditioned attempts to define the term (Kusztal, 2018).

The first is the discourse of needs, which is particularly prominent in welfare states. This discourse centers on caring for the child as someone who requires oversight, attention, and control. Kusztal links this discourse, which she maintains is culturally dependent and not universally applicable, to the Western emphasis on individualism, success, and adherence to culturally defined life models. She also draws attention to potential risks associated with this approach:

> When child care is defined solely through the discourse of needs, this may result in partial or misguided care when the abstract concept of "protection" is reduced to removing children from parental custody, placing them in isolation, applying *parens patriae*, or imposing indeterminate sanctions in criminal cases, as seen in the handling of underage offenders in the USA or the Scandinavian model. While meeting a child's developmental needs and prioritizing safety, this approach can lead to long-term family separation or withholding information about a child's family or social status. (Kusztal, 2018, pp. 64–65)

The second is the discourse of children's rights, which positions the child as an autonomous agent and citizen—subject to legal statues but also endowed with individual rights. This perspective foregrounds the child's independence and is often critical of the discourse of needs. As Kusztal observes, "actions taken in the child's best interest, characteristic of the discourse of needs, are, in fact, geared towards the adults' best interest" (Kusztal, 2018, p. 66). However, she also notes the idealistic nature of this rights-based approach, which often masks a dual reality: while the principles and laws it espouses appear progressive, they do not always align with prevailing social practices.

The third is the discourse of children's life quality, which seeks to offer an alternative to the two approaches above. Proponents of this discourse argue that it is more culturally universal—though this claim is contested from a cultural psychology standpoint—and highly context-dependent. For instance, within this framework, poverty is not necessarily viewed as direct harm, but rather as an indirect issue that may influence social status or reduce the amount of time parents can spend with their children.

This discourse emphasizes that life experiences, including hardships and crises, shape development and do not always yield negative outcomes. This view resonates with Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which posits that psychological crises can spur personal growth and may even be necessary for development (Dąbrowski, 1979). Moreover, this discourse stresses the importance of children's participation in decision-making and interventions designed to support them, centering on subjective well-being and the broader concept of mental health.

These discourses operate within specific cultural contexts and are closely tied to child—adult relationships and views on the role of the state in child-rearing and family support. Regarding child—adult relations, three main approaches can be distinguished:

1. The adult-focused approach, which prioritizes the parents' dominant role in the upbringing process.
2. The equality approach, which balances the parents' role with the child's independent growth and self-socialization within a community.
3. The autonomy approach, which grants significant rights and agency to the child in matters that affect them.

In terms of the second element—the role of the state—various models define the boundaries of state intervention in child-rearing (Kusztal, 2018). The first is the laissez-faire approach, where the state refrains from intervention except in extreme cases, limiting its role to observation or occasional involvement. The second is the blood-and-mental-bond model, in which the state acts as an auxiliary that provides support through child protection services and other institutions without attempting to replace the family's role. The third is the emancipation approach, which accords children extensive rights—sometimes based on the premise that they are not fundamentally different from adults and therefore deserve autonomy. However, this model may give rise to conflicts between the rights of children and those of adults (Kusztal, 2018).

Kusztal notes that Communist Poland leaned toward a state-intervention model, institutionalizing the socialist concept of the state as a central authority. Given Norway's political history and its current

status as a welfare state, a similar model may apply there. In contrast, modern post-communist Poland tends to follow the blood-and-mental-bond model, where the state primarily plays a supportive rather than interventionist role (Kusztal, 2018, pp. 83–84). In the Polish cultural context, blood ties are considered particularly important, and often take precedence over the public interest or the child's autonomy. This is reflected in legal frameworks, their implementation, and prevailing pedagogical practices, which adopt a systemic approach—viewing the child as part of the family system. In this model, support is directed at the family as a whole, and removing a child from their family is considered a last resort, as such actions may disrupt or even destabilize the system. (Though in some cases, disruption may be necessary for change.)

Unlike in Norway, where the preventive removal of children from their families is more common, such measures are rarely taken in Poland (Czarnecki, 2016). This difference points to a tension in the goals of child protection services, which can be viewed along a continuum: at one end, prioritizing the rights and welfare of the child, and at the other, preserving family bonds and maintaining the integrity of the family system. Poland leans toward the latter, with particular emphasis on the child's bond with their mother.

However, this approach reveals deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, which position mothers as inherently more competent caregivers. In Poland, fathers are often treated as "second-class parents." As a result, courts typically award custody to mothers, leaving fathers to pursue shared custody through lengthy legal battles or to organize advocacy groups such as the Fathers' Rights Movement or the Father and Child Rights Center. While this situation is gradually changing, the traditional view persists, as do significant cultural and legal challenges.

Another recurring issue in child welfare interventions—both in Poland and in migrant communities—is the use of corporal punishment and the attitudes of parents and educators toward it. Unfortunately, research findings in this area are concerning. In 2013, Katarzyna Makaruk of the Empowering Children Foundation conducted a nationwide survey of a representative sample (N = 1,000) examining Poles' views on corporal punishment, its legal prohibition, and

their personal experiences (Makaruk, 2013). Of those surveyed, 61% were parents, who were specifically asked about their use of corporal punishment. Although acceptance of such practices had declined since the Foundation began its research in 2005, the 2013 survey still found that 41% of respondents believed there are circumstances in which corporal punishment is justified, and 9% viewed it as an effective educational method.

The survey also revealed important nuances in public perceptions of corporal punishment. Public and pedagogical debates often center on the go-to example of the "disciplinary slap," which remains widely accepted. In contrast, more severe forms of punishment tend to be broadly rejected: 77% of respondents supported a legal ban on hitting a child in the face, 75% opposed using a belt or other objects, and 72% rejected strong hand strikes. Despite this, the slap remains a common practice—38% of respondents admitted to using it once, and 21% said they had used it multiple times. Alarmingly, 17% admitted to having used harsher methods, such as hitting with a belt or slapping a child's face. The survey also revealed that raising one's voice is a widespread disciplinary tactic used by 71% of respondents. Psychological violence, such as insults or verbal criticism, was reported less frequently, with 22% admitting to its use.

This research followed the 2010 ban on corporal punishment in Poland and coincided with public awareness campaigns drawing attention to its harmful effects. In 2017, Joanna Włodarczyk of the Empowering Children Foundation (Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę) conducted a follow-up survey as part of the EU project *From Policy to Reality: Shifting Attitudes and Practices from Corporal Punishment to Safeguarding Children*. The findings offered cautious optimism: the percentage of respondents who believed parents always have the right to hit their child dropped from 9% to 2%. However, the proportion of those who felt parents were justified in hitting a child under certain circumstances remained virtually unchanged at 48%. Overall rejection of corporal punishment rose to 49%, yet public opinion remained sharply divided over the emblematic slap—52% supported it, while 48% opposed it.

The 2017 survey also examined the reasons that parents gave for using corporal punishment. Respondents cited losing their temper

(56%), the child's temperament (37%), feelings of helplessness (36%), the belief in its effectiveness (24%), doing it "for the child's own good" (18%), lack of support (11%), lack of alternative methods (10%), and family tradition (8%). Włodarczyk categorized these motivations into two groups: those grounded in belief in the method's effectiveness or tradition (59%, mostly fathers), and those stemming from situational factors like frustration and helplessness (66%, mostly mothers).

While acceptance of corporal punishment is slowly declining, the process is neither swift nor widespread, largely confined to general awareness and public declarations. Respondents frequently distinguished between harsher beatings and the so-called "proverbial slap," yet both forms involve physical violence and reflect cultural norms. Although culturally rooted, this distinction is troublesome given the potential consequences for a child's emotional development.

Corporal punishment—even in its mildest form—constitutes physical aggression and should not be tolerated. Still, in 2017, only 34% of respondents believed it should be banned outright. This data suggests that many Polish parents lack access to effective parenting strategies and that harmful practices continue under the guise of "traditional parenting methods." For child protection professionals working in countries with different cultural or legal standards, this underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity. Education, preventive action, and awareness-raising should take precedence over radical intervention—especially when working with Polish families.

Magdalena Arczewska's study, conducted for the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, analyzed the semantic field of the term "the good of the child" (*dobro dziecka*, Arczewska, 2019). Her research included a sample of 81 professionals—family court judges, court officers, family assistants, social workers, and representatives of NGOs. Theoretically, the opposite of "the good of the child" was defined as neglect, especially attachment deprivation and social exclusion, shaped by a variety of environmental factors. Through semantic field analysis, Arczewska categorized the participants' responses into "equivalents" (words considered synonymous with "the good of the child") and "opposites."

The term most frequently identified as equivalent to "the good of the child" was *ensuring the child's legal rights and interests* (39%), an expected result, considering the respondents' professional backgrounds. The second most common equivalent related to *meeting the child's needs*, particularly material needs, was captured in phrases such as "the children are fed, clothed, not hungry." Respondents also spoke about the parents' role in ensuring the child's well-being, including providing physical care, ensuring safety, and engaging in activities like playing or taking walks. The third most cited equivalent (16%) was the child's *right to maintain contact with loved ones*, followed by references to *emotional bonds* (14%). Responses in this category included expressions such as "bonds," "strong relationship," "love for mother/father/grandparents," "a mother's worry about her child," "a strong need to be close to the mother," and "hugging."

These findings align with the Polish cultural model of childrearing, which places significant importance on blood ties and the maternal relationship. This stands in contrast to Norwegian practices, where, as noted in accounts like Czarnecki's (2016), emotional bonds and family relationships may be given less weight if a child's environment is deemed inadequate. In the Polish model, preserving the child's bond with their parents—especially the mother—is seen as essential to healthy development. Removing a child from their mother is considered a serious disruption to these bonds and is treated as a last resort. Systemic interventions in Poland generally aim to provide support within the family unit, with removal viewed as harmful unless absolutely necessary. Given these cultural differences, Polish families may respond differently than Norwegian ones to child protection interventions. While such measures are traumatic in any context, Polish individuals may react more emotionally or impulsively due to differing cultural expectations and norms.

On the opposite end of the semantic field, respondents most frequently identified *the failure to meet a child's* needs (42%) as the primary antithesis of the "good of the child." Again, this was often described in material terms—neglect involving insufficient food, poor hygiene, lack of medical care, or children having noticeable body odor. Some responses revealed entrenched gender stereotypes in the

context of childcare. For instance, neglect was often framed as "the mother not caring for the children," "the mother not wanting to care for the children," or "the mother being unwilling to offer care," while fathers were criticized for being "incompetent" or "inept." This embodies a traditional model of gender roles in which the mother is seen as the primary nurturing caregiver, naturally expected to care for and want to care for her child. In contrast, the father is typically cast as a capable and resourceful provider, whose main responsibility is to ensure material stability. Interestingly, the data suggest that a mother may be perceived as allowed to be incompetent, so long as she fulfills her caregiving role.

These stereotypes are closely tied to the cultural myth of the Polish Mother (*Matka Polka*), a uniquely Polish construct. The Polish Mother is portrayed as self-sacrificing, overburdened, and devoted entirely to her family and children. She willingly deprives herself for the sake of her loved ones and carries out her duties with tireless humility—often believing that no one else could do them better (Imbierowicz, 2012). This cultural construct is also deeply intertwined with Polish patriotism; one of her central roles is to raise children who love their country. The Polish Mother is an archetypal multitasker, who manages domestic duties, contributes to the family's income, and often steps in as the primary breadwinner when her husband is occupied with "higher" pursuits.

This image is rooted in Poland's tumultuous history, marked by wars, occupations, and resistance movements, during which men often left their families, leaving women to shoulder responsibilities beyond domestic life, including educating their children. The Polish Mother is typically portrayed as deeply pious, often longing for a husband or son who has gone off to war. In conservative and right-wing discourse, this myth merges with the ideal of the "normal woman," who—while she may have a career—derives her chief fulfillment from motherhood. This ideal is often contrasted with feminist women, who are criticized for "living for themselves."

Although the myth of the Polish Mother persists, particularly among older generations, conservative communities, and rural areas, its influence appears to be waning, especially in urban centers. This

shift can be attributed to several factors, such as women's increasing participation in a wide range of professions, growing awareness of gender equality (including the distribution of domestic labor), globalization, and exposure to alternative cultural role models through media, literature, and film. Nevertheless, as Slany and Strzemecka observe, the myth still holds sway among Polish migrants: "Polish families in Norway continue to anchor their functioning in an internalized representation of the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother)." (Slany & Strzemecka, 2017, p. 98).

Interestingly, Poland has a relatively high percentage of women in managerial positions. Between 2014 and 2017, the country was even led by two female prime ministers from opposing political parties—Ewa Kopacz and Beata Szydło. However, most women in leadership occupy mid-level positions, and significant gender disparities persist at the highest levels of power. This dynamic has historical roots: during the Warsaw Uprising and in the aftermath of World War II, women assumed many roles traditionally held by men who had perished. Communist propaganda also contributed to this narrative with its myth of the "Working Woman," exemplified by slogans such as "Women onto tractors" in the 1950s (Boski, 2009).

While alternative models of femininity and motherhood exist in modern Poland, the Polish Mother remains a cultural touchstone. This is especially relevant in the context of child protection services, which must recognize the central role of the mother in Polish child-drearing practices. For many Polish families, even temporary separation from the mother is often perceived as a severe punishment rather than a rehabilitative measure, one that can be deeply traumatic for the entire family.

In recent years, there has been growing academic interest in the experiences of female migrants, gender equality, and in how migration reshapes gender roles. This is apparent in studies conducted by Polish research teams—such as the Transfam project based in Cracow—as well as in joint Polish-Norwegian grant projects like *Socio-cultural and psychological predictors of work-life balance and gender equality: A cross-cultural comparison of Polish and Norwegian families*

(2013–2017), led by the University of Gdańsk and the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

However, as Ryndyk and Johannessen noted in a 2015 interim report, Norwegian scholars have historically paid relatively little attention to Polish migrants compared to other migrant groups—although this trend began to shift around 2017. As they observed:

> there is a tangible lack of academic literature focusing specifically on parenting styles among Polish migrants living outside Poland. This may be due to the negligence of the fact that Polish migrant families living in other Western societies may, in fact, experience serious constraints in adapting to host country's values and attitudes in the area of childrearing. (Ryndyk & Johannessen, 2015, p. 4)

This could be seen as an example of "positive discrimination," wherein Polish migrants and their culture are perceived as relatively similar to that of Norwegians—which possibly results in less scrutiny than that directed toward migrants from regions such as the Near East. However, Ryndyk and Johannessen argue that studying family dynamics and childrearing practices among Central and Eastern European migrants is both intellectually and practically important. They point out that when the EU and Northern European countries opened their borders and labor markets, they primarily expected the arrival of temporary migrant workers or commuters—not entire families with children. This highlights the need to examine family migration and its broader social and institutional implications.

One particularly interesting aspect in this field is the influence of migration on family models, childrearing practices, and cultural gender roles. Ryndyk and Johannessen's findings align with our own observations regarding the importance of the family system for Polish migrants. They note that in migration contexts, Poles often adopt the model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker. However, this does not necessarily stem from traditionalist views or the direct transplantation of cultural gender roles from Poland. Rather, economic factors appear to play a critical role, with families adapting to the social structures and labor market realities of the host country.

In Norway, for instance, physical laborers, blue-collar workers, and skilled professionals in traditionally "male" occupations are particularly in demand, and salaries in these sectors tend to be higher than those in fields more commonly associated with women—such as eldercare, cleaning, childcare, kindergarten teaching, or lower—to mid—level medical roles. Consequently, it is often financially advantageous for men to work full-time, while women either manage household responsibilities or work part-time. In these cases, household gender roles may result more from practical adaptation to the host country's conditions than from culturally ingrained traditions brought from Poland.

In 2019, a survey found that 80% of Poles identified family as the most important value in their lives (Boguszewski, 2019). However, the number of people who believe that one can live just as happily without a family as with one has increased—from 6% in 2008 to 11% in 2019. When defining what constitutes a family, Poles place significant emphasis on the presence of children. Respondents most commonly identified a family as a married couple with children (99%), a single parent with children (91%), or an unmarried couple with children (83%). A married couple without children was seen as a family by 65%, while only 31% considered a childless, unmarried couple as a family. Same-sex couples were recognized as families less frequently; however, the presence of children again proved decisive—23% identified a same-sex couple with children as a family, compared to just 13% for a childless same-sex couple. (As of 2025, Poland does not legally recognize same-sex relationships.)

Compared to a 2006 survey, Polish society has become more accepting of informal relationships—especially those involving children—as well as same-sex relationships. Interestingly, preferences for large, multi-generational families have also increased: 32% of respondents favored this arrangement in 2019, compared to 26% in 2008 (Bożewicz, 2019). This shift may reflect generational changes, as today's grandparents tend to be more professionally active than those of two decades ago. The trend could also suggest a desire for grandparents to play a greater role in childcare, akin to the model experienced by today's parent generation. Notably, 45% of respondents

strongly preferred that their own family resemble the one they grew up in, with an additional 39% somewhat agreeing. However, in urban areas, the model of grandparents providing childcare appears to be less common, potentially prompting parents to wish for its revival. This may also point to gaps in institutional support for single parents or dual-income households, where parents may be seeking relief or opportunities to rest and recharge.

Poles also place a high value on maintaining close ties with extended family members. In a nationwide survey on family relationships, 73% of respondents reported seeing their parents at least once a week, followed by 62% who saw their grandchildren, 59% their adult children living independently, and 45% their parents-in-law (Feliksiak, 2019). While parent—child relationships—particularly with adult children—can be complex, frequent contact is clearly valued in Polish culture, as evidenced by these responses.

This cultural emphasis on maintaining close familial bonds offers important insights for child protection services operating in countries where such ties may be less central or where greater parent—child autonomy is the cultural norm. Misunderstandings or conflicts may arise when child protection interventions clash with Polish expectations of frequent family contact and interdependence—tensions that have become particularly evident in interactions with Norway's child welfare agency, Barnevernet.

Barnevernet

Barnevernet is a municipal-level institution in Norway responsible for overseeing the welfare and safety of children, directed especially toward the quality of parental care. Among Polish families residing in Norway, Barnevernet is often perceived as one of the most stringent and anxiety-inducing aspects of life in the country, particularly for those with children or those considering relocating with children.

Every private individual who suspects that a child is being harmed is legally obligated to report it to Barnevernet. In addition to individual reports, the agency also responds to notifications from various

institutions—such as schools, kindergartens, and healthcare providers—which are legally required to report any concerns about a child's well-being. It is important to note that Barnevernet's mandate is limited specifically to matters of parental care and does not extend to other areas of a child's life, such as academic performance or disability support. Once a report is received, Barnevernet has one week to assess whether the situation warrants further investigation, a process usually initiated without parental knowledge to avoid influencing the family's behavior or triggering a potential attempt to leave the country.

If the issue is deemed serious enough to warrant intervention, Barnevernet may first speak with the child at school—again, before informing the parents—and subsequently arrange a meeting with the family. Unlike broader social services, Barnevernet is highly specialized and usually steps in only when other, less targeted support systems are unable to adequately address a child's situation. Its goal is not to perfect a family's circumstances but to ensure a minimum standard of care that prevents harm.

For example, seemingly minor issues—such as poor dental hygiene or children being out late at night without supervision—may indicate potential risks. In such cases, Barnevernet may initiate a formal three-month investigation. During this time, information is collected from the child, parents, neighbors, and other relevant institutions to identify the root of the problem and help parents make necessary changes. About 60% of these cases are closed within the initial three-month inquiry.

While parents cannot prevent Barnevernet from launching an investigation, they can now choose to decline the agency's support services—a relatively recent policy shift aimed at encouraging voluntary cooperation. The only procedure that parents are legally required to comply with is court-ordered drug testing in cases where substance abuse is suspected. If serious concerns remain, a judge may authorize temporary out-of-home placement for up to six weeks while additional assessments are made. In urgent cases, children are often placed with relatives or a familiar adult as a first option, rather than being immediately transferred to foster care.

Goal of the Project

The project pursues two closely intertwined objectives: one academic and one pragmatic (applied). Academically, it seeks to examine what happens when two ostensibly similar yet fundamentally different cultures intersect within the institutional framework of childcare. As we elaborate, Polish and Norwegian models of childcare differ substantially, which influences parental and caregiver roles and shapes underlying assumptions about concepts such as the child's best interest, parent-child relationships, children's autonomy, agency, and the authority to act in the child's welfare—whether derived from familial ties or based on the judgment of an external authority. These two cultures represent contrasting "ideal types" of childcare models in Weberian terms and hold divergent understandings of the role of government institutions in family life.

On a pragmatic level, the project offers applied value as it analyzes the real-world consequences of these cross-cultural encounters. It identifies both the obstacles and potential benefits that emerge in this intercultural exchange, while also anticipating future tensions. The context is particularly unique, as power dynamics (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021) significantly influence interactions between migrants and host society institutions, framing them within a "guest-host" paradigm. In such situations, the power relationship is inherently asymmetrical—hosts operate from a position of authority on their home ground. While acculturation ideally enables migrants to feel at home in the host country, they often continue to experience aspects of "guest" status.

This project focuses on the relationship between Polish migrants in Norway and child protection services, drawing on both migrant narratives and expert interviews to gain insights into these interactions.

The project's goals can be distilled into the following research question: *How do Polish migrants experience, perceive, and navigate their interactions with Barnevernet—including the cultural differences, coping strategies, and sources of support they rely on—and what broader insights do these encounters offer regarding differing Polish and Norwegian interpretations of child welfare concepts, such as the*

child's best interests, autonomy, and the roles of family and institutional relationships?

To answer this question, we designed and conducted a qualitative study that included interviews with Polish individuals who had personal experience with Barnevernet, as well as interviews with Polish and Norwegian experts specializing in the research topic (Bogner et al., 2009).

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