


Discourses between the Public and the Private: Transnational Families at the Crossroads

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Raising a child is a challenging venture, regardless of where one lives in the world. Most children are raised in their families; however, many states have welfare services if the child's well-being is at stake. Scandinavian countries follow a rather strict policy in placing the child's individual rights above those of the family, and Norway has child welfare legislation that applies to *all* children in the country, regardless of their status, nationality or citizenship. This institutional structure has raised issues about how family life is negotiated in society. In this article, we analyze the ways in which language and culture are used to address expectations of (good) *normal* family life in both private and public discourses with implications for transnational families. We thus problematize the notion of the family as a private domain or space. Furthermore, by examining institutional involvement in child-rearing, we extend research on family language policy to contexts of foster care. We thereby raise the discussion to a societal level about private and public expectations towards family life in a late-modern society.

INTRODUCTION

A harsh debate about languages, and in particular family languages and bilingual upbringing, took place in Norway's public sphere in 2013, the reverberations of which are still brought to mind today. Following school testing results that had indicated that children with an immigrant (particularly, Pakistani) background were more likely to receive additional Norwegian classes at school (and thus 'special help in Norwegian'), some politicians urged parents to (solely) speak Norwegian at home, and also ban their children from watching television in other languages than Norwegian. Proposed measures included obligatory preschool for children (in a country where more than 95 per cent of the children attend preschool anyway) and, for non-compliant parents, even the loss of childcare benefits.¹ The Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*) leader was even quoted as saying that he equated with child neglect the lack of initiative to ensure that children speak Norwegian well enough.² More radically, the then Minister of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, from the same political party, requested *Barnevernet* (child welfare services) to intervene

in the case of a lack of knowledge of Norwegian.³ In Norway, state institutions play a vital role in taking care of preschool and school-aged children, and trust in educational institutions is traditionally high (Fladmoe 2012). Knowledge of the majority language is generally considered to be a responsibility of the educational system, and the politicians' interventions were received with strong opposition, yet also some praise by the right-wing electorate (cf. Lanza 2020a; see also Haque 2012). The example raises the issue of family language policy at the crossroads between private and public discourses, and the need to look at the involvement of state institutional services, particularly child welfare services. Depending on a society's conception of children's rights and family values, child welfare institutions are more or less proactive in pursuing cases and in employing the means at their disposal, including (temporal) placement of the child outside her/his family. In Norway, children are considered relatively independent members of society—if a family is judged to harm a child's development and well-being, the state has the assigned right to take that child into its care.⁴ Nevertheless, the jurisdiction of the Norwegian child welfare services has most recently been contested by supranational courts, including cases involving immigrant transnational families.

The family is a major social institution (Rawls 2001), considered the most private space we can experience in our everyday life, and indeed in sociolinguistic inquiry, the family has traditionally been considered a private domain (Fishman 1965). Dagenais (2009: 39) points out that, historically, the family has moved from being more public to more private while in fact the 'public-private duality that is so characteristic of modern life did not exist in traditional societies'. Indeed space is constantly negotiated between a variety of social actors with different discursive power, material constraints, and spatial practices, which can change over time (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005). As such, the family can be conceptualized as a space along the private—public continuum of arenas of social life (Lanza, *In press*). The notion of *space* has been advanced in applied linguistics—as a space for language learning (Higgins 2017; Canagarajah 2018; Kramsch 2018) and a potential safe space for the family's language learning and use, especially important for children (Purkarthofer 2019a,b). Mediatized discourses on migrant families have thrust the family into the public eye, and hence to be constructed as a public space that can be commented upon, accepted and/or rejected (Lanza 2020a). While family life has been regarded as the prototypical private domain or context, public discourses and socio-cultural expectations, rooted in societal (language) ideologies (Busch 2017), are inevitably involved in what we perceive as our private space (Higgins 2018; Lanza & Lomeu Gomes 2020). As Mirvahedi (2020: 17) points out, 'language ideologies, practices, and management in a family do not take place in a social vacuum; rather, they interact with the sociopolitical, historical, and economic realities in which families find themselves'.

In this article, we analyze the ways in which language and culture are invoked in both private and public discourses to address expectations of (good) family life for transnational families. We consider transnational

families, with ties not only to their new host country but also to their heritage homeland, and who usually employ multilingual practices. They may be immigrants themselves or else are children of immigrants, perceived as immigrants by the Norwegian majority population. We find the focus on transnationalism relevant in order to be able to address conflicting expectations and multiple subject positions. We refer to the case of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (*Barnevernet*) to extend the boundary of research on family language policy to include contexts of foster care, in this case organized by child welfare services. Invoking Foucault's (1975) notion of normalization techniques, we examine the construction of *normality* in the presentation of cases in discourse, for example, by highlighting the compliance with Norwegian values or else through the othering of families and family members who do not comply with these values. Language and culture are used as intermediaries, or proxies, in this respect, to better understand the ways used to render family practices as normal or deviant.

We aim to broaden family language policy research focus in two ways: (i) we demonstrate how media discourses shape images of parenting and state involvement but also how parents orient to mediatized state agents; and (ii) we transcend earlier studies of family language policy by taking into account the child welfare service as a state institution and its tasks to provide family-related services that may have an impact on language policy. While adoptive families have been addressed in family language policy research (Fogle 2012; Wright 2020), there is an almost complete absence of work on foster care and family language policy, and the decision-making process around placements, the reasons for choosing foster families, and how this might be linked to perceptions of adequate language and cultural resources (Crea *et al.* 2018). In this article, we aim to address questions related to languages in families as a public and private concern in light of current theory. However, through our analyses of various discourses, we ultimately also aspire to contribute to best practices by raising an awareness about social workers' and families' decision-making processes regarding linguistic resources and language policy.

We begin with an overview of family language policy research and how our study adds to this growing body of knowledge. We highlight foster care as a particular community of practice and mediatized discourses as important influences on transnational families. Subsequently, we examine the construction of *normality* (cf. Foucault 1975) in four different data sets, referred to as cases, ranging from public to private sources. While each data set could be further analyzed apart, we choose to present representatives of this diversity of data sets for analysis to illustrate the complex variety of discourses involved. We begin with an analysis of media coverage of relevant cases involving transnational families and the *Barnevernet*, and relate those to court rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which represent public, yet much less widespread texts regarding some of the cases. We complement these texts with debates by members of the Norwegian Parliament: these debates are publicly available yet generally not distributed. And finally, we present data from

the quasi-private spaces of family interviews. The results of our analyses have implications for the study of family language policies in multilingual families by focusing on the understanding of what a family is and what functions are attributed to family life, and how transnational families perceive themselves as included in society.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONSTRUCTING FAMILY LIFE THROUGH LANGUAGES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCOURSES

Families are formed along various dimensions, both biological and social, and linked by kinship processes and potentially generational relations across two, three or four generations (Purkarthofer 2020; Wright 2020). Expectations of child-rearing and parental roles are highly culturally dependent (Crippen and Brew 2013; Lancy 2017) and are thus subject to public discourses, for example, in mediatized discourses (Lanza 2020a), blogs and online parental chat fora (Bello-Rodzen 2016; Piller and Gerber 2021; Lanza 2020b), and interpersonal evaluations (Purkarthofer 2019a). Family language policy research links individual cases to social evaluations and influences as it is anchored in the field of language policy, with the original focus on explicit and overt planning as well as ideologies and decision-making processes multilingual families engage in concerning language development and use in the home (cf. King *et al.* 2008; Curdt-Christiansen 2013; Schwartz and Verschik 2013; Lanza and Li Wei 2016; Smith-Christmas 2016). In line with current trends in language policy research, policies and practices are examined as intertwined, with practices contributing to bottom up policies (for a recent overview, see Lanza and Lexander 2019).

While family language policy has produced highly relevant results on the topics of language organization and management, ideologies and practices, and how ideologies, identities, agency, and imagination are created and enacted among multilingual families in divergent contexts (King and Lanza 2019; Curdt-Christiansen and Lanza 2018; Lanza and Curdt-Christiansen 2018; Higgins 2019; Lomeu Gomes 2020; Schalley and Eisenschlas 2020), the field in general has been less outspoken about the underlying understanding of what a family is and what functions are attributed to family life (but see Coetzee 2018; Lomeu Gomes 2018; Lanza and Lomeu Gomes 2020; Wright 2020). We will thus in the following sections describe families as *communities of practice*.

FAMILIES AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Family ties can be conceptualized in diverse ways: our understanding of family is based on Wenger's *communities of practice* (1998), as this favors a shared repertoire of social (and linguistic) practices as well as mutual engagement,

and the idea of a joint enterprise of its members (cf. [Lanza 2007](#) for multilingual families). In light of this, we ask which practices and plans are made relevant in talking about family life in the media, in court, in the parliament and in families themselves. Participation is key in communities of practice, but it is not construed as a binary either-or involvement, rather it is possible to participate at different levels: some individuals might be central while others might enjoy ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. In terms of language policy, this latter type of participation can be the case for children who are only starting to talk and have not yet acquired the full range of the family repertoire. In terms of cultural participation, transnational families might find themselves participating in Norwegian society at different levels of centrality; for example, rather central when it comes to school practices but potentially less so in terms of family languages or holidays and rituals. Even more peripheral might be the participation of family members who only occasionally interact with the family, be it distant relatives or children’s friends who occasionally visit. As an extension to [Wenger’s \(1998\)](#) conception of communities of practice, we may add that the use of social media, in particular with video call possibilities, adds a new dimension to participation in family life (cf. [Lanza and Lexander 2019](#); [Lexander and Androutsopoulos 2021](#); [Palviainen 2020](#)). In all cases, participation is understood as an active process and communities of practice are dependent on their members to continue producing them—including the shifting of roles within. Relating their family life to images of expected family practices in a given environment, families may have to plan specific encounters, to take part in certain interactions or to interact with certain agents of state institutions (like the school or the preschool) but also, in the case of transnational families, to define parts of their everyday life as transnational family space.

One particular example of a community of practice can be found in foster care: the temporarily formed generational bonds between foster parents and their children have been largely absent from research on family language policy. However, given that a relevant number of children interact with child welfare services during their lifespan, we deem this particular research context important, while being aware of the added legal challenges that come with complex constructions of shared guardianship and extended needs for safeguarding identities of children or (foster) parents. In regards to private and public family spaces, the construction of foster homes and families brings interesting aspects to the debate, among them the ways in which ‘temporary families’ are created and how changing family constellations, organized and run by public organizations, shape family language policy. While the number of concerned children from transnational families is not negligible, language has not been much of an issue in research on child welfare and foster care in many countries ([Purkarthofer, forthcoming](#); [Lomeu Gomes et al. 2021](#)). The often coerced nature of foster care, the difficulties in obtaining consent from parents and security issues for children undoubtedly complicate such research. However, this situation is highly relevant for decisions regarding language

choice, as sensible actions have to be taken to ensure continued family communication while also overseeing exchanges between children and (at times non-complying) adults. Other issues regard contact and language choice between siblings, maintenance of family languages or even multilingual acquisition in the case of young children in foster care. As contact with the parents is usually maintained in some form, these language questions have very concrete implications for children, parents and foster families in the case of transnational families. Knowing that foster care systems differ strongly across countries and that in Scandinavia children's rights trump those of the family, we restrict our attention to Norway in our evaluation of language issues and family language policy in regard to child welfare services and foster care.

FAMILIES, MEDIATIZED SPACES AND DISCOURSES

As family members are active transnationally, maintaining ties to family abroad through various cultural and media spaces, their language choices are thus not limited to the home language (e.g., German) and the language of the majority (e.g., Norwegian). Other languages are important for the parents and their activities, and some of them will also become important for their children. The families' linguistic repertoires belong to what Pennycook (2016: 212) has termed *mobile times*, where 'communication occurs across what have been thought of as languages, [...] speakers draw on repertoires of semiotic resources, and [...] language is best understood in terms of social practices'. Family life extends well beyond the traditional image of the shared dinner table, and it includes not only more persons than the immediate family, but also several means of communication such as messaging services and video calls with more distant relatives. It also usually includes mediatized discourses, family blogs and parental chat fora that contribute to families' manifold social spaces. Social media are only starting to be seen as an important influence on family language policy (Lanza and Lexander 2019; Lexander and Androutsopoulos 2019; Palviainen 2020; Said 2021), but we already see how mediatized discourses shape images of parenting and in particular motherhood (Bello-Rodzen 2016; Lanza 2020b). While direct causal links between mediatized discourses and language practices may be difficult to document, we can indeed map how participants orient to these discourses and negotiate identities in light of them.

NORMALIZING TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LIFE IN DISCOURSES BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE: METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Parenting and child-rearing are intensely evaluated in societies and different policies and practices are deemed appropriate. Foucault (1975) proposed the term *normalization* to analyze techniques of power in institutions and societies,

aiming to understand how we learn to be regulated and adapt our self-regulating strategies to comply with (or oppose) images of society. Through comparing, differentiating, hierarchizing, homogenizing and excluding, members of society assign each individual a certain place in society along with certain conditions on how to behave in that place. Sets of tacit and context-specific norms are in place, socially constructed and constitutive, and produce 'normal' or unmarked actions (cf. Scott 2017). Among the expectations towards parenting, language issues play a major role: which language(s) to choose to interact with children, which language(s) to ensure educational success, which choice of language(s) carry what kinds of social evaluations?

In our empirical data, we analyze the ways in which language and culture are used in four different contexts, or cases, to contribute to perceptions of societal expectations as well as to comply with, or oppose, expectations in Norwegian society (see Table 1). We employed discourse analytical tools to identify instances of normalization in the four data sets: (i) media representations of the Child Welfare Services (*Barnevernet*) with transnational families; (ii) respective court rulings from the ECHR; (iii) debates by members of Norway's parliament on what constitutes a 'normal' family in Norway; and (iv) interviews with Norway-based transnational families on expectations and perceptions of Norwegian family life.

With an eye on the harsh debate in 2013, noted in the introduction, and the statistics on immigrant children for 2016 that reached then a high of 26 per cent, we examined media discourses on *Barnevernet* and transnational families in mainly national and some international media, covering 2010–16 for **Case 1**. In order to get an overview of the discourses on *Barnevernet* and multilingual families, more precisely those mentioning language issues or a non-Norwegian family origin, the searchable, digital media archive *A-tekst* (by Retriever⁵) was used. It contains material from all major daily newspapers, regional newspapers, magazines, most local newspapers, digital news sources, and more, in Norway. Two sets of keywords were searched in the media archive, including multilingualism and also immigration and minoritized languages. In a first step, 755 articles were identified in 2016 and in the second search, more than 5,000 articles were found for 2010 to 2016. Of them, only 126 explicitly dealt with *Barnevernet* in relation to transnational families or minoritized family languages (such as Romanés/Romani or Sámi). Of these articles, we chose those related to transnational families and identified comparisons, differences and hierarchies as well as categories of homogenization or exclusion (e.g., through certain stereotypical names or descriptions). Among the means to oppose decisions of state services are appeals to the ECHR in Strasbourg, as shown in **Case 2**. The main article related to what may be considered inappropriate and hurtful practices of *Barnevernet* is Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the right to respect for family life.⁶ Appeals to the ECHR follow after an ultimate decision at the Norwegian high court has been taken and no other means of national appeal are possible. The applicants have to follow the

Table 1: Overview of data and exemplary cases

Case and description	Type of data	Selection	Languages
1) Media representations of <i>Barnevernet</i> (child welfare services) and their involvement with transnational families	Digital news platform (Retriever search)	<i>Barnevernet</i> and minoritized/migrant/language (126 articles, 2010–2016) Excerpt 1	Norwegian (presented in translation), English (Romanian is referenced in the example)
2) Respective court rulings from the ECHR	Court rulings on Art. 8 (Right to family life) (Public database search)	Norway, <i>Barnevernet</i> (child welfare services) and language (23 cases since 1996, violations were found in 7 cases) Excerpt 2	English, Somali (in the example)
3) Debates by members of the Norwegian parliament, which provide a relevant site of negotiation for questions concerning a 'normal' family in Norway	Protocols of parliamentary debates (Public database search)	Child-rearing and languages (2013–2016) Excerpts 3, 4	Norwegian (presented in translation)
4) Interviews with Norway-based transnational families talking about their expectations and perceptions of Norwegian family life	Interviews with German-Norwegian parents (collected by the first author)	Child-rearing in Norway (6 interviews, 3 couples) Excerpts 5, 6, 7	Norwegian and German (presented in translation)

process over a long time and typically, some cases are chosen that bear a chance to serve as a precedent for future reference.

Further pursuing transnational families at the crossroads of public and private discourses, we use exemplary data from parliamentary debates in Norway in **Case 3** to compare concepts of adequate parenting (especially with regard to the normalization of family life). The representative examples chosen for this article highlight the societal understanding of the place of parents and state institutions in the lives of children, and how, in one way or the other, priority is given to what is considered beneficial for a child in Norway (thereby downplaying potential differences in the lives of Norwegian children, in particular those coming from multilingual families of Middle Eastern, South Asian or African descent, and living in and around Oslo). The set of data in **Case 4** comprises qualitative interviews with parents in transnational families (of German and Norwegian origin), living in Oslo. Discourses in the family referred to ideas and ideologies of Norwegian child-rearing and thus the interview data add perceptions of parents, who are informed either through the media or through their professional environment, and position themselves vis-à-vis the Norwegian state and society. The interviews were part of a larger project on family language policy in Norway more generally (Purkarthofer and Steien 2019; Purkarthofer 2021). Data from a German transnational family, with a language and culture related to Norwegian, provide an interesting platform for examining the fine-tuned perceptions of normalization techniques.

In all four sets of data, we started with the explicit mentioning of language (and languages other than Norwegian). **Table 1** gives an overview of the types of data for each of the four cases to be discussed as well as selection criteria, what languages are involved, and references for further details. Note that the translated discourses are included in their original versions in the [Supplementary Material](#).

DATA AND EXEMPLARY CASES

Case 1: *Barnevernet* in the media

The Norwegian child welfare services (*Barnevernet*) in its current form was founded in 1992, its mandate regulated by the Child Welfare Act of 17 July 1992 (*Barnevernloven*,⁷ in particular, section 4), and its rules and regulations have been adapted over the years. Recently, debates about the adequacy of policies, the strategies, and responsibilities have started (Lichtwarck and Clifford 2010) and the need for a modernization of the institution has been articulated.⁸ Two main criticisms are (i) the local responsibility for child welfare services (with highly different practices and qualifications of employees across different municipalities); and, (ii) the general lack of transparency regarding the decision-making process, especially in cases of child placement with foster parents (Lilleland *et al.* 2011; Lønne 2015). A very rigid

interpretation (or even denial) of the right of contact for children and their biological parents has been at the center of several cases that have been taken to the ECHR in Strasbourg. These decisions are of particular importance with regard to language practices, but questions of appropriate child-rearing are often also linked to cultural expectations and misunderstandings. With regard to media representation in Norway, quite a number of prominent cases have concerned transnational families, with subsequent extensive coverage of *Barnevernet's* practices in international media. Statistics Norway noted that one in four children in contact with *Barnevernet* had an immigrant background in 2016, including an increasing number of children born in Norway to immigrant parents (Dyrhaug 2016). The percentage of children with an immigrant background has risen since 2016 and is currently recorded as 28 per cent, with the group of Norwegian-born children of immigrant parents more represented than immigrant children (Dyrhaug 2020).

Some media publications have challenged the numbers, claiming that cultural or immigration background is not among the relevant categories when it comes to involvement with *Barnevernet*.⁹ The lack of public statements from *Barnevernet* makes one claim or another difficult to verify. In the cases discussed here (as in Burns *et al.* 2019), the lack of transparent decisions is seen as particularly problematic and leaves room for (mis)interpretations regarding the presence of *normalizing* ideologies from the side of the institution. Preferences in the choice of foster parents that might be linked to language, religion or cultural background can thus only be assumed but are not part of statistics. Many cases highlight the dilemma of placement in foster homes in which only Norwegian is spoken. One Lithuanian parent took her daughter from the foster home illegally and returned to Lithuania; as the child spoke only Norwegian at school and in the foster home, the mother felt she could no longer communicate with her and was at risk of losing connection to her child.¹⁰ Otherwise, in homes where the minoritized language is used, right-wing politicians have threatened to involve child welfare services to supervise language use in families with an immigration background,¹¹ claiming that this is the kind of neglect that needs to be monitored by authorities. Even though language use is beyond the scope of child welfare, the intention to use child welfare as a threat to immigrant parents speaks to the assumed powers of the institution. In light of this, and no matter whether it is *de facto* justified or not, it cannot be ignored that culture and language are used as communicative resources in both mediatized and interpersonal communication, where parental background is constructed as a pertinent category. In media texts from Europe, certain myths circulate among groups about *Barnevernet*. For example, in Poland,¹² people expressed beliefs that authorities 'own' children in Norway, or that *Barnevernet* has a certain number of Polish children they are supposed to 'confiscate'. Some say that Norway 'steals' blond Slavic children, claiming it is a legacy from the Viking Period. While the accusations are not justified, they accentuate an underlying distrust between the family and the state.

Regarding normalization, several of the media stories highlight practices that are considered deviant in the Norwegian context (e.g., corporal punishment). They are used to explain *Barnevernet's* involvement and justify actions taken by them. On the other hand, counterstrategies of alignment with the families are also used; for example, in the case of a Norwegian-Romanian family (the Naustdal case involving the removal of five children), which generated international sympathy and triggered demonstrations, we read:

*Excerpt 1:*¹³ [translated from the newspaper]

'Last November, two black cars rolled into the farmyard where the Christian Norwegian-Romanian family lived in a small village in Vestlandet. One child welfare employee asked the mother in the house to come to the police station for an interrogation. She brought her two sons with her, and told her that her two daughters, who were at school, were already picked up by *Barnevernet*. The day after, four policemen came and took the couple's fifth child, a baby'.

Religion is mentioned in the beginning of the article and as this is also the religion of the majority of Norwegians, thereby underscoring attempts to create shared grounds between the readers and the family. Moreover, the highlighting of 'Norwegian-Romanian' and surely even the mentioning of the small village in Vestlandet, conjures up a rural image far from the multilingual city of Oslo (and southeastern Norway, commonly associated with immigration). The family is even depicted in the press photo wearing the *Bunad*, traditional national costume. Constructing the family as knowledgeable of Norwegian customs and willing to follow what is read as 'Norwegian behavior' serves as a strategy to evoke solidarity from Norwegian readers. Presenting the family faced with police interrogations is likely to arouse a sense of compassion in the reader. Drawing on effects like this aims to use emotions and bodily experience, albeit in a discursively and culturally shaped context (Ahmed 2014). What readers are supposed to feel is constructed in a media landscape that consciously works towards its goals, thereby shaping affective citizenship (Koivunen 2017). In contrast to the *Bunad*-wearing family, in the above-mentioned media texts about immigrant parents' failure to teach their children Norwegian, there is no appeal to Norwegianness and hence Norwegian readers are presented with the parents' otherness, revealing a lack of affective citizenship and creating distance. *Barnevernet's* reaction to never comment on cases, due to confidentiality and the protection of the privacy of the involved children, intensifies distrust. Foucault (1975) describes such distrust as a characteristic of total institutions (e.g., prisons) that they have no need to justify institutional behavior and while information is gathered by the institution, participants are not necessarily informed about this nor about any outcomes.

Case 2: Family life vs. Norway

In analyzing the written decisions of the ECHR, we argue that their role is vital to understanding the normalization of family language policies and practices in Norway and Europe. Despite the limited audience of such decisions (even though publicly available), they will very likely be used in future deliberations on foster care in Norway and beyond, thereby forming a growing body of legal texts that shape the understanding of family, and normalizing certain behaviors over others. State institutions like the Norwegian *Barnevernet* do not have to change their practice immediately after decisions are taken, but public pressure increases after successful appeals, and over time, the decisions tend to take hold in the national legislation. While the decisions are interesting in themselves, another fact is also relevant, as noted by Lavrysen (2019) in a prominent case against Norway: the surprising interest of other European states that have used third party interventions to react to the decision. In the case analyzed by Lavrysen, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Belgium as well as NGOs and faith-based organizations have contributed their views, thereby strengthening the impression that these decisions were seen as a European issue (and guidance in different countries, or with nationals of different countries, was expected). In a recent study by Breen et al. (2020), the court's understanding of the 'family unit' and the 'best interest of the child' was analyzed in decisions between 1959 and 2018 and in their results. Overall, the authors found a shift towards a more child-focused interpretation of 'family life' thereby giving more consideration to the situation of the child in the foster family. This is consistent with the 'best interest' principle that Banda and Ekeelaar (2017) highlight in changing conceptions of the family in international legislation.

Two very recent decisions of the ECHR regard foreign-born parents in Norway:¹⁴ in one case that we will use here, a Somalia-born mother appealed the adoption of her child by the foster parents (ECHR decision A 2019; summarized by Cranmer 2019). In this case, language, culture and religion are brought up as issues that concern the selection of the foster family. The young mother had initially agreed to have her child placed in foster care, but appealed against an adoption of her child by the foster parents. She argued that by initially choosing ethnically Norwegian foster parents, *Barnevernet* was then already convinced that reunification with the biological mother (and her family) was not likely and was thus not the aim of the intervention nor supported over the years (as would be prescribed by the law). In an ultimate appeal, the applicant argued as follows:

Excerpt 2:

40. X had been placed in a Christian family with a background very different from the applicant's and X's as to origin, language and ethnicity. Thus, the authorities could not have had reunification of the family as an aim. By placing X in a Christian home where the family, including X, went to church and ate pork, the respondent

State had also systematically violated the applicant's right to freedom of religion. (ECHR A 2019: 11)

The mother's initial wish was to have her child placed in a relative's family, or else at least in a Somali or Muslim family. In the description of the case, it is noted that ethnic choice of foster parents was commented upon, but no particular reason was given for why placement in an ethnically closer family was not possible (which only led to the assumption that no foster parents of closer cultural ties were available). The Norwegian authorities disregarded this preference without further explanation and later on used the fact that the child had grown accustomed to the foster family's Christian faith as a reason to argue for adoption as a completion of integration into what the child knew as his family. In the documentation for the ECHR, the Norwegian government stated that 'Cultural differences in the area of child welfare should not inform the outcome of the Court's decision' (ECHR A 2019: 12), thereby neglecting the role of heritage culture as a general part of the child's well-being.

The ECHR concluded that already the placement, along with very limited contact rights, violated the applicant's right to family life, especially as little measures had been taken to facilitate any contact between mother and son. This connection was deemed of particular importance, as this contact was seen as the only way for the child to know of his origin and cultural heritage. What is not specified in the court's decision, but is clear, are potential practical language issues: in the first descriptions of the early institutional contacts, interpreting services are mentioned at one point to inform the mother about a decision. However, no such remark is made in the evaluation of the capacity of the applicant to receive guidance by, for example, health professionals regarding the care of her child. It might thus well be that lack of Norwegian competence, that is, comprehension on the mother's part, was partly misinterpreted as unwillingness to cooperate. Such misinterpretations are frequently reported in other cases, especially in institutional communication (*Crea et al.* 2018).

Case 3: Normal family life in discussions in the Norwegian parliament

Further pursuing transnational families at the crossroads of public and private discourses, we use exemplary data from parliamentary debates in Norway to compare concepts of adequate parenting (especially with regard to the normalization of family life).

The following excerpt from 2013 is part of a suggestion to the Parliament by the Norwegian Conservative Party (*Høyre*) to supervise children's Norwegian language skills more closely before they enter school (cf. the public debate referred to above). Suggestions include an extended focus on 'language competence' (i.e., Norwegian) as part of a routine consultation with a nurse at age 4 (for now with a focus on typical child development).

Excerpt 3 [Conservatives,¹⁵ translated]

These members believe it is important for parents who raise their children in Norway to ensure that their children learn Norwegian. The lack of learning Norwegian is serious, and public authorities must engage in a dialogue with the parents of these children. The Child Welfare Services Act requires public authorities on their own initiative to provide information to the municipality's child welfare services when there is reason to believe that a child is being abused in the home or there are other forms of serious neglect, or when a child has shown persistent serious behavioral problems.

These members believe that keeping a child out of Norwegian society, for example, when it comes to learning the language, will be one element of the concrete and holistic assessment of whether the child is in such a situation that there is a duty to provide information.

In this passage, the concern about the lack of Norwegian competence turns into a matter of childcare, and ideas are presented that implicitly link child-rearing in a language other than Norwegian to potential harm to children. Initially, the link between language issues and *Barnevernet* does not seem clear; however, the suspicion towards parents who use other languages than Norwegian at home becomes very apparent. This is particularly motivated by an ideological hierarchy of languages in parts of Norwegian society: speakers of Urdu or Panjabi, along with other non-European migrants, are often constructed as less interested in their children's scholarly success. By means of othering some speakers, linguistic and cultural hierarchies in Norwegian society are enforced and normalized through, and in, parliamentary suggestions. While Norway is often referred to as a sociolinguistic paradise due to the widespread use and acceptance of dialects, there is indeed a hierarchy of languages that reflects on their language users (cf. [Røyneland and Lanza 2020](#)). Parents with mostly Western European home languages report that they are generally not perceived as 'real migrants', which includes their children being seen as rather 'unproblematic'.

In the following discussion of this issue with members of other political parties, we find another interesting turn, this time from a Liberal (*Venstre*) politician.

Excerpt 4 [Liberals,¹⁶ translated]:

Although parts of Oslo are characterized by immigration, there is still a lot of good, as what I experienced one day when I was in a preschool at Furuset. Most of the kids there looked like they came from somewhere else, and I asked the preschool teacher how work on language was going in the preschool. She looked at me in astonishment and said that all the parents in this preschool spoke Norwegian at home. So there's a lot of good going on around here.

While the politician first opposes the assumption that immigrants lack language skills and that the situation in Oslo is particularly problematic, in her last line a rather surprising evaluation of transnational families is given. Being told that all parents (with migrant background) speak Norwegian to their children in this preschool, she evaluates the situation as one that is indicative of a successful surrounding. Implicitly, and by normalizing this behavior, she leaves us with the conclusion that speaking a language other than Norwegian is socially less/not desirable.

Case 4: Speaking about Norwegian families in the family

Among the persons concerned with ideologies of child-rearing are parents of Norwegian as well as foreign background. In a series of interviews concerning multilingual family life in Norway, the first author followed families with German and Norwegian over 18 months. Speakers of German are generally rather successful in learning Norwegian quickly and their position in society is relatively unproblematic today. Nonetheless, German parents felt their own status evaluated and their integration into Norwegian society judged by their parenting practices. The interview data add perceptions of parents, who are informed either through the media or through their professional environment, and who position themselves vis-à-vis the Norwegian state and society. In light of influences that reach parents through mediated discourses, we can assume an impact on the parents and their aims for family life. The global interest in parental fora, blogs and guidebooks on multilingual parenting further speaks of the necessity of parents to take a stand towards their environment, for example, by shaping their family language policy in light of public expectations of what is good parenting.

In the first interview, the mother of one family speaks about her transnational identity and how she sees this as a difference in a society that is perceived as rather homogeneous. Having lived in Norway for more than 15 years, she sees children and their involvement with state institutions (primarily preschool and school) as factors that render one's life predictable and contribute to a sense of shared experience. This becomes especially obvious when the parents speak in Excerpt 5 about their decision to opt for a private school (*italics* are used for Norwegian terms inserted in the German talk).

Excerpt 5 [translated]:

- Mother1 so that's the homogeneous part, that everybody is doing the same and then, if you take your child out of the mainstream, that is really hard for the child. And I do have the feeling that's different in the German school, that children do a lot of different things [...]
- Father1 in Norwegian schools, a lot is about the musical band
- Mother1 so activities, school sports
- Father1 yes, and also soccer, handball, and such, *hockey*
- Mother1 Soccer, handball, *band*—girls handball, boys soccer, everybody *band*.
-

In Excerpt 5, both parents construct the idea of the Norwegian school being a place that is driven by sameness and shared ideas about sports and after-school activities. Opting for this kind of schooling is in their eyes also linked to opting for the same kind of activities, a reasoning that is supported by the feeling that the child might suffer if they are forced to do other things, that is, not go along with the shared ideas. Bicultural schooling is hence presented as a way to open opportunities for the child, apart from what the parents present as relatively standardized options. In Excerpt 6, both parents contrast the activities in the Norwegian school with a stereotypical image of German parents forcing their children to learn to play the piano (CAPITAL indicates emphasis).

Excerpt 6 [translated]:

Father1	I mean you can ask in which sense this is correct, but in the German school you meet people who drag their children to piano lessons
Mother1 (laughs)	there, the children are forced to do proper things
Father1 (laughs)	exactly, forced to do PROPER things

This proposition is co-constructed and flippantly repeated by both parents, thus expressing their knowledge about the image of German parents as being more driven by cultural and academic success. Normalizing is done in a humorous way, but at the same time, this excerpt shows the awareness of social pressure in both types of school. Even if the German school can be seen as a rather peripheral actor in Norwegian society, within the school, there are other practices at play that in turn open new forms of central and peripheral participation. By navigating between those spaces, the parents and children experience different modes of participation depending on their positions.

In Excerpt 7 below, one example is given that refers to a *barselgruppe* ('child-birthing group') initially organized by the local health station to put parents with children born within a few weeks' timespan in contact with one another during their parental leave. For this recently arrived parent, the group was among her first instances of participation in Norwegian society, which might partly explain the rather peripheral experience that she described. Thus, even before entering the childcare institutions, parents detect societal influences on child-rearing and, as we can see here, present these encounters as a form of social control (*italics* are used for Norwegian terms inserted in the German talk).

Excerpt 7 [translated]

Mother2 *Childbirthing group*, everybody does that. I mean in Germany [...] we met people from the birthing class, that was nice but that is not done by all. And here you go to the *community health care* and then it's kind of prescribed to you and everybody does it. And each time, you meet at 11, there are the same miserable half-baked breads, and the same *brown cheese*. And once I dared to eat *brown cheese* with a cucumber "oh NO, you can't eat *brown cheese* with cucumber?" why not? "Yes, because it's not done that way".

While these groups intend to offer low-stake social contacts, this mother frames them as a rather prescriptive offering. She emphasizes the relatively stereotypical character of the meetings by presenting a brief anecdote related to the proper way of eating *brunost* (a sweet brown cheese)—an almost iconic element of Norwegian culture. Her attempt to combine this cheese with a cucumber is thus instantly noted and sanctioned vis-à-vis an expected ideal. The short narrative serves a humorous purpose in highlighting the absurdity of regulating what is appropriate to combine on a slice of bread. It is presented as one instance of normalizing behavior, easy to extend to child-rearing.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTING TRANSNATIONAL PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FAMILY SPACES AS NORMAL

In concluding, we see that in both the media as well as in families, participants try to render their family experience as normal. In the parliamentary debates and even more in the court decisions, the question of whose normality is regarded as a priority and who succeeds in constructing a more convincing account of beneficial child-rearing is even the main topic. All four Cases can thus be read as attempts to express expectations about the private space of families but also as vital public expectations that influence the construction of family spaces and their interpretation as 'good', 'appropriate' and finally 'safe'. Negotiating culturally and linguistically different practices, initiated by minoritized groups, be they migrant or domestic, can foster change and reflexivity in society. In the context of *Barnevernet*, the migrant voices—both in Norway and in the countries of origin or affiliation of those affected—contribute to discourses about the legitimacy of *Barnevernet's* interventions into family life, and both the media and family members debate the potential roles the state should hold in regards to child-rearing. Analyses of discourses, and most importantly, application of the findings in education and training for institutions and employees, can help change procedures and raise awareness of the social phenomena linked to normalized family language policies and practices.

The means for doing family vary depending on the intended goals: as we can see in the media coverage, ‘normality’ is done by highlighting family practices that are considered mainstream (wearing a *Bunad*) or by pointing to shared cultural and religious practices (Christian upbringing, physical activities). On the other hand, othering is done by highlighting diverging language practices (minority language education, TV series), cultural practices (including food preferences) or supposedly divergent goals (less oriented towards education, traditional gender roles, etc.). These strategies evoke Foucault’s normalization techniques, by comparing practices and groups and by differentiating between groups and their ascribed values and shared practices. Ideas of homogeneous societies, where certain practices lead to exclusion, foster stereotypical pictures of migrants or non-migrants—with detrimental effects on children. In the case of those whose families are under suspicion due to their allegedly diverging practices and places of origin, this seems rather obvious, but it is equally limiting for those who struggle to voice their at risk status and to claim victimhood of, for example, domestic abuse (because their families align nicely with the image of ‘good’ or normal environments).

Participation in the community of practice of parents in Norway is constructed in the four Cases by different means: The participants in the interviews (Case 4) do refer to the expected normality of (Norwegian) society and they frame their stories about diverging behavior by demonstrating that they are well aware of the expected memberships in certain clubs, the expected cultural/culinary practices and other mainstream cultural symbols. Still, they aim for a family identity that is less closely linked to national expectations. While wanting to seem less ‘Norwegian’, they also avoid being read as ‘typical Germans’ and thus aim for a more individualistic, transnational approach. Humor and distancing strategies as well as the claimed role of the expert observer are used to justify observations of the host society—we might assume that this is also due to a position of relative security within Norwegian society as white Europeans. In general, we see matters of race, class, and gender roles interact and form power relations that can only be analyzed with an intersectional perspective, an issue that should be further pursued. For individuals under investigation by *Barnevernet* (Cases 1, 2), their identity as parents in Norway is questioned and threatened, but may also be reinforced when claims are settled and children are considered safe in their care. In light of language issues allegedly contributing to good or bad parenting (as in Case 3), we can see how conflicting positions need to be negotiated by parents who consider a non-Norwegian language as part of their family language repertoire and their sense of surveillance may become part of the family history (as has been reported for families of Samí or Kven descent in Norway in the 20th century, Lane 2010).

Throughout the data, it is clear that family life occurs in connection with other people. What exactly should be acceptable with regard to family life is, however, a less clear case: expectations of what serves children best to succeed

in a particular society are not shared unanimously. Pressure to behave like the majority, thereby ensuring the children the best fitting-in, might not resonate well with parents who struggle to find a place for themselves in society (among them, but not limited to, transnational families). With regard to foster care, these questions of mainstream expectations are of particular relevance, as countries have opted for different approaches for treating societal differences. In Norway, care is taken to aim for families at the core of society (independent of the family of origin's position) whereas other countries like Germany have attempted to place children class-wise/culturally closer to the family of origin. Both strategies have positive aspects, but are in other aspects equally flawed (e.g., with regard to social mobility versus the right to perceive one's cultural background as appropriate). Language and culture are thus among the factors that need to be monitored closely with regard to child welfare services, not just in Norway but everywhere, and discussions are needed to react to constructions of normality in private and especially public debates. For research on family language policy, we are once again reminded that decisions are hardly ever taken once and for all and that the aims we have for children and families might come at different costs, depending on the societal evaluation of our actions. At the same time, we as researchers must exercise reflexivity and be aware of our own expectations of adequate parenting and what we are accustomed to seeing as part of family language practices. An evaluation of transnational families at the crossroads of public and private discourses involving normalization highlights the ever-present tension and interconnectedness between social structure and individual agency in regards to family life in general and to family language policy in particular. Research on multilingualism in transnational families and family language policy cannot conceive of the family as a private space, rather as a space where the private and public meet at the crossroads.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest is declared by the authors.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary material is available at *Applied Linguistics* online.

ENDNOTES

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